

FRESHMAN VS. SELF

memoirs

from the ninth grade

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For Durham

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introduction

*We are here on a mission to make a book, not point out hypocrisies in our peers . . .
whom we love.*

Ms. G.

AS TEENAGERS, WE'RE ALWAYS TRYING TO DISTANCE OURSELVES from others, whether it's intentional or not; the idea of touching someone foreign to us is almost uncomfortable. Despite the fact that we see each other every day, and make eye contact with one another every once and awhile, most of us hardly *know* each other at all. And even more, we don't question each other's walls.

And adults look at us all the same way. We are lumped together, *seen* as the same, like apples on a tree. But every apple has its own flavor and its own bruise. This book is the third in a collection of memoirs written to show what actually goes through the minds of high school students.

This project was born out of a desire for freshmen to share our own bruises. Age and life experience are equated in the minds of many as one and the same, but loss can't be measured in any increment of time. For some, the material in this book may require a suspension of disbelief. For others, it may seem like we are trying to break down a wall that never existed in the first place.

That is what this book tries to remedy. By writing memoirs, we express, and learn to recognize the expression of, who we are. Writing is a way to divulge the things we would never talk about in person: abuse, self-discovery, hope, change, or even a simple day-in-the-life. Memoirs are an attempt to bypass our biggest adversary: our fears. But before that happens, we have to fight against ourselves.

Students hear about several literature-based conflicts in English classes: man vs. nature, man vs. society, man vs. man, or man vs. self (known as 'dichotomies' in Fancy Academic Talk). In our

case, it's *freshman* vs. self. For the past three years, the club has focused on the idea of high school students channeling our inner thoughts and feelings in writing. We are constantly stereotyped by adults and other peers, but rarely have the chance to address those assumptions.

What first started as an English assignment has now grown into a long-term project. In 2009, ninth grade students at Durham School of the Arts were told by their English teacher, Alexa Garvoille, to write a memoir about important events in their lives. Ms. Garvoille first got the idea to publish the memoirs from Stuart Albright, a colleague at Jordan High School whose creative writing classes had self-published their own collections. A few months later, the Publishing Club was born—and it was born small. The club only consisted of then-ninth graders Kaitlin Medlin, Joanna Ehrisman, Ian Leslie, and Fenn Walsh-Seaman. By the next year, the club had expanded to fifteen members strong. This year there have been even more members, and finishing the book of memoirs has never been easier.

A few months after their freshman year starts, students go through a six-week period of writing and revising their memoirs. After the drafts are submitted, the papers are given an initial session with Ms. Garvoille to be graded, then sent over to the Publishing Club to read and edit a total of four times. The club spends months of intensive spell-checking, sentence-dissecting, tense-changing, and comma-relocating—even on Saturdays, at school, in a little computer lab—with the final goal of eventually giving the refined memoirs back to the authors for any final comments or changes. Then the club scrambles around a table to decide a title for that year's book, and its chapters. Once the book is organized and assembled, it is sent over to Lulu.com to be published, and then sold in our local independent bookstore, The Regulator, and online through Lulu and Amazon.

* * *

Writing a memoir makes you insecure, makes you wonder if what you write is too personal, or not personal enough. At times you want to shove it into people's faces, screaming, "Read! *This* is

me.” Other times, you snap your notebook closed whenever someone stands behind you. The uncertainty of letting your façade slip away is felt not only when you write, but whenever you open yourself up. The fear of disclosure is felt across all ages, genders, ethnicities, political views, and socioeconomic positions. Hopefully, by allowing ourselves to be honest, we grant the opportunity for others to do the same.

Whatever the case, we hope that our readers will be able to see their own reflections.

*Publishing Club staff members Emma Crenshaw,
Kaitlin Medlin, Alethia Orbih, and Nancy Sullivan
Durham, North Carolina
April 2012*

freshman
versus self



the half-empty glass

sarah schaedler

victim #1

CHOMP, CHOMP, CHOMP, went the turtle girl, obnoxiously chewing on her wad of gum. *Smack, smack, smack*, went her lips. She turned her head to the side, watching some attention-craving idiot make a fool of himself. Her round, flat nose was smashed in so close to her skull that only two little sesame seed nostrils could be seen before her face curved down into a pink, fleshy beak, glistening with the fresh application of lip gloss. Her dull, bored eyes slowly closed and re-opened, her condescending glare scanning the large, open classroom. Up and down, up and down, went her beak. *Smack, smack, smack*.

As the poor student teacher, however incredibly talented and kind she was, struggled to control the class, I studied the turtle girl. I pictured her in a clear little box full of grass plucked out of the yard and lettuce from the vegetable compartment of the fridge, chewing away like the turtles I used to catch in my mom's backyard.

Art materials began to shuffle around me, and the meaningless roar of chatter started up again. Soon it faded into the background, a quiet murmur to my ears. Still staring at the turtle girl, I wondered why people were so content to settle into their little routines day after day, religiously following the status quo. Why did they come to this school and clog up the slots that could be filled by intelligent individuals actually interested in art instead of the latest bit of juicy gossip? I watched the turtle in her designer outfit flirt with the tool next to her, tuning out their words completely. *What a waste of breath.*

I groaned internally. I had no desire to be friendly towards turtle girl and her posse. In a few moments, I could immerse myself in my work, then run past the hideous excuse for a human as soon as the bell rang. Gordon would be waiting outside, and he liked me, right? He understood—maybe even shared—my disdain for the

majority of the human race. He didn't require my best curtsy and brightest smile. We could walk to the courtyard where we could join Dorthy, Kennie, and that other loser, whatever his name was. We could complain about society and laugh together at jokes others would consider crude. I could shuffle between classes, hanging onto the joyful moments spent free outside a classroom, talking with my fellow cynics. Before I knew it, I would be home, chatting with people worth my time while the Food Network hummed quietly in the background.

I focused back on the turtle girl as I came out of my rant. *Damn*, I thought, as our eyes finally locked in a silent duel, *I don't feel bad for you, turtle girl*. Her bored expression fell into a scowl when I didn't look away in fear. We held our connection for a few seconds that seemed to drag on to an eternity. I smiled, and she looked away in disgust. I shifted my focus to the beautiful empty canvas that lay in front of me and dove in.

victimized

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, throwing my poor stuffed penguin up and down. My dad had just taken my phone and laptop at the prehistoric time of eleven o'clock, cutting me off from the outside world just because he could. *Just because I let him*. I watched my penguin fly up, shrinking ever so slowly, tapping the ceiling with his little felt back, then growing again until he came to rest in the palms of my hands. I had mixed feelings about the abuse I was inflicting on my beloved penguin but always decided I was doing a good thing, giving a flightless bird wings. So up and down he went, shrinking and shrinking until my teal ceiling pushed him back into my arms.

This was how I spent many of my sleepless nights, choking on the lonely silence left by the dark restrictions my dad ever-so-happily smothered me with. *I'm letting him walk all over me. He never had these restrictions before, and I got straight A's with my four hours of sleep. Why does he have to change me? Am I not good enough for him to love me the way I am? Now I'm in high school, and he's taking privileges away?*

This frustrated me; it confused me to a deeper level than just misunderstanding. I was trapped in this cage, and, as I saw it, there was only one way out. If I could give him the power, I could take it away, too. If he couldn't accept me for who I am, then he could jump off a cliff. If he wanted to keep pushing me after what happened with my mom, then he had to deal with the consequences. He was in for a fight I refused to lose.

victim #2

I glared at the vibrant little ball of energy kneeling opposite me. Her black, shoulder-length hair spilled out of two rubber bands just above her ears. Her brown eyes, open wide with eagerness and passion, locked with mine. Her small, pink lips started to shape the same thing over and over again, blurring together as my eyes narrowed and the corners of my mouth began to droop.

She had been ranting for the last five minutes about rainbows and cherry blossoms, and I could only process so much useless information in a day. My eyes dropped down to the brightly colored bubble letter writing on her cut-up white shirt. *Loser is not a social status, it's a state of mind*, I read in my head, my internal voice thick with aggravation.

"I'm pretty sure it depends on the sort of person labeling you as a loser," I interrupted her mid-sentence, slowly dragging my tired gaze to meet hers with a sigh. "For example, thanks to this pathetic lecture, along with everything else, I am now officially labeling you 'lame.' Being lame is what makes someone a loser, correct?" She stared at me, shocked that someone would dare say that to her. She, of course, sat in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by her 'besties,' while I sat in the corner. I was one of her losers because I refused to plaster a smile on my face, wear a color other than black, wipe off my eyeliner, and join in her quest to save the world. What if my world doesn't need saving?

victimized

Where is he?

I stood on the ledge separating the covered passageway from the courtyard, looking off towards the Black Box, waiting for him to surface in the sea of people. I watched them filing by me under the overhang, the groups talking on the edge. Human interaction fascinated me. I glanced off towards the Black Box again and noticed his dirty blond head bobbing up and down in the crowd.

I maneuvered my way across the walkway, ducking under the cover of a large column. I peeked around, eyeing my target. Then I pulled back, waiting for my prey. Harold's head appeared first, hair hanging over his eyes as he bent over his iPod. I cocked my legs, ready to jump at the opportune moment. His body emerged from behind the column, and I imagined the crosshairs hovering over his chest. I screamed, turning the potential energy in my legs into kinetic and the solid ground under my feet into air. His head shot up, eyes wide with shock and mouth shaping the sounds of silent terror.

I landed in front of him, already weak with laughter. I clutched my sides, unable to regain control of my vocal chords. I looked up at him, still recovering from the near heart attack. "You should've seen your face!" I choked out.

"You're such a bully!" he said, an embarrassed chuckle escaping from his lips against his will.

"Payback's a bitch, huh?" I said, still laughing, referring to the terror he caused on my walk to sixth period every day.

He laughed as we bounded down the steps to where his junior friend, Shiley, stood. "Hey there," he said, as we stopped in front of her.

"Hi," I smiled shyly, tilting my head down and peering out at the unfamiliar face from under my hair

"Hey Jordan!" she said, giving a little wave, ignoring me. "So, Thomas and I were thinking, you, me, him, and Gordon, Rich, and Dylan should hang out this weekend."

"That sounds awesome," he said, enthusiastically. I smiled, trying to look like I was okay under the ton of bricks that had just been dropped on me, shattering my Friday afternoon mood, as they

jumped into intense plan-making. *Jordan, Henry, Gordon, and I were going to hang out this weekend.* I turned my head away from them, pulling my iPod out of my pocket and turning the volume up until the vibrations pulsed through my head with such force that my thoughts could be allowed to drift.

Standing on the playground in my uneven white stockings and saddle shoes, I shivered against the cool fall breeze, pulling my navy blue sweater closer. I looked around, wondering where my best friend was. It wasn't fair Ivana was in Mrs. McCarthy's third grade class instead of Ms. Slesenger's with me. I glanced off toward the monkey bars, the blacktop, the hopscotch grid, and the game of foursquare taking place in the corner, and finally toward the group of girls sitting by the fence, a spot reserved for the prettiest and richest at Chesterbrook Academy, and generally populated by fourth and fifth graders. All the other third grade girls wanted to be in that group, but they had long decided that third graders were inadequate. As I surveyed their group, my eyes narrowed with distaste, only to widen again when I saw the small head covered in deep black hair. Confused, I hesitantly walked closer. I watched Ivana laughing with the girls, showing them how to weave crowns and necklaces out of the grass—something I had taught her, something we used to do together.

Someone grabbed my arm and began to pull me toward the buses, snapping me out of my daydream. Startled, I looked up at Harold as we walked with the last few stragglers. He talked happily on about something I couldn't hear. As we came to a stop outside my bus, he gave me his usual farewell hug, and left me before he missed his bus. I fell into my regular seat at the back and watched out the window as the school slowly faded behind us, replaced by the usual sights of downtown Durham. This was the start to another lonely year.

* * *

I lay motionless on my bed, puzzled eyes fixed on the ceiling above me. My fingers clutched my penguin, tracing his soft features in search of something they had failed to relay to me. Night was transforming into morning, the dark fading with the first signs

of light. I was physically exhausted, but I had yet to quiet my racing thoughts. I had realized something while in the first rounds of battle with insomnia, and I was hit with an epiphany hard enough to knock the breath out of my lungs. At first I was too confused to make sense of it, but after pondering this newfound concept for the majority of the night, it was beginning to crystallize in my mind. I did this to people because I was trying to do it to myself. But it was nothing interesting. I was normal. Now, what I'd resented so strongly in the past had . . . consumed me. My face furrowed in frustration; this was indeed new to me. By trying so hard to be myself, and to figure out who "myself" really was I had lost myself. I focused more on others than I did on my own life. I felt utterly lost, hanging motionless in time.

I had never quite grasped the concept of losing yourself before—where could you go? But the jumbled mess of thoughts and emotions stopped thrashing momentarily, the answer clicking into place. I didn't know who I was, what I wanted, what to do with the only life I had. Every second wasted in my state of utter delirium was a second I would never get back. But how do you find yourself when you don't actually feel lost? I had defined myself by my view of others.

I violently threw my body to the side, burying my face in my penguin. I clenched my eyes shut, trying desperately to clear my mind, hoping for a bit of refreshing sleep, but opening them again after a few moments. I wanted nothing more than to leave this dreadful existence for a few hours of peace away from my stamped-in thoughts.

I missed the simplicity of childhood. I missed not having to care. I wanted freedom to be myself, to take responsibility for my own actions and in turn have complete control over them. I needed to stop focusing so much on others, I thought, rotating my body to once more face the ceiling. I sighed deeply, pushing the air as far out of my lungs as I could. Then I did what I always did in situations like this: I thought about my reasons to keep going.

People have a tendency to stress over the smallest things. I've come to believe we're all perfectionists in some form, naturally pessimistic to prepare ourselves for the danger that awaits in the half-empty glass. We freak out over one little bug on our metaphorical

windshield of life, which was exactly what I was doing. But I hadn't cleaned my filthy windshield in months, and now I could barely see out. I simply had to wash it to prevent crashing my metaphorical life car. I took another deep breath, smiling to myself. I glanced at my alarm clock, the bright green digits reading 5:17 a.m. I closed my eyes and stretched, still smiling. I had an hour left of potential sleep. I let my instincts take control as I yawned and let my eyes slowly begin to droop. Tomorrow was coming whether I liked it or not; I had to adapt. Tomorrow I would find my metaphorical sponge. Tomorrow was a new day.

electric rollerskates and epipha-knees

j. d. bower

I.

I GAZE AT THE METAL. The end to my curiosity is just a push of a button away. Simple as that. It is an inquiry, with no pause between the flowing syllables: “Hello-hello-hello?”

The Food Lion was one of the many local businesses my family frequented. As a result of frequenting these businesses, you begin to know the individuals that work within them. The individual in Food Lion’s case was a young black woman, a cashier, with whom my mom was, at the moment, chatting.

“Did you hear about the nasty weather that’s rolling in?” Mom conversed, sliding her credit card through the reader.

“Yeah, but I heard that it’s not nearly gonna be as bad as last year’s. Last year’s nearly took out the power of the whole city,” the cashier woman replied. Her pink false fingernails clacked as she tapped the buttons on the screen.

I was dreadfully bored with this conversation and longed to go out and play. Being only six, I thought this was a fair desire, but Mom disagreed and shooed me away. I went to sulk by the adjacent closed checkout line.

The first thing my fuzzy, blond head turned to in the checkout line was a large microphone. This in particular drew my attention because of my small stature and its accessibility. It seemed to beckon to me as I squeaked my sneakers toward it.

The finished metal was cool and slightly damp under my small hands. The scratches in it felt like scars, and they seemed to form a stitch-like pattern. The microphone part of it was a small metal cylinder with perforations on the top like prison bars. There was also a button that you were to hold down as you talked, which I now watched the cashier woman do. I was buzzing with anticipation as I reached up for the button, a deep motivation guiding my

hand, a dire curiosity, the tingling sensation that comes with the acquisition of knowledge.

I held down the button and paused. A crackle echoed around the store, the sound drifting down like sugar in tea. I spoke, my tongue bouncing spryly off the Ls: "Hello-hello-hello?"

Heads turned as Mom whirled around, smiling with her eyebrows high, trying in vain to be angry. She snapped, "Jakob!"

I blushed and looked down at my shoes, and the audience in the store smiled and laughed along with Mom. Then I grinned and glanced up at the laughter and the murmurs, and basked in this newfound limelight. But I either couldn't take the amount of attention or desired more; I lifted Mom's soft, black dress and ducked under.

Mom screamed in irritation and embarrassment as she flashed the entire store. I was bumped and scraped against stubbly legs as she tried to wrestle me out from under her. I resisted, but her stubble had the last laugh as I withdrew from the tiny pinpricks and ducked back out. Mom glanced around the store at the audience, trying to keep a smile on her face as she strangled me in her mind. After a long and serious lecture, she stood up, flustered, and finished checking out. As the cashier woman handed her the plastic bag of groceries, she grinned and said, "He must be fun at home."

II.

I gaze upon the expansive cave. Heaps of dark, glistening metal and thick, bubbling sludge litter the floor, and I retch.

I find myself on a highway cutting through an orange, barren desert, peering up at various green road signs. I can't quite look at them directly. All of them are counting down to one, over and over. I moan and thrash as I try to tear my eyes from the ever-counting signs. I am joined on the road by several piles of the metallic sludge, which begin to shift and rise. Standing, they vaguely resemble Transformers.

I dragged the vines of the sheets along with me as I stumbled to the trash can and vomited.

I was often referred to as the Duke of Puke. This nickname originated from an innocent childhood habit: I hurled a lot. But aside from the barf, the most interesting thing about my reputation was the dreams that I had prior to vomiting.

These dreams consisted mainly of a media I had absorbed (i.e. a movie, video game, TV show) twisted and warped into a nightmare that caused me deep mental pain. Saying “deep mental pain” sounds melodramatic, but in many ways it was. For instance, I had a dream based on a video game involving a stick figure. This all black, skinny stick figure is trying to push a massive boulder, but to no avail. Though he knows he can’t move it, he keeps trying. I felt the hopelessness of his effort branded into my mind; I tossed and turned in bed, moaning, opening my eyes to rid myself of the dream, but returning right back to it when I closed them.

In another, I am standing on a huge loop-the-looping race track. The track is lit only by glowing strips of iridescent neon lights of every color. These lights also adorn my skin-tight black bodysuit and my . . . electric rollerskates? I look to either side of me and see similarly dressed individuals, each with a different color pattern of neon lights. I brush back my unusually long and bronze locks. I am in a race.

Pitch black stoplights appear to start us off, and they begin to count down. Red, yellow, red, green, yellow, red. Still counting down. I squirmed in bed, a weight upon my stomach.

There is a momentary blur in the dream, and the race begins. But I can’t move. I feel like a newborn child with weak, undeveloped legs. I stand on the track as other racers speed by me.

I fell out of bed onto my side, groaning, my stomach twisting into a knot.

Somehow I begin moving, and I speed down the tracks. There are a few floating objects near me, and I move toward one and touch it. My hair flies back as blue energy propels me swiftly forward, straight into another racer. The collision sends reverberations down my spine. I felt the bile rising in my throat.

I try to stand up, but my newborn legs have struck again. I am continuously jostled by other racers, and I fall over onto the track. *Why am I even doing this?* I ask myself. A racer tears over my stomach with one of his skates.

I rolled around a few times on the carpet and vomited. My sister and brother were standing outside the doors of their rooms, looking down at me.

I had been crying and screaming the whole time.

III.

The dull glow of the lamppost grew into the flash of a brilliant star as I squinted out the window. The flutter of smooth voices drifted past my ears from the front of the car. My black and white clothes itched, but my excitement overcame the slight irritation. I was the black Power Ranger.

The plastic grip on the bottom of my Mighty Power Ranger feet gave slightly upon the marble tiles, and I slipped and then righted myself in the entrance of the hall. The bustling and swarming of people reverberated off every surface, and I launched into the midst of it, the floor reflecting the warm light of large ceiling bulbs, the kind you see in grocery stores. I swerved and maneuvered through clumps and clogs of people, my nimble movements made possible by a miniature stature and an admiration for kung fu movies.

Along the way, I brushed against soft, dark green pants below rough, brown, button-down shirts. I gazed up in awe at gleaming belt buckles speaking of long ago wars, and delicate, colorful badges upon broad shoulders. I felt empty when I made it through the crowd, so I waited for Mom and Dad to join me. Out of boredom, I blasted a few bystanders with my laser gun.

It was the seasonal Halloween carnival night for the local Cub Scout pack. The event was pretty straightforward: weeks before, you were encouraged to sign up on a list that said you were going to build a carnival game for the carnival night, then you went home and thought up some game where you would have to knock down a pyramid of soda cans with a Nerf gun, the process usually involving the Cub Scout's parent finding the cans and the Cub Scout playing with the gun. There were always some actually creative games, though. My brother was the Scout at the time, and Mom was his den leader. It was she that I actually glanced around for, knowing Dad would be off talking to some other dad, standing

awkwardly with his hands in his pockets due to his arms-length attitude towards most Cub Scout activities. But Mom was nowhere to be seen. I worried about where she was, so I weaved my way to the carnival game nearest to Dad and stood next to it, knowing Mom would eventually make her way towards Dad.

There was no sight of Mom, but I soon heard a strange voice. It had a strong Southern drawl, which was unusual to me. I hadn't heard anyone with that kind of voice during the few minutes that I was standing next to Dad, so I glanced towards the door, thinking it was a newcomer. It was there I witnessed the strange individual. The first thing I noticed was her enormous, gray, beehive hair.

The owner of this boisterous 'do also had large, red, spherical earrings, which swung with every turn of the head, and garish lipstick that echoed the earrings. She was wearing the Boy Scout adult uniform, but I had never seen her before. She stopped talking, and I watched her approach. The woman was making her way towards me and Dad.

She talked a few seconds with Dad, and I was puzzled. Why would he talk to such a strange woman that he didn't even know? My fear building, I crept over to where they were standing.

She noticed me, and turned and said, "Hi, sweetie!" Her earrings swung, and she bared yellow, rotting teeth.

I backed away, my breath coming and going in gasps and sighs. The question remained: *Where is my mom?*

The woman bent down and looked me in the face. She smelled like old lady perfume and an attic. She spoke softly, and in a regular, reassuring voice. "It's okay honey, I'm just wearing a costume."

I retreated, my fear and confusion piling upon each other like a mental dog-pile, with any trace of rational thinking buried underneath. I was anything but reassured. I screamed, sobs growing in my throat.

"What have you done with my mom?"

The woman took my hand and led me outside of the hall, though I offered plenty of resistance. She bent down again, and took off her hair. My eyes grew wide. She took out her teeth. She was trying to transform into Mom. I didn't believe the ruse. The shape-shifting monster that stole my mother would not get the best of me.

She bent down and spoke to me again in that regular voice. "Look! See? It's me!" She held me away from her so I could see her face clearly, and I almost believed it. But my mortification pushed through.

"You're not my mom! I want my mom!" I ran into the hall, bawling, and the beast followed me.

I felt lost. My eyes were sore from sobbing and tears dried on my cheeks. The stranger had thankfully stopped pursuing me. I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. I just stood there, looking for Mom. I was quickly noticed by the owner of the carnival game I had apparently been standing in front of, a middle-aged man with brown hair and peaceful dark eyes.

He asked me, "What's wrong?"

I spoke through a renewal of blubbering, "I-I've l-lost my m-m-mom."

"Oh. Well sit up here," he said as he patted the white plastic table that his carnival game was set upon. He then took a ping-pong ball out of a plastic bin, and asked me, "What's your name?" He said it calmly, like he wasn't talking to a child, but to an old friend with a broken heart.

"J-J-Jakob Bower."

He smiled when he heard me say my full name. "Okay," he replied. Leaning his elbows on the table, he took a pen and began writing on the ping-pong ball, in a very neat print, my full name. "Here you go, Jakob," he said as he handed me the ping-pong ball. He wasn't humoring me, as I had observed many adults do before.

I slowly reached for the proffered ball. Years of sitting on a patio watching the sun set and gathering around a table to warm welcomes of, "Come dine with us!" flashed past my eyes as I grasped the ball. I looked up at his content but lonely face and muttered, "T-Thank you." A warm, tired voice called my name, and we both looked up to see who it was.

It was Mom. I jumped off the table and hugged her, crying again, but this time they were tears of joy. She hugged me back, then saw my old friend and turned to chat with him.

The two of them talked and laughed for a few minutes, and then Mom and I walked off to find Dad. We found my brother and piled into our humble, brown van.

I fiddled with the ping-pong ball absentmindedly. The brilliant shine of a streetlight faded back to a comforting glimmer as I opened my eyes. I didn't think I caught the man's name.

IV.

I leaned against the first of the monkey bars, the sun-warmed yellow metal a distant recognition in my mind, and peered over the edge of the perforated black platform to the packed mulch below. I stood there, thinking. *If I were a superhero, what powers would I have? What would I call myself? Would I be a good guy or bad guy?* As I continued to think, I grasped the second bar, stepped off the platform, and swung.

I went off at a steady pace, one hand going forward, the second hand joining the first, and so on. I continued on in this fashion until about halfway through, when I paused, still swinging a bit, and hung there. While a bullet of a thought ricocheted through my mind (possibly over the color of my cape), my arms, stretched taut like rubber bands threatening to snap, began to shake and spasm from the strain. They eventually gave up their grasp upon the bar, and I plummeted.

After the blur of the fall, I found myself sitting, mouth open and resting on my right knee, which was tucked against me, my left knee splayed outwards. For a few seconds I sat there, staring at my hands resting on my ankle, and I puzzled over the perfect landing that I had just performed as a sliver of drool snaked its way down my thigh. As I stood up to wipe away the majority of saliva I had left on my knee, I glanced down and found that there was more to my peculiar landing than I had expected.

What I discovered was a small, two-front-teeth shaped indentation, which, after a second, filled up with blood like the opening of minuscule floodgates. The blood flowed in a small rivulet down the side of my leg and stained my sock a deep crimson hue. As soon as I saw all that blood, I expected to be enveloped by a surge of pain almost immediately. But there was no pain to be felt, just a slight numbness in my knee that caused me to limp as I walked over to where my teachers were sitting, chatting.

As I approached my kindergarten teachers' position, they noticed me and inquired as to "What's wrong, honey?"

I responded with a straight-forward description that I had "fallen off of the monkey bars and my teeth went in my knee," then a mime of the aforementioned and a gesture at the blood flowing down my leg.

They responded with a "Ooh, here sweetie, let's have a look at that," so I complied and held my leg up so one of the teachers could dab a paper towel to my knee. As she administered the paper towel, the two others resumed chatting and left me thinking about the bizarre injury. Once the blood had stopped flowing, the teacher placed a Band-Aid on my knee and gave a dismissive "You're alright now, sweetie, you can go and play."

So I limped away, my subconscious guiding my legs off, while my mind whirled and crunched. I had come upon the realization that pain could be overcome. If I could overcome pain, I could overcome anything.

V.

My pencil darted across the paper. I breathed sharply through my nose in frustration as I rubbed a mistake from existence. I felt the eraser; it was hot under my red fingers. I was that kid in class who doodled on his math homework.

I was six. No, not in age—I was the number 6. The hero, the good guy, and a secret agent (double-oh-six), to name a few. 6 specifically because it was my favorite number, and this most likely because of my interest in the patterns it made, the ways it performed alongside the odd numbers in the Swan Lake of mathematics. Especially 6's relationship with 3 and 9, which intrigued me, and made me think of 6 as the black sheep of the even numbers, pirouetting among the odds, because of how 6 so openly associates itself with 3 and 9. I connected with 6, both of us outcasts, weirdos.

But enough self-pity. Let's move on to 4, the damsel in distress. 4 because of when you write it in the A-missing-its-left-leg form, the extra line coming out of the right side of it resembled a pony-tail. And being 6's girlfriend, she was often kidnapped because of

6's secret ties with the Odd family. Because of that, 6 would often have to rescue her, and in turn try to disrupt any schemes 9 was brewing up.

So I guess I should detail 9, bad guy, crime boss, and corrupt government official forcing his will with terror and violence. 9 was evil because of the manipulations it carries out in mathematics, more specifically the patterns it makes in addition and multiplication. 81: $8 + 1 = 9$. 72: $7 + 2 = 9$. Also you can see it here: $9 \times 5 = 45$ and $9 \times 6 = 54$, a switcheroo of the numbers.

But bad guys aren't bad guys without evil, unintelligent henchmen to assist in carrying out their evil duties. For this role I chose 3, because of how everything divisible by 9 is also divisible by 3; $3 \times 3 = 9$. I also chose 3 because of the value difference between 3 and 9 makes me think of 3 as being a slightly dimwitted fellow, in contrast to his superior leader, 9.

No doodle is good though without guns for the good guys and bad guys to stand behind. For this, I chose 7, and it was just the simple task of turning it sideways and positioning it in the invisible hands of the numbers. The opposing numbers then took defensive positions around the leftover numbers or hunkered down in parenthetical entrenchments.

Thus I started an endless war of mathematical boundaries. And thus I started new, unimaginable thought processes, processes that begged for knowledge. Cats have nine lives. I have one. Curiosity killed the cat. But I'm still living.

where art thou?
here, living my life in this world.

anna herndon

REGULARITY.

Structure.

All things teenagers need in their lives in order to develop properly.

See, that's never really worked out for me. When regularity sets in, boredom is never far behind. And boredom can lead to some pretty interesting stuff.

All that you are about to read has spawned from moments when there was simply nothing left to do but create my own world where wisdom does not reign.

the roar of freedom faded

Though Harleys are the classics, Low Riders and other brands have started creeping into the market, giving the average buyer more options. Vespas, too, have made their way into the American stores, filling the more eco-friendly niche. Still, there's nothing like a classic of your own, remodeled and painted. At a street fair once, I saw one that had been airbrushed a bright cherry red, with a Coca-Cola box from the olden days of glass bottles attached to the back. Even the rider's helmet blazed fire truck red. Another time, on a road trip, the car passed by a whole gang of Harleys, each rider's helmet sporting a vibrant mohawk in a neon color.

Motorcycles were my first obsession. Not the machines themselves, but rather the idea of racing down a road with nothing between me and the air and asphalt except a heavy jacket. It enthralled me.

"How old do you have to be to get a license for one?"

"Well, mine says I was eighteen. I got a friend's brother to let me ride his, though, and, uh, a little five o'clock shadow can do wonders. The DMV guy never had a clue. It might'a changed since then, I dunno." The old marines veteran took another puff on his

cigarette. “Though I can tell you this: the state test is the way to go. Really, they teach you all you need to know right there on the road!” His gruff laugh accompanied a cloud of smoke, momentarily obscuring his face.

Why exactly am I here again? I wondered, shifting from foot to foot and scanning the humming crowd. “Here” was the rooftop balcony of a swanky hotel in downtown Washington, D.C, twenty-one stories above a lit but almost deserted highway of stressed asphalt.

I had come here for the thirty-fifth reunion of my grandfather’s marine corps unit—the first one without him. So far, the evening had consisted of the twenty or so retired men and their wives reminiscing, drinking (I wasn’t supposed to notice that part), and overall giving a fine example of their generation’s attitudes. All meaning I often was pushed to the sidelines of talks, both for being a girl and a kid. Not a fun evening. The *real* reason I stood here, instead of staying back home and getting ready for the school year to start, was that Mom and I were escorting my grandmother to the event. Consequentially, there was no one here we knew except for some guys who remembered mom from when she was little and they were still serving.

“Yeah, but the state test is really the best. By far.” The man hitched his shoulders, readjusting the worn but clean leather jacket and fishing vest that covered his rough button-down. “That way, if ya get stopped,” he winked, “well, you’ve got something to show ‘em.”

My mother, finally realizing the corrupting influence this conversation could have on my tendency towards excitement, interjected with the decision that the time had come to retire to the room. We said our goodbyes and good nights, receiving last jokes and second-hand cigarette smoke.

I had found a fellow thrill-seeker in the marines. And now I have a first-hand account of just what it takes to live to the extreme.

29,029 feet

You know how in movies the first drops of rain fall just as the hero is about to do something big? Like kiss the girl? Or maybe discover the murderer? Well, movies aren’t all wrong.

But I'm the only character here, and there aren't any cute guys to smooch. And I'm pretty sure there aren't any dead bodies around, either. Instead, I'm about fifty feet in the air, clinging to bark and branches that are quickly turning a dark, English-countryside brown.

Wedging myself deeper between two branches, I stare out over the graying fields and trees, all enveloped in a deepening haze. The regal trees had started to drip. This was the kind of rain where everything would be soaked. And *fast*. But it was so beautiful, like a scene out of an oil painting, it made me want to just sit there for a little while, wrapping my climbing rope more firmly around my waist. I absentmindedly rubbed the knots at the rope's ends, the tightly wound fibers melted together to prevent fraying. I leaned out a little further from the tree, trusting my weight completely to the tough blue rope and a single branch, knowing neither would let me fall. When my light down vest—perfect for the kind of sunny spring day that had disappeared half an hour ago—finally turned a shade darker than usual, I started to think about returning to earth.

Now, that usually just means climbing down, away from the patchwork sky, towards the still-frozen ground. Of course, that's what someone who had actually looked at the weather report before going outside would do. Or someone who keeps an exit route available at all times—a practice I detest. Not having done either of those, I had consequently trapped myself with no choice at all. The tree I perched on for the moment vaguely resembled a Q-tip, rising about thirty feet in the air before bursting into a bush of thick branches. I had reached it by swinging from another tree, when all was dry.

So you can see my dilemma. Cue the dramatic music that signals the hero of your film is thinking very deeply about something. After many minutes of pensive pondering—while steadily getting wetter—your hero, yours truly, decides to jump. And no, not straight down.

Next to my tree stood another one, about the same height and thickness. I planned to leap from my tree to the other, which possessed branches all the way down its height, making the earthward decent through the thin, misty air much easier than the one I was currently considering.

To ready myself, I unwound the rope from its knot and wrapped it around my waist, tucking the ends in to make sure it wouldn't

catch on anything and send me sprawling. This mode of rope-transportation let me keep the rope in easy reach while using both my hands to climb. Or in this case, to fall.

Finally ready, I shuffled out onto a thick branch, grasping the one directly above my head for dear life. Wobbling slightly, I forced myself to stand fully upright as my foothold curved downward and my handhold steadily ascended. When the tapering branches couldn't hold my weight for another moment, I swiftly gauged the distance and leaped.

There were no hanging-in-mid-air, life-flashing-before-my-eyes moments, so don't expect any. Only the rain stinging my face for a split second, then my reaching digits hitting sharp bark, and the rest of my body following.

According to Newton's third law, my bodily throwing itself at the trunk of this unfortunate pine caused it to sway violently and for me to lose my grip on the limbs, slipping frantically for several feet before crazily, finally, luckily, my forearm hit something hard. I grabbed at this new miracle branch, my legs still scrabbling for a foothold before my arms gave out. The equal and opposite reactions, including the retaliations of the *Pinus palustris* I attached to, all proved our good Sir Isaac wonderfully correct.

I ended up hanging like a sloth, my legs wrapped around the trunk of the tree. But I was safe, and on the right tree. I took a minute to get my breath under control and examine the considerable rips in my palms, which grabbing for purchase on passing branches had given me. I took the rest of the climb down very slowly despite the steady downpour. Something about the adrenaline rush had left me feeling shaky and elated, a combination that made me distrustful of my reflexes.

But it had been great, just falling free for a moment while fate rested somewhere far away. I knew that danger had its hooks in me and didn't want to let go.

split seconds and falling up

Clichés are useful sometimes. They really, honestly are, no matter how utterly aggravating they can be. The one I'm talk-

ing about specifically here is the whole idea that “riding a horse through a golden meadow feels like flying.” And clichés have to start somewhere, and this one is still absolutely true.

Now, I’m not talking about the whole wearing-a-dress-to-clothe-ten-elephants-with-a-bustle-as-big-as-a-pumpkin kind of horseback riding with the funny Victorian hat or anything. Or even the professional high-tech-saddle-and-fancy-spotless-pants kind of riding. I’m talking the worn-out saddle at least thirty years old, torn up jeans, and helmet on its third owner kind. The field had just begun to thaw from a brutal winter freeze, and the sky displayed a hopeful blue-purple.

No matter your aircraft, flying is still flying.

The rusty red gate shrieked and yielded under my gloved hand, begrudgingly swinging back on its axis to create a space just wide enough for me to slip through, followed by the lead rope, then a curious nose, and finally the other thousand pounds of my horse, Simon. Decidedly against the sounds emitted by the gate, he snorted and shied sideways a little, dancing to the extent of his lead rope until his rear end was free of the fence line. This was an impressive maneuver for him, since he was a large horse, almost as tall as the fence itself, and a good half-foot taller than me. He was old, too, almost twenty. Though he had technically retired last year, I still rode him two or three times a week to keep him in shape.

Today, we were going to do a miniature trail ride, just around his pasture once or twice, since the surrounding area was still too soggy from the thaw. The pasture was huge, almost a quarter mile of meadow long, with a small stand of trees in the center, and a ditch running straight through it.

Looping the lead rope loosely around a fence post, I reached up to the saddle horn and heaved myself up, shoving one foot in a stirrup to help. Once I settled in the saddle, it only took a small tug on the lead rope to free it from the fence.

“Good boy, hey babe, it’s okay,” I murmured reassuringly to him as I stood in the saddle, reaching up along his neck to undo the halter and quickly grabbing it before it hit the ground. I reeled the rope head harness in and let drop to the side of the dirt path. Gathering up the reins of the bridle Simon had been wearing underneath the halter, I clicked my tongue to send him into a walk.

He moved slowly at first, working the early-morning stiffness out of his joints. Soon though, we had sped up to a brisk trot. I had first started horseback riding at a summer camp, and had found that it was a perfect cure for my tendency towards danger. The feeling of power as I cantered was enough of a thrill to keep me out of tall trees and other likewise foolish situations, so my parents had helped me to finance the leasing of a horse from our local riding barn. I now had my weekly thrill fix, and everyone was the happier for it.

Simon responded to my voice commands, and we sped smoothly into a canter. The slight hills of the pasture rolled out neatly before us as I guided him around and over small dips and mole hills. Once we had made a complete loop of the meadow, I turned us to the inside. We cantered steadily near the woods, slowing a little to accommodate the more frequent fallen branches that littered our path.

As we reached the first tree, I shifted my weight, signaling to Simon that we should veer around the pines. However, he had different ideas.

Stubbornly staying straight on course, he barreled between two trees, making me duck to avoid the branches. I could feel the thunder of his hooves on the rocky ground, and gave up on trying to turn him out of the trees. Instead, I focused on keeping us away from the rapidly approaching trunks.

I glanced up to judge the distance until the meadow opened again, and therefore was unable to see the fallen tree that came across our path. Simon saw it, though.

I was thrown off balance as the two of us became airborne, soaring the two feet necessary to clear the log, nothing supporting me but Simon's sleek body, and nothing supporting him but the clear air that flowed past us in a constant stream until there was nothing else to do but rise up to the momentum and lean into the jump so that we were the perfect pair. Still together, we hit the ground.

Nothing could ever compare to that feeling as we trotted out of the woods, that I had been thrown out of control and had it suddenly returned to me seconds later. It had shaken me, not knowing where the ground was. It was a wild new taste of freedom. Like falling up.

terror maze

"Which way do the streets go again? Is up that way or that way?"

"Um, I don't remember." Mom glanced down at the map in her hand nervously. When she looked up, her mouth had quirked into an oh-well half smile. "Let's head that way and see."

We set out, dodging around the mid-afternoon foot traffic. To be honest, the towering Manhattan architecture was more intimidating than any crowd of bumbling tourists or city-hardened natives. But here we were, walking the streets between 31st and 32nd.

It's become our custom to walk somewhat apart from one another, so we might be mistaken as just happening to go the same way. I can tell it's just a phase she's tolerating, though, because I always keep just close enough so that I can still distinguish her footsteps from the ensemble of city noises around us.

When we finally reach the end of the block, we are greeted by a sign that confirms we have, indeed, been walking in the right direction. Mom steps up next to me, "excuse me" and "oh, go ahead"-ing her way through the growing crowd on the corner.

She says something to the effect of, "We made it!" But my attention has already been pulled away by a folding table on the opposite corner. Bright flags of color flap in the automobile breeze as a weathered old man sits in the shade of a ivory concrete wall, holding a chocolate-hued scarf the color of his skin up to a passing woman. The rest of his wares spin and dazzle the whole corner, firmly anchored by clips to the wire racks.

"Uh, huh? Yeah, yes," is my intelligent reply to Mom's statement. It's moments like these I wish I had a camera.

I am still staring at the scene around me when the crowd surges forward, off the curb. Assuming this is a sign that it would be wise to walk, I dart off the curb and onto 31st street, caught up in the surge of suits.

I am immediately confronted by a large black SUV, who probably has the right of way. He definitely has the traffic light on his side.

Surprise, surprise, it wasn't safe to walk just then. Just as I leap onto the opposite curb, the DON'T WALK flips to the friendly WALK, and the sane people from the curbside crowd join me on the other side.

Stupid, I know. How many times are you told, “Don’t jump into speeding traffic”? And how many times do you actually listen? Part of leaping without looking and not heeding the scoldings administered by freaked-out parents is just knowing that I *can*. That there’s a kind of terror in everyday life that, just for a second, makes you Superman.

my precocious childhood

sydney curtis

I.

MY ADULthood WAS UPON ME. I had just been to the dentist, and he had informed me that it was time to make the switch to grown-up floss, instead of the little plastic dinosaur flossers I had been using. In my third-grade mind, using grown-up floss made you *way* more of an adult than that dumb puberty stuff. Being that this was the first day of my adulthood, and tomorrow I could practically be opening a retirement account, I insisted that we stop at Kroger on the way home to pick up more floss. We bought a six pack of the mint flavored kind.

I could barely contain my excitement. All through dinner, the floss filled my mind. I attempted to focus on practicing piano, but every time I tried to play, my thoughts shifted to my new dental cleaning agent. The bar lines on the paper turned into little strings of floss in my head, so animated it was practically a Disney movie. I tried to do my math homework, only to find that the numbers were little strands of floss. Finally, it was time for the inaugural using of the floss. My dad was upstairs reading to my brother, and my mom was working in our bonus room. I removed the pack of plastic-wrapped floss from the Kroger bag. Obviously, I needed to cut away the dastardly plastic wrap that was the only thing impeding my precious adulthood. Since this was no ordinary floss, I couldn't cut it with oh-so-ordinary scissors. Instead, I went for the paring knife that was so sharp I wasn't even allowed to pick it up. But hey, I was almost an adult! I could handle anything. I put the knife in one hand, and my other hand on the package. With a swell of proud confidence filling my chest, I swiftly sliced through the plastic. I was another step closer to becoming an adult!

Then, I saw the blood.

At first, I was confused. Where was it coming from? I didn't feel anything odd when I sliced. Then, I realized that because the mo-

tion had been so quick, I probably didn't register the finger-slicing aspect. I dropped the knife back into the open drawer in shock. Sure enough, upon inspection of my left index finger, there was an inch long cut that went through the skin on my fingertip. I cupped my right hand under the finger to try and contain the profuse amount of crimson liquid. It felt warm as it began to pool up in my palm. The blood began to trickle over the side of my hand, at first slowly, and then coming over like a waterfall. I began running upstairs to get my dad. When I returned to my house very late that night, I noticed how murder scene-esque I had made the kitchen look, with blood spattered all over the white tile floor and red drips leading up to the white carpeted stairs.

I ran into my brother's room while my dad was readying him for bed. In an oddly calm voice, I informed my dad that I had cut myself. Not thinking much of it, he told me to go get a Band-Aid from the kitchen cabinet. This time, with a more insistent tone, I said, "Father, I believe you need to *divert* your *attention* over here." He glanced over, did a double take, and then said, or rather yelled, one of those four-letter words that good little children are never supposed to use.

He screamed to my mom, "Lesley?! You need to come here. *Now.*" She bolted into the room, saw the copious amount of blood, said another four-letter word, and ran downstairs. She returned with a paper towel and a washcloth. She instructed me to keep the washcloth wrapped tightly around my finger, and attempted to mop up some of the blood with the paper towel. In the most collected voice she could have possibly used in that particular situation, she told me that we should probably go to the emergency room and I would most likely be getting stitches. If this had happened yesterday, I would've been very annoyed at the prospect of having to get stitches. But for my first day of adulthood, it was pretty awesome to have an injury that warranted an Emergency Room visit. The idea that I would have everyone crowded around me, asking me what happened in school the next day *totally* overruled the blood and pain.

My mom led me to the car, my finger wrapped tightly in the washcloth. It was way past my bedtime, which also made me feel super mature. The night was pitch black and very cold. We got in

the red CR-V. In an attempt to distract me, my mom let me listen to G-105, which was a huge treat. We typically listen to NPR. I sat in the front seat so my mom could keep an eye on me, which was just the icing on the cake of adulthood I had just bitten into—and I didn't even have my stitches yet. As we drove down Highway 40, I stared out at the passing trees and listened to the booming pop music that was on the radio. My mom glanced over occasionally to ask if I was doing okay. I nodded and kept looking out the window.

In about twenty-five minutes, we had reached the emergency room entrance. We walked in, only to discover a thirty-person-long line awaiting us. My mom told me to go sit in one of the waiting chairs while she stood in line. Somewhere in the chaotic rush to get out the door, she had grabbed my book, *The Magician's Nephew*, and one of those handheld Twenty Questions games. I sat quietly, half reading, half observing the sick, ghastly people coming in and out of the waiting room. After waiting for what felt like a year, it was my turn to get checked up by the nurse. The nurse inspected my finger, told me I needed stitches, and that the wait for the pediatric surgeon would be at least an hour and a half. My mom led me back to the chairs to wait.

The time passed slowly. I tried to sleep, but the chairs were too uncomfortable. I tried to read, but I was too sleepy. After not one and a half hours, but three, the pediatric surgeon showed up so I could get my stitches. The doctor sat me on one of those cushioned exam tables covered in that weird, semi-translucent paper. I got very excited when I saw that there was a TV mounted on the wall. It was turned to Disney Channel, which I never got to watch because, according to my parents, "The kids weren't respectful to their elders." Just as the doctor was going to stitch me up, the show I was watching, *Sister, Sister*, froze on the screen. There went my distraction plan A. To try to re-distract myself, I attempted to start a conversation with the doctor. Just to get it going, I said in my super-nonchalant-third-grader-talking-to-stranger voice, "So. . . how many dental floss-related injuries do you think you get each year?"

II.

It was blazing hot outside. The rubbery mat that spanned the playground was almost melting. The yellow, metal jungle gym was scorching, so playing options were limited. As usual, I had brought a chapter book with me to recess, so the burning jungle gym and slide were no problem for me. I sat in the shady corner next to the gym, reading a mystery novel that my teacher said was *very* advanced for a second grader. I found the book to be much more interesting than the kids my age, who reminded me of crazy, uncivilized chimps. I became totally engrossed in the gore-free, lighthearted whodunit. So engrossed, in fact, that I didn't hear the stampede of sandal-clad feet nearing me.

"Hey, Sydney," some obnoxious boy screamed at me in a questioning way. "We heard you like Jason. Is it true?"

Okay. He had my attention. I peered up at this child who had the nerve to ask me that through my thick bangs. I sighed deeply. In my most I'm-more-mature-than-you-could-ever-hope-to-be voice, I said, "I expect everyone in my crowd to make fun of my proud protestations of faith in romance."

This was a vocab bombshell of a sentence for this jerkface. He stood there, dumbfounded. Right behind him was my teacher, who had rushed over when she saw the mob of children surrounding her goody-two-shoes, line-leading, paper-grading, princess student. Her face mirrored the expression of the mean boy.

* * *

I may have been an advanced kid, but I certainly didn't think of that crazy, rhyming line off the top of my head. It was from one of my favorite songs, "Wonderful Guy" from the musical *South Pacific*. Yes, I was a weird Broadway-obsessed kid. I would spend my Saturday afternoons watching *Cats* (the musical, not the species itself), *Lion King*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. I could sing every song from *The Little Mermaid*, and had the rooftop dance scene from *Mary Poppins* memorized. I was convinced that my destiny on Earth was to write a musical version of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Still haven't gotten around to that.

* * *

But alas, these people surrounding me had no idea that I had not just thought this up. After the initial shock of it wore off, the boy looked back to his hoard of followers and said, "Come on, y'all. She's a freak. Let's go." They ran off, probably to go tell Jason that I was weird and to ignore me.

That left my teacher. I had no idea why she looked so surprised. In my innocent voice, I asked, "Is there something you need me to do, Ms. McFadden?"

"No . . ." she trailed off, shaking her head in bewilderment, and walked away.

I thought nothing more of the incident until that night. I was practicing piano when I heard my mom laughing hysterically. I was curious, so I traipsed into the living room. I found her on the phone, practically crying from laughing so hard. I was almost a little concerned. She finished laughing, said thank you to the caller, and hung up.

"So, Sydney. That was your teacher." I instantly became very nervous. I didn't know what was going on. "She told me about what happened at school." I racked my brain for anything abnormal about the day. Nothing stood out. "She said you used some pretty big words at a boy."

My eyes widened. "I promise, Mommy, I didn't swear."

"I know," she laughed. "You used song lyrics as your defense mechanism."

III.

The November air was cool, and clouds covered the sky. It was only 6:15, but the sun had already set. I sat in my bed, listening to the "mature" mix CD that I had made just a few hours ago. Instead of the usual Jonas Brothers and Hannah Montana, my speakers were filled with the soaring voice of Alicia Keys. I flipped onto my stomach and stared expectantly at the entrance of my neighborhood, which I could barely see through the trees that stood guard around my house. A stream of headlights entered my neighbor-

hood. I would straighten myself up every time I saw them, only to discover that my house wasn't their final destination. Finally, a Honda Odyssey pulled into our driveway. I scrambled to my mirror to make sure the concealer I had borrowed from my mom had been effective, and then, in order to seem cool, just sat right back down on my bed.

I glanced out to see the object of my romantic interest, Graeme, and his little brother running through our front yard in what appeared to be a race to the front door. Graeme was two grades ahead of me and is one of the sweetest, funniest people I have ever met, even to this day. He was one of the only boys I knew who had the same tall, gangly figure I had, which was one of the main things I found to be so nice about him. His parents loved me, and his brother and I were very good friends. Everything just seemed so perfect. But, being the innocent boy that he was, I'm sure he had no idea of my feverish love for him.

I sat on my bed, looking as cool as a cucumber. I heard the front door open and close and the sound of chatter in the hall. Feet pounded up our staircase. I assumed my most casual position. My bedroom door was flung open.

"*Sydney!*" Graeme bolted in.

"Oh, hey," I said, in my most normal voice. He began talking in his usual rapid-fire way about the amazing book he just read and ohmygosh-did-you-see-that-game-last-night-and-who-do-you-think's-gonna-win-the-NCAA-tourney-this-year, and about eighty other things, too. He talked to me for maybe ten minutes, and then he left to go construct Lego castles in my brother's room.

After I had spent about thirty minutes sitting in solitude like a meditating monk, we were called down to dinner. In the dining room, I subtly tried to snag the seat next to Graeme. My mom noticed, even though I'm sure I was very stealthy. She intentionally pushed him towards my seat. He took the chair to my left. Being that we only knew each other through church, it was fitting that we pray before the meal. His mom was a Presbyterian minister, so we nominated her to lead.

"Please join hands," she said in that calm minister voice. Not thinking much of it, Graeme reached out and grabbed my hand. I flinched. His mom's prayer seemed to last forever. All I could think

about was my hand, which felt clammier than that of a guilty murderer awaiting the jury's verdict. I was so scared that he would notice and somehow become enlightened about my feelings for him.

Finally, she said, "Amen." The grueling prayer was over. We passed around beef bourguignon. The mashed potatoes were heaped and steaming and the greenbeans were fresh from the Farmer's Market. After quickly devouring our food, the kids got up from the table and went to watch *Shrek*. My brother got the movie going, and we settled in. Graeme and I sat on the couch, and our brothers sat on the floor. As the movie started, I realized how big this was. I was sitting on a couch with my crush in a dark room watching a movie. Just disregard the fact that our siblings were there, and that we were on opposite ends of the couch, and it was practically a date!

About twenty minutes later, my mom walked in with a plate of gingersnaps and chocolate chip cookies. We passed it around. I took five, and Graeme, being the polite guest that he was, took just two. I silently ate my cookies, pretending to be interested in the animated green ogre on the screen.

As I had just finished wolfing down the last of my cookies, Graeme said in his usual polite tone of voice, "Hey, do you mind if I have a few more cookies?"

He had caught me off guard. My super chill voice wasn't ready. Trying to imitate my usual tone, I said, "Whatever. I couldn't care less."

I had blown it! Instead of sounding like a mature girl who was very relaxed in her male-female interactions, I sounded like a blasé imp of a girl. I started mentally slapping myself. How could I be so stupid? Why couldn't I have just kept my cool? Well, there went my chance of marrying him.

Graeme proceeded to get up and return with a few more cookies, while I inflicted internal abuse upon myself. He immediately became zoned out in the movie and ate his dessert. I had seen it many times, so I was just focused on my totally failed attempt at winning over my crush.

The movie ended exactly an hour and a half after my normal bedtime, so as soon as the screen went black, Graeme's family quickly gathered their belongings, gave goodbye hugs and hand-

shakes, and drove away in the minivan. My father went upstairs to put my brother to bed. I started to follow them, but my mom held me back.

“So, did you have fun tonight?” she asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Yeah, it was cool. . .” I trailed off. Of course, it hadn’t been cool in my head. I was positive that my rude response to his innocent question had ruined my chances of him ever liking me.

“You know, those are some of the nicest people I know. The parents are so interesting, and their kids are so polite. I have to say, I wouldn’t mind at all if you married one of those boys.” She laughed, probably because I was blushing a deep red.

Little did she know, this was no laughing matter. My plan for the rest of my life had been foiled. All because of a stupid cookie.

IV.

We walked out of the icy, pitch black night and into the warm, welcoming buffet. My mom was right beside me, her thick, layered necklaces clacking together. Her high forehead was covered in wispy bangs, and her yellowish cheeks had a light swipe of rosy blush across them. Her painted mouth was twisted into the usual sarcastic smile. Her eyes were clear and sharp, although there were permanent bags under them that no amount of concealer could hide. Her feathery hair brushed against the middle of her graceful, swanlike neck. The steam added some moisture to her skin, usually bone dry.

We walked up to the host, surrounded by my dad’s family. We were so numerous that we almost took up a quarter of the space in the restaurant. My dad’s side of the family was all adults and older teenagers, so we sprawled out to cover every inch of available space. As everyone was taking their seat, I realized the awkward position I was in. I could sit with (or *try* to sit with) my teen cousins, which might not go well since I was only eleven, or I could be a little kid, like my brother, and sit with the adults. I decided to go for the cool teen table. I awkwardly placed myself between two of my older cousins.

“Oh, sorry, Maureen’s sitting there,” said my twenty-one-year-old cousin Cullen. I slid down a few seats, towards the edge of the table. No one objected verbally, but from the beginning, I could tell I wasn’t welcome. I tried to fit into their nerdy conversations. When they began talking about *Star Wars*, I tried to sound cool by informing them about the technology they used to make the holograms in the second movie. One of them shot me an irritated look, and it became clear to me that this *Star Wars* discussion was much more highbrow than the ones I was used to. With a heavy sigh, I picked up my tan plastic buffet plate, awkwardly wriggled out of my seat, and walked over to the plush booth where my mom and aunts were sitting.

My mom looked up. I could tell she knew exactly what had happened. She didn’t say anything, just slid over to make room for me on the soft booth seat. The table of women immediately started talking to me about five different things at once. My mom commented on the lack of veggies on my plate, my aunts laughed and said this was a buffet, it’s not like these vegetables would be beneficial to my health, anyway. The banter continued for a good hour. They inquired as to what I did in my free time, and how school was going. We ate our artery-clogging food, laughed, and then cleaned off our table.

Surprisingly, I left the buffet smiling. I was happy that I had fun, even though it wasn’t with the people that I intended it to be with. I guess I just wasn’t quite up to the teenage level yet. But really, how much *Star Wars* jargon and stats can an eleven-year-old know?

V.

The night was clear and dark. The sky wasn’t quite the inky blue that meant it was time to go to sleep. I was sitting at the piano, only half-focused on the score in front of me. The other half of my focus was on the driveway. The van should’ve been there ten minutes ago. I attempted to play the piece correctly, but all I could think about was that empty spot on the driveway.

I was in this slightly vegetative state for about fifteen more minutes, until out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a pair of head-

lights growing increasingly brighter. The van was here. In an attempt to seem like it didn't matter, I returned to the piece. Somehow, I managed to play it well this time.

"They're *he-ere!*" my mother sang (because we're just one of those families who sings instead of talks). *Okay*, I said to myself. *It's no big deal. It's only been two years. Just keep playing the piano like you don't notice them. No, Sydney, calm down. Shut up. Just shut up.*

My mom strutted to the front door. She flung it wide open. "*Hel-lo-o!*" she said in her same sing-song voice. My cousins came in, simultaneously greeting my parents with hugs and arguing about something. They were followed about fifteen seconds later by my aunt and uncle. My brother hurtled down the stairs, taking them two at a time. I could hear the loud, uneven thumping of his feet from the next room over. My cousins barely noticed his presence. They were too busy giving me a dual bear hug and trying to play my piano music wrong to mess me up. In the reflection of our freshly dusted piano, I could see my brother trying to join in the cajoling and fun, but it just wasn't working. I was instantly saddened by his hurt expression.

My cousins continued to lovingly harass me, but my brother was persistent in his attempts to get their attention. Finally, they turned around and greeted him with big smiles and slightly less enthusiastic bear hugs. He was happy to have gotten their attention. He had some pressingly important Lego castle to show them, so he tried to herd them upstairs to his room. They finally gave in, but on their way out of the room, they turned around, rolled their eyes at me, and gave me one of those I'm-really-too-old-for-this-nonsense looks. I half smiled back at them.

I went in to greet my aunt and uncle, who hugged me. Then, my talkative aunt immediately started to bombard me with questions that were phrased so that she could answer for me and talk more. I wryly smiled to myself, knowing that this could very well go on for another two hours.

Finally, my mom cut her off. "Hey, Sydney, do you think you and William could walk the dog? She's looking a little antsy."

I accepted the offer, and thanked her a thousand times in my head. I called up the stairs to my cousin. He came down, followed

closely by my brother. I asked William if he wanted to walk the dog with me. He accepted with vim and vigor that could only be a result of getting out of a situation with a kid as talkative as my brother.

As we were just about to walk out the door, it dawned on my brother that he was not included in this plan. He immediately ran over to my mother, and asked if he could please come with us.

My mom looked up at me. I gave her the *oh gosh no please* look. She shrugged her shoulders at me in a suck-it-up way, and said, "You can go if you promise to be respectful of their conversation."

My cousin and I simultaneously emitted audible groans of frustration. We both knew that if my brother accompanied us on the walk, we couldn't talk about high school and college stuff. It would have to be toned down for nine-year-old ears. We grudgingly walked out the front door, with my brother trailing us, already talking insanely loud.

We started the loop around the neighborhood. I had been prepared to try and include my sibling in the conversation, but once we rounded the first bend, it was clear my cousin had no intention of that. He walked in a way that blocked Graham from being beside us, and ignored his attempts at entering our discussion.

I felt plain awful. This sweet, little boy was trying so hard to fit in with the older kids, and it just wasn't working. Then, it hit me.

He was the new me. The new third wheel. The new little kid who was just an annoyance.

This realization made me happy at first. I was finally part of the accepted group! I was the one my older cousins wanted to talk to. I was no longer the ignored little kid.

But I knew how rejected my brother must have been feeling. He was just trying to be mature, trying to fit in with the older kids. But no matter what he said, no matter *how* impressive his metaphorical *Star Wars* jargon was, he was the baby. It could never work.

the write way

jolie de'luwa

1. beginnings

The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.
Anaïs Nin

HEAT TINGLED IN MY SWEATING HANDS as I looked around a room of drooping shoulders, blank eyes, and drool dripping from chins. It was as if they were all dead and only corpses sat in the pair of chairs at each long desk.

The year had been a mess of jumbled words and faltering friendships. Then, I always needed a friend by my side, needed to be active. I never wanted to be alone, and yet I never wanted to be the center of attention. It was a time of innocence, and with that innocence came constant problems.

Quietly, I set the four pages of wide-ruled paper down and rubbed my hands on my Bratz shirt. I wanted to skip my turn, but at the same time, I wanted people to hear my awesome story we had been “forced” to write.

At the front of the room, Mrs. Clark congratulated Darrell on his short, fictional story about a guy who was struggling with basketball. As he sat down, my eyes shot up to her, and my hand hesitated beside my head. Her face was pudgy and a little red, with wrinkles here and there. Her eyes darted around the room, their blue irises trying to locate her next victim.

When her eyes landed on me, I felt my stomach flip, and I winced. My hand was the only one really up, or at least half-way there. But I wasn't ready!

Oh, no . . . I don't want to go, Mrs. C! Don't make me go, please—

“Jolie,” she said, gesturing towards me. I dropped my hand immediately, brown eyes growing to the size of saucers. I wanted to shake my head “no,” but I could hardly move. My throat closed up, and I couldn't breathe. Mrs. Clark continued. “Do you want to go next?”

“Yeah, let’s go, Jolie!”

I didn’t know who had said it. Nothing really made sense to me in that moment. Somehow, I managed the trek from my seat in the middle of the classroom to the front of the room with my stapled papers. I didn’t recall picking up my paper, moving my feet, or turning to face the class. Everything was a total blur.

A moment of stiff silence engulfed the room, and I, panicked, looked at the curly red-headed woman to my right. She gave me a smile and gestured with her hand for me to commence. Again, my stomach felt weird. It clenched up, and my legs were already shaking with what would be my first case of stage fright.

“I was in the middle of life and death . . . No, really,” I began, my voice shaking terribly. As I read on, I attempted to control it. While I was trying not to make Katherine and her friends sound like nervous, babbling idiots, I was also failing at keeping my legs from trembling.

I’d written a story about Katherine Jones, her brother and sister, Jacob and Erin, and Katherine’s two best friends, April and Jason – who were cousins. Jacob was kidnapped one day, and a note was left that Katherine, her sister, and her friends had traveled from Durham, North Carolina to (a place I thought was on the coast) Jacksonville, South Carolina. By the end of the story, Erin had almost drowned, and the rest of the characters were in danger of dying by a machine that would cut them up into pieces. Katherine, though, had called the police with her mobile phone, and they were coming to the building in which they’d been detained. They escaped from death, and the two kidnappers were arrested.

“Mom said that if I ever did something like that again, I’d be grounded until I was forty.” I swallowed as I finished up and then blurted out the last line. *“Don’t worry, Mom,’ I said. I won’t ever do it again!”*

As I looked up at my classmates, I realized they were all fixedly staring at me, their eyes wide and hungry. Mrs. Clark was beaming my way, and she gave me a nice slap on the back. “Wow!” she laughed as I went to sit down. A few people were clapping, which made my pulse reverberate in my ears. I could hardly hear my teacher as she said, “That was an amazing story. I never thought you could do something that well, Jolie! I’m glad you were able to

give it a good plot. And to South Carolina? Wow . . .” She gave me another smile, which I returned feebly.

I buried my flushed face in my arms at my desk and listened to the other people read their stories.

Maybe . . . maybe if I keep doing this, I can start writing books like the big people! Like the lady who wrote that cat series. I need to read that book that Grandma gave me . . . It looks pretty . . . It's so messed up, though . . .

As I kept trailing on with the overly random thoughts in my head, school ended and I headed on home with my head high and a small smile dimpling my cheeks.

It was at that moment in my life that I realized I wanted to become a writer. If my peers were that amazed by a short story that made no sense, then why not write something big? And why not write something amazing?

I plopped down onto the cushioned bus seat with a light-hearted sigh. Above my head, it reached to where I could see nothing but a big mass of ocean-like, smooth fabric. I scratched my head, but immediately stopped when I disrupted the hair there. I patted my head as a remedy to the itchiness and then looked down at my backpack. As the bus pulled away, I took out my colorful notebook with butterflies and rainbow fish on the cover. I sat there for those twenty minutes and started to write.

2. me vs. writing

And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.
Sylvia Plath

Papers splashed onto the linoleum floor in a flurry of white corrupted with gray. Alana stood facing her cousin with intense passion in her ice blue eyes. Fists clenched, she pointed at the female standing across from her. “You don’t know *anything* about how hard this is for me!” she accused, eyes narrowed into slits.

“And you’re so dimwitted and annoying that I just can’t stand to even look at you anymore! I wish you would go die in a hole! Go slit your wrists! How could you do this to me? To *us*? To this *family*? And *especially* to”—

My fingers stopped typing almost immediately, and I glanced up from the black keyboard. Probably from the excessive touch of hands, a shine made the keyboard look like it was sweating. I stared around the vacant room, dark eyes searching every corner. There was nothing, though, that was strong enough to catch my fragile attention. I spun around on the chair and turned to the computer screen before me. The words started to blur together, and I sighed. Heat radiated throughout the room, though the air conditioner was supposedly on upstairs. I twisted my lips to the side in a grimace.

“Well,” I muttered under my breath, “this sucks . . .”

Roughly, I pushed away from my newly-bought desk and hopped up to my feet. The soft, plush carpet under my toes comforted me somewhat. *Somewhat*. I breathed out through my nose and shut my eyelids which were thickly lined with my mother’s cosmetics. *If only, if only, if only . . . I could write.*

What was the point of even *trying* anymore when all I managed to come up with was a paragraph per day? Not to mention each one contained a load of crap not worth reading, let alone publishing. All that I was left with at the end of the day was an unsatisfied feeling in my chest that wouldn’t dissipate fast enough.

With a slightly dejected sigh, I stumbled out of my room and down the hall to my bathroom, painted a blinding yellow. As I looked at myself in the mirror, my nose scrunched up and my eyes narrowed. I blinked and focused on the casual clothes I failed to pull off. Shoulders slumped, mouth creased with a frown, I knew I couldn’t possibly make it to the top with Stephen King. Or Erin Hunter. Or even—yes, I liked her in this period of my life—Stephenie Meyer.

I arched a dark, thick brow, my eyes scrutinizing my reflection from top to bottom. My hair, an untidy mess of dark brown atop my head, hung in my face. Lip pouted out, I blew it away, but when it just landed back in its spot on my normal, medium-sized nose, I huffed and rubbed my arm of tannish complexion. I arched my back with a long sigh and closed my eyes.

My countenance, though “beautiful as an angel’s,” according to my mother, was pinched and chubby in my always-critical eyes.

“Maybe that’s it,” I recited quietly to my counterpart in the mirror. “Maybe it’s the terrible self-esteem that makes me one of the worst writers in the world.”

If only I'd known back then it wasn't even *me* who was the worst writer in the world, but Meyer. Then again, even now saying "at least you're better than Meyer" isn't much better at all.

It was often, since I had become a writer, that I relentlessly talked to myself as if there were two or even three of me. More than once I'd get odd looks from people around me, but I never really gave them the time of day. I didn't care what others thought of me. It was the imaginary characters in my head that I wanted to spice up my looks for.

With the image of a pot-bellied pig with fat thighs in my eleven-year-old mind, I quickly used the restroom. As soon as I finished, I washed my hands and left for my dismal, lavender-painted room. The small, enclosed space was equipped with a brown and black desk that was cluttered with papers and books, a keyboard about my height leaned up against the wall in the corner, sliding closet doors that stood to the right with a large Bratz poster I never bothered to take down, and a twin bed covered with a fluffy, pink comforter. The walls were decorated with posters of my favorite stars: Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner, and, not to mention, my favorite country singer at the time, Taylor Alison Swift. I looked around the room, tapping my foot. I wondered why in the world I had these people on my walls.

"What do I need to make this work?" I muttered absentmindedly to myself. I took a slow, careful seat in my black, rolling chair, as if to make sure I wasn't sitting on pins. My mind jumped from character to character, scene to scene, scenario to scenario. "I could use Miles to tear them apart even more . . . but that's *too* much drama . . ." A frown crossed my features, and I rubbed the back of my aching, sweaty neck.

There was so much that had to be done with the characters and their relationships; I was hardly trying to form the extremely simple and cliché plot of the story. At that moment, I thought it would become the best story in the entire world—that was, if I ever finished it. Little did I know, it'd be collecting dust in the Recycling Bin folder of my computer in less than a year.

Suddenly, a loud, ringing noise made me jump, and my brother called from downstairs, "I got it!"

And *bam!* That was when it hit me.

"Yes!" I smiled widely, my cavity-filled teeth gleaming yellow as I stared at the monitor.

My fingers immediately started typing away, and I smirked at the thought of coming up with my "brilliant" idea. Making their father call in the middle of their fight made perfect sense to me . . . until I realized that their father was dead, they lived with their aunt, and their mother was away in Africa.

My shoulders drooped, my head banged loudly onto the keyboard, and I just let the c's repeat themselves.

3. a poet's cry for help

Ink and paper are sometimes passionate lovers, oftentimes brother and sister, and occasionally mortal enemies.

Terri Guillemet

My eyes darted down to the dark gray floor of the classroom. Inside, I could feel the stitches tearing away from the scar on my heart. So many times I'd tried to keep it together, to hold it in so it wouldn't break apart anymore. But the seams had torn and I was bleeding again. And again, and again, and again.

Out it poured, along with the words from his mouth that I just couldn't tune out. My defenses against people like him had fallen long ago when he'd promised me he'd never hurt me. That he liked me and we could maybe one day be together. But one of my best friends was his girlfriend. It was impossible for us to ever be together. But knowing that he liked me—at least a little—had consoled me to a point where I had let my guard down. I never even saw the betrayal coming for me. Not once did I believe that he'd go against his word.

But I've learned so many times that people will always hurt you, no matter if they mean to or not. But he meant to, I know. And he got what he wanted. Shattered, I sat in my sixth period class, just waiting for the bell to ring so that I could go gain some condolence from my friends in Creative Writing. They'd make sure I was okay. They'd make me feel better.

You aren't going to cry. Don't you dare let a tear fall, young lady. . . . You're stronger than this!

That part of my mind was trying to keep me from embarrassing myself. The other part of my mind was telling me to hit him, kick him, scream in his face. It told me to stand up from the stool and smack him across his arrogant, smirking mug. I couldn't do it, though. I was weakened and crippled inside. I had no will whatsoever.

The bell reverberated through the room, and I jumped up from my seat. It wasn't a moment later that a foot hit mine, and I staggered right into a black table. A laugh—or a scoff, more so—escaped his lips and I pushed past him. Upon escaping the prison I'd been held in, I rushed up the stairs, into the long hallway and then up the second flight of stairs into the Main Building. I needed to reach my classroom before it happened. Before the tears spilled from my eyes and cascaded onto the black jacket I wore. If I didn't make it before then, I'd be laughed at and then thought of as a weak, senseless little seventh grader.

"Hey," my Creative Writing teacher said, giving me a small wave with her hand of a dark ebony tone. I said nothing back, tossing my hand up at her with a sniff. Weakly, I sat down in my seat behind Justin and buried my face in my arms. Face hot, shoulders already shaking, I let the tears pour as the late bell rang.

"Hey, JJ," Katie said to me. I looked up with one eye, my hair covering the other. *Please don't let her see me crying* . . . I thought with a gulp as I tried not to let a sob break through my chapped lips. "You okay?"

My shoulders shook and I hiccupped before she moved to my desk, along with Luna, Elle, and a few more people. I was surrounded by girls in moments, and Eric turned around to look at me. I hid my face instantly, knowing that it was flushed and wet. No guy should see me like that. Especially not Eric, one of my little crushes.

"Come on, let's go to the bathroom," someone suggested and I nodded. I jumped up from my seat and ran for the door.

There, I was hugged and comforted by my friends. I tried many times to dry my face with the paper towels, but they were too rough.

By the time I was back in the classroom, my face was red and puffy from the irritation of the towels, and I was hiding behind my bangs, which provided an unhealthy amount of acne on that side of my face.

Later that day, at home, I deleted him as a friend on Facebook, the guy I'd spent hours into the night and early morning talking to. After that, I closed the laptop, ran upstairs to my room, and collapsed right there onto the floor. From under the bed, I took one of the razors that belonged to my mother. I'd broken one, and I'd planned on using it earlier that year, but then I stopped myself and decided I was being ridiculous.

But that common sense left me today in sixth period. I sat there on my tan carpet floor and stared at the blade in my palm. It glistened like a star, though it was far from one. It was a dangerous, lethal device. What I held in my hands could change my life forever.

With narrowed eyes, I stared at the blade. *Do I honestly want to do this?* I asked myself with a swipe at a tear that rolled down my cheek. *Do I want to really become emo? Do I want to destroy the rest of my life over this guy who loves to make people hurt?*

I dropped the razor immediately when that thought came to mind. If I did that, he'd get what he wanted. And I would never give that to him. I'd never give him the satisfaction of seeing me in pain. If I did that, I would let him know he'd won. And he hadn't.

I stood up and stared around the room. I slid the broken razor under the mattress this time and climbed onto my bed sluggishly. My entire body felt like lead, my arms stinging, but I didn't know why. I looked down to them and my breath caught. Blood poured from a nick on my arm. It wasn't deep—in fact, it was fairly shallow, but I hadn't realized I'd done it.

Slowly, I exhaled and stared at the cut on my arm, just an inch below the crevice of my elbow. It stung, but it didn't feel like enough. There was a twinge inside of me that scared the part of my mind that was trying to make me see sense.

Then, all I saw was red. I always wore the jacket, so no one would see them. Why shouldn't I? No one would really care, right?

My eyes flitted to the computer on my desk, but then I instantly looked away. On there, I'd pulled up a document that would stay open until I closed it. And in that document were reasons why I shouldn't do it. The logical part of my mind tried to coax me into going to the computer, waking it up, and reading it so that I would think twice.

But I couldn't . . . Could I? A tear dropped onto my arm and into the cut, causing me to wince. Then again, it felt good. I swallowed and ran to the bathroom. There, I took my favorite "Pirates of the Caribbean" towel with its black and red designs and pressed it to the scratch feverishly. The towel was soaked within minutes, but when I pulled it away, I realized the wound had stopped bleeding.

After washing the towel free of the blood in the bathtub, I dumped it in the clothes basket in the laundry room. "*I have two parents,*" I muttered under my breath, reciting the words from the "Inspiration Document."

"I have a lot of awesome friends . . . I have a computer, television, and a house to live in . . . I . . ." Words escaped me as I entered my room and felt the tears roll down my cheeks. The fourth one contained *him*. I would never again mutter such a lie in my life.

I took out my notebook from under my bed and started to adamantly write.

When I was finished ten minutes later, I'd come up with three different poems. I scratched two of them out and stared at the remaining one with blurred vision. My eyes stung from all the crying. I was surprised that I could keep it up this long. By now, I thought I would've run out. The poem read,

*Remember the day you broke my heart?
The day I drowned and you tore me 'part?
The day I felt like no one cared;
The day I lied about how I fared.
Remember the time you cut me deep?
The time I bled and you let it seep?
The time I tried to end this life . . .
The time that I first used that knife.
Now remember today is the day I say,
"You'll never again make me feel that way."*

I smirked slightly through the tears, but it faded slowly and dissipated. Happiness just wouldn't come unto me. I couldn't muster any bit of light in the darkness of my core. Bitterness had grasped hold of my withering will and spread like a cancer through my heart, mind, and soul.

On my computer, I pulled up Bob Marley and lay down on my bed, hoping sleep would crash onto me like the Atlantic. It didn't come, though, and I just continued to listen to three songs on a loop. And through that, I thought of what would be the best way to end the suffering and pain.

4. hopelessness

Writer's block is a disease for which there is no cure, only respite.

Terri Guillemets

Sparro: You can't quit writing. I love your story!

Mindeh: I know... I love it too. I just...

Mindeh: It's going nowhere. I'm tired of getting this freaking writer's block alllll the time. It's ridiculous, Sparra...

Sparro: I get it too. But you love G&G. I won't quit because I've been working on it for too long. But you shouldn't quit because of just WB. Come on, Mindeh, everything will be fine.

I sniffled and wiped the tears from my cheeks. *I'm so pathetic. . . I can't even write a three-hundred page book. . . . What's the matter with me?* The thoughts were so doleful and dejected that I knew it was one of those times in my life. Those times that I felt like I wanted to just go crawl under a rock and starve to death. Those times I just wanted to give up on this life of mine.

I typed in a message containing a long paragraph about how I always felt so depressed and sad and alone, but I erased it all, my eyes darting to my lap with shame.

Why was I dumping all of this on my best friend? She was someone who loved me for who I was: this messed up, crazy writer who'd been addicted to her computer all summer long. But I needed her so bad. I needed her to help me through all of this. But, as usual, I shut up and kept it all locked up inside this mass of a head. One day, it'd burst open and I'd be pretty much screwed.

"You just don't understand, Sparro . . ." I muttered quietly to myself as I dropped my head in my hands and tried to contain the small noises that would hardly pass as sobs. *Why am I crying so much? What is there to be so sad about? Oh, that's right. I suck at*

writing, my life is going completely downhill, and I'm losing the only friends I have . . .

Looking back to that time, I realize how hard it was. I thought I was losing every friend I ever gained on this amazing writing site. I loved everyone on there. They made me feel like I had a family when I had the idea in my mind that my family didn't care enough. Boy, was I wrong.

As I read Sparro's chat messages on the screen, I listened to her words in my mind.

"You know that if you give up with writing, there's really no going back. All that talk of becoming an author, a publisher, an editor—it'll all go downhill, Mindeh. You are a great writer, and I love your book. You can't give up. Please don't . . ."

In my mind, I silently thanked my best friend from California. She was an inspiration, and she gave the best advice. When nothing in the world made sense to me, she made sense for me. And that made me want to meet her in real life even more.

I replied quickly with a short message about having to go eat dinner, even though I didn't. It was five, and mom was downstairs resting. Dinner was around eight. She and I said goodbye with our virtual hugs, and I closed out of the window with a sniff.

The tears were still pouring down my cheeks as I felt my stomach twist uncomfortably. My shoulders hunched over, and I couldn't breathe anymore. I felt dizzy and uncoordinated. I wanted to just lie down and sleep forever. A coma didn't sound too bad. And, if I were to wake, I'd have all my friends and family around me. People would care about me again.

It was that bad—so bad that I wanted something terrible to happen to me to get my friends and family back to caring about me again.

"I guess I just got lost . . . being someone else . . . I tried to kill the pain, but nothing ever helped . . ." I started to quietly sing "Let Me Be Myself" by 3 Doors Down. It fit with my mood and reminded me of cavemen, which made me slightly happier. *"I got left behind somewhere along the way . . . Hoping to come back around to find myself someday . . . Lately, I'm so tired of waiting for you . . ."* I quietly sang the song and got to my feet. I closed out of the other tabs opened on the laptop screen and closed it.

I walked to my black-curtained window and looked out at the road before my house. In the front yard, I could see stood two thin trees suffering from lack of heat. Their nakedness made me sigh as I thought about the coming winter. My little brother, practically a male replica of me, was playing with my little sister, Kelly, on the sidewalk. She looked even more like me than my younger brother. Even though she was a major pain in the butt, I loved her like crazy.

As I finished off the song, my mind trailed back to the phone call I'd shared with my friend.

"Hey, Erry, how come you don't tell me what you look like?" I asked quietly as I lay on my futon pressed to the right side of my room. I was on my stomach, rhythmically kicking my feet against my bed.

The phone pressed to my ear emitted nothing for a few moments before a male voice on the other end replied with, "Well, you already hear my voice. . . . Can't you infer what I look like?"

"I only know you have black hair and glasses. Not much can come from that." I tapped my fingers on my pillow and sighed with exasperation. "You've seen pictures of me. You know what I look like."

"That's different. Those are pictures for everyone to see . . ."

"Why is it so different?" I narrowed my eyes.

"I don't trust . . ." He trailed off, seemingly undecided, and I slumped onto the bed, my arms losing the will to hold my torso up. The small smile I always held when talking with him was wiped off of my face. My eyes were blank and stared at the window behind the futon.

"You don't trust me," I finished with a glance down. There was a small twinge in my chest and my eyes stung. "Isn't that right?"

"No, it's not that, Mindeh . . ."

I shook my head and pursed my lips, trying to keep myself from letting loose the easily produced water works. "It is that. I know you don't trust me. . . . This is why we could never possibly meet, because you keep things from me. You don't trust me, I get it."

"Okay, fine!" Aaron finally said on the other end. "You want to think that, then fine. I won't stop you. Because telling you which state I live in, who I like, and my entire name means that I don't trust you. You know what, Mindeh? Eff off! I'm tired of you."

The phone beeped and I didn't even bother to wipe away the tears that flowed from my eyes and down my flushed cheeks. My throat closed up and I couldn't breathe. One of my best friends—no, my best friend, and I'd just probably ruined it.

I looked over at the monster of a computer at my desk. On the screen was the website I was usually on. In its chat box, Aaron's last message said, "Sometimes, in life, people just fight, you know?"

Luckily, both of us were fine. I'd apologized and he had told me that he didn't want me to see how ugly and lanky and horrifying he looked. I knew he didn't look bad. Still, to this day, I haven't seen a picture of him, but at least I could trust him. And he said he could trust me. And I know he can. I loved him as much as he loved me and we were like brother and sister now. Joined at the hip. Connected by our souls. Together, yet separate.

I moved from behind the black curtain and adjusted my eyes to the dark room. I walked to the computer again and opened it up. When I'd logged on, I went to Microsoft Word and began to write.

This is so stupid. . . . I won't get anything done.

It was true. I didn't write more than half a sentence before I shut the computer, curled up on the bed and thought about how in the world I'd ever become more than a wannabe loser trying to write stories longer than two pages.

5. awake and alive?

If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn't brood. I'd type a little faster.

Isaac Asimov

"I'm awake, I'm alive. Now I know what I believe inside. Now it's my time. I'll do what I want 'cause this is my life . . ." I trailed off in my singing to Skillet as I stared at the cursor blinking in and out of sight. So far, all I had was a short conversation between my two main characters Setheem and Zyherie. It wasn't working very well. Because Raven was being taken back to her kind—to their tribe. And the small group of demons and the one human had to leave. Why the hell were they talking like this?

Zyherie glanced to the trees, but she could hear nothing. No rustling, no shouts or screams. "What are you talking about?"

"Human senses," Setheem explained, picking her up in his arms. "You can't hear them. And you can't run. So I have to carry you. As usual."

The blonde narrowed her eyes at him and then looked away. "You know, why don't you just *run*, Setheem?" And he did. Passing through the trees off to the left, he followed after Garrett and Jessica, who had taken off as soon as the brunette had advised.

That paragraph remained lonely on the last page. It was just waiting to be added to. But I had nothing to give it. My mind came to a stop. The story had become cliché and pathetic. After 288 pages, I was done. After working from May to August on this book, it was all over and I couldn't come up with any way to drive this story onward.

My head dropped into my hands, which grabbed at my hair angrily.

Why can't I do this! I screamed in my head and hit my fist on the desk, creating a loud vibration from the objects upon it. A small faerie statue fell onto the keyboard of the laptop, but I didn't bother to pick it up as I turned away and stood up. *This is so stupid! I'm done. . . . I hate myself, I hate this book, I hate that I thought I could ever write a freaking book!*

Abrasively, I picked up a golf ball from my small collection and threw it at one of my closet doors with a loud bang. It bounced off and rolled back to me. My shoulders rose and dipped repeatedly; my face was hot and flushed.

I stared at the closet for a moment and then blinked. With a deep breath, I started to imagine one of my characters, Setheem, standing before me. At his height of six feet even, he towered above me. His black eyes turned down to me, silver bangs falling in front of them. His skin was bronzed, though lighter than mine. His defined muscles showed through his shirt of past times and though he was daunting, he didn't scare me.

"Why are you and Zyherie so hard to deal with?" I asked him with narrowed eyes.

Setheem's brow arched and the corner of my mouth twisted down. "It's not our fault. You decided to put us back together. I

think if you'd kept us apart more than a few hours, this wouldn't have happened. You completely veered off the path you wanted our story to go."

With a roll of my eyes, I set my hands on my hips. "Well, do you *like* to be separated from her?" When no answer came from the manifestation of my mind, I continued on. "Exactly. So *maybe* you should appreciate it, Seth."

"No." Setheem arched a brow at me and I blinked when his image shifted, as if a hologram. He continued on in a harsh tone. "Maybe *you* should learn to write like your friend. She's not a total failure."

I flinched back at the harsh words and the image faded before my eyes. My stomach twisted, and I held back the tears I knew would come if I let the comment get to me. I pressed my lips tightly together and turned around to look at my laptop. I moved to pick up the faerie statue when track twelve of the Skillet CD started to play. "Lucy" was one of my favorite songs and I sung it quietly under my breath.

And it was then I let loose the tears and put the statue back onto the top shelf. As I pushed it back more so it wouldn't fall, I sat in the chair and grabbed the tissues I had hidden behind the monitor of my old computer.

The song, I'd learned, was about a little girl dying in the womb. It was a sweet, precious song about how heartbreaking such a thing as stillbirth can be. Once the song ended and the CD had run all of its tracks, I closed out of Microsoft Word and shut the laptop. I grabbed the new Stephen King book I'd gotten with my birthday money and started to read.

As I did read, though, I saw none of the images I knew I would regularly see. Images of Setheem and Zyherie passed through my mind instead. I wondered how in the world I could possibly make my story better than it was then. I didn't want to try and rewrite it because rewriting 288 pages was *a lot*. But I knew it would be smart to. Otherwise, the plot would become blurred in the background and only conflict and romance would remain. No one would know *why* in the world I wrote this book. What was the purpose?

I was trying to tie together everything, but it wasn't working out very well for me. With a blink, my mind reverted back to *Under the Dome* and I sighed heavily. *This is what my life has become*, I

thought with a scoff. *A pathetic waste of time trying to write a book like Sparro. I've always wondered why G&G was so much better than Where the Lines Blur but now I know. My characters are cliché, all over the place, and conflict is everywhere. My story always has conflict in it. Not one moment is boring. Which makes the story one of the worst in the world. I don't want to be a wannabe writer anymore. I want to learn how to create an effective story.*

And I knew the exact person I needed to go to.

But that person was probably busy with whatever and she was across the country. I was helpless when it came to writing. I needed Sparro's input all the time. What kind of individuality was I showing? Why was I acting like I was a five-year-old in need of a hand?

Well, the answer to that question is simple.

I am.

6. rehabilitation

Every creator painfully experiences the chasm between his inner vision and its ultimate expression. The chasm is never completely bridged. We all have the conviction, perhaps illusory, that we have much more to say than appears on the paper.

Isaac Bashevis Singer

Imagine, you just walked outside of a restaurant and a woman is leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. Do you smell the odor in the air, just hanging there, tainting your lungs? Now, mix that in with the smell of vanilla and a new car smell. Are you with me?

And there I sat on the oddly-textured couch with the plushiest cushions I'd ever laid my butt on. To the left of the couch rested a small side table and a smaller couch. Behind it was a bookcase littered with books and precious memories. Next to the shelves was mounted a large case that held two birds: a cockatiel and a parakeet chirping their tail feathers off. It was distracting, but not annoying. To the right was an entertainment system with a large, old television. Then, further on was the hallway leading to the two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a "building room," as Shelly—my grandfather's wife—liked to put it.

In front of me, a low coffee table was placed, and beyond that, an opening in a low counter that separated the living room from one of the two dining rooms. The kitchen was off to the left.

Tapping my black ballpoint pen on the metal spirals of my green notebook, I timidly awaited an idea to come forth and whisk me away into the world of the unknown, into the world of “Runners,” a story I was trying to rewrite because it was a favorite of Sparro’s. Originally, it was about the adventures of orphans but her ideas changed that.

From the far end of the house came a jingle of a bell and my little sister’s voice calling out, “Derrick! I want sumtin to dwink!” My brother’s footsteps were easily recognizable, even out of my sight, since he was so flatfooted and his shoes made the most abrasive noise of all in our household. He was following after her and I noted the loud sigh.

“Why can’t Jolie get you something to drink?”

“B-because Jolie don’t want to! She say to ask you and you right here!”

I smirked at the comment. Kelly was so smart. She could easily predict what I would say. After all, why would *I* get up to make my little sister a drink when Derrick was *right there, in the kitchen*? It made me want to hit him. He’d been outside playing around, probably coming in to get a drink for himself as well, so not sparing Kelly of her parched status was just annoyingly egotistical.

When I heard the refrigerator opening and the sound of milk sliding reluctantly on glass, I knew Kelly had won. I had, too. I always won because I was the older, wiser, more logical one.

About five minutes later, I heard more pounding footsteps—the stomping ones and the hurried small ones—and then the jingling before the door slammed shut again. I looked down to the notebook and slid my tongue hesitantly over my mouth to banish the parched area. An idea, sprung my little sister, had suddenly come to me, and a wide smile curved my parched lips.

Unyieldingly and with eyes glistening with something almost primitive, I started to write on the college-ruled notebook paper with the amazing and magical ballpoint pen that I’d named Matilda. On the paper, I started to write about Jonathan and his old friend, Sootfoot, muttering condolences in Jonathan’s living room.

In less than five minutes, I’d written two pages and was still writing when my grandfather entered the room.

He was a stout man of broad stature with a slightly overreaching stomach; his steps were taken with certainty and though he

could be imposing, I saw him as one of the sweetest men in the world. His jaw was covered in gray fuzz that reached up to his ears and spread to his head. Though the hair was receding to where you could easily see his head through it, he still looked like the tough man I always knew.

"Ay, whatcha doin'?" he asked in a deep, coarse voice. He stuck his hands in his faded jean pockets and stared at me with iridescent green eyes.

"Writing," I answered with a yawn. Setting aside my notebook and pen, I stretched my legs out.

"Writing, hmm?" He nodded and looked off to the side. "You eat yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I 'av some tuna in the fridge if you want a sandwich." Granddad gestured into the kitchen.

I nodded, stood up from the couch, and extended my arms up to the sky in a long stretch. After I yawned loudly, I stole a glance to my elderly grandfather. It was rare that we came to his and Shelly's house. It was only about every other month or two. It was hard to organize weekends with them since they were always working or just busy. And then they *were* about two hours away from us. It was a long drive and no one ever liked taking it to either house. Even though most kids have grandparents in other countries or states, and we seemed lucky, it wasn't really that lucky when they were so close and yet so far away.

He patted me on the back as I passed him and walked on into the kitchen. Upon transferring my steps to the withered emerald and white tile, my feet lost the warmth of the jade carpet. I got out two slices of bread and plopped the tuna between them. I hummed the entire time, excitement radiating off of me in waves. I was finally writing. After almost two or three weeks, I was *writing*.

Granddad walked into the kitchen and past me into his bedroom off to the left. I grabbed a bottle of Sprite and a napkin before walking back into the living room. "Hmm . . . I wonder if I should do the same things . . . Maybe I should elongate the time in between Sahra and Jonathan's parts? I dunno. . . . Just go with the flow." I smiled to myself as I sat down beside my notebook again and slowly ate my sandwich.

Silently, I told myself that I was getting so much better at everything. Thanks to volleyball, I was in shape again. My thighs were strong and muscled instead of big jiggling wads of flesh. I was able to do twenty push-ups, easy. And now I was writing again. Not to mention it didn't sound like complete and utter crap. Although I knew it wouldn't last forever, that didn't matter. I was writing and I didn't stop.

rising fears: confessions of an overdramatic teen

kailey morgan

silent killer

I ALWAYS THOUGHT that if I ever saw a creature wicked enough to destroy someone, I would know when it was coming. I assumed that I could identify the criminal based on its appearance. Maybe because I had grown up watching the most clichéd Disney villains come to life on the big screen, my image of a killer would always be stuck in that little-kid mindset. The person would be dressed in all black, stretching down from his inky, coal-colored hair, to his fat, ebony toenails. His teeth would carry the rotten stench of evil, a flavor he somehow managed to concoct and carry in a delicate tube of toothpaste. The second his feet touched the ground, heads would turn, babies would cry, and screams would strike through the air like a single bolt of lightening.

Of course, my killer did not come to me like that at all. The sky was not a gloomy gray, and babies did not cry any more than usual. Instead, the electric blue sky lazily accessorized itself with marshmallow-like clouds. Streaks of sunlight shot down from above, illuminating the ocean in front of me. My older sister, Lindsey, twisted her hair into a high ponytail. The glint of her natural red streaks shone in the sunlight. My sister's eyelashes cast shadows on her cheeks as she closed her eyes, feeling the rhythm of the waves. Her dancer's feet dug deeper into the sand as her body tried to withstand the force of the waves crashing down on us. That was when I first saw my killer. I saw him only with a quick glance out of the corner of my eye, nearly missed, since all of my attention had been focused on Lindsey. My back stiffened and my muscles tensed. I prepared myself to swim to shore in a heartbeat.

"Hey, Linds, did you see that?" My voice rose with urgency as panic edged into my words.

She never had time to reply as I saw it flash through the water, a flicker through the salty waves. A giant, pink blob the size of double-fisted hands floated in the water in an almost elegant dance, but I knew how lethal it could be. I felt certain that I could feel the thin, metal chains that usually held down the torrent of rising fear inside of me break apart in an ugly disarray. I sucked in my breath, trying to keep the scream locked in my throat, but the immense horror of the creature edging towards me made me tremble. Finally, I could not fight the urge to scream and I let it out in one final wail.

“Help me! That jellyfish is going to kill me!” I hollered in uncontrolled fright.

I used every ounce of strength I could produce in my legs and splashed to shore. Heads swiveled towards me, Lindsey then ran and grabbed me as I lay gasping on shore.

“Kailey, it was just a jellyfish, you weren’t going to die,” she said to me in an embarrassed voice, her face blushing from the annoyed glares of the other people on the beach.

I barely acknowledged her words as I immersed my hands in the dry sand. I knew how that silent killer worked, a blob in the water but with a stinging edge that brought pain like death. I stared off into the waves and I knew that the next time I went into the ocean, I would not let it sneak up on me. I would recognize the killer, knowing it had little resemblance to Disney villains. Next time, I would be prepared.

breathless fall

“Don’t fall!” I screamed, my voice a heavy mixture of insane fear and absolute horror.

My sister’s foot dangled dangerously off the edge of the cliff, discovering that nothing existed below it. Her body remained a breath away from descending into the unknown depths of the mountain. I expected her face to tremble with terror, or shake in the knowledge that she stood one second away from impending doom. Instead, her face lit up in a smile to rival the dazzling flowers blooming in the dense shrubbery. Their unearthly beauty seemed inviting, but I

could see the danger in the thorns tinged with poison. The flower's captivating beauty just disguised its sinister nature.

"Dude, I'm not going to fall," she said with an annoyed eye-roll as she stepped away from the cliff.

Her brown hair, that she always wished was longer, swung in her face. She had deep, brown eyes that seemed to have vulnerability and innocence woven into them, even when her sometimes irritating attitude flashed through.

"I knew that," I shouted back at her. But I also knew the bittersweet taste that the lie left on my tongue. In truth, I thought she had been within inches of death's door. Humiliated and angry, I whipped my hair around and stomped off back to the car. The fall breeze settled lightly on my skin, while leaves fell to the ground around me. Only a few remained, desperately clinging to the scrawny tree branches as if they knew they had very little time before they too plummeted to the ground.

The familiar voices of my family faded into the background as I continued to march back to the car. My sole concentration had been to avoid the bugs, fearing the mosquito bites that would plague my skin. When my eyes snapped back to the world around me, I realized that I had wandered off the trail. Unknown terrain spread before me: an assortment of evergreen trees loomed over me while black, swirling shadows danced on the darker sides of the forest. My heartrate quickened as I felt I had been dropped into a nightmare. I felt like Snow White running into the forest, away from her vain stepmother, or Red Riding Hood traveling into the woods alone, vulnerable to the perils of the untamed land.

Sweat formed on my hands like droplets of fear, and my eyes turned with trepidation. I let out a howling scream. My throat burned with every shriek as I dashed blindly forward. I had no idea where to go, but the need to move, to advance towards *something*, grew stronger, even though my destination remained unclear. I felt only the devouring need to escape from the haunting woods.

My breath burst through me in sharp pants. My eyes searched in front of me for any recognizable landmark. A glint of metal sparkled through the trees. The car transformed into a beautiful sight. No longer did it resemble a disgusting, ozone-killing machine. Instead, it offered sweet refuge from the horrifying land behind me. I

let the panic seep out of my skin, but I never even considered going hiking in those woods again.

stainless steel prison

Popping noise echoed through my ears, the vibration stinging my eardrums. My legs wobbled, moving in an insane rhythm as I fell onto someone else. Rotating my eyes upward, I saw that the arms that gripped mine belonged to my mother. Her honey brown eyes always seemed to be a mirror for her emotions. They were always wide and open, allowing you to look deep into her soul. A mass of black curls, wild despite the fact that she furiously combed them every morning, surrounded her face.

“Are you okay?” she whispered to me.

I barely mustered the ability to nod as I steadied myself against the silver, metal walls of the elevator. Somehow the chill of the Chicago air had managed to squeeze its way into the tiny crack of the elevator door. I looked back up to my mom’s face, searching for a sense of comfort as a familiar panic settled in my stomach. We were going to the top of the Sears Tower and the longer we stayed in the elevator, and the higher up we went, the more my need to escape the confined space increased. A slender hand squeezed my shoulder as if it could squeeze the fear out of me. My mom’s gentle smile looked down on me and, although I would soon grow taller than her, in my mind my mom would forever be four feet taller than me.

I let my fingernails dig into my palm. The deeper they went in, the further my imagination went. What if the elevator floor melted away, revealing the many stories below us? My feet tingled with the weightless feeling of nothing as if the floor had really collapsed. I held in my breath, trying to find a sense of peace in the suffocating area. People’s bodies pressed into me as the value of personal space had abruptly decreased with everyone shuffling and elbowing for room. Somehow, I felt that I had taken a sip of Alice in Wonderland’s “Drink Me” potion and become incredibly small in the narrow elevator. I knew that any second I would be squished in the torrent of moving bodies, with nothing left of me but a single finger-

nail. A final reminder of the life I'd had before I vanished, crushed between the sterile, gray walls. My death would be in this crowded, stainless steel prison unless it suddenly, miraculously emptied.

I gathered my remaining strength, determined not to die in here, while I slowly relaxed my stiff shoulders. Exhaling deeply, I pried my fingers from my palm, uncovering the dark, red marks. Unexpectedly, but to my relief, the elevator stopped and the doors parted, letting the chill from the air crawl through my arms, inviting goose bumps on my body. I pushed my way to the front, not caring about the sweaty bodies I touched, just wanting to get away from the claustrophobic space. The second I escaped from the others, I truly let my muscles loosen, unwinding from the painfully tense position they had been in, as my heartbeat slowed. I rocked forward on the sturdy ground discovering that I could now see the view from the top of the Sears Tower. The excitement and terror of being so high up made my cheeks blush in a turbulence of emotions. Loud footsteps came towards me, but I did not have to turn to see that my mother had come up beside me. Instead, I felt her presence from the jingling of her earrings through the wind and the intoxicating smell that was uniquely hers. We both looked out at the world that always surrounded us, but never understood. The freedom and release of the panic that had choked through my throat vanished. I breathed in the world, inhaling each straight or jagged piece that created it, a jigsaw puzzle of forgotten dreams, stolen hopes, fervent fears, and endless love that I breathed in and never let go.

forgotten memory

The crumpled edge of the picture swayed in the wind, a faded reminder of the past. My mouth gaped widely, two front teeth sticking out from my gums, and short brown pigtailed protruded from my eight year-old head. A single second embedded on the Kodak paper, captured by the click of a camera, photographs always astounded me. Amazingly, a part of me remained immortalized in a moment while the rest of me had already moved on.

"Oh, you found that old picture." My dad's mouth stretched open wide as he let the words fall gracefully. It sounded as if he

sang each word, tinged with his slight, Liberian accent. He walked closer to me in strong, slow steps and peered over my shoulder at the picture in front of me. In that second the world seemed to tilt and swirl in deep indigos and blues as my mind went back to the day that the photograph was taken.

“Hurry up and sit down!” a balding man with hawk eyes shouted at me.

The rush of wind threaded through my hair, and the humid Florida air made my shirt stick tightly to my skin. The excitement of Disney World took away any discomfort the burning sun might have caused me.

Quickly, I jumped into the seat beside my father, enthusiasm beaming from me, as I anticipated the ride. The log ride was a trip down a huge waterfall; the unsettling drop brought so many people to ride it. The need to live off of some form of danger, to take risks, was such a twisted human need that I could not comprehend. True daredevils might be skydiving, bull riding, or shooting out of cannons, but for the average risktaker, going on scary amusement park rides brings its own kind of thrill. In that moment, a strange taste formed in my mouth, a mixture of elation and terror, as the ride jerked forward into a dark tunnel.

Water sprayed up from the side of the log, the only thing reminding me that I was not alone in the utter darkness of the tunnel. No longer could I discern the difference between my fingers and my father’s. Everything mirrored the color of the midnight sky but the absence of stars, like they had been forcefully jerked from the atmosphere.

A sudden jolt to the log slammed my body into my father’s. As we went downward, screams shot through the air, my own voice included in the symphony of shrieks. The log fell down the waterfall at an alarming speed, and although I had expected it, even anticipated it, my heart still beat wildly in terror. My eyes closed as if I could block out the water stinging my skin and the long way down. My ears heard the faint click of a camera coming from the onlookers below and then I . . .

My eyes flew open to the present; my hands trembled as I held the now torn photograph. Fear was a funny thing, but the joke was wicked. Looking back at my log ride at Disney World, I realized the

insanity of an emotion that overwhelmed reasonable thinking. Terror lay lurking underneath my skin, triggered by the mere memory of a scary moment. I drew in a sharp breath as I gave the picture to my father. His brown eyes glittered with confusion at my unusual breakdown. Instead of explaining, I walked away, letting the rays of sunlight burn my neck, as I turned away from a memory best left forgotten.

dizzying heights

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Worst case scenario: your rope breaks, you fall, and die.”

I jerked my head towards my rock-climbing instructor, my lips parted in honest disbelief. *Is he serious?*

His chuckle swept though the air as if the potential for death was the funniest joke he had ever heard. My hands began to sweat and uneasiness crept into my stomach. Suddenly, I no longer knew if I wanted to rock climb, lest I become the punch line of the instructor’s morbid jokes.

The bulky, metal harness tightened around my waist as I twisted to find my friend, Bree. Her hair shadowed her face, a chunk of liquid brown in war with the golden-white streaks in her hair. I fidgeted with a thread on my shirt, stalling for time before I had to climb. Bree’s smooth face, a result of the many Neutrogena face-cleansing products she obsessively used every day, smiled up at me.

“Just don’t look down,” her voice echoed through the room.

Her advice was not earth-shattering, but I took anything I could get. The tips of my fingers gripped the plastic handholds and the edge of my Nikes balanced on the bottom of the rock as I started climbing. The hum of the air conditioning from above grew to a roar as I ascended the plastic mountain. The gray ‘rock’ had bright, lollipop-colored handholds that looked like they belonged in Willy Wonka’s factory.

Despite the sweet looks of the rock climb, the height remained dizzying. I gasped for breath as my knees painfully scraped against the sides. I frantically grabbed each handhold until I reached my

palm upward and felt the emptiness of nothing. Amazingly, I had reached the top of the rock-climb. Exhilaration broke my lips into a shining smile when the adrenaline of success took over. That is, until I did the one thing Bree's southern belle voice told me not to do. I tilted my head downward to see the floor, twenty feet below.

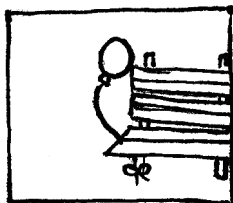
"Kailey, let go and the rope will take you the rest of the way down!" Bree shouted.

My chest tightened as I looked at her face that seemed so tiny from up here, but her voice echoed loudly. For a moment, I wondered if God saw us this way: extremely small but incredibly loud. Almost as if He had heard me Himself, a shocking realization hit me. Those twenty feet had given me some perspective on my life: I overreacted about things, dramatized small events, and let fear and panic seize me.

Something inside me freed, and I dropped my grip on the handholds. The air whistled past me, a sharp wind tugging my body downward. My breath caught in my throat as my heart seemed to fly out of my chest, beating in a fast, pounding rhythm. The drop felt addictive, a single act that released me from the bonds of an overactive mind into reality. My body surged with reinvigorated strength that shattered the chains of fear, once wrapped tightly around my heart. The broken links hovered in the air and I let them fall, one by one, rattling onto the tile floor.

memories of my grandfather

julia illana



“TCHAU, MENINA JULIA.”

Goodbye, Julia-girl.

A few minutes before we left, my mom had cornered me while I was alone and whispered, “Hug him. This might be the last time you’ll see him again.” I nearly spat in her face. I felt the familiar accusation rise up in my throat—don’t tell me what to do, I can think for myself—and bit down on it. My mother was stressed, and I had to make allowances for that. Still, something hot seeded in my stomach and took root.

I clamped down on that, too. I didn’t want my grandfather to worry.

Those days my mother had been latching onto that phrase like a lifeline. *Don’t make your grandfather worry.* But really, I think it meant something else. I think my grandfather worried a lot less than many as he stared down the barrel of his own mortality. I think it was the rest of my family that needed to let things go.

His apartment was cozy, for lack of a better word. It had scratched wooden floors and old sofas, a magnetic tic-tac-toe set on the refrigerator door, an ancient TV that sputtered obscenities. When I reached up to give my grandfather a warm hug in the doorway, I could only see the cold light of the kitchen and the dark burnished wood of the dining room table.

I untangled myself from his arms and looked at him for a few moments. He wore a washed-out gray T-shirt with a cracked and faded picture on the front. I had been surprised to recognize the pic-

ture the first time I saw that shirt a few weeks before: an old photo of me at seven, running through the sand of a Brazilian beach. A few liver spots crept up the sides of his face, and a bushy white beard hung from his chin in direct contrast to the shiny moon of his forehead. He smiled at me through his mustache, his dark eyes crinkling. “*Tchau, menina Julia.*”

It wasn’t an “I love you,” but I think that this goodbye was better. It was the same as every other time I had left his apartment. Just a pet name, a hug, and a goodbye.

“*Eu te amo, vovô,*” I told him, the same as always. I love you, Grandpa.

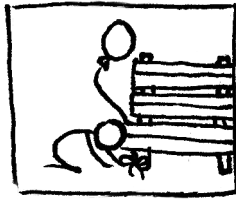
He gave my mother, his daughter, a long hug as well, and I could see her face contort in pain over his shoulder.

She held out all the way to the elevator, and then I could only crumple her blue jacket in my fists when she cried. I felt as if I held a stranger in my arms.

Distant as we felt, my mother and I were the same in that tiny elevator. We were a little bit of each other. She just had all the tears inside of her.

“*Tchau, menina Julia.*”

That is how I will always remember him.



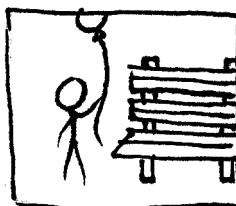
In the evenings, we would wander the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The air smelled surprisingly fresh for such a populated area, and the winter temperatures were nothing compared to what I usually bundled up for in Durham. Nevertheless, I wore a jacket, feeling like a turtle in its cozy shell. The sky was soft and wrinkled, a cloudless swath of indigo. The sidewalk beneath our feet was worn like an old tweed suit from its sheer use. Around us were people from all walks of life: street vendors selling sweet popcorn, shop owners closing up for the night, and beggars in alleyways. The homeless were everywhere.

I remember my second ever trip to Brazil, at the age of seven: in the backseat of the car, driving from the airport, we stopped at one of the countless intersections where cars inched forward like geriatrics. Through the street, I could see at least five boys peddling through car windows. My grandmother bought a bag of green jellybeans from a boy who couldn't have been older than fourteen. She paid him one *real*—a little less than a dollar—and he moved on to the next car, like thousands of other street kids did day after day. Brazil is not kind to her poor.

My grandfather tried to help. On one of our evenings, I saw him take a short detour, stopping in the middle of the road. I drifted behind at a little distance. A man scooted into his path on a purple skateboard: the stub of his left leg rested on the skateboard's rough grain, as he pushed himself forward with the other leg. He had cracked brown skin and a yellow smile. In America I would run, but here in the safety of my grandfather's presence, I took a second to look closer, searching for the danger in this man, but finding none. My grandfather buried a hand in his pocket to fish for bills and greeted him by name. I was introduced.

My grandfather introduced me to everyone on our walks, and most of them seemed to know me already. "*Essa é a minha neta,*" he would always say, to the men running the lottery or, it appeared, to the friendly amputee on the street. "This is my granddaughter." I'd be greeted like an old friend.

Every time this happened, I would wonder where this ever happened in America—in Durham—where you knew the people at the store by name. I felt a little as if I had stepped into the past, and made myself at home.



We were at the Pimenta Verde—the Green Pepper—a buffet place in Rio de Janeiro. My mother, my grandfather, and I took a seat outside of the restaurant near the bustling halls of the shop-

ping mall. I had piled black beans, rice, several fried meats, and cheese dumplings onto my plate. In a last-ditch effort to include something resembling a vegetable, I picked a few garbanzo beans out of a salad and delegated them to the far corner of my dish.

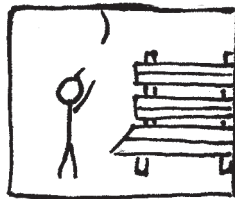
My grandfather wasn't exactly pleased, pointing out the lack of green in every opening that presented itself during our conversation. Now that she had a supporter, my mother jumped to push the familiar argument. I tried to field every accusation, but as the meal went on, I became more and more irritated. However, as I neared my breaking point, my grandfather said something that stopped my thoughts cold.

"If I survive," he said, "I'll come to America and make you eat your vegetables."

If I survive? I thought. That was the first time my grandfather had acknowledged to me the possibility of his not surviving, not making it through the surgery. And that was the moment I acknowledged that he might not make it. He had always been a little bit immortal, the man I had thought would always be on the couch in the living room with his old poodle by his side. I had never before lived through the death of someone close to me, and I had never really thought about mortality before. But here he sat, eating his salad and talking casually about his own death. I turned away from my mother, but not fast enough to miss the flash of pain on her face.

If he survives, I thought, I will be more than happy if he comes to the States. I might even eat my vegetables.

I just really, really hope he'll be okay.



"I think it was important that your grandfather died on your birthday. It's like he held out until then, fighting the disease."

"Some birthday present," I mumbled. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't think I wanted to talk about anything right then. It had

been a year, and the pain had long passed—I was just mentally exhausted and drowsy in the morning’s summer warmth. Other cars raced past us on the edge of my vision, and a soft cello case leaned against my shin. I dropped the humming video game console into my lap to tilt the instrument farther into the other seat.

“No, I think it was important.”

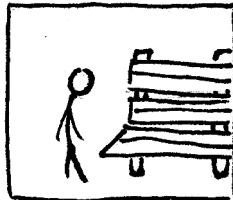
I offered a bland agreement and turned my eyes back to the screen of my video game. It was too early in the morning to talk about death, but the idea still hovered at the back of my head. Was my grandfather truly holding out for me in that hospital room? A “happy twelfth birthday” present? Why?

I would rather he lived on my twelfth birthday. I wondered how my mother felt, in the hospital room with my grandfather, thinking about her daughter waking up and unpacking a computer that her father had sent the money to buy. I wondered what he felt back then. I don’t think he remembered my birthday. I don’t think he was thinking much of anything.

It was okay with me. As long as he had been happy.

Happy birthday, Julia.

I closed my eyes.

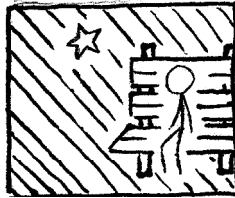


Through the living room windows, pools of sunlight curled up on the couch like old cats. I wasn’t sure why I opened the cabinet—perhaps I was just looking for binders to start the new school year with—but somehow I ended up with a pebbly brown photo album in my hand. I sat on the cold hardwood floor, not even bothering to get up and move towards the couch. There were the usual embarrassing family photos (one particular Polaroid of my father wearing a Speedo will be burned into my memory for all eternity) but as I neared the center of the album, I started to turn every page as if the plastic had grown heavy. My hands stopped moving altogether as I reached the very center of the book, the place where the pages al-

ways opened naturally. There were four glossy photographs on one side, all nearly identical: my grandfather facing the camera with a wide grin on his face, and a paper grocery bag with a girl's head sticking out of it. Mine. I was one year old, my smile even more gummy than my grandfather's. I only have dim recollections of that summer afternoon: my happy yells as I was dragged along the apartment in my grocery bag, my grandfather picking me up by the bag's paper handles and carrying me all around my parents' old apartment. It was the same apartment he had lived in when he died, one I will never separate from my mental image of him: the man with the easy smile, the endless life lessons, and the dirty jokes.

I didn't cry when my grandfather died. Sometimes, I wondered if that made me a bad person, if I didn't really love him after all. I felt guilty for going on with my life so easily. My mother was in pieces for weeks after, and I comforted her with dry eyes when some would be sobbing in empathy.

There, on the floor of my living room, I realized that maybe you don't have to cry to know you have always loved someone. It is enough to open an old photo album and revisit just another lazy Sunday afternoon.



in the dark

isabelle love

I.

NONE OF THIS SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED, but it did. In a perfect world, it wouldn't have, but this isn't. I always just wanted to go back, to find out what everyone had been keeping from me for so long. All my life I'd been hidden behind these walls that kept me from the past, and I wanted out. I've never liked being left in the icy cold of darkness, forced to find my own candle and light it with the knowledge I'd pried out of people. I've always known how to get information out of people. I made a noise halfway between a laugh and a groan.

A merciless whisk of wind dragged me out of my thoughts. It was awfully cold and dark to be a summer shower in Florida, but again, looks can be deceiving. I shifted uncomfortably in a wicker chair, staring at the rain sharply embedding the ground with its needles only a few feet away from me. There was always something dreamy about rain that I could never put my finger on.

Inhaling deeply, I gagged and stared daggers at the ashtray. I never understood that cruel addiction called smoking. Why would someone want so badly to burn a hole through their throat? The thought amused me, confused me. I'd never want more pain, more hurt. God knows I'd had enough of that already. All I wanted were answers, and now I had them.

And it's all because I was stubborn, refusing to be left in the dark.

II.

How did it get to this? What could have possibly happened that turned a happy family into a broken one? Light swarms of giggles burst through my mind, and the dark rainy day collapsed to form

a forest of dull-colored trees. Faded browns and greens surrounded me, some turning to gray while the smiling girl reached down to pick the sun-bleached flowers that started blooming in the lightly dusted snow, snatching up flower after flower until she handed a dozen off to the man behind her. “Mommy’s gonna love these!” She beamed, locks of gold bouncing as she talked, “They’re her favorites.” The man nodded with a loving grin. They left and headed back to the house, father and daughter hand in hand, trailing out of the woods with their Scottie bobbing behind them.

The man I recognized, dark hair and a permanent smile—my father. The girl I knew, but we had drifted apart, and I rarely catch glimpses anymore. That girl changed, grew, fought back, and pushed feelings down. Her hair grew straighter and darker with time, barely resembling the naïve girl of the past. But she was strong. *I am strong*. Despite the armies guarding her feelings, new love filled the holes of pain.

I’ve accepted the fact that my mom is just the woman who gave birth to me; she is still a part of my life, but more like a distant aunt or godmother. My dad was the one who made me—well, me. Now all I want is just to know. . .

“Why?” my voice cracked as the rain came back and the cold, moist air whipped. *Inhale, exhale, inhale . . . Push the feelings down.*

III.

I coped, lived, and let learn. I learned from the mistakes she made. I kept the dark feeling deep inside, its cunning lurking deep in my body. Though kept down by chains and locks, guarded by armies, it’s still there. Always will be. Eyes yellow, watching, waiting, planning. *It’s gonna get me when I’m at my weakest*. Broken, the chains come off. Withering, the locks are disregarded. Alone, the armies of strong thousands fall limp like toy soldiers. The monster is let free, and God help the person in its path.

At that point in time it was my mom, wearing red, hair changing like leaves with the seasons, eyes filled with regret. *If she’s so full of regret, why did she leave you in the first place?* The monster spoke. It wasn’t angry, blood-thirsty, or itching to pick a fight. It

wanted the same things that I did, only with a worse temper. We both wanted answers, and we both knew how to get them. I call it a knack, but then again, some just call it being a good listener. She told the story I'd heard go through my head many a time. I knew it. I always knew it, I just wanted to hear it from her. She'd made a mistake—we all do, but that one just so happened to change my life. She'd left me for a new family, a new life, a new state.

I'm okay with that. Again, I say I cope, I survive, I deal. The monster retreated back into its cage willingly that time, calmed with the answer and calmed by the fact that she had the strength to admit it. I, on the other hand, needed my space, my time, and my thoughts. In the rain, I sat, smoke again filling my nose, the urge to gag returning. No tears left my eyes, no whimper broke through my lips, and no sound escaped me when my heart shattered.

IV.

So now I know. I have the answer I've been waiting for, and it came from the person that I ever so desperately needed to hear it from. I thought it would feel better than this, thought there would be closure, but there was still a hollow pit inside of me that I couldn't seem to get rid of. The rain pounded harder at the ground, as though frustrated by its presence. Lightning snapped close by. I didn't care, didn't give it the time of day. My mind was too clouded to be concerned about safety. The pit needed to be filled. I should have never pried, should have never overstepped the boundaries put up. I should have never climbed the wall or lit the candle. Maybe staying in the dark wasn't so bad. At least it was better than being abruptly told 'I gave up on you for something better.' The monster stirred.

You aren't good enough, it repeated in my mind, ghosting over, whispering just to see my pain. I wanted to say I didn't care, that the words didn't wound me. It wasn't her fault, I tried to keep telling myself. *But it was*. Well, she didn't say those exact words. *But she meant them. If she really cared she would have stayed. She would have . . .* No! I refused to hold this against her, to blame her for this. If I chose to, I would blame the world, but I don't—I

couldn't, even if I tried. In the end, what didn't kill me would make me stronger. Forgive but never forget, and all that jazz. My family loves me, even if they do make mistakes.

V.

Would I go back and change it if I could? The rain was getting softer, its needles massaging the ground rather than stabbing it. I don't know how long I was out there, and I didn't care. Hours, days, minutes, what did it matter? As the clouds lightened, so did my mind. I forgive my mom, but I won't forget the pain she caused me. The wound will heal with time, and, when it does, I believe I will fully understand. *Inhale, exhale, inhale . . .* The feelings are down, the monster is caged, and the candle lights my mind. I'm not in the dark; I won't be again. *Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice . . .*

A mild knocking cleared my mind. Looking over my shoulder I saw about two feet of frizzy haired girl with her face squished against the glass door.

Leaning over, I slid it open and she came outside, curling into a ball on my lap. Seconds later, the door reopened, and a taller version of the girl crouched beside me. She put her hand on my lap and, in the most childish way, silently asked me if I was okay. Giving her a small smile, I stood, holding one half sister in one arm and the other by the hand. *Would I change it if I could?*

I thought of my dad, my sisters, my life.

No, not if it meant all this would change.

hell on earth

danielle bishop

WHY DOES HE ACT THE WAY HE DOES? Sometimes, all I want to do is leave, walk out the door and never look back. I love my sister and mother, but the terrible relationship I have with him is too much. It's his fault I don't want to be there anymore. I don't think he even realizes that he's lost me. Yet something keeps stopping me from walking out that door. I wonder if this is the way he shows love. If so, then he has one screwed up way of showing it.

I have told my mother multiple times that I will leave if he does not change. She asks me where I would go, and every time I reply "away." I feel trapped, like a prisoner who is innocent, yet still blamed for murder. There is no escape. There are no windows in my cell, only walls.

One day, I finally expressed my feelings toward him.

"You think everything revolves around you, but I am not your slave anymore," I said. That was my point.

Instead of replying, all he did was sit, sit there like a bump on a log. All he said was:

"Is that all?"

I didn't just want him to listen, I wanted him to understand.

"behind every closet is a horror."

My feet were getting heavy, and each step I took made me sink further into the carpeted floor. The distance between me and my target was not very far, but it felt like I was not moving. Perhaps I was too scared to even try. Somehow, my body overcame that fear leaving me behind, for it seemed to have a mind of its own. The steps I was taking were not fast, but slow, cat-like, and lingering.

From the corner of my eye, I caught movement. I knew just what it was, for I was on a mission, like a sniper taking out the president.

The plush couch was a dull, gray-blue. It was almost sad looking, as if it had been abandoned. The air was warm and wet from the sweat that was trying to escape my face but couldn't.

It felt like time was at a standstill. It felt as if I was falling in another dimension, a deep black hole where not even the heavens above nor the hell below could hear me if I screamed. I pulled my hand into a fist to make sure I was not in the movie *Inception*. That is when the cool texture of a rectangular device in my hand glowed. The laptop! I pushed away those thoughts, searching for the ones I needed. Then my pursuit became clear again. My foot moved, taking what was just a baby step. Closer. Closer. Closer. I felt my body aching to be at my destination, to get this problem over with so I could go on the hunt to find my sister.

"What possessed you to do this?" was all my voice said.

Instead of responding, the presence before me just stared, looking with abnormal, bloodshot eyes that could kill with just a wink.

"What are you talking about?" replied the deadly presence.

"You know exactly what. How could you? We will fix this *tonight!*" I snapped aggressively.

Turning around on my tip toes, since my heels wouldn't move. I scanned my surroundings to make sure I hadn't caused a scene. My mission was not yet done, for I needed to find my other half. My first idea was to go down the steps toward the basement where the gym was. I went down the first flight of steps and saw nothing but blackness. I continued the descent. It seemed like I was the prey walking right into the emptiness of a monster's mouth.

My foot touched the carpet-tiled floor. As soon as it did, a dark aura gripped me and slammed me to the ground. The aura stirred for a while. I did not want to be there any more than the equipment did, and everywhere I looked, the machines were staring back with a look of sadness and confusion. I turned my attention as soon as I heard sniffing, and there my other half sat, crying like a lost child.

"life is like an arrow—it is always dangerous."

The air was thick with a disgusting odor, a vile and terrifying smell that made the bogeyman smell like flowers. You could not

see what the cause of the smell was, but you could feel the dreadful hatred that it had manifested. The lights were dim, and it felt as if at any moment a mysterious person would jump out from behind me, forming a shriek in my throat. My mind was blazing and my feelings were at war.

Every step I took pulled me deeper into my clouded mind. At that point it was giving off nothing but pure hatred. The dreadful feeling that was flowing out of my heart was a murderous one. One that no one, not even the world's most hated man, could know. My body did not belong to me; I wanted to stop and calm down, but instead I rushed up a small incline. While this was happening, an episode was being forged together inside me.

I turned to the cause of my problems, and my feelings were let loose.

"You are a screw-up!" roared the demonic voice from my throat.

"Who are you talking to like that?" the ugly animal replied with a sickening sneer. The next thing I knew, a fierce beast was hurtling towards me with a force that would have turned a child's skin inside out. I took a step backward; if I hadn't, I would most likely have fallen, and if that had happened, then I would definitely be dead, like a ditzy blonde running from a crazed killer. At that moment, messages shot through my mind saying to fight back. I was molded with the ground, which forming around me, combining us as one. That's when my foot took the first step forward, and all that I thought was, *Will I survive?*

"there is always someone else who needs you."

That face, I hate it. Every time I look at it, my insides burn with a fire that not even hell can compare to. Every time I see that face, I have that feeling. I wish I could close my eyes and dream. But instead of a dream, it's reality. That face was attacking me. I could feel my body gripped by what felt like two giant boulders trying to squish me together. I opened my painfully closed eyes, and through my veil of tears, I saw it—that face. Not just a face, but a body, too, of a thick and husky build. The tension behind him was full force and angry—aggressive.

The eyes showed nothing but hatred, like a crazed, rabid animal. The lips pulled back into what was almost a sneer, nose blazing. The eyebrows were drawn together as if in response to an unwelcome presence. The skin on his body was rippling, like bugs crawling beneath the skin, and his forehead was full of wrinkles.

"I'm tired of you and your fucking behaviors!" I snapped. "You don't care, you act on your idiot behaviors."

"I'm tired, too. Cuss me out one more time!" he threatened.

That was basically all I could remember, for the next thing I knew, I was being thrown against the cold, thick, cement wall.

"I will kill you!" shouted a demonic voice.

These same words were repeated, the next time with even more emotion and intensity. All I could imagine was that this face had no soul, no other purpose than to hurt and harm me, and at the same time I could only wonder why. *Why, my supposedly beloved father?*

epilogue

I hate it. I loathe it. I just want to run and never look back. I have been his prisoner for too long. Either I will escape or he will have to die. I could never be a murderer, physically or mentally. I know for sure that I cannot stay here and be tormented by his so-called love. If I try to go, I will just get sucked back in. I cannot leave my dear, beloved mother, for I owe her my life as she has given one to me.

Life is such a simple term that people take for granted. For me though, I never really have experienced it, unless you call Satan's living room a pleasure. People tell me almost everyday, "Oh you're so young, life has just begun for you."

Has it? Life has never started for me. I am like a trapped child thinking there is no other life beyond my castle walls. Every night, I just want to cry and drown myself in my tears of anguish. It seems that the only reason for me to live is so I can be his tormented child, his pained daughter, his living ghost.

my angel

maria fibela de las angeles

I WALKED DOWN THE WINTRY STREET. Drop by drop, warm tears ran down my frozen cheeks. The night was gloomy; even the moon seemed dim. Still in shock from what happened, I walked along. Where was I headed? Who knows. It felt like the world was spinning rapidly around me. No matter which way I went, I felt lost. The streets I once knew so well quickly became foreign to me. After what seemed like endless walking, I arrived in front of a hotel. That's when I realized I had no money. I checked my pockets and found my phone, relief washing over me. I tried to think of somebody who could help and I immediately knew who. My aunt arrived at the hotel and told me to get in the car.

"What happened?" she asked.

"My dad kicked me out the house," I replied softly. My aunt's expression changed in a flash. I knew I could count on her for anything, but I just wasn't in the mood to talk about it.

"Look, I really don't feel like talking about this right now. Can you please rent me a room to stay in this hotel?" I answered. I knew she would understand.

"Okay. We will talk tomorrow. So, you sure you wanna stay here?" she said with a worried look.

"Yes . . . I don't want to bother you, and I could use the time to think," I responded. She opened the car door and headed out to the hotel's front desk. I followed her. I was glad she didn't ask anything else. She rented me a room and walked with me to it.

"Well, I'll let you get some rest. I'll come by tomorrow and if you need anything call me," she said.

"Thanks . . . a lot."

I slowly waved goodbye as she walked down the long and quiet corridor. When she was out of sight, I went into the cold and empty room, shutting the door behind me. I threw myself on the bed and closed my eyes. Images of my horrible day ran through my head, one after another, as if I were reliving that moment. . . .

back to the moment

The second I got off the loud and wild school bus, the worrisome thought of going home occupied my mind. The smile on my face quickly vanished, and everything around me seemed pale. I dragged my feet along slowly, trying to waste some time, but it seemed as if I arrived earlier than usual. Thoughts of my father ran through my mind as I slid the key into the door. As soon as I opened it and stepped inside, the stench of liquor and cigarettes hit me. As I walked further into my “home,” I realized my father wasn’t there. Relieved, I let out a sigh, but then I realized he would have to get there sooner or later. I walked into my room and closed the door behind me. You’d probably feel safe in your own house, but for me walking into my house is like walking right into my personal Hell.

I heard the door bang open; he was back—and drunk again. All of a sudden, I heard that deep voice that I have learned to detest. The next thing I knew, he was outside of my room, kicking the door. I walked toward it, and I began to feel hot. I opened the door and saw him holding onto the wall for support. *I knew it. He’s drunk*, I thought to myself. He looked at me with disgust, as if he couldn’t bear to see me.

“Where is your useless mother at?” he said, so awkwardly that I could barely understand.

“My mother is not useless!” I snapped.

The sting of his strong, dry hand hitting my face caused tears to form in my eyes, but I quickly wiped them away.

“Listen, I didn’t ask for your opinion, and don’t ever scream at me like that, you hear?” he snarled as he grabbed my shirt.

I could smell his breath: alcohol and cigarettes. Before I was able to say anything, the front door opened again. We stood in silence, just waiting for someone to appear. My mother walked up slowly—you could tell she was not so happy, either. As she saw me and my father standing there, she must have realized something was wrong again. Those days, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for him and I to argue; in fact, it had become something like a daily routine.

“Where the hell were you at?” my father screamed.

"I went to buy some food after I got off work," she explained evenly.

"Look, you don't need to go anywhere after work, you need to be here," he shouted back. He grabbed my mother and looked her directly in the eyes. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. Just let go, you're hurting me," she said quickly.

"Let her go!" I yelled.

"Nobody asked you, brat, so shut the fuck up, and didn't I tell you not to scream at me?" he growled in a loud, deep voice that made me tremble.

"You're hurting her," I said, my voice hoarse.

As he began walking toward me, I knew what was about to happen was not going to be good. Next thing I knew was that my father was grabbing and shaking me.

"You just can't understand that you shouldn't yell at me, can you? You think you're so grown. Well, you're not. Because you still live in my damn house!"

My mom began to pull him off of me.

"What, you're gonna defend this useless brat who doesn't do anything but cost us money?" he screamed.

He grabbed me with his strong hands and threw me to the floor.

"She's our daughter! And it's not like you help pay for her, you don't work and all you do is get drunk! Her stepfather does more for her than you do," my mother argued. My mother and father didn't get along since about two years ago, and they didn't want to get separated because of my siblings. They agreed to live together even though they weren't married anymore. My mom started seeing this guy, they started dating, and he became my stepdad.

"She's my daughter, not his!"

"Well, you know what? She would be better off without you!" my mother hissed, full of anger.

My father grabbed me off the floor and held me, then said, "Well, if that's what you think, she can start being better off without me by getting out my damn house."

My mother, surprised by this reaction, said, "She's your daughter, dammit!"

My father looked at me. "Get the fuck out of my damn house. Let's see how long you last." He dragged me to the front door and threw me out.

the rolled up piece of paper

As I lay there, all alone, I couldn't help but feel angry and upset. Why was life so unfair? What had I ever done to my father for him to treat me this way? I looked around me, and nothing seemed right. I just felt like screaming really loudly and letting this pain and anger out. I suddenly began to feel a pain in my chest, so I decided to go outside. The rain only made the whole situation worse because it seemed so depressing. I walked without knowing where I was off to. As I walked, I began to think of when I was younger. I really didn't remember my childhood at all. I remembered living with my grandma and how bad she used to treat me. Why was my life so difficult? All the other little kids were always with their parents, while I was always at home alone.

I bumped into someone and fell down onto the wet sidewalk. I looked up to see three people, two adults and one child. As they walked away, I saw how the two adults held the child's hands and walked beside him, smiling at him and giggling. Tears began to well in my eyes, falling down to the ground with the rain. Why hadn't my childhood been like that? Why? I guess my parents really didn't care enough about me to be with me.

I got off of the cold and wet ground and continued walking. There was nobody around anymore, yet I kept walking along with tears still falling down my face. It was around twelve in the morning when I decided to turn around and go back to the hotel. On my way there, a woman bumped into me, and when she looked up at me, she realized I was crying.

"Aye, girl. Ya a'ight?" she asked. I didn't reply. "Look, I know ya don't know me, but if ya having troubles this is helpful . . . trust me, I been there befo' girl," she said as she handed me a rolled up piece of paper. Just as fast as she appeared, she left. Before I went inside the hotel, I stopped at the gas station to buy something to drink and eat. As I walked up to the cashier, I grabbed a lighter. I don't know why, but I just did.

At the hotel, I ate a bag of hot Cheetos and drank a soda. I slipped my hand into my sweater pocket and found the rolled up paper the woman gave me. I kept rolling it in my hand and all of a sudden I took the lighter, lit it up, and began to smoke. One part

of me said to keep going, it would make me forget everything, and the other half said no. I tried to put it down and stop but it seemed useless. I couldn't.

I smoked 'til it was gone.

kim

The next morning I woke up late, almost in the afternoon. I left the hotel room for only a moment; it felt cold outside. I quickly walked back in and lay down on the bed again. I closed my eyes. I felt so empty inside; I needed someone to talk to and give me advice. Something vibrated under me, and I searched around my bed until I found my phone. I looked at the screen to see a message—Hey, what's up?—from Kim.

Kim had been my best friend for two years, since we met. She always gave me advice when I told her about my problems. I didn't want to worry her, but I needed her advice badly. I was totally confused and lost. So I decided I would tell her what happened. What I wasn't sure about was how to tell her about the smoking.

I texted Kimberly all day long and explained everything. She was sad about it and upset because we wouldn't be able to see each other for the winter break that had just begun. I wished she were with me right then; I needed her to hug me and tell me everything was going to be okay.

That night, my mom came over. I guess my aunt had been talking to her. Her eyes were rimmed with black shadows, and you could tell how sleep deprived she was. She seemed so fragile, the way she walked, the way she looked. This was a bad time for her, and I knew she felt just as lost as I did. Mom said that my father had left the house a while after me. I was glad to hear that because at least they didn't have to deal with him, yet it didn't make much difference to her.

I felt awkward. For the first time, it seemed as if I couldn't talk to my mom. I needed someone to help me, but she wasn't the right person. I knew I was lost in the middle of nowhere, and she was, too. The silence spread throughout the room; she tried to get me to speak, but all of her questions I managed to answer with a simple "yes" or "no."

"So, you feeling alright?" she asked for the thousandth time.

"Yeah, I've had some headaches and pain in my chest, but I'm sure I just need some sleep."

"Chest pains?" She arched a brow.

"I mean they've been there since about two weeks ago . . . They're just occurring more than before," I muttered.

"You need to go get a check-up!" she said with an anxious expression.

"Please not now," I pleaded immediately. "You know I hate doctors."

I had always hated doctors since I was little, and check-ups were things I definitely dreaded. Mom was right, though. This wasn't normal anymore.

The pain got worse every day.

going back home

I was in that hotel for almost a week. I'd done nothing but feel like crap. Whenever my mom came to see me, she always said things would soon get better; I wished I could believe that. I went out at night and always ended up smoking. I guess it just helped me forget things for at least a little while. My life seemed to be burning away just like my father's cigarettes had. I never told my mom I smoked, though. I was sure it would just make her more miserable than she already was.

It was midnight and was I just getting back from the streets. I walked into the hotel and lay on my bed. I couldn't help but feel so alone. I slipped under the cold covers and shut my eyes. I heard a beep and picked up my phone, answering the call.

"I have some good news, honey," my mother chirped.

"What is it?"

"You can come home now!"

"That's good," I murmured softly. I was happy to hear that, but I was terrified as well. I didn't want to see my father; he'd become a stranger. He was someone who didn't exist anymore. The next morning, I was waiting for Mom to come pick me up. I wasn't ready to live with him again, but I hated being alone. Once we were in the car, my mother told me something that changed all of that. She explained that they had gotten in a fight, and he was no longer living

with us. It all made sense now; no wonder she sounded so happy last night. I was so relieved things were starting to be fixed again.

As days went by, I didn't feel lonely thanks to Mom. I had nightmares about my father coming back all the time, though. Sometimes I stayed up all night because if I closed my eyes, the images would return. My mother knew something was wrong with me. She tried to talking to me sometimes, but I never liked expressing my feelings. I only did that with Kim.

hospital

My eyes slowly opened, and I saw no one; once again, I was alone. I looked down at my hands and blinked at the needles going into my wrists. I began to remember what happened. I saw someone walk into the room: my mother. Tears were streaming down her face, and she ran to kiss me on my forehead.

"I - I told Kim about you being here," she said softly.

"No!" I cried angrily. "I told you not to. She must be so worried."

Man, was I right. As soon as I got my hands on my phone, though, I saw that she knew everything already.

Kim: Just keep me updated please

Me: Maria just woke up.

Kim: Thank god thank you for letting me know

I couldn't believe my mother. The first thing I told her. It was just that I didn't want my best friend to suffer for my faults and get all worried. My mother told me how Kim had told her she would pray for me all night long. I never really had a true friend—I had lots of friends, but they were just there when they felt like it; when it came to helping you when you were in desperate need, they all just magically disappeared.

to kim

People wonder why I hang around you all the time. They don't know what you mean to me. You helped me through the dark times even though you knew what I was doing was wrong, but you did

it. If it weren't for you right now, I would probably be lost in the life of drugs. I can never thank you enough for being there for me no matter what. I could never live without you because you mean too much to me. You are a true friend. When my life was burning down, you were my angel.

freshman versus society



the life of an otaku

yuzu-chan

1. day-dreaming

ALL WAS SILENT. The thing looked like a giant praying mantis with a round, white, skeleton-like face that took the shape of a mask. It clutched a small girl in its claws.

A guy with orange hair, about sixteen years old, ran toward it. "My sister!"

"She'll be okay," said a girl with short, black hair and big eyes. She wore a black kimono. Lying against a wall, she clenched her sword in her fist, breathing heavily from the wound the monster had given her.

"Are you alright?" the boy who had watched the bloody fight asked her.

*"Hey! Snap out of it!" I heard a random voice calling my name. Damn. I got caught. I looked around at the gloomy jail cell they called a classroom, only to see my classmates, some staring, some snickering. W . . T . . F . . What the Ferrari! I looked down; in my hands was *Bleach: Volume 1*, the manga I had been reading.*

"Wha?"

"Answer my question," said my teacher, Ms. Carter.

"Uh, I don't know," I mumbled just loud enough for the teacher to hear me.

"I see," the teacher said, going back to whatever she was doing.

Later in the day, I went to science class. The classroom itself was just white walls and white cabinets with a few colorful posters scattered around. Short stools surrounded black science tables. One by one, my classmates sat down, all the same in their uniforms, navy blue skirts or pants and white polo shirts. Some guys sat at one of the tables talking, and one of them saw my book bag; on it was a picture of one of my favorite characters in anime, Deidara, from *Naruto: Shippuden*.

“So you like *Naruto*?” the random guy asked.

“Yeah,” I said in a shy tone.

“Me, too.” He rummaged through his bag and thrust a piece of paper in front of me. “That’s my *Naruto* person. Have you drawn any?” he asked.

“I can draw one right now,” I offered.

I grabbed a pencil and drew a character with long brown hair and brown eyes, with a smile that looked like she would kill this guy if he even just looked at her funny. She held a long sword. I didn’t think it was any good—I had rushed through it in about thirty seconds.

“Damn, she’s hot,” he said as he studied the picture.

“Thanks . . . I guess,” I said. And then I got an idea.

What if I made my own manga? I already had the main character. I’d name her Yuzu, and the story would be about her joining the Akatsuki, the criminal organization for the anime *Naruto*. I’d pair her with my favorite character, Deidara.

2. negative

“Germany! Germany! Germany is a really, really nice place. Tell me, how is it you Germans are so robust? You’re crushing me with your intimidation.” I laughed at the computer screen.

Italy, a pizza- and pasta-loving character with light brown hair, sang his song to the character Germany, a stern, serious character. *Hmm . . . Italy’s so cute! It’s official: Hetalia is my new fave anime.*

The bell rang. *What? First period already? But I only watched about . . . uh . . . a couple videos. Well, I’ll just start on my manga during class.* I got up from the classroom computer, got off of YouTube, took my headphones off, logged out, and went to my seat, which was in the back of the room right next to the computers. I took out a new black spiral notebook. On the inside cover, I wrote the title *Akatsuki Tales* and drew a small picture of the main character, Yuzu, and her guy friend, Deidara.

Once I started drawing, time went by fast. It was fourth period when the teacher told the class to line up for patio, when we all went outside to do whatever. It was like recess, but there was no

playground—just a field surrounded by a metal fence, with nothing but an old shed in the corner and a square sidewalk that cut down the middle of the field. Since I didn't want to meet anybody, I brought my notebook outside and sat on the sidewalk.

A girl walked up to me.

"Hi," she said. I looked up. Tall and skinny with dark skin, she wore the school uniform like everyone else. She had her short, black hair in a ponytail. "Can I see what you're drawing?" she asked enthusiastically. I nodded and gave her the book.

It was a small, four-panel comic with Deidara wearing his long hair half in a high ponytail, the other half covering his face. The other character, Hidan, had short, slicked-back, silver hair. The first panel showed Deidara's palms together. The second showed Hidan asking him, "Are you praying?" In the third, Deidara replied, "No, I'm making out." And the final panel showed Hidan with a surprised look on his face.

The girl said she didn't get it.

"Deidara has mouths on his hands, so . . . yeah . . ."

She thought about it for a while and started laughing. "Really? That's so nasty." She laughed again.

"I know, right?" I said cheerfully.

"You're funny. Wanna be friends?" she asked.

"Sure. I'm Yuzu-chan," I said.

"Zafni."

We talked and talked till patio was over.

3. pencil

"Boy, I'll stab you," I said, clenching a pencil in my right hand, making jabbing motions toward one of the guys while I held onto the book with my left. They were still grabbing at the black notebook. *Grr, you're thinking I'm not serious? Okay, then . . .*

Why I was trying to stab a guy? Well, it started like this.

It's only been two weeks since school started, huh? Damn, it feels like forever, I said to myself as I walked down the hall.

"Hello." Zafni walked up with a happy look on her face.

"Hi," I said.

"So you're writing more stuff in your comic?" she asked.

"Yeah, this part is when my character joins the Akatsuki."

"Hi, Zafni!" a voice came from behind me. *Oh, it's her. Or he. Or both?* Its name was Kelsey. I remembered the first day we met.

"Hi, I'm Kelsey," a pig-like creature with glasses had squealed. She had the laugh of Flapjack and Spongebob mixed into one annoying sound. "You look lonely," she had said. "I'm not really hanging out with the popular kids because of stuff."

You? Popular? Yeah, right. I had the urge to slap her. I held back.

"Oh, have you met Kelsey?" Zafni asked.

"Uh . . . yeah," I answered.

"Hi! He-he-he," she grossly giggled.

"Well, I'm gonna draw somewhere else for a second." I saw an empty seat behind two guys, Daquan and Wybe. Daquan was a weird perverted person that licked hand sanitizer and liked to watch animals humping each other on the computer behind me. We also had to share a locker because our school sucked and we had a shortage of lockers. Wybe was a tall guy with bags under his eyes that made him look like he was high. Since I was there, I asked them to look over the comic and see if it was okay. The comic was about *Naruto* characters and they knew the show, so it made sense to ask.

"It's good, just let me draw in something to make it more *realistic*," Wybe said. They reached for the book, so I playfully grabbed it and pulled it back.

"Um, no," I said, moving the notebook from the guys' reach. I grabbed the pencil on the desk. "Boy, I'll stab you," I said, clenching a pencil in my hand, making jabbing motions toward Daquan while my left hand held onto the notebook. They were still trying to get it.

"Ow!" Daquan said, holding his arm. He looked like he was in pain. It seemed as if I had stabbed him. I wanted to say "told you so," but the wound still had the tip of the pencil in it, so I held back. Tears started to come from his eyes. *Pussy*, I thought and walked away slowly.

"Come outside the room!" the teacher said in a stern voice.

"Okay," I mumbled, and walked outside the classroom.

"What happened?" the teacher asked.

"It was a reaction," I said. "Sorry."

"Sorry won't cut it. He might get lead poisoning!" she answered, probably trying to make me feel guilty for something. *You don't get lead poisoning from a pencil because the 'lead' part of the pencil is made of graphite!* I kept my mouth shut.

"You know I'll have to tell the principal now?" she said.

"Wha?" I whispered.

"No, she's cool," Daquan said. *Yeah, listen to him. He knows what he's talking about!* I looked up.

"Still, she might have caused lead poisoning," the teacher repeated. *Not again with the damn lead poisoning thing! It's made of graphite! G-R-A-P-H-I-T-E! Graphite!* The teacher told me to wait in the classroom until further notice, so I sat at my desk.

"What happened!?" Zafni asked.

"Nothin'. I just screwed up the moment, that's all," I said in a sarcastic tone.

"Where is that notebook?" a male teacher asked walking up. I pointed and the teacher took it. *Great, just great.* "Come with me." The teacher pointed at me so I got up and followed. We walked up to the principal's office and I saw my dad. *Damn. I'm so screwed.*

I stood next to my dad as the principal explained the situation. Then, to rub salt in the wound, she showed the camera footage of what happened. And to make the situation even worse, she added, "Your daughter has been writing pornography."

Excuse me, you haven't even scratched the surface of the manga. So what? There's a few parts showing but I censored all the really bad parts, so nothing was really showing. And plus the comic has a much deeper storyline than just some random porno, and if you think this is bad, you should see yaoi and hentai! That would make you explode!

"She was trying to defend herself," my dad said. *Wha?* "To me she didn't do anything wrong." *So, I'm not screwed?*

"Well, anyway, your daughter will be suspended for three days," the principal said.

"Yeah, I understand," he answered. He took me to the car and we buckled up.

"Is Mom gonna kill me?" I asked. My mom's Filipino so she would probably kill me before I got the chance to explain.

"I don't know," Dad said in a calm tone, "but you know you should have punched him rather than stabbing him." He laughed. I kept quiet as we drove home. I stayed in the car as my dad explained everything to Mom. After that, I got out.

"Are you mad at me?"

I'm so damn stupid! I thought to myself. *Why did I ask her that? Dumb, dumb, dumb!*

"No," she said.

battle against my secrets

sydney biles

1. the kid who was late

EVER WALK INTO CLASS LATE and notice how everyone looks at you like you murdered someone? That's what happened to me.

Now, as far as I'm concerned, no one is to be trusted, and as far as everybody else is concerned, I'm not supposed to be trusted. I've lost a lot of "friends" in this battle against my secrets, but it's hard when you're fighting rumors. Horrible things are said. Secrets are made public. That's what happened to me. I fell into the pit of adolescent gossip.

Back in the eighth grade, I got into it with one of my best friends. She held my precious secrets in her hand. Day after day, I heard a new one released. "Did you hear about Sydney?" "Oh my gosh, she did what?!" they said behind my back, pointing at me, whispering about me to their friends. Every time they did, I felt a flush of heat from embarrassment.

Normally, this kind of thing wouldn't break me. The rumors weren't even that bad. I could have just brushed them off. Now that I think about it, it probably would been better if I had. But no. It was all about revenge at that point. I had to even the score. I started the next rumor. I began an all out war. I started to build my army, making allies with people who were nearly at the top of our middle school hierarchy. At that moment, I was winning, too. I wasn't going to let my guard down. But even after all that preparation, I was still unprepared for what happened next.

I walked down the hallway. My friend ran behind and nearly tackled me when she finally caught up. "Whoa! Slow down before you get in trouble. What's up? Isn't your class the other way? You're going to be late," I said.

"Yeah, but don't worry about that right now. You're not going to believe what people are saying now," she said, gasping for air.

I stopped walking and looked at her. The worried look on her face told me that this would be unpleasant.

"What is it? And you should really slow down next time. You look like you're about to pass out." I tried to act calm.

"Okay, don't freak out. She said that, um, you like, um, girls." She tried to smile like it was all going to be okay but she knew that it wasn't.

"Oh, well okay," I said, trying to make sure she didn't worry. "You should really get to class before you get into trouble. I'll catch up with you, okay?"

"Wait, so are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." I quickly walked away before she could reply. I didn't want her to see me upset. I just kept walking. Then I stopped in the middle of the hallway. Most of the eyes were on me: girls giving me disgusted looks, and guys giving me looks inappropriate for school. They were all talking about me in one way or another even if they weren't speaking aloud.

Without a friend by my side, I sank into my sorrow. My confidence from yesterday quickly shrank away into the darkest part of my soul. I didn't want to look at anyone's face. I didn't even look up. I just watched my feet while emotions and thoughts swirled in my head. *Why is this happening? Is it really that bad?* I finally reached my class. I didn't even have to look up to know that all eyes were on me, like I was the kid late to class.

2. in jail

As I walked in, I felt the weight of a thousand cinder blocks being dragged by my shadow. I didn't want to make eye contact with anyone, but as I scanned for a seat, my eyes met her gaze. We didn't have to say anything, but we knew exactly what we'd say if we did. My rage was starting to flare up in my body. If I talked, a whole line of swear words would come out, no matter what I meant to say. Trying to calm myself, something in the logical part of my brain said, *Calm down, Sydney. You can't deal with this right now. Just find a seat.* Luckily, I listened.

I found a nice desk in the very back of the classroom. It wasn't too far from the teacher's desk, but the teacher always stayed in

the front of the class. I did feel a little uncomfortable when the person I sat next to gave me a look. I thought that was hypocritical because she used to sit next to me all the time before this just to cheat off of me.

Then, I realized that middle school is a jail and the people here are your strong, scary-looking cellmates. I was the wimpy, new guy that would now be the new punching bag.

When I finally noticed that this was math class, I decided not to listen; I always stayed ahead in this class. I began searching for something to do. I didn't have any paper, so I couldn't draw. I started looking around at people in the classroom. Then, my gaze turned to her again. I stared at her with a look so heavy, my gaze wrapped chains around her neck. I never thought that I could hate someone with such a lethal passion. *I hate her. Everything she does is just annoying.* Then I stopped. *That's not right. How can I be thinking these thoughts? Me and her used to be best friends. Where did I go wrong?* My thoughts were quickly interrupted when I tuned into a word that the teacher said.

Partners?! My spirit plummeted.

Everyone tried to avoid eye contact with me except Lala. She stared at me with the same hatred I had given her earlier, but this time, when I looked back, my expression was filled with anxiety. I raised my hand. I tried to stay confident when I said, "Why are you trying to treat us like children? Are we in kindergarten or something? Instead of you choosing our partners, why can't we pick them?" I got a lot of nasty looks because no one wanted to be partners with me—but then, no one disagreed. "We're in the eighth grade."

"Well, amazing speech there, Syd. Okay, you guys can pick your partners." I got looks of approval, but still no one would be my partner. Maybe it was my lack of effort, but still. There was only one other person who no one else wanted, and that was George. He was my best friend, and Lex's little cousin. But that meant that he was like a cousin to Lala too, since Lex and Lala were together. He was neutral about the whole situation.

"I'll do all the work, Sydney. Lex says you been really stressed out lately." He was trying to make conversation, which threw me off because I didn't think anybody was going to talk to me.

“No, I’ll help. We’ll get it done faster that way, and don’t worry about me. I’m fine,” I lied. “Tell Lex that, too. I don’t want him getting into this.”

“Okay.” The conversation was quickly over. We indeed finished our assignment earlier than others, so I just read afterward. When the bell rang, I felt like a prisoner who had been let out of jail. It was time to go home.

3. thinking

When I got home from school, I grabbed my bike, forgot about all the homework I had, and rode off. I biked to my favorite part of the neighborhood. I remembered my first time coming there. My friend had brought me there because we were running from people who were mad at him for showing me the fort they had made. I guess it was supposed to be a secret. Anyways, we ran out there to hide, and when I saw it, my eyes widened, my jaw dropped, and I was set in a trance. It was beautiful, especially for my neighborhood. It was a bunch of small hills layered with thick, tall grass the color of wheat. A brownish pond was filled with baby tadpoles, and most of the area was surrounded by tall, thick trees.

I almost cried when he said they were going to build a hotel there when they got enough funds. That was nearly two years ago. I guess they’re broke since it was never built. Frankly, I hope they never get the money.

I’m sitting here alone today. I sit thinking while the grass rubs against my legs. It itches, but I pay no mind. All I can think about is those eyes. All those eyes watching me with disgust. I pull my legs in closer and shiver at the thought, even though it’s ninety degrees out here. The eyes, the names, and no one to tell about it. I bury my head in my lap. I finally let my emotions take over.

How did all this happen to me? Why did I let myself get mixed up in this? Why now? Too much is happening at one time. At that moment, my world caved in.

My thoughts were quickly interrupted when my dad called. I cleared my throat and sniffled before I picked up, but I refused to wipe my tears since my eyes kept creating more.

"Hello, dad." He was freaking out. I realized that I been so caught up in my emotions that I had forgotten to call. "No, I'm not at a boy's house. I'm at the park," I lied. "No, you don't have to pick me up. I have my bike." Actually, it was because I didn't want him to hit me in public. "No, I'm not meeting a boy. I just came here on my own. I needed the exercise. Please stop yelling at me." I started crying again. I can only take so much of other people's emotions before my own come out.

He realized I wasn't doing well. "Okay, Sydney. Come home now."

I stood up and took in the scenery one last time. I got on my bike and left for home.

Every step towards the door felt heavier, for I knew I had to go in and explain to my dad why I hadn't been home. My dad and I never communicated well, so I knew that telling him what happened at school wouldn't be the best idea.

As I slowly turned the doorknob, I finally wiped the tears from my eyes. I stepped into the house and couldn't find him. "Dad! I'm home." Still silence.

Then, I heard the faintest call back. "I'm in the basement. I'll be right up."

I went into my room. I realized that I'd have to leave soon. I had to go the mall with Lex to pick out a dress for the dance tonight.

"Sydney, why were you at the park?" my dad said from behind me.

"I thought it would be a good place to study. I didn't feel like being at home. I know I should've called first and I'm sorry I forgot," I replied.

"Okay," he said with a hint of doubt in his voice. He knew something was up, but he didn't want to push for details. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

4. decisions, decisions

"So this one or that one?" I asked. "I mean this one is on sale, but that one is like we were made for each other." We'd been in F.Y.E. for at least a hour. I just couldn't decide on which CD I wanted.

"I don't know," he said. I shot a glare. There must have been something about my look that said choose because he quickly corrected himself and said, "Okay, okay. Gt the one that's on sale because it's almost Christmas and someone will get the other one for you so you won't have to pay retail."

"Genius decision my friend," I said with a funny English accent.

"Yeah, whatever," he said sarcastically. I didn't think all that was necessary because he was trying to choose, too. I only know because he has that funny look on his face when he thinks. He'll make this weird kissy face and he'll raise one of his eyebrows. He looks as if he's being denied a kiss. It's so cute.

"What's so funny?" he said. I had chuckled without realizing.

"Oh, nothing," I chuckled again. I started looking at him: his curly black hair hopelessly drowned in coconut oil, his light brown skin polka-dotted with pimples, his dark brown eyes morphing into hazel in the sunlight, his body like one of a body builder from long days of martial arts and football practice.

"What are you looking at? Do I have something on my face?" he said while wiping his face, looking for something.

"Huh? No, sorry I zoned out," I lied. I hadn't actually meant to stare.

"Oh. Were you thinking about Lala again? I know the rumors must be stressing you out. I can talk to her, if you want."

"No. I don't want you involved with my problems. I started it, I should finish it. *Alone*. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine," I said warily. I knew it'd only get worse, but I'd rather not have him worry. "What this really is about is how Lala's going to kill you for hanging with me. I mean if she found out that the love of her life and her sworn enemy are best friends, still, she'll be devastated. No wait, I love that. Let's go tell her!" I said, trying to make a joke.

"Ha ha, you're not funny," he laughed. "But seriously, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Remember, we're not little kids anymore," I tried to reassure him. He wasn't buying it. "Fine. You can talk to her. Just let me be there."

"No, I got it. You let me handle it alone," he said strictly with a hint of sarcasm.

"Okay, whatever."

"I'm serious, Syd," he said, glaring at me. I just nodded. I didn't feel like talking about it anymore. I'm glad he got the hint.

"We should go. I want to try on the dress before the dance. You have to tell if it makes my butt look good enough," I joked.

"I love my job."

5. dancing to remember

He's allowing me to be out of the house with friends and boys? Perhaps my dad was being extra generous because he thought I was going to wear a dress. He had always wanted me to be more girly. So, for my dad, I wore a black dress with sequins on it. But I always brought an extra pair of clothes to dances and parties because he would never let me out the house with the stuff I like to wear. Then, when I got changed, I had on black pants and a black tank top with a white shirt over that.

Tonight was going to be fun. It was Friday, and I was ready to get my dance on. The looks wouldn't bother me tonight. You can't see someone while you're dancing in the dark. Plus, I was going to look pretty hot, so why even bother worrying about people, right? As we pulled up to the school, I saw my two best friends, Kelsey and Kessie. Kessie was wearing a short, pink dress with big, brown and black polka-dots. Kelsey was wearing a sensual, black dress that her parents wouldn't be proud to see public. Both wore smiles on their faces when they saw me.

"A dress?!" they cried in unison. They were obviously shocked that I would even consider a dress.

"Take it in, girls, because it's coming off when we get in there," I laughed. "My dad thinks I'm on my way to being a lady with this dress on." They were still surprised I was out in public.

"Okay. Just let me take a picture," Kelsey said, taking out her phone. "You want a copy Kess?"

"Yeah! Seriously, this is huge. Sydney in a dress. A new era should begin for such a colossal event to happen." I just laughed as they ranted in shock.

As we walked in the door, I saw several people wearing the same expressions that Kessie and Kelsey gave me when they saw the dress. Walking up to pay for my ticket, I saw Lex and Tameka

waiting. Lex looked pretty causal as if he hadn't changed before he came. Tameka was all too fancy. She wore a skin-tight dress against her skinny body that clung to show off what little curves she had. She was wearing heels, making her a couple inches taller than me. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail.

I ran to hug them both. What I forget was I was also in heels, so I slipped before I could get to them. Lex caught me with one arm as if we were ballet partners. I felt the familiar flush of heat, embarrassed at the fact that he was looking at me with concern and compassion. I tried to play it off cool.

"I'm fine. Thanks for catching me, but I meant to do that." I stuck my tongue at him. It earned me a smile.

"Whatever you say, your highness." I just laughed.

I ran into the bathroom to get changed. I walked out like a model. I stroke a pose. "Bam!"

They laughed at me. "Come on, Tyra. Before the dance is over," Lex said. The gym was dark, but you could still make out figures and faces if you were close enough. Multicolored lights glided around the room. Groups of people danced together in small circles, but it was too early for the real party to begin.

I smiled. "It feels like tonight is going to be amazing."

"Telepathic ninja!" Kelsey laughed. "No, I can feel it, too."

"Where's Lex?"

"He went to talk to Lala. I didn't even know she was here." She looked around. "There they are, on the bleachers, up there."

"Oh, okay." I shifted uncomfortably, remembering the look on his face when he caught me. *Let it go. Tonight's a night of fun.* "Let's go dance, you guys. They're playing our song."

The lights glowed brighter now that we were on the dance floor. Adrenaline rushed through my body as I moved to the beat of the song. My people gathered around and danced with us, which got the party started. Then someone tapped my shoulder. It was Lala.

"Sydney, can I talk to you? It's kind of important." I looked at my friends to see if they knew what was going on. At this point, I don't think they realized we were even in the same room together.

"Um sure, why not. What's up?" I didn't want to be mean. Plus, I wanted everyone to have some fun, even her.

“Well, I talked to Lex and I think this rumor thing has gotten way out of hand. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

I was shocked. Could we have really called it off just like that this whole time?

I gave her a big smile. “I agree. Hey, you wanna dance?” I said it loud enough for my friends to hear finally. They stopped as their night of surprises continued.

She gave me a cheek-to-cheek smile. “Sure.” As we went to dance, I decided that it was truly a good night and that no rumor could ever ruin me.

a dangerous feeling: my adventure diaries

sidney andrew gwaltney III

“ON YOUR MARKS! Get set, Go!

“And they’re off! Round and round and round they go. Number three is in the lead. Watch as he rips past the competition. There it is! Uh-oh, number four is catching up and number three is running out of gas. It’s number four. . . . No! It’s number three. . . . No! It’s . . . number three that claims the victory! Sidney G., you have won the race on the Adventure Landing’s speedway! How do you feel?” the man with the strange voice asked.

“I feel awesome! I can’t believe that I won a real race! Better luck next time, Dwayne!” I shouted as I drove away, victorious.

* * *

“It’s dark in here,” I whispered.

“Sid, stop being a baby!” William exclaimed as we geared up. There were blinking lights everywhere. *Is this laser tag or a TNA arena?* My friend, William, fired the first shot. Luckily, it missed me, but soon after, another shot fired at my vest. At that moment, I felt like a target. Then I started shooting rapidly at the red team, like *You’re finished. Throw in the towel. It’s over. We win. You lose. Ha-ha!*

Eventually, we won, and the red team cried like girls. We ended our laser tag shooting frenzy and decided to head back to the go-carts. “Ready to get smoked again?” I asked Dwayne and William.

“Bring it on,” they replied.

So we were off once again, but unfortunately, my go-cart ran out of gas as soon as I finished the first lap, and my friends did not even stop to check on me. They just drove past me and made funny remarks as I started to go backwards. *That’s what I get for being cocky.* Luckily, I got to change cars and continue the race. In the nick of time, I caught up with my friends and came in second place! How surprising is that?

I started fussing at William and Dwayne: "Why didn't you help me? I could have died! You must have been crazy to leave me right there going down that hill! Are you mad?" Eventually, I stopped and we laughed about it. We decided to get some pizza—not that we were hungry, but only because it smelled yummy. I got full off of only one huge slice. After we ate, we decided to play in the arcade.

I played a basketball game, a dancing game, and a racing game. I scored 1,000 tickets, and William scored 1,000 tickets as well, but Dwayne scored 1,001 tickets. I got a pair of glow-in-the-dark vampire teeth, a gun, a fancy comb, and a bear for my lady friend.

* * *

That could have been the best day ever, but nothing could compare to the time I had to climb the 250 stairs that lead to the top of the magnificent structure that is Duke Chapel. My friends and I met up at our church at nine o'clock a.m. on a foggy but bright Saturday morning. Our chaperones told us the history of how it was built, how long it took to build it, and how tall it is.

"Finally, we're here," I said from the back of the sixteen-passenger van. As we pulled up into the driveway, we took a long look at the large, magnificent structure.

"We have to climb all the way up there?" my god-brother exclaimed.

"Yeah, you didn't think we were gonna take the Magic School Bus up there, did you?" my friend, Lahkayyah, said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. We all entered the massive cathedral.

"Dang, this ain't no little Christian church," my friend, William said.

"I know, right?" I replied, "Let's sit on the back pew."

As soon as we sat down, William got spooked out and said, "Sid, look up!" I looked and saw a lot of stained-glass windows. One had Jesus on it and from that moment on I was freaked out, too.

With good timing, our tour guide Mr. Keith Daniels came up from the old, dusty crypt and led us to the staircase. Before we started climbing he advised us, "Boys and girls, this is a 250-step climb and it is really tight. The farther you go, the tighter it gets, so if you are claustrophobic, stay on the ground. If you are scared of heights, stay on the ground. Other than that, have a great time."

Keith took the first steps, "It's alright to make your way on up."

One step. Two steps. Three steps, and—Oh my god. The dim lights started to go on and off each time I stepped on an ancient stair. But that was not gonna keep me from going to the top of Duke Chapel and seeing the world from a distance. All of the sudden, I started to get dizzy from walking up the circular staircase, the space got tighter, and temperature rapidly increased. I could smell nothing but the tight, foggy air entering my lungs.

"Sid, are you okay?" my 'friend' Ta-Ta shouted. But I could not respond, and I suddenly felt my world fading to black. I started to close my eyes, and soon woke up to find myself in the bell chamber of Duke Chapel surrounded by paramedics and my friends who were worried sick about me.

I finally got on my feet and a young, dark-skinned woman from the Duke paramedics came up to me and said with a worried voice, "Sidney, you passed out because you didn't drink any water in the last twelve hours. Drink this bottle of water, and you will feel fine."

"Thank you, doctor," I replied.

One step. Two steps. Almost there. I felt a fresh breeze of crisp, clean air coming from a door at the top. It felt like I had been called to heaven, so I entered the door, and there I saw a plain of green pastures, a whole lot of buildings, and lakes that left me in total awe. I also saw a baby blue bird falling through the air, and an old guy who claimed he only had two days to live trying to skydive off of the top. Weird, I know. After that, I realized that I had a serious fear of dying and falling without protection.

My friend, William, snuck up behind me and said, "Nice day, isn't it Sid?" I felt all my muscles in my body clench up. Then, my friends Kyyah and Will told me to look down; when I did, I felt like dying. But all that changed when Will and Kyyah decided to try and push me off the Chapel as a prank; at that point, I felt like killing somebody. But I still forgave them for trying to kill me. Finally, we went down the 250 stairs, and, as we entered the lobby of the chapel, I thought to myself, *It had to be faster coming down than coming up.*

"How did everyone's experience turn out?" Mr. Keith asked my group.

“Exciting, great, no fear in these eyes,” I said desperately.

“What are you talking about, Sid? You were crying like a little baby. Dude, stop lying.”

“And by the way Sid, while we were about to throw you off the chapel your money and cellphone fell out of your pocket.”

“What happened?” I shouted, my temper dangerously flaring. I stormed out of Duke Chapel, even angrier than before, to look for my possessions.

But as soon as I opened the door, Will stopped me: “Sid, while you were on the way down, I went outside and picked them up from off the cement.”

“Well, where are they now?” I asked.

Will replied with a smile, “Like your girlfriend, I took ‘em.”

“Oh no you didn’t, busta. And by the way, my girl don’t want you, homie.” His head dropped, so I said, “Will, you know you my homeboy.”

finally, the state fair

de'sontia rowdy

"YESMEEN, ARE YOU READY FOR THE FAIR?"

"Yes, I can't wait!" she replied. When we finally got to the state fair it was late, as usual. It was already nine o'clock.

"De'Sontia, look how many people are here! The lines are so long. It's like a hundred people standing in front of us," Yesmeen complained.

"Man, it's going to be a while before we get in." I knew we should have come earlier. Now we had to wait in line.

When we were almost at the front of the line, we saw our first spectacle. "What is he doing?" A crazy man kept forgetting to take everything out of his pocket to go through the metal detector. He was holding everyone up and making the line really long.

"Come on, ladies, we don't have all day," remarked the ticket collector sharply. *I can see that, sir. Don't you think we're ready to get in? We've all been waiting in line for hours.*

"Gosh, why he gotta be so mean?"

"He's probably ready to go home," explained Yesmeen, "That's why he's being rude."

"Do you smell that?" I asked. "The turkey legs, the cotton candy, the candy apples. I love the smell of the food here!"

"Look, De'Sontia, there's my favorite ride!"

"Well do you want to get on that first or eat first?" I asked her.

"We can eat first," she replied. We walked slowly past everything, but I already knew what I wanted. I could smell the turkey legs everywhere, but then I walked past the best the Philly cheese-steak stand.

"Yum! I wonder if the price went up on the subs, because they are really high this year." I didn't care though. I just wanted one. As soon as I got my sub, my mouth began to water. White melted cheese was falling from the hot, oily meat.

"That looks good De'Sontia," Yesmeen commented.

"It is. I get this every year." I ate the sub so fast I wanted two more.

"Do you see that ride?" I asked Yesmeen, "The one with all those big, colorful, lights blinking?"

"Yeah, you want to get on that?"

"Sure, it looks new," I replied.

Somehow, I managed to pick the longest line to stand in. I started to worry that we wouldn't ever get on the ride. Then people started to cut in front of us. Everyone was going crazy over this ride. It made me want to scream.

"There goes Faith and Asheley!" Yesmeen shouted. "Asheley, Faith, come here! Where y'all been?"

"Girl, we been here all night. The question is, where y'all been?" Asheley replied.

"Me and Yesmeen been here standing in the most ridiculously long line," I said.

"What rides have y'all been on?" Yesmeen asked the girls.

"We've been on the best drop zone ever! It was mind blowing, all of them long drops. I'll never get on that ride again, not even for a million dollars," Faith laughed.

"Where are y'all going now?" I asked them.

"We're about to leave to get some food. We'll see y'all later," they told me.

We were finally at the front of the line. Now I was really anxious. "Dang bruh, you see all them people leaving the line?" I asked Yesmeen. Maybe they were too scared to get on.

"Good. That means we don't have to stand in line as long," she replied.

This one man in line in front of us had on the flyest boots I had ever seen. "Hey everyone!" he yelled. "Y'all need to get out the line if y'all not getting on." Everyone slowly walked out of the line. Dang, they must have been scared of him. Suddenly, we were at the front, about to get on.

"You ready, De'Sontia?" Yesmeen asked as we entered the ride. We didn't know where to sit, the front or the back.

"Let's sit in the front where we can feel everything." My eyes widened, but I held my ground and got on because it was our first time at the fair together and I didn't want her to think that I was too scared.

The ride started, and I felt a cold wind blow through my hair as we moved up and down. "Yesmeen, you like this ride?" I screamed, although I knew she could barely hear me.

"Yes!" she shouted once it was over. I just stood there. That ride was crazy but worth waiting for.

"I'm so happy we came together. I'm having a great time with you," I said to Yesmeen. "Now let's go and explore some more."

summer of '11

lauren phillips

1. "lonely day"

I WAS STARTING TO FEEL SICK. I didn't know if this queasy feeling was from being at sleep-away camp for the first time, driving on the winding mountain roads, or trying to digest the fast food I ate for lunch. I figured I must have been nervous. We arrived on the winding gravel roads at the entrance. There must have been a line of at least a hundred cars. The gates would open in one hour, so my father and I decided to go for a walk on the road to look at the scenery. I got nervous when I saw girls I might describe as "prepsters" strutting past me. It was hard to believe my parents when they told me everything was going to be alright.

Two teenagers stood outside of the car in front of us. I'm thinking that they were about fifteen or sixteen. The girls both had long, light brown hair and were very tall. My dad was trying to coax me into talking to them. I started to feel extremely shy and very stubborn. I didn't want to talk to them; I didn't need friends. My dad and I got back in the car, and the counselors started driving by to alert the line of now four hundred cars that the gates had opened. Cars started to pile in. We were so far back in the line that I couldn't even see the large wooden gate. We passed the forest green reflection of the lake, and I started to feel more relaxed. After we passed the entrance, we wound through the open, grassy hills. I couldn't help but think to myself, *This is it. This is the time for me to venture out on my own. This is also the time for me to learn from experiences and become a better person overall.* My dad and I struggled to carry my trunk down the hill. As we reached the front steps, I heard those four important words: "Welcome to Camp Cheerio."

2. “are you happy now?”

I sat on my stiff bunk bed mattress, trying to find my name among the many others on the neon paint-splattered door. Deirdre, my friend from school, seemed to be making new friends, but I still felt mute. I lounged on my bunk, making a sign with my name on it. The girl above me wouldn't sit still. I heard her voice and recognized it as the blonde, blue-eyed girl from our cabin who wore designer clothes and a lot of makeup. Everybody called her Hope.

“Hope, maybe you should chill out a little bit.”

“Why?” Hope questioned.

“Because there is someone below you!” the voice laughed.

I looked up and saw a girl with dark, shoulder-length hair, kind brown eyes, and a heart-shaped face.

“Hey, I'm Moriah!” she exclaimed.

“I'm Lauren. It's my first year here,” I replied.

We went on talking about our activities. It turned out we had canoeing and arts and crafts together. I was relieved to know somebody in my daily activities. I still felt a little shy around her, but it's difficult to be easygoing when you barely know the other person's disposition.

We all grabbed our Crazy Creeks (portable seats) and headed out the door of our cabin to the gym.

“Moriah, where do we sit?” I questioned nervously.

Moriah smiled a wide, toothy grin and exclaimed, “Relax and just follow me!”

Everybody trudged down the hill to gather in the gym. “Mean” by Taylor Swift blared on the speakers, and everybody started dancing in circles. These dance circles seemed silly at first, but in a way, they symbolized freedom. Everyone, boys and girls, were dancing, carefree and unconcerned about whether they looked ridiculous or even whether the music was their personal choice. For example, Taylor Swift is not usually my style, but I decided it was more important to have fun.

While everyone was dancing, I noticed Moriah sitting curled up in her Crazy Creek. She gave me a weak smile, and before she could protest, I grabbed her hand and pulled her to the dance floor.

“What are you doing?” Moriah shouted over the music.

I began to jump up and down and bobbed my head to the music. “Chill, it’s your fifth year. You should be enjoying yourself!” I replied.

With that, we joined the embrace of the Wichita cabin and started a dance circle that was the size of a large room and had the roar of a pack of lions. Cabins like Mohican and Okaneechee joined us, along with their counselors. This was only the beginning of many friend-filled nights.

3. “don’t let me fall”

Step-step-clap, step-step-clap. This is the beat we made as we entered the dining hall. It was dinnertime, and all of the girls from the Wichita cabin gathered around two circular dining tables. We ate in a building with large, wooden rafters, old photos, and animal heads covering the walls. The sound of chatter began to ring in my ears.

“Did you hear about the activities later on?” a petite blonde girl questioned another.

“Oh my gosh, we have matching hair feathers!” a group of twelve-year-old girls squealed.

“Spy Hunter is a game where there is a red, white, and blue team!” my friend Caroline added.

All of a sudden everybody around me started singing. The new dining hall songs were all so confusing to learn.

“Lauren, why aren’t you singing?” Moriah cried over the song about an elephant named Louise.

“I don’t know any of the songs!” I explained.

“We all pretended to sing our first year,” she whispered into my ear.

I started to feel embarrassed, spitting out each syllable as I “sang.” I looked back to last summer, thinking I didn’t have to deal with these silly little troubles before. I remembered taking pictures with my friends up in my grandmother’s giant Japanese Maple tree and organizing games of capture the flag with the younger neighborhood kids. I knew I shouldn’t be complaining, but I didn’t want to feel like I missed part of my childhood, wasting my time at

a camp that none of my family members went to.

Awaking from my thoughts, I joined the others who were waiting to head over to the gym. After we arrived, I enjoyed a few laughs with my friends Emily and Mary Neil. We attempted to do the Energizer to Shakira's "Waka Waka."

"Everybody listen up," Camp Leader Mischaux's voice boomed over the speakers.

Sami leaned over to clearly explain the rules of Spy Hunter that Mischaux was teaching us. It was like a giant game of hide-and-go-seek combined with tag. Moriah also included that there were water guns. Thoughts started running through my head a mile a minute. *Wait, did she say water guns? Sign me up!*

4. "sandstorm"

"Oww!" Moriah exclaimed.

"What?"

"My leg muscles are killing me!" she cried.

Moriah and I were taking a treacherous and exasperating journey down the mountainous, green hills. Hiking down the hills was how we got to the Camp Cheerio lake. The only three activities held on the lake were games, canoeing, and kayaking. Sadly, we chose canoeing. Once we got to the lake, we realized our activity had mostly kids from the ages of eight to twelve in it. That made it confusing for us to know where to stand and who to stand with. Our counselors were not even there yet, so we went to sit on a grassy embankment while the kayakers and the younger children went searching for them.

"Hello my fellow campers!" an odd voice bellowed.

We looked around and figured that the man who spoke was one of our activity counselors for canoeing. This man seemed about twenty-five years old, with funny, rabbit-like features. His clothing consisted of jean shorts that reminded me of what characters in a Mark Twain novel would wear. Along with the shorts, he was wearing a life jacket as bright as a traffic cone. We sat there with bored expressions, hoping they would let us switch activities. That made it easier, because at Cheerio, counselors would do whatever

it took to make sure the campers were happy. We didn't want to appear bratty, but sometimes it was worth it if you were not enjoying yourself.

Moriah and I climbed into a canoe, and our weight caused it to creak like an old staircase. Lake water splashed in as it tipped back and forth. She and I discovered we had to share the canoe with a small, annoying eight year-old with beady eyes and messy brown hair. I know I shouldn't judge her on looks, but her personality and appearance went hand in hand. We started paddling in circles as big as a swimming pool. We only went in circles to avoid the zipliners who reminded us all of chimpanzees swinging from vines. Our counselor cried out to us to start heading over to shore.

"Finally!" I cried with relief.

He stopped all of us, and I knew it was too good to be true. He told us the only way to get out was if we would let him flip us. I considered being smart and asking him if we looked like pancakes. Moriah and I were fully against this idea. First of all, the water was disgusting and about as clear as a stormy sky, and second of all, I had to rush to rifle shooting after canoeing. The last thing I wanted to do was shoot guns while feeling like soggy oatmeal.

We tried to explain this to our counselor, but he didn't care. He started to rock our canoe back and forth like a toy boat. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed everybody rushing out of their canoes, and in the blink of an eye, we were upside down in the muddy brown water. I was not a happy camper.

5. "bye bye bye"

It was the last day of camp. Some days during the week I had felt like I wanted to go home—probably because I had a cold—but on other days, I never wanted to leave. This would be both one of the easiest and the hardest days of camp. We had a free day to go do whatever activities we wanted. This was tough because I could meet new people, but in the same day I had to say goodbye until next summer to those I already knew. I got to hang out with my best friends in my cabin that I usually didn't have activities with. Hanging out with them caused me to meet new people that they

were already friends with. I got to meet Jack, who became one of my best friends from camp. Moriah, Jack, and I decided to go to arts and crafts. I always thought the name for “friendship bracelets” seemed silly, but it was starting to make sense to me, since the time spent making them is with your friends.

After that activity was over, we skipped our next one and threw a football out on the open field near the dining hall. Being teenage kids, this did not entertain us for very long, so we decided to go play dodgeball in the gym. I was about as fond of this sport as I was of mosquitoes, so I decided to sit on the stage with two other girls from my cabin.

“Hey!” I heard a voice say to me.

I looked up, and there was a kid about my age whom I had never met before but had seen around.

“My name is Cormac,” he shouted with a Southern drawl over the music. “What’s yours?”

“Lauren. It’s nice to meet you,” I replied.

After introducing ourselves, he started asking me if I liked camp. I got this question a lot since it was my first week there.

“Hey guys!” An overenthusiastic Hope came skipping over. I should have known Hope was friends with Cormac, considering they were two of the most popular people at camp. Hope was one of those girls who liked to be noticed. Cormac got attention more for his physical appearance than his personality. The good thing about camp was that it taught us to look past everybody’s flaws because you only had to spend a week with them and you were there to meet new people.

Later on in the evening, all of the girls were putting on makeup and doing their hair for Indian Ceremony. Indian Ceremony was the part of camp when everyone dresses up and goes to a Native American worship ritual, and during the ceremony, the camper of the week gets chosen. Everyone was emotional this time, because our friends who were fifteen were being celebrated as last year campers. After the ceremony, we all went back to the gym to hug and cry. These true friends we had made in just the short period of a week, and now it was goodbye until next summer.

formal disaster

glc

EIGHTH GRADE FORMAL, FOR A GIRL, IS LIKE A MINI-SCALE PROM. There are plenty of things to worry about, like the dress, makeup, hair, and, most importantly, the date.

1. just buy it!

“Hey, what’s up?” Nigia and Johanna yell as I walk up to our group of friends.

“Oh, nothing. Hey, I was just wondering if you guys have dates to the dance.”

Nigia says, “Oh, I’m going with Dakota.”

“Cool! What about you, Jo Jo?”

“I don’t really know yet. I think I might be going with Khalil . . . as a friend. Are you going with anyone?”

I shake my head. I feel embarrassed about not having a date, but I guess a lot of other people don’t have dates either. Bringing some random guy would just make the whole night awkward, so I think I should be fine without a date.

“Aww, I’m sorry. You should ask Alex to go with you.” They both giggle.

They both know that I like Alex, but he is in ninth grade. I thought that would be weird.

“Um, I don’t know about that, you guys,” I say in an unsure voice.

“Come on! It would be so cute if you did!”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, right as the 8:35 bell rings. I start walking to my locker, and Johanna runs up behind me.

“Hey! You know you don’t have to ask him if you don’t want to.”

“I know, but maybe I should ask him. It couldn’t hurt, and he might actually say yes.” Now I really start to think about buying Alex a ticket. I want him to say yes and accept the ticket, but I guess I’ll have to see when I ask him.

The 8:40 bell still has not rung. Thoughts of buying Alex a ticket linger in my head. Maybe Johanna was right. Ten minutes would give me enough time to run down to Ms. McLeod's room and buy the ticket. Then it would be over with. But would it be the right thing to do? Is it weird for a girl to buy her date's ticket? I just don't know. If Alex does end up saying yes, he probably won't remember to buy his own ticket. I see Ms. McLeod walk into her class, so I glide down the hall and slip into her doorway.

"Hello, Ms. McLeod, I would like to purchase a ticket for the eighth grade semi-formal." I weirdly use proper grammar only when I talk to teachers.

"Okay. That'll be ten dollars." I think that ten dollars is a ridiculous price for a little piece of paper, but I assume it will be worth it in other ways.

She hands me the ticket. I can feel the warmth of the pink, freshly printed card stock against my fingertips.

2. the ticket

I'm heading to second period when I see Alex coming down the hallway. The ticket is in my hand. Johanna walks up to me. I have a nervous feeling that starts to spread.

"Should I go give him the ticket now?" I ask.

"Just do what you want to do." I know she doesn't really like Alex, and it's kind of obvious by the tone she's using, but at least she is still being somewhat supportive.

"Okay, fine," I say as I start to walk towards him.

I see that he is about to enter his class, so I speed up.

"Hey, Alex, wait!" That sounded really desperate. I hope he didn't notice.

"Hi," he replies. I can tell he feels awkward. It seems as if he didn't expect me to come talk to him.

I hand him the ticket, "I got a ticket for you." My voice sounded higher than usual.

"You actually got it?"

"Of course I did! You are my date right?"

"Thanks!" He sounds really happy about me getting him a ticket.

As I start to walk back to Mr. Barbaza's class, I stop for a second. I can hear my heart beating. It feels like I have one of those big African drums inside me. I am so happy.

3. fun on the bus

After the 3:45 bell rings, I rush to my locker. I want to get "my seat" on the bus, and I really hope that Alex is going to ride today. I speed-walk down the hallways and down the stairs, and then I'm finally at the bus lot. I go to the bus, and I can see Alex walking down the sidewalk. I'm starting to get nervous, but I'm also happy at the same time. The only person on the bus that I don't really want to see is Lizzie. She makes me so mad. She is always flirting with Alex. When I ask her if she is flirting with him, she denies it, but it is so obvious. Johanna said that she probably only likes him because I like him. It's like she envies me or something. I'm going to try and ignore her and remind her that Alex is going to semi-formal with me, not her. By the time I have all these thoughts through my head, the bus is moving. I turn around to see that Alex is not on the bus. I hadn't even noticed, I guess I was just deep in thought. *Ugh!* I really want to talk to him about tonight. The sound of laughter fills the bus. Then I realize that the bus is slowing down. I turn around and see Alex running towards the bus. Oh my gosh! He looks so funny.

As he is getting on, he says, "Hey!" He actually talked to me! I am really excited right now. It is also funny that he talked to me because he usually says "Hi" to both me and Lizzie, but he completely ignored her today.

"Hey!" I reply.

Rachel pokes up from behind her seat. "So, are you gonna go talk to your boyfriend?"

Ugh! I hate when she says that. I actually don't really care what she says at this point, but sometimes she just gets on my nerves. "He is not my boyfriend! He is just my date to the dance." I hope I didn't say that too loud.

I think she can tell that I am getting kind of pissed off. "Okay, gosh! I was just kidding."

"Sorry. I just get a little angry when people say that." I hope that I gave her a good enough apology because I don't want her to be mad at me on the day of semi-formal.

"It's okay," she replies.

Thank goodness she forgave me. Earlier in the week, I asked Rachel if she planned on going to semi-formal. She said that she wasn't going because she thinks that dances are stupid and that no one would want her to be there anyway. I told her that she was crazy and that the dance would be so much fun, but she kept saying no.

"Hey, Rachel, are you going to go to the dance tonight?" I asked. I just wanted to see if she had changed her mind about the whole "dances are stupid" thing.

"Um, no, I don't think I want to."

"But it is going to be so much fun! You can dance with boys, there will be lots of food, and you get to dress all pretty."

"That's not really my thing." I am starting to get really annoyed with her, and I'm even getting the idea of inviting her to sleep over after the dance.

"You could get off the bus with me and we could go together. You might even be able to sleep over at my house once the dance is over. Also, if you are not having fun we could leave early." I can't believe I just said that! I don't want to leave early—I want to stay, and I want to be able to dance and talk with Alex and my friends.

"I would like to sleep over, but I have to ask my parents. I'll call my mom and ask if this plan is okay with her," she says in that I'm-thinking-about-it tone.

It took about ten minutes, but she finally gave me an answer. "My mom said that I could come over to your house and that she would bring me some extra clothes."

"Yay! So that means you'll come to semi-formal?"

"Yeah, I guess it does." I love convincing my friends to do things. I especially love it when I convince them to do something that I know they'll love.

"Great! Well, here comes my stop. Let's go!" I'm so glad that Rachel is coming to the dance with me. Tonight is going to be so much fun.

4. the dance

Rachel and I walk into the gymnasium. I see my friends that have already arrived. I'm getting nervous and anxious because I want to dance with Alex, but I feel like it might be awkward. Also, I don't even know if he will want to dance with me. I mean he is coming as my date, but I decide to go wait by the door and look for him. It is raining cats and dogs, and I can barely see anything. There are people with umbrellas coming toward the gym from all different directions. It is starting to get dark outside, and the fifth song is beginning. I am getting the feeling that Alex is not going to show up. I see Julian, one of Alex's friends, is at the dance.

I go over to him and ask, "Hey, do you know if Alex is coming?"

"Oh, no, he can't come. He had to stay home because he got sick from something and he is throwing up," he replies.

"Oh, okay."

"Yeah, sorry about that," he says apologetically.

"It's fine, you don't have to apologize," I say as I start walking away.

This is just great! I finally get a chance to hang out with my crush, and now he isn't even going to show up. One of the best days of my life has been ruined. My friend Michelle walks up from behind me.

"Hey! Why hasn't Alex gotten here yet?"

"He can't come, he got sick." I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes. Why am I crying over him? This is so stupid, I shouldn't be crying over a boy.

"Oh, I am so sorry! Did I make you cry?"

"No, it wasn't you, just forget about it." I feel like I am going to throw up. I need to get away, I need fresh air. Even though it is still raining outside, I go out onto the steps of the gym. I can't get him out of my head; he is the only person I can think about right now. All I want to know is if he is okay. *Should I call him or would that be weird?* I just want to talk to him and see how he is doing. I know he is not my boyfriend, but at this moment I am worrying about him as if he were.

Later that night, at my house, Rachel and I start to talk about Alex. I still want to know if he's okay and how he's doing. I de-

cided to text Alex and tell him about the dance. It took him about twenty minutes after I texted him to reply, but he said that he really wished he could have been there and that he was sorry that he couldn't come. That made me feel a lot better about the night. So, even though my date didn't show up to the dance like I hoped he would, I still had loads of fun. Sometimes when someone makes a promise to you, you shouldn't get your hopes up because they might end up breaking that promise and let you down.

trapped

ashleigh w.

1.

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.

Seneca

“DO YOU WANT YOUR HAIR STRAIGHT OR CURLED?” my cousin Lisa asked me.

“Straight,” I replied.

I was getting ready for my mom’s wedding to John. My sisters and I were to wear black, as were my soon-to-be stepsisters. I stepped into my floaty, knee-length dress and sat down as Lisa began straightening my long, light brown hair. I loved my hair when it was straight because it felt long and silky and pretty, different from my normal tangle of waves.

Finally, it was time to go to the church. I saw my stepsisters waiting at the door for me, talking in hushed voices. Cassandra, who was sixteen, was wearing a plain black dress that gathered at the waist, with her hair straight and shiny. Rachel was also wearing her hair, normally a jungle of beautiful, dark curls, straight. “Hey Ashleigh, don’t you look pretty!” Rachel said.

“Aww, thanks! You do, too,” I replied. “And you too, Cassandra.”

“Thanks. Your mom is in that last room to the left. Hannah and Kristy are helping her get ready,” Cassandra said.

I walked slowly to the room that my mom occupied, looking at the doors that lined the hallway on the way there. After a few minutes, I came to a door with a plaque that said “Bridal Room.” I figured this was it and opened the door. I stepped into the small, white, old-looking room and my sisters immediately ran in my direction. Hannah, my nine year-old sister, was wearing a black dress with capped sleeves and shiny black shoes. Her hair was floating around her face in soft caramel-colored tendrils. Kristy,

who was also nine, but was four inches shorter than Hannah, was wearing the same thing as her, but with a black lacy bow on top of her head. Her hair was curled up around her round face. She looked adorable.

“Oh, hey! You like the dress?” my mom asked. She was wearing a gold, knee-length dress with beading on the waist and a matching gold jacket. Her golden hair, matching her dress, was pinned back around her face with glittery pins, and her face simply glowed.

“Yes, I like it! You look so pretty!” I replied, sitting down in a chair beside Kristy.

Rachel and Cassandra walked in and immediately took out a camera.

“Picture time!” they exclaimed simultaneously. I’m still not sure how I felt at the time.

2.

Each time we face our fear, we gain strength, courage, and confidence in the doing.

Unknown

I tried not to look at him. I tried to look at the beautiful array of glistening fireflies, floating in lazy spirals just behind us on the back deck. I was doing this because I was afraid of crying, or even seeing him cry. I couldn’t seem weak or defenseless. That never happened, and it wasn’t going to happen now.

“Ashleigh, are you even listening? All I want is for you to hear me out! I’m not trying to be your dad here!” John exclaimed, an exasperated expression on his face.

“Yes, I’m listening, and yes, I already know that. You say the exact same thing every single time I talk to you,” I replied, just as exasperated. He really did not understand that, in my family, you just don’t talk things out like this. We didn’t have emotional heart-to-hearts, we just sort of knew when another was upset or angry or confused. My sisters, mom, and I didn’t like to talk about it. But John did.

“Fine. I was trying to get to know you better, but I guess you don’t want me to . . .” he trailed off.

"No, I guess I don't," I replied, with a certain heaviness in my voice. I always knew how to get that painful sting in my voice that hurt people the most, and I definitely knew how to push people away.

3.

You must not fight too often with one enemy, or you will teach him all your art of war.

Napoleon Bonaparte

"Oh, I know! Is that crazy?"

My best friend Amy and I were talking on the bus, most likely about something completely unrelated to what we had started off talking about. No one ever really knew what Amy and I were saying because our conversations were so strange and we changed topics at a pace that confused everyone but us.

"Look, it's raining outside! We can't go on our walk!" Amy exclaimed. She was right. The hazy fog had turned into misty rain.

"It is? Aw!" I replied, my expression matching Amy's exaggerated puppy dog face. Just then, I felt a vibration from my pocket. I took out my phone and saw a text from John, who I didn't even know could text. It said something silly about the television and how it was not just mine. I didn't know that I had done something wrong or even what he was talking about. I decided not to reply, but to complain to my friends instead. "Amy, I just got a text from John saying something about the TV that I don't understand. He's probably gonna be really mad when I get home."

"You don't like your stepdad?" some guy on the bus asked, peeking his head over the side of the worn blue seat.

"Well, I like him sometimes . . . Just not most of the time," I replied uneasily, running my hand through my hair.

"Oh." He looked confused. I guess I would have been confused if I were him, too. Most people are when they hear about my family, but I didn't have time to explain it to him even if I wanted to because my stop was here. About five minutes later, I walked through the door of my house, thinking about how good popcorn would be at the moment since I hadn't eaten lunch. Then of course,

I heard it. The tell-tale sound of raised voices in my mom's room that told me that John wasn't happy with something or another. Just hearing that was all it took to make me mad. He came down the stairs, his face red and angry looking.

I sat down in the blue leather chair in front of the television and pretended not to notice. "And now you're just gonna sit at the TV, like you always do. You never do anything for us! I do everything I can, climbing up ladders with my back killing me, scraping paint, and you don't do anything!" he yelled.

"Well, I'm fourteen. What do you want me to do, get a job? Go to work everyday so I can come home and complain about how much I need a shower, and when someone suggests taking a shower yelling at them like you do? I can't even drive, so y'all would waste more gas money driving me to work than I would actually make!" I replied, my voice raising every couple of words.

"No, I'm not telling you to get a job. I'm telling you that you need to appreciate all that I do and how you do nothing at all! Try doing what I do for a day! You would be whining in twenty minutes!"

"John, you do what you do because you can't get a job. That's not my fault, so I really don't see why you're yelling at me about it."

"I'm not yelling, you're the one who's yelling!" he replied, quite obviously yelling. John didn't notice my mom coming down the stairs, walking slowly and deliberately.

"John, at the moment, you're the one who's yelling," she said, her voice sounding somehow venomous.

"Leslie! Why do you always take her side? They are never going to get anywhere if you are always fighting for them and taking their sides on everything!" he screamed, his deep voice trembling with anger.

"Because I'm right in most of these situations!" I yelled, getting angrier by the second.

"You've never been right a day in your life," he yelled back, also calling me a name.

That's when I snapped. It really felt like something inside broke, and all my self-control just went out the window. I started yelling incoherently and throwing the closest things I could find. I remember throwing a phone charger, and a magnet or two, maybe

a pencil. Nothing substantial enough to hurt him, but it still got across the general message.

About an hour later, I sat in my room and thought. I thought about how mad I was. I thought about how life used to be, how it was now, and how it will be. I thought about my mom, and how I didn't want to drive away John as her husband, but I did want to drive him away as my stepdad. I always come to the same conclusion: I'm trapped.

a short memory

g-man

I'VE NEVER KNOWN WHY I was picked on for being shorter than everyone. Many times it even felt like I was shrinking to the ground rather than growing toward the ceiling. Nothing seemed to work for me—not milk, not sleep, not age. I thought this was how I was going to be forever. Now I'm going to tell you the hardest part of my life: the first day of middle school.

* * *

The reflection of the bright yellow bus curving around the corner shone. As the bus came to halt, the screeching sound buzzed in my ear. When I stepped on, I was nervous, what with all the people gazing at me. I rushed to the back where no one else was sitting. I wasn't used to riding the bus, so when it started forward, I followed, my face smushing into the seat.

When the bus driver picked up the last person, we started heading to the highway, and then we came to our final stop. When I reached the front of the bus, the driver looked at me pleasantly. He had a dark, prickly face and deep eyes. "Alright, bye, have a nice day." I looked back, thinking that he wanted me to say something in return.

I walked up the little dirt stairs parallel to the concrete ones. I reached the double doors, and pulled the cold metal handles. I wandered inside, struggling to find my way.

* * *

Where am I going? I asked myself while gazing at the artwork in the endless hallway. I questioned people in the hallway, afraid to look them in the eye, asking them where to go. They replied, "Go to the guidance office." Still confused as to where to go, my head

was quaking and trembling as if an earthquake had struck it with a mighty blow.

Walking aimlessly toward my hidden destination, I listened to my surroundings and the echoing voices in the quarter, the 'awws' and the laughter filled my mind. People in the hallway passed, staring at me with grins on their faces. They were skyscrapers and I was just a lost taxi. Finally, I reached my destination, the guidance office.

When I rushed in, my mind went blank. The walls were white as snow without a single piece of artwork, and in the quiet room, I could hear my heart racing in fear. Trying to calm myself down, I went to the woman at the front desk.

"I don't know where to go," I explained to her.

In a gentle voice, she said, "May I see your schedule please?" As I took out the folded piece of paper from my side pocket, she extended her hand. After examining my schedule, she told me exactly where to go.

* * *

That first day I felt excitement and a little bit of anxiety. The excitement was due to the fact that I was now a middle schooler. The anxiety part was, of course, due to being shorter than everyone around me. I was short, but I was confident, so when my classes started, I thought that not much could happen—at least nothing bad.

When I walked into my first class, all I saw were grins plastered on everyone's faces; I could see my reflection in their glazed, laughing eyes. I was an outcast: everybody seemed to give literally little notice of me.

* * *

The genetic curse. I don't know why I am so short. I guess it's just because of my genes. I was a pudgy baby with enough chub on me to sprout up. Harassed by my mother to no end to eat a proper diet. On my dad's side of the family, I have aunts and uncles that are six feet tall with a few shorties mixed in. On my mom's side of

the family, all of my uncles are average height. I don't care if I'm five foot two or six feet tall; I'm just glad that I'm not four feet tall.

Most people don't realize how hard this age is on guys. You see, girls grow so gradually and change into adulthood all about the same. But guys, dang, some start in sixth grade, growing mustaches, and others have to wait until sophomore year in high school. That puts some of us late bloomers out of competitive sports. I couldn't drink enough protein shakes to catch up even if I tried.

* * *

So my first week of sixth grade was pretty junky. Being one of the shortest guys is never a plus, and it's not like platform sneakers are cool. In the end, everything worked out though. I am pretty comfortable being me and I found a crew that can look deeper than superficial qualities. Here is to growing pains and the people we become because of them.

learning to love myself

aiyana elizabeth torres

1.

IN MY LIFE SO FAR, I have noticed that everyone goes through some type of bullying at some point; some not as harsh as others, some ending in extremes, and others going unnoticed. My experience began at an earlier stage. It appears I have always been the tallest of my peers since I was in pre-K. Of course, nobody cared about it at first. Not until the first grade. It wasn't a matter of disliking me. They just thought I was weird because I was taller. So one boy, named Aaron, started calling me a giraffe. Then the rest of the class called me that, too. And that was just the beginning.

2.

In third grade, I remember gaining some weight. It wasn't until around picture day in Mrs. Moore's third grade class that I, and others, began to notice. I wore a blue plaid skirt and a light blue shirt. It was one of those 'made-to-fit-tight-on-everyone' shirts. When I sat down, you could see my stomach stick out. My friends playfully talked about how the shirt made my boobs look bigger. I must admit, that was really funny. But then Richarda saw my stomach and made fun of how it stuck out, and all of my friends fell silent. She started calling me fat.

Finally, Jay screamed, "Why don't you leave her alone!" At that point, I had already gone to the bathroom to cry. I cried and cried. Nobody heard me, though. Nobody even remembered I went in there. But when I finally came out, my friend Marcus told me that my skirt was tucked into my tights in the back. He hurried and stood behind me. But some of the others had already seen and

began to laugh. My face turned red. After I fixed it, I told Marcus I wanted to sit alone, but he wouldn't let me.

"Aiyana, you are not fat. Richarda is, and everyone knows it! Don't let her make you cry. You're my best friend, and I won't allow it!" he said. The biggest smile came across my face. But I didn't know that as we talked, Mrs. Moore watched and listened. She was also smiling. She gave us some ice cream and thanked Marcus for comforting me.

I was truly thankful to have a friend like Marcus. Out of all the friends I had, he was the only diamond. I think that's why it affected me so much when he moved in the fourth grade. Before he did, all I could think of was what he told me. It ran through my head every day. But when he left, those words vanished.

I felt like Richarda knew that I was upset. She would say, "Marcus never really liked you. He thought you were dumb, and that's why he moved!" I never believed that, but I still let her run all over me.

3.

It was Mrs. Miller's fifth grade class. Richarda and the normal followers had called me fat, and I just sat there. They'd told me to go away, so I moved to the normal space in the back of the classroom. I remember watching everyone stare at me and laugh. Next, I heard Mrs. Miller say it was time for recess until we went home. Everyone ran outside, laughing and pointing at me. I wasn't sure what I had done that time. I just went to the swings as quickly as I could, which wasn't quick enough. Richarda and the gang had gotten there already. They watched me sit alone by the slide as I waited for the next available swing, laughing. I started to shake from nervousness. When I finally got up, they all walked towards me.

"When is the baby due?" Richarda asked with a smirk on her face. Everyone laughed at my confusion.

"What are you talking about? What baby?" They began to laugh and point at my stomach.

"Jerrod said that you're pregnant! And you're so fat, you might just be!" Richarda said in a loud voice, as if she wanted the whole

world to hear. I couldn't take everyone pointing and laughing at me, half the playground calling me fat, the other half calling me *pregnant!* My goodness, I was only in the fifth grade! I panicked and took off for the classroom, the only place I knew no one my age would find me.

Running away from it all, I tripped and fell to the edge of the chair. I could feel the dirty lint-filled tennis balls against my legs. I tried to push myself up between the chair and the table. Papers on the desk were soaked by my salty tears. Sniffing as I tried to pull myself together, the chair tipped over and I fell out. The tears were coming out even worse than before.

With red eyes, I cried, "Why am I so fat, God! Why did you make me out to be so ugly and such a fool?"

Mrs. Miller saw me on the floor with my deep red eyes and tears rolling down my cheeks. All she did for the rest of the day was hold me in her arms while I cried.

4.

Kiera had deep brown, almost black eyes that, when staring directly into them, made you feel as if you were falling into a hole. She had fiery red streaks in her hair, which she would flip in your face. She would chew her gum differently when she stared at me, like a cow. She constantly accused me of staring at her, but I had no interest in doing such a thing because she had nothing that I wanted.

"What?" she demanded.

Puzzled, I slowly looked up and said, "Huh?"

She responded with, "I know you're not that damn dumb! What are you looking at?"

Not knowing what to say, I turned around; my friend Anoviua mouthed, "Why did she do that?" With a blank look I shrugged, knowing then that it would be a long first semester.

It was sixth grade, and I could not believe it was happening again. The pain in my chest. The pointing and laughing. Confusion. Panic. Sorrow. Tears. Not being able to ask for help.

I remember disliking having to go to sixth period. Thinking about being bullied and taken advantage of in elementary school.

Thinking about how Richarda made me bring her my juice and a snack every day, and then I would end up not having any for the next two weeks. And how my godfather gave me a hundred dollars for a birthday and Christmas present, she made me buy her everything she wanted from the book fair. *Everything* she wanted. And how when Richarda and Mariam copied my test secretly, I was the only one to get in trouble for it.

I began to feel as if my life at DSA was going to be just the same as my old life at Eno Valley. Maybe even worse. As if I would forever be tortured, no matter where I was. I needed to find help.

5.

Coach Armwood made me go. She grew tired of watching me come to class in tears. As I walked the counselor's office, I was scared. *What if this doesn't work?* I felt like I was going to vomit, just like the lady who stood in front of me at the state fair. I could tell my face was pale. I could feel it as I talked to both counselors, Mrs. Middleton and Mr. Hardy. Kiera ended up coming in, too. And we ended up settling everything. Kiera and I are now like sisters.

It's funny, every time I ask her why she acted so mean to me, she would say, "Because you stared at me too much!" with a giggle and a big smile. Now that I think about it, maybe she did it to make me tough, to give me strength, because she saw that within my shy, fragile looks, I was a sweet, caring person. She just needed to push my buttons to get me to realize that.

I am now a ninth grader at DSA. Everything since then has changed, for the better. I'm very social. I was president of the eighth grade and now of my freshman class.

Nobody should think they are better or less than anyone else. Nobody should feel like an outcast.

I feel like I am the lyrics to a sad song. I feel like I am the voice for those who feel how I felt.

suzuki camp: stories of a childhood

allison weasley

THE SUZUKI METHOD OF TEACHING MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS puts emphasis on starting young, having small goals, listening to music, and interacting socially with other Suzuki children. Some Suzuki families, like mine, choose to do Suzuki institutes over the summer.

sweet briar

As we drove smoothly over the hills through the opening in the low, stone wall, I gazed at the wide, rolling hills, shaded by large-trunked trees. It was so picturesque that I immediately wanted to jump out and roll on my stomach down to the bottom. When I excitedly shared this with my parents, they put an end to my fantasy.

We had gone over the final hill; Sweet Briar College stood in front of us. The steeple of the chapel towered over the rest of the buildings. They were all made of red brick, a contrast from the smooth white stone of the chapel. The windows of the buildings looked old even from where we were looking at them, and I could see that they needed to make repairs.

“Are Susan and Grace going to be there when we get to dinner?” I wondered aloud. Susan and I hadn’t been getting along lately, but we had promised to make up once summer came, as only seven-year-olds can do.

Susan and Grace were indeed at dinner that night. We greeted each other as if nothing had ever been wrong and went through the cafeteria line giggling at the gross-looking food and the people in front of us, who were having a hard time choosing what to eat. We whined in sync when our parents told us that we had to have at least one green vegetable before we could have an ice cream bar. It felt like nothing had ever been wrong between us.

I knew it would be a great week. Little did I know at the time, but that would be the last week Sweet Briar Suzuki violin camp ran, ever. The director would pass away, and a new one would never come. The next year, we would be going to a new camp.

the hill

“Scuse me! ‘Scuse me!” I warned the people walking to the cafeteria as I raced down the hill on my bike. When you rode down the hill without stopping or breaking, it felt dangerous. At any moment, you could lose your balance and topple into the muddy green duck pond to the left of the brick sidewalk. People had done this before, and it wasn’t pretty. One of my friends broke her collarbone there one summer when she lost control of her bike going down this very hill.

My bike, a bright shiny blue, had seven gears, which allowed me to go much faster than a ten-year-old should be permitted. When I went down hills, the adrenaline rush and the wind swooshing loudly through my hair made me go even faster.

I sped past the music building. The shade from the trees made the breeze even cooler. The wind rushed past my face as I slowly released my grip and felt the bike move faster. The ultimate thing to do right then would have been to close my eyes, but for obvious reasons, that wouldn’t turn out so well. I let go of the brakes and swished down the hill.

pennies

The gravel crunched.

“I found one!” Susan yelled. “I saw a glint of it around here.” She pointed. “Help me dig!”

We searched in the hot gravel for the shiny smashed penny, the rocks hurting our knees. I wore jean shorts and my Virginia Suzuki Institute t-shirt. The sun beat down on us.

“Yes! First penny of the year! I called it!” Susan extracted the penny from the gravel beside the railroad tracks. Susan, at age ten,

measured pretty short for a rising sixth grader, with unruly, curly hair. Her eyebrows, eyes, and hair all matched; a dark brown color that didn't like change. She dressed in baggy t-shirts and athletic shorts with beat-up sneakers and dirty socks. She called people who did laundry frequently Clean Freaks.

"I'll give you all of my candy from theory class if you give it to me!" her sister, Grace, tried to negotiate. Grace, skinny as a piano key at ten years old, had tight, light blond curls. Her ears were small and flat against her head. She had fair skin and a small oval face. Grace usually wore t-shirts and shorts, but she wore dresses sometimes, too.

"No way, Grace, find your own!" Susan was adamant about keeping her penny. "Are you guys ready? Let's go to lunch."

"Dude, you're lucky. How did you ever find it in the pile of gravel?" There were little dips in the mound of gravel on both sides of the railroad track from us digging through layers of it. The penny was hot from being in the sun all day. The edges were sharp from being flattened, and flattened it was. You could see a faint outline of Lincoln's face and a faint outline of the Lincoln Memorial on the back.

I didn't really look forward to lunch. I always wished Susan and I sat with the kids our age, instead of our seven- and eight-year-old sisters. I don't think Susan ever really considered that. She didn't go to a regular public school, so she didn't really have to deal with peer pressure to be a stereotypical middle schooler. She could still live in the world of the child, where she didn't have to care about what other people thought of her. She didn't have to be self-conscious.

We were technically not supposed to be on the tracks. They told us every year. "It's too dangerous," they'd say. "You could get hurt." But year after year, we still put pennies on the train tracks at Emory & Henry College for the train to smash.

It's a tradition for us three girls who, along with my sister, have known each other almost since we were born. My mom and Susan and Grace's mom knew each other in college, and both played violin. Now, they both teach Suzuki violin. Carrie, their mom, was Amy's and my first violin teacher. Some of my earliest memories are at their old house, sitting on the floor during our little vio-

lin lessons, just Susan and I, since Grace was too little, and Amy hadn't been born yet. We took our tiny bows and learned how to hold them correctly. We played songs while balanced on one foot, sitting on the ground, and lying down on the floor. We balanced our Beanie Babies on our violins and had contests to see who could keep theirs on the longest.

That went on until I became about four or five. Then I started getting private lessons with Carrie. Amy did too, and we would always fight over who had to go first in the lesson, because the other would get to play with Susan and Grace first.

We slowly grew up, and gradually saw less of each other. Grace switched to piano, so she didn't do lessons with us anymore. We still met them at the pool and occasionally had dinner together. We grew apart, at least, Susan and I did. After a few years, and especially once I became a teenager, the same jokes weren't funny anymore. We didn't have as much in common, especially in the context of school. I still appreciated her company, and we're good friends to this day, but I can't tell her things like I used to.

This was one of the reasons I wasn't as excited about summer Suzuki camp that year. Susan didn't want to be friends with the same people that I did anymore. Susan, Grace, Amy, and I always sat together at meals. If I decided I wanted to sit with the older kids, they thought that strange, so I never did. I could hardly invite the older kids to sit with us, since Susan was a year younger, Grace three years and Amy four.

By the time I was a teenager, I wasn't very happy at camp anymore. The other teenagers didn't really think of me as one of them, since I mostly hung out with Susan and the younger kids.

When my mom suggested that we go back to Blue Ridge Camp, I agreed. It would be good to have to make new friends, since Susan and Grace wouldn't be going. I knew that camp would be easier and less awkward without them. I wouldn't have to explain to Susan why I didn't want to wear my pink Mary Jane Crocs to classes, or awkwardly sit at our dinner table while Susan, Grace, and Amy chatted about their favorite type of horse and what they would name it. While I enjoyed and welcomed having friends that I could sit with and play with all of the time, they could get tiresome and annoying.

back to blue ridge

The wooden picnic shelter looked very old and really gross. The concrete floor hadn't been washed in years; the brown pillars were moldy and didn't look sturdy enough to hold up the roof. As we walked through the wet grass, the only thing that looked like it had been cared for recently, I heard people talking and laughing loudly. They all looked comfortable and happy, unlike me.

I hadn't been here in a few years, and people had formed their groups of friends in the time I had been gone. The last year I went, it was a small group of us eight- and nine-year-olds, happy and carefree. This time, I would be staying in the teen dorm, where I didn't know anyone. Moreover, I wasn't in the advanced chamber program, and most of the other teens were. The advanced chamber kids had been here since Friday, and I came on Sunday. They would have already settled in and made friends if they hadn't made them the summer before, or the summer before, or the summer before that.

I could smell greasy hamburgers and soggy beans as I walked across the grass to the picnic shelter. I went down the line, taking my hamburger, potato salad, watermelon, and juice. My parents were right behind me, and weren't very sympathetic when I told them that I didn't know anyone there.

That was a lie. I did. There were violinists from the Triangle area that I knew, but I hadn't seen them in a while, so it would be awkward to just walk up and sit down, as if we had been friends forever, when in actuality, I hardly ever saw them. I ended up sitting with my parents in wobbly, white plastic chairs on the small stage, feeling out of place.

the candy store

"The candy store's open! The candy store's open, everyone!" The little boy ran back to his lunch table with his friends, all carrying their fortunes of candy. No one paid much attention, except for the little kids, who all started talking and planning what candy they would purchase after lunch. I understood. I mean, who doesn't like

candy? It just didn't hold the same excitement that it did last time, when I was eight.

The store hadn't changed in the two years I had been gone. Everywhere I stood, kids surrounded me. Some kids negotiated with friends about sharing money. Others declared that "this one package of M&Ms is gonna last the whole week!"

It was a small store; the line to the checkout desk almost reached the door and there were only about eight kids in it. There were two rooms. One was a thin, rectangular room of old, strange, dusty things on shelves, like ancient glass Coca-Cola bottles and old porcelain figurines with a centimeter of dust on them. The candy and food section was the bigger of the two, square, with a cash register on a counter that reached all the way across one side of the room. There were also cigarettes back there, but to us kids, the good part was the rack of candy. They sold real food, too, ramen noodles and microwave popcorn that people occasionally bought because the food in the dining hall wasn't very good. Most kids, however, bought candy with two-month advances on their allowances or money they had begged out of their parents. The store didn't have specific hours; the owners just opened the door whenever they felt like it. It didn't open often, which explained why whenever it did, it was always packed.

I picked out my choices: M&Ms and a Dark Chocolate Milky Way. I had a hard time eliminating the Sour Skittles, but they were more expensive, and chocolate was better anyway. I paid for my candy with the money my mom had given me and looked for my friends. Apparently, people did remember me from the last time I had come, which made it a lot easier when it came time to not sit with my parents at meals. They accepted me right away, a huge change from the teens at Emory & Henry. Together, we went off to afternoon classes.

epilogue

That last summer at Blue Ridge wasn't what I had been expecting. Almost everyone was nice. About fifteen kids made up the teen dorm, much smaller than at Emory & Henry, and there was

a much smaller group of advanced violinists as well. Although the group of older, not-as-friendly teens still existed, us younger teens had our own group. That was the best Suzuki camp I had ever been to because nothing was awkward; it was just fun.

painful beauty

priscilla garrett

1. I want to mo(D)el

WHEN YOU'RE A LITTLE KID adults ask you what you want to be when you grow up, the typical answers being doctor, lawyer, president, astronaut, and things like that. Me, on the other hand, my answer was always the same. I wanted to be a model. The problem with that was the fact that everywhere I went, there was always someone taunting or teasing me, bullying me to the point that I thought it would be easier if I gave up on my dream.

2. words do hu(R)t me

Ever since I started school, I have always been thought of as different, whether because of how I dressed, looked, acted, or talked. When I started elementary school, everything seemed to be okay. I had some friends and was generally a happy kid. When I entered third grade, things changed. I was called fat and ugly and stupid. Kids made fun of me because I had a speech problem and couldn't always pronounce things correctly. As the years went on, the bullying and teasing got worse. I started losing hope that it would ever end.

I was relieved when I graduated from elementary school. I thought that all the ridicule was over. The summer before I entered sixth grade I had gotten taller and thinner and everyone told me I was becoming a beautiful young woman. I thought that starting middle school would be a fresh start for me. I was ready for it. I was wrong.

Middle school was worse than I thought it would be. It was as though all the kids that made my life miserable in elementary school had just followed me there. I didn't fit in anywhere. I tried

everything, but it was no use. Soon people began to see how different I was and used my differences to their advantage. I thought that maybe it was just a sixth grade thing, but I was wrong again. It was a throughout middle school thing. As I got older and moved to seventh grade, the insults became more harsh and hurtful to the point that I'd cry in class or not even want to go to school.

For most people I put on a face of strength, or at least indifference. Of course, many people could see right through it and would manage to break me down.

I was lost and alone with nowhere to go. I didn't think that my life could get any worse. It was at that moment I knew that it would take only one thing to send me off the deep end, and, of course, one person pushed me too far.

3. shatt(E)red

"Why don't you just go off and die somewhere? It's not like anyone will miss you," she told me. Her words cut through me like a knife through butter.

I believed her.

Everyone there hated me. They treated me like dirt and didn't care what happened to me in the end. I walked away silently, so many different thoughts running through my mind. I felt hopeless and lost. I got on my bus to go home. All the kids around me seemed so happy and carefree and joyful, like they had no worries in the world. I just sat there feeling alone.

Once home, I dropped my things in their usual spot and just let all the pain and anger sink in. I felt trapped. I couldn't breathe. I was suffocating in my own pain and anger. I had had enough by then.

Tears started streaming down my face, and I got a box cutter from my dad's office. I walked into the tiny bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I was disgusted. With black eyeliner running down my cheeks, puffy redness under my eyes, I looked like a complete mess.

Why doesn't anyone like me? I shut my eyes and held the sharp metallic blade to my neck. I swallowed hard then stopped. I couldn't do it. I was too weak.

I slid to the floor, cursing myself for failing again. I dragged the blade across my arm. I did it again and again until I felt numb. I had found something that completely took away all my pain, something that made me feel free.

At that point, I realized that I had hit rock bottom and that I had probably destroyed any chance of achieving my dream of becoming a model. I didn't care, though. All I cared about was being free.

4. finding priscill(A)

I remembered how it used to be hard to find things that could make me happy, but now I knew one place where I could escape the pain and anger. The sweet air that I longed to smell all year. The sounds of cars parking and campers unpacking. I was finally at Camp Kanata.

Every summer I go for two weeks, and they are always the best weeks of my year. I enjoy being able to hang out with my friends and not worry about making a good impression because no one really cares. Kanata is the place where I can be myself, and where I found who Priscilla really is.

The only problem was that I couldn't figure out how to bring all the confidence I had at camp back home with me. Everything at home seemed so tough that sometimes it was hard to believe that Kanata was even real.

5. drea(M)

Eighth grade seemed to be the absolute worst, just as I had thought. At that point I didn't really care about anything or anyone. I was broken, a living example of Humpty Dumpty.

It was close to the end of the school year. I was at the mall one day when I had decided to enter a contest with a grand prize of a one year modeling contract. About two weeks later, I got a call from the agency. They told me I'd have to compete for the grand prize. I was nervous from the second I got that call to the second I got on stage. One day, about four days before the competition, I was get-

ting ready for the first photo shoot. My mom was helping me with my makeup when she lightly grabbed my arm.

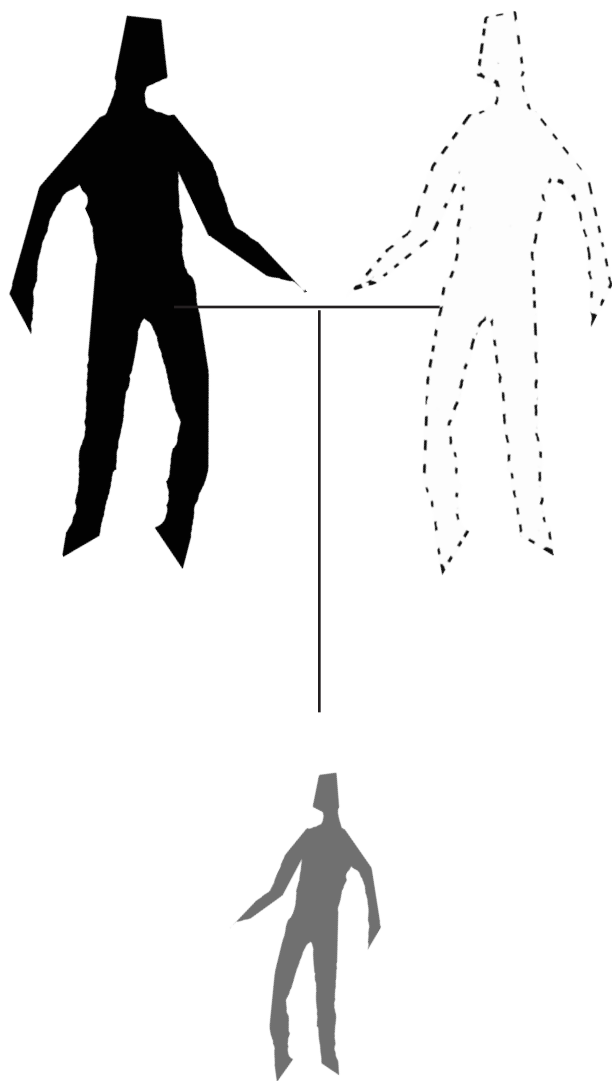
I could sense something was wrong. I had been thinking about how my life had seemed better and I was happy so I looked at myself in the mirror. It was as though confidence beamed from me, I made a decision that I'd never regret. I stopped. I was ready for the competition. Nothing and no one could take my eyes off the prize.

"Now we have number eighty-three, Priscilla Garrett!"

I heard them announce my name and number. I turned around and I gave it my all. I walked my fiercest walk, striking all my poses on time and on point. I was proud of my performance. About two weeks later I got the results.

I had won. I had actually won. Through all the highs and lows, I had achieved my goal, just by following my DREAM.

freshman versus parent



love or hate: a daughter's desire for attention

trisha white

wishing upon a miracle

I SLAMMED THE DOOR BEHIND ME and sank down to the floor wishing that I was anywhere but here. Mom had come home in one of her moods and took it out on me again, but I knew I had to hold on just a little bit longer, and then I'd be out of here for good. My fists slammed down hard against the floor as my eyes began to water. I lay my head on my knees and began to sob.

"Mamaw, Mamaw!" I laughed as I ran into the house. I came to a sudden halt when Mom and Grandma's voices came from the kitchen. They were arguing, and she hadn't heard me. Slowly, I crept along the wall to the corner of the kitchen so I could hear better.

"I deserve a chance with the kids, so I'm taking them!" my mother cried. Instantly, my eyes began to water. My stomach churned, and suddenly I found it hard to swallow.

* * *

"I remember that house, Mom! You made your own son and daughter sleep on the floor so you could have the bed! Bad things happened to us in that house, and you know it!" I shouted back at my mother.

"What is your point, Trisha? That was years ago, get over it! All you do is complain, complain, complain," she responded in a mocking tone.

"Yeah, okay, I complain. I have a right to. I'm a kid. I shouldn't have to listen to you scream at me about how you failing is my fault, about how you wish you had never had me and about how if something were to happen to me, it wouldn't bother you. I shouldn't have to listen to you when you tell me about how if you had never had kids, your life would be so much better. Oh, and as far as I know,

a kid was not made to clean the whole house while their parents do nothing but watch television. A kid is not supposed to be raising an infant. If Tristan and I are such a disgrace, then why did you have another kid?" I barked back at my mother. She stood speechless in front of me. Never had I called her out on the things that she had said to me in the past, but today I snapped.

I picked my head up and dried the tears. No longer would I hide and cry like a child. *I'm old enough to stand my own ground, and that is exactly what I aim to do. I know in my heart something is wrong with my mother, but I do not know what. I know I'm right, but I can't put up with it any longer.* Before I could change my mind, I walked out of my room and out of the house without a single glance at anyone. I was going to my favorite place where nothing could touch me.

guilty as charged

The scent of rotten food filled my nostrils as I walked into the house. By the time I made it past the kitchen, I was choking almost enough to throw up. I looked up to see both my mother and stepfather sitting on the couch, watching TV. Instantly, my insides were burning. Clothes were strewn all over the floor, empty soda and beer cans and pieces of trash were scattered on the coffee table. My brother looked at me as I looked at him. I knew he could read my expression.

"Um, hello?" I addressed them.

"Hey," they both responded stiffly, as if hypnotized by the TV.

"May I ask what you are doing?"

"We're watching TV, Trisha!" Mom snorted. "What do you want?"

"I want to know how y'all can just sit there and watch TV when this house is a disaster and totally reeks." I made myself sound stern, though I was uncertain why I was the one doing this. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Aren't the parents supposed to be the ones to holler at the kids to get up and do something?

"What smell?" Derek asked.

"Really, you can't smell that?" my brother questioned. He was still holding his hand over his nose and staring at me. He always looked to me for help, even though I was his younger sister.

"Would you two just go away!" Mom demanded, giving me a look to kill.

Tristan went downstairs to his room, and I instantly went to cleaning. I prayed to myself that I could get it done before Ashleigh was brought home. This was not a healthy environment for a child. How could they not smell it? How could they live in a house that looked like a pigsty?

beauty of darkness

"Everything is fine; we are all just doing so great!" Mom tried her best to sound enthusiastic. She deceived everyone around her, but I could see the darkness in those deep blue eyes.

"That's great." Her friend, Desiree, smiled as she sat down on her porch.

I snorted. Everyone was so easily beguiled by the creamy, beige-colored skin, sparkling blue eyes, the luscious brown locks that hung down her back, and the smile of a goddess. No one knew there was ice lying within the sparkling blue eyes, or that the smile she showed so easily was about as real as the tooth fairy.

"The kids went to their grandparents' house this weekend," Mom assured her. "That's where I just came from."

I could hear the deception in her words as she spoke them. My heart felt out of place. Refusing to listen to any more of the lies, I silently disappeared. My head was spinning in circles, trying to balance the ten thousand questions that needed to be answered.

Desiree's neighborhood was green, and it grew yellow daises. Houses were white, the grass stood exactly an inch tall, and not a piece of garbage was to be found. The familiar sound of birds chirping was soothing to my ears. For a moment I felt as if nothing could bother me, that I was once again fearless and untouchable, just like I felt at Grandpa's house.

"Trisha!" Mom's voice rang through the neighborhood.

"Coming!" I screamed back.

Within a few minutes, I was back at the car, buckled in, and ready to go. On the way home, I couldn't help but think about what kind of mess I was going home to. Several ideas swirled in my head,

and I couldn't just latch onto one. My headache began as soon as I spotted the tip of the house.

the verdict is in

It was early on a Monday morning. I could hear Ashleigh knocking on my door, saying, "Sissy, can I come in? Please?" Sleepily, I stretched across my bed and opened the door. The smile across her face was all the thanks I needed. She threw herself into my arms for her usual good morning hug.

"Why ain't you at school?" she questioned.

"You know, for being two, you sure do know a lot," I smiled. "Sissy has to go to counseling today."

She talked me into letting her play in my room while I showered. Patiently, she sat while I curled my hair. Then she wanted hers done. She surprised me by actually sitting still so I could do her hair the right way. I smiled and sent her off to go show Mom while I finished getting ready.

Within ten minutes, I was ready and on my way out the door. I heard Mom's voice before I had made it out of the house, but then when I opened the door, I realized she was yelling.

"Ashleigh Breanne get in your car-seat!" Mom demanded.

"I want Sissy to do it!" Ashleigh wailed.

"Ashleigh!" Mom screamed louder.

"Quit screaming at her. That won't solve anything." I rolled my eyes and picked Ashleigh up to put her in her seat.

Mom didn't say much the whole way there, so I passed the time by talking to Ashleigh and working on counting to ten with her. She was really picking up fast. As we walked into the counselor's office, I gave Ashleigh a toy and sat her in a chair. She was as content as could be. Then, when the counselor called me back to the room and Ashleigh realized she couldn't go with me, she began to cry. My heart sank. I knew she didn't want to be left alone with Mom. She never has liked it. When she was younger, she slept in my room, I fed her, I bathed her, I changed her diapers, and I taught her what she knows. To this day, she still sometimes calls me Mom.

I sat down in the plump love seat and looked at the blank walls filled with drawings by young children. The room felt cozy and safe. I could still faintly hear Ashleigh crying. The counselor shot me a glance before she settled down into her chair.

"How are we today?" she spoke softly.

"Could be better, but I'm managing," I assured her.

"Well, tell me a little bit about what's going on, honey." She picked up her fancy-shmancy pink pen.

"Well, lately, Mom has been about as helpful as a rock with Ashleigh. You can tell Ashleigh doesn't like to be very far from me. When I go to school, she does nothing but cry and cry. Every morning before I leave, I get her dressed, feed her, and tell her it'll be okay. Tristan hasn't been home much. I don't blame him, though. I would probably do the same thing if I didn't care so much about Ashleigh's safety. Whenever he's home, he has to do chores or listen to Mom scream at him for something he did that was supposedly wrong.

"Mom flipped out on me the other night when she came home from work because she had failed one of her tests for college. Dumbfounded, I just sat down and thought about how it could possibly be my fault. There's no way that it could have been my fault. I just try to and satisfy her. I made Ashleigh stay in my room with me so she couldn't say I didn't give her time to study. Even that didn't help.

"Mom gets mad at every little thing. She takes it out mostly on me, and I don't understand why. The things that she says hurt. Especially when she talks about how us kids are her biggest mistake. Sometimes it makes me think her brain is smaller than a pea. I just don't understand how you can say things so hurtful to your own child and not even say sorry or feel any kind of regret at all."

The tears were streaming down my face.

"Honey, I understand. You are one of many kids dealing with this. Your situation is a little different though. Your mother is sick. She shows signs of narcissism. Unfortunately, there is no cure for this. Therefore, it is something you'll have to deal with for the rest of your life." She spoke as if hearing this would make me feel better about the situation.

I sat there in disbelief. I knew something was wrong, but a medical condition? *No way* . . . If she is narcissistic like the coun-

selor says, then how am I supposed to help her at least get a hold on it? *Can I help her accept the fact that she's narcissistic?* Being narcissistic means that she tends to derive erotic gratification from the admiration of her own physical or mental attributes. Denial of others' opinions is a big part of narcissism. This set off an alarm in my head. *How am I going to move and leave my siblings here alone with her? Does that make me a horrible sister?* I gulped.

say goodbye

I could see the jagged Virginia mountains and the flat grassy plains of Kentucky in my head when Aunt Kathy called to say she was on her way. Since then, I had been extremely anxious. The option of moving had never really crossed my mind until the night before. The fact that I was leaving my siblings and had no clue when I would see them again bothered me most. All these thoughts were making my head spin, and I was glued to my bed. My phone began to ring.

"Hey, baby, you ready?" Grandma's voice came through the phone.

"Yes and no," I sighed, choking back the tears.

"What's wrong?"

I explained to Grandma why I wasn't ready to go. One by one, tears rolled down my cheeks. She tried her best to soothe my fears, but for some reason, the voice in my head was telling me that something was going to go wrong when I left. Grandma had to work, so she couldn't talk any longer. I gathered myself before I walked out to the living room where Ashleigh would be waiting. I didn't want to upset her.

Ashleigh and I spent most of the morning playing. I cherished every last moment I had with her. Other things were on my mind, though. Mom and I have never had the tightest relationship. Our relationship is like the grass and the wind. Whenever the wind blows across the grass, it's forced to bend. My mom pushes me, and I'm forced to bend until I break. Would leaving change this?

My mind was made up, but my heart was telling me no. I just couldn't stay; for years I'd been looking for a way out, but had been too scared to leave my siblings behind. Now that I was older, I

understood that I couldn't save them unless I first saved myself. I was moving to North Carolina so I could get an education and make something of myself. That way I could help not only myself, but also my family. After all of this was said and done, I hoped I would be able to bond with my mother. Even though moving away from her was not the way I wanted to do this, I believe that for her to lose me will be the only way she'll realize she actually does want me. I hope I'm right.

The day before I left, Mom had requested a day to spend with me, only me. She claimed that she wanted to spend quality time with me, but that isn't exactly how it turned out. She took me to the mall, but it was with one of her friends. Soon, I found out that she was going to spend four hours having her hair colored and cut while I babysat. Not that I had a problem with watching my sister, because I most definitely didn't. My problem was that Mom would rather spend her last hours with me getting her hair done and hanging out with her friend than actually spending the time with me.

Right before we left, Mom handed me a box. A thin, silver chain slithered between my fingers. Two connected diamond hearts dangled from the chain. My eyes swelled with tears. "Ashleigh" was written on one heart and "Trisha" on the other. Both Ashleigh and I were given one. She's still too young to wear hers, but I'll wear mine every day. Even though Mom made this gesture, it doesn't change my feelings toward her. I wonder what she'll think when she realizes I'm gone—gone for good.

bastard

sean howard

AS I GRASPED THE IRON HANDLES AND PULLED THE GIANT WOODEN DOOR, the smell of the elderly escaped from the room ahead. An absence of life permeated the air. I crept in slowly, waiting awkwardly for the acknowledgment of my arrival. It shocked me to hear nothing but the steady beep of a machine. I saw a group of people somberly gathered around her. I glanced to the farthest corner of the room, and saw my father watching at me. His eyes were grey, green, and drooping. His hair didn't dare to come out from under his hat because it could hint at his age. His clothes matched and he had shaved, even though we were just meeting family. "Hi, son," he whispered.

I was confused at first; his voice was that of a stranger. I hesitated, and replied with a "Hi." I could already tell this evening was going to be difficult. I walked over to the bed to see my nana, so weak, so changed from when we had last spent time together. She had always been very sweet to me and kind. I remembered all the times she would pick me up from elementary school, and all the family reunions I used to attend with her. I started to regret slowly spending less time with her; I didn't even send her emails or call anymore.

* * *

I gathered my thoughts and asked gently if she needed anything. She began to speak, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Hesitantly, I asked her to repeat herself. She replied louder, and I carried out what she asked. We began side conversations; everyone questioned me about my life, ignoring the one that we were possibly about to lose.

Sometimes I didn't understand what my nana asked of me, so I nodded in agreement, even though I had no idea what she was saying. Eventually she asked a question that I didn't understand

but still nodded to, and she repeated herself, this time in the same volume. "I'm sorry, excuse me?" I whispered. My father raised his head and quoted what she said, this time much louder. I answered the question with embarrassment, and took my seat beside my mom. It was getting late, and my father waved farewell. I grabbed my bags as we left the hospital. I wish I had known that this would be the last time I saw Nana. I waved my goodbye to my mother as I walked away with my father.

He was as much of a stranger then as he is now.

* * *

We walked quietly from the hospital, careful not to wake anyone who could have still been sleeping at noon. I felt bad for hospitals; depression always filled most of the rooms. Why are the nurses working there so nice? They can't mask with their smiles the fact that these people are sick. All they do is make it seem like everything will be alright, but it isn't and it won't. All the nurses I saw leaving the hospital had smiles on their faces.

We saw the hospital doors, and my father and I practically ran to get out; we both dreaded being in that place. We walked to the parking lot, and I saw an expensive-looking car. It was really shiny, and smelled like it was fresh off the lot. He glanced at me and smirked, as if it was an accomplishment. I was happy for him, that he had managed to afford an expensive car, but I wasn't proud.

* * *

I got in the car, and he assured me that we were going to a hotel for the night, due to the long ride we would have to Atlanta the next day. I was excited to go to Atlanta; it was a place I had never been before. We made our stop at a giant hotel in Greensboro. The lobby was nicely decorated and spacious, it also had a nice smell. We made our way to the front desk, where my dad flirted with the check-in lady. I stood patiently with my luggage. Once he was done, I grabbed my items and we walked to a nearby elevator. I looked up, attempting to see his face, but his new shades got in the way of my view, so I quickly looked down again.

He slid the card down the lock; the door opened to reveal a dirty room. He gestured his hand to a nearby couch, referring to where I would sleep. I dropped my luggage near the chair and pulled out my Game Boy. As soon as I turned it on, the lights went out, so I put it back down. I couldn't sleep that night because, for some reason, I felt like I wasn't supposed to be there.

* * *

We didn't talk the whole way to Atlanta.

Finally at his house, I waited anxiously for my father to say something to me. Instead, I was left standing there. I didn't speak at all because I was afraid of breaking the cold tension in the room. Awkwardly, I asked where I could put my things. I flinched when I saw his arm swing, gesturing to a nearby room. I quickly grabbed my bags and waited for help. He began to walk to the living room. I took my stuff to my room without aid. I sat there, patiently expecting dinner. The room was still and I looked up at the pale walls. I leaned down and took a seat on the floor. I realized that this was going to be a long week.

I thought about how strange it was to actually be meeting my father for the first time. I mean, we had met before, but this time it was different. Before, when we met, it was like visiting distant relatives. I waited anxiously for dinner; I wasn't hungry, though. Just to have another chance to actually talk to him was what I wanted, what I was looking forward to. I was nervous: what should I ask?

Time passed, and I was getting bored. I unpacked my console and began to play a game. The game completely captured me. It was one of my favorites. I eventually heard footsteps, and a loud crashing at the door. I was stolen away from the game. I looked, and heard the roar of my father, "Why are you playing as a girl?" he asked. We stared at each other until I cracked my voice in an answering response. I stopped myself, because I was unsure if my response would be the one he wanted. We stared at each other awkwardly. "Well, it's time to eat dinner," he said. I went to the dinner table and sat down.

He gathered his food and walked away. I watched him as he left the room. I sat there for a while, then got up and walked to my

room to continued playing for the rest of the night. I eventually decided to go to bed. I crawled into the bed and went to sleep. It was weird, lying there in a strange place where I didn't belong. It felt like this house was a part of a nightmare or an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I drifted off, and began to think about my mom. It was the first time I had been so far away from her.

I'm not sure if I cried because I was homesick or because I didn't recognize the man in the other room.

ex-stepdaughter

h. v. solomon

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Leo Tolstoy

I.

I BELIEVE THAT ONE OF THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS I HAD WITH AMY was when my dad, in his typical fashion, decided to buy the whole Planet Earth series probably while he was trying to find sandpaper at K-Mart. We started watching part of the first one for a while, but then my brother and I started fighting, so we put it off for a couple more nights. But that time, an unwelcome guest was present, one that made my nostrils flare whenever she got within three feet of my father. While Morgan Freeman described the patterns of the territorial battles between two lions, or cheetahs, or maybe it was tigers, there was a very pathetic, one-sided territorial battle in our own playroom, that only one out of four of us were aware of.

I remember when I looked over at my dad and this woman, I missed him. I didn't just miss him—I envied her; as I probably would have said at that age, “that stupid-headed . . . fart . . . head . . . dumb . . . face.” I felt left out and was completely convinced that dad was moving on with his life. Which, I know now, of course, was wrong, but I really did think that he was just sitting right there, watching Planet Earth, with his arm around this strange woman, making the decision to abandon his family for this, this—*bitch*, and what could I do?

Now, here's where it gets sort of interesting. And please note that the following story will make Amy and I both sound like terrible people, but hey, I'm a pretty honest person in my writing, and this is a memoir, right? Just keep in mind that I had only been alive for nine or ten years compared to the grown woman in her late forties.

I continued looking over at them, sitting there, scowling at his stupid-headed arm, and nobody noticed me. I didn't want attention; I wanted him to stop. I thought that I would be able to somehow, telepathically, maybe, just move his arm. That's all I wanted. But what if I came up with a terrifically evil plan to get him to sit with me, and not her? Well, I knew what would happen. You go over there, and he finally takes his damn arm down, and he puts the other one around you. But guess what? It turns out his arm *wasn't* keeping her there. She can actually sit there without his arm behind her! So you try to get him to scoot over, because she's seriously starting to piss you off, and you want him to be closer to you than to her, but you don't say that because you're just such a wonderful, manipulative kid. Turns out, Amy was probably very similar as a child, because next thing we know, she runs out of the room crying like Kate Winslet at the Golden Globes.

So, here's where I decided I hated my dad. For the night, anyway. She walked out of the room briskly, crying on the way to her car. I'm pretty sure she saw that in a movie. Or several movies. Several terrible movies. My dad went out and talked to her and she got a little less annoying and emotional and irrational and stupid and flighty, and he came back in and told me she'd be back in a minute. But then I had the greatest, most original idea of all time: to do something very, very similar to what she just did. I owned it though, I promise. I totally owned it. Because I called my mom, and what could be more awesome than simultaneously crying and running, then calling your mom?

Of *course*, my dad didn't come after me. He didn't follow me or try to get me to come back down to the playroom. I should have expected that because now I was being the irrational one.

But it still hurt.

II.

She never got tired of telling the story of how they hurt her poor, sensitive foot during her pedicure. It was one of those stories that got progressively worse each time she told it. She turned the story of How the Little Korean Man Slightly Distressed Her Trying

to Get the Callouses off of Her Feet into some kind of torture session right out of *Saw*. All this happened because the best thing Amy could think to do for stepmother-stepdaughter “bonding” was to take me to Lee Nails every other Sunday. Lee Nails was the kind of place where you could smell the nail polish from the street and you weren’t even sure what the people working there were saying.

But Mimi’s Nails opened across the street where they had started developing. It hailed as heaven on Earth in comparison. The changes were slight, but they made a world of difference. For example, the whole room didn’t have an intoxicating light blue tint because of the crappy lighting, and they let you choose the lotion that they then massaged your hand with, which, in all honesty, was a tad awkward, with a stranger rubbing in between your fingers and you’re just *sitting* there, looking up and playing footsie with yourself. My manicurist actually had a name this time, and we created some fingernail masterpieces.

Anyway, I’m afraid that if I go on and on about the manicures, which is kind of where I’m headed, I’m going to sound like a brat. And I really could go on, too, but I would just hate myself if I did. So, with Amy, most of the bonding was done in the car on the way to and from the nail salon. I’ve never been one to yell across five rows of chairs about personal matters, unlike some others, so this was about the only option left, unless I wanted everything to be really awkward with Amy where we don’t talk about anything and go about our daily errands dutifully. Most of our talks were about things like Kyle and Savannah’s scandalous relationship or about how much I hated my private school teachers. I could tell her gossip stories without her trying to lecture me like my parents about how I shouldn’t be like my friends, while trying and failing to subtly slip in “tokens of wisdom” that I would never listen to (and none of these were really anything substantial enough to tell my therapist). A lot of the other subjects we talked about included family because I know some of that would offend my parents and, again, cause a lecture. Despite this so-called “bond” that I knew she felt, it wasn’t entirely the same way for me. Whenever she would try to relate to me or help me, I would contradict it in my mind with something like, *Don’t listen to her, she has a tramp stamp*. At a young age, I had already learned that if I complained about her to

my dad, it wouldn't make any difference unless I had evidence of her doing something terrible, which I never would. And as horrible as it sounds, somehow, I still hated her.

III.

On one such outing, she awkwardly struck up a conversation that I still resent. "So, what would you like to call me when I'm being introduced to people?"

I was silent for a moment, then let out an "Umm . . ." and tried to look like I was thinking by pressing my lips together, furrowing my eyebrows, and looking up.

"I don't really like the term 'stepmom' because I'm not a step, and I'm not your mom."

She had lost me by now. Did she realize that that's not what that means, or was she just being whiny and obnoxious to make me mad? I was triggered, and it was quite hard to keep from repeatedly rolling my eyes or, God forbid, saying something *rude*. "Well . . ." *What the hell else am I supposed to call you?* "Maybe, like . . . friend, or something?" I managed to get something out. I had remembered my dad introducing her as his friend before, something I found extremely awkward and indirect.

She said something stupid like, "Okay, works for me!"

Of course, I didn't abide by her wishes. I told everyone she was my stepmom, but the worst was when people called her my mom. She was *not*, never had been, and, now more definitely than ever, would *never* be my mother. (I was glad she had to have a hysterectomy; she would have been a terrible mother.) This was particularly an issue in sixth grade, when I was embarrassed to say that I had a stepmother because everyone at Montessori had perfect little hippie families, but I had to somehow make it clear that this woman was *not* my mother. It never helped whenever I meekly tried to correct people, but I escaped this a year later for two reasons. The first is because I left the school; the second is upcoming.

IV.

People, especially those in the Solomon family, tend to project their emotions from something big-picture onto something tiny. Today, it was pretty clear that that was happening to me. I was in the home stretch of sixth grade at a school where I had attended preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school. Nothing was constant anymore, and, as I learned when I came home, not even the brick wall by the pool was a constant. My dad decided to put in an extra set of stairs where there was originally a wall. *And he didn't even ask the twelve-year-old daughter for permission!* I was so scared, no, so *terrified* of any sort of change that I started crying. *Again.*

After that point, everything just blended together, but I'll describe it to the best of my recollection. The next thing I remember, my dad came in, Amy came in, and I was still crying and they were making me feel better. Somewhere along the line, my dad had left the room, but Amy was still there, all sniffly and gooey with me, and we were saying a lot of things about our feelings on change and childhood and everything, and she comes right out of nowhere with something I never expected.

"When I was a girl, I was sexually abused by my neighbor."

I felt horrible for all the negative thoughts I'd had about her. Then I felt horrible for all the negative thoughts I was going to have about her, and then I felt horrible for all the negative thoughts I *still* had about her. But my negativity didn't really matter then; it would have to be tabled for the time being.

V.

I looked around the large, round dinner table with Christmas decorations all over it. Everyone was engaging in discussion, but when I had nothing to say, I looked over at Amy, who had been silent for a while. I rolled my eyes. *What's her deal? She's just looking for attention.* I looked around at the rest of the table and smiled politely at our family friends and across-the-street neighbors, the Walkers. They had two twin girls my age that I grew up with, Paige

and Rosaline, and two sons. Luke was my brother's age, and Isaac was a little over a year older.

"The plot was kind of stupid, but the 3-D was really good. They don't have anything cheesy, like, 'Look over *the-e-ere!*'" Isaac pointed directly in front of him and dragged out his words. Everyone laughed, but Amy forced a smile and stared straight ahead. She annoyed me by acting this way, but I would not let her ruin my fun. I forgot about her and went back to the conversation.

"I don't know, the plot was really predictable."

VI.

At that point, we had somewhat of an unspoken agreement: we both figured that even if she was coming back, we didn't want her back. As it had been going for Christmas and birthdays, she picked out the presents for my dad, my brother, and I. That was basically the only way that I was affected. Still, I did feel some sympathy for my dad.

As we discussed what to do about the Christmas presents she bought for me, I couldn't help but pay closer attention to his face than normal. His hair had always remained a light brown color, making him appear much younger than his almost fifty-three, but it had been graying recently. The light hit his face in an unflattering way, making his cheekbones look dry and raw. The corners of his thin lips formed a natural frown. Not a frown of anger, but a frown of many years of clinical depression. He hadn't shaved that day, but nobody had really expected him to. His eyebrows were, as almost always, unkempt and untamed. His eyes, like his mouth, were turned down slightly, as if he was destined to feel sorrow. But within each shape was one blue-grey abrasive ring around his pupils, and every time we made eye contact, I knew that two similar eyes were staring back at him.

I wanted to do whatever my dad wanted to do, and we settled on the decision to go ahead and look at what she had picked out for me. When he took out the box, it was physically the brightest object in the room, but I didn't feel that way. It had neat, square holes in it, but was covered in a thin, bright, costume tissue paper to hide

the contents, which didn't come close to making up for what she had done. The first thing I noticed were small black sequins peeking up from the top that couldn't be concealed within the disguise of the box. The rest of the box hosted small token gifts, but the one that stuck out in my mind the most was an electric trimmer. It was like she already knew she was going to leave when she went shopping, even before the incident of Christmas Eve, two days prior. It was like she felt compelled to provide me with the supplies of womanhood before she left us.

After she left, I got two emails from her. They were casual, she wanted to take me to get my nails done or something stupid. I wanted to reply using every curse word and offensive thought I could possibly think of, but I hated to leave a paper trail. I didn't want to give her any attention or spend any more time on her. I didn't want her to think she had an kind of impact of any kind on me, and I've still never really been sure if she did.

one teenage life

angie raudales

1.

A PEACEFUL PLACE TO VISIT, I thought as I took my first step outside the doorway. The neighbors would ask, “How’s it going?” and I would start a conversation with them about how nice the day was, the warmth of the sun reflecting on my skin, the familiar stench of the cars burning gas, and the birds tweeting in the morning. The kids would laugh and play until their stomachs hurt. When we went to the flea market, we’d hear “Oranges for sale! Two for a dollar!” My grandma would buy some, and I would start eating the fresh, juicy oranges and sweet watermelons. I’d spit out the bitter, black seeds, trying not to bite into them. We’d take trips to the beach where the hot sand would work its way between my toes and the waves of the ocean would approach, making me sink into the salty water and taste it.

When we’d go to visit our family members, like at Grandma’s house, you’d see hugs and kisses flying around. She’d offer us cookies and milk, as if we were still five, and ask us the usual questions: “How is school?” “How are your grades looking?” I would normally answer, “Great, Grandma. How has it been down here?” and that would lead us into a conversation.

I would walk down the street to meet new friends and have a good time. We’d play around and laugh like wild hyenas. The taunting aroma of burger grease coming from the McDonald’s around the corner would lead us there, making us order a meal and a soft drink. The food would fill us up for half the day, making us feel too lazy to walk back home. The hot sun’s rays would hit us like an unbearable fire burning our skin, making us feel sick. As the night approached, we’d hear crickets and frogs lying around somewhere in the grass, hurrying us back. We would see the brightening stars in the sky, along with the glowing half-moon. It felt like a beautiful time to

sit down beside the crickets and frogs, looking up at the sky and just enjoying the moment. As it became darker minute by minute, I couldn't wait until the next busy day would come up with the sun.

2.

Over a year ago, my mother asked me, "Angie, are you going to want a *quinceañera* party or a car?"

I was shocked and told her, "I don't know, Mom. Let's see . . . If I get a car, I'm not going to be able to drive it, because I don't have my driver's permit, and my *quinceañera* is only once in a lifetime, so I think that I want my *quinceañera*."

A *quinceañera* is a tradition that Hispanics have. It is like a sweet sixteen, except it's a year earlier. I had made my decision: I wanted a *quinceañera*. We went to many different stores to see if they sold dresses. Most of them didn't, but about a month later, we found a store that sold everything for *quinceañeras*. We also started to look for my cousins so they could dance with me. This is also a tradition that we have. There were many things on the list that we had to look for, and we didn't know if we were going to make it on time before the party started. As the months went by, we started to get all of our materials prepared. We found my dress, chose the venue, planned the food, and sent invitations. The day was getting closer, and we began to worry. We feared that something was going to go wrong on the day of my party. The day came, and everything turned out the way I wanted it to. I was excited and glad I chose the party and not the car.

3.

When I was five, my mother and father separated. I haven't lived with my father since.

At the time, I felt frustrated because I couldn't be with my dad. I wasn't very close to him, but I still missed having him around. I remember everyday after school he would make me a sandwich and help me with my homework.

The week my father left was the hardest for me and my sister. We cried every night that week. I was depressed that the family couldn't be together anymore, but I was not going to tell my little sister. It would have just made her more angry, and she would have cried even more. But as time went on and we got older, we managed to overcome the situation. Since I'm the oldest, I had always understood more than my sister. We are now used to living with a single parent, who has a lot of responsibility with four kids and a house that has to be paid for. I feel like my sister Catherine and I are now very strong for having to live through that with my mom and brother.

4.

As my brother, sister, and I walked in the hospital, the smell of medicine filled our noses. It smelled like children's cherry ibuprofen.

We walked up to the main lobby to meet the receptionist.

"What floor do we go to if our mother just gave birth?" we asked her.

"Upstairs on the seventh floor and make a right when you have reached the double doors," she responded in a polite way, and we thanked her for her help.

As we were going up the elevator, I had a picture of my mother's face in my head. I could imagine her smile, her pink, curvy lips turned up at the corners.

We got off the elevator, walked down the hallway, and pressed the button to open up the double doors. It took us to another receptionist, who told us that we had to wait outside in the lobby area. We couldn't go in there yet because we were not eighteen or over. We tried to tell the receptionist that our mother was in there but she told us that we still couldn't go in because we were underage and she was giving birth. So we slept in the lobby all night long. We decided to join two chairs together and make a small uncomfortable bed that we couldn't fit in because our feet would dangle off the bottom of the chair. My mother didn't know that we had slept there until the next day.

The baby was already born, and we were anxious to see it. We had to go to my aunt's house and make up the lack of sleep because the next day we had to go to school. On the third day, she got to take the baby home. I remember laying the baby down in his bed for the first time. I was excited, but in the back of my head I told myself that the family was going to change now that there was a baby in the house. Most of the attention would go to him. But I told myself to try to get used to it because this is how our life was going to be from now on.

5.

I should have known that growing up wasn't going to be an easy task. It seems like the older I get, the more responsibility I have, considering that I already had enough work around the house. After my baby brother was born, the entire family changed because all the attention went to the baby. The house had to be tidier, and I was in charge of handling that since I'm the oldest. My baby brother is now a year and a half, and our responsibilities have increased. For example, on top of school work, we have to keep the house clean—spotless. Mother says so because there's a baby in the house and he can't get sick.

It is a lot to do when you're a teenager. Sometimes you feel very stressed out and just want to get away for a day or two. If I look back at the day he was born, how emotional and happy we felt on May 10, 2010, I think that we appreciate that he is here.

that man called my father

sofia arredondo

1.

THAT MAN. Tall and skinny. Arms that reached past his hips. Long, dark hair tied up in a pony tail. Eyes the color of milk chocolate. When the sun shined on his face, his tricky eyes revealed pieces of caramel. He looked pale, really pale, as if he was sick. His wild, ugly smile exposed a silver tooth. His fingers were long and skinny, just like his legs.

Why? Why does he do the things he does? I don't even want to look in his direction or breathe the same air he breathes. I say to myself, *He doesn't deserve to be called my father.* Did he if he was never really there for me? Not only was he not there for me, but he wasn't there for my sister, brother, or mother. It's funny how he's only a father when he feels like it.

There he goes again, leaving us like strangers. I was only six or seven, and my brother was a year older, my sister not even born yet. When he left, I asked him, "Daddy, where you going?" Though I didn't love him as much as my mother, he *was* my father. I wept.

"I'll be back, Windy," he said in his deep voice. I looked over to mom. She wasn't smiling or crying. She had a look on her face that told me, "Don't worry sweetie, everything's going to be okay."

My mother has always worked day and night to get shoes on our feet, clothes on our bodies, food on the table, and most importantly, a roof over our heads. Even when my father was there, she was the one who paid the rent and bought the food. She has been a mother and father to us. I was too little to understand why my dad left, why my mother worked day and night, and why I barely saw her. I was curious, but I never asked her what was going on because I figured she wouldn't tell me.

A year passed. I can still remember the day he came back. I first saw him standing in front of the house, waiting, as if someone

would go up, hug him, and say how much we missed him. He didn't seem to understand that no one would. My eyes got bigger, and my skin got cold; my little world froze, and I felt like a little girl getting told Santa Claus didn't exist. Yes, he was my father, and I cared about him, but I didn't want him back.

Still, I hoped he would be more of a provider this time, so my mother wouldn't have to break her back working. They say that people change over time, and I desperately hoped my father had, but I soon realized I was wrong. Things started changing that first week he got back. My father got meaner and meaner, and, day by day, I started losing what love for him had still remained. I no longer wanted to call him "Father," "Dad," or "Daddy." "That Man" was what I was going to call him. *Bye-bye, Father*, I repeated in my head.

When he wanted to be a father, I was his little girl, but when he didn't, it was like I didn't exist. He never treated my brother like a real father would treat his son; he treated him more like a boy he didn't care about. He always had my brother cleaning up after him, like he was a king. There wasn't a time, day or night, that I could remember when That Man was not hitting or yelling at my brother and me. My brother and I could barely be children. He had us studying constantly and cleaning up after him like we were his slaves. He even made us get up early in the morning on Saturdays and Sundays just to clean up.

And toys? Such a simple term, but back then, my brother and I did not even dare speak or think of them. We couldn't even look at a toy without That Man getting infuriated. He took all of our toys away and packed them up in a box that stood beside the television. When he had the money, he would send our toys to Mexico and make his mother sell them. She was no grandmother to me.

Perfect! Not only did he have us doing all that cleaning and studying, but That Man wanted us to be perfect. He wanted us to be the children who acted like adults. He wanted us clean, with nice neat nails, making us look like rich white people. So many times I wanted to explain to him that nobody in this world is perfect. But I couldn't, because if I did, who knew what would happen next?

2.

After That Man came back, I retreated to my trenches to hide from my enemy. But there was no way I could, since he would find me the second I put a foot on the battlefield. I wanted my old life back so badly, but thanks to him, I had no chance.

Two years later, he still hadn't left. When he would go to the store or his friend's and leave me and my brother alone in the house, I would sit there and count the hours, minutes and seconds that went by, waiting for him to come back home, pack up his stuff, and leave forever.

I would get so happy when my mother came home because it felt like being with my guardian angel. I would think of an angel every time I saw her beautiful face. I loved that woman so much—more than my life. Sometimes I wondered how she lived with him all those years, and why she didn't just pack her stuff and go. I didn't want to blame my mother and say it was all her fault, but I dreamt of a better life for all of us.

The first day That Man went to work, my brother and I were so happy. We felt like free puppies running from a horrible owner. We would have so much fun playing, doing all kinds of crazy stuff. We would get all the pillows and set them on the bed and hop on them until we sweat like workers out in the field. During that time of the day, I felt like the world had its color back. But later on, when That Man came home, we couldn't even blink or move because we were so scared. That's when the world would go all dark again.

There were some days That Man wasn't in a bad mood. Sometimes he would let us go outside and play for hours. That's when I felt like a normal girl living in a normal family. But then he would turn into That Man I didn't like.

I couldn't bear it when my mother and That Man got in a fight. I felt bad; it was like looking at a lion attacking a baby giraffe. My mom couldn't stop crying. I felt terrible. I wanted to hurt him so bad, hurt him so he could feel the pain my brother and I felt. There were times they didn't seem happy, but later, my mother would act like nothing never happened.

3.

A couple years later, I was at my mother's birthday party. After we finished eating, it was time for birthday cake. In my family, it is a tradition to push the birthday person's face into the cake. I walked over to my mom, preparing to push her face, I heard my uncle say, "Don't push her at all, it'll hurt her stomach." What he said confused me. *Why would that hurt her stomach?* That was when I realized I would soon become a big sister.

Later on, my mother had her baby. I was so excited, but at the same time jealous, because I knew that my mother wasn't going to pay attention to me anymore.

Even though my mother had her baby, she still went to work. And I still wondered why That Man didn't have a job again. He had one, but after a while he stopped working.

One day, That Man finally got up and left. My sister was only a couple of months old. I felt really bad for my mother. I wished I was old enough to get a job so maybe we could have a better life.

I had seen my mother struggle for so long that I didn't know what to do. I wished I could talk to her, but I was too young to understand what was going on or know what I was talking about.

The only way that I could help my mother was by taking care of my sister and cleaning the house. I didn't mind doing all that for my mother because she had done a lot for me over all these years; there was no other way of paying her back.

Time went by really fast. My sister was almost a year old, and even though my mom struggled a lot, we got through all the bad moments and kept on with our lives. We lived happily . . . or so I thought until one night, when my mom woke us up. Her voice sounded so happy and excited. Her beautiful smile could never be erased from my mind. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw it.

Then that moment, as soon as I opened my eyes, I heard the word 'Dad,' and my smile was erased. I grimaced when I saw That Man's face again. I felt confused. He wasn't a good father, and my mother knew it, so why did she let him come back? My sister didn't recognize who he was. And I wish I hadn't either.

4.

Finally, That Man decided to stay with us, which made me feel better about my mom not having to work a lot, but also made me feel bad about having to deal with him for the rest of my life. I was around eleven or twelve when he decided to come back. I was in middle school, and I was happy, ready to start a new life, hoping again That Man had changed his way of life. We moved to a different apartment, a place That Man liked. But my mom was still the one paying the rent. Sometimes That Man would make me so mad that when my friends asked who he was, I would say that he was my brother's tutor. He was a basketball coach, and when he worked, my sister and I would have to go with him. Sometimes it was fun, but other times, That Man would be in a bad mood and get mad over every little thing. I hated that he had money to spend on other people and others things, but not on his own so-called family.

I hated Saturdays and Sundays because my mother wouldn't be there, which meant that That Man would have to cook for us, and we had to eat his nasty food. We ate that or nothing at all. When he set the plate on the table, I didn't have any choice but to smell it and get used to it because sooner or later, it was going to be in my mouth. The food would be on the table, and I would just sit there and think to myself *What kind of food is this? I'm Mexican, not Indian. Where's my Mexican food at?* I'd think of that and more, before he could turn around and start yelling and saying whatever came to his head.

5.

I was a nice little girl. Sweet, respectful, funny in my own way. All of my elementary teachers loved me, and so did I. But after elementary, on my way to sixth grade, I changed. No one told me, but I didn't need anyone to tell me. I figured it out myself. I was mean, rude, and disrespectful. I always had a reason for yelling at someone or cussing at them. I felt bad but good at the same time because all of that was pure anger I had built up from That Man, and I had been holding it in long enough. I couldn't take it

anymore. I couldn't take the anger out on my mother because she never gave me a reason to. Yes, she would get mad when I would do stuff I wasn't supposed to do, but she never treated me like That Man did. I knew that I couldn't take my anger out on That Man and talk back to him because I knew what would happen, and it wasn't something I wanted. That's why I decided to take my anger out on other people.

Around that time, my brother changed, too. When That Man wasn't around, and my brother and I would be alone, he would treat me like he was my father. Man, there were times I wish I could have just killed him. I was little, and my brother didn't like doing anything making me cry. I was a little girl; of course I was a crybaby. I wasn't a big girl, yet.

There were times my brother and I understood each other, but other times we would end up hurting each other. I wouldn't tell my mom or That Man on him because by the time my mom and That Man got home, my brother and I would be nice to each other, or other times I would just feel bad about the way That Man would treat him, so I preferred to take care of the problem myself.

By the time I got to seventh grade, That Man had left for Mexico again. Since I was big enough, I learned That Man had another family; that's why he was always leaving. Maybe he didn't love us as much as them because when he would be over here with us, he would send his other family money, yet when he left us, he didn't even send a penny. *Bastard*, I'd think every time I thought of him.

My uncles and aunt said I looked like him, because of my eyes. I wanted to take them out. I'd rather be blind than have his horrible eyes. I wanted to look more like my mother because she was beautiful and because I loved her. I didn't want to look like someone I didn't like, I didn't want to listen to people say how pretty "daddy's little girl" looked.

6.

I'm fourteen now, and last time I saw That Man was when I was eleven or twelve. Since it had been a long time since I'd seen him, I recently decided to give him yet another chance.

He called us and asked to chat on the computer. He told me he had changed, but later on, I realized he hadn't. *Why did he lie to me?* I thought. I hoped I would never see him again. When we would get in trouble and my mother didn't know what to do, she would call That Man. All he would do was cuss at us and tell us what to do. But why should we listen if he hasn't really been a father to us? Why should we care if he was really never there? He only wanted to be a father when he could curse and yell at us; other than that, we didn't exist.

If I was nobody to you when my birthday came, or when I did something that made my mother proud, or when I had my first concert, or when I first started high school, then don't even bother to think I'm someone now.

It hurts me seeing other people with their fathers, but I'd rather not have a father than have one who treats me like shit.

being with dad

andrea torres

KARLA LAUGHED AS SHE STOOD ON THE EDGE OF THE SOFA, looking at the floor, measuring where she wanted to land, then jumped. At that very moment, I dropped my keys and ran to her as fast as I could. My heart pounded as I held her in my arms and let out a huge sigh of relief. “Don’t jump anymore,” I pleaded to her.

Every weekend my cousin Kendra and I took care of her two-year-old sisters Karla and Karina. It wasn’t a hard job, but there were difficult times when we had to be our most careful. Relieved that nothing bad had happened yet, I watched TV and thought back to the time when I broke my arm. I glanced at the small living room. It reminded me a lot of the living room I had when I was six. The living room was our playroom. Tables and sofas would be used to jump from, carpet floor would make it comfortable to do cartwheels, and toys were scattered all over.

* * *

I chased after my cousin Kendra, jumping over toys like in a game of hop-scotch. We were in my old living room. I observed her and my other cousin, Yoshi, as they jumped off the blue and brown plaid-patterned sofa. Fascinated, I joined in. Yoshi jumped off the edge fearlessly.

“Okay, my turn!” Kendra shoved me. I didn’t mind her skipping me. After all, I thought the last people always seemed to have the most fun. Then came my turn. I wasn’t hoping for a thrilling rush, just a fun experience. I leaned straight forward, bent my knees, and jumped! *Yeah! That was fun!* We raced each other in a game of how fast we could jump and then run without tripping. Rushing behind Kendra faster than before, I jumped!

But I lost my balance, and my body tilted to the right, my whole weight landing only on one side. I came crashing down with

a loud thump and a crack that came from one of my arms. I began to panic. My right arm began to hurt. *Did I break my arm?* I felt it start to heat-up and even burn. I tried to get up, to recover, but I wasn't able to do so. The pain increased and assured me that I needed help.

* * *

I hugged my mom as my body grew tired and exhausted. Barely able to even keep my eyes open, I hoped that the pain of my right arm would go away. I looked up at the mirror across from me. It showed me his tired face. His deep brown eyes filled with sorrow, his lips curved down with guilt, and his wrinkled forehead, showing he was determined to do his best. He wore a big blue jacket like that of a policeman and his warm, tan skin reminded me of the warm, cozy home I had just left. His hands pressed on the steering wheel, as if he didn't want to lose control of anything. Once or twice, he would start a constant tap on the wheel until the sixty second period marked it was time to rest.

"Andrea, we'll be there soon," he tried to comfort me. I didn't know what to say. Many thoughts came to my mind. *What was going to happen to my arm? Would they have to perform some type of surgery? And would it be tonight?!* But, at this moment, I didn't want to think about it. The pain increased abruptly, and I began to cry. The car came to a stop, and my stepdad quickly stepped out. He opened the door and patiently helped my mom get me out the car. I held on to my stepdad with my left arm. My mom, my stepdad, and I walked into the hospital. A nurse there attended to us and guided us to a slightly dark waiting room that was painted a dull, navy blue.

After a long wait, I felt cold and a bit nervous about the doctor examining my injured arm. I noticed my stepdad's face was expressionless as he looked at me. I didn't know how he felt at the moment—I just knew he was there, by my side. The doctor finally walked in and checked my arm. He tried moving it, but I jerked away. I walked with him moments later to a room where he could get my x-rays. When the doctor and I got back to where my mom and stepdad were waiting, he announced to us that I needed a sur-

gery to get my right arm back to normal. My parents just looked at each other.

* * *

I sat down, opening the paper bag and passing out what everyone had ordered. “So, how’s school?” my dad asked.

“It’s okay,” I answered. “But we don’t have school this week because it’s spring break.” Next came a stiff silence. It eventually became awkward so I tried to start a conversation.

“How long are you going to be here?” He didn’t live in North Carolina, so he always struggled to tell me when he was leaving to go back to Texas. I don’t know why, but I guess he thought I would get all emotional if he did.

“I’ll be here two more days, then I have to head back to Texas. But hey—” out of the blue he remembered something important. “You do know today’s your cousins birthday, right?” Yoshi, Kendra, and I looked at each other.

“No, we didn’t,” Kendra answered.

“Well if you guys want, I could take you to the party. I wouldn’t want y’all to be bored back at home.”

“Yeah, sure,” Yoshi answered, thrilled for us. I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to go to a place where I didn’t know who the people were. But, still, I was going with Kendra, so I knew at least I had someone to talk to. We drove to my cousin’s house in Cary, and no one said a word on our way there. I guess we were gathering our thoughts together since it was the first time in a long time that we would see our cousins from our dad’s side of the family.

We came to a bumpy stop. I opened the door of the old blue Ford and waited for my cousins to get out. We walked up the steps of the house behind my dad, and he knocked on the door. It was answered by a woman.

“Oh, hi!” she said. She had a short structure, her face replenished with peace. She looked down-to-earth. “Finally, you guys come visit your aunt! Wow, you all have grown up so much!” She hugged us. “Come in!” She led us inside. I thought she was nice. “Your other aunts and I were just about to set up the tables so we

can all eat, but you're free to go in the living room and watch a movie with the rest of your cousins." I nodded.

Kendra, Yoshi, and I headed into the living room. I paused, startled. There were about twenty kids in there, not watching a movie. What they were doing was throwing water cups and toys at each other. It was a mess. I felt strange walking into this mayhem. *These people are so wild. No one would've been able to get out of this kind of mess without punishment from my mom.* I spotted a girl coming over to talk to us. She looked the same age as me, with black hair and bangs. "Hi! I'm Titi."

"Happy birthday!" Kendra congratulated her.

"Thanks. Hey, you guys want to go to the park with a few of us? It's across the street."

"Yeah, sure," I answered. Besides, I didn't want to be inside when my aunt saw the living room. I still didn't know her well, and I didn't want to know how she would react.

Walking to the park, I was speechless. Even though they were my cousins, I didn't know these people. I started to feel bad because Titi and I hardly had anything in common. She talked loudly on the way to the park. I remained quiet the whole time.

"So, what do you guys want to do?" Titi asked at the park. My cousins got together and they all agreed, freeze tag was the best game to play. We started to run, but I didn't know who was It, so I got tagged and stopped playing. I sat on a swing, watching the last few people play. One of my cousin's friends, Gerardo, came up to me breathing hard and asked me if I still wanted to play with a few others.

"Yeah, sure," I agreed. I let out a sigh as I started playing with him, Kendra, and five other people. I ran about, tagging people, laughing all the while. I was ecstatic to be there, finally enjoying time with my cousins. As I was pursuing someone, I tripped, losing my balance and scraping the tops of my knees. They started to burn and blood trickled out. Gerardo helped me up, and we went inside so I could get help.

* * *

From the beginning, I knew this wasn't going to be a good day for me. I'd just woken up, my right arm in a cast. I crawled down to

the end of the bed, hoping I could push myself to stand up this way, but it didn't work. It was barely the first day wearing this cast and I couldn't even get myself up! But I wasn't going to ask for help. I knew I could get up if I put the right strength and energy into it. I tried several more times. Twenty minutes passed and still nothing. I stopped and lay there. My stepdad came in.

"What's wrong?" he asked, wondering why I was still lying in bed.

"I can't get up."

"Oh! I'm sorry." He hurried and pulled me up.

"Thanks." I got up and walked into the kitchen with him. My mom was making breakfast. "Mom, when do you think I'll be able to take this cast off?" My mom stared with disbelief.

"But you just got it yesterday! Tell me, how's your arm?"

I looked at it. "Not so great."

"Well don't worry about the cast. It will be off before you know it."

"But how?" I asked. "The doctor said I needed a surgery before my arm could go back to normal and you didn't agree to it."

"Right now, it might all seem confusing, but your grandma and I talked."

"I'll be taking you to Texas so you can go with your grandma back to Mexico. There you will be checked by a doctor and we'll get his opinion," my step-dad told me.

"So I'm going to Mexico?" I smiled. "Will I be able to see my cousins?"

"Yes. But don't forget you're only going because you have to see a doctor. It's not a vacation, Andrea." I nodded, agreeing. Thrilled nonetheless, I looked at my stepdad. I appreciated everything he did for me. And him taking me to Texas meant a lot. Since my fourth birthday, he had always been there for me. He'd given me all the love and support a daughter would want from her dad. I had grown a tight bond with him over the years, and I knew him as Dad.

* * *

I held his hand as we walked across the street. The air was cold, windy. "Well, this is the end of my train," he said. I looked up

at him. "I'll see you in a month, okay?" My eyes started to tear up. I guess I didn't want him to leave my side. He noticed my tears. "It's okay, Andrea." He held my shoulders. "A month will go by so fast, you won't even notice you left. And look at it this way, you'll be all better!"

Accepting his true words, I hugged him and he gave me a bear hug back.

"Ow," I laughed as he squeezed my broken right arm.

"Oh, sorry." He smiled back. "Well, I'll see you in a month then." I nodded, and walked to my grandma who was waiting for me beside the bus.

"Bye!" I yelled as I climbed onto the bus.

* * *

I looked at my bleeding knees. I was inside my aunt's house, full with family members and guests, trying desperately to find my dad. I found him straightening up the tables, throwing away plastic plates that people had used to eat. "Uh, I scraped my knees." I walked up to my dad awkwardly and showed him. I wasn't used to calling him "Dad," and calling him "Sir" or his first name would be disrespectful, so I didn't call him anything.

"Oh, well go ask your aunt if she has band-aids. I'll be with you in a moment." I went into the kitchen, looking for my aunt.

"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked as I waited for band-aids

"Yeah." I showed her my knees. She grabbed a pack of band-aids from a cabinet and gave them to me.

"Could you bring them back when you're finished?"

"Okay." It was dark outside, so I sat underneath a light post. With me was the pack of bandages and a wet paper towel. I cleaned my knees and then put the bandages slowly on both sides. I looked at my cousins and family members walking to the back of the house. I recognized Kendra as she walked towards me.

"C'mon, Andrea! They brought a Dora piñata, and I can't wait to get candy! Let's go to the back!"

"Yeah, I want candy, too." I got up and ran with her.

At the back of the house, I saw my dad and uncle hang Dora on a tree.

I'll be with you in a moment, my dad had told me, but he never came. I was his only daughter. It wouldn't have killed him to check if I was alright. I tried not to let it get to me. Besides, I already knew that my dad would never be a real dad. He was never there for the important stuff, like my birthdays, my preschool graduation, or even the day I was born. It did hurt, but I had faith that one day it was going to change.

a disaster waiting to happen

diamonique johnson

1. needing answers

A TALL, DARK GIANT WAS THE SUBJECT. This muscular person always ran through my mind, giving me a scare. I am confused and do not know what to do. I do want to have a relationship with him and let us get to know each other, but why should I? He never made the effort to try and get in contact with me. He never even tried to locate me. There was something about my relationship with my father that I couldn't point out. I just knew the chance of knowing him was going down the drain every second. I was alone in my room and angry, tears flooding out while I wrote in my diary. Every time I would write something about him, I would get even more upset. All I could do was remember times with my father and how when I was born, I wasn't accepted by him or his family because of my skin color. He didn't accept me because I came out light skinned, and my older brothers and younger brother were his complexion. I was furious. How could someone deny their own child for so many years?

Calming down, I tried to think of good things. That was tough. I couldn't stop thinking about how he thought calling a few times, showing up at my house, or buying me shoes was going to fix our relationship. I was supposed to be his little girl, the one who got special treatment, who had the over-protective father. It seemed selfish, but I didn't care. This wasn't how my relationship was supposed to be with him. I was his only girl, and this was how it ended up.

2. still waiting

Waiting for my father to arrive, I prepared what I would say when I saw him. I was wondering if he wouldn't show, like all the

other times in the past. As I sat there, wondering what we would do when we arrived at his house, I heard a knock. I nervously ran to the door. When I saw him, I froze. I didn't know what to do, so I just hugged him awkwardly.

On the way to his house, neither of us said anything to each other. I listened to music while he talked on the phone. Ten minutes in the car with nothing being said. I felt like we weren't getting anywhere. When we arrived at his house, I saw a lady sitting at the table. I had no clue who it was. Maybe it was his long-lost sister? Or maybe there was a secret child? Interrupting me as I was trying to think of possibilities, he came out and said, "Diamond, meet Candace, my girlfriend."

3. the big surprise

I dropped my bag in shock.

"Hi, Candace, nice to meet you."

"Same to you. I'm honored to meet you; your father has been going on about how he wanted us to meet."

"Oh, great!" Still shocked, I walked towards the couch and flopped down, looking in the distance.

As we sat there, her staring at me and me staring into nothing, Candace said, "So, how old are you?"

"Fourteen," I said, looking at her.

"Oh, that's great."

Our conversation went back to a silent stare. I felt like we had nothing in common. As we sat across from one another, we glared at each other every once in a while. I stared at my dad, and he tried to get me talking. He asked how school was going and asked about my grades. I replied with short answers, and it seemed like I just sat there, not even trying to communicate. I was very worried that our relationship wasn't going anywhere.

"Hey, Diamond, I have a surprise for you at nine," my dad said. I was eager to find out what the big surprise was. I worried that maybe I wouldn't like this surprise. I worried about what facial expressions I should have and how I should react.

4. the bigger surprise

We weren't getting anywhere, but finally, nine o'clock arrived. Someone knocked on the door. "Go get the door," my father said to me. I walked towards the door and opened it. It was my three brothers. I was so excited to see them; I finally had someone to relate to. I hugged them, and they came and sat down. We caught up on things and reflected on the past. The time passed by, and my father and Candace had gone to sleep, so it was just me and my brothers.

"Do you know the news?" asked Dominic.

"Oh yeah, I know Dad and Candace go out."

"No, the marriage," he said.

The second my brother said that, my stomach dropped. I never would have thought that my father would ever get married! I was so upset. I felt as if this was going to hold us back from getting our relationship in order. I felt as though I were being replaced. He wasn't going to be the fun, playful dad that I was trying to get to know more of. He was going to be the "married dad," and I wasn't happy with that. I went straight for my phone.

I texted my mom saying, He's getting married, and I'm just finding out!

She texted back and said, How do you know? How did you find out? It seemed my mother wasn't happy with it either. It seemed she was even more disappointed than me.

I'll talk to you later, Mom, I typed. I asked my brothers when they found out about the marriage. Could this get any worse?

5. up all night

The night passed and morning came. I couldn't sleep the whole night through, so I was still lying awake early in the morning. I had been having creepy dreams about my dad and his girlfriend getting married, making me fall out of bed. I had another one that was about having to stay with them after they got married, and they sent me to boarding school. That was the most terrifying dream I'd ever had.

Thirty minutes had passed, and I was still the only one up, worrying about my father and his marriage. It didn't even concern

me that I was here to try to get a good start on our relationship. I was really worried about who my father was marrying. I was worried about whether she was really right for him. Maybe he should wait a while.

forgiveness brings happiness

idania rosales-alas

I HAD THIS ANGER INSIDE OF ME—not just for my dad’s girlfriend, Iris, but also for my dad because every day I dreamed of my parents getting back together. As I got out of the car and walked inside the house, I saw her standing in the doorway with a huge smile on her face.

I looked at her from top to bottom. She was of a medium height, and she had black frizzy hair. Her face reminded me of an elephant’s face; her cheeks were chubby and her skin was tan and rough. She had almond-shaped eyes with sparse black eyelashes. I started smiling when I saw her lips, because they were huge. What mostly caught my attention was the way she was dressed—like, OMG. She was dressed like an old lady. Her shirt was flower-printed and twice as big as her, and her light brown pants made her look fat. She walked towards me and gave me a big hug, saying, “I’m glad I finally got the chance to meet you.” Although I returned the hug, my facial expression did not suggest I was happy to meet her.

Iris told me to take a seat. As I did, she and my dad started talking to me, asking me a lot of questions.

How has my life been for the past nine years? You would know if you were there. As we were conversing, she offered me a drink.

* * *

When I moved to my dad’s house, I had to get used to the idea of being nice to my soon-to-be ‘mom.’ I knew that it was not going to be easy to have a good relationship with her, not just because I didn’t know her, but also because I was angry at her for taking my mom’s place.

At first, I didn’t say a single word to her. But time passed, and I knew that I had to change the way I treated her, so I started talking to her and trying as hard as I could to build a good relationship. I tried to help her with cooking and cleaning, not just because I

wanted to have a good relationship with her, but also because I was trying to make my dad happy. I didn't want him to be upset or mad at me for not liking his girlfriend.

One Saturday morning, I woke up, went to the living room, lay on the sofa, and turned on the TV. As I watched Phineas and Ferb torture their sister, Candace, with their crazy inventions, my stepmom woke up. It was kinda weird, because she doesn't wake up early. I was like, *What? Why is she awake so early?* And I knew at that moment that something was going on. I asked her, "What are you doing up so early?"

She replied, "Mmm, your dad hasn't told you?"

"Nope. . . . Told me what?" She stayed silent. "Would you tell me already? What's happening?"

She said, "I'm up early because I'm going to go to the mall to buy a dress. . . ."

"A dress? What for?"

"Your dad and I are getting married." My face turned red as a tomato, and I started crying. I didn't want my dad to marry another lady. I said to Iris, "You can't get married to my dad."

She asked, "Why not? All I have done for the past ten years is be a good girlfriend to your dad. I've done that by staying faithful and by treating him with respect." As she was talking, tears were falling. "I promise you; I have and will always love him. I don't want to take your mom's place; I want to be here for you whenever you need me. I want to be here to give you advice." She made me cry, but even though she said those beautiful words to me, I acted as if they didn't touch my heart. I was dying inside, but at the same time I just wanted to jump in her arms and give her big hug and thank her for saying those words that were full of honesty and, most importantly, love.

* * *

It has been a year since my dad and my new mom were married. I decided that I didn't want to waste another year being mad at Iris. Two months after they married, I decided to stop being angry.

On a Saturday afternoon, I told her, "I'm sorry for being so mean and rude to you. I hope you can understand me and why I was mad."

She said, "It's okay. I understand how you felt." I thanked her and gave her a big hug, just like I had wanted to when she told me that she and my dad would be married. My relationship with Iris quickly became better than before. I felt good about it, and my dad did, too.

tough love:

a story of diminishing returns

john woodbridge

1.

MY DAD SEEMED TO BE one of the most seasoned outdoorsmen I'd met. He was only forty then. He had a rough beard like a pioneer, and he was skinny like a stick, in comparison to now. His baby blue eyes had something special about them, but he had already started to bald, and he showed some slight strains from age. It seems like long ago, but I still can remember him back then.

My earliest memory of my dad was when my little baby brother was born. While my mom was in the hospital, he picked me up from school, and we went to see her. Walking into the hospital felt more like walking into a large mall. The lobby was lined with well lit gift shops, which proudly displayed all kinds of goods from their windows.

She was still weak from the surgery when we got to her room. We sat down, and my dad then took a tiny bundle that looked like a fruit basket and placed it in my hands.

"John," he said as a wide smile spread across his face, "Meet your new baby brother, Riney."

I looked down and saw two tiny raisin-like eyes staring back at me. I was so happy to have a little brother. It felt like receiving a puppy.

Looking back now, I can't really remember a time when my dad was this happy. His joy vanished slowly, but surely, just like mine.

2.

"Gold's down today," my dad said casually.

"Really? How much?" I asked.

"About down around 1800. That's still very high, though. I wouldn't complain until it drops below 1400."

"How are the stock market and your equities doing?"

"Down the tubes."

My dad moved away from the computer and looked at me. A thin smile appeared on his bland and aging face. His eyes lit up in contrast to the rest of his face and a glow of youth waned. His face relaxed and revealed the stress of being a cubicle worker in some large, faceless corporation.

"How's Apple doing?" I asked. He had invested in the Apple Corporation ages ago, before they became the success they are now.

"It's alright. . . . I can't tell you the specific price, but I can quote all the prices of the metals I'm investing in."

Our conversations were strange, but it seemed that it was the only way I could really bond with my dad. Our father-son time was checking stock prices, looking at percentage gains, and sharing his investment strategies.

"Now, check this out," he said with a glimmer. "This right here is the growth of the S&P 500 index over the past ten years."

Beaming with pride, he pulled out another chart. "Now this is the growth of my portfolio over the same ten-year period." The difference was vast. His chart showed an impressive twenty something percent, while the S&P chart showed a measly single-digit number.

With him being a stubborn-headed, conservative, traditional white collar dad, and me being me, we argue most of the time and rarely seem to get along. If anyone asked us why, he would say that it was because I was an "insubordinate, arrogant, and cocky teenager." I would say it's because he's a "micro-managing, sarcastic, pessimistic, long-winded old man with anger issues."

As I got ready for bed, my mind reflected on our conversation. *Someday*, I said to myself, *someday, I'll quote these conversations when I'm king on Wall Street.*

3.

The car speeds along the dimly lit highway. I peer out the window and see what looks like thousands of pairs of red lights in front of me. My mind races through today's events.

My dad sits in the driver's seat, staring intently at the road ahead. Then, all of a sudden, he breaks the cool silence.

"You know, driving here takes a long time. I really think you should take the bus." I grit my teeth, knowing we've been over this dispute many times.

"No, dad, we've been over this many times, it's totally unreasonable for me to take the bus."

He tenses up, a glimmer of anger and annoyance showing in his eyes. His stubborn face turns towards me as he goes off on one of his long, windbagged speeches that I really don't want to hear at 9:30 p.m. I try to ignore him, but I can't. His mouth opens and closes repeatedly as he drones on and on, sounding like that annoying kid in class, you know, the one who you want tell to just shut up and get lost. Finally, when I can't take this any longer, I talk back at him.

He stops. Now he's really mad; his face gets all red, and veins pop out from his fat, bald forehead. He's screaming some BS about what a lousy kid I am. I can only listen as he hurls a torrent of swear words to describe me. This really makes me angry inside. I'm burning with contempt for my father, but I feel helpless, trapped in the car with him as he speeds off the highway and towards home, under the cover of the dark night.

4.

I take a sip of my ice-cold soda, filled with chunks of melted ice and a brownish-black sugary, syrupy liquid. From the best seats, baseball looks pretty interesting, especially when you know what is happening and you can actually see the players. Today is a good day at the ballpark; the Bulls are doing well. Everything feels like it's going my way.

Sitting next to me, my dad is smiling. We both look ahead as a batter for the Bulls steps up to the plate and is quickly struck out by the opposing team. The rowdy crowd hushes a little, and I look up and stare at the sky. The sun is shining brightly against the few clouds; the weather is warm and nice. A massive rumble comes from the crowd, and I find myself jumping up to my feet and cheering.

“The Bulls just made a run! Yeah!” he screams into my ear. The bright twinkle shines in his aging eyes.

“All right!” I cheer, swept up in the emotions of joy running through the crowd.

I sit back down, sip my now-diluted Pepsi and lean back. *Today has been a good day*, I think to myself.

a guy story

antonio cervantes h.

I.

IT WAS ANOTHER SUMMER VACATION, and there was nothing to do but sit at home and watch television all day, the remote clicking away in my hand and my mind bored with every channel that went by. Every other summer ended the same way: watching TV.

I had wanted to do something really fun that I would remember for a long time, but as much as the little hamster in my head ran, I couldn't think of anything. But then I had a thought: *I don't have to think; this is the age of technology. All I need is my computer and crazy ideas.* So I got to work and thought of crazy things that I wanted to do.

My first try was sky diving, and it was not looking too good when I researched it. The websites said that I had to be eighteen years or older. The second choice was bungee jumping. Still no chance. I couldn't think of anything else but hang gliding off a mountain view. But . . . do I really need to say it?

So that's how I ended up there again, bored as a cucumber. I noticed my dad staring at me from the dining room table, and by the look on his face, he'd been there for a while. After some time I burst out laughing and asked, "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? You should be asking yourself the same question," he said. I could tell he was also trying to find something to do.

"Well there's nothing to do in this boring house!" I retorted. He put down some paperwork he was doing, got up, and walked towards me.

"You know what?" he asked.

"What?" I responded.

"We should go fishing again," he said. "It'll be fun, I promise."

The only thing I could think was, *To adventure!*

II.

We needed to pack a few things that were important for fishing, but the only problem was that we had no idea where we had left the stuff. The only thing we could do was to search all the areas where a fishing pole, nets, and the extra items would be, which was not going to be easy. So we searched, and searched, and searched for what seemed like an hour. *Where could they be? We've looked everywhere, but they still haven't up shown*, I kept thinking to myself.

The first place that I went to look was in the garage. Who doesn't put stuff in there? The garage was dark, like a huge cavern.

No matter how much we looked, they didn't pop up anywhere. I turned to my dad and asked, "Did anything or anyone mess with them after we went last time?" He turned to me with a surprised face, which I hadn't seen since last Christmas when he got his favorite jacket. The only thing I could do at that time was slap my face. It was like being on a mountain with no way down (unless you grew feathers and flew down yourself). I knew what he was going to say, so I just sighed.

"You know what? Let's go ask my uncle. I think he had them."

We hopped into the car and drove to my uncle's house. I could tell that he was embarrassed, so I decided to forget about it until the time was right. But it wasn't helping at all because the radio was off, so it was quieter than an empty room. I didn't want to touch the radio because it was new, and I had no idea how to use it. But I was so curious.

"If it's okay with you, I am going to put some music on," I said.

"Sure. Go ahead, but don't go crazy," he said with a serious look and tone.

I turned it on and found my favorite music station. I decided to just lie on the seat and wait until we got the fishing poles and bait and headed for the lake.

III.

After spending a couple of minutes trying to find the fishing poles at my uncle's, we headed for the highway a second time. It

was sunny as rays of light beamed down slowly. The trees were all huddled up together with the grass growing between their roots. It was calm on the straight highway; nothing could disturb it. I took a long breath of air to smell the the sweet fragrance of the trees. I had never been this relaxed before. But the scenery had to stop once we got near our destination.

"We need to go get some bait since we're near the boat rental shop," he explained.

"Yeah, sure, I don't mind at all," I muttered.

We stopped at a fishing store that was about five minutes away from the boat rentals. The fishing store was like a normal gas station. It had drinks, chips, candy, and a bathroom. The only difference was that it had worms and other fish bait, a lot of fishing equipment, and actual fish. I didn't really know what, or how much bait we would end up getting but I was excited. This store also sold food, such as chicken and turkey. Boy, did that make me hungry, and I think my dad noticed, too.

"Do you want some to go?" he asked.

"What? Yeah, sure, I want some," I said, embarrassed.

"Okay, we'll get some and eat after I take you to the best fishing spot in the lake," he exclaimed.

We ordered some food and then got the bait, which turned out to be a lot more than I thought we would need. We paid for the items and headed out the door and back to the car. It wasn't going to take long, since we were really close. I noticed that the trees were becoming more spaced out than before. That's when I noticed the small bits of water in the spaced bits of the trees. It was hard to tell, but I was sure of it because I could see the sun shining its long rays down to the water and reflecting on it like a mirror. I also noticed a small little cabin-looking building next to the lake.

I saw the exit for the lake coming up, and I felt the excitement exploding out of my head like a paper bag exploding with too much air inside. I couldn't wait to get on that boat. We headed to the parking lot and started to take the fishing equipment out along with our food. I brought the stuff down to the docks while my dad paid for the boat rental at the small shack. All the boats looked pretty big, and they had their own small motor for the long trips.

My dad came down with the battery for the motor and said to put all the stuff on any boat gently. I had no idea which to choose. There were a lot of boats in rows and columns, so I ended up choosing the biggest boat there was. We put the stuff down and my dad drove us to his favorite spot on the lake.

IV.

I lay back on the boat, staring at the sky and my mind started to wander. I felt the energy flowing through me. My dad drove the boat all the way back to the docks and parked it safely so we could get out easily. We headed for the car. It felt as if every minute was going by fast. With that feeling, we made it home in no time at all. I passed through the living room and saw the television once more. Instead of sitting back down and clicking away, I went outside and just stood there. I felt revived, and wished that this feeling would stay a bit longer.

a day in the car

justin young

1. the gas station

“ARE YOU READY?”

“Yeah, hold on. Let me buckle my seatbelt,”

“We have to go to Sheetz so I can get some coffee. Do you want anything?”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to get an Arizona. I’m addicted to the iced tea and mango-flavored one. It’s delicious,” I said with a smile.

“Do you know how nasty that is?!” my stepdad shouted.

“What are you talking about? It’s good.”

“That’s the worst mixture I have ever heard of in my life. I don’t see how you can drink that mess.”

“Well you can’t knock it ‘til you try it,” I said with a giggle. We exited our neighborhood, and what seemed like a five minute drive was actually fifteen minutes to the gas station. The conversation that my stepdad and I were having interested me and made the ride seem shorter. I appreciated that because I was ready to go home and just get some sleep; being out here this early in the morning on a Saturday, for a teenager, was not a fun time.

We both entered the store, and as I walked away to the drinks, I saw him go get some chocolate. I rushed over to my stepdad, getting ready to complain. However, when I asked him who the chocolate was for, he said it was for me because he was just being kind. I didn’t know how to respond so I just said okay with a gentle smile. We got the goods and got back in the car. Near the gas station the roads were kind of bumpy. I guess they were being worked on, but they smoothed out eventually.

2. generations

Listening to the purr of the car made me think more about how technology has advanced. As humans we have advanced electronically, mentally, physically, socially, and culturally. My stepdad and I were talking about how our generations have changed.

“Your generation gets away with everything. You guys wouldn’t last a minute in my time,” he said with a smirk of accuracy. “The styles and fashions that you guys have today are the same thing we used to wear, it’s just a little different.”

“I know, it’s just that you say life was a whole lot harder back then when I still think it’s the same. Yeah, maybe it got a little easier, but it’s still difficult,” I said with a sigh of respect. When we have these talks, he usually wins because he knows more than me, but he says I put up a good argument. I still think he’s just mad that he had to use encyclopedias to find information back in the day, while my generation can just use the internet. When we talked about how education has changed, we both agreed that technology has made life easier by unveiling all the information in the world on the internet, but it’s also made people a lot lazier.

I will admit that I am lazy because the work that I am asked to do isn’t difficult. It’s just that I don’t have my priorities set. My stepdad tells me that I won’t make it in this world if I put fun before work. However, he did say life isn’t all about work. Life’s not hard, it’s just that when you have a lazy mentality, life seems very difficult. He was trying to explain that to me, and I understood. It’s just that it’s hard to follow through with it.

3. happiness

“Hey Justin, what time is it?” my stepdad asked with a calm look.

“It’s 9:15. We have plenty of time before Mommy wakes up,” I said.

“I just hope Aneccia doesn’t wake her up because you know how babies can be.”

“I worry more about Arianna doing that than Aneccia.”

“Surprisingly, Aneccia can entertain herself more than Ari can, and she’s only one,” he explained. “And being that Arianna’s

seven, she easily gets bored and is always looking for someone to play with.”

“But she should know not to wake Mommy up when she’s sleeping. Mommy’s always doing work of some kind, and she’s always exhausted,” I said.

“Yeah, usually when she sleeps, I’m up to watch you guys, but I drift away and fall asleep too because I get up at four in the morning so I can go to work. Man, is that tiring! I swear it feels like I’m just going to drop dead if I don’t get some rest,” he mumbled with a sigh.

“It’s okay. You can handle it. But make sure you don’t fall asleep while we’re in the car,” I giggled.

Making uneasy small talk isn’t as simple as it sounds, but I guess I just did that to pass the time. Somehow we got on the subject of how my mom and dad broke up. He said that I’m not old enough to know the exact details, but he basically gave me a general idea of what happened.

He said my mom and dad weren’t on the same page and that they decided that it was best to split. Luckily my parents still keep in touch, and I am able to see my mom and dad so that I don’t grow up without a mother or father figure. I’m not really caught up in what happened; I’m more focused on the fact that everything is okay and there is peace right now. My stepdad and I both agreed that we are not happy that they split, but we are okay with their decision. If they didn’t split, my stepdad and I would have never come to be and I was thankful for him. My stepdad and I have a relationship that is different from others. There will never be another stepdad in my life that is as cool, hard-working, nice, kind, and loving as he is.

“I remember when you didn’t know me that well and you said that you didn’t want me to be your new dad.”

“Yeah, you have changed my life in many ways. I’m glad that you did come into my life. I used to think that you didn’t like me and that you only liked my mom, but I’ve come to find out that you are the best stepdad anyone could ask for. I love you,” I said with a look of happiness that had grown over a long period of time.

“I love you, too, Justin. Stepdad is only a title. You will always be my son,” he said with a smile on his face and a tear in his eye.

4. family

By then, the car had gotten all mushy because of all the love that was being spread around. Since we were guys, we tried to change the subject to something manly. Sports, food, females. Usually, this was the only time we got to just have real conversations because during the weekdays, we usually talked about school and things that relate to family time. “So, Justin, who’s your favorite basketball team?” he asked

“The Celtics. They are the best team ever!” I said happily.

“I’m a football person, Justin, but I have to disagree with you. The Bulls are the absolute best.”

“Yeah, they’re the best if you like losing, but the best team for this year was the Mavericks because they won the championship! And honestly, I was pulling for them in the playoffs after the Celtics were knocked out.”

“Oh, okay, then what’s your favorite football team now? I know you don’t look like you’re into the Steelers anymore.”

“Nope. My favorite team for this year is going to be the Eagles, I think. Only because they have Michael Vick on there.”

“I don’t know why you are rooting for them. You know it’s all about my Dallas Cowboys!” he said with a smile and a nod as if he knew that he was correct about something.

“Personally, you know that I’m not a big football fan, but if you believe that your Cowboys are going to win then I’m cool with it.”

The conversation about sports ended with a ‘No way!’ attitude, because my stepdad gets very passionate about his football team, and I just left it at that. As I stared out the window, I saw that we were approaching the exit of the highway.

5. the barbershop

As usual, I entered by myself to ask my barber Bruce how many people were in front of me. He usually says two or three but today it was only one, so I went and told my stepdad. He got out of the car and came inside.

Bruce has been cutting my stepdad's hair for over ten years and has been cutting mine for about five years now. I still like his cuts to this day. However, that day I was not satisfied with the hair cut that I received. He had cut my hair a little too short and I didn't like it. But it didn't look that bad, so I didn't make a big deal of it. My stepdad sat in the chair to get his hair cut, and as I looked at him, out of the corner of my eye I saw three girls staring at me.

At first, I thought they were trying to stalk me, however I further realized that they were checking me out. They were approaching the entrance, so I had to pop my collar and brush my jeans 'cause I was turning on my swag. They entered the barbershop and their eyes grew bigger as they looked at me. I don't think they knew that I was looking to see if they were looking, but I could tell that they were trying to see if I was interested. They sat in the barbershop lobby for a few minutes, then they got up and left. However, as they were leaving, they waved at me and it left a smirk on my face because I knew that they were checking me out. My stepdad got out of the chair and paid Bruce for the haircuts. We got back into the car.

"Are you ready to go home and wake everybody up, Justin?"

"Sure," I said with a smile and a laugh.

how's daddy?

serenity smith

1. *mi descubrimiento interesante*

I LOGGED ON, AND TYPED IN MY SILLY, NINE-YEAR-OLD PASSWORD. I hadn't been on Facebook in a while. Swiveling around in my comfy computer chair, I noticed a bright, red box above my messages tab. It had a white "16" inside of it. I moved over to it, and clicked on it. Scrolling down, I noticed a name I recognized, but was surprised to see. Suddenly I felt as if I couldn't breathe. My fingers felt tight, my mind spinning, and my eyes watering. Struggling for breath, I finally took a gulp of oxygen, and read the name again. I was astonished with the way that name felt on my tongue. *Jeffrey Smith.*

That name made me remember the days back in elementary school, feeling all alone when it was time to go home. My friends would jump into their fathers' arms and their fathers would catch them. But my daddy wasn't there. Being so small, I didn't understand this. It didn't make sense. Why didn't I have a dad?

That same day, I went home and asked my mom that question. She seemed annoyed that I wanted to know so desperately and ignored me. Later on in life, I would understand why she reacted like that. But as an eight-year-old child, I was furious that she didn't seem to understand that my pain, the hatred and envy I would feel towards my friends for simply having dads, was unbearable. I wanted to throw bricks at their heads when they jumped into their father's arms, and scream when their fathers caught them. With tears rolling down my soft, plump cheeks, I ignored the pain, and left my mother to her work.

And just like my eight-year-old self, as I stared at each letter of his name, I ignored the pain. I wouldn't allow my tears to fall this time.

2. conversaciones confusas

There was a message taunting me on the wide, pale computer screen. When I finally got a hold of myself, I clicked on it. As I waited impatiently for it to load, the room seemed to get smaller and quieter, and I felt myself becoming nauseous. Finally, it popped up. Hands shaking and eyes wide, I read it:

Dear Daughter of Mine,

I love you more than you could ever imagine. I know this will be a surprise for you, and I hate to make you as upset as it probably will cause you to be, but I had to let you know I cared. This is one of the greatest moments of my life, and I hope it's yours too. Tell your mother I said hello. I love and miss you very much, and it almost seems impossible for you to be as big as you are. Please reply back.

Love, Dad

I sat there in shock, thinking back to those times, hearing family members and friends whispering in secrecy. They assumed I couldn't hear them, but I did. It seemed as if they all made a vow to never tell me too much about my father. And when I did hear stories, it seemed like there was always something missing, something hidden. The stories told always made my father seem like a wonderful guy, so why was he hidden from me for so long? I could never understand. I remember my aunt hissing about my father, saying things like "Do you think she knows?" But then I didn't understand what she meant.

"Mom!" I cried.

"What?" she uttered, slightly annoyed.

"Come look at this."

She walked in calmly, took a look at the screen and seemed to freeze in place. My mother was a graceful, independent, and confident woman; to see her act this way was like hearing a gorilla speak English.

"W-what's this?" she whimpered.

"Dad . . . He's trying to talk to me," I whispered.

"So he decided to be a man this time?" she challenged my father's ways.

"I guess so," I replied, deep in thought. She turned around and started pacing the room nervously.

"You know how I feel about your father," she whispered. "I don't trust him or his family."

"They're my fam—" But I didn't dare finish the sentence.

We stared at the screen blankly, not knowing what to do next.

3. *saber más*

After reading all the dreadful messages of my father trying to get in contact with me, I began to go crazy. I never knew how to respond, so I never did. My mother, not being very happy about these messages, supported my decision one hundred percent, and told me that he was not worth my time. It was almost as if she thought she was shielding me from something, but I didn't understand what.

As we were on our long road trip back to Durham, I asked her why she seemed to be so disgusted every time she heard my father's name. She replied, "He's made some very bad decisions in his life, and I don't want you to follow the same path that he decided to take." This answer didn't satisfy me, but I asked no more questions. She was entirely too tired to be harassed about him. But, later that night when we got home, she explained in detail, with a tear falling now and then, the horrid things he did to get deported.

Amazingly, even with this new information about my father, I adored and admired him. He had been through so much in his life, and he was doing wonderfully. I was astonished that someone could go through the things he did, and still come out on the other side not insane, ill, or dead. I sat on the couch that I had claimed as mine when I was three years old. I being so little and the cushion being so soft, it would surround me when sitting in the middle of it, and I would feel cradled, sort of like being held in a father's arms. I would pull the pillows around me to be alone, and finally feel at peace when my mother and stepfather fought. I did this now, pull-

ing the big, affectionate pillows around me, sitting in darkness, and letting my thoughts roam.

Does he really care?

The best moment in his life?

Am I being ridiculous?

What if Mom's wrong about him?

Should I ask him to explain himself?

Question after question after question. Sadly, they were hard questions to answer. Sitting in the comforting darkness, I let feeling slip back into me to open my eyes. I pulled the large pillows away and got up. *I'm going to find an answer to my questions.*

And I did.

4. la noche una llamada telefónica bonita y extensa

Panting after dance class, I rushed over to my mother sitting in the driveway of the theatre. I jumped into her car, slammed the door, and buckled my seatbelt. Her Reggaeton music was blasting as I settled into my seat, ready to get home and take a nice, warm shower.

She was singing along to the music when she looked at me and said, "I have a surprise for you when we get home."

"What is it?" I asked, skeptical. She seemed reluctant to tell me about it.

"I promise you'll love it," she sadly with some discouragement in her voice.

"Mom! What is it?" But she didn't answer. She stared ahead at the road, turned up the music, and started singing along again.

What was this surprise that she was so hesitant to tell me about?

As we pulled into the driveway, I gathered all my stuff and got out. I turned the rusty-colored doorknob, and stepped inside. Lugging my heavy book bag up the stairs, my shoulders felt the same amount of pain physically as I did mentally. I dragged my feet through the living room, set my stuff down, and sat on my couch. My mom slowly reached into her bag and pulled out her phone. Before dialing the long number, she took a deep breath. She dialed, and put the phone up to her ear.

"Jeff!" she exclaimed. I looked up at the sound of my father's name. "Yes, she's right here."

Saying nothing, she handed me the phone. My mind stopped working and I dropped the phone, making a loud plop on the floor. I struggled to pick it up.

With a little bit of doubt in my voice, I whispered, "Dad?"

"Yes, it's me." I nearly felt like fainting. A huge smile grew across my face, like a rainbow after a storm.

"H-hi." I had no other words left.

"Hey, sweetheart, how are you? This is weird, isn't it? But it's okay. Things are gonna be awkward at first . . ." The conversation went late into the night, and hour by hour, minute by minute, questions I thought were unanswerable, got answered.

"Hey, Dad?" I whispered.

Yawning, he replied, "Yeah?"

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

5. mi mamá y mi papá, eso es correcto

I listened to the joyous sound of my mother and father giggling and reminiscing together. That was one of those sounds that made your soul smile.

Are they getting back together? The question remained in my mind as I mixed the Cup-of-Ramen noodles I had just heated in the microwave. I ran up the steps delighted with the thought, and pranced into my room, doing a little ballet on the way. As I walked in, my tiny kitten, Leo, ran up to my feet and licked my ankle, gesturing that he wanted to play. "Not now, Leo," I said, as I scooped him up and flopped onto my bed.

I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, lowering the volume so I could slightly hear my mother's side of the conversation my parents were having.

"Leo, Mommy and Daddy are . . ." I had to stop. The way I said that sentence, was wrong. *Mommy and Daddy? Are they all of a sudden able to be in the same sentence? Or am I over-thinking the noise I'm hearing?* I had to reassure myself that the phrase was correct in that sentence: Mommy and Daddy. And as I eavesdropped through the door, I was reassured. Mommy and Daddy was right.

life's tough

mike walters

three bullets, one kill

MY FATHER WAS SITTING DRUNK WATCHING TELEVISION. I was playing on the floor with my toys. I was three years old, and my father was smiling at me with his crooked grin. But that look changed when I saw blue and red lights flashing outside the window. On his face now was a look of concern and fear. I remember running to the window, being three years old and curious about the flashing lights. I saw four police officers run to the door armed, merciless, and ready to kill. One ran around the trailer to the back door. While I was looking outside, my father went into his room and got his shotgun. He dragged me away from the window and yelled, "Get behind the couch and don't come out 'til I say you can!" He then rushed me behind the couch and whispered, "Don't look."

I hid behind the couch but I still looked. A large crash signified that the police had kicked down the door. I saw my father's eyes grow larger. He aimed his shotgun, but before he fired, I heard three shots ring out almost at the same time. I saw three bullets go through my father's body with supernatural speed and his blood splatter. Before that day, I had thought my dad to be indestructible, but seeing him actually hurt was something I never thought I'd see. In my rage, I ran to my father's side, striking the cop with all my force. But it didn't do any good since I was only three.

That was the last time I would ever cry in my entire life, for that tragic event had hardened me to the point where nothing could break me down—I had become virtually indestructible. My father may have died that day, but at least the last thing he saw was his son trying to avenge him.

controlling the uncontrollable

I came home tired from school one hot, August day. When I walked in the door, my mother seemed upset and my sister wasn't there. I guessed what had happened. I asked my mother, "What's wrong?"

That made her so depressed all of a sudden, she was sobbing in between her words: "She cut herself again."

It was not a shock to hear this. My sister had pulled this stunt many times before, and I didn't understand why my mother was so upset. Whenever this happens, I don't get too worried because I know she does it for attention. My mother wrapped herself around me in a hug.

"It's not like she's never done that before," I said. In situations like these, I had always felt useless because there's nothing I can ever do. I left to get my sister from my grandparents', but when I got there, she was in a heated argument with them. I tried to mediate the situation, but it didn't amount to anything. My sister tried to leave, but I got in the way. I was yelled at for trying to help.

"Get out of the way! Let her leave if she want to!" snapped my grandfather.

"No!" shouted my grandmother. "She's not going anywhere!"

But it was too late. I had already let her outside. I asked her politely as I could to come back inside. I thought I had convinced her to come with me, but she ran and I ran after her. Being much faster, I didn't take long to catch her.

When I caught her, I took her to the ground and I shouted out my pure emotion of anger and frustration, "You need to learn how to listen and that life ain't all sunshine and rainbows!" I held her to the ground with all my force and weight, but she kept hitting me.

"If you keep hitting me, I'm gonna break that arm!" I yelled.

My grandparents came lumbering over with their faces full of concern and said, "Let her go, Michael."

So I let her up. My sister kept saying I hurt her, but I didn't, or at least, I wasn't trying to. My heart was full of disgust and loathing that my sister would say I hurt her, I was trying to help. I tried to explain myself, but all I got was backtalk and shouts of hatred, saying I should not have attacked my sister and that I needed more

self-control when she was the one who needed to control herself. I then went and walked the dog to cheer myself up while I started trying to think of what I did that was wrong. I thought about everything, but all I could come up with was that I did the right thing.

the title match

One day, as I got off the bus, I thought to myself about how I hoped no one would notice I was home. I snuck in, the door shutting soundlessly behind me, and stealthily dashed back to my room with such amazing speed that someone sitting in the room wouldn't notice. It takes a lot of practice to achieve such a feat as to be unheard and unseen by all. When I reached my room, my heart felt like it was going to launch out of my chest. I quickly got out my homework in efforts to do it, but as soon as I finished two questions, I saw my doorknob slowly begin to turn. I could feel and almost see my heart beating within my chest. I felt overwhelmed with anticipation that something was going to happen. It swung open and my stepfather appeared in the doorway.

He was a large man with a big gut protruding over his belt and sticking out from under his shirt, and he had an even bigger attitude. He was also strong, stronger than any man I had ever fought before.

"What do you think you're doin', boy?" he said with the smell of alcohol leaking from his mouth.

"What's it to you?" I asked with a smirk. His look was frightening, but it was nothing I had not seen before.

"Alright, have it your way, but you're gonna do your chores one way or another," he said with an dastardly smile.

I had many things to do every day while he didn't even have a job. That angered me, so I unwisely blurted out, "Why don't you get off your fat ass and wash the dishes yourself!" He turned around fast, and I stood up to ready myself for what was coming. He swung his giant tree trunk of an arm at me wildly, throwing a haymaker that could not be easily avoided. I didn't move until the last moment. I ducked with unnatural speed and came back up with one hell of a knock-out punch. But he was still coming at me, so I

dodged a few more punches, and when there was a break in the hitting, I threw three wickedly fast jabs one with the *right* then with the *left* then the *right* again as he was off balance. I shoved him out the door into the hall to continue the fight, but he got on his hands and knees and begged for mercy, apologizing repeatedly. There was blood and tears mixed on his face; his eyes were blackened and his nose broken. His dignity was broken as well, being that this 300-pound grown man was beaten by a 155-pound sixteen-year-old boy. It was useless to beat him more as he had already lost and nothing good would come of it. It was just like the story of David and Goliath.

I shouldn't have shown him mercy. He tried to press charges, but the judge called his case frivolous. I did all of the chores they were too lazy to do, but now my stepdad knows who wears the pants in the family and who holds the title as man of the house.

days with my father

bn

jalapeño peppers

I SHELTERED MYSELF IN A COZY SEAT AT GOLDEN CORRAL. All sorts of items, from macaroni and cheese to barbecue ribs and salad, filled my plate. Across from me sat my father, whose plate looked more appetizing than mine. It was filled with grilled BBQ wings, baked spaghetti, and salad with different dressings. He wore a blue dress shirt with khaki pants and dress shoes, which was weird because he's the only man I know who would come to a buffet with nice clothes on. His skin was as dark as chocolate; it made the whites of his eyes flash as he watched my every move. I noticed the jalapeño peppers on his plate.

"Dad, why do you eat jalapeño peppers?" I asked.

"They're good for you. Do you want to try some?" he asked.

This was the moment I'd been waiting for. A chance to show that fear had no control of me. I thought maybe if he could handle it, then so could I. This was a probably a once-in-a-lifetime chance, so I knew I couldn't back down. I put several of the sliced peppers in my mouth, and felt a burning sensation roast my tongue. My whole entire mouth felt like it was on fire, like someone was ironing my tongue on the highest heat possible. So much water dripped from my face that I couldn't even tell whether it was tears or sweat.

I wanted to tell my dad how bad I felt, but I didn't want him to think I was weak, so I began to eat more. Now, I wasn't exactly sure how he figured me out. Could it be how sweaty my forehead got or how badly I was wheezing?

"No more jalapeños for you!" he said before telling me to get something to drink immediately, and that whenever I eat jalapeño peppers, I should be careful.

I drank the whole cup of fruit punch, and waited for a refill.

"How come you didn't tell me they were too hot?" he asked.

"I didn't want you to think I was weak," I said.

"You didn't seem weak, but you sure didn't seem smart. Next time I ask you to eat something and you don't like it, just don't eat it. No matter how much you want to impress me," he said.

He made himself clear, and we began to eat. After two more plates, we left Golden Corral with our bellies full.

bible study

"Everybody, come downstairs," shouted a voice from below.

It was my father; he had come to have a Bible study with us. I could hear my siblings' footsteps racing downstairs, competing for the best seat. I rolled out of my bed, and began to drag my feet down the steps. Everyone gathered around in the living room with a Bible in their hands.

"Today, we will read from Luke 19," my father intoned.

He began to read about a sinner named Zacchaeus, who climbed up a sycamore tree to get a glance at Jesus coming into Jericho. When Jesus saw the man, he told the man to get down, and then he invited Zacchaeus into his house. My mind was full of violent passion. Why did Jesus invite a man of sin into his home? What made him better than everyone else in the crowd? Possible answers skittered through my head like seagulls. My dad paused and asked each of us to reflect on that scripture. One by one, my siblings and I each talked about how we felt about the scripture.

"Did Jesus know that Zacchaeus was a sinful man?" I asked.

After we were done with our discussion, my dad began reading the rest of the scripture. I had finally come up with an answer for myself. Jesus picked Zacchaeus so that he would regret his thoughtless actions. I was overjoyed that my father had brought us together that day to go over the Bible. My dad is a very holy man. He wants all of his children to have a strong faith in the Lord. So, whenever he comes to visit us, he makes sure that we have a discussion about the Bible. Even though my faith in the Lord isn't as strong as I want it to be, my dad appreciates my participation. He just wants us to grow up believing that through God all things are possible. You just have to pray, and God will take it from there.

Later that day, I daydreamt about being Zacchaeus, climbing up a tree to catch a glimpse at Jesus entering Jericho. He had also chosen me to come into his home, and I was thrilled.

the race

“Are we there yet?” I asked.

“Almost,” exclaimed my father.

We were on our way to Duke Gardens; this was my first time going there, and I was so excited. I’d heard it was beautiful. All I saw was green. The wind blew in my face, and I could smell the freshness of it. As we walked, I noticed a smile on my dad’s face. It wasn’t a wide smile, it was more like a soft grin. A grin that showed a man’s pride, a man who’s gone through more than any usual man could bear.

I noticed that, for the first time, he wasn’t wearing any dress clothes that day. He had on some khaki cargo shorts, sandals, and a short-sleeved shirt that said “Best Dad in the Universe.” To me, that made him seem cocky towards the rest of the dads because everyone kept trying to read what his shirt said. Somebody asked if we could race, so our family split up into three teams. Each person had one partner, and my two older siblings decided to go first. They quickly raced down what seemed like a hill.

“Come on, I’ve seen you guys can run faster than that when you see food,” yelled my father.

They began to speed up and eventually got to the finish line that we had made.

“It was a tie,” my dad said

Next was my father and my brother. They both sped down the hill like road runners. My father was very smart. He saw the hill coming up, so when they reached it, he rolled down, going twice as fast as my brother. That technique eventually won him the game, and I could see a smile growing on his face. Then, finally, it was my and my sister’s turn to race. I sprinted to the finish line as fast as my legs would let me. By the time we reached the hill, I forgot about the technique my father had used, so I continued to run. But my sister hadn’t forgotten. Her body sped down the hill, rolling faster and faster.

The game was over, and I was tired. I relaxed on the ground with my body spread out, as if I were making a snow angel in the grass. Somebody asked if we could have a rematch, and we did. After about three games, we decided it was time to leave because we were all out of breath. On our way home, nobody spoke; we just cooled off in the car.

"So what do you think of Duke Gardens?" asked my dad.

"It was fun," we said. My father's smile returned.

It seemed like whenever we left the house, my dad was happier. He looked proud of the decisions he made in life. He was no longer looking at the bad parts of his life, which made me want to smile.

missing the bus

"I'm late," I yelled.

I ran downstairs and opened the front door. From a distance, I saw a yellow bus coming towards the bus stop. I began running to the bus stop as fast as my legs would let me. I guess I was on her blind side because she began to pull off. I had missed the bus, and had no ride to school, so I went back into my house.

"Mom, can you drop me off at school today? I missed the bus," I explained.

"I've told you countless times not to miss the bus. I don't have enough gas to be dropping you to school everyday," she said.

"Alright," I said with a frown. I thought about calling my dad, but he was all the way in Chapel Hill. I figured I had no choice, and I began to dial his number.

"Hello," he said in a sleepy voice.

"Hey, Dad. I missed the bus. Can you bring me to school?" I asked.

"Alright, I'll be there in about thirty minutes. Be ready when I come," he said. He hung up the phone, and I went downstairs to eat breakfast.

My mom made pancakes and sausages. I was famished. Moments later, my dad came and I got into his car.

"Good morning," I said.

“Good morning. Haven’t your mom and I told you to be on time to your bus?”

“Sorry, I overslept,” I apologized. He took a breath and said, “Prevent anything that will cause trouble because prevention is always better than sorry.”

My dad is a very warmhearted person, and when he gives you a piece of advice, you better take it. He doesn’t like seeing people suffer, so if he finds an opportunity to help someone, he will. He’s suffered a lot, and the last thing he wants in life is for his own flesh and blood to go through the same. When he gives me even the smallest piece of advice, I take it, because at some point in life, I’ll need it.

freshman versus culture



the second life

samantha sanders

I.

TAKING OFF MY SHOES AND RUNNING TO MY BEDROOM, I think to myself, *I have a ton of homework*. I begin to do my homework like it was any other day at home. When I finish, I watch TV on my bed in my pajamas. As I watch the screen, something pops into my head: Today is a special day; it's not on the American calendar, but on the Chinese calendar. I am waiting for my parents to call me out of my bedroom, so they can tell me what day it is. Then my dad calls.

My parents ask me what day it is, and I answer, "It's Chinese New Year," and add, "恭禧發財, 紅包拿來."

Mom says, "You remember."

"Of course, I get money today."

"It's not just about money."

"Does Kevin know that today is Chinese New Year?"

"No, he doesn't. All he needs is that computer and he's satisfied," she answered before calling my brother down to ask him if he knows what day it is. He shrugs his shoulders. Mom tells him and he says, "恭禧發財, 紅包拿來."

"Why do you guys care about money so much?"

Both my brother and I shrug our shoulders, and Mom says, "I need you guys to find your old red envelopes, because I can't find any."

I go into my bedroom and think. Years ago, my brother put his red envelope in a case. I wonder if it's still there. I walk to my bookcase and look for that case. While opening it, I think to myself, *I can't let my parents know that this is Kevin's*. As luck would have it, it's there, the red envelope with a person with pigtails. I give my mom the red envelope, and she says, "You actually kept it."

Trying so hard not to laugh, I say, "Yeah." My brother comes downstairs with a red envelope, too, and I wonder how he found

one; I thought I took his. My mom puts money in the envelopes, and we thank her.

After I get the money, I say, "This isn't my red envelope. It's Kevin's."

"I knew it was mine. I remember putting it in one of my iPod cases," Kevin replies.

"You really enjoy tricking your parents and lying to them," Mom sighs.

"At least I told the truth in the end; all I wanted was the money."

As I say I am sorry, I wonder if my parents will take the money back. Luckily, they don't.

II.

As we enter the empty restaurant, the walls of fish, lobsters, and other creatures of the sea greet us. The waiter talking to us has a deep voice. It's a holiday, so most restaurants aren't open. The Chinese restaurant wasn't, so we had driven around until we saw one that my brother and I wanted to go to. My dad thought it was a great idea. Being eleven years old, this is my first time at an American restaurant.

"Order anything you like for us," says Dad to my brother and me. Looking at the menu, my eyebrows furrow, and so do his.

"I don't know what to order," I say.

"You and your brother are the only ones who know English, so why can't you order?" asks Dad.

"I don't know what you want to eat," my brother butts in.

Mom, looking at the menu, says, "This looks good. We should order this, it has crabs."

When the waiter comes over, he asks, "Have you chosen your appetizer?" My brother and I look at each other, confused. I feel really stupid not knowing what an appetizer is.

He asks, "What is an appetizer?"

When the waiter tells us what it is, we escape into the menu again. I see that most of the things have cheese, which I hate. When the waiter comes back, we order. But when I see the food coming over, I notice a grave mistake. The crabs have cheese all over them,

and it looks like there is some orange soup or fondue. My brother had ordered something similar to mine, except he has some sauces to go with the crabs. My parents, who surprise me, are the only ones who ordered something that I would want to eat: plain crab legs. So my parents and I switch our plates. My mom and I don't eat a lot because I don't like anything on the table and my mom isn't hungry. My brother and my dad are the only ones trying to finish, stuffing food down their throats.

My mom says, "You don't have to eat if you don't like the food."

"The soup tastes bad," says Dad.

"I can't finish it," adds my brother.

When the waiter comes back with the check, I feel relieved. I can go home and forget this day. Dad pays the bill, and we get in the car. My mom says what we are all thinking: "We're not used to American food. We are better off eating Chinese food." Everyone agrees.

III.

Driving on the highway, I ask my dad, "Are we there yet?"

"Almost there, wait a couple more minutes," he responds.

Looking at the complicated highway, at how cars come right to left and through the wavy bridge in the middle, I wonder how people don't get into more accidents.

As we arrive at the supermarket, we see a damaged yellow awning and rails that are there so that people can't take the carts outside to their cars. The inside is so small that people have to cram through in order to pass. My dad tells us to buy whatever we like, but as we pass along the aisles of food, we find nothing we want to eat. We just keep on showing food to our parents and asking what it is because it looks interesting. When my dad comes back, the cart is full. My mom starts to look over his choices. Next, we come to the area where they sell cooked food. We've been there before, and the buns are good. My dad buys a boxful of them. Then we buy other food, like chicken and beef, that we can eat on the road.

When we go outside with our cart, we aren't used to keeping the cart in a gate. We bought a lot of stuff, so we have to go back

and forth to the cart. Dad says, “Why do they have to put up a gate? So we can’t take the cart? We don’t have this back at home.”

Mom says, “It’s because they think people will steal the carts.”

Finally reaching home, I figure out we went to Maryland just for food.

IV.

Walking over to the colorless membership counter at Costco, looking in every direction, I see nothing that pops out except the colors: red, white, and gray. My parents and I had to get a new card. While asking the lady for a business membership card, my dad butts in, “Ask her if you can use the executive membership card for business.”

Frustrated, I say, “It doesn’t say you can.”

My dad’s brows furrow. “Will it hurt to ask?” My mom asks the clerk about executive business membership card and she says yes.

My mom, with a look in her eyes, says, “Is it that hard to ask?”

Maybe to you it is easy, but to me it is harder than you can imagine, I think. The clerk lady gives us the paper to fill out. Then my parents’ friends come over to say hi and to get a card, too. Dad talks to them while mom and I fill out the information. I touch Dad with the pen and say, “Sign here on the line.” Dad signs there, and I give the lady the paper. She pulls out her pen and fills out the other items for us. Then she hands me a brochure and asks me to tell my parents what’s on it, like she knows I am the translator. She tells me to tell my parents to take their picture. After they get their picture taken, it takes us like a minute to get our card. My parents say goodbye to their friends, and we say thank you to the clerk. *Try to speak up and conquer your fears, even if you are shy. If Mom can do it, so can you*, I tell myself.

V.

As I put the disc in the DVD player, I wonder if there are any Chinese subtitles in this movie. The movie was filmed in English,

but it is a martial arts movie with Jet Li. Looking through the menu, I am relieved that there are actually Chinese subtitles. When I tell my parents, they say, "That's actually the first time we've ever seen Chinese subtitles on a movie." I hit play, and, seeing the Mandarin, a relieved sigh escapes my lips.

This time, I don't have to translate the words, and I don't have to see my parents' confused faces. Laughing with them and talking about the movie makes me feel happy.

I usually have to translate almost everything for my parents, and I end up confused myself if I don't know how to say a certain word in Mandarin. It's an important responsibility that they depend on me for, but it's also a burden.

I have figured out that I have a pretty complicated life. Actually, I have two: one life is at school where I can talk to people without feeling the need to explain thoroughly. The other is at home where I learn about my culture and my memories bit by bit without even realizing it.

I wish I could find more movies with Chinese subtitles so that I could have more opportunities to bond with my parents. As the credits roll through, I feel glad. It might be complicated, but it's worth it, this second life.

good morning, chile!

constanza palacios bustamante

THE CLOUDS COVERED THE SUN, the cold breeze rushed in from the open window, the soft sound of the engine, almost imperceptible, resonated around the loud horns of other cars with angry people inside them—people trying to get to their work on time, even though they knew it was impossible—and we were stuck at a red light on our way to Vivi's house.

Out the window, I saw houses of all colors, tall buildings, and millions of people walking on the street on their way to work. It was weird to see all that after a year of living in Durham, where instead of walking to work people drove and the houses were all the same color.

It took me a while to get used to it and to realize that I wasn't dreaming. I was in Chile again.

I saw flags, tons of flags, Chilean flags. In eighteen more days it would be the independence day of Chile or, as we call it, *Las fiestas Patrias*.

Las fiestas Patrias is the perfect day to spend with your family. We used to make BBQ (*hacer un asado*), eat *empanadas de pino*, dance the *cueca*, our national dance, and go to *Fondas*, a place that has a lot of restaurants, to play the national games. One of them, for example, was *La Rayuela*.

I missed living in Chile. I asked my mom if she missed living in Chile, too. She said no.

"Why?" I asked her. She said because she felt that living in Durham was easier than living in Chile.

I didn't agree with that; I was happy to be back.

Then, I started to think about July of last year. Before, I had lived here, and now I was just visiting. I was just a tourist.

"You are kidding me, right?" I had asked my mom, holding my breath. "We're moving to where?"

"The USA, Connie. We are going to live in the USA. Isn't that great?" she had said with a smile on her face. I was about to say,

"How is that great?" I mean, I would lose all my friends, I didn't know how to speak English, and it was the middle of the school year. But I just nodded and smiled, pretending (and I hated to pretend) to be happy. I just wanted to make her happy.

"Just a tourist," I said aloud.

hi again

I walked as fast as I could. I was late. I was supposed to be there at 4:00 p.m., and it was already 4:10.

I kept walking until I saw my old school. It had not changed much; the stupid light blue that I hated so much, for no reason, was still there. The posters were different, of course, but they were still there, as I remembered.

When I finally got there, I looked around until someone, who I soon found to be Mara, jumped on me and hugged me so tight that I could barely breathe.

When she let me go, another friend did the same thing, and that repeated over and over again.

Soon we started to talk about Durham. I told them that it was full of trees and that people didn't walk. "Streets like deserts," I said, and we spoke about New York. This time I told them that it was like Santiago, full of buildings and busy people, but "they are not just 'tall buildings,' they are skyscrapers, like seventy stories, and there are not just a lot of busy people, there are millions of busy people." I told them about the Statue of Liberty; they were amazed. After that, I gave them the presents that I had bought for them in the states.

I was hanging out with my friends for almost twenty minutes. I had a smile on my face that nobody could break. I looked at the time. It was 4:43 p.m.. Two more minutes wouldn't hurt anybody. Javiera said something really funny about her mom, who got mad at her for being late for dinner, and all my friends and I laughed. I remembered my mom giving me a long speech about being on time, and I also remembered her telling me to be at *La Estacion La Moneda* at 5:00 p.m.. I got into a panic and looked at the time.

4:50!

"Girls, I have to go right now. I will come tomorrow. See you at four. Bye!" And then I rushed to the bus station.

weekend

Gosh! Late again! I was supposed to have been there at 4:00 p.m. It was 4:50! "Keep running, Connie," I said to myself. "Keep running." I saw people staring at me, probably thinking, "What the heck is going on here?" but I just kept running as fast as I could.

When I finally got there, someone slapped me. I didn't even have to look at that person to realize that it was Danae, curiously one of my best friends. I didn't like people hitting or slapping me every time I got somewhere, but she actually has a lot more positive things than negatives. For example, she gives me advice every time I need it and also understands me more than any other person, including my mom. So when I got there, after the "incident" and also after I had slapped Danae back, I asked the typical question.

"Are you gonna slap me every time I get somewhere and you are already there?"

"Yep," she said. Then I realized that Danae was not the only person there. I looked around and saw Javilu jumping on me, yes, jumping on me. After a while, I realized she was hugging me, and what a hug! She was hugging me for, like, ten minutes, saying how much she had missed me.

"Umm, Javilu, I saw you yesterday," I said.

"Yes, but I just missed you so much!" Javilu said and hugged as hard as she could. It was like she was squeezing a lemon, but in this case, I was the lemon.

"Okay! I get it! Now get off of me!" I yelled. "Girls, help me!"

It was not until after Danae punched Javilu in the arm that I could move as far away as I could and ask, "Catalina, did you give her chocolate again?"

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, but she was, like, crazy, I thought she was gonna hit me or, even worse, kill me!" said Catalina.

"Okay, but she almost killed *me*!" I said, and then hugged her, saying, "I missed you so much." I repeated the action with Belen, another friend, and after that, we did our secret handshake.

"Anais! Oh my . . ." I could not finish what I was saying because she hugged me, and obviously, I hugged her back; plus her almost-blond hair was on my mouth (ew, right?), and I could not breathe. We stayed like that for five long minutes.

"I missed you so much," I said.

And this time she was the one saying, "Um, Connie, I saw you yesterday."

"I know, I know." There was an awkward silence, which I broke to say, "So, how was school?"

"Really?" said Belen. "We haven't seen each other for a whole year, and yesterday we saw you for like fifteen minutes, and the first thing you ask is 'How was school?'" she said with an angry tone. "I would slap you right now, but I have not seen you for a while, and I don't want to leave a bad impression."

"So what should we talk about? . . . Wait! Where is that beautiful person whose name is Mara?" I asked.

"Um, she is not here. She is . . . not . . . coming," said Anais slowly. For a moment I thought that grandma was talking because she always talked slowly, but then I realised that Anais expected my reaction.

"What? She's not coming? Are you kidding me?" I asked, at the same time promising myself to punch Mara in the arm so hard she would never leave me waiting again in her life.

"No, no, you misunderstood. She is coming, but we have to pick her up," said Anais, trying to calm me down, but what she didn't know was that she was making things worse.

"Oh, really? Now we have to pick up Princess Mara because she can't walk two blocks?" I said, and Anais opened her mouth like she was going to say something, but then, I guess, she realized she would make it worse.

"Hey, guys, I have to leave. My mom just called me. She found out." Now it was Belen talking.

"Found out what?" Anais and I said at the same time.

"That I'm not at home, duh."

"Uh, Belen? Did you get into trouble again?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Hell, yeah!" she said energetically. Then she hugged me for a long time and said, "I'm gonna miss you, you know, and all that

stuff that friends do when their friends are not there. Take care, love you, bye guys! See you in a year, Connie!" And then she crossed the street, and I watched her until I couldn't see her anymore.

"What now?" Catalina asked in a boring tone.

"Um, I guess we will have to wait until my grandpa comes to pick me up," said Danae. "His car is red, um, like that one right there," she said as she pointed to the street.

"Danae, do you realize that there are, like, five red cars right there?" said Catalina.

"Oh yes, my bad, I'm sorry, you see that red car that is in the front?" We all nodded. "Well, like that one."

"Okay, can we walk and see if there is some place where we can buy something to eat? I'm starving," Javilu said. We all looked at her because she had not talked since Danae punched her. We all nodded.

"Okay," I replied, "and I'm sure Danae has a lot of money, and she will buy us ice cream,"

"Yay!" cheered Catalina, Anaïs, and Javilu at the same time.

"No, there is no way I will buy you all ice cream! I only have enough money for one," she said.

"Deal, we will share it," I reasoned, and I heard an 'ew' that I knew came from Catalina, but I just went on like I had not heard it.

So we walked, passing my old school, until we found an ice cream shop. There was a boy that kept looking in my direction. I thought he was looking at me, but then I realized he was looking at my Super Elmo sweater.

Danae bought an ice cream, but when the person who was in charge gave her the ice cream, Danae's grandpa had arrived, which meant that we didn't have the opportunity to try it, and, of course, we had to say goodbye. I hugged her and said, "I'm really going to miss you. I love you tons. Take care." Then she got into the car, and they left.

Someone touched my shoulder. It was Anaïs. "We have to go, it's like 6:00 p.m. and my mom told me she was supposed to be there at 7:30."

"Yeah, um, Connie, we have to go. It is getting dark, sorry. We love you, you know it," said Javilu, and then she and Catalina hugged me.

"I love you, too," I muttered, and then they started to walk away.

Anais and I were the only ones left. We started to walk to her grandma's house, which was on a little street full of colorful houses. I really liked it there. When we got in, I said hi to Diego, Anais' cousin, and Natalia, her sister. Then we all sat down in the dark living room, talking about the soccer game that Chile had lost that day, until it was 7:25 p.m. and Eliana, Anais' mom, knocked on the door. We said goodbye to Diego, put our backpacks on, and left for Mara's house.

When we got there, I was yelling and talking like a drunk person because I wanted to embarrass her. "Mara! Mara! Where are you?" I yelled from outside in my best drunken voice.

Mara came out with her backpack on. Eliana and her mom talked for a while about silly things, and then when Mara's mom closed the door, Mara punched me in my arm, but it did not hurt.

"*Tonta*,¹" she said, and, of course, I punched her back as hard as I could, as I had promised myself before. She shouted, as if someone was torturing her.

"What was that for?" she asked ten minutes later,

"*Por dejarme plantada*,"² I explained.

It occurred to us that Anais's house was in Maipu, which is far away from where we were, and that we had to take a bus, and then a subway, and another bus, because Anais's car needed maintenance.

When we arrived at Anais's house, her dad was waiting for us with pizza and soda; each of us took two slices of pizza and a can of soda and went upstairs.

Once we were there, we just laughed for no reason, and, when we stopped, we started again. As we laughed, we ate. I dropped my soda on the carpet, and my plate with my two slices of pizza on it (I ate it anyway), and I also dropped Anais's soda, and I think Mara's too. Any moment we stopped eating, we would laugh until Eliana came.

"Hey *monos*,³ help me bring out Anais's old bed, so you two—" she pointed to me and Mara "—have somewhere to sleep."

We all helped her carry the bed. When all was settled, she said goodnight and closed the door behind her.

1 Dummy

2 For ditching me

3 monkeys

We were getting ready for bed when I asked Mara if we were going to watch the movie.

"Yes!" she said.

"No," said Anais, who hated the movie.

"Sorry, Anais, but we are two against one."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mara.

"Anais, could you please press the play button?" I asked her gently.

"No!"

"Please?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm sleepy and can't move."

"C'mon."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm sleeping!"

"You are not sleeping and you know it!"

"Connie, I'm tired, I won't press the play button, so shut up!"

"*Te va a pesar, weona*,⁴" I said. Mara started laughing. I did, too. Anais rolled her eyes and started to 'sleep.'

"Okay, I will do it," said Mara, after around twenty minutes of laughing, and she stood up, pressed the play button, and we started to watch the movie.

When it ended, I turned on the lights and woke up Anais, who was 'sleeping.' I said, "We are going to put on make-up." They, of course, started to complain. "Stop it, it is not that kind of make-up. Anais you are gonna be a mime and you, Mara, are gonna be a doll."

"What about you?" pondered Mara,

"I'm gonna be . . . um, I don't know."

"Okay?" said Anais.

"Let's do it!" We started to put on make-up. Mara ended up like a diabolic doll, Anais like a ghost, and me, I put on some eyeliner and lipgloss, nothing extravagant.

4 It will pass, lazy.

"Now what?" asked Mara.

"Hey, don't look at me. I don't know," I said. "Wait, we can play Truth or Dare."

"I dare you to bring soda to all of us."

"Deal," I said, then went downstairs and brought up a big bottle of Coke.

"What? You brought the *whole* bottle?" she said.

"Just shut up and drink the Coke," I said.

"Yep," said Mara, and we started to drink Coke. I spilled some on the carpet.

* * *

Saturday, 8:00 a.m.

"Hey, wake up! You have ten minutes to be ready!" said a male voice that came from somewhere. It was Anais's dad.

Thirty minutes later, we started waking up. Well, not me. I was already in the shower. When I came out, Mara and Anais were just waking up, and, of course, I helped them. I threw chips at Mara and poured some water on Anais's face. They were mad at me for five seconds, but they started laughing really loudly.

Ten minutes later, Mara and I were ready, and Anais was taking a shower.

It took us an hour to get ready, and when we went downstairs, Anais' father, Claudio, was waiting for us. His face was red.

"Did you know that we have to take three buses to get there?" he snapped.

"Nope, sorry," I said.

"Yeah, sorry, Dad," said Anais.

When we got "there" (some place, we didn't know until we arrived), we found out it was *el hipodromo*⁵, with horses and all that. There were *a lot* of people, like everyone in the city had decided that Saturday was a great day to go to *el hipodromo* to spend time with family. We met with one of Anais's father's friends, who was an old, fat man. Hungry, we decided to make *un asado*⁶.

5 the hippodrome, or arena

6 a BBQ.

After the *asado*, (which, by the way, was a *total* disaster, because the meat was overcooked and the weather wasn't cooperating), Anais, Mara, and I found ourselves with nothing to do, so we went to explore the place. There was nothing interesting, just people, little kids, and horses. There was this thing that was like a circle that you could sit on with your friends and get some speed by pushing with your feet, and the entire world started to spinning around us.

* * *

Sunday, 11:00 a.m.

"Oh *mierda*,"⁷ I said when I woke up and saw the time on my iPod. I was supposed to be at *La Estacion Santa Ana* at 12:30, and it took two hours to get there from Anais's house. I tried to get up, but my head hurt, as if someone had hit me with a metal baseball bat. Suddenly I remembered, after the whole *hipodromo* thing, we came back to Anais's house and Mara pulled my hair. *I knew that Mara had something to do with this*, I said to myself, because the others were sleeping. I looked at the time again. 11:30! "Mara, Anais, wake up!"

"I'm not going," said Anais. I didn't say anything because, sooner or later, she was going to regret it. I looked at Mara.

She was still sleeping, so I took revenge to her right ear. "Wake up!"

She jolted upright, alarmed, and I laughed.

1:00 p.m., and we were almost there. I felt sad and anxious because my mom was probably going to blow her stack for us being thirty minutes late.

1:10 p.m., and my mom stood there with an angry look on her face. When she saw me with Anais's mom, Eliana, and Mara, her expression changed. "See? She is not mad!" said Eliana. She had not noticed the change. It seemed like I was the only one that noticed.

7 Oh shit.

calama

"To the national airport, please," said my mom to the driver of the taxi as it pulled away from the curb.

"Are you excited?" I asked.

"Yeah, kind of. I mean, I am, but . . . never mind." We remained in silence the rest of the way.

Once we got there, my mom paid the driver and then walked into the airport. We checked in our bags, went to the door, and passed through the metal detector. Once we were ready, we kept walking in stiff silence until we found the door. We sat down and waited.

"*Pasajeros con destino a Calama, asientos del uno al quince por favor abordar,*⁸" announced a robotic voice.

"It's our turn. Connie, we have the fourteens," said my mom.

It was a small plane, but I didn't care. It was okay for me. We sat down in our seats, and waited. Ten minutes later, my mom was asleep.

Four hours later—it was seven a.m.—we got off the plane. It was cold. Very cold.

"Miguel!" I cried and ran to hug my cousin, who was so tall and skinny he reminded me of a noodle. We all walked to the car, and five minutes later, we were on our way to my uncle's house.

"Aunt!" I said.

"Connie, *mi amorcito*,⁹" she gushed. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Kind of sleepy, but okay. And you?" I asked.

"I'm okay."

"Where's Javiera?" I asked about my cousin, who I think of as a sister.

"She's upstairs."

"Okay." I went upstairs and into her room, but she was not there.

I knocked on the door to the bathroom, but nobody answered. I knocked again. "Stop it, Marco," said a voice from inside the bathroom. I knocked again. "Okay, okay." She opened the door and saw me.

I hugged her. "I missed you, *tonta*," I said.

8 Passengers traveling to Calama seated in rows one through fifteen, please board now.

9 my sweet love.

bye-bye, chile

And, suddenly, we were back, nervously hanging in the painful airport. There, again, were the scary people wherever you looked, some eating, others saying goodbye. We walked like prisoners to the electric chair, through that jungle, and there it was. The door. Once we walked through that door, we found ourselves in a room full of sad people, who passed through police.

We waited for our turn to pass through the police, and, when it was our turn, my mom gave him our passports and a paper that said that my father allowed my mom to take me out of the country. The policeman just drew two lines, and that was it. We kept walking like convicts to the place where you had to take off your shoes, empty your pockets, and then walk through a metal-detector. Then you were free to go to wait for your flight or buy some food if you were hungry. We sat down and waited.

My mom's cellphone started to ring. It was my uncle. He wanted to say good luck. My mother talked to him until it was time to get on the plane. There we were. My mom and I were on the plane, and it was time to go. When the plane started to move, I started to cry rivers. My mother, of course, tried to console me, but it just made me cry more. Soon I understood that crying was useless, so I stopped, and we were flying.

the awkward change: a romanian in america

paula marchis

my past life

IN ROMANIA, MOST PEOPLE LIVE IN A TEN-STORY APARTMENT BUILDINGS. I lived on the fourth floor, just like my best friend Cristina in the building across from me. She is the loud but quiet type, with fair blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She is sometimes shy, unless she is around her family and friends. I can talk to her about anything and have known her since I was four years old in kindergarten. We have been best friends ever since. We were always together. Some of the other girls even got jealous that we got along so well.

My cousin lived in Romania, too. I treated him like my brother considering he was an only child like me. We didn't have anybody else we to fight with, so we fought with each other. He is a tall, dark-haired boy five years older than me. When I was younger, I made him do everything for me. I made him wait on me like I was a princess. He knew what was going on, but he still wanted me to feel special.

old school

It wasn't considered large, but it was the right size for me. It took me five minutes to walk to and from school. Cristina used to wait for me every day so we could walk to school together. Most of the time I was late, so she would leave without me.

School started at eight o' clock in the morning and didn't end till around noon. We had classes every day and none of mine were with Cristina. I also took Judo, a type of karate, at school rather than gym. Girls and boys were separated, so when boys had Judo, girls got out of school at ten a.m. We had homework almost every-day, but it was always something easy.

During school, we had ten minute breaks outside. The sun shone bright as we played basketball; we forgot about school for ten short minutes a day. I wished I could forget about my English teacher; I hated her because I didn't learn any English, plus she always said that I didn't return a book to her.

After school, my friends and I always went outside to hang out. We used to ride our bikes through the puddles and play volleyball, even though we didn't know how. We always found something to do. When the rain poured, we would hang out in our building lobby and play with dolls. We went on walks in the park and ate pizzas until it seemed like we were never going back home.

It was really hard for me to get used to the idea that I would be moving to another country. When my parents told me, I didn't know what to say; my heart did a somersault then dropped into the pit of my stomach. The feeling was strange and unforgettable.

no sleep

The airport was really weird because we didn't know any English. When we finally made it to the correct terminal, boarding for our trip had already begun. The first plane ride wasn't very long—only about an hour. But since we had never flown before, I thought it would never end. The sandwich they gave me was okay, good enough to settle me until we stopped in London. I dare not talk about the airport there. My family and I went to the bathroom and, in the blink of an eye, we lost our group. Running around the airport was a nightmare brought to life. We didn't know where to go, and, on top of that, our carry-ons were too large. My dad kept pushing the luggage down until we finally got it to fit in the luggage measure.

When we finally got on the plane, I relaxed and took in my surroundings. The plane was large and cold. I was freezing even in my large coat, under a blanket. I couldn't sleep because daylight peeked through the window. The food tasted like week-old Chinese takeout. The plane ride ended after a long fourteen hours.

The day we arrived was the hottest of the summer: one hundred degrees and climbing. As we stepped outside, a heat wave hit

us and I felt like I was melting. In that moment, I realized that we were not in Romania anymore.

what is it going to be like?

All I saw were trees and no mountains or snow. Just trees. Miles of them. It was so different. The ride home from the airport, I didn't know what was happening or where I was going.

I saw all different races of people on the streets, and that was something no one can say in my country. I didn't know how I should talk or act to make friends. It felt like I was on a different planet. I was actually scared but I wouldn't show it—I was too strong for that. Even the cars were different. I had to get used to the idea that I would have to ride the bus to and from school. I didn't know how that was going to go because in Romania I walked.

In the grocery store, you didn't find the same things you'd find back home. We didn't like the food because we weren't used to it, though one thing that really surprised me was how the people in the neighborhood always waved at you, even if they had no idea who you were. In Romania, if you waved at someone random, they would think you were crazy. Back home, the streets were really crazy and hectic, but in Durham, the streets were calmer and quieter. I really was in Durham, North Carolina.

something different

On my first day of school, I had tears in my eyes. I didn't know English at all. When we got there, I started crying because I didn't want my parents to leave me there all scared and alone. My first friend's name was Melanie. She started showing me around the school. It was a challenge for me to stop myself from crying because I just wanted to go home.

My first class was okay. The teacher was nice, but I couldn't understand a word she said. I looked at her like I was staring at the stars. When she would come talk to me, I would say, "I don't understand what you are saying." Every time she told us to do

something, I would look at the other kids to see what they were doing. It wasn't easy for me.

A couple of hours later, we had lunch. I didn't even know what my number was, what to eat, or what the lunch lady was saying. I was on a completely different planet. I sat with my class, and my friends were kind enough to teach me some English. I didn't feel alone anymore. I figured that maybe this place wasn't so different at all.

going into a different place

rené sanabria

I HEARD THE PHONE RINGING. I rushed to it and answered.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” said my aunt, “let me talk to your mom.”

I ran to the living room, where my mom was sitting, and gave her the phone. I sat beside her and started to watch TV.

I overheard her talking about selling something, but I didn’t pay much attention to it since I thought it was probably something she owned that wasn’t mine. But eventually, she said it was my bed and started to give my aunt a price for it. *Where am I going to sleep?* I thought. *Why is my mom selling my bed? Is she giving me away to my aunt or, even worse, to a stranger?* I looked at her with confusion, totally ignoring the TV.

I patiently waited until she hung up the phone, but I was so worried and scared that those minutes she talked to my aunt on the phone felt like hours. Finally she hung up the phone, and I asked her, “Why are you selling my bed?” She ignored the question and didn’t tell me. Later that week, she told me we were going to leave El Salvador to go to the United States.

* * *

She started crying as she gave me the last hug. My aunt knew I would be gone for a very long time; I was her only nephew, and she didn’t have kids, so she considered me like her son. I started walking towards the airplane with my family. I felt both excited and sad because I wanted to explore a new world, but, at the same time, I didn’t want to leave behind everyone I knew. When I sat on the airplane, I waited and waited until it finally started to fly. It was like going in a car really fast, and then everything went smooth. At that moment, I knew it was the last time I would be in El Salvador.

I looked out the window and started to see everything getting smaller and smaller; I felt like I was looking at a map. I also noticed how we started going above the clouds, so we started seeing clouds below us. When you're in an airplane, it feels like you're just sitting down in a chair, and it's smoother than riding in a car.

When we landed, we felt the wheels of the plane hit the concrete, and I knew I was in a whole different place now.

* * *

"We start school next week," my cousin Kery said as we sat by the pool.

I was going to be the new kid, and everybody spoke English except for me. I remembered how we had gone to the school's open house, when I saw a really big school that was very different from my school in El Salvador. I was used to eating outside school, not inside the school grounds, and the whole system of education seemed really different.

The water was a little cold, but it felt good on a hot summer's day. I dove to the bottom of the pool, thinking that my life was going to change forever in the next week.

* * *

"What are they saying?" I asked my friend Eddy, a Hispanic classmate of mine who wore his hair combed to the back and had brown skin and yellowish eyes. The teacher had assigned him to translate for me. I sat in my seat around people who looked at me straight in the eyes and said things to me that I couldn't understand. I didn't know if what they said was good or bad, so I just smiled and waved at them. On the positive side, I thought it was good for me to be around different types of people: people who tried really hard to impress others around them by acting in a bad way, dressing in really loose clothes, and writing on their arms and hands with Sharpies, pretending they were tattoos; as well as other people who tried to impress the teachers and other authorities by acting with good manners and following everything the teacher said, exactly the way the teacher said it.

Eddy explained the rules of the classroom to me. He also explained the directions I had to follow every day at school. He was the only person who I could talk to because he was the only person I could comprehend.

I hated when he was absent. I sat in class with nobody to talk to, unable to understand anything. I kept thinking to myself, *What am I doing here in this stupid school?* I felt like I didn't belong.

However, I hung on, and after six months of me trying to learn English by watching movies with subtitles in Spanish and people talking in English, I learned. I was able to understand my teachers a little bit better and was able to communicate to other classmates. After that, I never again had to ask my friend Eddy what they were saying.

across the blue and black sea

luna lawliet

airplanes, little brothers, and chewed-up pen caps

I STARED OUT THE WINDOW OF THE CAR SLEEPILY as we pulled out of our driveway. It was about 8:15 a.m., and I was practically dead on my feet when my alarm rang at 7:45. I leaned my head on my palms. My reflection stared back at me, my messy brown hair spilling out from my sloppy ponytail. I unsuccessfully tried to smooth the frizzy curls sprouting from the top of my head. The car sped along the highway, cutting through the morning traffic as easily as slicing butter.

We were almost at the airport. *I should be more excited*, I thought. Not everyone gets to travel to a different country and miss out on three days of school. Sadly though, traveling had its costs, like the upcoming hours of doom on the plane ride. It would last about ten hours, not to mention the four hours of customs and luggage check-in. I glumly turned from my window to stare at my happy-go-lucky brother, who was anxiously bouncing up and down in his seat.

“Luna! We’re almost there! We’re almost there!” he chanted.

“Whoop dee do,” I responded in my best ‘I don’t care’ voice.

“Don’t be such a party pooper!”

“Then stop shouting the same stupid words over and over again!”

“Children!” my mom shouted as she turned around in the passenger seat to face us.

Her hard gray-green eyes scanned us from head to toe. I sat stock still in my chair. My brother imitated me, sitting perfectly straight in his seat.

“I know I don’t hear fighting back here, do I?”

My brother and I locked eyes for a moment, then lied in unison, “No!”

My mom glared at us some more, easily breaking through the web of lies my brother and I had tried so hard to construct. Finally, she turned back to the front. I let go of a breath I had not realized

I had been holding. My mom is a great person, don't get me wrong, but she can be scary when provoked, especially on a long trip like this. A stressed out mom is not a happy one. I returned to staring out the window, trying hard to avoid my brother's gaze. I tapped my fingers nervously against my leg and bit my lip. A sign for the Raleigh-Durham Airport flashed by, and I figured there were about five more minutes before I lost my cool. Airports did that to me.

The car pulled through the parking lot of the airport, and I switched my nervous chewing to my fingernails as we came to a halt. I helped my dad lift the heavy suitcases from the trunk, picking up the handle on mine, and walked with my family toward the long, boring, stressful hours to come. I thought for a minute, then removed my chewed forefinger from my mouth and replaced it with the cap of my pen. Now I wouldn't damage myself.

I stuck the lidless pen into my pocket and continued to trudge along with my family. About two hours later, I was sitting in one of the plastic chairs that was attached to the other identical seats. My dark blue backpack was sitting in my lap, filled to the brim with entertainment. I felt something fluttering in my chest, as there were only twenty minutes to go before we boarded. My brother sat next to me while my parents were getting food. He poked me in the arm.

"Luna, I'm bored," he said.

"Aren't we all, Tai?" I replied.

"Play with me!"

"No."

"Please?"

"Not gonna happen."

"I'll tell Mom!"

"Tell her what, exactly?"

My brother stared into my eyes with confusion. He didn't understand that it wasn't a crime if you did not play with your sibling. He furrowed his brow, and then his face lit up.

"I won't bug you on the plane!" he said persuasively.

"Deal."

I reached into my bag, pulled out a shiny blue rectangle, and flipped up the screen. My brother excitedly pulled out his Nintendo DS and turned it on.

"Mario Kart?" I questioned, switching on my own DS.

My brother nodded, and we began the game. I took my mind off the awaiting airplane ride and the fluttering in my stomach and focused on the screen of my video game.

looking down on the world

“Why are you sitting next to me?!”

“Cause who else is gonna play with me?”

“You said you wouldn’t bug me on the plane!”

He was silent.

Great. Our parents reclined in their chairs behind us, obviously enjoying that they didn’t have to sit next to Tai.

“Turn it off,” I advised. Tai still was playing Mario Kart, except he was racing by himself.

“We are not gonna take off for at least another ten minutes,” he grumbled.

“I’m going to separate you two if you keep bickering,” I heard my mom inform us from behind. The intercom above informed us to “please look to the hallway.” I looked past my brother into the hall to the flight attendants’ safety lecture, and then to a magazine that I pulled from my bag. I shoved another stick of gum in my mouth and chewed nervously. About ten minutes later, it was time to take off. I chewed on my gum more, as the plane picked up speed and took off, shooting into the sky. I quickly looked out the window. As much as it terrified me to be thousands of miles in the sky in a big metal bird, the sky itself was beautiful. I looked down on the minuscule streets and houses and wondered about how marvelous everything was, seeing the ground get smaller and smaller until the pearly white clouds shielded the sight from my eyes altogether.

I focused on a particular cloud and watched it glide by, relaxing slightly as the clouds calmed my nerves.

jet lag

The Belgium Airport was clean and bright compared to the old RDU Airport we had just left. The windows were free of cobwebs

and grime and let the bright morning sunshine fall into the rooms. We had made it! My family and I trudged along the hallways, bypassing small shops and gates to other flights as we headed to the rental car area.

My dad waited in a relatively short line in front of a big sign with the words “Euro Car” printed in bold yellow letters. My dad signed a bunch of stuff and we were on our way to the baggage claim. I rubbed at my eyes sleepily as we walked over to conveyor belt C4. The time change had been rough on me. The sun outside the window meant that it was around 11:00 a.m., but my inner clock said 7:00 p.m. I hadn’t slept on the plane at all.

It seemed like ages before we were in the rental car and driving off to my grandparents’ house. Truth be told, I was not as excited to see them as I should have been. I didn’t see them very often, and when I did, it was brief. I just didn’t have a very strong relationship with them. I still loved them, of course, and I will always love them. I leaned my head against the door and dozed off, thinking, *At least you have Tai with you . . . although that can be either a good thing or a bad thing. Hopefully a good thing . . .*

“Luna, wake up, we’re here!” Tai screamed in my ear.

“Definitely a bad thing,” I mumbled, sitting up.

My grandparents had a quaint house with a potted plant outside the door. We rang the doorbell, and my grandfather opened the door. He had white hair and wore a sweater. His huge, thick glasses were balanced on his nose. He had kind eyes behind the spectacles, just like my father. My grandma came in, wearing a pink blouse and white pants. Her eyes were kind as well, and she hugged me like my grandpa did. I smiled to myself.

“Hi Boma and Bompa,” my brother and I sang like a choir. We had practiced in the plane. Boma and Bompa meant grandma and grandpa in Flemish. After my parents greeted them, my brother and I raced up the small flight of stairs tucked away in the corner of the house. At the top, we sprinted to the guest room past Boma and Bompa’s room and the airplane room, as my brother and I called it. We jumped into the room and I leapt from the doorway to the small cot positioned next to the big king-sized bed. My brother jumped on me and we began wrestling over who should have the cot.

tranquility

Small, brick buildings, some business and other residential, lined the sides of the road. A long line of asphalt split into branches up ahead. One car after another sped by. The breeze caught my hair, letting the loose tendrils blow back behind my ears. The flower boxes that lined most of the second story buildings carried the fragrance of roses to my nose.

As I walked ahead of my family and through the village, many noises swept over me—not cars or buses, but bicycle tires squeaking on the sidewalk. I stepped to the side, allowing them to pass and nodded my head in greeting before the biker could speed ahead. I kept walking, letting my fingers glide over a bike rack.

That's when the first drop of rain fell. It hit my cheek and rolled down to my chin. It was the first time that I glanced up to the sky and noticed the dark clouds fully prepared to release their watery wrath. My sense of tranquility vanished as the downpour of rain started to drench me. I began running, spying an open door of a small business selling shoes. The slap of shoes hitting the ground alerted me to my brother's presence behind me. He quickly joined me in the front as we sprinted to the open door.

I stopped for breath, putting my hands on my knees. A cramp formed in my side but I didn't care. I stood up and jogged towards the door. My brother had already leapt inside, my parents closing in behind me. The cold rain was still coming down in sheets. I stumbled forward into the small store. It felt as though the AC was blasting on my cold, wet body. Only in Belgium could the weather act like this. My parents rushed in, breathing heavily as they slumped against the wall. I sighed, hearing the rain drum against the windows. I pressed my wet forehead against the cool glass, watching my breath fog up before me. This little village in Belgium was a place where the rain could turn on and off as easily as you would flick a light switch.

The rain let up a little bit after about two minutes, so we decided to make a run for the grocery store. My brother and I braced ourselves in an imitation of two professional runners preparing to sprint to the finish line.

"Ready!" I shouted.

“Set!” my brother added.

“Go!” we said in unison as we sprinted down the wet sidewalk.

Our shoes splashed through three-inch-deep puddles. The water cascaded upward, drenching our legs. I shuddered in the chill of the evening but continued my run. The drops of rain stung my eyes. The water was now sloshing over my sneakers again. I stopped my frantic run and wiped at my face. My brother was behind me, obviously worn out. I looked ahead and saw the lights of the small grocery store. I trudged forward; with each step the store came closer in my vision. The flowers that lined the outside of the store were drooping, leaning down to kiss the soil in their pots. I pushed through the two thick pieces of clear plastic into the warm and dry store. Friendly faces greeted me and soon, the rest of the family was there. We all went upstairs to Michael’s house, where Michael and I danced to our favorite music and talked as well as we could. We left later that day with some produce and upturned mouths. As the sun came out from behind the clouds, I felt happiness wash over me again.

victory and disappointment

I peered down the barrel of the short range BB gun and aimed it at the four-inch long plastic lined up on the table in front of me. The gun began to dig into my fingers as I aimed. My finger slid to the trigger and I pulled. The minuscule bullet zoomed through the air and split the tube down its middle. I set down the heavy metal and cheered. My dad slapped me on the back and loaded my gun again. We were standing at one of the numerous trailers that lined the streets during the fair. There were shooting games, games where you were given a fishing pole so you could hook the small plastic ducks that floated in the artificial current, and there was even livestock to look at.

My mom and my brother were at another trailer where you threw a baseball at some bottles to try and knock them over. They would most likely return soon. I picked up the loaded gun and once again aimed and fired it. The plastic tube spun off the little rung that held it upright. Ten shots later, my family and I were walk-

ing away with a couple of small prizes. We came across the old fire house that had been turned into a restaurant.

My dad walked in, leaving my mom, my brother, and I to look at the livestock. A girl walked up to me and started saying something in Flemish. It sounded as if she was wondering if my brother and I wanted to play. I was sad to say I could neither understand nor speak her language. I sadly shook my head and pointed to my throat signalling my inability to talk. The girl with her chocolate brown eyes looked crestfallen for a moment before giving my brother and I a soft smile and a small wave before scampering back to her friends. It just reminded me that smiles come in all languages.

laziness at its finest

I pinched the stapled sheets of paper between my thumb and forefinger with disgust. I dropped the sheets to the table and sighed. I would have to do my homework eventually, I figured. With only a few more days left of Belgium, I was commanded to do it by this afternoon. I angrily removed my pen cap and slammed the tip of my pen onto the first math problem. In a matter of minutes I moved on to next one. My temper was building with each question. My hands shook with frustration by problem eight.

By the time I had flicked on to the next page, I was fuming. Why was I given so much math homework? More importantly, why did I have to do this when I was in a foreign country? In frustration, I tossed my pen across the small kitchen I was sitting in. It landed in front of the sink. Great, now I would have to get off my lazy butt and go retrieve my pen.

departure

I shut the door behind me. We were about to load the car and head back to the airport. I was really sad to leave this foreign place. I had grown so used to the area, it hardly seemed foreign anymore. I took it all in one last time before stepping into the car. I was chewing my pen cap again, but not as hard.

adventures from africa to america

abdel mouliom

1. schools in africa

SCHOOLS IN AFRICA ARE NOT FUN. The rules are too strict and unfair. I remember my first time going to elementary school. I thought school would be the same thing as Pre-K or Kindergarten. Well, I found out the hard way that elementary school wasn't like that in Africa. I had to go to an English school, and we would sing the national anthem in French outside, where there is a big pole and flag. But after the national anthem, we would immediately speak English again.

Our principal would make announcements in front of the whole school, standing up high where every student could see him. We would stand up, quietly listening to him. Some people got tired and would get in trouble for disturbing everyone. Sometimes, I would be tired, but later I got used to it.

I never knew that we had homework in school. My first teacher to assign me homework was my math teacher. He was very strict and straightforward; he did not play with the students. Instead, he would be everyone's enemy, unless you did your homework every day. A lot of people had problems doing homework for his class. Some people got scared of him and started doing homework so they could avoid being hit by the teacher.

The teacher had a rule. His rule was very different from the other teachers'. If you didn't do your homework, he would whip you in front of the whole class with a rubber band whip. You had the choice to be hit on the hand, back, butt—anywhere but the head. Everyone feared him for that. My relationship with that teacher was bad.

My teacher would always get mad at me because I did not have neat handwriting. I never did my homework, and I would always be the most annoying student.

One time when I got in trouble, my teacher asked me which weapon I wanted for my disruptive behavior. I chose a ruler, because I knew it wouldn't hurt, but I could pretend that it did. This time something went wrong. The teacher hit me on the hand, but the ruler broke. I couldn't control my laugh, and the teacher got furious. He commanded a student to go ask the principal for a whip. When it arrived, I was scared, and the teacher whipped me on my hands. I didn't feel most of the beatings, but the during last two, I cried because it hurt and people were looking at me and laughing.

2. the first move

I was six when I first found out that moving can destroy your relationships with your friends. I had two best friends, and we always played together when we were bored. We would play hide and seek, tag, and other games. I remember one time my friends and I cooked food using only things from nature. We used in-home ingredients to add some flavor to our meal. When we finished cooking, we all ate on one big plate. The meal was good, and everyone enjoyed it.

One morning, things went differently. I woke up and got ready to go to my friend's house, thinking it would be another fun day. We played hide and seek and tag for hours until I came back home. Then, my parents announced that we were moving. I was shocked; I didn't want to leave my best friends. We packed the next few days so that we could be ready to depart. I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. As I looked out the car window on our drive to the new house, I wished I could go back to say *salut* to my best friends.

We drove for about thirteen minutes before we arrived. I was not really familiar with the route to the new house. When I saw the house, I wasn't very excited. The new house was like the old house; the only difference was that the new house had two floors and the kitchen was bigger.

I kind of liked the new house until I went outside. When I went to make new friends, the neighborhood turned out to be different than what I had expected. No one came out to play.

3. traveling to america

It was sunny in Africa that summer. We were preparing to travel to America, so we went to Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon.

The bus was crowded with sweating people. It took us one day to travel to the city. We had to switch buses often during our travel because some buses only stopped at a station. On the second bus, it was a little better; it was bigger than the last one we had been on. We had been on the road for many hours, though it seemed like weeks of traveling. We had to stop a lot of times to buy food from people selling it at stations or on the road.

After hours of traveling, we finally arrived in the city. It was extremely hot, and traffic was crowded due to the heat. Motorcycles, taxi cabs, and cars all fought for space on the road. My mom suggested that we take the cab, since motorcycles often had accidents because they sped when there was no road space.

A lot of our relatives lived in Yaounde, so we would stay with them as we prepared. We first went to get our pictures taken for our visas. The line was so long that we had to wait hours and hours. Night was almost near. After waiting, we went to visit one of our aunts for a night. Then we went to visit another aunt for one week before going to the embassy.

My parents came to pick us up. The place was nice and cold, refreshing after walking in the sun. There was a metal detector, which I had never seen before. I went around it twice because I thought that the device was a toy. We proceeded to a different room, where we had to wait for our visas to be made.

Another thing I liked about that place was the restrooms. As I finished using the restroom, I was about to wash my hands, and I found that there was no push down button for water to come out. I was surprised and curious. I soon discovered how it worked by curiously putting my hands near the sink. Magically, water came out. I was totally amazed and started playing with it. I showed it to my brothers.

The next day, we went to visit some of our old friends and some cousins. After a few days we went back home. I was disappointed that the day to travel was so far away. My dad left earlier than us.

He went first because he was the only one capable of finding us a place to live once we arrived. He also had an education, so he could find a job easily.

Months flew by like an airplane. The day had come for us to depart for America. Some of our relatives, including my grandma and grandpa, were there to wish us a good flight. They were sad that we were leaving, but I was excited. I was also sad though, because I would miss my old friends and some of my cousins. We proceeded to the waiting room, where we had to wait for our plane. I had never seen a plane, so I was curious. Hours passed by, and the plane arrived. Everyone was excited about going to the country where so many people in our country wished they could go.

4. new adventure

We arrived in America not knowing which way to go. Our brother was the only one that knew a little English, and he tried to figure out the directions. We fought the challenge of where to go and eventually reached the lobby of the airport. I was amazed. The airport was big and warm and full of people. I had never seen that many people of different colors. I didn't know there were Caucasians before then. The only color I had seen like that was a guy who was walking home with his friend. His skin kind of looked like it was burnt, so I assumed that he was African American.

We called our dad once we got settled. He tried to explain where he was, and after a while, we found him standing up and looking around for us, confused. When he saw us, his face was full of excitement, smiling so much that we were excited, too. He took us outside to his car. When I got out of the airport, it was cold. I had never imagined a country to be this cold.

We had also never seen a van. In Africa, we would see old cars that people thought were fancy, but probably not in other countries. My family thought that it was a nice car. It was big enough for the six of us. We put our luggage in the back and drove back to our apartment.

Everyone paid attention to the roads and how different they were from those in Africa. In Africa, there was a lot of traffic and

little space, which caused a lot of accidents. But when we were driving, there was so much space between the cars and there were traffic lights. In Africa, people don't respect traffic lights, and they don't get a ticket for doing so.

We got lost many times going back to our apartment. Our dad couldn't remember the way back. We found ourselves having to ask directions to the people walking on the sidewalks. Some knew where it was, but some didn't. I had also never seen that many lights. At night in Africa, everything is shut off, so it's dark. One time we heard that robbers were stealing from houses nearby, and we decided to pay some guards to protect our neighborhood from theft. We were lucky that they didn't reach our house.

On the way to our apartment, I slept a few times. I was really tired from all the things I had seen in one day. It was fascinating. As we neared our apartment, we were hungry. Our dad told us that there wasn't any food at home, so we stopped by a fast food restaurant and bought some chicken.

When we got home, we saw that our apartment was nice. We had never seen an apartment in Africa because there were only hotels or houses. Also, houses didn't have a new fresh house scent. But in America, our apartment did. I was pleased by the smell of the new apartment and felt like I was living the dream. After eating, I lay gently on the floor, dozing off into a nice sleep.

5. snow

The first time that I saw snow, it was a cold morning a few weeks after we arrived in the United States. My dad took us in his car to show us a little bit more of Maryland. It was fun seeing all of the new places that we had never seen before. It was really cold, so we had to get the jackets that we had in Africa. We had never really used them at all because it was always hot there.

As we were driving to some of the places, my dad showed me where I might go to school. I was very excited to go to school in America rather than in Africa. I never thought that I would be excited to go to school. I usually thought that school was the worst thing in life and that people didn't really need it.

We finally arrived back to our apartment and turned on the heater.

I started seeing little things falling out of the sky. I asked my brothers what they were. They explained to me that it was snow. I didn't know what snow was, but when I saw it, it kind of reminded me of some of the shows that I saw in Africa. I remember watching some Disney Channel movies that would have white things falling from the sky. I asked my parents if I could go outside to touch it, and they said yes.

I put on a jacket and gloves and ran as fast as I could down the stairs from the tenth floor to the lobby straight outside. I was so happy to see snow, it was like I lived in heaven. Everything was covered with white.

my life as a first grader

a. jacinto

MY PALMS WERE SWEATY. I had this feeling that I was going to have a fever. I hated this pain. It was the pain of being nervous, and I just wished that it would go away. All I heard was my mom telling me to hurry up and get in the car.

My mom was walking me to my first grade class. I worried my teacher was going to be mean, and not knowing anybody in my class made me even more anxious. But knowing that my mom was beside me made me feel better. When we got to the door of my first grade class, my knees felt weak, and I wanted to pass out. I couldn't walk anymore. My mom told me that she was going to the bathroom. That made the pain worse. I suddenly felt like crying. I wanted my mom to be there with me.

When I noticed that she was not coming back, I got upset until my teacher said, "Everything is going to be alright." I started to feel better. My teacher, Ms. Duke, looked mean and evil but she was the sweetest old lady I'd ever met in my seven years of life. Ms. Duke had wrinkles all over her face. She looked like she was a mean, sour, old lady, but she smelled like cinnamon. Her hair always looked puffy like white cotton candy. Ms. Duke would always wear long skirts, as if she were going to church. When she would give us work to do by ourselves, she fell asleep at her desk.

Later on in the afternoon, my mom acquired the teacher's phone number and address. Soon after, I realized that this teacher was going to be my tutor. She was going to help me on my English and writing. The reason why I needed help with my English was because I had just come from Mexico, where we only spoke Spanish.

When my mom neared to my tutor's house, I felt nervous. I had this feeling like I was going to throw up; it felt like someone was hitting my stomach. But I told myself not to be afraid because my mom was going to be there with me. When we got there I noticed that she lived in a big, tall house. I'd never seen a house like

that before in my life. At that point, I thought that she must have been the richest person that I'd met. I was speechless. She had one daughter, and her name was Lauren. She had all the toys that any girl would want to have. I was a little jealous of her because of what she had, but later I really did not pay attention to it, and we became friends. When I first met them, I always thought to myself that they were going to be spoiled people, and all they cared about was money. But I was wrong. She was really nice. She even gave me toys that her daughter did not like to play with.

When I started to work on my English and writing, I thought to myself that it was the hardest language in the world. I hated being corrected by my teacher every time I did not say a word right because I wanted to get this over with. At the time, I could not concentrate on my work because her house was just so amazing. She had a huge living room and three bathrooms. I always thought to myself, "Why would someone want that many bathrooms in just one house?"

I started to get the hang of English and writing and even some of the reading. I thought learning English must have been the toughest thing that I'd ever experienced in my life. When I went back to school, I noticed that my tutor was my brother's third grade teacher. I was so surprised about that. I felt so grown up because I was studying with a higher grade teacher. She was the best because she helped me through tough times when I did not have anybody to help me with my reading and writing in English.

how people in church act, boy you would not believe it!

promise woody

kids need to get their lives together!

AUGUST TWENTIETH, the anniversary of Jesus' Word Church (J.W.C) choir. Guest singers sang, and everybody got into the spirit. All was going well until we closed out so that everybody could go downstairs and eat. It was a long line. We usually let the visitors get in the front of the line because it was the church's policy. That church policy is something I hate, but I don't show it. I stood in line, talking to my friends and family. I was so happy because the line was getting shorter and shorter, which meant I was getting closer to the food. Then one of the ministers had to leave early.

"Let the minister get in front of us," I said.

"Okay," said my sister. Well, of course you know the devil had to have his way. Well, this girl standing behind my sister rolled her eyes, and the minister saw her.

"I know that girl did not roll her eyes at me!" yelled the minister. She went and told the missionary that the girl rolled her eyes at her, because she knew that the missionary could set this girl straight better than she could have.

"Do not be rolling your eyes at the minister!" yelled the missionary. "You hear me?" This girl didn't give up. She rolled her eyes again.

The minister explained, "I can't take this no more. I'm gone."

The minister left, and the missionary left as well, though the missionary came back to get her food. It turns out that ministers can act just like normal people.

lord, you only know how choir rehearsal goes!

"I don't know my key," said Lakayla.

"Well maybe if you would sing, you would know what the key is," argued Minister Green.

"I was not talking to you, I was talking to the choir director," said Lakayla, enraged. Finally, Minister Green shut up. She was always trying to be the choir director, but someone had to say something to get her to stop controlling us.

"If *you* were not off key, then maybe she could find the key," Evangelist argued. Minister Green rolled her eyes.

"What is the key again?" Lakayla said in a soft, mellow voice. I gave her the pitch. If you are shocked that I'm one of the choir directors, yes, it is true. After I gave her the pitch, she was on key. The sopranos started to sing. They were doing well, even with some messed up notes. Out of nowhere, somebody from the tenor section said something.

"They are too loud!" Minister Torain blurted out.

"You are not the choir director, so be quiet," Minister Green said in a harsh voice.

"Okay, okay, please keep all comments to yourself. How many times do I have to go over this?" I shouted over them. Everyone was quiet then. Yeah, I'm the harsh choir director. After I put everyone in their place, we had a good choir rehearsal and a good prayer to close out the practice.

they call it vacation, what a day!

I didn't wake her because she said she was not going to waste her money on nails.

"Don't talk to me. I'm upset with y'all. I'm going to get something to eat," McKayla said to Shawna, my sister.

Shawna turned around, looked at me, and said, "Why is she upset with me?"

"I don't know, maybe because we didn't wake her up to get her nails done?"

"She's upset with all of us who got our nails done, but really upset with our godmother," Shawna replied.

I went and told my mother about the situation.

"Don't worry about it," my mother said.

"But Mommy, she is bragging about her new clothes and pocketbooks she got when we got our nails done," I responded. Then I went and told my godmother about it.

My godmother responded, "What? Why is she mad at me?"

"Because we didn't tell her that we were going to get our nails done."

"Didn't she say that she was not going to waste her money on some nails?" my godmother asked.

"Yeah, she did say that, but she is still upset about the situation."

"Well, it isn't my fault. She shouldn't have said that she didn't want to go," my godmother explained. As I was thinking about what else to say, I thought to myself, *Oh, my God! McKayla is coming!*

I found my voice and vocalized, "It's okay. Now we know what to do next time."

"Yeah, that's right," my godmother said.

After all the excitement, anger, and drama, my godmother and I left to enjoy the rest of the day.

did he just say what I think he said?

I was inside the bounce-house, prancing like a deer with my friends from church and my family. My friends and I were having fun and laughing up a storm, but the amazing part was that there was a slide attached to the bounce-house. When you slid down, you dived into to a ball-pit. As I went down, heading towards the ball-pit, I was thinking to myself, *Am I going to get me some food or go play basketball?* If you knew me well enough, then you know I would be getting some chicken, but instead, I chose to go and play basketball.

"Hey," my sister Shanekwa shouted.

"Hey," I shouted back as I walked closer to her.

"Do you want to play basketball?"

"Yeah," I replied as ran toward her and my friends. I was playing basketball against the boys. Afterwards, I was really getting hungry, so I got some food with my sister. I went to go play some board games with family and friends. While I was waiting in line for the board games, one of the minister's sons came up to me.

He was a friend of mine named Reggie, but we called him Booty when he bothered us. Reggie grabbed me and said, "Dance with me, please!"

"No, Booty, I don't feel like dancing right now," I fussed.

"I know what it is, you don't know how to dance, huh? Is that what it is?" Reggie teased.

"*I do* know how to dance!" I yelled at him.

"Then dance with me!" he grabbed me and started dancing. Then he told me in a nice, mellow, deep voice, "You know you like this."

"Get off of me, Booty, with your sweaty self!" I pushed him off of me, and he got mad and turned around to talk to his friend.

Thank God he's off of me, I thought with relief. Okay, okay, you are not going to believe this, but Booty liked my sister, who already had a boyfriend. Later, he took me where no one could hear us talking.

He asked me, "Do you want to go out with me, I mean, since you sister is going out with somebody?" I was thinking, *Oh no, he didn't just say that to me!*

"No, Reggie, because I'm already interested in this boy named Michael," I tried to tell him nicely.

"Okay," Reggie said in a sad voice.

caught the ball!

"She caught the ball," my teammates said.

"When it is your turn to kick the ball, I'm going to catch it," this lady named Shirl taunted. Shirl is a minister, too.

It was the kids' turn to go to the outfield with the ball. All of the adults were looking evilly toward us, like they were going to get us. Some of them looked exhausted, some looked like they didn't care, and others looked like they were going to beat us up after the game. So of course, they wanted me to go first. Shirl was looking at me like, 'Go ahead and kick the ball over here so I can catch it.' I kicked the ball with all my might, away from Shirl, and I ran all the way to home base.

"You got away this time, but it won't happen again," she cried.

"That's what you think," I said to her. "When is she going to leave me alone?" I asked my teammates.

"I don't know, girl," said my sister.

"It'll be alright. I don't care—it's just a game."

life in america

yuliana carrizales

MY NAME IS YULIANA CARRIZALES, and I was born in Mexico on October 18, 1996. I lived in Mexico for five years. My family and I moved to Chicago so that my sisters, brother, and I could get a better education. My first school was called Gompers. It was a lot of fun there, mostly because when you're a little kid you don't really know what you're doing.

The second school that I attended was called Parks School. For some reason little kids there were crying everywhere. I didn't want to let go of my mother's hand. After my first day at Parks School, I was really tired, and I didn't know what to say to my mother when she asked me how my day was. After two years there, I moved to another school called A. O. Marshall. It was a big school, but first and second grades were really easy because I paid attention. Everything got difficult in the middle of my second year, though. Third grade was really important for me because, not only was that the year that I felt like I was going to do really well, but also my friend, Gloria, moved away.

Fourth grade was unforgettable because that was the year I moved to North Carolina, and I had to say bye to my friends. I really didn't want to leave, but the decision was made, and there was no backing down. The day I found out I was moving, it felt like my whole world had come apart. I had everything here. When I saw my friend passing by on her bike, I started crying. I thought it was just a moment of weakness, but it wasn't like that at all; I was really going to miss everyone in Chicago.

When we first arrived to North Carolina, the scenery looked like something out of a fairytale, but as we got closer, it didn't seem like I would actually want to stay at a place like this. We decided to go to my aunt's house. My family wanted to stay over at her house for the night because it was really late, and my dad was tired of driving. My siblings and I were in denial; we didn't want to believe

that we would have to live here. After winter break was over, it was time to go back to school. I had changed schools a lot already, so the fact that I had to move one more time really didn't bother me. I was already used to the idea.

After two days of nonstop paperwork, it was time for us to go to school. The first day everybody was staring at me; I knew from experience that this was a usual reaction. But I didn't feel like starting over and making new friends if after one year I was just going to be leaving again, so I figured wouldn't even try. Then these four girls came up to me and started talking. They asked me where I was from and where had I lived before. I started remembering Chicago. It wasn't easy to smile and pretend like I wasn't hurting inside.

When I got back from school, my mother asked me a lot of questions, like How was school? Did you like it? Did you make any friends? What bus do you ride? I didn't feel like talking, so I just left her talking and headed straight for my room. I was really mad at my mom. I told her not to get in my life. I didn't feel like that was the way I should have said it, but it was the way it came out. After passing fourth grade that summer, I had gotten more used to the idea of us staying in North Carolina for a little longer.

A lot of my feelings for North Carolina have changed. After giving it a little time, I think I'm starting to like it here—although sometimes I feel like running away because everything in my mind and around me isn't going the way I expect it to. My fifth grade teacher, Mr. Witt, who I thought was going to hate children, turned out to be the best teacher I have ever had and knew how to teach well. On my EOGs I got two IIIs, which was really good because I had never gotten more than a high II. I remember what my teacher used to tell us: "Life doesn't come easy, you have to work for it."

That day I got the scores, I went to a party. We didn't leave the party till 2:30 a.m. I didn't feel like going to school the next day. Then I thought to myself, *Tomorrow is graduation, and I can't miss it.* After I shook my teacher's hand, it was time to say goodbye to all my friends. I was really going to miss everybody. Then after I said goodbye, it was time to go home. Two weeks after I graduated, my parents had planned a special trip to go to Mexico if everyone passed with good grades. We got a surprise because nobody thought that my brother would end up passing with good grades.

That summer we went to Mexico, and I saw my family, including some that I didn't know I had. We went to the beach, the plaza, grandma's house, worked at our stores, and fixed up our house a little. It was really fun.

When we got back from our trip to Mexico, we were in a hurry to get everything ready to go back to school. Everything was done so fast, I didn't even think we would be able to get everything in time for school, but we did.

When I first got into W.G. Pearson Middle School, I knew right from the start that I was going to get lost at least three times. I didn't really know what to expect from that school because that wasn't the school I wanted to go to. Although I hated that school, I learned a lot from there. Sixth grade was really easy since it was a new school, and the teachers really focused on the students. At the end of the school year, there was a cookout. It was really fun because we got to do some things we wouldn't have done if it wasn't the last day of school. We spent the whole day outside, and my teacher brought her dog.

Seventh grade was one of the easiest grades I ever had to go through; the teachers were very sweet and taught really well. I learned a lot from my math teacher in seventh grade. Her name was Ms. Marin; she was always in a happy mood, even when she lost her voice for a week. The rest of the year was pretty boring. After she left nothing much happened, well nothing out of the usual happened, at least. That summer we didn't go anywhere, but my cousins came and visited for one month.

Eighth grade was really hard! The teachers told me and everyone else not to mess around this year because this determines the next step you take towards life. It was a long and hard school year, but I wouldn't change anything about it. That year I graduated, and as I walked across that stage, I remember thinking to myself *Whatever you do, don't fall*. When I got to my seat, without even tripping, I sat down, and, finally, I knew it was all over. There was a ceremony afterwards. I was really sad because I was really going to miss my friends, but life goes on. That summer we went to South Carolina with my cousins and went to the beach. It was really fun, and I enjoyed shopping with my two sisters.

When I found out that I wasn't going to go to the high school that I wanted, and that my sister had applied me to another school without my permission, I wanted to kill her! I told my mom, "Whatever you do, don't put my name in the lottery for DSA," and she didn't listen to me. The first school I wanted to go so badly was Southern, but my mom said I couldn't because it had a bad reputation. The second school I wanted to go to was Riverside because a lot of my friends were going to that school.

When I found out I was going to DSA, I wanted to fake sick so I wouldn't have to go to school. When I first got to DSA, I thought to myself, *This is a big school. I'm never going to find my classes.* I got lost just trying to find my locker. When I got home I was so mad at my sister, I started to yell at her for no reason.

After three weeks, I already knew where all my classes were, and even my locker. There was a lot going on in my house, but I couldn't let it get to my school work. I don't like school, and I don't think I ever will. I know that's never going to change. I'm really mad at my sister, and I don't think I am ever going to honestly forgive her for what she did to me.

Hopefully, if I give it a little more time, I'll get used to the idea that I have to go to DSA. I don't think I will, but I'll give it a chance. Maybe I'll end up liking it.

they came back:

the time I met my Togolese family

julia henn

1. meeting my family

WE ARRIVE. I feel an overwhelming sense of nervous excitement. I look over at my mom in the passenger seat of our car. Almost as if she had read my mind, she looks back. Her thin, rosy lips smile with her clear blue eyes, the seas of dependable patience and understanding. Her thin, blond eyebrows are raised with excitement, yet a bit of their tender loving shape remains. Her lips curl up until they touch her ears. Her African dress is made of bright green batik cloth.

I look out the window at all the beautiful scenery passing by. The huge leaves of the banana tree stretch out, casting shadows over the road. Other varieties of trees with broad leaves also crowd the roadside. Huge mountains rise up from behind, trying to touch the sky. They smile down at us. “Welcome back,” they whisper. We drive until we come to an old, wooden sign reading, “Welcome to Yikpa.”

“We’re here,” I shakily whisper to my brother Jacob.

“Yeah,” he faintly replies.

The forest yields to a collection of dull brown houses. As if on cue, hundreds of people come out of them. Waves of excitement emanate from my parents. They have been waiting for this moment ever since they left.

The crowd of people starts to grow rapidly. Soon there is a sea of delighted Togolese faces trailing behind our car. We drive on until we reach the end of the village, where we park in the shade of an old tree.

My mom opens her door first, and the whole crowd bursts to life. The shouts of greetings erupt from all directions, “*Bonjour! Bonjour, Laura! Bonjour, Jurgen!*” My parents are quickly enveloped, and they smile and hug everyone within reach. One rather small

woman jumps into my mother's arms excitedly and kisses her on the cheek. This happens to be Lucy, one of my mom's best friends.

Jacob and I stand plastered to the car, gaping at the crowd. We feel like movie stars. After a few minutes, someone manages to corral us all toward a large covered structure. It closely resembles a park picnic area, except without the picnic tables. Inside, there are four wicker chairs and a small wooden door. The door leads to the sacred place of the chief's ancestors. My dad will have the opportunity to enter the room later.

Four people join us once we reach the structure. They are the chief, his cousin, and other relations. The chief and his cousin sit in the middle of the four chairs. The chief wears a toga-like outfit made of batik cloth and is using a long blue umbrella as a cane. A couple of men leave the crowd and come back carrying plastic chairs for me and my family to sit on. Everyone else sits or stands wherever possible, careful to keep a respectful distance from the chief.

Once everyone gets settled, the chief's cousin says a few words, opens a bottle of gin, and pours some into a hole in the floor as an offering to the ancestors and to announce our arrival to them. Then, we are offered some of the gin. My parents gladly accept. My brother and I politely decline. To finish off the ceremony, the chief's cousin gives several speeches, all of which are spoken in French and Ewe. The chief cannot speak because he is very ill and unable to talk. This is especially worrisome to my mom.

I can't understand anything he says, so I take a look around. The first thing I see is a huge mob of people staring at me. Blood rushes to my cheeks. I have a hard time restraining myself from looking back. I recite to myself the list of reasons as to why they stare at me. I am white, my hair is long and blond, my parents are legends, and I am a stranger. I forcibly turn my attention away from the crowd, and to the structure of the building. The thatched roof is supported from a few poles sticking out of small wooden walls, which are covered by people. "Well, I made it through the first five minutes," I tell myself. I look back at the chief and remember why coming here is so important. Important enough to suffer through a seven hour plane ride. Important enough to leave the comfort of decent air conditioning, plumbing, and electricity.

Important enough to lose two precious weeks of school. This is important because I am here to meet my family.

My parents had both lived in Yikpa. My mom was in the Peace Corps, cared for by the chief and his family. In many ways, the chief is like a father to her. My dad was a taxi driver. When someone leaves Yikpa, they don't usually come back, especially if they are white. My parents have, and with kids. I remember what my mom had said on the plane as we left America: "These people were my family all those years ago and your dad's too. Now you are also a part of this family."

2. goat killing ceremony

The music is lively and happy. However, I am too shy to dance. Besides, I would look funny, and I am already embarrassed. I had ripped a huge hole in my skirt earlier this morning while playing a game of tag with the village children. I am wearing a bright green embroidered batik shirt and skirt with complex geometric designs.

Rigid as a board, I stand by my brother. We are both exhausted, even though it is still morning. We are still getting over jet lag and the heat is stifling. I look toward the crowd of singing and chanting people.

There is a small circle in the crowd with seven smiling musicians inside. Four are chanting women with gourds covered in multi-colored buttons, or cauri shells. They shake out a steady beat, and the sound of their cheerful, high-pitched voices pierces through the noisy crowd. Next to them is a man with a dented and rusty old trumpet that could pass as the surface of the moon. I'm surprised that the thing still works. He plays a loud, cheerful tune that makes my head hesitantly nod. Another man has a large drum and is making a lively beat that coincides with the gourds. The last man has an animal's horn. I don't like the horn. Its high-pitched squawking noise reminds me of a dying goose, and sends shivers down my spine.

To the side of the excited crowd stands a man holding a big brown and white goat on a raggedy old rope. The animal struggles in vain. It knows more about what will happen next than I do. Once

I see it, I realize that no other goats are anywhere in sight, which is odd because usually they are everywhere.

Just in front of me, a man taps my dad on the shoulder and whispers something to him. Dad nods and comes towards me and my brother.

"You may want to leave. They are going to kill the goat," he says to me.

I stare at him wide-eyed, panicking. "Why?" I reply frantically, "They don't have to do that for us, we're not that important, tell them to stop!" The words spill out of my mouth as tears burst from my eyes.

I frantically turn to my brother and tell him the news. He has the same reaction. Desperately, we ask him to stop them, using every negotiation tactic we can think of.

"Sorry, there isn't anything I can do. It's a tradition. It is a part of our welcoming ceremony."

Of course Dad doesn't care. He likes goat meat and does not feel squeamish about killing an animal. He'll probably want to videotape the whole thing, I think to myself. (He did.) My friend Gaetan steps out of the crowd and leads me and my brother up a hill to an ancient gazebo that appears to be falling apart. The paint flakes that remain suggest that it was once white. As usual, there are goats aplenty up here. I lean over the railing of the gazebo, placing my head into my hands. The air smells distinctly of charcoal fires. I can faintly hear the music in the distance.

Gaetan speaks a little bit of English, so we chat for a while. I shyly look at his smooth, shiny, deep brown skin. His eyes are like hazelnuts. His hair is clipped short in a classic African style. His face is almost perfectly sculpted, with a well-rounded chin and slightly visible cheekbones. He has a towel draped around his neck, a good idea in this climate. He also wears a white t-shirt, white pants, and white flip-flops with blue straps.

Jacob's head can be seen just behind Gaetan. His eyes are squinted and his head is drooped. His freshly buzz-cut hair is plastered to his forehead. His face is already coated in a smudgy layer of pale dirt. He looks like a wilted flower. I smile as I remember his new nickname: goat boy. We call him this because he is constantly disappearing into the village, chasing goats with the other kids.

When we were finally able to find him, he had dirt caked on him from head to foot with a pathetic goat flailing in his arms. Fortunately, he likes the nickname.

Suddenly, the music stops. Time halts as I wait in eerie silence for the crack of a machete. Finally, after what seems like hours, the music starts again. Once we meet up with the group, Jacob and I are swept up by a couple of women who put ceremonial cloths around our waists and beads around our necks, then sweep us to the front of the crowd to our parents. Slowly, we shuffle through all three sections of the village, passing by playing children and many, many, many goats and chickens. Finally, we reach the end of the village, where there are dozens of chairs and a huge tree that provides shade for us, our car, and the small elementary school for the village children. We take our seats, and the chief's cousin gives us more welcoming speeches.

3. a calm day

Quietly, I step out of the car. Hundreds of people are out and about, dancing and talking. Not for us this time. Today is the day before Easter, a big holiday here because half the village is Christian and the remaining animists will take any reason to party. The holiday is celebrated with a lot of drinking and dancing. The main drinks consumed here are Sodabe and Deha. Basically, they are both fermented palm wine, but Sodabe has been distilled, and Deha has not. People drink them from gourds cut in half. Sodabe has a clear look to it, and Deha looks milky. My parents enjoy these alcoholic beverages so much that they named two of our cats after them.

Once my parents exit our vehicle, they go to chat with some friends and get some refreshments. My brother goes to play with some kids, and I am left standing alone. At first, I calmly stroll through the village, weaving between the mud brick houses. I am surprised by how long some of these houses have lasted. The oldest house is over a hundred years old.

I also come across the skittish livestock of the village: goats, chickens, and more goats. Both of which I have discovered are

really tasty. My parents think that the chicken here taste much better than the ones back home. I agree. Our third cat's name is Choclo, which is Ewe for chicken. This is because she acts like one, not because my parents like chicken that much. The kids here also appear to be fond of chickens for two reasons. One, they taste good. Two, they are a lot of fun to chase. Jacob and I have already joined in numerous chicken chases.

For a village, Yikpa is surprisingly large. As I have mentioned before, the village has three sections. The first two are roughly the size of two subdivision blocks. The last one is a little bit larger, the reason being that the chief lives here and the small elementary school is here as well. The river is just past the end of this section. My parents used to drink from it, but since it is riddled with disease, like most rivers are, my family will use bottled water for this trip.

As I weave in between buildings, numerous people gesture for me to come closer. I do, just to be polite. They ask me to sit, so I sit. They start to talk. I don't understand anything they say, so when they look at me, obviously expecting some kind of a reply, I say something along the lines of "yeah," "uh-huh," "sure," "okay," "great," or any other words of positivity I could think of. Eventually, their attention seems to shift to another subject, and I gladly excuse myself.

About an hour or so later, I find my brother. He is at the front of the village by a mango tree, making our little green Crocodile Dentist game eat a mango. The basic idea of the game is that you press on the crocodile's teeth, and if you hit the wrong tooth, the mouth shuts. The point of the game is to make it to the last tooth without hitting the wrong tooth. Dozens of children are surrounding him, smiling and giggling. Jacob's sun-blond hair is matted to his forehead. His eyes have their usual gleam of mischief, and he is caked in dirt from head to toe, again.

He makes me feel a little awkward. Here I am in a place where most kids would do anything to get to, and I am just confused and stiff as a board. Come on, Julia, you have heard about all the crazy things your parents have done here, like when Mom had to wrestle that crocodile out of the fish pond, or when Dad tried to catch snakes for an animal trader with his bare hands. No one is going

to judge you. Go find Mom and Dad and then just hang out for a while. “Hey, Jacob, know where Mom and Dad are?” I shout.

“Nope,” he replies.

“Kay.” I wander toward the road. As I get closer, I notice a few guys on motorcycles. They have several empty gourds. One seems to call for me, but I ignore him and continue up the road. When I get to the midsection of the village, I see Mom and Dad.

I wave and walk closer, then I hear a shout. I turn and see one of the men from before. He seems tall, even though he sits on a motorcycle. He is too close to ignore, so I go to see what he wants. Perhaps he only wants me to tell Mom and Dad something for him. I cautiously walk towards him.

When I am standing a few feet in front of him, his big lips curl into a very, very, very friendly smile, revealing a set of crooked yellow teeth. He nods his head, still smiling.. He shifts around on his yellow scooter. His dark eyes dart back and forth. I notice the stubble of a gray and black beard around his chin and the total absence of hair on his head. He places a bare foot onto the dirt road. I begin to get nervous. Carefully, I keep my dad in the corner of my eye. The man then says something in French, slightly waving his dark hands. I don’t understand. Guessing what he meant, I say my name. Usually that works. Then he gets off his motorcycle and grabs my hand. He points to me and then to him and in very rough English says, “Marry. . . me?” My eyes grow huge. I rip away and pelt straight to my dad, half blinded by shock.

Once I reach him, I point to the man and frantically explain what just happened. Dad patiently waits until I am done, then he goes over to have a little chat with that man who is still expectantly waiting on the road. My mom taps me on the shoulder. She tells me that we are to be going to the village bouvette to get some drinks. I nod.

Once we get there, I order an orange Fanta and sit down with Mom on a small wooden bench. Eventually Dad comes in. He orders an unidentified alcoholic beverage and joins us.

“Well he definitely proposed to you. I told him to back off. Try not to worry about it. He was drunk and about forty years old. You are not really expected to marry him. He probably tried to marry you because you are white. Here, the general stereotype is that if

you are white, you are rich, so if he married you, he would be able to get rich as well.”

I remember learning in social studies class that in some countries outside the US, people get married at age eleven. I finish my Fanta and go to put the bottle in the bottle bin. It's then that I notice Gaetan behind the counter. As it turns out, his family owns the place. He invites me join him, and we sit together on the floor. I bring out my Uno cards from my purse (a coconut with a zipper at the top). Seeing that I have cards, he goes to get a small stool that serves as our table. I ask if he knows how to play. He says no. So I show him, using a tiny bit of English and a lot of finger pointing.

“You put color with color and number with number,” I say, pointing to a blue three and a blue seven, a red three and the blue three again. Teaching the special cards is challenging. Luckily, mathematics symbols look the same in French and English. After a while, we are able to get through a couple of short games. Once that is done, a few other kids join us. Gaetan does most of the explaining for them.

After a few hours of playing, Gaetan leads me to a back room and turns on a small radio that barely manages to crackle out music. Awkwardly, we try to dance to it. I can almost see myself blushing. I have never been alone with a boy before.

After a little bit, my mom finds me and tells me it is time to go. Slowly, I walk over to her, smiling with a small sense of pride. I leave Uno with Gaetan, thinking that he and the other kids would like it.

4. the waterfall

The trail cannot be more than a foot wide. To my left, I see nothing but a cliff going straight up. To my right, I see nothing but a cliff going straight down and a few trees that dare to defy gravity and grow sideways. A sudden image of plummeting while frantically fighting to catch a grip on one of the trees flashes across my mind. I swallow hard and keep moving. I can only imagine how my mom feels. She has a severe fear of heights. When the trail first started to become treacherous, she ordered everyone to go in front

of her, so she wouldn't slow anyone down, and more importantly, so she could be absolutely sure that we were all safe.

Almost all the villagers are ahead of us. Only a few of our loyal friends stay behind to make sure that we don't fall to our deaths. I don't care that we are the slowest of the crowd. The others have done this before.

I glance up from the trail for a moment. To my horror, Jacob's new friend is running toward a sapling dangling off the edge of the cliff. Then, before I can scream, he leaps onto the sapling and hangs from it like a monkey. His dark, bare feet dangle over the abyss as the little sapling slowly starts to bend with his weight. Time stops. Eventually, he swings back on to the path, grinning ear to ear. The shocked look on all our faces clearly pleases him.

My friend prefers not to be such a show off. Gaetan walks just behind me, helping me with the particularly tough spots and double checking that I don't injure myself whenever I trip (which is often). Meticulously, we plod on. After a while, the trail widens a bit and starts to slope gently downhill. The trees part, and we gaze upon our destination.

Mist rises from the huge waterfall, creating clouds that lazily drift up into the atmosphere. The jungle surrounding it consists of every shade of green in existence. Below this fantastic display of plant life, I can see the crowd of villagers bustling about our makeshift camp. The layout is fairly simplistic. In the center is a small cooking fire that we will use to heat up our lunch. A few feet from that is a huge sheet of yellow plastic material stretched over a few metal poles, creating something like a tent. If you walk down from the tent towards the waterfall, you will find yourself among a field of large black rocks bordering the river, which snakes across a small patch of land before abruptly dropping into another impressive waterfall.

Once we all fully take in the amazing view, we rapidly walk down the final slope, eager for lunch, swimming, and a break from perilous cliffs. As soon as the path ends, I head for one of the large rocks. They look like a good place to change into my swim suit, but first I need to recruit a guard.

"Hey, Jacob, could ya come over here please?"

"What?" he replies.

“Could you guard the rocks while I change?”

“Sure.”

I walk with him to the biggest rock I can find. He stands guard while I change, then we switch. When he finishes, I place my pack by the cooking fire and head into the river. The water is pleasantly cool. Happily, I swim around, carefully avoiding the part of the river that is too close to the second and the first waterfalls.

After a while, Gaetan meets up with me. I feel a bit shy in my blue floral bathing suit. But I get over it quickly. We talk and swim until lunch time. I sit on a rock with my plate, hungrily wolfing down my food. Breakfast seems like a hundred years ago. We have some sort of green vegetable that reminds me of spinach, black-eyed peas, and a dark meat that looks like goat. It all tastes very good. As soon as I finish, I go back to the water. For a while, I paddle along happily. Suddenly, a large drop of water hits me. Then another one, and another one. Before I know it, it starts to pour.

We all huddle under the tent, waiting for the rain to stop. Feelings of excitement sweep through the the camp. I sit in a corner of the tent. Gaetan is behind me, playing with my hair, along with a number of others.

I hear the soothing sound of rain tapping on the yellow fabric. I look outside the tent, awestruck at the downpour. Plants become shiny as glistening droplets of water drip off their leaves. The air begins to smell like wet earth, and wispy clouds of mist rise from the ground .

After a while, I realize the silliness of cowering from the rain when I would be getting wet while swimming anyway. It's not thundering. As I head back into the water, others take my example and join me. Soon, the rain stops and the golden sun comes out.

Eventually, we have to go. First, I grab my pack, which was moved to the tent when the rain started. Then, I change back into my shorts while mentally preparing for the hike back.

The hike back seems a little easier, now that I know the length of the trail and it slopes downhill most of the way. Gaetan holds my hand on the way down, and to my surprise, he kisses it a few times.

We are almost back to the car when I notice the guy who proposed to me the other day lurking in the shadows beside the trail. He is staring at me from the corner of his eye. I feel a shiver go

down my neck. I stop, looking for some way around him, but the narrow trail is surrounded by thick forest, and it is impossible to pass through without getting cut by any number of sharp, pointy plant life. I have no choice but to try and pass him. Once I am in his range, I speed up, but he manages to grab me and yank me off the trail. He kisses me on the cheek with slimy, wet lips. His breath smells of alcohol. Next, he gruffly flings me back onto the trail. I would have had a nasty fall if a couple of the people around hadn't caught me. My heart pounds, and I can feel myself shaking. I quickly look over to Dad with bulging eyes. He saw the whole thing.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, a little dizzy, and my shoulder hurts where he grabbed it," I shakily whisper.

Dad and the people who caught me stay with me until we get to the car. Once I am safely in the car, he calls Mom and a bunch of other people over, and they all go to have chat with that guy. They are gone for a long time.

I slump down into the car seat, exhausted. I reflect over what just happened for a while, and then I think of what my parents and the other villagers are saying to him. I picture the whole group of angry people yelling at him with pointing fingers. This makes me laugh, and I feel better.

Later I would learn that he had been severely yelled at, and the entire village would be watching him for the rest of my trip. Mom told me that she was proud at how quickly I had bounced back. I had been a tough little traveler, a high mark of praise.

I look back up to the mountain, where the waterfall is. The sun's rays penetrate through the wispy layer of clouds above them and shed a golden light on the lush forest that covers the mountain's slopes. It reminds me of the forest back home. I smile, thinking of Gaetan and my family. Home, perhaps, it isn't so far away after all.

5. goodbyes are never easy

A soft breeze blows across the village, kicking up small clouds of dust around the feet of the village choir. The girls stand in small

rows of five on wooden benches that are set up like bleachers. They are wearing traditional blue dresses covered in little red, yellow, and blue squares. Their faces and necks are white with ceremonial paint. Their lips, painted dark red.

They sing for us because this is our goodbye ceremony. I listen to the sound of the words they sing. I can't understand what they are saying, but I feel the emotion in each word. These girls may have never met my parents before, but they have heard the stories and know of their importance.

My parents are sitting next to the choir, along with the chief and his family. My parents are sitting on stools placed upon fake animal skins. Dad has a fancy ebony cane. He wears a white batik cloth. On it are little multicolored squares. He wears it in a toga-like style, just like the chief. My mom is wearing the same green batik dress she wore on the first day. Each object has some kind of symbolic value, and all together this is the highest honor that the villagers could have given to my parents.

I look over at my brother, who has his head drooped over and his eyes half shut. I'm surprised that he had not fallen asleep yet. I play with my ceremonial necklaces. Each bead is made of clay and has red, yellow, blue, and brown dots all over it. I look down at the ceremonial cloth that is draped over my dress. Blue, gold, silver, and dark green stripes travel horizontally across my lap. After about half an hour, the girls finish singing. That's when the chief's cousin starts the lengthy speeches.

When the speeches end, we go to eat our lunch at the family house. The family house is the oldest house in the village because it was the original home of the chief's family. The chief's uncle, the village elder, lives there.

The room we eat in is on the second floor. As I climb up the concrete steps, I notice that they are cracked, and in some places huge chunks are missing. The room looks very small and dark. Inside are many sacred objects, like a battered old warrior hat that belonged to the chief's grandfather. We eat lunch at a small wooden table full of food. The black-eyed peas, rice, and goat give off an aroma that make my mouth water. Once everyone seats themselves, I help myself to the peas. The adults do a lot of talking. Jacob and I just eat and then wait to be released into the village.

Eventually, we are set free. Eagerly, we race down the steps. Jacob goes after a goat while I walk towards a small courtyard, pondering my next move. For a while, I walk about aimlessly, trying to take in as much as I can. I come across a group of kids who really want to play with me, but I don't know any of their games, or the games looked too hard. In one game you have to try to hit a tiny clay ball with a very long and very skinny stick. When Jacob comes back from chasing the goats, he tries it and miserably fails.

While I watch Jacob lunge for the tiny ball (and face plant), I decide to teach the children one of my games, the classic Duck-Duck-Goose. I gather a few kids, and form them into a decent circle. Then with a lot of finger pointing and gesturing I show them how to play a few pretty decent rounds of Duck-Duck-Goose. Though they don't actually say Duck-Duck-Goose; that is too difficult.

After a while, everyone gets tired. So, I try a different one. This game is simpler. I pick up a kid, and I spin them around in a circle with their feet flying in the air. I learned this game while playing with little kids in America. Young kids in Togo have the same reaction as the American kids do: lots of laughter. After about five minutes, I have every single kid in the village waiting in a somewhat orderly line for their turn. After about twenty minutes or so, I have to stop. I can hardly stand up.

That's when my parents show up. The moment I had been dreading all day has come. It is time to go. As I shake hands with Gaetan, I barely manage to hold back the stinging tears that cloud my vision.

"Goodbye," I somehow manage to whisper.

Jacob tearfully hugs his little buddy and gives him his Crocodile Dentist game. We then go to our parents, who sadly hug and shake hands with all of their many friends.

When they are done, I slowly shuffle back to our car and take a seat. My dad gets in the driver's seat, and the engine comes to life. Slowly, we roll out of the village. Hundreds of people wave and shout as we leave. I look back until the village disappears around a turn, and I can see the little wooden welcoming sign. "Welcome to Yikpa" it says. Yikpa literally translates to "The place you never want to leave." The name suits it well.

freshman versus environment



flight to nevada

bongsha bollybush

THE EERIE SOUNDS OF LUGGAGE WHEELS FILL THE AIR. It's a depressing place where homeless people sit in torn, tattered chairs. People sleep on the floor, as they wait for a loud call. The people waiting to pay their fee get restless. The smells of musk and burgers waft through the air. People that look suspicious along with helpless elderly people are being viciously patted down by guards. Babies are crying and trying to escape the strong grip of their protective parents' hands.

My grandparents and I finally get to the plane by walking through a slanted grey hall. Overhead are emergency kits with bandages, gauze, and a defibrillator. The door slams closed and the pilot gives his dry welcoming speech. People begin to settle in with their pillows and blankets. The man on my left side is rather large. His stomach is coming through his shirt. He is fast asleep, and spit is everywhere. The other man is Indian and has a turban on. He smells like curry. I bury my face in my sweater, trying not to smell that horrible odor. It is making me queasy. The man turns to me and asks me if I am alright. I lift my head and slowly nod. The man tries to have a conversation with me, but I can't focus on what he is saying. His breath smells indescribably bad. His teeth are brown like dirt, and they look rotten. I don't know if I can take this much longer.

He finally gets the point that I do not want to talk to him at all, so he stops talking. I turn to the obese man on the other side of me. He is fast asleep. Spit has accumulated so much that it is like a pond on the groove of his chest. How on earth did I happen to get this seat?

"Passengers, we wanted to inform you that we will be landing in five minutes," the pilot booms through the intercom.

Finally, the ride has ended. After five hours of rancid peanuts and flat soda, I can get some real food. The plane hits the runway

on a wave of turbulence. We walk out into the airport. There is a mad dash to get the luggage, and because there are so many people crowded around the rotating luggage carrier, it is hard to get a spot where you can look for your bags.

One thing is different about this airport: there are gambling machines everywhere. At midnight, the last thing you want to see and hear are a bunch of shiny, loud machines and drunken people. We find our bags and go out into the lobby.

"Excuse me, sir, but no minors are allowed in this area," the attendant says hesitantly. Because you have to be a certain age to gamble, they would not let me through. Now, we have to take a detour, and each one we take makes it take longer and longer to get to where we need to be. I can tell this is going to be a headache.

At 12:45, we are out of the airport and looking for my uncle's '57 red Corvette. At 1:00, we are waiting for the Corvette. At 1:15, we are still waiting, and now my grandfather is mad. He calls my uncle and angrily asks him where he is.

My uncle replies, "I should be there in about forty-five minutes to an hour."

"What's taking you so long?" my grandfather asks impatiently.

"I am so sorry, but I forgot about you getting here tonight, so I went to bed." Something gives me the impression that this is not going to be the best night.

At 2:00 a.m., my uncle gets to the airport, and we can finally leave. The engine of the car roars off into the night toward our destination, my uncle's house.

* * *

"Time to eat breakfast!" my aunt yells through my door.

"I'm coming," I reply. I just got cleaned up from my jump in the pool earlier this morning. The pool water had made me kind of ashy. The scent of bacon and pancakes wafts through the air. It's not that hard and crunchy bacon—that's the nasty kind of bacon. That's like chewing on greasy rocks. The good bacon is the kind of bacon that is not crunchy, but has a little crunch to it. The best bacon is a golden color. The doughnuts sit on a round silver platter, waiting to be eaten. Coffee cups sit face down on the center table on

the little white plate. At breakfast, the only sound you hear is forks clattering against plates and the dings of glasses hitting the table. Every now and then, you will hear the laughter of adults. I am not quite sure what's so funny, and I don't really care. I got the seat at the table that's facing the TV, so I'm watching midgets fight. Nothing they are talking about can possibly be more interesting than midgets fighting. They are drop-kicking each other like it doesn't faze them. It's just amazing.

The food is almost gone, so I get up from the table and go outside to look around. Last night we got here so late that I did not get to see very much. There are palm trees everywhere, and there is this little spot where, in between the palm trees, you can see the mountain range. The mountains look like they are wrapped in a shroud of clouds in the far distance.

Suddenly, my Aunt Von comes outside and tells me to put my shoes on because we are going to ride down the strip. Let me just tell you that the strip is much better at night than during the day. You can see all of the glossy, shiny buildings. There is also a building that is a pyramid, but it is covered in a layer of black glass panel. Casino advertisements are everywhere. At night, the neon lights glow in the air, but during the day the strip is just a bunch of buildings lined up in a row. Trash is everywhere, and it is very dirty. It's not so impressive, I would say. The car finally stops, and we get out and go to this casino place that has a huge aquarium in it. I am not a big fan of aquariums, but I like to see the little fish get eaten by the big fish. This aquarium is kind of interesting: it has the overhead where the sharks can swim over you, and at one point, you come into a glass room where the fish and sharks can swim all around you. Sometimes the sharks and fish try to bite at your feet and hit the glass instead. Including going to the Grand Canyon and the Hoover Dam, the thing I think I like the most of the trip is the aquarium. The dam and the canyon are both like tourist traps, and they only want your money.

* * *

Going home can be a sad thing. I really did not want to leave, but I had to. If I had to compare where I live and Nevada, I think

I would stay in Nevada. Everything is so nice up there, but I still had to go home. We get to the airport, and of course the flight is delayed about twelve hours. It reminds me of the journey here, and how long it took. I wait anxiously to board the plane, thinking of the destinations to come, whether home or other vacations.

my life in germany

gabryel wilborn

meeting the neighbors

“HEY,” I said to a tall boy crouching in front of a hole in the fence at the end of the street. “My name’s Gaby. What’s yours?”

“I’m Jacob,” he replied. “So you just moved here, right?”

“Yeah, I’m just going around meeting everybody now,” I said. “So, what are *you* doing?”

“About to take a walk through the woods,” he exclaimed. “There’s a path down here that you can follow ‘til you reach the end of the woods. The adults don’t like us going down there but I go anyway because it’s cool.” He glanced at the steep path leading down into the pine-covered forest floor. “Wanna come?” he asked with a mischievous grin on his face.

I looked up at the deep forest green and the big fence it stood behind. There seemed to be a hole in the fence, big enough for a kid to crawl through. The fence looked old and rusty but behind it were several raspberry bushes full of ripe berries. Their sweet smell lingered around the fence. I looked back to see if any of the adults were watching. The street looked empty.

“Sounds like fun,” I said.

Jacob went through the fence first to help lead me down the path. The tall pine trees were like giants towering over us. In between branches, rays of light from the sun shone through, making us emanate a brilliant golden glow. When we came to the end of the woods, he stopped at a tree to look at the cars that passed by. That’s when I really looked at him. He had curly hair the color of milk chocolate and light brown, curious eyes to match the smirk he had on his face. He had pale pink lips and a strong chin. He looked to be around the same age as me, maybe a year older.

“So, I’m guessing we’ll be going to the same school, huh?” he said.

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous though," I said, embarrassed. "It's hard meeting new people."

"It's a really good school. I think you'll like it there," he replied. When the sun started to set we decided it was time to make our way back up to the neighborhood. My mother called my name as the smell of dinner filled the street.

"So, I'll see you in school tomorrow," I said.

"Yeah. Later," he replied.

When I reached my house, I saw my mom and brother talking to some of the other neighbors. The adults stood on the patio talking while four girls about my age chatted with each other on the sidewalk. Once they saw me coming, they rushed over to introduce themselves. There was Jennifer, who was the youngest, Amber and Yamila, who were both my age, and Bianca, who was the oldest out of all of us. Jennifer had short, dark brown hair and was a bit thicker than the rest of us. Amber was a redhead with light brown eyes and freckles that covered her nose and cheeks. Yamila was short and had long, brown hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. Bianca was the tallest, of course. She had long, black hair, green eyes, and a huge smile.

"Hi, and welcome to the neighborhood!" Bianca shouted.

"It's nice to meet you," said Amber.

"We were about to play frisbee in my yard," Yamila said. "Wanna play too?"

"Cool," I said, as she picked up the frisbee. I spent the rest of the day outside until, soon, I was called inside for dinner.

first day of school

Cars lined every side of the block. Parents walked their kids into the lobby to say their goodbyes. I was a little nervous at first, but I got over it.

"Have a great day at school!" my mom shouted as I made my way to the big, blue doors. Once I entered the building, I took a left down a long, blue hallway filled with kids trying to find their classes. I found my homeroom class a short way down the hall. Mrs. Green, my homeroom teacher, was nice. She taught us about writing and

punctuation first, then gave a few examples and let us write our own stories. Her class went by quickly, and, soon enough, I found myself walking back down the hallway and into the lobby again. In the center of the lobby stood a large staircase spiraling upward and connecting to the next floor. To the left of the staircase were the boys and girls restrooms, and to the right was the office which looked cluttered with paperwork. Near the office door was a fish tank full of hyperactive goldfish. I walked by the office and up the stairs to get to my art class. In art, we learned all about the color wheel and famous painters. Though the art teacher was strict, I didn't let it stop me from having a good time. German was at the end of the hall. As I came into the classroom, I was greeted by the teacher.

"*Guten Tag*," she said. "Welcome, and have a seat wherever you want."

The classroom was very organized and flooded with outside light. In the back of the classroom were a bunch of games and posters based on the German culture. For the whole period, we played board games and learned some basic greetings in German. Soon, school was over and I was home again. After homework was done, I went outside to play until my father came home.

trumpet

Looking at the neighborhood from the sidewalk, I sat there, waiting quietly, anticipating when the horn would blow, signaling that work was over for the day and that it was time for all the soldiers to go home. Whenever it was about time, I would go outside and wait for my dad. In the distance, I could see the sun setting, painting the sky a red-orange while crows flying above me almost seemed to float on the breeze. The clouds seemed to hover in the calm, vast sky. Germany was cold, but you had to admit, it was beautiful.

"Hey, what'cha doin'?" a voice behind me asked. I turned to see that it was Jacob, riding on his skateboard. He got off to kneel down beside me. After a minute or so passed, the familiar tune I was waiting for sounded in the background. Still kneeling, Jacob came to a sitting position beside me, reached into his pocket, and pulled out two pieces of candy.

"Want one?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks," I said, taking one from his hand. That's when I heard dad pull into the driveway.

"I'll see you later," I said to Jacob as I got up to greet my father.

"Bye," he replied. He grabbed his skateboard and started practicing again. I saw my dad step out of the car in his green camouflage army suit and tan boots. I ran up to him quickly and gave him a hug.

the woods

"Where is he?" I murmured to myself as I ran down the sidewalk looking around nervously. *His parents are looking for him and I bet you anything he's down there in those woods*, I thought.

At the end of the street was where I saw it. It was Jacob's skateboard, but no Jacob. I knew immediately where he had gone. I walked over to the raspberry bush next to the rusted gaping hole in the fence. It had been foggy this morning and the old metal was slick with dew. Beyond the long, broken, reddish-gray fence was the glistening forest filled with lush, green life. I looked back, knowing that what I was about to do was wrong. The last time I went in there, I had gotten in trouble and was grounded for two days. But I really liked going down there. It was quiet and pretty, a nice place to relax. I glanced back at the shining woods and began walking toward them. I slipped through the fence easily, climbed down the steep slope, and made my way down the path, eager to see the person who awaited on the other side.

"Hey, Jacob, you should go back up. Your family is looking for you," I said

"Oh, thanks," he said. He was up in tree looking down at the cars on the nearby street.

"Did you see the clouds?" he asked after a few silent moments. "The weather man said it's supposed to snow tomorrow."

I looked up to see the dark cumulus clouds starting to cover the sky. When it was winter in Germany, the temperature usually fell below zero. A cold wind blew. I shuddered.

"Yeah," I said. "I heard, so let's go back up before we freeze to death."

winter

Dark gray clouds covered the sky, blocking out any sunlight. A freezing wind came my way, sending a chill down my spine. My toes and fingers were frozen solid, but to me it's all worth it to get to play in that thick white blanket that covered the land.

"First one down the hill wins, okay?" my little brother told me, grabbing one of the sleds. I grabbed one too and slid down several times with my brother, and some of the neighborhood kids joined in. After the sledding my brother built a barrier between us and prepared a supply of ammo.

"Snowball fight!" he yelled.

"Take cover!" I told my friends. I heard a scream from behind and turned just in time to see my friend, Courtney, get knocked over by a snowball. Not bothering to build any of the details of a proper fort, I hid behind one of mounds of snow I made and started flinging slightly round chunks of snow at people. The feel of the hard ice against my hand stung my fingers.

When our war was over, my frostbitten brother went inside to make us both some hot chocolate. Meanwhile I remained outside, making a snowman with a few stray twigs, some dark round stones and pebbles I found buried underneath the ice cold blanket of snow.

a new world: my venture to indonesia

larry stevens

I.

I STARED OUT THE WINDOW AT THE PITCH BLACK SKY, the sky over Jakarta, which was not nearly as smoggy as I had expected. Thirty-one hours of travel and being stuck in Korea for a night had made me itch with anticipation.

As I walked speedily down the ramp towards the baggage claim, I immediately located my luggage. There, we waited, and waited, and waited for my mom's luggage, but nothing came. *Bam!* The doors of the baggage claim slammed shut.

"Where is my bag!?" my mom exclaimed.

I responded hastily, "Why don't we talk to the office here?"

We went to the office and explained our situation: that we were only going to be in Jakarta for a night and would need it shipped to Bali. We finally got it all sorted out, and were on our way.

We walked to Golden Bird, told them our name, and were led to a luxurious SUV that my uncle had rented. When we sat down, I noticed the plush leather seats and '80s American pop music, and I felt like I was living in the time my parents grew up. I knew this would be an interesting trip.

II.

When we arrived at my uncle's, it was close to midnight. We pulled up to his gated house through streets scattered with people smoking and talking. No one seemed to want to go home. I saw a tall, dark figure walk out of the garage with another not-so-tall figure. As it strolled toward the gate, it became more and more clear that it was my uncle. He opened up the gate and asked me how I'd been as he helped my mom carry her luggage inside.

He showed us the part of his house we would be staying in, then showed us to his part of the house. We walked in, and he introduced us to his girlfriend, Fiana. We all sat down and talked for at least an hour. I asked them all about Indonesia, specifically where we would be going, a place called Bali. I remember asking my uncle why there were a bunch of guards outside of the house opposite his.

“You mean the mansion? That belongs to a Chinese mobster.”

III.

I woke up early the next morning, around seven o'clock. I felt disgusting from the past few days of travel. I got ready, then went over to my uncle's side of the house and knocked on the door. He didn't respond; turning around, I saw his roommate's two dogs sitting right behind me.

I tried to walk past them, but the little one, aptly named Chewy, began biting at my pant leg and wouldn't let go. Then the bigger one, Carpet, came and lay down in front of me. On the carpet. I tried to grab Chewy, but he let go of my pants and ran behind a corner. Then, a few seconds later, he came running back with a little rope toy.

I grabbed one end of the rope too and started twirling it around. Chewy kept jumping, trying to grab onto one end of it, while Carpet stared blankly up at me. *What does he want me to do with this toy?* I thought to myself, then I remembered playing with my cousin's dog when I was a little kid. It had a rope toy just like this one, and the dog always wanted to play tug of war.

I lowered the rope to where Chewy could reach it, but instead, Carpet decided to snatch it from him at the last second. He just sat there gnawing on it like it was a bone, and Chewy began growling at him. Carpet sat up with the toy still in his mouth, and stared directly into the eyes of Chewy, who continued to growl intensely. I waited with anticipation for what would happen next, as if this were the end of an episode of a bad crime show. Chewy vaulted forward to try to latch onto Carpet's part of the toy, but Carpet simply lifted his paw and stopped him. It looked like something straight out of a cartoon.

Chewy backed down, knowing he had been beat. I decided to let go of the rope toy and headed back into my part of my uncle's house so that I could get some of my summer assignment done. I sat down and got my laptop out to get to work.

I had finished about two chapters when I heard my uncle knock on the door. I went to answer it and saw that he had all his luggage in his hands and on his back.

"Are you and your mom ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah. Let me go get my mom," I responded.

My mom and I walked out of the house with all our stuff. I looked around and at Carpet and Chewy, knowing I might never see them again. We hauled everything to the Blue Bird taxi and waited for my uncle to say bye to Fiana, who wouldn't be coming until Friday night because of her job. We got in the car and were off on our way to the airport, on our way to Bali.

IV.

As the plane landed, I felt the familiar jerk forward for a split second. It felt normal, this being the seventh flight I had been on in three days. As we walked off the plane, my uncle quickly brought us to the luggage claim and grabbed a taxi before they had all been taken. He had the driver put the meter on while we went into Starbucks and got drinks. It was strange seeing how many American tourists were there, pretty much as far from the U.S.A. as you can get and still be on Earth.

We got into the taxi, and my uncle started speaking in Balinese. It was strange; I had never heard him have a conversation in another language. He told the man the location of our villa in Seminyak. We drove through some of the smallest streets in the world, which were all packed to the brim with mopeds carrying families of up to seven. The taxi passed all kinds of stores and restaurants. My uncle pointed out that we would go to stores that had everything from fake sunglasses to lizards that you could keep as pets. It almost felt a bit like Myrtle Beach.

When the taxi slowed down and came to a complete halt, I stared at the walls of what seemed like a fortress. I knocked on the

door and was greeted by the two employees of the villa who would be there in the morning to make breakfast and clean after we left. They offered us all watermelon juice, showed us everything the villa had, and then left us to enjoy.

V.

Splash! I resurfaced and signaled to the dive master that I was okay. It was our second dive of the day, and I was ready to go down. I waited for my mom and uncle to step in. *Splash!* Then, a few seconds later, *Splash!* We were all in and ready to go.

I released the air from my buoyancy compensator and slowly drifted towards the coral reef below. When I got to the bottom, I used the signals to make sure my mom and the guide were alright. My uncle had gone off with a different guide, and another advanced diver. I saw them drift away into the clear waters of Crystal Bay.

Now that we were ready, we began to descend little by little to avoid injury. As we grew close enough to observe the life crawling through the coral reefs, I felt like an explorer charting new lands and observing the locals. Everywhere you turned there were fish and sea urchins. Everything had a unique color pattern. We even managed to catch a glimpse of a bamboo shark, which looked like a big brown log in a forest of blue.

As I gazed at one reef with amazement, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the guide. He was pointing to a shadowy figure approaching from the depths of the sea. My heart sank. The creature was obviously huge, and I knew there had been Oceanic White Tips, violent sharks, seen in this area, and I wasn't sure I would be able to stay calm. It drew closer and closer, then turned to its side, and I thought, *This can't be a shark; it's too flat. Maybe a manta ray?* It continued to rise closer and closer. Then, I knew that it was a mola-mola, also known as a giant sunfish. They were huge—the biggest salt water bone fish we currently know of—and they are also ridiculously rare, due to the fact that they only come up from their normal depth of one thousand meters to clean themselves with the sun's rays. The best part was that it was swimming right toward us.

I checked my air gauge to make sure I had enough time to stay down and swim with this amazing creature. I was at exactly half a tank, meaning I had plenty of time before I ran out of air. I began swimming up to the mola-mola, when I looked around and noticed another one swimming straight towards me, catching me by surprise with its pitch black eyes, giant lips, and huge stature of about seven feet tall and easily three feet wide. I froze as I gazed straight into the eyes of this creature, knowing there were very few people in the world who had experienced this privilege. I swam with them a bit more, and even got close enough so that some of the small fish started nibbling on me like I was one of the mola-mola.

Then I felt the familiar tap of the guide's hand on my shoulder. He signaled for me that it was time to go up. I took one last glance at the fish as I heard the sound of my ears experiencing the pressure change as I went up to the surface. I saw my uncle and his group about fifteen feet away, and I yelled to them since I was the first one up. My uncle swam over to me and asked me if I saw the mola-molas. I told him the whole story, and he told me that the advanced diver with him had gotten a bunch of photos of them.

As we climbed back onto the boat and took off our gear, I knew this dive had been a great one, and might even be the only time I saw mola-mola. I heard the boat engine start up, and we started back, wondering what it looked like to the mola-mola.

VI.

The sharp clanging sound of breaking glass ripped me out of the conversation with my uncle. I turned as fast as lightning, even hurting my neck a bit. I was expecting to see something cool or interesting, but it was only that a waiter had dropped a stack of plates. I turned back to my uncle to continue our last conversation of the trip. I continued clutching the back of my neck due to the slight pain I was feeling from turning my head so fast.

I asked him, "How do you always stay so calm and composed when you talk about seeing these people, like the leprosy colonies? Even thinking of that makes me cringe. I guess what I'm saying is you make everything seem so much like it's not that big of a deal."

He thought for a second. "I guess I just realized that spending time feeling bad for not only yourself but also other people won't accomplish anything. You have to at least put on a façade of being calm and composed, as you put it, if you want anyone to believe in you. Think about it. Would you rather hire a nervous wreck who spends their whole interview talking about how bad they feel for these people and shuddering at the thought of it, or someone who can at least make themselves appear calm and talks about fixing something and what they plan to do?"

"So I'm guessing you took that ability and applied it to your personal life?" I said, slightly confused.

"Essentially, it's the same thing. Would you rather spend your time talking to a person who whines and complains and freaks out, or someone that's just relaxed and somewhat carefree?" he replied as he began to reach for his cup of coffee.

I let it all sink in. "I understand . . . I think."

"Don't worry," he said. "It takes time for everyone to understand something like that."

* * *

It was around one in the afternoon when my uncle came and knocked on the door. My mom and I were ready to go. We grabbed our bags, walked to the check-out desk, and had them put our luggage where they keep it for people that are not going to the airport until later. We walked out of the hotel into Legian. I thought about it, and in comparison to Semnyak, this place really was a dump: the ripped-up concrete, the stores selling fake goods, and the massive amount of buildings that looked as if people had just sat there for hours throwing rocks at them.

I put that behind me as we talked about where we were going for lunch. We found a small restaurant about half a mile from the hotel. We sat down and just reminisced about what we had done up to that point—everything we had seen, talked about, and experienced.

When lunch was over, we walked back to the hotel and got in a taxi, which had all of our bags in it. I did not say much that ride; instead, I just thought about what things would be like when I got back, how things would be different, and how I thought this

trip had changed me. I stared out the window as we drove through Semnyak, by the villa we spent our first half of the trip in and the restaurants we had been to, especially Kronos. I almost felt more at home in this country, where I knew almost no one, than I did in my official home. I knew I would miss it.

We took everything out of the taxi and unloaded it onto a cart. My uncle paid the taxi driver, and we were on our way inside. I chuckled to myself when I thought about how lenient security was here. We just walked through to the lobby, then onto the plane.

* * *

The plane began landing like any other; it flew in what seemed like a circle around the city until it began to descend to the runway. I looked at my uncle and mom, who had fallen asleep even though the flight was no more than an hour and a half long. I woke them up and told them we were here, in Jakarta again. The night sky was black as the fur of a panther, but the city was illuminated with iridescence.

We walked off the plane and into the shuttle area. My uncle said he hoped that things between me and my dad got better and that I would have a good ninth grade year.

I told him thanks, and that I couldn't wait to see him next year for the family reunion. He and my mom said their goodbyes. He told us where to go from there and called a taxi for himself. As I walked into the airport, I looked around and saw a man drop a bottle of wine that I assumed he got from the duty-free, reminding me of the glass shattering this morning.

Clanging and loud, I missed this place already.

the adventures of moving

dekhayla barnes-hankins

THE DULL, WHITE WALLS SET A LAZY MOOD THROUGHOUT THE APARTMENT.

“Can I please turn the channel?” I pleaded to my mother, with her soft, brown complexion and high cheekbones that made her smile even when she wasn’t trying.

“Khayla, I’m doing something important.”

“What?” I wondered. *This is so boring, looking at a white screen with big words on it.* My mother sat on the edge of her bed, leaning towards the TV, which seemed to be sucking all of her attention towards the screen.

It was Saturday, and I was missing precious shows like *Sponge-Bob SquarePants* and *The Fairly OddParents*. Soon, I forgot about the cartoons and instead paid attention to my mom, trying to figure out why she wasn’t paying any attention to me.

Then I knew how to get her undivided attention.

“Mommy? I have a question to ask you.”

“What?” she replied with a hint of agitation in her voice.

I was startled but asked anyway. “Should I watch cartoons or play with my toys in my toy box?”

Her eyes, which had before held the glowing reflection of the television screen, now reflected me.

“Please go somewhere so I can concentrate,” she answered. Her face turned back to the TV with a concentrated gaze.

I slouched out of her room, so low that my fingertips touched my toes.

I guess that didn’t work, I thought to myself.

* * *

I wished my mom would hurry with the mail. It doesn’t take that long to get mail. I was ready to get home, watch TV, and play with my toys.

I was sitting in our off-white mini van, waiting for my mother to hurry to the car. We were at the mail center in our apartment complex. It was dark and cold outside. The only lights on were the street lamps that lined the sidewalks in our subdivision.

My mother paced to the car, opened the door, and got in.

"Mom, can we go now?" I whined.

She gave me a piercing look. I stopped complaining quick. She had a certain expression that told me she was waiting or hoping for something. I read the name on the envelope in her hand: Biomer-iux. I wondered where that was from.

After my mother read through the letter, a wide grin spread over her face, and she let out a loud scream. It seemed as though the walls in the car multiplied it by ten.

"What?" I yelled. She had really scared me.

"Khayla!" she screamed. "I got accepted for a new job!"

My heart raced. We weren't as privileged as other kids my age, but maybe my mommy would start making some extra money so my little brother and I could get the toys we wanted. But what if I had to change schools? I didn't want to do that. I thought there might be mean kids there, like at my school then. They bullied me all the time about my skin tone and called me Count Blackula. I suddenly got scared.

"Where is it, mommy?" I asked.

"Durham," she replied.

Where's that? I thought. I hoped it wasn't in another state because even though some of the kids were mean, I would still miss my school in Greensboro.

I guess I had a look on my face because she also mentioned that it was still in North Carolina.

Whew! I thought. The dull gray in the car seemed like it brightened up as I learned more about this new job my mommy would be getting. "So does that mean we have to move?" I asked.

"Yes."

The inside of the car darkened.

* * *

I was coming from the cafeteria at my school where I had just eaten breakfast with my friend Lana. She already knew of me mov-

ing to another city and so did everyone else in my class. Lana and I had met in first grade. On the first day of school, she came up to me and introduced herself, and from then on, we were friends.

I continued to walk down the long, narrow hallway toward my classroom. I remembered when I had met my first boyfriend here. His name was Terry. He was a shade lighter than chocolate, and it seemed as though his nose was shining all the time.

Those were the good days. I instantly saddened when I thought about leaving Greensboro to go to Durham.

I walked into the classroom, feeling mixed emotions. I went to my cubby to put my book bag away. No one seemed to be paying any attention to me. That day went by very slowly, but I had to be happy because it was the last day of school before winter break.

* * *

What should I take with me? I thought as I sat in a fort of boxes.

It was the middle of winter break, and we would be moving to Durham on New Year's Day.

I was scared and excited. My mom had already enrolled me in a new school called Bethesda Elementary. Earlier in the year, we went to visit on a school day. The drive had seemed endless. There was a long strip of highway, and then you could see a big stadium introducing the amazing city of Durham. When we got to the school, we walked into the building, and it was beautiful. It was small, and looked older than my old school, but it was still beautiful.

My new school had wide hallways covered in slightly chipped blue and white paint. The classes were right next to each other, but the different grades were not close to each other. The class that I was going to be in for most of the time was across from the A.I.G. class that I would also be in. I found out that A.I.G. stood for Academically/Intellectually Gifted. But the best thing about the school was the playground. It was big and had a monkey bars, a jungle gym, a big green slide that looked like a spiraled dragon, and two sets of swings that could take you on dangerous adventures.

The only downside to moving was the new kids that I would have to meet. And the bullies.

* * *

“Don’t pack everything tonight. Just pack what toys you still want to keep, and put the rest aside for the Salvation Army,” she said.

Why would the Salvation Army need them? But that question wasn’t really my main concern.

“I need help,” I whined. I was getting frustrated because I didn’t know what I should throw away and what I should keep. I wanted everything!

“What do you need help with, sweetie?” my mother cooed to calm me down.

Looking at my mother with pleading eyes, I asked, “What should I throw away?”

“Anything that you don’t want or don’t play with anymore. Like that,” she said, pointing at my old xylophone that I had as a toy ever since my second birthday. “Hurry up, though, because I need you to eat and go to bed.”

* * *

My daddy had aged, gray hairs sprouting up around his head. He looked like a mixture of the rappers Ice Cube and 50 Cent. My stepdad was a short man with giant muscles from being in the Navy and a beard that made him look like the advertised dads on TV. They were both there to help with moving boxes and furniture.

According to my mom, the new apartment was big and wonderful. There were three stories, and we would be living on the second floor. The apartment came with cable, too. I had my own bathroom and a large closet. My mother had a big room that the sun would brighten every day. The balcony door was also stationed in my mother’s room. Her bathroom was an interesting one; I’d never seen a bathroom with a “his” and “hers” sink—whatever that was.

I was taping my toy box shut so that when we packed it up in the moving truck, my precious, beloved toys wouldn’t fall out and get crushed.

My mother walked in to check on me. “Are you excited that we are moving to another city?”

She seemed excited. She had a glow about her that was mixed with sweat from moving boxes and furniture. I was pretty excited myself, now that I had chosen to move with my mother, rather than stay with my dad until the end of the school year.

"Yes, but I wonder how the other kids will like me." My happiness was interrupted by the thought of being picked on all the time.

"They will accept you," she said. "If you're still uncertain, Khay, then just pray about it. . . . But not right now—we have to finish packing."

"Okay, thanks for helping me, Mommy," I said.

When we finished packing, it was 11:30. My dad had gone home, and my stepdad was going back and forth from Greensboro to Durham to drop off our furniture and boxes.

My little brother Tyric and I had already taken a nap, but not a long one because we were too excited, and we wanted a chance to ride in the truck with my stepdad. We both rode to Durham with him. Tyric went when we were taking some of the furniture to the apartment in Durham. I rode there on the last drive to the amazing city. I was so excited because I was sitting in the front seat. The seat was so high that I felt like a grown-up.

"Are you ready, Khay?" my stepdad asked me.

"For what, Way-Wayne?" I asked him cluelessly. I had called him "Way-Wayne" since I first met him.

"For you moving. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm excited, and I can't wait to get to the new house and see what my room looks like with my stuff in it."

He nodded his head like he was confirming something.

When we arrived at the apartment, it wasn't like what I expected. Nothing was organized; it was just there. There were even boxes that didn't belong to me in my room. But we all prayed our New Year's prayer for a good year, and then my mom made a pallet on the floor from two sleeping mats and lots of blankets. The blankets were clean and new, just like the life I was going to be starting.

california lights

edwin garcia

ONE DAY AFTER SCHOOL, my parents wanted to talk to me about something. *I didn't do anything wrong*, I thought. I sat down on the couch and my dad said, "We are going to move."

I asked where.

"North Carolina."

"Where is that?" I did not know it was on the other side of the United States, so I just laughed, and then it got silent. The first things were my family and friends. No more parties, no more visits. At first, I was happy and excited, but as the time drew nearer to leave, the more I didn't want to go. I wasn't a fan of going to a place far away from California, and at the time I still didn't know where North Carolina was. Every time my parents mentioned the words North Carolina, I would feel my heart breaking into pieces. My whole life in California would disappear, but my parents said it was a better future for us. At that point, I didn't care; I wanted to stay.

* * *

The highway was dark, and the van was silent. Nothing but my family's happiness for moving was heard. My head began to hurt, and I started to cry. I sat up in my seat and turned to look at the California lights one more time. As I looked back, I asked myself, *Why did I agree to this? Why didn't I say that I could stay at my cousin's house and go to school in San Diego?* But I knew I had no choice; my dad had said we are family, and family does not get left behind.

* * *

We drove non-stop, passing Nevada and traveling all the way to Texas to stay at one of my uncle's house. We stayed there for two

or three days to rest, but we had to keep going. I suddenly began to wonder why we didn't stay in Texas. When I asked my father, he didn't answer me. One part of me was happy about the move, but the other part wasn't. I was made to live in California. And I was tired of being in the car.

One night, as I woke up from a restless sleep, my dad announced, "We're here."

At first I saw nothing but farms, so the conclusion I came to was that we were going to live on a farm. *This is going to suck. I don't want to start a farm.*

"This isn't it," my father reassured me when he saw the distressed look on my face. In my mind, I thanked God. Two hours went by until we pulled up to a house. My mom told me it was my uncle's house. I went in to meet my family.

We stayed there for three months until my dad could find a job. The next thing I knew, my mom was waking me up to go to school. The name was Hope Valley Elementary. I didn't want new friends or new anything. When I got there, my heart was pumping so fast and so hard that I felt like it was going to burst from my chest.

* * *

When I got to class, people kept staring at me. *I hope this year goes by fast*, I thought. And it did. But I didn't get to finish second grade because we had to move again, this time to Goldsboro. I had to take second grade again. This time, I was more open to new friends, but for some reason I had more girl friends than guy friends.

When my parents went to work at a Chinese place, my sister and I would stay in the van to watch movies or play games. When my mom was on her break, she would take us to walk around and stretch our legs. We would go to a store or go eat a burger. But little did I know, we were going to move for the third time once I graduated second grade. We moved back to Durham to go to third grade at Forest View. I went there from third to fifth grade and then to middle school at Rogers-Herr.

* * *

I just kept getting frustrated. I would argue with my parents. Why hadn't they asked me if I wanted to move? If they had cared how I felt, they would have asked me, right? But now, I thank my parents for bringing me to North Carolina. They told me it wouldn't be perfect, but it would get better. It took me five years to feel safe, but, you know, they were right. It's not perfect, but it gets better.

forgetting what doesn't matter

chadwick copernicus

AT A YOUNG AGE, I WAS VERY POPULAR. Everybody loved me . . . but that all changed. I began to wear my hair in a ponytail and dress like a tomboy. When I went to school, I was made fun of. To me, it didn't matter until I was in the sixth grade. I couldn't make many friends. It was as if I had a disease no one wanted to catch. My mind tried to stay off the things that people called me. My eyes were always exhausted from the tears that fled from them. I came home crying, and my mom said, "What's wrong?" I told her I was being made fun of. She looked at me and said, "Don't care about what people think. You're beautiful."

I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I saw a face that I didn't want to be mine. I was ashamed of the way I looked. *What am I doing on this earth?*

In the summer of eighth grade, I decided to wear my hair down and dress a little better. People didn't make fun of me as much, but when someone tells me their first impression of me, they always say, "You looked scary and mean." I try hard not to get depressed about it, but it hits me, and all I want to do is hide in a deep, deep hole and never come out. Now, I really don't care what people think and I just say, "Fuck you."

* * *

When I got out of the car, I felt the cool, ocean breeze hit my skin, giving me goosebumps like I was watching a creepy scene from some horror movie. I took my shoes off and placed them underneath the seat so I wouldn't have to carry them while I was taking a walk on the beach. When I took a step, it was like walking on light tan cushions that rubbed against my feet, filling them up with comfort. Watching the children on the beach smile and laugh was like watching little kids enjoy the rides at a carnival, forcing them

to make high pitched screams. This reminded me of the wonders of joy I had when I was a little girl.

My brother and I would sit on the sunroof where the salty sea air could caress our noses while we let our skin soak in the sun's nutrients, giving us a natural glow. While I sat there, I'd think of how great it would be to live at the beach one day. I'd taken so many exciting trips there that when I was there, I felt at home, as though this was where I belonged. I longed to be free, to get away from it all, and to see its breathtaking scenery.

* * *

When I was three, my family moved to North Carolina. We didn't live in a house. We lived in an office building filled with eight to ten rooms. The place reeked of cockroaches and car wax. My brother, sister, and I shared a tiny room together at the end of the hallway. My brother's and sister's beds sat at the end of the room side by side, while mine was by itself, with no pictures or posters, like a lonely person slept there. I walked down the hall to the bathroom with a fork in my hand . . . I was three, so I didn't know any better. I put the fork on the door knob, not knowing that my brother was in the bathroom. He opened the door and the fork jabbed me in the eye. It made me extremely angry.

My dad told me to calm down, but all I could do was scream. He and his employees held me down to put eye drops in my eyes. Finally, the pain settled, and I fell asleep.

The next day, I got news that my family was going to move into a house. I was excited to know that I'd get to have my own room and that I wouldn't have to hear my sister snore. My dad took us to the new house. It was big with two stories and a blue-gray color. I felt weird when I walked through the grass in the front yard. The grass was about three feet tall. I tagged along with my family into the house to take a tour. As I was walking through the hallways, the scent of fresh paint hit my nose, making me say, "Ew!" I spotted my room and walked in, closed the door and let the euphoria of having my own room wash over me. I grinned from ear to ear, because I knew that I'd have an exciting new life in Durham.

at immaculata

suyana ellzey

I REMEMBER MY FIRST DAY AT IMMACULATA. I was frightened at the thought of going to a real school for the first time in three years. As soon as I walked through the glass doors, I was whisked into the office and officially started my day. I was partnered with a girl named Ariana, who showed me around and told me how the day would work. After we had an English lesson, I was walked to the room where I would take the entrance exam. After spending more than enough time in there, I went to lunch with my class. Lunch was interesting. This kid, Nick, had pasta and ate it really slowly. To announce that he was done, he poured his chocolate milk over the pasta. That concluded my first lunch at Immaculata.

* * *

“Suyana, get the mail, please,” my mom yelled to me from upstairs.

“Okay,” I said as I flipped through the mail . . . Bill, advertisement, coupons, and a letter from Immaculata that was addressed to me. I opened the letter and read what was on the note card. It was a nice note from my homeroom teacher, Ms. Rains. I mulled over the name for a bit, and decided that Ms. Rains was a nice name. I imagined that she would be young, beautiful, and full of life.

On the night of orientation, I was super excited. My mom and I slowly walked up the brown staircase and down the hall. We stopped at the room with ‘Ms. Rains’ engraved onto the plaque that hung from the door, and I saw my teacher for the first time. She was plain and simple. She had a slightly wrinkled forehead that reminded me of a well worn wheelbarrow rut. Her hair was a deep brown with little bits of gray running throughout. She was short, barely five feet tall. Her dark outfit accented her cream colored skin. Hidden behind her glasses were small eyes and slightly

arched eyebrows. She was on the heavier side, big-boned.

"Hi! My name is Ms. Rains," she said as she greeted us. Her voice was rough, but warm. The teacher I had imagined disappeared, and I replaced it with a new one, the real one.

* * *

I nervously sat at the kitchen table, trying to eat a bowl of cereal. I felt stiff and uncomfortable wearing my school uniform; it was too starchy. Before I was ready, it was time to go.

The drive took all of three minutes, and my new school came into view. It was a large, brick building, fortified like a castle. The grass was systematically mowed, and all the flowers were symmetrically arranged, not even a speck of mulch out of place. I watched as student after student sashayed out of a row of sports cars, all meeting the unspoken assessment of each scrupulous faculty member. First impressions were everything.

I sat in the car, stalling, assessing the journey I was about to make. The first day at this new school intimidated me; I wanted to stay in my safe haven, protected from the change that lay before me. Just a week ago, I was excitedly getting my school supplies ready. However, now that the day was finally here, and I was anything but.

"It's time to get out, Suyana," my mom said, impatience creeping into her voice.

"I know," I mumbled. I slowly got out of the car and trudged towards the open doors. I breathed in deeply and took my first step into the unknown.

By the second week, I figured out three things. One: On Fridays you should get to the lunch line first because you don't want a soggy hamburger bun. Two: During recess, if you're too cold, ask to go to the bathroom and stay there 'til classes resume. Three: I hate uniforms. Uniforms make everyone feel like one. We were all the same, clones of each other. Blue polos, khaki bottoms, white shoes, and white socks. It seemed as though none of us had any uniqueness about us, zero personalities.

But sometimes I enjoyed it. The structure of it represented the achievement of perfection that the school looked for in each of us—

—perfection that most of us strived for and only some achieved. We were proud of the emblems that were engraved on each of our garments. They represented what each of us stood for. The uniforms were important in the way that no one person was above the other, no one person was better than the rest. That people were judged by the quality of their personality, not the content of their closet. I guess feeling starchy daily wasn't *that* bad; you just had to get used to it.

The sharpening of pencils and the rustling of the papers was a daily sound during the morning in Ms. Rains' room. The chit-chat grew do a dull roar as the warning bell rang. I had a great class, and we all worked together perfectly. Ms. Rains wouldn't admit it, but she knew that we were her favorite class, and always would be.

* * *

I can't believe that four years ago, I was new, scared, and unsure about going to Immaculata. Now, I was giving my eighth grade speech, one week away from wearing a white cap and gown, graduating from Immaculata.

I took a deep breath as I stepped up to the podium. Emotion took the place of nervousness. Taking a shaky laugh, I began.

"I remember my first day here at Immaculata . . ."

Memories came flooding back. I looked out onto the faces of my classmates. Some were listening intently, with me in the moment. Others were staring at the wasp crawling across the gym floor. Either way, I knew that they knew how I was feeling because they too had experienced the impact of this school.

I spent four school years at Immaculata. I learned life lessons there, grew up there. Like I said to my teacher in my eighth grade speech, "With all that you have done for me, in teaching and giving your all to your job, I know I will leave here a better person than when I first stepped in the doors." There were some times when I didn't enjoy it, when I wished I could wear flip-flops and no uniform, but looking back, all of the rules and regulations, standards and procedures, they were all beneficial to me. I can say now that I am grateful.

When I was giving my speech, I felt a rush of emotion. I went from "I can't wait 'til I am outta here!" to practically crying in front

of the whole school. Finding yourself is hard to do in high school, let alone in middle school. But somehow, I managed to do just that at Immaculata. I figured out who I am and who I can become.

one giant leap

melody rose

“I’M HOME! I mean, *we’re* home!” I yelled. My younger brother and I had just gotten off the bus, and we were hungry. School lunch was poison to the taste buds, so we never ate all of it. When we walked into the kitchen, we saw my parents with this very tall man. The man’s complexion was pale, but his face showed a hint of red. He had sky blue eyes, which had a sense of seriousness in them, but he had a voice that would give anyone the chills, especially me. By the looks of his name tag and his bright red shirt, he was a realtor.

“Hello there,” he said.

“Hi,” my brother and I said nervously. In my head I thought, *Why is this man here? Is there something going on I don’t know about?* My mom and dad explained to us that we were moving. The goosebumps I got when I was nervous began to dance; I had a smile on the inside that I was too shy to release. The last time I moved, I was in diapers, so you could say this was my first time moving.

I ran upstairs to my room and began to twirl and spin, hugging my favorite teddy bear. Purple fur covered her and, since I’d had her for a long time, she was very stretched out. She had black eyes that were surprisingly still in place. I liked looking in the eyes because I could see my reflection. As I hugged and spun with my teddy bear, I noticed the drapes covering my window swaying back and forth because of the air. I walked to the window and gazed outside. The sun had started to set in the background. I saw children riding their bikes down the street, giggling and smiling. A dog walked through our neighbor’s yard. *I wonder how they get their grass so green . . .*

a place to call my own

Between two rooms, there was a place for me. It was small, squared, a place any girl would want to go. Pink, floral curtains, a

closet full of personality, and a bed to sleep in or maybe cry on. This place was *my* room. *No, don't go . . . Just hide in the corner. In your closet? Somewhere!* But that would be a bad idea.

I had these stickers on my wall of Winnie the Pooh that had been there since I was a baby. I would talk to them when I was sad, or even when I was happy. I remembered one day when I was mad. "Today was a good day," I had said. "Until she arrived. I wish she never did that, but I guess these days are just that way." I let out a long sigh, wondering what to do. Those were the days, talking to my stickers as if they were friends right next me, listening to my thoughts, to how my day went, and, most importantly, to my feelings. It was too bad that I couldn't take them with me. I had to peel them off as if I were peeling an orange, and threw those peelings away.

The first thing I began to pack was my clothes. I remember a couple of summers ago, my dad and I counted my jeans; the total was 103. "Wow," I had said in a shocked voice. So I had to pack all that up. It was a lot of work, and my hands felt worn out.

When I was halfway done with packing my clothes, I walked down the tan, carpeted stairs just to re-explore what I had been exploring for years. I went to the special room. It was all white and well-furnished with cushioned couches that your butt could sink into. Two doors led to the kitchen. It also had a window, which, when I looked into it, showed green sign with my street name on it. You could also see my little plum tree if you tilted your head a bit. It looked so lonely, and it would be even lonelier once I left. I returned to my room and looked at the outline on my wall. The stickers that once fit perfectly there were now gone.

a walk down memory lane

Since people had to look at our house, we frequently had to go to the park that was right up the street. You could say the park was like a mini-jungle. It had monkey bars and a trail that led to a black, worn-out tire swing. The swings were my favorite. It also had two banana-colored slides.

"Why are people kicking us out of our house?" my younger brother asked. He was only seven and didn't really know what

was happening. You could tell he was a little worried because when the sun shone on his face you could see how his eyes glistened with sadness.

“We’re not being kicked out; we just can’t be in the house while other people are there,” my older brother explained. He sounded calm, but looked worried because of the way his eyebrows furrowed. He would also look into the distance with an anxious expression that hid underneath it all.

Personally, I was a little bit furious. It was like a bomb going off in my head. Why should we have to be forced out of our own home so other people could look at it?

“Well, are we moving to a bigger place? A place big enough for all my toys and more toys to fit?” my younger brother asked.

“I doubt that, but I don’t know where we’re going,” I answered. My little brother ran off to play. I just watched as he slid down the banana-colored slide and swung on my favorite black, rubber tire. I sat on a bench where I could see my home in the distance. I could just make out the bricks that stood out beneath my window, the giant tree that had been growing forever, and my favorite little plum tree. How those plums were so sweet and delicate every time I took a bite from them, I would never know. They made me feel happy, as if they grew for me, and only me.

when will it come?

“When is the moving truck getting here?” my younger brother asked. I didn’t care how long that truck took. I wanted to enjoy my last moments at home.

“It should be here soon,” my father answered. My dad had sweat beads racing down his face, and it looked as if the sun was sucking the black out of his hair.

“Finally!” my mom exclaimed. Her set eyebrows then relaxed, and her mouth opened to reveal perfectly white teeth.

The men who drove the truck looked even sweatier than we did.

“Hey, sorry we took so long,” one of the guys said. He had a round head and eyebrows that would scrunch up naturally. His teeth were awfully yellow, like grass that had been sitting in the sun for ages.

“No problem,” my dad said sarcastically. The first thing that went in the truck was the furniture. I couldn’t really help; the furniture was too heavy. My brother and I watched my older brother, my dad, and the men as they moved the furniture.

One thing I made sure did get packed that day was my teddy bear. I had to have her with me at all times. Her scratched, black, button eyes still allowed me to see my reflection. I would tell her my secrets because it seemed like she was the only one who was really listening to what I said. The ears looked like they actually heard what I was saying, and her mouth frowned and smiled all at the same time, based on what I had told her. She was as special as the home I was leaving. Thankfully, I could take her with me.

no turning back now

Empty. That was the only word I could use to describe how my home looked. We were ready—well, they were ready to leave, so we headed out. It looked like a ghost house from the outside. My room looked abandoned, the house itself looking like it was about to fall apart. As we drove off, all I could say in my head was, *No, turn around! I forgot something!* But of course there was no turning back now. We were already halfway down the street, headed to our new “home.”

I did nothing but stare out the window as we drove. It was late at night, so there was not much to see. All I could see were trees that looked like black stick figures. My younger brother was half asleep. Whenever he slept, it seemed like the world was so quiet. His cheeks were slightly red and splotchy under the streetlights.

When we arrived at our new place, it was awkward. Outside were many doors which you would probably see at an apartment. It looked small. The color was baby blue, but the paint was shedding right off of it. As we walked in, I noticed my hypothesis was correct. It *was* small. The house only had three bedrooms and two bathrooms. “Where’s my room?” my younger brother asked.

“For now, you and Melody are going to sleep right here on the floor. We’ll get everything straightened out by tomorrow,” my father explained. *The floor? Why in heaven’s sake would I sleep on the floor?*

"Fine by me," I lied. It was way too late for me to even care about where I was sleeping. All I knew was that I was not going to like it.

When we woke the next morning, I was curious. I walked around and explored. There wasn't much to see, but at least there was something. The living room was quite small but cozy. It was tan-colored with a door to the deck. There was a giant window in one of the rooms that had a view of the lake. I thought it was pretty besides all the spiderwebs and bugs hanging outside the window. "What are you doing?" I asked my younger brother, who was standing outside on the deck.

"Making waffles," he replied.

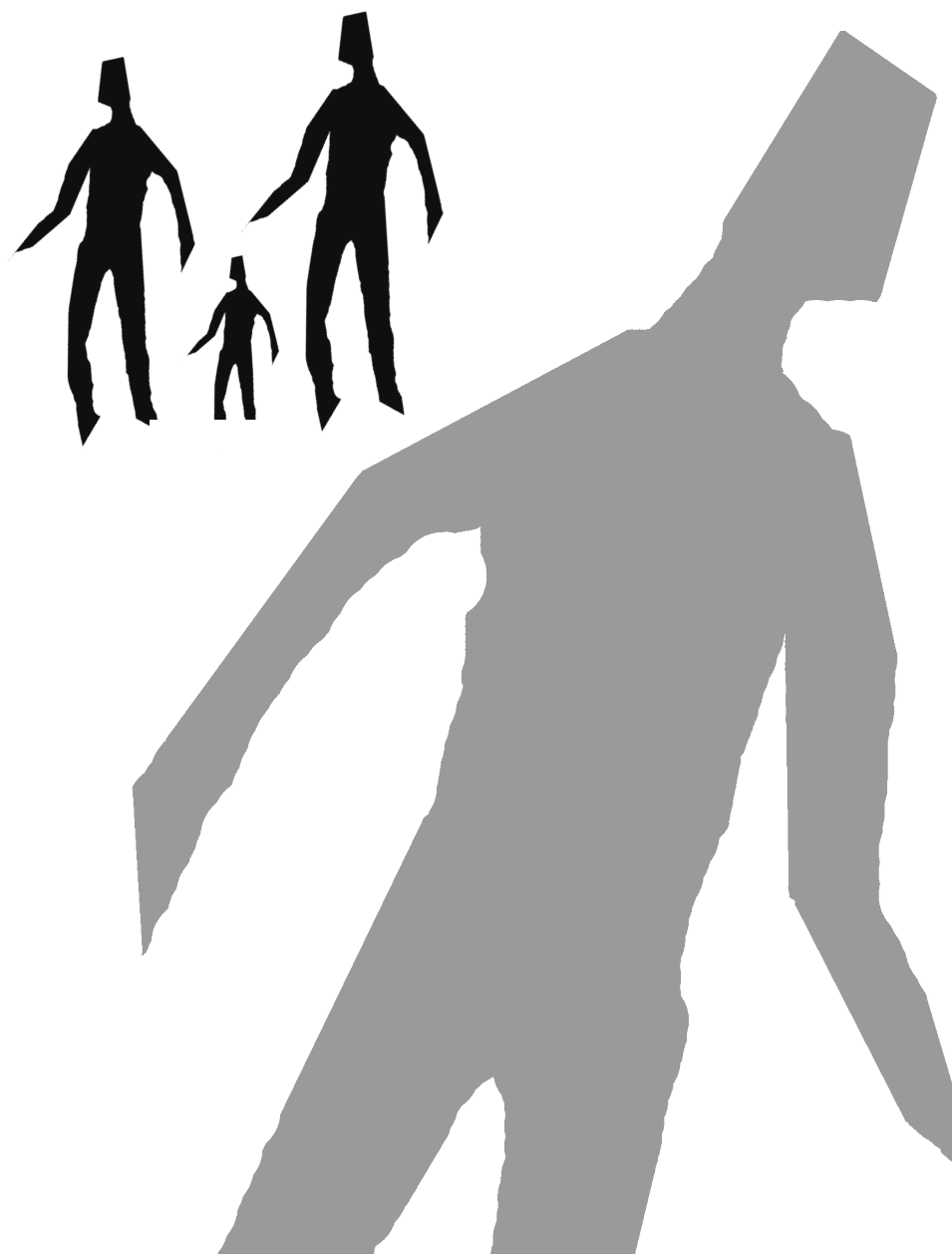
"By holding them up to the sun?" I questioned. I was somewhat curious as to whether that worked or not, so I tried it. It worked, and for breakfast we ate sun-toasted waffles.

Later that morning, we began to place furniture into the correct places. I ended up getting the room with the view of the lake. It was okay. At least I got a room to myself with a somewhat nice view. My older brother and I put my room together. It was like a puzzle because we had to put the pieces in the correct place, or at least the way I like it. My younger brother had to sleep in the living room on a pull-out couch that my parents had bought.

"Why don't I get a room? Why did we even have to come here in the first place?" he asked in sorrowful voice.

No one said anything and just acted as if his voice was on mute. I went back to my room and stared blankly at my bed. It was missing something truly important. I placed my teddy bear on it, right in the middle, like a throne. Then I closed the door. This was now my new house, and I had to adapt to it. It may not have been the best place ever, but at least it was a place to stay and call my home.

freshman versus family



papa, dogs, and baseball

benjamin conner

TWO LITTLE BOYS are propped up with pillows on the headboard, their Nana in between them. Sippy cups of juice and plastic cups of munchies rest beside them, fingers dipping in, an occasional crumb falling onto the bed linens. They're watching a movie tonight, *Polar Express*, which is seen at least twice every Christmas.

As the movie ends, with the boy safely home with his gift from Santa, the boys' heads start to droop, eyelids flutter closed.

"Come on boys, let's go pee-pee before you go to sleep." Nana shepherds them into the bathroom, the boys stumbling, sleepy-eyed.

Now Papa comes up to send them to sleep, and he gets in bed with them. Behind him trots Sugar Dog, and she jumps up on the bed with him. Nana doesn't make a fuss about it and lets her curl up at the foot of the bed with some discarded pillows.

"Alright," Papa says, "let's race to sleep. I bet I can beat you."

The boys respond eagerly, snuggling down in the covers next to Papa and shutting their eyes tight. As Nana watches, Papa quickly falls asleep, easily winning the contest, as he always did. The boys are trying too hard, a bit too excited, but, eventually, their little round faces relax, and they drift off to join Papa in Dreamland.

* * *

"Did you tell him?" she asked, eyeing me.

"But, Mom," I pleaded, already comfortable, "Can't we just go?"

"Nope." She watched me squirm under her gaze. I slowly turned around and walked back across the lobby area to Papa's room.

I walked in and there he was, the same as we'd left him, watching an MLB game on the small TV mounted on his wall. His cheeks sagged with a little more than the usual tinge of jowliness, and his worn face stood out in contrast to the clean, simple hospital room with the varied machines next to the bed.

His face brightened to match the flowers on the bedside table as I walked in.

“Hey buddy,” he said in his low, kind voice. “You forget something?”

“No,” I said, walking over to him. I leaned over to hug him, mumbling, “Love you.”

He hugged me back. “I love you, too.” I stood up, saying good-bye, and quickly walked back to where my mother stood waiting by the elevator.

“Alright,” she said, putting her arm around me, “let’s go.”

Why I could never say that before, I don’t know. I’ve always had a bit of problem coming out with those words, to anyone. Even at that point, in the hospital, Papa still felt very distant to me.

* * *

Papa is always at as many of our little league games as he can make. That means most of our cousins’ games (they live in the same city) and a few of mine and my brother’s each year. He’ll be there in his camp chair, baggy windbreaker, and a coffee in the fall, or an icy coke in the summer.

When Papa comes to our games, it usually means an overnight or weekend stay, visiting or helping my mom with some little project. When Papa stays at our house, there are usually doughnuts or Bojangles’ sweet biscuits; it’s a kind of tradition of having Nana and Papa over.

Papa sits next to the bleachers usually, sometimes on the top, but never in the middle. He doesn’t cheer as loudly as Mom or even as loudly as Nana but always noticeably. Between innings, Papa might come over to the dugout to talk, always ready to get me something to drink if I’m out, needing only the suggestion.

It’s a privilege, after games, to ride home with Papa in his old Cadillac for a conversation and for the possibility of stopping for a treat.

* * *

It was a big, comfortable cab, especially when only one person occupied the large backseat. The leather seats offered plenty

of legroom and places to put all the snacks and drinks that kept us entertained. I sat in the front seat for the majority of the trip, reclining in it like an armchair.

In Atlanta, Papa pulled the long trailer, loaded with cars, into the parking lot of a car dealership. We helped him unload the cars, cursing at the difficult straps, and he went inside to sign them in. We'd come back later to load up new cars. On the way, Papa told us stories of the people we were going to visit.

He was happy, you could tell, back where his family had lived for decades, where he'd spent much of his boyhood. He drove us around the little town the next day, showing us his old haunts, making connections, and telling stories. I enjoyed it almost as much as he did.

The South has always held a certain mystique for me, and we were deep in at that point. I have a keen interest in genealogy, and I loved the stories of his uncles, siblings, and grandparents from years ago.

It was a small Alabama town, big on college football and not a whole lot else. One of the few things I took away from there was a little printed flyer with all the Alabama colleges' football schedules from some distant uncle who was jovially appalled by my lack of interest in football. A mill or factory of some type employed a great deal of the town, including many of Papa's family members from what I understood.

Uncle Willis and Aunt Helen lived out towards the countryside, though the change from city to country was not as overwhelming as it might be. Their road had just a few houses, each on a few good acres of land, some for farming or grazing but often just used as a bit of open space. Their drive was gravel and extended a few hundred yards into their land, ending near a large, one-story wooden building, a garage of sorts. Under an open part of the building, a carport, was parked an old Ford pickup truck and a big Ford sedan, both from around the 1980s—the everyday cars.

My cousin and I walked to the front door, leaving Papa to check the cars on the trailer. I rang the doorbell, since knocking on a screen door is never very effective, and we stepped back to wait. A kind, older woman opened the door for us.

"You must be Wendell's grandsons," she said, beaming. We gave her the kind of awkward half-hugs you give when meeting

family for the first time. Papa came in from behind us, and they greeted each other warmly as Uncle Willis appeared.

We'd heard things about him, this distant uncle of ours. He wasn't especially kind to everyone, wasn't the friendliest guy in the family. Everyone wondered at the time why Helen had married him, as she'd had another suitor who was much more likeable.

He acted kindly towards us though, very hospitable if not exceedingly warm. We crossed the threshold and were shown to where we would sleep that night.

After we put our duffel bags away, Aunt Helen turned to us. "Y'all must be hungry." Being teenage boys, we agreed that we were. We'd already heard about her great cooking, delicious multi-faceted Sunday dinners, and, needless to say, we were excited.

She informed us that today there had been no Sunday dinner, but there were things from breakfast she could heat up for us, and some eggs she could cook. We assured her that would be great, and she bade us sit down while she fixed the food. So we sat in the old-fashioned living room, trying to chat with Uncle Willis. After a few minutes, we heard the food call, and drifted towards the delicious smells coming from the kitchen. Maybe she'd make us iced tea.

* * *

I swing my heavy, oblong bag into the backseat of the old Cadillac, making sure it doesn't land on breakable pieces of the clutter that reside there. Slamming the heavy door shut, I get into the passenger seat right as Papa walks out of the garage. He's in his classic everyday-is-Saturday garb now that he's retired: ragged jean shorts with a key ring on a belt loop, a little league T-shirt (one of my cousin's all-star teams), a golf hat, and worn-out white sneakers.

He sits down heavily in the driver's seat, positioning his diet soda next to my water bottle. "You ready?"

"Yep."

"Alrighty then, lez go," he says as he starts the car. On the way, we talk about baseball, my little league, and his softball league. I love going to the cages, especially with Papa, love the feeling of hitting the ball again and again. Papa was just as happy to go, always willing to help his grandson, especially if there was baseball involved.

At the cages, we come to a noisy halt in a small gravel parking lot with a half-dozen other cars. I extract myself from the front seat, leaning back in to grab my water bottle, and then get the clinking red bag from the back seat, slinging it over my shoulder. Papa takes a few bills from the battered folds of his brown leather wallet, handing them to me to buy tokens. The tokens are bought through a window, similar to that in a concessions stand, behind which stands a man in a little room filled with the bats and helmets and snacks. He gives me an extra token with a smile, making sure I have what I need before sending me off.

With my bag leaning against a wooden picnic table on the concrete outside the chain-link cages, I get out the tools of my trade. From the bottom of the bag comes the old black helmet, a birthday gift, I think. From a side pocket, worn white and black leather and nylon batting gloves, smelling a bit musty from sweat and disuse, folded over onto each other. After patting down the Velcro on the gloves, I go for the most important piece: the bat. Forced to choose between my two hand-me-down bats that I'm so fond of, I go for my favorite, the red one.

Papa sits down at the table as I go into the cage, the medium speed. 'Ages 11-13,' the sign says. I put in the token to start my first round, with Papa at the table analyzing me, I'm sure. The first round goes by, I hit a few, foul more, and miss the rest of the twenty mechanized pitches. It's not a busy day—the middle of the week—so I'm getting ready to start another round when Papa comes into the cage. He starts talking about a few inconsistencies in my swing—dropping my shoulder, pulling my head out—and takes the bat to show me something. I nod and agree, and he goes back out, leaning on the fence as I put in the next token.

the important things in life

ecila walcott

part I.

YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE? I really hate to see homeless people in the streets begging for money. Everyone is always so quick to assume that they got there on their own, or that is was their fault that their life is like that. No one ever knows their story. No one ever knows that that could be them one day. You don't have to give them money, just show them some compassion. Maybe even sit with them for a couple of hours. That's what happened to me.

It was a sunny day in Brooklyn when I spent time with my grandfather on my father's side. All I wanted to do was some shopping. I couldn't wait to get into H&M and feel the air conditioner blowing while I picked out anything and everything I wanted. We left my grandfather's house, both of us smelling like his cologne. As we walked, I inhaled the smell of cigar and bus smoke, thinking, *This can't be good for my health*. I didn't mind though, since it was the only place that had that kind of air. North Carolina didn't have anything like it, the wonderful state that it was, what with the bugs, the heat, and to top it off, the accents.

Anyway, as we continued walking, I felt the need for candy. With my grandparents it was always the right time to eat candy, as much as I wanted. Into the convenience store my grandfather walked. I leaped, happily anticipating the sour and sweet taste of candy, like I was seven years old. I couldn't wait to get Sour Patches in my hand. I picked them up and put them on the counter as my grandfather pulled out a wrinkled dollar bill. I could feel the sour pellets sizzling in my mouth already. I grabbed them off the counter and walked back outside. I tore the bag open like my life depended on it. I thanked my grandfather with a smile, and we continued walking. We came across a man that was sitting on the concrete with smile on his face. He was homeless. The last thing

you would think to see a homeless person wearing was a smile. I had thought every homeless person would look just as miserable as their clothes. We walked past the man, expecting him to ask us for money of some sort. After we passed, my grandfather stopped with a look on his face that I had never seen before. He took a few steps back and greeted the man.

"Hello," he said. I looked at my grandfather in shock. The man looked at him as if he was used to this.

"Hello," he replied, still with the smile on his face. *Please don't let us be out here forever talking to this man*, I thought. *I really just want to go shopping*. They started up a conversation. I stood there watching, tired already. They talked for about ten minutes, the worst and longest ten minutes of my life. My grandfather offered the man a meal from any fast food place, but he refused. This made my grandfather want to help the man more, because he acted like didn't need it. The man turned down the offer. Instead of walking away, like I hoped he would, my grandfather insisted.

We walked into a McDonald's. My grandfather took our orders, asking me what I wanted, then sent me to the line. I dragged myself over to the crowd of people, thinking, *If I was going to get the food, why did you ask me what I wanted? That was pointless*. I didn't want to be in a McDonald's. I got up to the front of the line and ordered. Another thing I hate is when the person taking your order continues to ask "Will that be all?" after everything I say. It pisses me off. Thank goodness she wasn't one of those people. It would've made my mood way worse than it was already. She placed the receipt in my hand, and I stepped to the side to wait for my order to be called out. The lady brutally called out my order, giving that look that says 'I hate working here.' I walked up to the counter and grasped the tray firmly, as if it was liquid slipping out of my hands, responding to her facial expression in my mind. *Well, guess what, lady? You don't have to be here*.

I walked back to where my grandfather was sitting and placed the food on the table. He started unpacking the food, placing it in front of whom it belonged to. He noticed that I didn't get anything. "Where's your food?" my grandpa asked.

"I didn't want anything," I replied, hoping he wouldn't ask why.

"Okay, we'll stop somewhere later on," he said with his deep Guyanese accent. *If there is a later on*, I thought. They continued their conversation; I could tell they were running out of things to say. That was good luck to me because I wanted to leave.

I was daydreaming in McDonald's when I heard my grandfather say the words, "Okay, nice meeting you. I hope the best for you." I was never so happy and upset in my life. It was already 4:30, and my mother was on her way to pick me up. But I couldn't have been happier that we were out of that McDonald's and headed home.

I looked sad on the walk home. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. "I'm sorry we didn't get you anything this visit. I didn't mean for my conversation to last so long," my grandfather said, as if he was taking the thoughts right out of my head.

"It's okay," I lied. And we continued to walk home.

part II.

"No! Why did he have to go? Why did this have to happen?" my cousin, Shaunte, struggled to say. "I can't take this; I'm going to miss him too much."

"I know honey, we all will. Just calm down a little bit," her mother told her.

"Calm down? I can't calm down. This is my grandfather we are standing in front of!" Shaunte yelled.

I stood there, watching it all happen. I thought to myself, *What a drama queen. She should really be an actress. I've seen this in movies before, and even the actors aren't that dramatic.* Everyone was staring at her like it was her wake, instead of her grandfather's. Except for me. To me, her show was rather humorous. The situation was not, but she was just hilarious, if you ask me. It was like when that one person in church hops up and starts crying and jumping up and down while the choir shouts. All the adults find that normal, but it gives me my laugh of the day.

Meanwhile, everyone else was crying very quietly with tissues in their hands. As far I was concerned, there was no way crying would bring my great uncle back. He was a good person, from what I was told, and he was going to a way better place than this.

After everyone took a seat, a lady walked to the front of the room. She started talking. She had a very deep accent. I could tell she was from Belize, like the rest of my family, but there was something slightly different about her accent. It wasn't like everyone else's. It wasn't easy to understand. I tried hard to figure out what she was saying, just because of how nosy I am. Soon, I started catching on to what she was saying. She was yapping on about how he will be missed. That's when I stopped listening. *Don't you think we know that?* I thought. *The tears and tissues aren't present because they won't miss him.* Right after she finished speaking, my aunt walked up to the front of the room the lady had just left and told everyone they were dismissed unless they wanted to spend more time with my great uncle. I told my grandfather I wanted to leave. He didn't think twice about standing up and walking out. He didn't like being with dead bodies either.

My grandfather took me to the convenience store to get some candy while we waited for the people who were still in the funeral home. I got my favorite, the ones I can't get in North Carolina: cherry Sour Patches. When we walked back across the street, the people we were waiting for were making their way out of the church. Out of nowhere, a little girl came up to me and asked me for three of my Sour Patches. All I could do was smile at the way she put three of her adorable fingers up as she asked. Normally, I could say no and not feel a thing. This time, I said yes. For the record, it was only because she was pretty.

In a way, people's feelings mean nothing to me. Being a psychiatrist is not my forte. If that had to be my job, I wouldn't know what to do.

my dysfunctional family

1. b.



MY LIFE AT FOURTEEN SEEMS SPLENDID. I'm a ninth grader at the school everyone in Durham wants to get into. I'm on the cross country team, and I'm faster than ever. I have so many great friends. And I have great relationships with all of my family members. Maybe it was a struggle at first with some, but eventually it worked out. My life seems put together. Normal. This story is one not of suspense and of magical witches and wizards defeating dark lords but of real life.

At times, I wanted to make a TV show and title it *My Dysfunctional Family*. I would be the star, of course, and it would rival *Modern Family* with its crazy plot twists. However, I've never actually had that much drama in my life. Sure I've had some, but so does everyone else in the world. For the purposes of entertainment, my brain would amplify the drama in my life. Even then, the show of my life would be much duller, and who would watch a show about me? There would be barely anything going on at all. I couldn't beat *Modern Family*. They would just end up sweeping the Emmys again.

1.

In the spring of 2005, Mom, James, Carrie, and I were headed to my cousin's house. We stepped outside, and the innocence was

tangible, manifested in the flowers that had just opened and the rabbit that sat gnawing at the grass. Everything seemed extraordinarily wonderful because, as a seven-year-old boy, understanding other people's feelings was not my strongest skill. I didn't see the pain when I looked in my mother's eyes.

I noticed Grandma's car was there too. *We must be having a party!* I went inside. The room seemed dead silent, and I saw no one except Grandma, who was slumped over on the couch. Her hair was less poofy than normal.

What happened? Where's my party? Is everyone okay? I was clueless, not the brightest seven-year-old.

"I have something I need to tell each of you, one at a time," Grandma told us. I got more worried by the second. This didn't seem right. She led James into the kitchen and closed the door. Carrie and I sat on the couch.

There are only a couple of reasons I get worried: if I forget my homework or if something is unknown. The unknown and the mysterious have always scared me. James finally came out and told me it was my turn. He looked upset and his eyes were red, puffed up, and tired.

I went into the kitchen, sat down on Grandma's lap, and, right away, she told me, "Earlier this morning, your aunt left and she took Michael." Michael is my two-year-old cousin. He couldn't really talk, so it was hard to tell if he liked me or not, but I'm pretty sure he did. My aunt and I had a pretty good relationship, too. I don't remember anything bad about her. But then again, before that, my mind hadn't been tainted with mistrust. I left the kitchen and sat on the armrest of the couch, stunned and breathless. I was still unsure exactly what this meant, but I knew it would be permanent and bad.

"Will Michael come back?" I asked Grandma.

She responded with two extremely powerful words that only increased in their levels of power due to her complete and utter seriousness. "He better."

I was shaken and dazed, and I cried into Grandma's shirt. The day became dark, eerie, and ominous. The house never seemed so magical again. It became my real life haunted house. Gray and spooky, it was infiltrated with an unpleasant array of memories. It reeked of her, my ex-aunt.

Once finished with all the agreements, my uncle won custody of him. My ex-aunt had him every other weekend and on Thursdays for dinner. This meant that when my uncle was working, we had Michael at our house. Later, the nasty freak-show of a woman moved further and further away until she was in Virginia. This is now where she takes him every other weekend to her cheaply furnished evil lair. Eight hours of driving for a child every other weekend is in no way healthy, but it's what ended up happening anyway.

2.

"Blech!" That was the hideous noise that escaped from my lips when I stepped forward and smelled it. I hadn't breathed in that type of tainted air in over four years, since it had emanated from my sister in her infancy.

My mom also made strange sounds in the process of trying to hold in her clean, undisturbed air. The moment had an awful hilarity to it. It was funny to watch my mom attack the special delivery from Micheal with the skill that only a three-time mother could possess. She seemed to be moving at the speed of sound in a complex process that I could never recreate.

James and I stood just far enough away to the side making disgustingly immature jokes about the whole ordeal. I stopped for a moment, suddenly realizing that this was my new life, my new future, and my greatly altered destiny—putting up with Mike's "stinkers," as my mom called them. The moment left its origins of hilarity and moved to a less joyous destination of mixed emotions consisting of anger, sadness, confusion, and utter, unexplainable seriousness.

However, in that next moment, something else hit me. I realized that this day wasn't ruined. It was funny and filled with laughter. This was not a bad memory that you try and try to forget but one I should try to remember. He won't be a burden but a friend. All of this will be okay. I decided that it's important to enjoy the little things in life. I ran back into the room, took a big sniff, and started laughing. This laughter was genuine. It was a sign of hope and a good day to come.

3.

“No! You’re not listening to me!” my mother yelled back to Michael, who sat in the back seat of our car.

“I just don’t know what you mean,” he replied with that annoying and completely fake Southern accent he learned from his OCD mother.

“Yes, you do, but you’re choosing not to think. I’ll say it again. Why would your teacher have to put your name in the thinking jar?” she inquired with severe frustration ringing in her voice. We were all frustrated. These types of conversations began to establish themselves as recurring events that littered our daily lives.

At the age of six, Michael was constantly misbehaving in his kindergarten class. These problems would lead to the awful, confusing after-school conferences that inevitably affected the rest of our day. Mom would ask Mike how and why he misbehaved. He would play dumb and sit in the backseat staring out the window answering everything with his classic, “I just don’t know what you mean, though.” It pestered everyone in the car to no end.

His eyes were hollow, and you couldn’t read his facial expressions unless he made some snarky, disrespectful face at you. His hair was dark and coarse like his mother’s, and he still had a slight layer of baby-fat surrounding his cheeks.

I felt extremely upset with that boy. It seemed like he was wasting my life; he was draining my time and energy. I was twelve years old but my actions were limited to what a six-year-old could do. Sometimes, instead of *The Office*, I had to sit through an episode of *Dora the Explorer*. He was the Swiper to my Boots, taking my time and freedom away from me. This was the cause for my spiral into the deep, deep pit of ferocity I wrongly directed towards him.

I was beginning to spiral downwards. Like a plane that had just stalled, I was falling. I was being severely mean to a little boy. I started blaming him for every one of my little problems. I self-diagnosed myself with an anger disorder to try and push the fault of mine away from myself as well as I could. I knew it wasn’t a good thing to do. I knew I was wasting too much energy on him, but I told myself even more that he deserved it. I was right and he was wrong. And that’s just how it was.

4.

"Maybe this yellow one can go here," I suggested.

"I think I need a blue one for that," Mike replied rather rudely.

"If I were you, I'd use a red two-by-four for that."

"I think a green two-by-five is fine."

"Well, I have the piece right here and if you use this one, it won't hang over the edge like that."

"That would be awful," he continued to insist, only because it was my idea.

My anger and frustration with him had been growing stronger over the past few days, triggered by his immaturity and his antics. His know-it-all ways annoyed me to no end. That has always been one of my biggest pet-peeves—little kids trying to outsmart you and appear better than you. I had such a big problem with this, that if you ever do it to me, you may want to duck and cover. It was a constant pattern of Mike doing this to me. He also mimicked my every move. But this wasn't just copying he was doing.

I played Legos with him one afternoon after we were home from elementary school (I was in fifth grade and he was just starting kindergarten). I will be clear with you right now: I had no interest in Legos and I have never ever enjoyed them. They're frustrating bits of plastic that serve no purpose but to be built and destroyed and built and destroyed. The only reason that I was playing with those artificially colored 'bricks' was because my mom made me.

I started to build an interesting tower of sorts that had a special device that made it move up and down. I was very proud of it. It was something different, not just an ugly car that no person in their right mind would ever ride. It was special, so I showed it off to my other cousin, Carson, and Mike said, "Oh cool! I'm going to make one of those—except better."

You did not just say that! Stop messing with me, punk! I only came up here for you and you just go and say that! Yeah. No. This is not going to work out. That is what I thought and what I wanted to say. However, somehow miraculously what I did was, well, not that.

I stood up and replied, "Well that's nice. Have fun playing by yourself." It was good. Simple yet a dagger, but not too mean to get

me in trouble for making the poor boy cry. I walked downstairs, got some chocolate, and watched a TV show.

I knew I shouldn't have been angry with him. I knew that he had so many challenges in his life that it made it difficult for him to do what was right. But to me, he just didn't try to do any better. He seemed like a parasitic creature that would come and eat your food, time, and happiness, limit what you could do because of his presence, and frustrate you. Just when you began to make progress, he would have a weekend with his mother and go back to square one. It was a cycle of progression and regression which seemed to have no end.

I decided to give Legos with Michael another try. It was mostly because I was bored and there was nothing good on TV, but also because, I sadly admit, I really wanted to get him in trouble. I went upstairs and started building some weird house with him.

We were making conversation and everything was fine. Which means that it was not fine for my goal. I wanted to bust him for doing something wrong, but there was nothing to get him for. He was being good. I tried everything in my power to get him to slip up, but he didn't. He was being kind. It was such a change that I had to stop trying and simply enjoy it.

"Hey, guess what," Michael said.

"What?" I asked him.

"When I grow up, I really want to be like you."

This hit me. All the times that he had been copying me or anything else, he was trying to be like me. I realized that I needed to step up my game in the role-modeling department. I needed to be a super model. Right now, I was not in any way being that. I was somewhat brutal and overall mean. After coming to that conclusion, I came to another. I didn't have to worry about his behavior, just my own. If my behavior improved, so would his.

5.

That day changed me. He changed me. I was becoming less frustrated. I lost my self-diagnosed 'anger issue' and I was becom-

ing happier. But most importantly, Michael and I rose to the level of friendship that I had pushed away for so long.

And now, finally, we get to the part of the story where they can finally say, “and they all lived happily ever after” . . . mostly.

Sometimes people destroy your hard-worked Lego structures. Like a silent tornado in the night, they can come and break it apart. That’s what Michael’s mother did to my family. But those Legos don’t just stay bashed. You have to put them back together again, and often times the building gets better. It just takes dedication. Legos are meant to be assembled and they will be. Whether it’s a family death, a tragic accident, or an evil witch like her that knocks your structure down, eventually it will be rebuilt and the conflict will be resolved. When the wolf huffed and puffed and blew the pig’s house down, they went back and built not out of straw or sticks again, but out of bricks.

If she ever reads this, she should know that our Legos have been rebuilt. The dent she made has been fixed. And it’s much better than it used to be.

believe it or not: the perils of sibling abuse

uche ekenna

“UCHE . . . UCHE . . . UCHE EKENNA, GET DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW!” a loud, angry voice cries out from downstairs. *Oh my goodness, what have I done now? Why does it always have to be me?*

“Coming, Mommy,” I yell with fear as I swallow some spit. My heart starts to beat rapidly like a drum. I walk slowly, counting each and every step as I approach my bloody doom. I creep into the kitchen and see my mom standing right in front of me with her arms crossed and foot tapping. Her eyes resemble machine guns that shoot bullets right through my body. I can see that my mom seems pretty stressed out from the day she had.

“What is this?” she says, pointing towards the sink. The dishes tower to the sky, the pile at least the size of Mount Everest.

“Mommy—”

“Why are these dishes still in the sink?” she interrupts me.

“Today is not my day to wash ‘em though. It’s K.C.’s day to wash,” I say with relief. My sister gets up from the living room. Her long black hair stops right under her shoulders. She has the same bland look on her face as she usually does, like no emotion ever enters her soul. She balls her fist up like a rock as if she is going to punch someone.

She slowly creeps up from the chair and says, “No, I washed ‘em yesterday!” with a hard justice to her voice. My sister is clearly lying, but my mom doesn’t know that.

What is wrong with her? Why is she always lying to get out of things? I have to think of something, something quick. “Mommy, you saw me washing, remember?” I say, trying to refresh her memory. There is a long pause.

“Oh, ya, that’s right, I remember now. K.C., come wash these dishes right now.”

“But Mommy!” K.C. cries.

“No buts!” my mom yells.

My mom turns around, puts her hand on her forehead, and walks back to her room. I look over at my sister as she's slowly getting up and walking toward where I'm standing. "Why ain't you just go with it and wash them dishes?" she looks back at me and says harmfully.

"Because I washed 'em yesterday," I say.

"So?!" she says, getting louder than before. "That don't mean nun' to me! You're such a stupid lil' thing!"

I turn and walk away toward the dining room. I don't want to just go back upstairs because it will look as if I am afraid of her. Even though I am scared, I want to show her that I shouldn't be messed with. I slowly turn and scream to the back of her head, "That's why you're a *crusty butt monkey*!"

My sister sharply turns like she expects me to say something. My heart feels like it has skipped numerous beats. My sister reaches out for the closest thing to her. She throws her arm out and I see a stick of wood coming right for me. My body just stands there as if it is paralyzed, like I am frozen in a block of ice. There it hits, lead piercing into the top of my scalp. I reach up at to feel my head, and a warm but moist liquid is on my hands. It starts to drip down my right cheek. I see the pencil hit the floor, drenched in blood. My hand shivers as I slowly pull it down to look at. The top of my finger tips are covered in blood.

I run to the bathroom with now both hands on my head, leaving a trail of blood. My mom comes out of her room to see what all the commotion is about. She looks across the room and see my legs from the bathroom. "Is everything okay?" she says with a calm soft voice. She pushes the door open and sees me with a cloth over my head and the juicy red spot on it. "What happened to you?!" she screams, pulling the face towel off of my head. The bleeding has slowed down a bit, but it still hurt.

"Mommy, K.C. threw a pencil at me!" I start to fake cry to make sure K.C.'s punishment is severe. A frown appears on her face while I smile on the inside, knowing that whatever K.C. is getting for this, she's getting it good.

My mom looks up then down back at me and says, "It's okay. Just go upstairs, take a shower and go to sleep." She washes her hands and goes back to her room and closes the door.

Really! Is that all? What happens to K.C.? Are you not going to hang her upside down and poke her head with something and let the blood pour out of her body? Huh? I put the cloth in the room next to me and walk past my sister washing the plates. “Ha ha,” she calls out to me. At this very moment I want to scream. All that and she gets away again. I skip the shower and go directly to my bed. If I were to take a shower, I might drown in anger.

* * *

“You forever messing something up. Dang!” my sister screams in a menacing voice. I look up at her face and see her eyes filled with fire.

I turn around because I feel bad for her, but then I remember how she ripped up my posters into little tiny pieces and a small anger grows inside me. “W-well that’s what you get, you big ugly loser,” I mumble under my breath.

“What did you just say to me?” I take a step down to the next step on the stairs and feel two hard clumps on my shoulder blade that hit me so hard I fall over. I begin tumbling down the stairs, my life literally flashing before my eyes. My head is the first thing to hit. I wrap my hand over my head. Flipping over and landing on my stomach, I “superman” myself all the way down. I feel my stomach hit each stair, step by step, and everything is moving in slow motion. After the initial shock, everything happens so fast I probably couldn’t stop myself even if I wanted to.

I lay there motionless for minutes, not even minding the sharp burning pain that pierces my arm. The only thing going through my head is that my sister actually pushed me down the stairs. There is no point in telling my mom because she is sleeping. I’d rather lay here in pain than wake my mother up from sleep. A tear falls from my eye. Am I really crying, or did the tear force itself out my eye of its own free will? My sister has gone back in her room, and by the time she comes out, I am getting up. She looks at me with a grin on her face.

I slowly fall back to the ground and crawl my way to the living room couch where I will lie all night, waiting for the next morning.

tree house

swag daddy

1.

IT WAS A VERY HOT SUMMER EVENING, and I had just gotten home from my grandparents' house in Augusta, Georgia. The long drive with my grandmother had left me tired, but the anticipation of going home overpowered the feeling of exhaustion. When we finally arrived in Durham, we weren't going the usual way to my house, and I thought my grandmother was getting lost. We went to a side of town that I never even knew existed. We pulled into a neighborhood named Swan's Mill, then entered a driveway in front of a new house, or at least that's what I figured because there were only about six of them. Little did I know, I would soon call this house home.

I walked into the newly bought house in the lonely, undeveloped neighborhood. It was bigger than the one known as my own, but with a smaller backyard. The house had a new car smell, which was weird because it was a house. I remember watching my dog sniff around, her hair recently cut by my brother; she had bald spots everywhere. She looked like a naked mole rat. I went to go see the bedroom—it had all my stuff from my old room. I was so happy.

I dashed down the stairs, but I remember it as if I was running in slow motion. I approached my mom, and she had a sorrowful look on her face. Then I asked, "Where's Dad?" The news hit me harder than a baseball bat.

She said, "Me and your dad are not together anymore." A river started to flow out of my eyes, and I started to ask where, when, and why questions.

After I calmed down, I asked, "Where's Brianna?"

"She moved to Tennessee." I was even more devastated than before. It was the worst day ever. All at once, I had lost my father and my cousin. I ran upstairs in fury and sadness. I slammed my door shut and didn't come out for a couple of hours. I was just

thinking about the news and how things would be different without my dad and my cousin.

When I came down to dinner, I didn't talk much. My mom tried to talk to me, but I just responded in short answers and conversation closers. The next day, I found out that my dad lived a couple of blocks down from me, which made me feel a little better because I could visit him every Tuesday and Thursday. It took a couple of months for me to be able to get in contact with my cousin Brianna. We have a very close connection now, even though we live miles away.

2.

I'm sitting in my new house, looking at old pictures of my cousin and all of the times we had together. Universal Studios, Disney World, Carowinds. Since she moved and my mom and dad got divorced, I have never gone back to Disney World. I don't have adventures like that anymore. Without her, I feel like I don't have anything to do.

I remember going Myrtle Beach and having so much fun in the Lazy River. We would have our floaties on, which was funny because the water was only three feet deep. Our parents made us wear them because they thought that we would drown—more Mom than Dad. Because of my dad, the first thing we learned to do is swim. We were both water babies.

3.

In our old house, the backyard had many places: a basketball court with concrete, trees that we were able to climb, a bridge that we built so we could get to the woods, and, the best of all, a tree house. It wasn't really a tree house because it was actually sitting on top of a storage shed in the backyard, but it was so high that we could see the whole backyard from the top. To get to it, there was a ladder. You climbed the side and then opened up a door, like a doggy door, and climbed in. The tree house had always been there, even before we moved into the house.

The tree house was our escape into another world. It was filled with all of our favorite toys and things that we liked to play with. It was just like another room for each of us. It was a combination of a girl's and boy's room, but everything was made of wood—no paint or wallpaper. It created shade for us after exploring the woods or just running around in the backyard. The tree house was a place that Bri and I could go. No matter what, the tree house will always be a part of the childhood that we both shared together.

4.

In our backyard, the trees were not that tall—only about fifteen feet. Bri and I always used to climb them to see who had the guts to go higher. Bri always climbed higher, since she was three years older than me.

One day, we went outside and she wanted to climb the trees again. “Let’s climb the trees,” she said. Since I did everything with her, I felt I had to.

“Sure,” I replied

We started at the bottom and went up the trunk of the trees. Brianna climbed much faster than me, so I tried to catch up to her. Bri finally reached her stopping point, and when I caught up to her, I yelled, “I’m going to go higher than you!”

I reached for a higher branch and grasped it. I slowly pulled myself up to victory. Brianna looked shocked because I had never climbed higher than her before. I just stuck out my tongue and smiled, “I finally beat you at climbing.” Her face had no emotion, like a rock, but then she smiled back at me.

“Okay, but you won’t beat me down,” she replied. She didn’t seem to care about winning, just about being together and having fun.

autism for dummies

michael vincent stacatto hodgens

1.

I used to be indecisive. Now I am not quite sure.

IT WAS THE UGLIEST THING I HAD EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE. It was wrinkled like a mole rat and white like Cool Whip. The only thing that it would do is lay there on its back in its little white crib, crying its little eyes out. I've never been big on babies. I don't see what's so good about them anyway. They look like grandmothers—wrinkly, pasty, and hairless—only smaller. He lay there looking up at me, tears in his little wrinkly eyes, hands scrunched up and waving everywhere, legs kicking like Beckham. His crying came with a screech that sounded like the mating call of a Tasmanian devil.

When the phone call came that Maya had given birth, my mom screamed as if someone had died. My brother Eli, my dad, and I all rushed downstairs to find out what had happened, only for my mom to show us some pictures of an ugly lump, or something that resembled silly putty mixed with applesauce. "What is that?" I asked, tilting my head this way and that. "Oh wait! It's a . . . No, what is it?"

"It's Derek and Maya's baby! His name is Jonas!" my mom screeched in a deafening tone. "We're going to see them this weekend!"

"But they live in Washington, D.C.," my brother replied.

"Yeah, we're taking a road trip," my mother yipped, more high-pitched than a dog whistle.

So, here we are, in Washington D.C., staring at this hideous creature that will soon be a sticky-fingered baby, grabbing at things, eating keys and everything else. But for now? This thing, Jonas, looked like E.T.

2.

Do not argue with an imbecile. He will drag you down and beat you with experience.

“Jonas, no biting!” shouted Lara. Jonas had always been a trouble child, yelling, screaming, and biting. His hair looked like a mix of spaghetti, dirt, and glue. He has the complexion of paste, and a nose so round that if you honked it you would think he was a clown.

Parts of our three families were in the car, cruising the streets of Washington, D.C. on our way to the Air and Space Museum. Jonas was jumping all over like a bouncy ball. Dustin started singing, and all of a sudden, he had a moment of pure genius and said one of the curse words in the song. We could not get Jonas to stop saying that word.

On our left and right were many monuments: the Abe Lincoln statue, then the obelisk, and then a grubby little hand waving all around.

“Jonas, could you please calm down?” my brother Eli begged.

“Why?” asked Jonas.

“Because he asked you nicely,” I responded hastily. These arguments and questions proceeded to get more and more aggravating until we got there.

“I wanna go on the spinny wheel! I wanna go on the rocket! I wanna see the astronaut!” Jonas squealed as he pointed at everything, running and tugging at all of my clothing.

Now, Jonas isn’t my brother or anything, but the way that he tugs on my nerves, and yet is still in my heart every night and day, makes it feel like he is.

3.

Anger is not the answer, it is the question. And the answer is ‘yes.’

It turned out to be a tough but fun day. I recall everything that happened once we had gotten to the Air and Space Museum as clear as yesterday, such as Jonas running around to any and everything, screaming when he didn’t get his way. We all ventured onto the rides except for Jonas, so we each took turns watching him

while others went. It would have been a perfect day if Jonas hadn't been yelling and crying the whole time.

During the whole Washington, D.C. trip, I felt like we were babysitting Jonas. He was such a hard child to take care of. If you stopped watching him for more than a millisecond, the whole museum would have been in flames, planes and rockets hurtling at all of the innocent tourists like rain. We understood that it was hard on his family, having to take care of him, so we took him practically *everywhere* while his mother shopped and snacked with my parents.

Being on one of the rides with my brother, I remember all of the screaming coming from Jonas, and my brother purposefully making the simulation ride at the Museum of Air and Space go upside-down. The ride was a simulator, where one person steers the ship, and the other person is the shooter. I turned out to be the shooter and my brother the navigator. When the navigator steers, it moves the entire simulator and when you turn it upside-down, you would be hanging upside-down until the navigator decided differently. We had so much fun nearly hurling on the simulators, going to all of the exhibits and in all of the rockets, and then, finally, going to the gift shop.

There are not words to describe what a terrible mistake it was taking Jonas into the gift shop. He clung to everything like a monkey and started full-out sobbing when he couldn't get things. It turned out to be a tough but fun day.

4.

Eating food doesn't make you fat any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.

adapted from Billy Sunday

"Food is ready!" Cleo screamed. All of the children rushed to the kitchen like moths to a flame. The counter looked so full. All of the food made me think it was Thanksgiving. At the table we had such a variety: fruit salad, salmon soufflé, fried rice, scrambled eggs, a large selection of breads, salami, ham, and so much more. We fought over the food as viciously as nine lions fighting over a gazelle. We grabbed all the food that we could and then relocated to the living room to eat our feast.

As we ate our brunch, I realized that the room seemed very calm and peaceful, and then I realized that Jonas wasn't to be seen. Soon enough, I heard yelling coming from the game room, as loud as a stampede of bulls, and rushed over there only to find a determined-looking Jonas playing video games. He was standing three inches away from the television screen, screaming at his remote while he tried to dislodge his motorcycle from the bushes. "Jonas, could you come eat with us?" I calmly asked him.

"I'm not hungry," he replied, sounding like a begging duck.

"Well, could you please eat with us anyway?" I begged, trying to distract his eyes from the television screen.

"No!" he yelled, pushing me away. I took the remote and turned off the TV as he screamed and kicked.

"Jonas, let's eat now."

"I don't want to eat!" he screamed, grabbing at the remote. I took his grubby little hand and walked him to the kitchen as he fought and mumbled at how unfair this was. We got to the kitchen and, just as I expected, he suddenly decided that he actually felt hungry.

After brunch, Dustin, Eli, Diane, Shelly, Mack and I all ascended the stairs to Dustin's room. After we had reached the peak of the stairs and walked down the hallway to his room, I looked up to find a Korean girl smiling at me, teeth and all. I grabbed the cold handle, and opened the dark oak door. I went into the room, and found so many more glossy, smiling faces. "Dustin, why are you so obsessed with Korean girls?" I asked.

"Cause they're pretty!" he replied. I laughed, placing my satchel on the wooden floor. I heard my brother plop down on Dustin's ladylike classic floral bed. Diane and Shelly ran around the room, squealing and giggling.

"Don't let Jonas in! Don't let Jonas in!" they yipped.

"Come on guys, it's not his fault that he's autistic, and we still love him," Dustin asserted.

"It's true, let him in, girls. He has just as much right to play with us as you guys do," I remarked, grimacing as they opened the door, preparing for the lightning to enter and strike us all dead.

5.

Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak.

Alan Dundes

“No! Don’t let him get to third base!” I yelled at Dustin as he and Mack played a baseball game on the Wii. I watched the little Mii run across the television set and fly across home base. “Oh no, he got a home run!”

As I sat on the couch, staring at these two boys play baseball, drinking an Izze, I heard crying from the hallway. I went outside to see what happened and found Gena. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Jonas is being mean to me,” she replied, frowning and wiping tears from her eyes.

“How is he being mean to you?” I questioned.

“He says no to everything I ask,” she said, and I walked her into the game room.

“I’m sorry, Gena,” I said as she crawled into my lap. We stayed watching the Wii for a long time, screaming whenever one of them got a home run. But that didn’t happen very often. Jonas sat on the floor screaming whenever anyone else screamed just because he wanted to fit in. My brother, for some reason, tackled Mack every five seconds causing the whole floor to be sticky from all of the sodas spilled. I guess that boys will be boys, and this was a boy thing. Sally and Diane remained sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall. At that moment, I realized that these people were like family to me, and this felt like a joyous reunion.

“I wanna play a game!” Gena squealed.

“Okay, let’s play a game! What do you want to play?” Dustin said.

“Let’s play hide and seek,” Sally piped.

“Hide and seek! Hide and seek!” Diane repeated.

“I’ll be it!” I yelled.

“One, two three, four—” I heard footsteps and giggles all around. “—five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Ready or not, here I come!” I ran behind the red leather couch, light bouncing off of the cushions. No one there.

I sprinted to the coat closet and pushed all of the coats to one side. No one there.

I went into the guest room and looked under the grand king-sized bed. No one there.

I checked all of the bathrooms, the kitchen, and the playroom. No one there, either. So I dashed upstairs and looked in the study room's closet. There were three giggling girls and two boys. "I found you! Wait, where's Eli?"

We ran around the house everywhere looking for Eli before he jumped out of Olive's tiny white dresser and ran around the house chasing everyone screaming, "*Rawr!* I'm gonna eat you!"

"Dinner's ready!" Maura said as the zookeeper opened up the lion exhibit at the zoo. We sat down at the oak table and stared at our salad. The thing with us is when we see something that we don't want to eat, we stare at it until it goes away. It doesn't necessarily go away, but in some cases, it's better than actually eating it. As we stared with ice cold eyes at the salad provided on our plates (in very generous amounts if I may add) Maura came around and plopped down some food resembling pea soup mixed with what looked like chicken bones.

6.

The last thing I want to do is hurt you. But it's still on the list.

"Eli is my boyfriend! Eli is my boyfriend! Eli is my boyfriend!" Jonas shouted from below as I groaned and walked down the stairs to figure out what was going on.

"Jonas! Say 'Dustin is my boyfriend!'" Sally snickered, holding a piece of bread a few inches away from his face, and waving it around to the point that made him seem like a dog.

"Sally! Diane! Stop that right now!" I yelled.

They dropped the bread and ran giggling the whole way to the kitchen, the soles of their black Mary Janes pounding the hardwood floor. "Would you mind getting the children to the table, it's dinner time," my father asked me as he stirred the pasta and red sauce together.

"Sure, Daddy," I replied, sauntering up to my brother's room only to find Eli and Dustin screaming at a video game.

"Dinner's ready!" I screamed, making sure they could hear me through their headphones. I then went to my room and called Olive, who happened to be engulfed in her Junie B. Jones book. "Ol-

ive, dinner's ready, let's go," I informed her as she slammed her book closed and jumped off of the bed, skipping beside me all the way downstairs. Once we got to the living room, we found Sally and Diane once again taunting Jonas with appetizers. "Di-ane! Sa-lly!" I yelped. "It's dinner time, stop messing with Jonas," I beckoned through their giggles and laughter. Once I had gotten all of the hyped-up kids to the table, we ate our meal—well, most of us. I'm fairly certain that only about ten percent of Jonas's food actually ended up in his stomach.

"Jonas, where is your fork?" Diane squealed.

"Eew!" Diane and Sally screeched. I brought him over a fork, only for the fork to end up on the floor, and Jonas to continue eating with his hands. After we had finished eating dinner, we all set up Jonas with *Home Alone 3*, and he watched it calmly and peacefully until he was finished. During the final credits the parents decided that it had come time for everyone to leave and for me to go to bed. We helped them get in the car and then sent them away smiling.

"See you tomorrow!" we yelled, waving at the cars, knowing they probably couldn't hear us. The night was long and rough, but sometimes going through this is just a part of life when you're doing it for the ones that you love.

7.

The early bird might get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.

Jeremy Paxman

There were so many flavors of ice cream, and I could only have one of them. I always feel like ice cream is laughing at me with all of its friends. "She can only choose one of us," Chocolate would say, as it pointed at me. Chocolate is smart, and he's certainly classier, more original, and richer than all of the others. So I chose him.

"Could I please have a small chocolate sundae?" I asked politely as the rest of the kids tried to push past me. I watched as the man who worked there scooped up the ice cream, slicing through the chocolate as it smirked at me. "I knew you'd pick me."

I pushed past my mom and Derek as they fought over who was going to pay for the ice cream. I took my sundae from the dark

black counter. I shuffled my feet, counting the steps to get to the table. The lights were dark, and everything smelled like sugar, vanilla, and chocolate. Once I got past the hyped-up kids and over Jonas's spilled ice cream, I sat down at the round table. The table was red with a metallic silver outline, which did not at all match the brass chairs with brown cushions.

This table had people that I loved and that I would have to soon see leave. I stared at Jonas's pasty little face that was entirely covered in strawberry ice cream, the light bouncing off of his blue-green eyes. I would hate to see them leave today; it took efforts to have them here, extreme efforts, and patience, but they still are in my heart like a tumor, a tumor that you can never get rid of. I scooped out a bit of sundae and raised it to my mouth, staring at all of the hot fudge and chopped walnuts. "Don't eat me! Don't eat me!" it begged. I assured that cocky little friend of mine that I wouldn't and then let it take a little vacation to my taste buds. The sweet taste of betrayed friendship. Yum.

We exited this grim little ice cream shop to play around on the curb because, honestly, Jonas happened to be annoying the heck out of everyone at the store, running up to them yelling and making sure that he was too loud for anyone to pay attention in there. Sally stood there with a death glare as though she ruled the world and didn't want him on it. Diane stood, arms crossed, glaring down at Jonas condescendingly, but he just smiled ear to ear. If you wanted to, you could individually count each and every one of his yellow, grimy teeth. I don't know why Sally and Diane were being like this anyway, acting like Jonas's bosses. They are barely a year older than him and he hadn't done anything at all, really. I think they made some silent vow to the Anti-Jonas Club.

Today was a Sunday and everyone had school tomorrow, both the children and the adults who had to teach. So, after we ate our ice cream, played on the curb, talked, laughed, and played some more, we stuffed Gena, Derek, Maya, and Jonas into their car, and watched as that little blue van rode off into the distance—just four people that I loved leaving, waving from the backseat and not coming back for a long, long time.

over the river and through the woods

bryn mason

I SQUINTED MY EYES AS I STARED UP AT MY MOTHER, the obnoxiously bright sun sitting just over her shoulder. Heat radiated off of the paved driveway, seeping up into the soles of my sandals and then into my feet. I held a defiant stance, arms crossed tightly over my chest, glaring. At a height of barely three feet, I must have looked adorable to anyone and everyone but myself and my mother. Me because my emotions were no laughing matter, and my mother because she knew what would come next.

“Why not?” I demanded, with just the slightest edge of whine thrown in.

My mother sighed and instead of answering my rather important question just shook her head. The movement caused her shortly cropped auburn locks to bounce a bit. The first few streaks of gray were creeping back in around her roots, and I knew soon she would be redyeing it, hiding her age, though her nicely wrinkled face clearly displayed it. Her skin was pale, despite the fact that she’d spent most of her childhood outside running around her yard in Charlotte and, in later years, riding her horse over the very spot we stood.

This had to have been the second year our little battle had taken place, not to mention the several other skirmishes when I had demanded compensation for the crimes committed against me. After a few seconds, when it was clear I wouldn’t be surrendering, she took up her own battle stance. “I’ve explained this to you before, Bryn.” She gave me that look, the one that screamed ‘conversation over, Missy,’ like she was already victorious. I, being stubborn, had no intention of giving up without a fight.

I gave my mother, my enemy, a hard stare. “But I want to *stay*,” I said, like it was the most perfect reasoning in the world.

My mother shook her head again, exasperated. She started toward the car, passing me and pausing only long enough to scoop me

up like I wasn't a fierce little five-year-old. "Let me go!" I shrieked. It only fazed her for a second as she tried to regain her hearing in the ear that had been closest to my mouth. I struggled, trying to break free in that slight hesitation, but in a second, she was back to lugging me toward the beat-up old minivan. The car was starting to look more like a cage with wheels, and I myself felt like a prisoner of war, caught right in the clutches of my merciless captor. She took no heed of my shouts, instead persistently dragging me towards my impending doom.

I kicked and wriggled. Why couldn't I stay? Why could my brothers and my cousin Sarah stay, but I couldn't? It was unfair! I had endured the three-hour drive to the mountains, just like they had. So why was I having to be hauled back home? Hot tears leaked down my cheeks, and I continued to scream. We were nearing the edge of my battlefield when I saw the most hopeful sight.

My brothers, Josh and Ben, came loping down the rise that led to my grandparents' house. They wore the simple uniforms of cargo pants and cotton tees, but more obvious was the look of astonishment scrawled onto their faces. Clearly, I had not thrown a tantrum of such a scale before. I shouted for them, too. My first thoughts were, *My rescue! It's here!* But slowly, the realization took me, as they stood unmoving at the edge of the driveway. They would not save me. I would remain my enemy's prisoner for another year.

* * *

Every summer when I was a child, my brothers and I would visit my grandmother's house, tucked away in the rural Appalachian mountains. The town was minuscule, barely on the map at all, its only distinguishing feature being that it was about thirty minutes from Boone. It took us nearly three hours to get there, driving along the nauseatingly twisty roads, my mother humming almost every moment in the car. At the end of the drive, we would meet my cousins and then stay there for the week with very limited adult supervision. The plot of land my grandmother lived on was huge—expansive—nearly sixty acres of goat pens and steep hills. Being a gardener, my grandmother loved to plant, so a massive garden was kept where she grew various types of vegetables and fruits.

There were three main rules enforced at her house: don't do anything stupid, don't drink a soda without first having a glass of milk, and no one under the age of five could stay the week. I heavily suspect the first and last rules were connected, but at the time when I was a wee four-year-old, the more concerning issue to me was discovering how to get around this.

I never did actually get to go early. Instead, when I was five, finally old enough to stay, I took the three-hour drive with my brothers, and was welcomed graciously into their kid-dominated hierarchy.

* * *

I stepped slowly beside the expansive row of blueberry bushes, trying to find a cluster that the birds had spared. Overgrown blades of grass brushed along the bottom of my small bare feet, and I struggled to not giggle from the feeling. I stopped, curling my toes a bit. It was early enough that the dew hadn't had a chance to evaporate, meaning my feet were thoroughly soaked and chilled. The air was sharp, clean, and cool, not yet that boiling heat that it reached at midday. As I stretched up to reach a little grouping of berries, a bald spot amongst the leaves revealed a face.

I smiled, and Sarah smiled back, a curving of her thick lips. The chocolate brown of her eyes sparkled with their own light, hiding a certain lack behind them. Her bangs completely covered her brow, clinging to that smooth tan color of flesh most people had to struggle to achieve. The hair that matched her eyes hung limply from her head, yet maintained the ever slightest curl at the tips. It was just long enough for the brown locks to crest her narrow shoulders.

"How many berries ya got, Brie?" she asked in a cheery voice, using the nickname bestowed upon me by my family. Though four years older than me, she didn't have to stoop to make her bony face visible.

I dropped my gaze to the bucket I held in my tiny grip and started to try and count the little indigo blobs at the bottom of it. After I reached four, I stopped, deeming them far too many to possibly count. Instead, I pulled the bucket into view, tipping it forward just a bit so she could see, and replying, "A lot!"

Impossibly enough, Sarah's frail face lit up even more. She ducked out of view, and in a few seconds rounded the end of the row, heading towards me, her own gallon bucket in hand. She stopped a few paces in front of me, tipping the forward until I could see its contents.

She had filled the bucket half full, at least. The little fruits were piled, and whereas most of mine still contained that red hue that showed them to be unripe, hers were all solidly blue, without the slightest traces of imperfection. The smile seeped off my face, and turned my gaze back down to the meager contents of my tub. The fruit barely covered the bottom, and even then, many were still holding those touches of crimson. I tipped my bucket to the side, as she had, but instead of a tide of blueberries pouring over each other, it just caused a soft series of thumps as the small, bitter, unripe berries collected at one end. My lips curved sharply down.

Sarah noticed, and her expression wilted just a bit, her eyebrows knitting together. She tried to process my sudden change from smiling to almost glaring. Lowering her bucket, concern flitted across her features. "What's wrong?" she questioned, lips twitching into a frown.

I was fully prepared to shout, scream, and throw a tantrum in the way only a five-year-old could. How dare she be better at picking berries than me? Forget her years of so called "experience." I had helped my father in his garden, not just once, but at least three times. That ought to make me an expert at anything remotely related to gardening.

As I sucked in the air necessary to spew off my long list of reasons why I might be angry, I heard the warning rustle of leaves. It made me hesitate, only a second, as childish thoughts of monsters zipped through my head, but it seemed a second was enough. A black shadow launched itself from the depths of the bush. Sarah and I had scarcely time to react before the shaggy mass of the creature's head collided with my cousin's tub of blueberries. The little orbs sprayed everywhere in a moment, scattering as the bucket exploded from Sarah's slender grip.

While the beast rolled and slowed, I tried to register what had happened. The first emotion to hit me was outrage, fueled by my preexisting anger. I was going to eat those! But as my beady little

eyes flicked to the scattered fruit, I felt a wave of satisfaction. Well, well, look who had the fuller bucket now.

Sarah was the first to recognize our assailant. “Flush!” she cried, the rare note of anger threading through her voice. “Don’t do that!” Her tone was enough to make me blink, surprised, but the overweight, dopey black lab took no heed. He rolled into a standing position, instantly lowering his head to lap up the berries with his long tongue. Sarah let out a frustrated sigh as she realized that he was ignoring her, but bent to pick up her emptied tub, shooting a glance at me.

“I guess it’s good you picked so many, huh?” She was already back to her peppy demeanor, while my mind still scrambled to piece everything in order. After a second, I smiled and nodded. She was being friendly, and I thought I’d won. Sarah flashed a brilliantly white smile back, and we started back towards the house, me lagging behind only a bit. Sarah, wisely, had worn shoes.

* * *

I held a wide stance, fists clenched, with my tiny face scrunched up into what I could only imagine was a look of sheer six-year-old fury. My cousin Sammy, with a face so skinny it looked like he’d had a nasty run-in with a taffy puller, glared back. His already small eyes were narrowed into slits, through which the barest glimpses of his dull, manure-shaded irises could be seen. He held a much less practiced version of my stance. Amateur.

Sarah hovered a few feet behind her younger brother, that concerned look on her face. She and her sibling shared many features, but where hers gave away her soft personality, Sammy’s showed a person as sharp and ugly as his spiky and short haircut. I ground my teeth a bit. Behind me, I had my own brothers egging me on. While the urge to impress Josh and Ben, both at least five years older than me, was strong, this was also a matter of showing my rank.

I was a year Sammy’s senior. Third in charge was *my* slot. I had earned it upon showing that I was more dominant than frail Sarah. I glared harder at the usurper, blood boiling in my veins. Even the gray, overcast sky seemed to agree with me as it bleakly

shone down on the front yard. I wanted to defend my place, and I would.

With all the might I possessed, I charged toward the dirty blond with full intent to make him bleed. Bleeding people were rarely concerned with status. There must have been something in my eyes because even Sarah looked a touch afraid. I wasn't sure if my brothers had stopped cheering or if I had simply blocked them out, too focused on the task at hand. In truth, it didn't matter. The mix of astonishment and terror on Sammy's face was enough to push me forward.

A wordless, angry scream tore from my throat as I slammed into him hard, using my weight to drive him to the ground. By no means was I a light child, and he was winded or at least stunned for a second or two. I didn't waste the opportunity. My fist struck into his cheek. It made my tiny knuckles ache, but there was just enough padding in his cheek that I could bet it was hurting him a lot more than it was hurting me.

He started to scream, which only drove me more. I wasn't putting clear thoughts behind my actions, just doing as the situation—and my rage—called for. I wedged in two more blows before I felt hands pulling and tugging me off of him. Sammy was crying and sobbing by then, but sadly, not bleeding.

"Baby!" I screeched as my brothers hauled me off, toward the far side of the lawn. "Baby, baby, *baby*!" I glared furiously, kicking my legs even as they pried me away from his screaming form. One blow landed on his leg, causing him to cry out, far louder than the hit really deserved. He was weak and he was childish. My only regret, as Josh and Ben pulled me out of his line of sight, was that he still wasn't bleeding.

* * *

The bright reds and oranges of the summer sunset were still draining out of the sky. Where the trees cropped up in a thinner spread, I could glimpse the radiant light. On the eastern edge of the sky, purple-gray clouds drifted in like a blanket stretching from the horizon. Their darker, gloomy look dampened the glory of the blazing sunset.

I sat on a stump that protruded from the barren land, squinting my eyes against the slanted light. My brothers were dragging flammable objects to throw into a massive pile. They were far from done, and it already towered above me. The potbellied gentleman graced with the title of my grandfather stood a bit to the side of their growing stack, supervising. At his feet lay a few supplies, the most obvious being a newspaper, and we knew he had no intention of reading the old copy. My grandfather stood so still, I wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Every time I was almost certain this was the case, his wrinkled face would move to scan the emptied goat pen, dispelling any illusions.

He was a small man compared to his children, standing only about five and a half feet, probably less. His gut hung well over his belt, due to a few too many Klondike bars after dinner. The shirt he wore, like most of his clothing, was plaid, following the stereotypes of his hometown. If there were any doubts, his warped Southern accent confirmed his redneck roots. Upon further inspection, you could see his hazel eyes showing in uneven proportions from the fact that his face always seemed scrunched. It gave him the look of being lopsided, unfinished, and, more often than not, a little deranged. Depending on the situation, he could morph his face into a smile or a scowl. Even when he chose no expression at all, his mouth gaped open a touch, allowing a permanent view of his ivory-colored teeth and numerous fillings.

Sarah sat on the rotting remnants of a nearby log, hunched over. She stared directly at the red soil in front of her, one hand folded across her lap, the other absently picking at a tuft of coarse grass. She'd seemed a little distant for that week, a drone-like girl replacing my cousin. Thinking back, I can remember that she had turned eleven that year, a crucial milestone for development. At the time, I had dismissed it, the way a child so easily does, but now I find myself curious about what had passed through her head in those days.

Sammy lurked around the edges of our makeshift circle, which in turn was centered around the wood pile. He paced restlessly, unable to keep still, yet not daring to venture toward me, keeping a very good distance. He had ever since the previous summer, when I had gotten into a brawl with him. Needless to say, I was the vic-

tor. The little shrimp had tried to usurp the pecking order, wedging himself in as number three, *my* rank. For that, he'd held some bruises on his face the entire week. I could still clearly remember, clearly see myself being dragged off of him. I hadn't received any punishment because it was unanimously agreed the twerp had it coming, but Sammy hadn't seen it that way. The day after our scuffle had been the first day he'd chosen to steer clear from me, only risking a glare every now and again.

A few minutes after the last light had slipped from the sky, my grandfather opted to move from his supervising spot. We all froze in what we were doing, eyes turning towards him as he bent to pick up his materials. My brothers stopped moving the junk, curious. I sat in rapt attention, my gaze following every movement he made. Was it time? I could only wonder with growing anticipation.

He took the newspaper first, crumpling entire pages into enormous wads, and stuffing them into the nooks of the pile, mostly near the base. The crinkling paper was the only noise that pierced the still night, the slightest breath of a breeze all that moved. The crickets were well overdue to start their symphony, but remained eerily silent, as if they too held their breath and watched. After a sufficient amount of paper had been crammed into the little gaps between the planks and frames in the stack, my grandfather grabbed a rectangular tin can, and took the time to douse most of the pile in what fluid the half empty container held. Again, the only sounds were of him working, the quiet splatter as liquid hit the boards, the wheezing sound of the can as he tried to empty all of its contents.

When it appeared nothing else would come from the little tin container, he limped back towards where he had originally stood, depositing it and picking up the lighter. It was the type with a long, red handle most commonly used for grills, but tonight it would start the flame for our bonfire. The grip seemed to emit its own crimson glow, a stark contrast against the dim backdrop of the goat pen. He clicked it to life, and touched each of the wads of paper with the tiny, flickering flame. My eyes locked onto the wood pile as the orange haze steadily grew.

I had always appreciated the beauty of fire, especially when I was little, but with that admiration and wonder also came a good

deal of fear and caution. It was in this way I came to understand the more unpredictable things of life, like storms, or the ocean. I could admire the concept of them while keeping a safe distance. Awe and terror were a powerful mix of emotions and more than enough to keep my focus solely on the steadily growing bonfire.

The flames spread hungrily along the gasoline-soaked wood, slowly at first but gradually with more speed. The chorus of night sounds was picking up, encouraged by every loud pop from the fire. Fireflies, recognizable only by the little neon blinks that touched the air every few seconds, began to circle around the fire, attracted by its bright light. It wasn't long before the entire stack stood engulfed in flame.

A rolling crack of thunder sounded, tearing me abruptly from my tranquil state, causing both Sarah and I to jump. Though I couldn't see Sammy, I was fairly certain he'd been startled, too. Turning my gaze skyward, I was just in time to see a streak of lightning split the sky in a white arc, promptly followed by another thundering boom. My eyes widened. The plan had been to camp out in only our sleeping bags, but now that wasn't looking like a terribly good idea. We hadn't even bothered to bring tents up with us or, to my knowledge, flashlights. I moved closer to Sarah, fairly intimidated, and was certain I could hear Sammy snickering.

Clap after clap of thunder sounded, some so close I swore I could feel the ground vibrate. No one but Sarah and myself seemed affected by it, my brothers sitting on the other side of the bonfire, conversing placidly. Sarah and I exchanged worried glances. It was apparent neither of us enjoyed storms, much less sleeping out in them. The only thing that rooted me in place, preventing my fleeing back to the house, was my pride. But, eventually, that gave out, too.

"Sarah?" I whispered, now sitting right beside her on the rotting log. A particularly loud bout of thunder had just sounded, and I gave all credit to not soiling myself.

"I know," she replied in the same low tone, guessing my thoughts. Really, my voice hadn't made it all that difficult to read.

"Can we leave?" I squeaked, drawing my knees up to my chest, feeling thoroughly terrified.

She nodded, standing up boldly. Shooting one reassuring glance

back at me before she spoke, Sarah announced, “Me and Bryn are gonna go back to the house.” I started to stand to join her, when I heard what was clearly bitter laughter. A cry erupted from the other edge of the circle.

“Baby!” Sammy shouted, flinging my own words back in my face. “Baby, baby, *baby!*”

I stood abruptly, making my younger cousin falter for just a second. My face felt hot and my eyes stung. My pride was that which I most prized, and now, even when I had to bend it, he continued to spit on me, to kick me while I was already down. I turned away, on the verge of tears, and blindly started back toward the house. Sammy’s barrage of catcalls followed me unceasingly, his confidence only reassured as I ran, until a sharp voice cut him off.

“Samm-eh,” my grandfather’s gruff drawl sounded. “Shut up.”

Silence followed, but it didn’t stop me from tearing down the path. Sammy’s desired damage had been done. I cried the whole way back, the hallowed glow of the rising half moon like a shadow of the glorious sunset, giving dim light to my way.

* * *

The ceiling was painted white but made in the old style so the bumps in its uneven surface cast shadows. It made the thing look flecked, spotted. My childish eyes saw it as a giant snow leopard, stretched out across the roof of the house. There was no monster in the closet but instead a beast on the ceiling. I wondered what would happen if I fell asleep. Across the room, Sarah slept, snug in her own bed. Her soft breathing was a comfort to me, letting me know at least she was nearby if I needed to fend off the creature.

I had my hand stuck in my mouth, awkwardly wiggling the little canine tooth in my top row. It wasn’t very loose, but I was quickly changing that. I always had found it funny, the way a wiggly tooth felt. I’d lost several teeth before and had taken special care to remembering the stages of looseness as well as attempting to document them. It was my own miniature study, I told myself.

The little clock told me it was drawing closer to midnight, but I still felt like I couldn’t sleep. Why, though, I wasn’t sure. My incident with Sammy had been two days ago, on Thursday of that

week. Today was Sunday and drawing perilously close towards the morning on which I would depart from my grandparents' with Josh and Ben. I didn't want to leave, that was certain. But insomnia was not something I often experienced, and it was unnerving.

I felt the ever slightest twist, and then nothing. I let my fingers pull away from the tooth. I'd been too absorbed in thought to actually note how loose my canine had gotten. I let my tongue run over the spot where it had been, sort of curious. It didn't feel like the tooth had come out, or at least I didn't feel it bouncing around as I swished my tongue about. Where a gap supposedly should have been, I felt the smooth siding of enamel. It made me curious, because it didn't feel the same as before. It didn't feel the same size, or the same shape, or even exactly the same texture. My curiosity got the better of me.

I stood up, sliding out from between the heavy sheets and then standing lightly on my feet, careful to avoid waking Sarah. The carpeted floor felt sort of chilled, and I stumbled about, trying not to step on any of the Barbie dolls that lay scattered across the floor. I knew how much their sharp hands hurt bare feet from previous expeditions to the bathroom at night. After a minute or so of moving around the obstacle course that was our room, I was in the hallway, which was at least a little brighter.

The hardwood floor of the narrow hallway was smoother, and not riddled with debris, but also incredibly cold. The house always seemed blisteringly hot during daylight hours, but frigid as soon as the sun sank below the wooded horizon. The main thing my small mind could sum up was that the mountains were *weird*. They were their own type of desert, cold in the evening, hot by midday, and instead of a lack of rain, there was a lack of people.

The doorknob to the bathroom turned awkwardly, as it was old with a certain blotchy look brought on by the fading bronze paint. It wobbled a bit as I turned it, and, as always, I was afraid it was going to fall off. It was so unstable, so frail, that I felt the natural need to be gentle with it. The interior of the bathroom was old and faded, too, but I took less heed of it. After the first week here, the yellow room had ceased to grab my attention. It was one of those places that stood out the first time, but you noticed less and less with each passing glance, maybe because it was the only thing

about the house that hadn't changed.

Standing in front of the large mirror, which was made up of a collection of smaller ones, I let my index finger draw back my upper lip, so I could see the tooth. I blinked at what I saw, thoroughly amazed. The canine, which had barely been loose six hours ago, was wedged on top of the neighboring teeth, sideways. I hadn't the faintest idea what held it in place. I poked it, tentatively, and felt nothing. The area felt almost completely numb. That scared me the most.

Quickly, I backed from the mirror, as if that would make it go away. I stumbled out into the hall, moving much more quickly than I had on my way to the bathroom. I ran across the cluttered floor of the bedroom, wincing at I stepped on the sharp edges of a Lego, but not stopping until I slammed into my cousin's bed.

"Sarah!" I said in a loud whisper, my tone urgent but my voice low.

She jolted awake, not from me calling her name, but from the fact that I had rammed into her bed at full speed. She blinked several times as her eyes attempted to focus and adjust to the dim light. "Brie?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep. "What's up?" Her head was already sagging back to the pillow, but I shook her again, before she could pass out. She continued to blink but this time attempted to sit up. "What's wrong?"

I pulled back my upper lip, letting her see the damage for herself. Sarah's eyes, which had been almost closed, now widened, to the point where her whites glowed brightly in the dim light. She stared for a few seconds at the twisted tooth before her hand slowly rose and poked it once. Nothing happened, and I resisted to urge to close my mouth so she wouldn't prod it again. She jabbed her finger at the tooth, and this time, it fell out easily. I blinked as I felt it land on my tongue and attempt to roll down my throat. Retrieving it before it managed to lodge itself in my windpipe, I smiled at Sarah.

"Thanks!" I said cheerily, my voice loud and breaking the silence.

Sarah nodded wearily, and let her head drop onto the pillow. She mumbled something along the lines of, "Go to sleep."

I did.

* * *

I left the next morning, reluctantly saying goodbye to Sarah, and sharply ignoring Sammy's presence entirely. No, I had not forgiven him for what happened around the bonfire. No, I doubted I ever would, just as I doubted he would ever forgive him for beating him to the ground. An eye for an eye; his humiliation for mine. It didn't stop me from thinking awful thoughts towards him on the long drive back. I wasn't aware at the time, but that would be my last year at my grandmother's. It wasn't that we didn't want to go, my brothers and I, but Sarah and Sammy had refused to attend the next August. I had known my brother held a relationship with Sarah similar to my own with Sammy, but with more verbal attacks than physical. It made me wonder which one of us had scared them off first.

Sitting in the car, unaware what was to come, I easily day-dreamed of next summer, my mother lightly humming to the tune of "over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go."

sisters

kearra williams

AS WE LIE IN THE PITCH BLACK ROOM, I stare into the darkness and watch my little sister's sun-kissed skin glow while she lays next to me. A few minutes go by, and I hear her open her mouth to say something—"I'm hungry," or something crazy like she always does. She reminds me of myself when I was her age. No one could really ever quite make out what I was saying, and I was always asking for food. But instead of something crazy, she actually whispers, "Kearra? Has anyone ever died in your family before?"

I acknowledge her question and reply. "Yes, Sydney, someone has. It was my grandpa, and, of course, our brother, Micah."

I begin to chase away the thoughts running through my mind. It seems as if my brain has shut down or something. I'm sure hers has, knowing that her dead brother was just mentioned. I begin to see teardrops running down her face and onto the foot-long pillow we share.

"Well, I miss him dearly, and I wish he was here to take road trips with us and here for me to talk to everyday, you know? I talk to him every night before I go to sleep, and in the morning he leaves messages on my pillow waiting for me," she responds.

I catch myself crying, recalling the photos of him hanging right outside of our door.

"Well, Ke, I don't want to talk about this anymore because it just makes me think of what used to be, and what I wish could be now, but it's not. So, goodnight, love you."

"Goodnight, Sydney. Love you, too."

The next morning, I awake to the smell of warm syrup, hot pancakes and oven-hot turkey bacon. I roll out of the bed of memories. As I get ready to go to the bathroom to wash my face and hands, I realize that my sister's hot pink laptop isn't plugged into the wall,

which makes me think she has left, but I glance to the right and see her bags packed neatly. I follow the smell of a hot home-cooked meal all the way downstairs.

I notice my papa on the couch doing the usual: reading his newspaper and watching his soap operas. To the left of him, Sydney lies on the floor playing with Ruby, the annoying German Shepherd. My sister mumbles, "Morning Ke."

"Morning," I reply.

I glance at the clock that displays 11:23. I think to myself, *What? There's no way I woke up before noon.*

My grandfather's wife, Charlene, says, "Kearra, your breakfast is in the microwave."

"Thanks."

While I'm eating my delightful meal, I come to a halt and think to myself just once more before realizing that my phone is ringing. It is my other little sister Kamryn back at home. I drink the rest of the orange juice left in my cup and answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sissy!" she cheers.

"Good morning, Kamryn. How are you?"

"Good. I just called to say I love you and to check up on you 'cause I love you oh-so much."

"Well, I'm doing just fine and I love you, too. Talk to you later. I need to finish eating."

"Don't forget to call me back. Love ya. Bye."

My sister Kamryn is only five years old. What is she doing calling me? I finish eating the rest of my breakfast before it gets cold and begin to think of what I am going to wear that day. My papa's wife has a day of plans for us. I put my plate in the sink and walk upstairs. Sydney follows me to the guest bedroom. I open up my suitcase and start to lay my clothes out. She just sits there quietly and watches me move around the room. I go to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth.

She says, "Ke, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings last night. I just didn't wanna remember the bad about him, only the good, you know?"

"It's okay, Sydney. I shouldn't have taken it that far. I apologize for that."

I continue to walk into the guest bathroom and do my usual face wash with my Proactive face cream, brush my teeth, brush my hair down, and I'm good to go. I put my clothes on and walk downstairs to tell my papa's wife I'm ready. We say our goodbyes to my grandfather and open the door to the garage. I hop into the front seat, and my sister slides into the back seat. We arrive at Target and I tell my papa's wife to call me so we can meet back up. We go our separate ways and my sister asks me if I mind letting her walk with me. Of course I tell her no, I don't mind.

As we're walking towards the beauty section, I think about why she would ask me something like that. I'm pretty sure she knows I don't mind, but maybe she thinks I'm upset with her, even though I'm not. I take a couple steps forward to ask her, "Sydney, is there anything you want to talk about? You seem a little bit upset."

She replies, "I'm fine. I've just been thinking about some things lately, so I've just been laying low."

"Okay, Sydney, you know I'm your big sister and you can talk to me about anything, and I promise I won't tell anyone. Even though I know you are lying to me, I just hope that you feel comfortable even to come and tell me anything because I've always wished I had a big sister to come talk to and tell me things."

She says to me, "Ke, this isn't the kind of conversation we need to be having in the middle of Target, but since you are my big sister I know I can come and tell you anything. But we live in two completely different cities!"

At this moment, I'm disturbed by what I just heard come out of my little sister's mouth. I'm beyond shocked. I never knew she felt this way. I wish she would have told me all of this before.

"Sydney, how dare you say that! I'm nothing but a phone call away! I don't even think I want to talk about this anymore!"

Twenty minutes go by and we are home again. I go upstairs to try out my purchased nail polish. My sister follows. We enter the guest bedroom, and all of a sudden Sydney says, "I'm really sorry for what happened in Target. It was never meant to come out like that. I never want you to feel like you don't do your job as a big sister, because you do a great job at it. I just came up here to tell you I love you. My mommy is downstairs and it's time for me to leave. Love you. Bye."

“Wait, Sydney, I love you, too, and thank you. I try my hardest, and of course I know you didn’t mean any of it. You love me too much.”

We both smile as I watch her walk out the door to go home.

I never knew I could gain a better relationship with my sister within just two days. God knows the next time I’m going to see her. But I’m pretty sure she’ll call me.

playfighting

dante otero

I.

IT WAS WARM, BUT NOT UNBEARABLE. Piles of crunchy leaves scattered the ground. Gray clouds lingered above as my sister grunted with the strain of pushing me up the hill in a plastic Jeep. It was a small plastic car found on the side of the road, ready to be taken by the garbage men, but my parents had taken it home and given it to us. It used to run on a battery, but now the only way to move was it was by pushing. She was wearing her hair in a ponytail, and her red sweater and blue pants clashed. The red plastic Jeep seemed heavy after my sister asked, “Dante, can you get out of the Jeep and help me push it up?”

I refused, enjoying the air as my sister panted after she finished pulling me up. “Sofia, come on, can you push me down?” She gave me a death stare, but pushed me down the hill as fast as she could. It was a small incline that seemed a lot steeper at the time. After a couple repetitions, we abandoned the Jeep, moving on to the sandbox.

Soon it started to rain, full drops falling fast. My sister and I set out buckets to catch the rain, checking them constantly and emptying them into a larger pail. The day ended soon after that, the fading light heading toward night. We fell asleep to my sister telling stories with the lights turned off from the top of the bunk bed.

II.

It was after five o'clock p.m., the sky was starting to get dark, and it was the perfect temperature. My sister was sitting at her glass desk, her attention absorbed by her red laptop, and no matter how hard I tried, she ignored me. She wanted to use the com-

puter instead of being with me. I was bored and wanted attention. It started out with small things like touching the stuff on the desk's shelves. Eventually, it escalated until I was messing with the height elevation on her chair and flicking balls of paper at her. She got angry of course, but at least she paid attention to me. This type of situation would always end up with us yelling at each other, the loud screams radiating through the house.

This led to the dreaded vibration of one of our parents coming up the stairs to see what was going on. I was sent to my room, and my sister returned to her laptop. This would always leave me frustrated, and would generally get me in trouble again.

Now that I have inherited my sister's room since she left for college, I am reminded of all the moments spent outside it staring at the door, waiting for her to come out or let me in.

III.

Looking back on good times that I had with my sister, our trip to the movies was one of my favorites. She worked at the Stadium 10 Movie Theater and invited me to see *Pirates of the Caribbean 4* with a free movie pass.

Before the movie started, my sister and I went to a Chick-fil-A and ate on a bench sitting across from a creepy old lady that kept staring at us. My sister and I whispered back and forth.

"Why is that lady staring at us? Do we look like punks?"

My sister responded with, "Maybe she is looking at the sandwiches?" After laughing about this, we went out to look at stores to kill time before the movie. We both had about four dollars, with which my sister decided to buy a *lot* of candy. While my sister browsed at some popular generic clothing store, I snuck off to buy a banana split, something that my sister and I have always wanted to eat. I waited at a table in front of the store and shared it with her. After finishing the banana split, we went to the movie theater early to find good seats.

The movie was phenomenal. After that, my sister and I went back into the mall. All the stores had already closed, and there was a janitor suspiciously looking at us as we ran through the lobby.

I used the last of my money to get some gum for us, and then our parents arrived to pick us up.

Now, I find myself missing her. I wish that I had been able to spend more time with my sister before my parents picked me up, but alas, my sister needed to organize her stuff for her “journey” to college. I regret all the time wasted with her arguing when we could have been doing something fun.

IV.

It was still early in the morning, dark as the coming of a storm, the air thick as though it were waiting for something. The birds were still asleep in the gently swaying trees. The silence was shattered, interrupted by screaming and yelling from a house at the end of the cul-de-sac. It sounded like the voices of a boy and girl. The boy (for it was I) was repeatedly yelling, “I did not do that to the mirror!” but the girl (for it was my sister) insisted it was me.

“I know it was you! I just saw you!” The mirror was as dirty and crusty as the shell of a crab, with flecks of dried toothpaste on the surface. As this continued, the screams intensified until support arrived.

My father came up. “Both of you stop yelling *now*,” he bellowed. The stairs were a battlefield with all three of us yelling at one another. He split us up, sending me to the bathroom downstairs since her plethora of hair products would have taken too long to move. Later in the day, we would forget about it and forgive each other. Almost. We would still blame each other, keeping it inside except for the glares. Needless to say, this led to my parents being riled for the remainder of the day.

V.

The car shook vigorously, boxes of random objects trembling in the small, confined space. The boxes obstructed my vision, preventing me from seeing my sister though the mountain of junk separating us. The copious amount of boxes prevented me from sitting normally, let alone stretching out comfortably.

I realized that from now on I would not be as big of a part of my sister's life and would soon grow distant from her. It was a good thing that she was leaving though because she couldn't stay home forever. She needed to go find her identity and explore the world.

Closer to the campus, I realized the change that I would have in my life now that my sister was gone. I would be alone with my parents. I wished that we had spent more time with each other happily and not fighting, but that is behind us. Now when we see each other, we will see each other as adults, and less like whining siblings.

As I helped my family unpack the car, I was helping to make my sister go away. I felt a sudden urge to stop and repack the car. I wanted to turn around and drive back, but instead I helped bring my sister's stuff to her new room, a nice enough dorm with a window and a bathroom.

The drive back felt very lonely; the decreased number of boxes allowed me to sit comfortably with a reduced amount of noise, but it still could not put me at ease.

thoughts of depression

hector Muñoz

1.

SWEAT BEADED DOWN MY FOREHEAD. I sat in a chair with one leg crossed, tapping my foot every second. I could hear the sound of airplanes zipping by in the sky. The sound of luggage on wheels rolling by got on my nerves. I became impatient. As I looked over at my little brother's expression, I could tell he had become impatient also.

"What time is it?" he questioned with a sad look of lost hope. He really started to doubt that he was coming at all.

"*No te preocupes, el va a estar aquí!*"¹ my dad proclaimed. His forehead had been covered in wrinkles from all the times he lost his temper at my brother for being so childish. "*Yo ya le pague su ticket, entonces el va a estar aquí!*"² he continued.

My patience had become limited. I felt as if my mind was being locked up in an asylum, tortured with all this waiting. My eyelids were getting heavy and hunger took over my stomach. I couldn't keep them open for much longer. Then out of nowhere my dad informed us, "*Solo cinco minutos más hasta que llegue su avión.*"³ My eyes opened wide.

Finally! I thought. *This miserably long wait is almost at its end.* My stomach churned from hunger.

2.

By the time we finally got home, excitement at seeing my older brother filled the house. Everyone asked him all sorts of questions.

1 Don't worry, he'll be here!

2 I already paid his ticket, he will be here!

3 Only five minutes left before his plane gets here.

“Did you miss us, Hector Hernan?” questioned my little brother. He was a very curious little guy, but he also had a short temper like my dad.

“Why do you wear skinny jeans now?” asked my little sister in confusion. My older brother visits us during holidays or every summer, when he stays for a month or so. I don’t really get to see him often because he lives with his mom. His mom and my dad divorced when he was little and they don’t really like each other. So, really, he is my older half-brother. He was a senior in high school at the time.

“Okay, *en una hora vamos a dormir*,⁴” my dad declared. *What?!* I thought to myself. We had just gotten home after a miserably long wait at the airport. I only had one hour to get to know my brother again until the next day.

My brother was a very good person. I don’t think my dad ever punished him because he was always kind to others and generous. That is why I looked up to him, that and he could do really cool things like parkour, otherwise known as free running. Free running is when you climb on buildings and do flips and wall runs.

“Hey, Hector Luis. Come on man, time to go to bed.” He looked at me awkwardly. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it right now,” I replied. A smile started to grow on my face.

3.

The building was a dull shade of a gray. Right next to the structure was a giant rocket almost the size of the building itself. I was going to the Museum of Life and Science but I wasn’t really hyped about it. I thought I was too old for that kind of stuff. Since there were always little children there, I felt like I was being treated like a child.

“Okay, *ya estamos aquí!*”⁵ exclaimed my mom.

“This is the museum you guys were talking about?” Hector Hernan asked my little siblings.

4 we’ll go to sleep in an hour

5 we’re here

"Yeah, I really like this museum. You're going to like it, too!" Tiffany responded. *I just know I am going to be bored out of my mind here*, I thought to myself. I didn't really like the museum because I had always come here on field trips and stuff, and every time I came I would always see the same exhibits. As we got out of the car, my sister said something about the animals exhibit, but I was too annoyed with the idea of being here that I didn't pay attention.

Since it was a Wednesday, the admission was free, so we just walked right in, not having to worry about paying. There were little children everywhere, either checking an exhibit, calling for their parents, or whining about not wanting to leave. I began to get a headache; luckily, we were headed to a quieter place in the museum. As we did, I looked over at my older brother and I saw an expression on his face that distracted me from all of my surroundings. His face looked disappointed, like the life had just been sucked out of him.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked him.

4.

My little cousin shouted with glee. He had always loved going to the beach. "Be quiet, Bryan," I told him as I looked over at my baby cousin. The child's eyes were wide open, and he made noises only an infant could make. His eyes wandered around trying to get everyone's attention because he did not know what was going on. He did not know why everyone was so excited.

"*Callate niño!*"⁶ my uncle demanded in anger. My uncle did not usually yell; he was a calm man, but sometimes Bryan would get on his last nerve.

As my uncle parked, I could feel the gentle pull of the brakes. I unlocked the door and stepped out. I took a deep breath of sea air and gave a sigh of relief knowing I wouldn't be in a cramped car for at least a few hours. The sound of seagulls and waves crashing onto the shore calmed my nerves. The only thing I disliked about the beach was that every time I went, I would get sand in my shorts or salt water up my nose or in my mouth.

6 Shut up, boy!

As I took that revitalizing breath, I felt the cool sea breeze blow past my face. The air smelled of salt, hot dogs, burgers, and sandwiches. I spotted my family unpacking our supplies and food just a few parking spots away.

"Hey, Hector, where are you going?" Bryan questioned as his head tilted to the side.

5.

The thought of it made me depressed. My older brother was finally leaving. I dreaded the idea. I didn't want him to leave. He had stayed here for two months, but it had felt like just two weeks. The time had flown by.

"I wish you could have stayed here longer," my little brother said.

"Me, too. I had a lot of fun with you guys," he responded with a sad look on his face.

"I'm going to miss your skinny jeans!" my sister giggled, trying to lighten the situation.

"Ha, ha. Thanks, I'll miss you too!" Hector Hernan answered.

So that was it. Everyone said their goodbyes. My dad gave him a handshake and a hug and asked him, "*Si tu madre te da problemas me llamas, ay?*"⁷

"*Sí, gracias papi,*" my brother answered.

He gave everyone hugs and kisses, then thanked my mom. This was a really hard moment for me because I didn't know when I would see him again. He gave me a handshake and a hug. As he let go, I could see that he forced a smile so I wouldn't get so sad.

There was really nothing else anyone could say. So we just guided him to where he would board the plane and said our goodbyes one more time. As he left, we watched him get his bags checked and saw where the exit would be. There was no stopping him now; he had to leave.

As he walked away, I didn't feel depressed anymore. I knew that I would see him again. Besides, that would happen to me too when I got older and had to leave home. Before Hector Hernan left the area, he looked back at us with a sad grin and waved.

7 If your mother gives you problems, call me, alright?

a tale of brotherly love and hate

bird

I.

ABBA, EMA, LIZZIE, HE, AND I ALL SAT WAITING in the hot van, surrounded by everything he would need for his new life. The van rolled forward, clunking over the sneaky speed bump in front of the security box.

Abba gruffly uttered, “Hello. We’re here to drop off a new student.” The rent-a-cop nodded, pressed a button, and went back to watching *Star Wars* on the little TV in his booth. It made me feel like we were at the doorstep of a foreboding ancient castle, waiting for the gate to open. The mechanical arm lifted slowly and noisily, and we were in. We slowly drove past the signature green gates enclosing the “American Hebrew Academy: America’s *only* Jewish, pluralistic, college-prep boarding school.”

“So, Shawn, what dorm did they say you were in?” Abba asked, as we passed the school’s glistening private lake with canoes gliding over its tranquil surface.

“House 116, room 7,” he replied tightly. I noticed that his slightly pudgy cheeks were red, his thick brown eyebrows upturned, and his braces were clenched as firmly as train tracks.

The car was silent and full of tension and unguided anxiety as Abba pulled up to an emerald, freshly mown hill near the dorm buildings. The boy, the freshman, the son, the brother; he took it all in. His dark eyes widened, making him look like a petrified kindergartner. This wasn’t a normal high school. It was a private school that took the entire junior class to Israel for two months every year. The journey to get to the American Hebrew Academy took an hour and a half, and after we left, he’d be on his own at thirteen years old.

I pitied him. Even though he’d tormented me during his middle school years, that boy with the small ears and thick blond shag car-

pet hair was still my big brother, and now he would be completely alone in a huge school with a horrible attitude. I couldn't let go of how he used to treat me or how his hand had held mine on the first day of preschool. We were the blond kids and that, for some reason, brought us together. Still, he had changed. Everything in his life had molded him into a towering, pale-skinned cave monster whose baby face was a façade. Those narrow lips had rarely uttered a kind word to his baby sister in three years. That "adorable" little button nose that Mom-Mom just loved to tweak had snorted in contempt at me countless times since we moved. Even now, his hair was darkening to brown, reminding me of my dad. He had even begun to take on the perpetually coarse, condescending ways I've grown to hate.

"Do you need help unpacking?" Lizzie asked.

"No," he said, "but you guys don't have to leave just yet."

Dinner came and went, and then it was time. It was time to say goodbye to my big brother, one of the hardest things of my life.

All the necessary pieces of Shawn's new life were with him—and his family was driving away. But, as we did, it just felt like we were forgetting something.

II.

Our boots clomped on the asphalt, and the sleds dragged behind like a chorus of screeching penguins. The grass was dusted in a white chiffon curtain. The near-naked trees sparkled with the fresh powder. The chill in the air turned our cheeks and noses a comical shade of pink. This was a rare honor in North Carolina. The snowflakes teamed together to create an unbelievable winter landscape, and the sight of it left us all breathless. My whole family was out to celebrate the snowfall. Our voices cracked through the untainted stillness of the day, and we left proof of our presence with every step we took in the crisp snow. We saw Christmas trees glittering with yuletide spirit from the windows of the homes we passed on our way to the big hill in the neighborhood. An inflatable Santa smiled at us from underneath his thick, jolly beard, and seemed to wave as he bounced in the wind.

I was so excited, and truthfully, what six-year-old girl wouldn't be? I jumped around in my woolly marshmallow coat. I inhaled the fresh, cool air, completely content, and giggled as the cold chilled my throat.

When we got to the hill, Ema zipped up my sister Lizzie's winter coat and pulled her poof-ball hat over ears, like any mother would do. Our dog Ginger took off running, her four short legs barely clearing the top of the snow. My dad, Abba, slowly made it over to the hill, his damaged knees working at their own pace. Shawn was laughing and running all around the hill, scaring off any birds or deer for miles. I stuck out my tongue and merrily started to run around, catching snowflakes.

"Who wants to race me first?" Shawn asked everyone.

Abba stepped up and said assertively, "I accept your challenge." It was father vs. son in the first race of the season, and they both looked determined to win.

When they reached the bottom of the hill a minute later, the race was over. A short distance away was a charming little creek that Ema and I liked to go by when we walked Ginger.

Shawn rose from his blue sled, his snow pants rustling with his every move. He knew he'd lost, and he didn't like to lose. He trudged toward Abba, who was struggling to get up, and, in a very sportsmanlike manner, gave Abba his hand to help.

When Abba got to his feet, I shouted, "I wanna go against Toto! Me next!"

As I bounced happily up and down in the snow, Lizzie angrily stated, "I *told* you not to call me that, Bird!"

"I'll race you for the rights to call you 'Toto,' Lizzie. You win, I call you Lizzie. But if I come out the victor, it'll be like we're in Oz, Toto."

"Fine. Let's go," Lizzie said aggressively. She walked over to the sleds.

The snow soaked through my gloves, freezing my fingers. But I wasn't going to let frostbite and losing a couple appendages stop me. I stared fiercely at Lizzie. *She better get used to being called Toto.*

And the race was on! I jolted forward like a polar bear on the hunt, skillfully dodging the fruit trees and ornamental bushes scattered around the hill.

The sled moved forward through time and snow, the rails leaving a visible path behind me. The sled advanced quickly, the land passing like fleeting snowflakes plummeting to be caught by a child's tongue. As the sled continued forward, it bumped and shook over rocks hidden under the surface. The sled was nicked, and its path on the hill changed. On its new path, the sled leveled off, the rough patch behind it. It was travelling smoothly and swiftly once again. With each passing second, it came closer and closer to the finish line.

I gasped sharply. I was going too fast and had no way of controlling my plastic sled. Shawn, the race official, was waiting at the bottom of the hill. When he saw what was happening, he nobly raced out in front of the sled to stop the steed upon which his baby sister rode.

He plunged selflessly into the snow to rescue me, but to no avail. The plastic stallion would take no guidance. My hat flew off into the crooked path behind me, and I was holding on for dear life. The bulge of snow from the previous contest stopped my sled like a brick wall. I was bucked from the sled. All I saw was white: the white of the snow, the clouds, and the clear white sky. I was churned around in a wintry washing machine. Ema and Shawn sprinted over to my shuddering form, and lifted me out of the creek like a lost and helpless kitten.

Everything was drenched, from my hair to my feet, which I wasn't even sure still had toes. My tears froze on my cheek. The harsh winter winds blew, making me colder and even more miserable. Through my tears, I whispered to Shawn, "Can we go home now?"

On the way home, I looked like I was drowning in the fabric of my brother's winter coat. He had given me the coat and his gloves. Baby teeth chattered in a pointless attempt to protect me from the merciless, bitter blizzards and gusts of a North Carolina winter. Shawn held my hand, trying to keep me warm. My numb lips struggled to move as I said to Lizzie, "Hey T-T-Toto, I won-n-n. And guess what? We're not in Kansas anymore."

III.

The kitchen radio mumbled about a miracle cure for stretch marks, and you could hear the floorboards creaking as Lizzie paced upstairs. But here in the living room, Shawn and I were debating again. Shawn's narrow lips were cracked from the habit of biting his lip when he is nervous. Once he got talking, those scratched lips would never stop moving, and his eyebrows would dance. He was lecturing me again about doing chores. His eyes, like the sky before a tornado, stared me down as he said, "Bird, you just need to do more in this house."

"But you get home three hours before me!" I said, frustrated. Shawn talked about helping, and drew up these "contracts" for Lizzie and me to do more, while he did nothing. He would write up a piece of paper, saying something like, "I will fold laundry once a week," and asked for all of us, except him, to sign it. He was *not*, certainly not, the boss of me, and I had never signed one of his stupid contracts.

"Middle school is harder than elementary school, and I need to take a nap when I get home."

I sat up on our ancient brown couch, readying myself for a furious rebuttal. Shawn though turned around on the living room carpet to face our dog. Then, in the shrillest, most annoying voice he could come up with, he said to Ginger, "I think she'd better calm down, don't you think?" Ginger didn't reply, but I was livid, and his stupidity had broken the last straw in my milkshake of sanity. *He is the most annoying, stupid person I have met, and he is . . . just dumb! Does he really imagine that Ginger is going to talk back, and that they're having a conversation?*

"Why do you think she doesn't do any chores, Ginger?" he asked. "Oh, I see," Shawn said like he was having a revelation. "She's *la-azy*."

I stomped out of the room, shaking up the dust bunnies on the carpet and making a scene in front of my parents. I ran to my bedroom, snatched some paper from the drawer and took hold of some colored pencils. I then wrote an angry letter to my parents about their horrible son. I jabbed holes in the paper from writing so hard, and I doubted anyone could read my furious chicken scratch, but it took care of my rage.

I smiled as I pranced downstairs to place it gently on my dad's desk and then walked away like a good little girl.

Now I must only wait to exact my revenge on the boy. After all he's done, he deserves what's coming. But does he really? Is he really this bad, or am I just taking out my anger on him? He's the one with the problems, not me. Right?

IV.

I worked in the dark, with only the dim light from the judges chambers of *Law & Order* to help my straining eyes. I had been sitting on the stiff carpet in my living room for hours now, building a house late into Friday night. Jokers lined the walls, filling up the hollow mansion with their humor. Kings and queens sat poised in their palace thrones. Diamonds were scattered about the halls, and hearts were buried under the iron edges of spades. The card house was amazing, fit for the royalty that comprised its corridors.

Balconies and bedrooms were carefully built with decks of blue and red bricks that I had found in the cupboard, and you could almost picture ivy growing on the wall of the delicate mansion. The hands of an eight-year-old girl with an overactive imagination had built a family manor that would stand for generations.

"My bologna has a first name, it's O-S-C-A-R, my bologna has a second name, it's M-A-Y-E-R," little kids shouted out to anyone watching the commercial

The sound of a crashing footrest and a tumbling structure interrupted the commercials. I gasped, shocked and speechless and betrayed all at the same time. "Shawn! I *know* you did that on purpose! *Why?*"

He had been sitting in the recliner, and had slammed the footrest down like an inconsiderate fool. The earthquake had destroyed my entire masterpiece, and cards fluttered down, down, down, onto the sad, grungy carpet that used to be its foundation. He just stood there, his mouth hanging open like a broken door, but I knew he had planned this and was faking his surprise now. He would do anything to ruin my dreams and mess with me. The castle was gone. Pieces of my determination lay flat and useless on the floor.

I sat with the remains, seething with anger and digging my little fingernails into my palm. I wanted to throw those cards at him like ninja stars and let him see how it feels. But I couldn't. First of all, I would be the one getting in trouble again, and second, I knew somewhere beyond the anger and the hurt that he hadn't done this on purpose. He had just been getting up to get something to eat during the commercials and had accidentally pushed down the footrest a little too hard.

But why did I have to be the mature one? He was older, and just ticked me off, but did he ever apologize or take responsibility? No. But I figured someone had to act rationally, and it definitely wasn't going to be him.

V.

I walked through the crowd to Shawn. The Olive Garden was packed, and we were all stuck waiting outside, in the mountains of North Carolina, during winter break. The potted plants outside the restaurant were dead, and the face of the building was stone cold. The clock showed seven o' clock, but even at this hour, a long line waited for tables. Just like everyone else, we got the circular device that flashed and blinked when a table for you was ready.

Shawn stood by the curb holding the device when I joined him. He didn't really notice; he just kept looking out to the car, where our luggage and the dogs were waiting. He had that look, the look that is a familiar sight on Abba's face. I knew that Shawn was thinking, but to anyone else, they might've thought he was about to punch someone. His thick brow was furrowed, and his narrow mouth was sloped downwards, like a spaghetti noodle hanging from a fork, covered in heavenly marinara sauce—gee, I really was hungry. The silence hung around us awkwardly, like pasta spun around on a fork.

The barrier broke when Shawn asked, "So, Bird, what college are you thinking about going to?" He asked this because we were in the mountains for Lizzie. We were driving to colleges in Virginia and UNC-Asheville for her, even though it had only been a few months since Shawn started college. Things had changed with

him. He had become a person that, admittedly, I was a little bit jealous of.

"I don't know. I don't even know what I want to do with my life," I replied.

"You'll figure it out," he said, strangely optimistic and supportive. I skeptically said, "Really?"

And with that, it turned somewhat weird for a moment. I rubbed the arms of my sweater, partially because I was trying to keep warm and partially because I was fidgety and didn't know what to do or say.

"Bird, don't get a boyfriend, it only complicates things," Shawn muttered.

"Whoa-ho-ho, where did that one come from? And what about Ruth?" I answered, turning to look at his face.

"Well, yeah, but do you know how many problems we've had with a long distance relationship and everything else that comes with a relationship?"

"Okay . . ."

"The thing is, it only complicates your life, and it opens up a whole universe of things you have to do to impress and keep people happy, and you think you have to be this person that is completely not who you are, and you're always watching your back, trying to be perfect for the other person."

"Is that what it was like between you and Tanya?" I questioned, gingerly stepping into what might be dangerous territory. But surprisingly, he didn't seem to mind.

"Yeah, kind of . . . I mean, Tanya was nice and all, but she was much more outgoing than me and was always surrounded by more outgoing people. It was also harder to talk to her seriously." I could tell we both were still kind of uncomfortable with the subject matter. "And don't let any Tyrie or John pressure you into doing something."

"Um, I'm in middle school. There's not a whole bunch of that 'something' at Townsville Middle."

"And, as your big brother, who, remember, also went to Townsville, I'm telling you this for a reason."

"Ri-i-ight, like—?"

"Like those guy friends you have," he interrupted.

"They're my *friends*, not *boyfriends*, Shawn."

He sighed. "Just remember what I'm telling you now," he coolly said.

"Yeah, okay."

Shawn started, "Bird, I will give you ten dollars—"

"What?" I said excitedly.

"Let me finish. I will give you ten dollars, *if* you ever have a boyfriend and after you break up become friends. I think that it is impossible for anyone to do that. You know, the brain reaction that happens when someone's on crack is the same one you get when you're in love. And when you see that person, it's like a recovering addict seeing crack right in front of their face, and you can never go back to seeing that person the same."

"So, that's starting now?"

"Yeah."

"Aw, man . . ."

He stared at me for a moment, confused.

"Just kidding!" I lied.

Shawn lightly laughed, but at least he didn't suspect me of having a "past" with anyone. Just then, the SUV parked in front of us drove away. I watched it go and realized that, as important as that conversation was, to the rest of the people here it was just two more voices woven into the fabric of others' conversations.

taking another look

kendall conder

1.

Birth and death; we all move between these two unknowns.

Bryant H. McGill

THE WINDOW FEELS FRIGID AGAINST MY CHEEK as I peer out at downtown Durham unfolding around me. My family's car slows as we turn into the parking garage and begin our ascent to the higher levels. We park and exit. An icy, winter breeze rushes toward me and instantly floods my body with chills. My hands and face feel raw as I struggle to zip up my jacket before a gust of wind rushes through my thin t-shirt. The parking garage has a strong smell of gasoline, and concrete encloses the cars like a tomb. My dad ushers us toward the elevator. As we descend to the lower floors, my stomach drops with the elevator, and I am relieved when it's over.

I walk through the doors, and the hospital smell assaults me. My arm starts to ache from the memory of painful shots. I struggle to keep up with my family as I navigate the crowded hallways. I dodge old, fragile people whose wrinkles are like the rings on a tree trunk telling the years gone by. They pass by in wheelchairs and walkers, struggling to push their IVs along with them. Doctors or family members follow shortly behind with grim faces. The harsh, fluorescent lights exaggerate their faces into dismal and expressionless masks. The floors are hard and cold, shrouded in scuff marks from the wheelchairs and walkers of those too weak to walk alone.

I run to catch up to my dad, who is far ahead. As I fall in step with him, doctors descend on us like vultures, steering us towards oversized, yellow suits that smell of cleaning supplies and then instruct us to put them on. The doctors hand us gloves to wear, and mine are too big, no matter how hard I pull them on, leaving me with inadequate control of my fingers. A doctor who towers over me simply says that we have to be careful because my grandmother's

immune system is so weak that we could make her current state deteriorate even further if we don't take the necessary precautions. Still confused, I take the mask from an unusually chipper doctor and place it over my mouth. It is too big and hangs loosely from my ears, but before I can protest further, my dad already has his hand on the long silver handle and pushes the door open to enter my grandmother's room. He takes a step in, and the door begins to close. Noticing that I was not already in the room, he sticks his right arm out to catch the door. I hesitantly take a step forward. I place my left hand against the cool, smooth wood to take the door from my dad. The second he steps completely into the room and lets his hand drop, I instantly feel the weight of the solid, wooden door and have to use both hands to keep the door open just far enough for me to swiftly slide in between the door frame and stumble into my grandmother's hospital room. I steady myself on a chair and the door slams behind me as loud as a clap of thunder, sending a breeze of air that lifts my long, blonde hair off my shoulders and awakens an unpleasant memory of the unforgiving weather outside. Luckily, no one has noticed my blunder. I stand up straight to adjust my bright yellow attire. Confused as to why the usual sarcastic remarks of "Nice, Kendall!" or "Walk much?" are not being shot at me from all directions, I look up to my father for explanation, but he is busy whispering something to my brother Keenan. Instead, I direct my questioned look at my mother only to see that she, too, is not paying me any attention.

My mom sits hunched over in a chair by the window. She has her head propped up on her hand. Her dark-circled eyes flutter shut, but instantly open wide again only to slowly slip back down toward her cheeks. She is wearing a buttoned-down pin-striped shirt that is helplessly wrinkled. Long pants cover most of her pale feet except her toes, which protrude from beneath the hemline. Her shiny, black heels lie clumsily underneath a nearby table. I follow my mom's gaze to my grandmother, who looks small and weak lying in her hospital bed. Her skin is uneven with discolored splotches looming over her entire body. Her hair is gray, thin, and missing in some places. All of the faces around me look grim and hopeless, but as I look to my grandmother's, the face I expected to be the most scared and sad, I see the opposite. She has found a way to keep her chin up, as if balancing a book on her head, while lying

down. Her eyes have a light to them that fills me with hope and calms my shot nerves. I feel my whole body relax, and I turn and look to the window to see the sun poking through the dark overcast clouds, shedding enough light to warm you as you stand under it.

The perky doctor bounces into the room carrying in her hand *The Game of Life* and suggests that we all play together. I pull up a chair next to my dad and brother across from my grandmother, and we begin to spin the wheel, determining who will go first. During the game, my grandmother focuses like she would during a bridge game, showing no intention of letting us win. So there we sit: grandchildren, children, and grandmother. All generations starting our lives over to see who will retire first.

2.

Getting out of the hospital is a lot like resigning from a book club. You're not out of it until the computer says you're out of it.

Erma Bombeck

I pass through the sliding doors and feel like a wizard, magically moving them out of my way. Keenan and I race ahead of my dad through the hallway toward the elevator. Keenan beats me and begins to tap the wall, impatiently counting “1, 2, 3, 4, 5” and so on until I finally catch up with him. I slap the wall to end the count and learn that he beat me by twenty seconds, though I could swear I only lost by ten. My dad reaches us, ending the argument before it starts, and presses the button to call the elevator. When it arrives, Keenan rushes in and presses the familiar button for floor nine. As the elevator starts to move, my stomach does not lurch as it used to as we climb to the floors above. When we get off, my brother and I easily maneuver the once-confusing hallways like a maze we’ve solved so many times before. We reach my grandmother’s room and tear through the door. As we enter, Keenan and I shout in unison, “Hi Gamma!” Now that my grandmother’s state has improved, we get to ditch the abysmal yellow suits, gloves, and masks. Even the doctors don’t hover around us as much.

“Hello Charlene,” my dad says as he walks in.

“Hello everyone!” My grandmother is sitting up in bed finishing her lunch, hardly fazed by our sudden and loud entrance, but

my mom shoots us a look that screams that we are being too loud for a hospital. I quiet down once I look at my mom.

Since my grandmother has been in the hospital I haven't seen much of my mom, but now that Gamma looks in better shape maybe my mom won't spend too many more nights at the hospital. For me, this is just another visit, almost identical to all the others I've spent here during my second grade year.

3.

Thin line 'tween heaven and here.

Bubbles, *The Wire: Season 1*

"Isn't it great?" she exclaims as she surveys the empty living room.

"Yes, and so bright, Gamma!" I add as I, too, scan the living room. Sunlight pours in from the window and covers the entire expanse of the room, illuminating even the darkest corners. The light reflects off the wood flooring that runs vertically from the front door across the room leading into the kitchen. I step onto the bleached white tile that encases the kitchen. Pale countertops without a speck in sight blanket white cabinets. Even though the entire kitchen is white as snow, it is as warm and inviting as the weather outside, thanks to the window overlooking the garden and my grandmother's beaming face.

Her skin is an antiqued cream, as smooth and flawless as the counters, broken only by a few brave wrinkles that dare exist on her forehead. Her pointed nose leads down to her full lips, which are enveloped in a layer of bright, pink lipstick resembling the roses meticulously cared for in the garden. Her shirt is pressed and neatly tucked in. Around her neck, the seashell and starfish necklaces my mom got her so long ago fall delicately on her collarbone.

4.

A family is a place where principles are hammered and honed on the anvil of everyday living.

Charles R. Swindoll

I step out of the car and feel a warm breeze gently touch my face as I drop my foot onto the lawn. The grass is neatly cut around

the street, and a small pear tree is contained in a brick circle. I continue to walk parallel to the house and then join the cement driveway that has a slight incline that I feel in my calves as I walk up to the front door. The smooth cement meets the rough, brick steps. I climb the three small steps and open the glass storm door. As my knuckles hit the door, my grandmother's dog, Rosie, goes nuts. The door swings inward to reveal my grandmother. Her face is covered with a smile.

"Hello!" she exclaims, seeming genuinely happy to see us, but with a slightly high-pitched voice, as if she was surprised that we were here, even though she had been well aware that we were coming.

"Hey Gamma," I reply as I step over the door frame, my mother close behind. Rosie barks at my ankles, and I bend down to pick her up. Her curly hair is soft and comforting, which is necessary to keep me grounded, because as I stand upright, the sight hits me like a tidal wave. Everywhere I look, all I can see is boxes and piles of junk. The last time I had seen my grandmother's house, it had been completely empty, and now it seems like every possible surface is covered with papers, magazines, newspapers, and other various items one would expect to find in a house. The problem is that everything is multiplied by twenty. Underneath my grandmother's belongings you can see the bones of a normal house. A couch, television, dining room table, and more, but how to get to them was another story entirely.

"Sorry, I forgot to clean up," my grandmother declares, as if forgetting to pick up the house once would have lead to such a dramatic transformation.

"That's what we're here for," my mother answers as she, too, surveys the current state of the house. The room gets quiet as we all take in the sight around us. The only thing that can be heard is the uneven breathing of Rosie in my arms.

"Where should we start?" I quickly ask before the silence continues too much longer.

"Well—" My grandmother turns and scans the room. "—why don't we start by putting up some shelves upstairs in the loft."

I follow my grandmother, carefully navigating the unstable piles. We turn and head up the stairs. As we reach the loft, we see

that it is just as bad as downstairs. Box after box of various “important” items cover the floor in three aisles across the room, accompanied by a ring of boxes that surround the perimeter of the room. Thrown across the tops of the boxes are miscellaneous papers, tools, and plastic bags filled with more unidentifiable objects. The room is stuffy and hot; an air conditioning unit is in the window, but it does little to nothing to cool or move the warm air. We see two white wire shelves leaning against the wall. My grandmother explains, “If you will hang these shelves, then I can get some of this stuff off the floor so that I have room to go through some of these boxes.” I look at the shelves, then again at the barren white wall. She can maybe fit some of the smaller boxes up there but there is no way she’ll be able to put the larger green bins on the shelves without them collapsing. My mom shows the same concerned and confused look as the one probably plastered on my face. My grandmother definitely notices but pretends she doesn’t. Rosie squirms in my arms, so I place her on a nearby box. As the awkward silence reaches its peak, we start the long task of putting up the shelves while my grandmother goes through the boxes.

The whirl of the drill sounds as my mom screws in part of the wire shelves. I pick up yet another copy of *Our State* magazine and throw it into an old liquor box, now the base for our mountainous pile of magazines. I turn and look to my grandmother, who is looking intently at a small book with a faded floral print cover, the flowers blending together to create a tangled mass. The longer my grandmother examines the book, the more her lips curl into a smile and I hear a faint chuckle under her breath.

“What’s that, Gamma?” I ask. The normally empty and meaningless words now hold general interest as I rack my brain for what the peculiar book contains.

“It’s an old photo album.” She promptly closes the book. “Want to see?” She delicately holds the book out to me. She looks proud and regal with her perfect posture, even though we are sitting on the floor going through trash. One thing I’ve always loved about my grandmother is also one of her biggest downfalls: she treats every object in her house like it’s a priceless artifact, and this photo album is something that I, too, believe to be one. My fingers close around the book, and I immediately open it to see what rich trea-

sure is hidden beneath the jungle of flowers. As I open the cover, the book reveals my oldest cousin Hannah sitting on a couch with my uncle, their attention grasped by a hidden object out of the frame. I turn the soft, worn page to show another picture of Hannah. This time she is alone, running boundlessly through an open field of rich, emerald green grass. I flip the pages to reveal photo after photo of Hannah and her parents or Hannah by herself or Hannah going on some sort of adventure.

"Where did you find this?" I ask my grandmother.

"Over by the ledge." She points to the half wall that looks down upon the congested living room. I navigate the piles of things we have gone through and those left to uncover. I carefully step around Rosie, dormant on a pile of blankets, and can't help but smirk as I think of "The Princess and the Pea," and how if she truly is the princess of this "castle," she shouldn't be able to sleep in this mayhem. As I reach the area my grandmother had pointed to, I begin to dig through pile after pile, looking for my hidden treasure.

After minutes of exploring piles near where my grandmother directed, I finally grasp my bounty. I've found two books of similar size to the first one my grandmother uncovered. One of them has a beaten up blue cover, soft from the many hands opening it, and the other is covered in what was probably a once-vibrant flower pattern that has lost all luster and is now as muddled as the first cover. I open the flowery chaos to reveal Hannah again, with her family, sporting a big smile to the camera. *Is this yet another photo album of Hannah?* I quickly thumb through the rest of the album to validate my suspicions. All the photos are ordered chronologically, placed with care on each individual page.

Okay, two photo albums of Hannah, first grandchild, I get that, so this one has to be one for Keenan and me. Since I'm younger, I probably won't be in the front of the book, so I'll start from the middle. I turn to a random page and see a picture of Keenan standing there amidst a fort of sofa cushions, a simple sign leaning on the back of the couch to the wall, reading, in red, "Keenan's Bakery." I continue to look through every picture, flipping madly, looking for some evidence of my existence, a shadow, an arm in the background, anything. But then I turn the page to reveal the back cover. *Not one single picture!* I throw the book aside and try to

conceal my disappointment from my grandmother, expecting her to be watching me, but instead she is looking through a copy of *Our State*, probably searching for some recipe that she forgot to cut out five years ago. Luckily, my mom looks at her phone and, startled, looks to me and says, “Oh my gosh! We have to go or we’ll be late for church!” Relieved, I quickly gather my things, say my goodbyes to my grandmother, and promise that we’ll be back next week to go through more boxes. We quickly slip out the front door and into our car. On the way home, we both are too overstimulated to speak, and I lean my head against the window like I always do, like I did all those years ago on my first trip to the hospital. My anger starts to build and bubble up as I can’t shake the thought of the countless pictures of Hannah and Keenan, and the lack of pictures of me. They just continue to circulate in my mind like a bad slideshow with no music, no words, just picture after picture.

5.

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sunday comes around again, and it’s time to return to my grandmother’s house for some more fun times with boxes and clutter. On the drive, the photos of Hannah and Keenan keep resurfacing in my mind, no matter how hard I try to file them away. When we arrive, I get out of the car and slam the door. My mom looks at me with a puzzled expression. “It’s nothing, I’m just tired,” I say to cover my anger at not making it into a photo album. My mom walks up the driveway and knocks on the door. I hang back, still reluctant about giving up my weekends to help her clean up her house. *I mean, what grandmother doesn’t have pictures of her grandkids everywhere?* I reach the front door, and my mom is already inside. “Hi, Gamma,” I say softly, as I step over the threshold.

“Hi, Kendall!” she replies cheerfully, not knowing that she has done anything wrong. *Maybe she didn’t do anything wrong. Maybe under all this crap, she does have some pictures of me.* Suddenly eager to work, I drag my grandmother and mom up the stairs to the loft and get back to work.

While we are going through my grandmother's things, I secretly work on my own mission: to find one picture of me. If I can find just one, I will be perfectly content. I try to focus on both tasks, but I become so distracted by the doubt that I will find a picture that I give up going through and sorting the boxes and focus entirely on finding a picture. The longer we work, the less sure I become about finding one.

"Kendall!"

"What?" I turn to find that it is my mom who called to me.

"Can you go get me a Sharpie from downstairs so I can label these boxes?"

"Yeah, sure." I grudgingly get up and descend the stairs, but as I near the bottom, I stumble and spread my arms out to catch myself on the nearest object. I sigh, relieved that I didn't break anything on my way down, and release my tightly wound grip from the edges of a bookshelf. As I stand up, I come face to face with the sharpie I was looking for placed on the bookshelf, but behind it is what interests me most. I direct my attention to a framed picture of my grandmother before the cancer, smiling in her ski bibs, sitting on a picnic table, with her arm wrapped around a small, blonde girl. As I look closer, I start to recognize that I am the little girl, and I begin to remember when this picture was taken. We were on a ski trip to Beach Mountain with my family, and while everyone else went zooming down the slopes with ease, my grandmother was perfectly fine to sit with me at the ski lodge and drink hot chocolate. Not only was there a picture of me, but instead of it being in a photo album hidden under piles of stiff pages, this picture was framed on display for everyone to see.

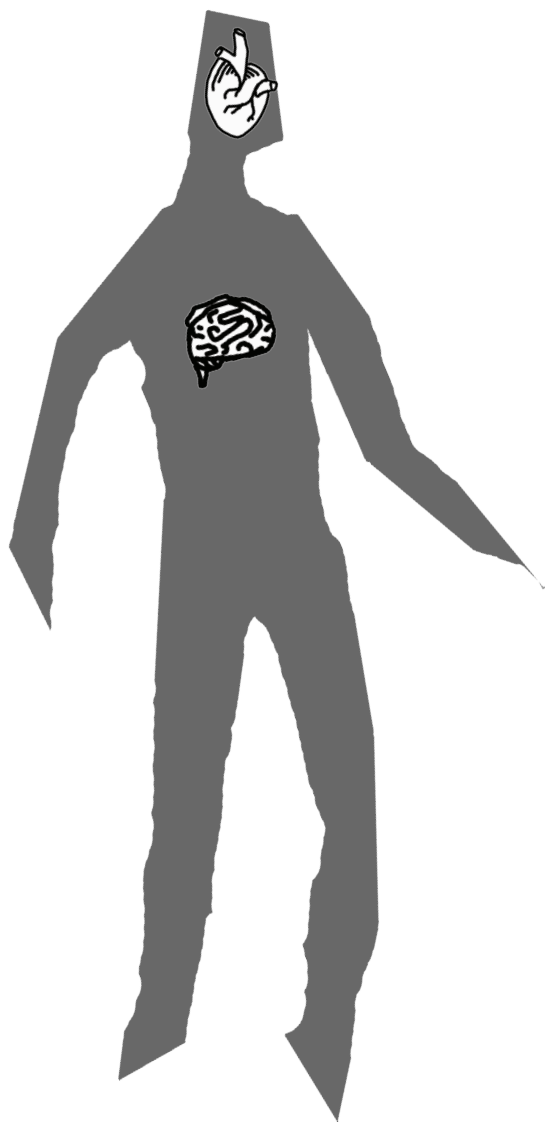
"Kendall? Did you find the Sharpie?" my mom calls from upstairs.

"Yeah, I'm coming up with it now." I snatch the Sharpie off the bookshelf and bring the picture to the front so that it can be more clearly seen and serve as a reminder to myself if I ever forget why we keep up the monotonous task of clearing out box after box. I bound up the stairs, taking them two at a time to join my grandmother and mom. I hand the Sharpie over to my mom.

"You okay? I thought I heard a crash?"

"Never better," I reply. I sit down next to my grandmother and pick up right where we left off, going through each box, each bag, every folder, careful not to miss anything or leave anything out because some things are hidden right in front of you.

freshman versus body



the moment I promised

aonani

a is for affright

“T’M BLUE, DA BE DE DA BE DI . . .” I attempted to sing along to Eiffel 65 as I finished up my summer assignment in the living room. Mom sat in her room, enjoying her stay-at-home job and yelling into the phone about amendments and faulty contracts. The living room walls were a bright peach, which sloppily corresponded with the ten-year-old arm chairs, and the twenty-year-old green couch. The rapidly spinning wooden blades, and blinding light of the new fan looked out of place in our forty-year-old house. The house itself seemed a sophisticated mess. Papers from my mom’s job were strewn everywhere. Phonics books for Allen were in his little corner of the couch. Blankets and textbooks covered both arm chairs and the couch itself.

Allen stayed perfectly still on the floor, listening to the gospel music on his laptop. The psychedelic patterns on the computer distracted his inquiring mind. His small, timid forehead scrunched up into lines every few seconds as he contemplated the complexity of the words and notes of the songs. The lines interrupted his smooth, clear skin with a couple of moles here and there on his firm jaw. His thick, burly eyebrows could rise at any moment with curiosity. His head was round and small, not yet misshapen by the punches of the world. He had freshly cut hair, as of yesterday, with the side burns he has had since he was two. I’d been trying to convince my mother to let him grow it out so his hair could be black shiny swirls, like when he was younger. He had a monstrous stature but wouldn’t swat a fly. His cheeks were round and chubby, and the dimple on his right cheek had the perfect arch of a gleaming smile.

His eyes were dark and sparkling with wonder and discovery. They gave off a certain vulnerability with a hint of ‘you’ll never fig-

ure me out completely.’ They expressed innocence and honesty, distance from reality. Sometimes I wanted them to see reality, what every typical ten-year-old saw. I wished that the autism wouldn’t blind him so much that he couldn’t comprehend. But I knew that he couldn’t, and it hurt.

Just as I finished the last sentence of my responses, I heaved a sigh of relief and nonchalantly looked up to see Allen twitching and shaking on the floor. “Oh my gosh, please not again! Please not again!” I yelled as I ripped my earphones out, leapt off the couch, and ran to him. He was desperately rubbing his head up against the T.V. stand, and drooling like he had rabies. I felt his hands. They were red hot when they were usually ice cold. The sparkle in his eyes was completely gone; they had been replaced by black, unseeing holes. The depths of his cheeks held his dimple prisoner. His face was sunken in and blank, as if someone has sucked the life out of him. I pulled him close to me, holding his head to my chest. His drool soaked my shirt.

The paramedic said that compression helped bring him back to the real world, but it wasn’t working. *Please don’t die, for the love of God, don’t die!* It was happening again. The seizure that the paramedics couldn’t diagnose was happening again. *Oh God, what did I do this time? What did I do?*

I is for lackadaisical

“C’mon, you little stinker, take your cod liver oil!” I pushed the cup in his mouth. He drank with caution, looking at me, probably thinking of ways to get out of taking his supplements. After he finished his cup, I picked up another bottle and opened the top slowly, looking at him to make sure he didn’t run away. Then I pulled the side of his mouth open and dropped six droplets on his teeth, each one resembling crimson blood. This was a daily routine we did, so that he wouldn’t go crazy during the rest of the day. I attempted to help Mom because she was always stressed out with her work and I didn’t want to bother her. We were standing in front of the counter with all eight of his supplements in a line, from easiest to take to hardest.

When we got to the last supplement, Allen looked at me like a sly fox. This was his most-despised supplement, and I could tell he was going to run away. So, I pretended to be totally oblivious to the whole thing and looked down to get the bottle. As soon as I looked down, he tried to take off, but I wrapped my arms around his middle and pulled him towards me though he was laughing the entire time.

“Uh-uh! You ain’t going anywhere, Booka!” This was a love name we gave him when he was a baby; it was the only thing he would say. I turned him around, with the supplement cup already filled and put it in his mouth. “There ya go, Booka, all done!” I smiled at him, and he smiled back. Every time he smiled, his eyes lit up, like his mouth and his eyes were synchronized when every other part of his body wasn’t.

I twisted the black cap back on the bottle. I wondered what it would be like to take these every day. I decided to try one of his supplements out. I twisted open the bottle I thought would taste the best, held it upside down, pulled open the side of my mouth, and dropped a couple drops in. “Oh my God! That’s disgusting!” I screamed in surprise. Allen fell on the floor and busted out laughing, rolling around, and drooling with joy. He couldn’t really understand much, but he knew how to laugh, that’s for sure. I gave him a condescending look, and went into the bathroom to get some mouthwash. “Yeah, laugh it up, little boy. I got you, I got you . . .”

About an hour later, I was sitting in the living room, scanning Facebook for status updates to like and cute pictures. *Everybody Hates Chris* was on, but it was just background to Facebook. Nowadays, everything is background to Facebook. “Aonani! Come here now! There is something wrong with Allen!” I should have paid attention. I should have checked.

I is for lost nerves

“Allen! Please stay with me baby, okay? Oh my God, please stay with me!” I screamed at the top of my lungs as Allen kept giving me that blank stare that made my blood run cold. Time stopped as I questioned what I should do.

Okay, if I call 911, I'll probably scare Mom into thinking that this is something serious. What am I talking about? This is something serious! Oh my gosh, Mom! She hasn't come out of her room yet! She probably doesn't even know what's happening!

I decided that I could leave my brother for two seconds while I went to get my mother. As soon as I let go of Allen's head, he plopped down on the floor and started rubbing his head against the T.V. stand again. I felt ambivalent about whether to care for Allen or go get Mom. I resolved to move Allen by myself. I tried taking his head in one arm and his legs in the other arm; I almost hurt my back on that plan, so I decided to grab his legs and pull him away from the T.V. and into an object-free area. My arms were shaking. The drool stain by the T.V. stared menacingly at me, as if to say "This is your fault." Next, I took a bunch of pillows and stuffed them under his head so he wouldn't bang it on the floor. I made sure he was okay and almost slipped on the hardwood floor running to get Mom.

The entire house rattled in reaction to the door slamming into the wall. She was yelling into the phone and punching symbols into her computer just like she was when I left her fifteen minutes ago. I stood there watching her not notice me. I thought immediately that if I had not been there, she would have never known. She would have been completely clueless to the fact that Allen was twitching, shaking, drooling, and possibly dying on her living room floor. I was shaking all over now, like I was the one with the seizure.

"Mom, Mom, Mom! You have to come now! Allen is doing it again!" I screamed at her, not caring whether or not her boss could hear me. In fact, I wished he could hear me so he would know to let my mom go, to let her actually pay attention to what was going on just a short hallway from her bed.

"Hold on, Jim. Aonani, I am in an *extremely* important meeting right now. What is it?" She looked annoyed. She had no idea what was going on! I looked at her disdainfully.

"Mom! Allen is having a seizure! You need to come right now! Right now, Mom! This is not a drill! Beep beep beep! Emergency!" I was saying anything I could do to get her out of that bed. Her face turned into mush and then to stone. She had a blank stare just like Allen. She calmly jumped out of bed, pushed past me, and ran to the

living room where Allen had stopped twitching. Now, when he had started twitching I was scared—but when he stopped twitching, that scared me even more. It wasn't like he had stopped twitching and everything was okay again; it was like he had stopped twitching and had gone completely still. I panicked and sprinted over to him. I laid my head on his chest and listened for a heartbeat. He was still breathing, so I heaved a ragged sigh of relief.

"Help me get him to his room! Aonani, now! Why are you just standing there! Help me!" Mom's voice faded in the background. My autopilot kicked in as I robotically grabbed his head and Mom grabbed his shoulders.

"Alright baby, c'mon, you have to get up. Mommy can't carry you anymore; you're a big boy!" She was acting like he could hear her. I rolled my eyes and helped Mom stand up. We relaxed a little when he started to attempt to stand.

He put most of his weight on us as we half-carried, half-dragged him to his room. His wobbly legs gave out on the way, as he slowly slipped back into his trance. I hit him softly in the face to keep him up, thinking that if I just kept him awake, he would stay alive.

e is for emotional

"... *Nut Bush City Limits. Go to school on a weekday, go to town on Saturday. But go to church every Sunday,*" Tina Turner screamed from the speakers of my laptop. I grunted and sighed as I struggled to get my shoes on. We were going to a cook-out. "*Thirty-five is the speed limit, motorcycles not allowed in it . . .*" I bobbed my head to the bass line. Just as Tina was about to do her big finish, a screeching wail pierced the relaxed air of the living room like an old, ear-splitting fire alarm rudely interrupting the quiet serenity of a five-minute freewrite.

"Aonani! Come here now! There is something wrong with Allen!" Mom screamed over Tina.

I immediately jumped up from the couch, one shoe on and one not, stubbing my toe on the coffee table. "Aonani!" my mom screamed in my ear.

"I'm here, Mom," I said calmly. "What's wrong?" She slowly pointed a shaking finger to the bed where Allen was lying. She was cowering like a dog who just got hit for being bad.

There was something queer about his lying there. He looked like a panicking puppet that had fallen off his strings, looking up clueless and unblinking into his ceiling fan. His legs were shaking violently, and at that point I knew: there was something seriously wrong with my little brother. I just stood there. Mom was pacing and hyperventilating, trying to figure out what to do. "I was helping him get his clothes on, then he just snapped his head up to the ceiling fan and fell down onto the bed!" She was starting to cry.

I ran out of the room to get the phone. I came back into the room and started to dial 911. "No! We can't call them!" She jumped up and smacked the phone out of my hand. My face was plastered with surprise. I would think that her first reaction would be to call the professionals about this.

"Why did you *do* that?" I scrambled to pick it up.

"Because! Maybe this will all blow over. Yeah that's it, it's just, uh, minor." She babbled like she was going straight-jacket crazy.

"Mom, he is lying there, twitching up a storm. What am I supposed to do?" I stared at her degradingly as she plopped down in Allen's desk chair and started to rub her temples. I put the phone down on Allen's desk so that she wouldn't get riled up again. "Well, what we can do now is try to get him up and see if he is okay. I cannot *believe* you are sitting in a chair when your *son* is having a seizure!" My words spit fire.

She got up quickly and shuffled over to the twitching boy. The tension seemed to melt away as I reached across the bed to steady Allen's legs. Mom sat Allen up, trying to turn his head forward, but to no avail. "Go get some blocks, Aonani! He needs to touch something!" I threw my shoe off my foot and tried to scurry in my socks, but what I really looked like was the road runner cartoon running in place above the ground. There were some blocks in the play room, so I grabbed those and blazed back to Allen. He couldn't sit up without Mama holding his back; his vision was still stuck on the fan and he was foaming at the mouth. I contemplated why he chose the ceiling fan as his point of interest.

“Say ‘Mama’ Allen! Say ‘Mama’! For the love of God, *please!*” She was growing hysterical.

“Mom, Mom! He is not going to say ‘Mama,’ okay? He is out of it!” I didn’t want to believe it, either. She snapped her head at me as quickly as Allen to the ceiling fan. She stared at me for the longest time, thinking that if she did this long enough, I would take that back. It finally worked because after a long while, I was also trying to snap him out of it.

After about five minutes of this with no success, Mom turned her head towards me slowly, a single glistening tear running down her cheek, ruining her make-up. She said in a soft voice, “Aonani, call them.” I nodded and gently picked the phone up from where it was quietly recovering from the throwdown Mom had given it.

Beep, beep, beep. “911. What’s your emergency?”

n is for never again

I sat up and grunted in pain; putting two chairs together to create a makeshift bed does absolutely nothing for your back. As I scanned the room, all of the memories came flooding back to me so fast that I had to lie down again. I remember the paramedics busting through the front door, the white heart monitor being clipped onto Allen’s finger, the faded, distant sound of the ambulance leaving me stranded in the dust, and the frustrated call of my mother, already starting up the old van.

I looked to the left and saw my mother sleeping soundly on the roll-away bed next to my brother’s hospital cot. Their breathing was synchronized, their diaphragms smoothly lifting up and down in a rhythmic fashion, their eyes neutral but sweet. The worry that once filled them had melted away.

But I knew that it was far from over. I knew because we were still in the hospital, waiting for a doctor who was taking six hours to get one test done, to walk in the door and tell us what we did wrong. The room seemed isolated and quiet compared to the excited bustle happening just mere feet outside of our door. I closed my eyes and tried not to believe what was happening to me.

The doctor strolled in, bringing with him an overwhelming whiff of ammonia. He was anything but the classic scrubs and ugly tennis shoes doctor. He had gelled-down, straight, black hair with a little spike in the front. His ears were lined all the way up the cartilage with piercings, complete with two in his nose. He looked like an escaped mafia member who had gotten his medical degree. He loosely held a folder in his hand. My mom jolted awake, the roll-away bed sliding a little as she moved.

"Hello, Mrs. Jackson. This is the Jackson room isn't it?" The doctor spoke softly and calmly, clashing with the loud, punk look he was sporting. My mom nodded and slowly lowered her head. I could tell she was extremely tired. "Good. I am Dr. Hyde." Hyde, how classic. "We have received the results for the chemical tests done on Allen Jackson." He slowly opened the manila folder and carefully removed the clean, smooth sheet of paper. He glanced over the sheet and raised his eyebrows at the results. I gulped. *He's fine. It's not like he has a disease right? I don't know if we could handle him with epilepsy, not added to the autism.* "We took a sample of his blood to make sure that the supplements you told us about were received in the body properly." *Uh-oh, I gave him the supplements.* "There was a supplement named B12 that needed to be taken with some kind of food or drink, but we did not find any signs to show he has eaten today."

My mother snapped her head up and glared at me, her eyes flaming up frighteningly fast. My blood ran cold. *It's. My. Fault. I'm the one who didn't read the directions on the bottle. I'm the one who gave my little brother something that could have taken his life. I'm the one who put my mother through one of the scariest situations of her life.* As the realization sunk in, I started to sob. Dr. Hyde looked at me inquisitively, wondering why I was crying so hard. "But, as you can see, he is going to be alright. It wasn't a huge seizure, but you should still be extremely cautious when giving him his supplements. They can help, but can also be very dangerous when you don't follow directions."

"It wasn't a huge seizure? It wasn't a huge seizure! Are you kidding me? My baby almost died on my living room floor and you're saying it wasn't huge?" She got up quickly and snatched the results out of Dr. Hyde's hands. It scared me how fast my mom could go

from calm to shocked and then to flaming mad. I stopped crying and stared at her.

Ever since she was five years old, my mother has been known as being “small but mighty,” and ever since I could remember, she had lived up to the name. She was only 5’3”. She was thin but not too skinny. Her eyes were usually a calm, dark sea of brown, horrifyingly different from the blazing inferno I was seeing right then. She had desperately tried to defer them from coming, but alas, the wrinkles came anyway. Yet somehow, she preserved a young look behind them. Her thighs were huge like mine, which gave her a pear-like shape. Her eyebrows arched perfectly, thanks to her specialists at Southpoint Mall. She read over the results and looked up at me with remorse.

I always feel like I let her down. Every time I try to help, it always goes wrong, and I slide a little farther down the pole of trust. I lowered my head and tried to find some dry skin to pick at. “Well, I guess that’s that. We need to wait for your father to come, and then we can go home.” She gently handed back the results to the doctor, who gave us a queer look as he exited. I heave a sigh of—well, I don’t really know. I just discovered that this whole situation could have been avoided if I had only fed him. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my guilt.

* * *

I watched as Allen breathed deeply, slowly recovering from the second scare in two years. I was lying beside him, holding his warm hand, thanking God for the peace. Mom told me that the psychedelic patterns on the computer give people seizures, and I’m the one who turned his gospel music on. And now I did it again. But I can’t blame myself anymore. The seizure he had today wasn’t nearly as scary as the first, and it will most likely not be the last.

His face was calm and neutral, with a slight smile at the line of his cheek. I squeezed the slumbering boy’s hand as a promise to him. *You rely on me more than I think. I will never let you down again.*

far from perfect:

a true story of surviving brain cancer

emily b.

dreamhouse

I AM SILENT, KNEELING ON THE FLOOR OF MY BEDROOM, with my ear up against the door.

My Barbie dolls are abandoned, sitting in their too-pink Dreamhouse. I listen closely. Slightly distorted, I can hear my mom on the phone. She's talking to my dad. At this point, they have loud, angry arguments at least once a week. I usually ignore them. This debate, though, revolves around me, so naturally, I'm interested.

"Yes, Dr. Burke. I know it's expensive, but she needs this! She's not going to get better without treatment!" My mom stops and listens, and I can hear her crying. "Goddammit! Why can't you accept that we have to make sacrifices?"

She starts to sob, choking on her own tears.

She slams the phone down and runs to her bedroom like a child. She shuts the door hard, making a loud, clanging noise that echoes throughout the quiet house. I sigh and sit back down, staring at the perfect family of dolls around their tiny dining room table. The mom is smiling brightly, her blue eyes gazing into space. She's holding a small plate, with a cardboard cutout of unrecognizable food on it, as best as her poised, plastic hands can manage. It had been awhile since I'd had a home-cooked meal, or even just eaten with my family. Every night, when I got hungry, I would have to go and find something in the house to pop in the microwave by myself.

I pick up the little girl and put her in her bedroom, filled with little cheap furniture and an itsy-bitsy stuffed bear. I glance over at my own teddy bear, Rodger, whom I've had since I was a baby, with his dirty cream-colored fur, his stuffing falling out, and I smile. He sure has been through a lot the past seven years.

"You are always here for me, Rodger," I say to him. I hear my mom's door opening softly, and I stand up, wanting to comfort her.

Opening my door, I step into the hallway and bump into my mom. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her mascara is smeared all over her face. Her dyed blonde hair is ruffled, and her nose is running.

"Hi, Mommy," I say, almost whispering, reaching up and gently grabbing her manicured hand.

"Hey, baby. Are you hungry? I can fix you some chicken nuggets," my mom hoarsely asks, trying to smile.

"I got it, Mommy. I was on my way out to the kitchen anyway. Can I get you anything?" I question.

"Water?" she suggests.

"Okay." I walk out to the kitchen and open the fridge. As I'm pouring the icy water from the purifier into a Duke cup, I see my mom retreat back into her cave. I sigh, pick up the glass, and carry it down the hall. Sometimes, I wish I could shrink down and be a part of that perfect little family sitting in their Dreamhouse.

nightmare

I'm lying in a hospital bed, with millions of wires and needles stuck in me. The beeping of the heart monitor is too loud, drowning out the noise of nurses shuffling around outside my door. No visitors ever come to disturb my dying. I painfully tilt my head to look out the window, where the setting sun is casting a tidal wave of vibrant colors across the vast sky. I hear the annoying beeping noise speed up, and nurses rush in.

I lurch awake, sweat and tears running down my face. I cover my mouth with my shaking hand to stop the sobs. These nightmares come almost every night now. I look over at the clock sitting on my nightstand, its red numbers lit up brightly. 5:46. *Might as well wake up*, I think. I throw the sweat-drenched blankets off of me and get up. Picking my way to the door through all of the junk on my unknown-colored carpet, I try to rub the sleep out of my eyes. Opening my door, I step out into the hallway. I quietly creep down the dark, ominous corridor. Reaching the bathroom, I turn on the light, closing the aged wooden door behind me. I look in the mirror. My hair is sticking up all over, my makeup from the previous day smeared. I'm wearing the same clothes I wore

to school yesterday, but they are rumpled and wrinkly. I run my hand through my hair and turn around. Reaching behind a floral shower curtain, I turn on the shower. Fifteen minutes later, wide awake and skin rubbed raw, I'm back in my room. I hear a soft knock on my door. It opens slowly, and my older sister walks in, still in her pajamas.

"Morning," she says, yawning. "You look terrible."

"Thanks, that's exactly what I needed to hear."

anxiety

The waiting room is chilly, the A.C. turned on full blast. I'm sitting on a green chair with uncomfortable upholstery on it, like I'm relaxing in a briar patch. A receptionist is sitting behind a desk with her head propped up on her arm. Her black eyeliner is smearing under her eyes, making her look like a blonde raccoon. The TV on the wall is muted on a newscast, and the subtitles are behind by a fraction of a second. I breathe in and out deeply, closing my eyes like the shrink told me to.

"You okay, sweetie?" my mom asks with a worried look in her eyes. She's sitting on my left, clutching a People magazine so tightly I'm sure it's going to rip.

My dad is on my right. Looking calm yet awkward as ever, he answers for me. "She's fine, Theresa."

Just freaking dandy, I think to myself, my teenage sarcasm kicking in. I can tell that they hate being here together, especially after a nasty divorce.

"I'm just—" My mom is cut off by a middle-aged nurse in pink scrubs opening the waiting room door.

"Emily?" she questions, looking around.

I raise my hand warily and stand up. My parents jump up, but the nurse politely tells them they can sit. *Thank you . . . Velma?* I think while squinting at the older lady's name tag. She leads me to an exam room and hands me a dressing gown, takes my blood pressure, and sticks that pointy thing in my ears and nose.

"Do you smoke or drink?" She glances at me, her pen poised and ready.

"No," I respond, watching her write a note in her little book.

"Are you sexually active?" with a tone of voice that suggests she's already asked that question way too many times that day.

I answer, "No."

"Alright then, the doctor will be right in, darlin'." She clutches her splintered clipboard and hurries out of the room. I slip into the gown and put my clothes into a cardboard box. Climbing back onto the table, I look around. The pasty yellow walls are dusty and the paint is faded. A poster is hanging directly in front of me from where I am sitting on the plastic-covered exam table. I read it silently, smiling at it. It shows a picture of a man scaling a high, steep cliff. The words, in big, white, bold print say, "Is he crazy?!" In smaller print, it reads, "He's not wearing any sunscreen!" I shift on the table, making an obnoxious crinkling sound. Suddenly, the doctor comes in. It's my usual doctor, the one that's had me as a patient since infancy.

"Hello, Emily!" He has a smile that shows years of love and caring. "Are you ready?"

"Hi, Dr. Burke. Yeah, I guess I am." I smile reluctantly at him.

"Okay, then sweetie, follow me." He opens the door for me and strides down the hallway. I have to speed-walk just to keep up. Dr. Burke stops in front of a door marked MRI. He pushes through the swinging door, and I follow him in and lie down on the hard, white table. I've done this before. He goes into a cubicle-like room and switches off the light. "Keep still, please. I'm going to turn on the machine now."

The table begins to slide into a tube-like container, making a really annoying beeping noise that makes my head hurt. Staring into a small light bulb on the top of the sterile cylinder, I try not to blink. A green grid light scans me, like I'm being copied on a printer. I hear a soft click, and the table begins to move back out of the claustrophobic pipe. I blink, my eyes watering as I swing my legs over and stand up. There is a mirror on the wall, and while I wait for the doctor to finish analyzing the MRI, I look at myself. I'm still wearing my gown, but it's baggy and shapeless. My hair is slightly disheveled, and I try to pat it down. I'm not wearing any makeup, and, staring at myself, I regret the decision.

"Emily?" Dr. Burke had startled me, and I turn to look at him. "Shall we go back to your parents?"

I nod and we walk back down the hallway. This time, Dr. Burke is walking slower, as if he dreads seeing my parents. We advance into the waiting room, where my mom and dad had shifted seats, so there were three seats between them instead of just one.

"Oh! Dr. Burke!" My mother glances up from her compact mirror. "Good news, I hope."

"Sadly, no." He shakes his head calmly. "Let's go to my office."

My parents arise, and we all follow him into a small office, and sit down on the faux leather couch. Dr. Burke sits in his desk chair, and folds his hands together.

"So, looking at Emily's MRI, I can see a small tumor-like spot. Now, we can't be sure that it's cancerous, but we will have to schedule a bypass surgery," he says.

Wait, what? My eyes widen.

"Oh dear," my mom stammers. "Okay, whatever it takes to make my baby okay." She smothers me in a bear hug only mothers are capable of giving.

"Mo-o-om . . ." I whine. Yup, there's that sarcasm again.

"So, can we schedule it for eight weeks from now?" My parents and I nod in unison, just wanting to get out of the stuffy office.

We walk out of the clinic, my dad's stern hand on my shoulder.

I have tourette's, but tourette's doesn't have me

haley elizabeth mosley

PART 1

are you okay?

I ENTER THE BUILDING AND WALK DOWN THE HALL, hoping that this thing that's been happening to me won't happen today. I slowly move into the classroom. I sit down, and the cold of my desk's surface radiates through me. My friends walk by and wave, so I wave back while they sit at their tables.

As I'm writing something down on my paper, my body jerks. I think to myself, *Really? Really? Why does this happen to me?* But I just continue working.

"Okay, everyone, gather around the carpet. We're going to do some reading."

I sit down and rub my hands against soft blue carpet as I listen to my teacher read. I grunt and my body jerks once more. I squint my eyes as if I'm frustrated and hope no one noticed. The girl who is sitting beside me then leans over and whispers, "Are you okay?"

Of course I'm okay! Don't you think I would have said something to someone if I wasn't okay? I think to myself but all I tell her is, "Yes, I'm fine," a bit of frustration creeping into my voice.

Once the book is finished, she tells us to go back to our seats. She hands out a piece of paper with a design on it, and tells us to color it. I start coloring. I like everything to be perfect. My body jerks again, and when I look down at my paper, I see that I messed it up. *Ugh! Why!?* I think to myself.

By now it's recess, so it's almost the end of the day, which makes me feel a lot better. Swinging on the swings, looking up at the clear blue sky, watching the wind blow the green leaves off the trees, and listening to my friends talk makes me feel like none of it matters.

Once we're back inside, we start packing up to go home. Every day I get so nervous going to school, and now it's time to go home, where I know I won't be judged.

I walk out the of classroom door and outside to the car line. I look around for my brother, but I don't see him, so I just sit on the stone wall and wait for my mom or dad to pick me up. I see a small black truck and know my dad is picking me up. I see my brother stand up and walk toward the truck, so I walk to the truck and get in.

"How was your day today?" my dad asks.

Like always, I say, "It was fine." My brother says the same.

The rest of the ride home we just sit and listen to the radio.

home

I run out of the car and into the den. I see Justin running behind me, but I'm too fast for him. I grab the remote, turn the TV on, and stick my tongue out at him. My brother and I have always fought over what to watch. I turn it to Disney.

"What do y'all want for dinner?" I hear my dad yell from in the kitchen.

"I don't care," I yell back. I grunt, and I see my brother look at me from the corner of my eye. I just ignore him and continue watching TV. *Why?* I think to myself. *Why? Why can't I be normal just like everyone else?*

I hear our kitchen door creaking open and heels clicking fast onto the floor and know my mom's home and is running, which means she must really have to pee. I walk back to her room and sit on her bed, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom.

She soon walks out and asks, "How was school?"

I give her the same answer I gave my dad: "It was fine." I then grunt. My mom looks at me but says nothing. We start walking down the hall, and my body jerks and I grunt again.

"Honey, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" I say with a bit of attitude.

My mom stops me in the middle of the hallway. “Haley, you need to talk to me! What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing! Just leave me alone!”

“I think we need to go to the hospital.”

I start to cry. I don’t want to go to the hospital.

“We’re going tomorrow.” She hugs me as I cry.

My mom walks into the kitchen where my dad is. I hear her talking, but I can’t understand what she’s saying. I have a feeling that she is talking about me. I don’t like it when people talk about me. I run to my room, go to my CD player, and put a disc in. Music has always been a getaway for me. I sit on the floor and sing along with the music.

I don’t want to go

I wake up thinking I’m going to school, but when I look at the clock, I see it’s about 8:30. I think to myself, *Either my mom’s alarm did not go off and she’s still sleeping, or we really are going to the hospital.* I thought she was just kidding; I didn’t think we were really going.

“Mom, it’s 8:30. Why didn’t you wake me up for school?” I say to her, still hoping that it was just her alarm.

“I told you, we’re going to the hospital,” she says to me in a stern voice.

“I don’t want to go!”

“Haley, you have to. Now go get dressed; we’re going to be leaving soon.”

“Ugh!” I growl, while storming off.

As I’m getting dressed, I notice that the grunts and the body jerks have become more frequent. *Why does this have to happen to me? Why can’t it be Justin?* I know I should go to the hospital, but I don’t want to. I’m scared.

We get in the car, and I’m pouting about going. I don’t feel like talking, I just want to sit silently. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be anywhere. I look out the window, and all I see is the blur of the trees and grass. Everything feels like a movie in slow motion. I grunt, and I notice the radio’s not on. I turn the radio on,

hoping that will cover up the grunting. I guess it helps some, but it's still noticeable.

"Mommy, I don't want to go. Please can we just go home?" I beg my mom.

"No, we're going. I'm sorry."

I look down and I notice my leg is shaking. My leg always shakes when I'm nervous. I close my eyes and pretend I'm at home in my room listening to my music. I feel the car come to a stop. I look up and I see we're at the hospital.

* * *

PART 2

the hospital

My mom fills out a bunch of papers while we sit in the waiting room. We are there for a long time—over two hours. My name is finally called to go back. They put me in a space with a bed and curtain, not even a room.

"Haley, we're going to put an IV in your arm," the nurse tells me.

"Okay," I say, without knowing what an IV is. I then see the nurse coming toward me with a needle and have a pretty good idea of what it is. I hold my mom's hand as she sticks the needle through my skin. She then leaves with the needle still in me. I didn't know it was supposed to stay.

We are in that room for a long time. I fall asleep, and when I wake up, we are in a different room. I guess they moved me while I was sleeping. I look at all the buttons on the side of the bed, I then see a remote that goes to the bed. After I hit the buttons and realize that it makes the bed move, I start to play with it. At the time, a bed that could move seemed like the best thing in the world. I see the doctor walk in, and I stop, hoping he didn't see me.

"Hello, Haley, Mrs. Mosley," the doctor says.

"Hi," I say quietly.

"Haley, you're going to have an MRI," he tells me.

"Okay," I say, with no idea what it is.

They put me in a wheelchair and roll me to a different room. I don't know why I'm in a wheelchair; I can walk perfectly fine. I

see a giant machine, so I get scared. I'm told to get on the bed that was attached to the machine and that I had to be completely still while I was in there. This is going to be very difficult for me. They turn the machine on, and the bed starts to move inside it. Most of my upper body is inside the machine. I try so hard to keep my body from jerking; it was so hard. I feel like I've been in here for hours. The bed starts to move out and I feel so relieved. They put me back in the wheelchair and roll me back to my room.

I crawl in the bed and try to go to sleep, but there's a medical machine beside me that keeps buzzing, keeping me from sleeping. I close my eyes and try to ignore it. I must have fallen asleep because I can't remember what happened the rest of the day.

the findings

I wake up the next morning, and I see my mom still sleeping. I turn the TV on and look for something to watch. My mom wakes up, probably after hearing the TV. I see her slowly get up and move to a different chair so she can see it better. I hear the door open, and I see the doctor come in.

"Hello," the doctor says.

"Hello," my mom replies.

"Okay, so after the MRI, we think we found what's wrong."

"Well, what is it?" my mom asks anxiously.

"We think she has Tourette's Syndrome," the doctor tells my mom. Her eyes widen.

"Well, what is it?" my mom asks nervously.

"Tourette's Syndrome is a disorder where your brain isn't wired correctly and can cause you to do some things uncontrollably. In this case, she grunts and has body jerks. We also call these tics," the doctor tells us. My mom says nothing. I say nothing. The doctor waits patiently for a reply. "Mrs. Mosley, can I talk to you outside?"

"Sure," my mom replies.

They walk outside, but leave the door cracked a little. I turn the volume down on the TV, and try to listen to what they're saying. The doctor says something about the MRI and a brain tumor. *A brain tumor? Do I have a brain tumor too? What else is wrong*

with me? They are out there for about ten minutes, and then my mom walks back in alone.

“What did he say?” I ask.

“He said that you should be able to go home by Friday or Saturday,” my mom tells me. I know that’s not all they talked about. What were they saying, and why are they keeping it from me?

all my animals

A lady from my church walks into my room. She has a bag with a bow on it. “Hey, Haley,” she says to me with a smile while handing me the bag.

“Hey,” I say back. I open the bag and see a stuffed animal. I smile wide. I love stuffed animals. It’s a little green, pink, yellow, and blue bird with a checkered hat on. I love it so much. I wonder if anyone else will bring me stuffed animals.

I fall asleep with the bird wrapped in my arms. I wake up about two hours later, and I see two bags lying on the floor. My mom sees that I woke up and hands them to me. I open them both. One has a fat bear, and the other one has a brown dog with a red collar. I wrap all three stuffed animals in my arms and lie back and watch TV with a big smile on my face.

“Haley, I think you are probably the healthiest person in this hospital,” my mom says, laughing.

Over the past two days, I’ve gotten about twenty stuffed animals; they all don’t even fit on the bed. My teacher even came by and gave me a white and brown dog. I love this dog so much.

“Hello,” the doctor says as he walks in. “Well, it looks like you get to go home tomorrow.” I look up at him smiling. In a way, I am kind of disappointed. I had been hoping to get more stuffed animals.

leaving

“Okay, do you have everything?” my mom asks me.

The doctor is in the room. Apparently wherever I go, I have to be in a wheelchair. I still don’t understand that, since I can walk

perfectly fine. The doctor wheels me down to the lobby and tells me I can get up now. I stand as my mom moves to stand beside me. She takes my hand as we walk out the door. I see my dad pulling around with the car. We both get in. I'm so happy to be going home.

I'm sitting in the backseat with all my stuffed animals. I barely have enough room for myself. I counted right before I left the hospital and found that I have exactly twenty-eight stuffed animals.

I look outside the window and see the blur of the trees. It all seems really familiar, but this time I feel happy. I'm glad I have Tourette's. It makes me feel different—special in a way. But just because I have Tourette's, that doesn't make me much different from everyone else. I grunt, but this time, I just smile. Yes, I do have Tourette's, but Tourette's doesn't have me.

the pursuit of soccer

pablo viveros

THE SOCCER FIELD IS MY SECOND HOME. When I play on that big expanse of green, I feel like I'm in my own world. Sometimes I go there just to get problems out of my mind. They just go away when I step on that dark grass. It's like paradise. When I kick the ball, it's like kicking my emotions out of my head. It lets me feel so alive.

I attend Durham School of the Arts in North Carolina. I am very passionate about sports and used to play soccer when I was in middle school, where I went to practice almost every day. We played one or two games a week. I play defense and midfield. The jersey I wore to the games was number eighteen. It was really fun because I was able to play with and against my friends in other schools. But I'll get back to soccer later.

* * *

After my parents got divorced, my mom started a new relationship with my soon-to-be-stepdad. His name was Edwin, but he liked to be called Gustavo. I really don't know why. I actually liked him because we always used to go to the park to walk around and talk. We talked about sports and we argued about who is the best soccer player in the world. When I was younger, I wasn't into sports or anything like that. I usually played with my friends, but I really didn't know what I was doing. So, sometimes after we walked around, Gustavo and I would pass the soccer ball to each other. He began to teach me the basic skills for soccer and even a few tricks.

After my mom told me that she and Gustavo were planning to get into a serious relationship, I was really happy. I enjoyed being with him. We started to hang around with each other a lot more, and we were also getting to know each other better. After I got better at playing soccer, Gustavo started playing games with his friends at public parks. One day, I finished my homework before he

left the house to go play soccer with his friends. When he saw that I was done and had nothing else to do, he looked at me and told me to go put on my cleats.

When we got to the park, he put on his cleats. and started to warm-up by doing some simple exercises, like stretching and running and other things. I didn't play because he played against older people, and he thought that I would get hurt. I liked to watch him play because I got better by watching and then practicing by myself or with him. He usually played midfield, which means you play forward, but you also help out the defense. So he had to run back and forth, which is actually kind of hard because you get tired really quickly.

When I watched him play, it made me think that someday I might be able to play just like him, or maybe even get better than him. Since then, I haven't stopped playing soccer.

* * *

I had just started eighth grade when I heard about tryouts for the boys' middle school soccer team. Ever since Gustavo showed me how to play soccer, I had wanted to play for a team. I really didn't care if it was an inside or outside of school soccer team. I talked to my mom about tryouts at school, and then told her that if I wanted to try out, I needed a physical. I was kind of scared to ask her because she might say no. When I approached her, she was watching TV since she had just gotten back from work. But she actually said that she would let me play on the soccer team. "But only if you're doing well in school," she said. Later on in the day, my mom and I went to get my physical. The physical was around forty dollars, just for a piece of paper that I was only going to use one time in that year.

When we walked out of the store and got into the car, my mom's face was completely different. She wasn't the type of mom that got upset over money, but she did this time. She started to argue about the cost of my physical, but I really didn't pay attention to what she was saying because I was so excited about trying out for the school soccer team. After a few minutes of being in the car with my mom, I noticed that she had gotten over the whole conversation really quickly, so I had nothing to worry about later on when we got to

the house. My mom ended up telling Gustavo, but she wasn't really mad at me anymore. I think she let out all of her frustration in the car.

* * *

It was Wednesday in the second or third week of school. Someone announced that the tryouts for the middle school boys soccer team were going to be held tomorrow. When I heard that announcement, all I could think right then was kicking that soccer ball as hard as I could.

So the day had come. It was Thursday morning, and I was ready for tryouts. At the end of the school day, I went to my locker to get all of my stuff that I needed, including my physical. After I gathered my things up, I changed into my shorts and another shirt that I didn't care if I sweat on. I put my cleats on outside because I wasn't supposed to wear them inside the gym.

When I walked outside and saw that some of my friends were already there, we started to play around with the ball, trying to do tricks that were really cool. The coach was late, so we started to do the exercises without him. We ran around the whole field, and then we started to do some stretching so we wouldn't hurt ourselves when we started to play. Finally, the coach came, and we all gathered around him. He told us to fill out a small form saying what position we wanted to play in and the usual things, like our names and age. We gave him our physicals, and then started to do what he said. I was really nervous about what he was going to make us do, but I was mostly excited. After three days of tryouts, the coach said that he had made up his mind and he was going to put up the list of the players who made it on the team at the main office by the next day. I went to check, and I was actually on the list. I was very surprised because there were a lot of other players that were a lot better than me.

* * *

On the field, I could feel the pressure going through my body, knowing that we only had a few minutes before time ran out. I

looked over to the coach, and he was screaming at the players to pass the ball forward. Everyone on the team knew that we really needed to score the last goal to be able to go to the semi-finals.

The big, green soccer field was filled with eleven guys from each team. The time was running out, and the home team was down by one. If DSA could even out the game, then we could still go to the semi-finals and then try to win the finals for the championship. The defense made a very long pass to one of the forward players. Axel got the ball, and as he put the ball down on the ground, he looked confident that he was going to make the goal. He got the ball into position, aimed at the goal, and then all of the sudden he took a shot at it. Everyone in the crowd went quiet as the ball flew through the air. Then everyone in the home crowd started celebrating. DSA had made the last goal, and we were going the semi-finals.

I could taste the sweat rolling down my face. We could hear the home team's crowd shout as the time went out, letting all of the DSA soccer players know that we had won the game, but the best part was that we were going to the semi-finals. All of the players and the crowd kept cheering.

* * *

After the school soccer season ended, I still wanted to keep playing. I told my mom about it, and she said that she would try to find a team open for tryouts after school ended. I could play the whole summer instead of being bored inside my house. So a few weeks before school ended, my mom found a team downtown that was open for tryouts and discovered that they needed a defense to play for their team. The name of the team that I was going to try out for was the Aguilas, and they trained near my house. When I heard about the team, I didn't really know what to think. Since I would be playing with younger kids, I thought they weren't going to play that well, but when I saw them play, I took my words back.

After I got out of school, I went to try out for the team and was accepted by the coach. I really didn't know anyone on the team, so I was kind of shy about getting the ball and starting to shoot. When I really started to go every single day, I noticed that I was improving my game play, my skills in soccer, and most of all my speed.

When I first started out, I got tired really quickly and didn't know many skills on how to take the ball away from someone that was trying to score on my team. It's really exciting to still be on the team right now, though I will probably have to get off the team later on when I'm fifteen years old because of the age group that the team has. The age group was originally from eleven to thirteen, but they have now changed it to eleven to fourteen because most of the players are already fourteen, and the coach doesn't want to lose any of his good players.

Soon, I will have to leave the team, but I will never leave the field.

ain't that a kick to the head

devin klibanow

1.

IMAGINE YOURSELF standing in the barren, dusty, soccer field at Central Park School for Children around 2005. You see some third grade and younger boys hanging around the area. The wind is chilly, clouds are overcast, and maybe the soft occasional drop-lets of rain. Teachers are conversing happily on a bench under the shade of a strong oak tree that has seen better days.

Look around. Do you see the Caucasian boy at the goal? His name is Max. Max is a somewhat chubby boy, nice at first glance, but when you become a personal friend, he shows his true colors, rude and vulgar.

Keep looking. Among the small cluster of boys, one is rearing up to kick a ball; his name is Madison. He brings his leg down from its coiled position faster than a swinging axe but with the same driving and cutting force, and the outcome is shown on Max's face. The ball has hit him in the gut and he quite suddenly acquires a pained expression that hits the earth, and falling along with it is his will to get off the ground. Realizing what has happened, Max crawls over to the sidelines shortly after.

The boys crowd around Max and set their eyes on Madison, the villain of the moment, and commence to cuss, harass, and shoot volleys of words from the bows of their mouths, hitting the misunderstood victim of the moment. Then, the real violence begins. The boys begin to pick up the ball and pelt the villain.

Then, a boy, small in size, the color of coffee with cream, easily glances over, grabs the ball as it is hurdling towards the cowering victim of circumstance, and holds on for dear life. Madison, wanting a chance to attack the other boys, demands that the ball be turned in to him. This boy refuses, and Madison charges him, screaming maniacally, and in doing so, tackles the child. Madison

is clawing and scratching the boy with all his might, and the boy won't let go.

Then, tall and lanky, and dark as the starless night sky, someone hurtles toward the smaller and larger boy, screaming, "Let go of my friend!" The tall lanky boy then grapples the larger of the two boys, Madison, and brings all three of the children to the ground. The teachers, realizing that three forms have fallen to the ground, rush over to investigate. On the ground, the small boy lies; smooth, clear drops of rain roll down his face. Slowly helped to his feet, he begins to walk while a group of children-turned-paparazzi gather around to investigate the scenario.

Soon, you are left in an abandoned playground, feeling the rain slither down your own face.

2.

There I am, standing alone, waiting. It's warm outside, even though some ominous-looking clouds hover overhead. The dirt constantly pesters us with its round talons, forcing me to rub my eyes. Little droplets fall to the earth, spending the last of their time frantically reasoning that soon they would be consumed by the dry, greedy ground and lost forever. With each passing minute, tension is thrown up into the air, piece by piece, and I can't figure out why or how to complete the puzzle of stress before me.

The ball's in possession of Madison, a second grader, who is even taller than me, which isn't very hard to believe, considering I am a midget compared to everyone else.

"Kick the darn ball already!"

Dylan, Eli, Sammule, Jacob, Marcus, Isaiah, and Max stand around irritably, waiting for the ball to fly their way.

"I'm just getting prepared!" Madison shouts.

He kicks the ball, and I watch as it flies through the dusty soccer field.

"Aigh!"

I glance around alarmed, trying to figure out where that came from, and notice Max lying on the ground, his face distorted into shapes of pain.

"Max!" I yell, quite alarmed. I run over and attempt to help him to his feet. Some of the others follow my example. As soon as he was helped to the sidelines, the boys look over at Madison.

"What the hell were you thinking, you bastard?"

"Sorry!" exclaims Madison. "I didn't mean to!"

The boys refuse to listen. They throw the ball that was recently hurled at Max and commence throwing it back at Madison at an alarming rate. Soon, Madison is frantically deflecting the ball assailing him.

I've had enough.

I step between the boys and Madison and exclaim, "That's enough, guys, break it up."

Instead of heeding my words, the boys just make a sexual joke and grab the ball again. They start to throw it at Madison.

This time I grab the ball and hold it close. "Leave him alone!"

Soon, Madison wants the ball to "give the other boys a taste of their own medicine."

"Give me the ball!" he shouts.

What'd I ever do to him? Why is he being so hostile? I say, "I can't. You might hurt them."

At these words, he starts to scream and commences to rush me. I stand firm, and am soon enveloped by a large, angry brute. I have no idea what's going on and am, frankly, frightened.

Suddenly, amidst the scratching and flailing limbs, I hear, "Let go of my friend!" I catch Isaiah catapulting toward us, and the three of us are suddenly flung toward the ground.

After what feels like hours lying on the cold, unrepentant earth, the teachers finally come. *Well, shoot, if you could take any longer,* I think as I'm helped to my feet. Everything is a blur, and I can't differentiate between scenery and "friends" anymore.

3.

"Well, you ready?" asks my father, who sits in the front seat. I nod my head, and look solemnly at my sister. She nods her head enthusiastically. Her wide, brown eyes shine brightly as the sun would on a warm, summer day. Neither her mood nor mind are different.

Although short for her age, packed into her tiny frame is an enthusiasm that no one can replicate and the happiness of a bunny in a carrot factory. Her face, sprinkled with freckles, is just as bright as her eyes. Her eyebrows arch like rainbows with an expression just as colorful. She bounces up and down in her seat. Glancing at her, and then back at myself, I notice that our garments look extremely different, while being exactly the same. Darith's robes are white and clean, but mine are dusty white with little luster.

"I'm so excited!" Darith chirps.

"Great . . ."

"Aren't you excited, too?"

"I'm not completely sure," I sigh.

"Well, I'm excited."

"Good for you."

My dad pulls up into the driveway and my sister and I exit. "Have fun, Devin and Darith!" my dad yells from the car.

"Okay!" we shout back in unison.

The car pulls away, and we're left on the concrete that leads up to the building we were instructed to enter, the building that has shaped my outlook on life, the building that's helped to build me as a person, the building where almost all of my battles would start and inevitably end: Shaw's School of Karate.

4.

How did I end up in this situation? How is it that I was sent off into battle with my uniform? It was because of the playground. The images running through my head sped through like bullets. I was fated to soon realize that the actions that took place at the playground battlefield was all just training for what was to come.

I stand on the pavement outside of the dojo because of what happened, and ambivalence quickly spreads over me, suffocating me.

I enter the building and encounter a black, medium-sized man, with black hair glistening like a new assault rifle. He has the look of a commanding general, and he sure is ready to give orders.

"Well, hello there!" he says.

"Hello!" my sister replies.

"Hey," I reply with forced enthusiasm.

"Are you here for class?" he asks.

"Yes," we reply simultaneously, as if the uniform did not give that fact away already.

"Okay, my name is Mr. Shaw."

"Hello, Mr. Shaw," my sister and I reply.

"I am Darith!" my sister bubbles.

"My name is Devin," I mutter, trying to display the same amount of excitement as before.

"Nice to meet you, Devin and Darith. One thing that you should know," he says, "is that in this building, you refer to all black belts you see as 'sir' or 'ma'am.' Any questions?"

"No."

"No, *what?*"

"No, sir?"

"Very good!"

After my first class, the sun is high up in the sky with the most amazing gleam I've ever seen. *What a wonderful day!* I look up and sniff the fresh, crisp air and give a sigh of relief.

Day after day, I go, and I enjoy class. I quickly go through white belt, as does my sister, and soon, we cruise through yellow belt, saunter through blue belt, and work our way right through green belt. At this point, we have learned how to use large sticks as weapons, a series of new fighting styles, and we have started to spar. But soon, the real test will begin.

5.

It is a stormy Saturday, and I feel as if a drill instructor stands over me awaiting my arrival to the land of the living, even though I am sleeping peacefully. I get up and half-march, half-shuffle toward the kitchen. My father is there.

"Good morning, goof! How are you holding up?"

"Thnim phyrne . . ." I slur in an unrecognizably sludgy voice.

"Well, I certainly hope you're ready because today's the big day. Get some breakfast, and a big one at that. You need all the energy you can get for the test today."

I know what day it is, and I certainly am not very happy about it.

“Oough kayee . . .” I am slower than a slug at the rate I’m going, but there is a reason.

The waffles pop like the bang of a pistol, very quick and somewhat startling. I put them on a plate and drown them with the sweet, sticky syrup. Only this time, my father doesn’t tell me to stop, that it is way too much. No, instead, today, he is as quiet as the fallen on a battlefield.

After breakfast, I go into my room, change into my dark uniform, and put on my green belt. I was warned about days like this. My karate instructor had told me about this day—that it might be the hardest day of my life. Now, I believe him. Now, I know that this isn’t going to be a walk in the park. The pain that was foretold by previous students worries me a bit, but what really worries me is standing up in front of people and expressing what I know about karate. Stage fright takes hold, and it is suffocating.

* * *

I sit at attention in the car, my sister and father both saying words of encouragement to me.

“You’ll do fine, Devin,” or “You’ll survive!” or “Good luck,” is all I hear from them as we drive down the road towards the dojo. The ride takes forever, as we swerve and ease by every turn. My stomach jumps around in my body, which wants to go back to its nice, safe home where it doesn’t have to do any physical labor. Unfortunately, the car doesn’t agree with my body or my stomach, and decides to continue toward my final destination. *It’s now or never.*

We arrive at the more-than-familiar sidewalk and make our way to the double doors that used to be welcoming, but are now frightening, cold. It is like standing in the sights of a sniper, focusing intently on you, determining your fate: whether you live, or are sent to the morgue with a crisp, clean hole through the head. I enter the doors, daring the sniper to shoot, and he does not—but he continues to aim at me.

When I enter, I see other students also looking around nervously, testing like I am, worrying that someone is staring at them, but doesn’t know who. Mr. Shaw gathers us around him

to tell us about the struggles that we are about to encounter very soon, and, out of the corner of my eye, I see the sniper locking and loading his weapon.

I force myself onto the floor, and glance around at the many black belts sitting in foldout chairs, eagerly awaiting my performance.

The first part of the test consists of doing basic techniques: punches, kicks, blocks, and so on and so forth. The first few minutes are rather easy, and I start to think I stressed over nothing. And then the sniper takes his first shot. In mere seconds, pain blossoms through my body as my muscles deteriorate from the repetitiveness of the moves. *Upper block, downward block, middle block, right hook punch, augh!*

The bullet pierces my limbs, but I continue to struggle through. Finally, the sequence is over, and the first part of the test is done. I'm treated by a nice cup of fresh water, healing the stress and tension of my muscles.

The next challenge that is thrust upon me is to perform Katas. A Kata is a sequence of techniques that go together in a strategic form to defend oneself. During this point in the test, the sniper decides that now is not the time to strike. Because of his mercy, my Katas are in tip-top shape.

Next comes self-defense. Self-defense is taking multiple simple techniques and defending yourself against one simple technique. On this occasion, the sniper decides it is time to take another shot, screwing up my self-defense.

The challenge after self-defense is minute line, defending oneself against punches and kicks. I manage to block all kicks and punches coming my way. At this point, the sniper reloads and is about to strike at the worst moment possible: sparring.

Sparring consists of fighting another person with padding on. I would have been fine with doing this—except for the fact that this event is the last, and we are already exhausted.

* * *

I am called up to the ring. The person I am fated to spar with is Jonathan. He is Asian, very nice, and an excellent sparrer. This fact makes me wary, and soon we are in the ring.

“Bow to us!” our instructors demand.

We bow.

“Bow to each other!”

We do so.

“Ready . . .” The pause seems to last for a lifetime, and my stomach crawls into my throat, trying to go home. And then the sniper is back.

“Fight!”

As soon as the instructor utters those words, the sniper fires, and the strain in my muscles returns. To add to that, fists fly in my general direction. Sweat and tears drench the floor as punches are thrown. The sniper fires shot after shot at my crumbling, straining, aching body, but I stand firm and fight back. After many grueling, excruciating minutes, the last punch is thrown. I come out victorious, and the sniper surrenders to my superiority.

* * *

I stand in the middle of a half-circle with a few others. They’re all smiling happily, having avoided and defeated the sniper within them. My name is called, and I step forward.

“You have permission to walk the line from green belt to purple belt.”

The joy and satisfaction that rush through my chest are overwhelming. I step up to my belt like a soldier that has just been promoted, tall and proud.

It all started with the playground. The frightening images, the loud, echoing voices, and the physical and mental pain that I went through. The decision I made prompted me to get here, and further still. The choices I made in the past put me where I am now.

home court advantage: chaos at duke

victor kidd

dreams do come true

THIS SUMMER, I HAD MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF DUKE UNIVERSITY. I was finally able to go to Duke's basketball camp. I had been waiting the whole school year to experience my independence. Staying on campus in the dorms for the first week was the icing on the cake.

"We're here," my uncle said with confidence. My cousin Timothy and I started to unpack and settle into our dorm. We had a detailed list of what we needed to bring. All that mattered was that we would be staying a week on campus with some of the greatest basketball players in the world. The room was a miniature studio apartment. We had everything we needed at our fingertips, and you could smell the fresh aroma of jocks in the air.

We decided to tour the enormous campus. We came to the front entrance gate. "Only the Best Ball Players Were Born Here" was written on it. Walking on the campus was an amazing opportunity. Tim looked speechless. He pointed at a sign on the building. It read, "Cameron Indoor Stadium." In my excitement, I fell to my knees. *We're finally here, I thought. We are finally at the place where history was created, and my dreams are now a reality.*

play of the day

The tournament was just getting started as I laced my Jordans and dashed onto the blistering outdoor courts. Tim looked at me impatiently as he stood at the gate. As I opened those gates, I felt intimidated by the other players. It was clear that they were no strangers to the court. They were dominating the game—running back and forth across the court like roadrunners. Tim and I started to look out for our team. Once we found them, the game had

already started. We were down by one with five seconds to go, and the clock hit three. The coach, unsurprisingly, put me and Tim in the game. We both knew we had to make something happen. When Tim got the ball, he blazed down the court, looking for an open man. I yelled for the ball, and he passed it to me.

I was thinking, *Don't think, just make it happen!* With nothing but the net in my view, I released the ball. All of the confidence in the world lay in my fingertips. Time slowed as the ball glided through the air. The spectators were on the edge of their seats, anticipating the final results.

The whistled sounded, the dust had cleared, and our team was proud to be standing tall in the garden.

After the game, I took some time to myself and ventured through the garden. I was enjoying the sweet smell of success, admiring the beauty which beheld my eyes, when out of nowhere, appeared the greatest beauty of all: Mason Plumlee.

chaos in the dorms

Tim and I were sound asleep, trapped in a slumber, but it was disturbed by the of thunder of a fist against the door.

"Get up," the coach called, his words piercing through the door. Tim and I walked down the halls, confused about the silence that echoed around us. Tim knew something, but he would never tell me. When I asked him, he replied, "You'll soon find out."

I was walking home and saw a crowd of people charging for the dorms. Music engulfed my ears as I came closer. I opened the door, and it was a celebration party. Our victory had been recognized throughout the campus. There were drinks, video games, and a cake that said, "Go Devils" in big black and blue letters.

the beginning of the end

I stared out the dorm window at the rising sun as my confidence sank to the bottom of the ocean. I glanced at Tim as he packed his stuff. His body language told the story: I knew he didn't want to

leave. When we were done packing, we left the room, taking our depression with us. We found our uncle leaning on a broad building.

“Ready?” he asked. We nodded as we glanced at Cameron. We kept our heads high as we made our way to the truck.

My speed and agility had become so strong, I felt invincible.

motivation

jo marquette

I'm here [at Manchester United]. I have to enjoy it but I also have to work very hard.

Javier “El Chicharito” Hernandez

“HOW WAS PRACTICE?” I heard someone say as I opened the car door to take a seat next to the driver. My eyes looked up to meet my dad’s dark, coffee-brown eyes that wandered from mine and back to the rear view mirror.

He seemed calm and serious yet good-hearted when asking. He kept his eyes on the road as we pulled out of the soccer fields’ parking lot. I looked down to the car floor and placed my half empty jug of water down. I shifted my weight on the seat, trying to make myself comfortable, and ended up kicking the jug of water to the side.

“It was just a simple training session today. We went over last weekend’s game, and worked on foot skills and finishing.” I looked up at him as I answered. My dad nodded his head to confirm that he was listening to what I was saying. I took a deep breath and waited to hear the speech that I always received after practice or a game. It was always annoying to hear things being repeated and jammed into my head.

“*Ay que siempre echarle ganas a todo,*”¹ he said to me with a firm tone. This was one of the many things he always said, and I really didn’t want to hear it repeated.

“*Si, ya se.*”² I rolled my eyes, facing the window so he couldn’t see. *Here we go again,* I thought.

“*Nada mas escucha lo que dice,*”³ I remember my mom telling me one day when I had complained to her about the lectures. *This car ride is going to take forty-five minutes, so I might as well just agree with what he has to say.*

1 You’ve always got it give it everything you’ve got.

2 Yeah, I know.

3 Listen to what he says.

I felt I had done a good job at practice today, and had pushed myself to work hard. It was intense. I had practice three times a week and two games every weekend. It was tiring, but I put as much effort as I could into it. I was tired of hearing my dad tell me the same things, and I felt like I didn't need to hear them anyway; I didn't feel the need to take his advice.

Somehow, my dad knew what I was thinking because the next thing he said caught me by surprise. "I'm telling you this so you know that you can't goof off and then lose it all." I turned my whole body to him, now leaning against the car door, because I wanted to pay attention to why he was saying this.

"What do you mean?" I asked. He kept his eyes on the road, but I could feel him trying to keep his communication with me close.

*"Tienes que tomar en cuenta que nosotros no podemos pagar por todo lo que tú y tu hermano tiene. Pero pagamos lo más que podemos. Trabajamos muy duro para que ustedes tengan mejor vida que yo y tu mamá."*⁴

I struggled to listen to what he was saying to me. I understood the message he was giving, but I wasn't fully taking it in.

The car ride became silent, and I didn't want to break the quiet. As I sat there, I stared out the front window of the car, watching the upcoming road and street lights. Ten minutes away from getting home, I thought about what my dad was saying. It wasn't that he thought I wasn't doing well or putting all my effort possible into playing soccer. He just wanted me to understand that if I really wanted to play club soccer, I had to put all my effort into it because playing club level was being given to me almost free. I had to take the fullest advantage of an opportunity that was being given to me because maybe one day it could be taken away from me.

I decided to break the silence when we were just around the corner from our neighborhood. "There are people that get great opportunities and don't take full advantage of it. I never really realized that I was getting financial aid, and that I was sometimes lacking focus during practice." As I spoke, I remembered joking around with a couple of my teammates while on the field earlier that practice. "Soccer is one of the big things that I want to always

⁴ You need to try to understand that we can't pay for everything you and your brother have; we pay for as much as we can. We work hard so you can have a better life than the one your mother and I had.

do, Pa, and from now on—and now I know that if I want to keep going—I *need* to focus on effort.”

As we pulled into the driveway, my dad moved one of his hands from steering to fist bump me.

“Ahh-ri-i-ight.” He spoke in a rough, low-pitched voice. “That’s what I want to hear,” he said, taking the key out of the ignition. He got out of the car and headed for the house door while I was still in the passenger’s seat.

Wow, I thought, I probably wouldn’t even be playing soccer right now if my parents didn’t try so hard. I mean, getting financial aid to help pay for soccer is great! Now I just gotta work hard to show that I do want it.

My dad peered out of the house door, “*Ya metete a bañar qui-eres feo?*”⁵ he yelled at me.

I grabbed my things and locked the car. My dad held the door open for me. As I walked past him, I stopped and turned, “Thanks, Pa.”

* * *

You can have the top stars to bring the attention, you can have the best stadium, you can have the best facilities, you can have the most beautiful project in terms of marketing and all this kind of thing. But if you don’t win . . . all the work these people are doing is forgotten . . .

Jose Mourinho

After taking a long shower that washed away all my sweat from practice, I felt relieved, and now dinner was the only thing on my mind. I took my seat at the table as my parents came in, discussing with my brother about his math difficulties. Elias seemed a bit bothered by my mom’s nagging, and I felt bad for him.

Trying to make my mother back off my seven-year-old brother, I interrupted their conversation by adding a smart comment, “What *grade* are you in again, Elias?” I emphasized the grade when I spoke, trying to give them a hint on the fact that he was still learning.

“Ay Jo, I’m in first grade, duh. You’re so slow,” my brother rolled his eyes, not understanding that I was trying to help his case.

5 Go shower, will you, ugly?

My mom turned her attention from my brother and me, and moved towards the oven. A hint of maize and wheat came from the stove. She had already started making dinner and was now heating up the corn tortillas.

"What is this smell?" my dad said as he took a seat across from me.

As my mom stood at the stove with her back to me, her voice filled the room, "How was practice?"

I gave a small grin, remembering my conversation with my dad earlier that night. "Very good," I said, making the answer simple and understandable.

"So what did you make for dinner?" my dad asked, changing the subject.

My mother turned to face him as my brother and I watched her open her mouth to reply. I felt as though she might give the wrong answer, and my dad would not like that.

"Enchiladas. Two for Jo and Elias, only because I don't want them to eat too much. More for you and me." Her voice was simple, yet I could hear her sarcastically trying to change the way she answered in case my father changed his attitude toward dinner.

"Why? Jo just came back from practice. She does not need to eat something unhealthy." My dad's voice seemed more tense and disturbed.

I didn't like when my dad told my mom what food I should and shouldn't eat. I loved all my mom's special Mexican dishes. He always criticized the traditional dishes because they seemed greasy and full of fats. Of course, he only brought this up when soccer season happened, or when summer came around.

My dad finished his explanatory argument. "Too much fat and grease. This is why most Hispanic people get sick and become overweight."

I'd heard this too many times as well, but this time he made me actually ponder his statements.

I'm a young athlete with a big future. I had practice an hour and a half ago. Maybe he's right. Why would I want to eat something unhealthy after practice? I thought to myself, If I eat like this after every practice, will I become unfit and out of shape? But I love my mom's food!

I saw my mom nod her head and turn back to the stove. She turned it off and walked back to us with a plate in her hand that held just one enchilada. She placed the plate down in front of me. I saw my dad stare at her and then switch his glance back to me.

“Could I have a glass of water so I can stay hydrated please?” I asked, trying to sound hearty so I could get approval from my dad. He nodded in my direction and got up to go to the fridge. I rolled my eyes at the thought of just drinking water with one enchilada.

“You know, in Mexico all we would eat, everyday, was greasy food or some type of unhealthy dish. It was always delicious, but now that I’m older, I have to pay the consequences.” Again, I felt like I had heard this in some other story from him, and I just agreed with everything he said just so I could keep eating.

I caught myself giggling as I watched my mom serve him five enchiladas. She had done it on purpose because he was so caught up in telling me his stories about daily food in Mexico that he forgot to apply his health statements to himself.

I realized that being soccer-fit isn’t just physically staying in shape. You have to have the right athlete’s diet to make it all come together in balance.

* * *

Manchester, Madrid, Los Angeles or Freetown . . . football’s a game people love everywhere you go . . . Every dressing room [is] full of players from different countries, different continents, but, even though you may not speak the same language as your teammate—and you may have been brought up in completely different backgrounds—when you’re playing football together you understand each other perfectly.

David Beckham

Sitting in my second period health class, I looked up at the whiteboard, where our daily assignments were always written.

Where do you want to be ten years from now? What about twenty years? Thirty years? What about seventy? In blue dry erase marker, these questions took up all the space on the whiteboard, making them noticeable immediately.

“Obvious,” I whispered under my breath. Where did I want to be ten years from now? The answer was simple. I began writing in my health class binder where all my journal entries were kept.

Ten years from now, I want to be in college (more like a university) studying to become a psychologist and playing soccer for the school team. Maybe I'll even get a chance to start training with the Mexico National Soccer Team. Twenty years from now, I will be living the dream of playing professional soccer for the Spanish female team, Real Club Deportivo Español. I'll already have my degree in psychology, and it'll be of use when I am tragically injured or something. Thirty years from now, I will officially be playing as a starter for the National Mexico Team. Around the age of thirty-five, I will probably have to retire due to a leg injury and move on to working as psychologist in Boston. When I am seventy years old, I am going to live in Madrid, Spain and will be sitting on my couch watching my brother play in the World Cup for Mexico.

I wrote things seriously and added a little joke here and there that I thought could be possible. I kept writing the description of my future, excited to share my plans, when the memory of a conversation with my dad in the car a few days ago popped into my thoughts.

"It's great that you have the goal of going further into sports, but you need to realize education is much more important and gives you a better chance of getting far in life," my dad preached at me for what seemed to be the tenth time as we drove back home after my soccer practice. Having no energy to argue back, I simply agreed and listened to him speak. His face seemed serious, as always, with small stubble that peered out of the bottom of his cheeks and chin. His steamy-looking eyes were always on the road, except when he turned to glance at me to make sure I was listening and not zoning off into space.

My dad, being an athlete himself, always encouraged me to play sports but not to focus on them too much since being successful there isn't always reliable.

"Most Hispanic students spend so much time focused on the ball, and other things, that they never seem to 'have time for school,' so they say," he took one hand off the steering wheel to make a quotation mark in the air emphasizing that it was the excuse the students have for not going to school. "You need to get far in school to be able to have a good job in the future. You can't be like me when you get older."

I knew what he meant since he always says the same thing over and over again. I really want to get far in soccer. It's a huge deal to me. Going to college is extremely important to me, too, since I could be the first in my family to go to college in the United States.

I took a deep breath and sighed, “Yes, Pa, I know.”

Every time we had that conversation, his statements would always upset me. As if I didn’t know I had to work hard in school, like at training. My dad always used the same example to get me to understand what he meant.

“You know why the boys U17 Mexico team won the World Cup right?” he asked me like always.

I took a sip from my almost empty water bottle and answered, “Because they spent all their time practicing and never studied their school books like the European teams. Which gave them time to become better with their technical skills and speed of play.” I mocked his body expression as I stiffened my back like his.

His eyes were still on the road but he nodded his head ferociously, “Exactly!” he exclaimed. I guess I had answered his question with the exact words he had used the last time we had that discussion.

“Who would like to share their future plans?” My health teacher’s voice brought me back to the present. I looked down at my journal where my future was written. I read my answers over and over again, trying to figure out if I would erase a part of it.

As I read the sentences on my paper one last time, I realized that all my dad wanted for me was to get a better education than he ever did and to have a better future than him. He repeated the same things because he wanted me to get the message in my mind. He wasn’t telling me to quit playing my sport; he was making sure I had the right idea for what was to come. Playing a sport can’t be a life long career since it could fail for many reasons, whereas graduating school could open many opportunities for someone. I thought my future was pretty well planned, or at least I knew what I wanted to do. I raised my hand to be the second person to share.

* * *

Every kid around the world who plays soccer wants to be Pele. I have a great responsibility to show them not just how to be like a soccer player, but how to be like a man.

Pele

As I’m sitting in my room and writing my memoir, I realize that the job of a father is to lead his children to the best path possible. All the things that he says and repeats are all meant to help

me, even if they are upsetting. My dad always says, "When you get older you will think back to all the times I gave you advice, and you're going to be very thankful." Right now, I am extremely thankful, and I have learned to appreciate and take in the advice given to me from adults. They usually know what we teenagers go through since they were once young, too. Parents and idols try their best to be role models because they know we will do what they do. I'm glad my dad does his best because it inspires me to do the same.

desperation and frustration

deolu akintunde

I INHALED AND EXHALED HUGE BREATHS OF AIR; beads of sweat ran down my face. My mouth was desperately in need of water. The sun beamed rays of warm discomfort on my arms and neck. I sluggishly jogged up the pitch, which smelled of . . . well, grass. This was our pre-season scrimmage against Jordan High School's JV soccer team who were notorious for being real beasts. I was playing as an outside midfielder, and my stamina was failing me. A towering Jordan midfielder began to dribble down the pitch towards our goal and defensive line. Our left center-back, Gerard, pressured and pursued him like a hawk would a field mouse. The Jordan player desperately passed the ball back to his own defender. The fullback fumbled and soon lost possession of the ball. This was a golden opportunity for a break down the field, and I went for it willingly.

I began to accelerate toward the loose ball, sending clumps of grass flying, showing the other players a clean pair of heels. I imagined that the defender's heartbeat tripled within seconds, his fear increasing with each stride I took. I had more ground to cover, but nevertheless I reached the ball first. I touched it forward with a feeling of security, which was immediately squashed. The Jordan player dived into a slide tackle late and caught my ankle. I spun several times in the air and slammed hard on the ground; the referee's whistle sounded. Thoughts ran through my head like bumbling bees: *Did you break anything? That looked like it hurt. You should just lie on the grass, it's nice and soft. Take a break, you deserve it.*

I ignored all of them, determined to continue playing, and began to get to my feet.

"You alright, man?" asked a skinny, Caucasian boy.

My only response was a quick head nod, and I pushed aside the pain I felt. My ankle and hips were sore, and sharp needles of pain stabbed at my legs, but none of that mattered at the moment.

The whistle blew for halftime. We were down 4-0, exhausted, and discouraged. The usual pep talk from Coach Green seemed to have no effect. Near the end she made a few changes, which included me moving back to a defensive role. I had plenty of work to do during that second half. I remembered how Jordan got a corner kick at the forty-fifth minute; I marked this 5'10" Peruvian striker. It turned out to be Dakota, our old teammate and friend from the previous school year. We exchanged quick nods and got back to the match. The set piece was sent in, and it was cleared poorly to outside of the eighteen-yard box. Then, a Hispanic boy intercepted the ball, and placed it perfectly in the top-right corner, a beautiful goal to score. He and his closest teammate celebrated. Our keeper, Javier, punted the ball to the middle of the field in frustration. We were completely dominated throughout the whole game, despite our determination and persistence.

I had especially wanted to do well so that Coach had something to think about for the season, but things don't always work out that way. Jordan left our home field with an 7-0 win and we left with our heads hung low. Life is full of disappointments, but it's how you recover that helps you perform later.

dealing with disappointment

As the end of the school bell shrieked, the rustle of papers and the sounds of zipping book bags filled the classroom. I slung my book bag onto my back, and began to leave the room with butterflies in my stomach. Today was the day that Coach Barrianger was going to post the middle school team list in the gym. I walked down the band room hall tentatively, my mind buzzing. *Did I do enough to make the team? Am I on that list?* I continued to walk, collecting my thoughts, anxious to get to the gym. As I entered the main building, I saw Freddie, a chubby, multiracial kid, who was older than me, but you could never tell. "Hey, Deolu, you heading up front?" he called.

"Nah, I have to go to the gym to see if I made the team," I responded as we met up.

"Ah, okay. Good luck. I'll see you later."

"Alright, thanks." I walked off, each step taking me closer and closer to the gym. With each inch closer, my feet became heavier. I opened the dull, gray double door and I approached the hallway outside of Coach Freeman and Coach Bowden's office. The hallway was always a little dark, but on this particular day, it seemed pitch black. I don't know whether it was the heavy musk smell or the layering heat, but the air became hard to breathe. The list was at the end of the hallway on the billboard, but getting to it was like a long trek through a dense jungle. There were people around me, but I felt alone. I reached the list, anxious, sweat clinging to my brow.

I scanned the list from top to bottom, bottom to top. Desperately hoping that it wasn't in alphabetical order, because I didn't see my name at the beginning. My heart felt like a caged bird ready to taste freedom as it almost beat out of my chest. Then it suddenly dropped. The world slowed down. Everything was a blur other than that list, that list without my name on it. I began to walk away with my shoulders slightly drooped. I tried as hard as I could to hide my disappointment while the other people in the hall celebrated with each other.

"Hey, Tunde, did you make it?" Jonah, a pale ginger, asked me as I passed by.

"Nah, but it's no problem, man." I said back with a weak smile, knowing in my mind that it was. *You'll get them next time. Don't worry about it. Let this be your fuel.* It is the cold, harsh reality that you get knocked down, but you can't just feel sorry for yourself; you have to come back even harder than before.

the softball field

It was my eighth grade year at DSA, and tryouts began to end. I was sweating heavily, but I could only focus on what was going to happen next. Coach Barringer decided to go ahead and tell us who made the team. He split us up into two groups, not knowing the veteran players didn't even care to find out who was cut or not. I, on the other hand, was more than interested. The previous year I was unfortunately left off the roster, and had to settle with being the manager. As manager, I still went to the games and attended

practice, but I soon quit, the reason being that I was given so much crap by some of the players on the team that it really got to me. Comments like, “You’re really just a waste of water, why drink it?” left a taste of disgust in the back of my throat. I didn’t want to go through that and handle their equipment for them.

So for this year’s tryouts, I used everything at my disposal to make the team. I worked hard, and, luckily, the coach thought so, too. I was overjoyed when I found out that I made the team. A wide, toothy grin spread across my face as a blanket of relief fell gently over me. I felt like a bird soaring at its highest. The season started soon, and I couldn’t wait. I was hungry for a year full of wins.

like a virgin

The white bus pulled into the Franklington park, and we all put on our shin guards and “cleated up.” We were confident that today we would secure the win, and we felt no pressure. The sun shined, and the breeze passed by, leaving a lingering pine smell. The team warmed up, laughing and socializing. Out of the many conversations one stood out. Gerard a.k.a. “the Filipino” told me, “Hey, let’s keep our goal a virgin today.”

“Ha ha, oh snap, bro! . . . Hey Javie, you hear what Gerard just said?” I said, chuckling. I told Javier the witty analogy. Soon, everyone had heard of what was expected today and it only lifted our spirits. Plenty of other analogies like “Javie’s the condom,” and “Tyler’s the dick,” spread as we chugged down our water. That pre-game banter hyped us up, and that was our best game of the season so far.

The game ended 2-0 in our favor. One of the goals was scored by Tyler, our center forward. He broke clear of the defensive line and it was between him and the keeper. The goalie desperately sprinted to Tyler in hopes of causing him to slide it pass the post. Our forward kept a composed attitude and slid it past the goalkeeper’s reach into the back of the net. It was a good day; we got the win and played around with a few Franklinton players. Regardless of my shot clearing the fence and escaping into the thick woods—and my failing to find it afterwards—we left the park with two goals and a clean sheet on that white activities bus.

young pele

I was about four years old and my dad and I were heading to Duke wall to “train.” My dad was a mad soccer fanatic, and, like most African dads, he expected the same of his children. We were pulling into one of the parking lots. I was in my booster seat, squirming and messing with the seatbelt, wanting out. I was like a helpless worm trapped in the beak of a bird. I called out, “Daddy! Help!” several times. Sure enough, he came to my rescue, quickly unfastening the belt, and helped me out of the white Altima. He opened the truck, taking out a couple cones and a classic soccer ball. I reached desperately for the ball in his thick, large hands. He towered over me, so my current task of playing with the ball seemed impossible, and I soon lost interest.

I sat on the lush grass and began to uproot each smooth blade. Dad found a good spot and began to line them up.

“Deolu. Come here,” he said with his thick Nigerian accent.

“Coming, Daddy!” I responded, abandoning the grass and running over. He dropped the ball, passed it to me, and I clumsily stopped it with my foot.

He told me to dribble the ball in between the seven cones without touching them. “You understand?” he asked.

I nodded, even though I wasn’t completely sure. I began at one end of the line and kicked the ball in between one set of cones. I repeated this trend not knowing that it wasn’t correct. My dad eventually gave up on it, and we ended up just going one on one. Whenever he had the ball, he would always stand still and let me steal it, and when I had the ball, I would just kick it. He faked the other way with bad theatrics and took a break to “catch his breath.”

I put my hands on my hips and puffed out my tiny chest feeling like Ronaldinho and Pele.

when a champion is born

jairo fernandez

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF WRESTLING TRYOUTS, and I was starting to get nervous, scared, and a little excited. I was sent to the locker room, but I didn't really know what to do, or where to go, until I saw one of my older friends, Chris, who had been on the team last year. I asked him where to go.

"We're supposed to go to the small gym where everyone is going to weigh in. And ya remember this coach doesn't play, so do your best to make the team," he replied. Once I got to the small gym, it was hot and humid, and I started to sweat because I saw a bunch of people waiting to try out. I immediately thought, *Oh my gosh, how am I going to make the team with all these people trying out?* I tried to remind myself to keep it cool, and try my hardest to make the team. When I got weighed in, the coach told me I was 109 pounds, and in the weight class of 112 pounds. I was then told to wait on the mat until everyone else was done weighing in. When they finished, the coach introduced himself, which I didn't really care about until he said that only a couple of us were going to make the team, which made me even more nervous.

We started practicing like crazy, doing push-ups, sit-ups, up-downs in a circle, and running until we collapsed. I was so sweaty that I could fill a whole gallon milk jug up with my perspiration. The coach gave us each a number; mine was four.

He said, "If you see your number tomorrow on a piece of paper at the front of the school, that means you made the team." I watched the others, nervous about making the team, while I walked up to the coach to ask him how I did. All he said was, "I'm hoping to see you tomorrow, kiddo." He had told me I made the team before he told anyone else; he knew I could become someone if I worked hard.

* * *

It was a normal day at school. I was just talking to my best friend, who couldn't wrestle because I had beaten him in the play-offs in practice, so I would get the privilege of wrestling in my first match ever. I was really scared and sweating like crazy. I tried to drink a Five Hour Energy so that I could have more speed, strength, and stamina, but for some reason I knew that if I drank it, I would be cheating. Plus, my mom said that I'm too young for energy drinks. I also managed to make a deal with my mom: if I won first place in wrestling at this match, she would have to buy me an iPod touch the day after. I was petrified that I might lose and get laughed at by all my friends. I knew I had to be strong and brave when I faced my first match. When I saw the kid I was up against, I thought, *This dude might be shorter than me, but he is so buff*. I tried to lie and tell my coach that my head was hurting so that I wouldn't have to wrestle, but it didn't work. I was panicking on the bleachers, and my coach told me, "Try your best and give it everything you got."

"Dude, I wish you were wrestling him instead of me," I told my friend Justin.

"Good luck!" he responded while laughing at me, knowing that I might lose today. When it was finally my turn, I was shaking; people looked at me like I had done something wrong while I walked toward the mat. I saw my opponent walk up, too, with no fear in his face. After that, we shook hands. He shook with a tight grip, which told me that he was aggressive. Then the referee blew the whistle, and suddenly my opponent started slamming me, pulling me, and doing what ever it took to pin me down on the filthy mat. I tried to be very defensive so that he couldn't beat me even though he was exceeding me in terms of points.

I was scared that my coach would scorn me for losing to a boy shorter than me. When I did finally encounter him, the first words out of his mouth were, "Come on, Jairo! That kid is way shorter than you! Just focus on pinning him!" I couldn't reply because my mouth was so dry. I needed a sip of water to regain the feeling in my mouth that I had so suddenly lost. Break was over, and I soon took my position, as did my opponent. The referee blew the whistle and, somehow, I managed to trip him and he ended up pinned in seconds. I was ecstatic and proud of myself. I had just won my first

match. My teammates ran up to me and showered me with compliments. I knew from my first match that I would become undefeated and earn the respect of everyone in school the next day.

* * *

I was in science class relaxing, not really caring about my work. My friend, who was sitting next to me asked, "Are you ready for today's match, bro?"

"Who are we facing, dude?"

"The worst team this year."

"DSA, right?" I guessed. After class I was walking with my homie, Eddie, telling him how quickly I thought we were going to beat DSA.

"So fast that there's no point in them coming anyway," he added. Both of us started laughing. Once we got to the locker room, Coach Gordan came to tell us something, amazement on his face.

"Remember to go easy on them today," he said. While he started saying that he laughed, and my teammates started laughing, too. We were all ready in our small gym, practicing, waiting for DSA to come. When they got there, we were all tired from practicing, but still we had to finish quickly. When all my teammates went up, they won in seconds. It was my turn to win with a perfect record of 9-0 in the last match. I went up to the mat ready to win, but the kid I had to face was like me: short, strong, and muscular. When I started wrestling him I felt like I had become a professional because every wrestling move I did was right, I didn't even need my coach to tell me what to do. I decided to pin my opponent with a cool wrestling move that my coach taught me, and it worked in less than a minute. I was filled with happiness and joy; the other kid threw his head gear and started to tear up. It was funny but understandable; I would've done the same if I had lost.

"Great job, man. You almost had me there," I went up and told him. With a smile, he thanked me.

* * *

I was chilly in my last class, looking at the clock and hoping it would tick to the last second. Right when I was thinking I wanted to leave, the bell rang. I got out of Language Arts and walked down the halls with my friends, all of us wearing ties and suits. We looked fresh, and Victor said, “Yo, bro, you ready to kill Githens like we did last time?”

“You know it, bro!” I replied. Once we got to the activity bus, I watched all my teammates, knowing that if we won, we would become champs. I started pondering, *Are we going to beat Githens? Even though we beat them the first time, I hope we can beat them again.* While on the bus, I watched my homeboy sitting next to me, looking outside the window and listening to his Mexican music on his iPod. I wondered what was going on in his head.

When we arrived, we quickly put our Brogden wrestling sweats on and put up our hoods so that we could all look mean and tough. We walked around their school and headed to the weight room. Once we got there, still mean and tough with our hoods, they looked at us as if we were heading to battle.

Then we had to take our clothes off to weigh in. As I was getting weighed, I saw two girls in wrestling suits. *What the freak are they doing here, looking like they’re going to wrestle someone?* When all of us were done weighing in, we headed straight to the gym to warm up. Our coach called me and my friend Zack over to tell us something.

“You two, get ready to wrestle a girl.” Zack and I looked at each other. We might lose to a girl. I was so mad that I was going to cry, but my friend was mad at my coach, asking him why he had decided that it was okay. When the match started and we saw the girls in their tight wrestling suits, Zack and I changed our minds completely about what we had said earlier. Zack went up first, looking like someone about to take a final test. In seconds, he beat the little Asian girl. I hoped I could do the same. I was surprised when I saw the girl I had to wrestle. She was taller than me, and when I saw her closer, she was pretty—even cute. Of course, I didn’t tell her that. Soon, I realized that I was stronger than her. When I was trying to pin her, for some reason, she started to grab my private parts. I don’t know why, but she did. I think it was so that I could get up and keep wrestling her. Then I beat her.

* * *

It was 2:20 p.m., and the bell had rung. I was nervous about the tournament today, but as I saw my friends, I thought, *At least I'm not alone*. My teammates and I walked to the locker room, pumped up and ready to win some medals for Brogden. When we were done putting on our tight wrestling suits, we headed straight to the gym. When we walked in, we were shocked. It looked like a real tournament you would see on the Olympics. Everything was already set up; the trophies and medals were all laid out by weight class. There were two mats right beside each other so there could be two matches going on at the same time, which I thought was really cool. As we watched all the other middle schools come, we started preparing and getting serious. When all the teams were done weighing in, our coach said, "Do your best, and show them other schools what Brogden is made of!"

I watched the other coaches tell their wrestlers last minute words before the tournament started. I waited on the bleachers with my teammates, not talking to them because I was so nervous to wrestle in front of so many people. I watched other matches until I heard my name called. *I'm so pumped. I'm ready*. While walking onto the mat, fixing my headgear, I heard that I was wrestling a kid from Carrington. When he came to the mat and shook my hand with a tight grip, he told me that he was ready to beat me, but I had the same feeling. To make things even more stressful, my mom came and started filming me, thinking that I was going to win. We started wrestling for the first two minutes. He was beating me. My coach started screaming, "Come on, Jairo, remember what I told you before."

I could even hear my mom saying it in Spanish, "Come on son, win this for me." All I could think was *Win*. I heard my mom screaming, and looked at her wearing her favorite dress. Her pretty brown eyes just stared at me, hoping that I would win. When the kid tried to pick me up, I grabbed him on the mat until he was pinned. I was so happy that my mom took her time to be here instead of at work. It was the match, the *final match*, to see who was going to become the 112-pound champion. I went over to my mom so that she could wish me good luck, even though she was going to

be right beside my coach so she could film me like she did on my semi-final match.

It was my turn. I heard the fans go crazy, all my teammates told me good luck, and I began to wrestle. Somehow, in seconds, I beat him—I guess because I just slammed him down on the mat so hard that his head must have started to hurt. My coach and my mom were proud of me. They watched me get my medal and a plaque saying “Most Improved.”

taking down fear: tears, jeers, and internal fears

jonathan white

I LED THE TEAM INTO THE GYM AS CONFIDENTLY AS POSSIBLE. The chaos of hundreds of people hustling around and voices all speaking at once hit me instantly as I stepped through the door. I noticed the distinct smell I had come to hate over the past two seasons: a combination of sweat, dirty singlets, and mat-cleaning fluid. In the middle of the floor were two worn mats, one light and dark blue with cracks in it, the colors peeling, the other, a crimson red with a yellow circular center that looked uncomfortably stiff. I could pick out one or two teams that were warming up on them already, clumsily practicing double-leg take-downs on each other. A four-sided scoreboard hung in the center of the gym, its digital block letters displaying a zero-zero score with one minute on the clock, ready for the match to the begin. Above and below the score and time were '90s Coca-Cola logos, worn and discolored. I had begun to depend on the clock's consistency and honesty. I knew no matter how I thought I did, that clock and score would be the ultimate judge. It did not allow failure; it did not care about how hard you tried or how hard you practiced. My coach told us to wait on the side while he figured out where we were supposed to be.

I remembered about a year ago, in seventh grade, when I wrestled in the last tournament's championship match. I stepped up to the line, so nervous that my legs must have been shaking. I got into the championship match only because I had received a bye, a free pass to the championship round. I had reached out to shake his hand and received a firm and confident grasp from my opponent. The referee blew his whistle, and I was attacked instantly for inside control. I just tried to hold him back as well as I could, but I knew I wasn't going to last much longer. We fought further, but, thankfully, I was saved by the bell. I started off on the bottom in the second period, and from there, I was done. My opponent just ran me right over. I could feel my shoulders flattening and then

the referee blowing the whistle and slamming his hand down on the mat.

"Hey, Jon-Jon, could you help me stretch out?" Keir asked, waking me out of my jittery trance.

"Yeah, sure," I complied. "So, how do you think you're going to do?"

"I don't know, man, I need to see my bracket first, but I'm hoping for something better than last year."

"Yeah, me too, I just don't know about that Brogden kid. Apparently, I didn't get the first seed because I didn't wrestle enough matches."

Quickly, we were ushered into a back gym where several other teams waited to get weighed in and have their skin checked by the referee. My team claimed a corner and began stripping down to our boxers. From there, I surveyed my surroundings. I could see two teams lining up by weight class, looking like a staircase of heads. In socks and singlets, the teams stood there silently, edging up one by one onto the scale and then to the ref who tapped their nails to see if they were too long and then twirled his finger, signaling to lift your arms up and spin in a circle so he could check for any type of skin disease. The large, fluorescent lights glared overhead, reflecting off the disregarded hardwood floor. To the right, near the entrance, I noticed cracked glass next to a coach's office that somehow looked like it came from a punch rather than a basketball.

The coaches stood out from the rest of the crowd. They were all dressed in button-downs with sleeves rolled up and a tie. I looked back at my own team's coach, Chase, previously a high school wrestler who made it through college off of sports scholarships and now (we were pretty sure, although not certain) he was going to some sort of class so he could eventually get a teaching position. He stood around 5' 11", 260 pounds of muscle under a proud layer of fat. His skin was a shade of reddish-pale that would only sunburn and never tan. His hair, a worn blonde, was buzzed on top, and he had a soul patch on his chin. His brown eyes, with a serious tone, always looked you straight in the eye. His nose was crooked from being broken so often without giving it time to heal. His ears were lumpy from being roughed up on the mat. His typical attire was a pair of

old, worn tennis shoes, cheap jeans, and a wrestling sweatshirt, topped off with a DSA Bulldogs flat-brim hat.

"Aight y'all, after that team gets through with weighin' in, I want y'all to get lined up in your order and follow them up," Chase ordered. I jumped to front of line and then stepped up to the scale evenly so as not to register a higher weight. I was relieved when the scale showed in its digital red font 84 flat.

Chase caught back up with us after running over with the officials how the tournament was going to work.

"Ay, y'all need to get y'all's stuff and head into the bleachers and wait. Go!"

After we did that, he resumed in his rapid country accent, "Aight, so here's how it's gonna work: e'rybody, except for a couple of people, are goin' to wrestle in the first round right now. It's double elimination, which means you're all gonna wrestle at least twice, and we're startin' with the highest weight class and goin' down. Tykeem, that means you better start warming up right now. Go. And make sure you listen for when they call your name, whether you're in the hole or on the deck 'cause they ain't gon' repeat it."

I knew it would take a while, so I propped up my bag behind me and got comfortable. For the next thirty minutes or so, I relaxed and talked to my friends. Before long, they got down to the 108 weight class, meaning I was in the hole. I stood, joining some of the other wrestlers from DSA with some stretches and a few exercises that would get my blood flowing.

My first opponent came from Brogden, and he was the only one that beat me last season. I was understandably nervous that I had to wrestle him first, but I had heard that he had missed a lot of the season and was probably out of practice. This time, I was ready.

"On deck, Jonathan White," a voice boomed through the speakers. I stripped down to my singlet and jogged around the table side of the mat where I waited for the ninety-three match to end. Once it did, I checked into the table and trotted onto the mat. I strapped on the ankle band that is used in scoring the match and did my ritualistic three jumps, bringing my knees to my chest. The Brogden kid lined up with one foot.

The whistle blew. At first, I just stayed on defense, waiting to see if he was going to go for a shot. The referee threatened to give

us both a stalling penalty quicker than I expected, so I decided I might as well go for a single leg and see if I could circle around him for a take-down. He definitely hadn't improved since I last wrestled him, and I easily got the two take-down points. From there, I ran the regular half and got my back points, but before I could reposition myself for the pin, the whistle blew, signaling the end of the period. I had a comfortable lead and I had control, so I agreed with Chase when he decided to set me up on top for the beginning of the period. I positioned myself, then looked up to the ref, anticipating the second he would blow the whistle. I got the early jump, with one hand on his neck in a half nelson, the other on the inside of his thigh, and walked around his head until he rolled over onto his back. My opponent and I both knew that was it. I got a tight grip around his head, and put my chest on his and touched my forehead to the mat in perfect pinning position. I heard a loud smack on the mat and the whistle blew once again.

I got up triumphantly, shook my opponent's hand, and let my arm be raised in victory. My opponent stumbled back to his bench, choking down tears. *One down, two to go*, I noted to myself as I entered a swarm of congratulatory high-fives and pats on the back.

I headed back to the bleachers after passing off my head gear to the next wrestler. For the next hour and a half, I collected myself as I took sips from my water bottle and chatted with my friends about the matches in front of us, or who won and lost. Soon, I had to start warming up again for a war against a Carrington wrestler who I had beaten easily earlier that season. Later, I stepped up to the line—same as the first match—and gave my opponent a serious handshake. I decided to do my best to make quick work of this wrestler, so that I would be strong enough for the championship match. I tried immediately for inside control, which would hopefully get me into position for a take-down. His improvement in skill and aggression surprised me, but that just forced me to be more aggressive, too. I took advantage of a point where he had stuck out his leg a little too far; I snatched it up and prepared to trip him while he bounced on one leg. When I did that I made sure to throw my arm over his neck as I took him down. He smartly turned away from me and used my pressure to push himself up for an escape. I was surprised that he shook me off so easily but it only made me

more determined. I repeated the process, but this time I planned to let him up, then trip him back down onto his back again. Luckily, he fell for it. I could see that he looked a bit confused and a bit in shock from being taken down unexpectedly. It seemed like he didn't know exactly what to do because he just lay there, trying to squirm out of my grip unsuccessfully. As soon as the ref got down onto the floor to check that my opponent's shoulders were flat he slapped the mat and blew his whistle. I released my enemy and clambered up. As my wrestling adrenaline wore off, I let my arm be raised for the second time that day. I felt relieved to be over with that match but also anxious about the pressure waiting in the championship round. I jogged back the bench for a welcomed bit of rest.

Alright Jonathan, you've made it this far, but you've still got one left, I told myself. I got up from the bleachers a little while later to go join the rest of my team along the edge of a mat while they watched a match. I took a seat and stretched out cowardly behind my teammates while I scoped the gym looking for my next opponent. I found him sitting passively on the end of the Githens team bench, and I tried to shoot him my best tough glare, trying to convince myself more than him. Ten minutes until the beginning of the championship ceremonies. Before every match that year I remember getting those nervous butterflies in my stomach even though I knew I didn't need them; I had won every match but one, and most of the other eighty-five-pounders were in seventh grade, but today I couldn't help it. I migrated to a corner of the gym where I started to warm up by practicing my stance, doing some push-ups, and preparing myself mentally.

At the two minute warning I collected myself and trotted back over to the mat where they told us to line up by weight class on the opposite side from our opponent. I was aware of how the procedure went: the announcer would call my name, then my opponent's name, and then we would come to the center of the mat, shake hands, and then walk back to our positions in line. They started with the highest weight class and worked their way down. Once that was over with, I headed back to my bench while fifteen or so other matches went before me, a gift I gratefully received. I may have had another hour before my match would begin, but I never

let myself settle down. I bounced in place or took practice shots or dropped to the floor in a defensive sprawl every chance I got.

"On deck, Jonathan White from DSA," a voice over the loud speaker said.

That was my cue. I jogged up to the side of the mat and waited while I watched the ninety-three match. Before long I heard a hand slap the mat for the pin. I stepped up to the line, gave a firm handshake to my opponent, looking him dead in the eye, and stood ready for the whistle to blow. When it did, I tried immediately for hand control. This went on for a good twenty seconds until I found an opening for a shot and I took it. When I drove my knee into the mat between his feet, he immediately dropped to his stomach allowing me to see (and feel) how his defense had improved. He kept his hips steady, I found myself losing grip of his legs, and I felt the beginning of a BC coming on as the whistle blew, signaling the end of the first period.

I got up, still in good shape, and looked over toward Chase to get the sign for his choice of being on the bottom for the second period. I kneeled over the line and looked up to the ref. As soon as I saw the ref beginning to blow on his whistle I jumped as soon as possible but my opponent held tight. I was regaining strength for another escape attempt when I was relieved to hear the Githens coach screaming to let me up. This meant a point for me, giving me a one to zero lead. After that, the second period went the same way as the first. I was able to last through another minute and a half or so until I looked up to see the buzzer going off for the end of the period. I was breathing hard now, but I knew my opponent was breathing harder. I figured if I just put on an attack that held up another two minutes, I would have a win.

The whistle blew once more, and I started with a basic half and then worked myself to get into a shot once again. I glanced up at the scoreboard to see that there were ten seconds left in the third period. I just clenched up and held on to his leg tight and tried to wait out the last few moments until I got the win. I felt like I could have counted the milliseconds, time was going so slowly. I could hear half of the gym cheering and shouting at my opponent to get up while the other half cheered for me. I looked at the scoreboard one more time with my opponent's leg jocked up to my armpit as

the clock wound down to zero and the buzzer sounded. I got up, relieved and joyful, knowing I had just won the conference championship. I was out of breath after five minutes of straight wrestling, but I was excited. I got back on the line where it all started. After giving my opponent a brisk handshake I let my arm be raised triumphantly. Then I jogged over to the Githens coach and shook his hand. From there, I stumbled back over to where the rest of my team had watched my match.

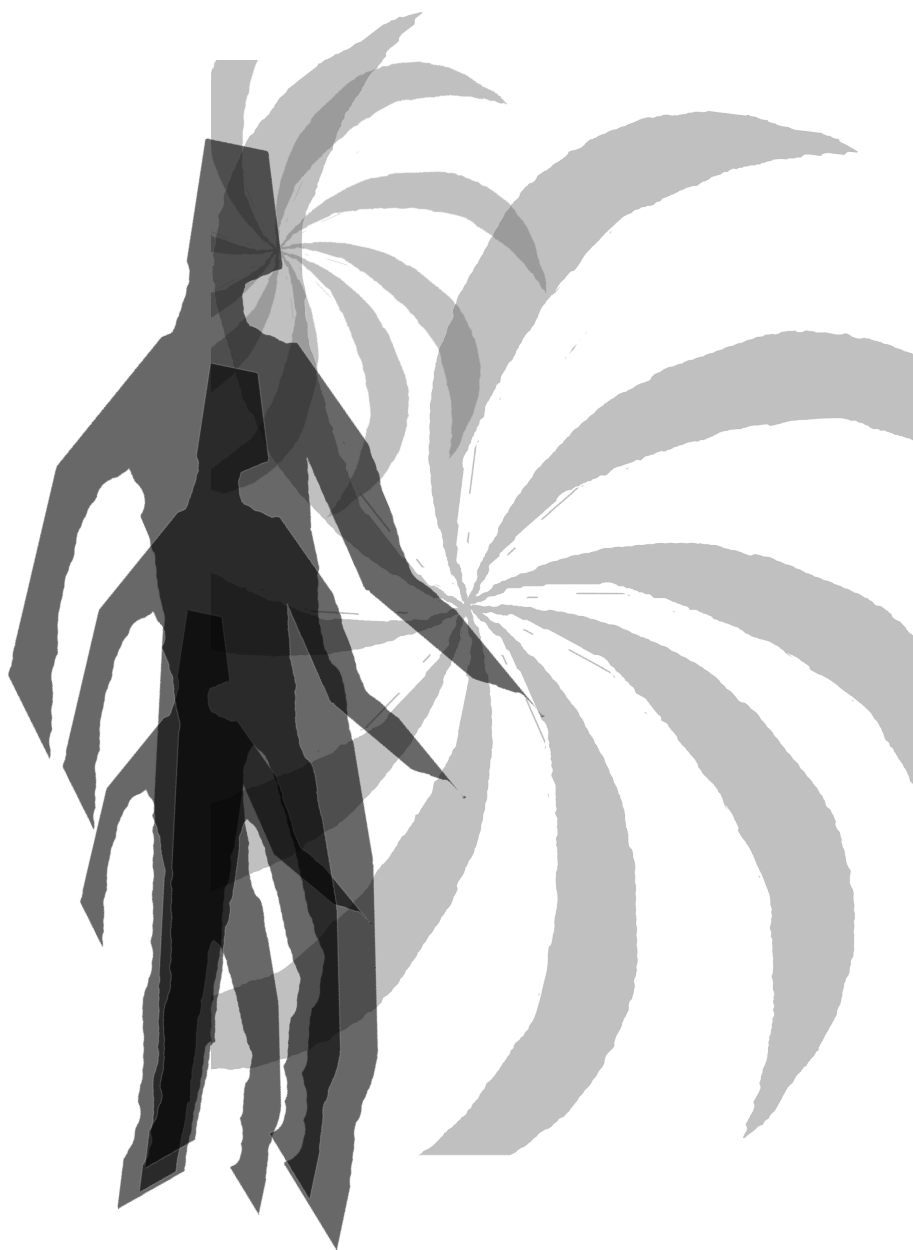
I took a seat on one of the mats next to a few of my close wrestling buddies as we heard the loud speaker voice announcing the finishers for each weight class. When they called my name for first place in the eighty-five weight class I stood up, and worked my way to the front where the announcer greeted me with a hand shake and a shiny gold-painted medal with an inaccurate image of two people wrestling on it. Engraved on it was "First Place - 85."

They guided me onto a low, flat stool that was elevated above the second and third place finishers on both sides of me. They handed me the eighty-five bracket with my name in the center, underlined and circled. A few camera flashes went off, and I went back to the DSA section where I showed off my medal as the announcers began listing off the placing of each team as a whole. They made it up to fourth place without having said DSA's name yet, giving us hope that we could at least finish in the top three. It seemed like it took forever, but it was a great feeling to not hear our team's name in the fourth or third place.

As expected, we ended up taking second place under Githens, who had more overall points from first and second place finishes individually. But we didn't care. We were overjoyed to know we did so well.

I strode out into the cool February air, trying my best to stretch out my hour of fame and the end of my middle school wrestling career. In the car on the way home, I reflected on what had happened. I had just beat up three people, and for what? A title and a medal? Is that as barbaric as it sounds? I suddenly felt guilty for what I had done. It was then that I decided that I couldn't return to the sport. I'm not meant to be a fighter.

freshman versus hormones



no longer a kid

kimberly orellana



I DRAGGED MY FEET ACROSS THE CARPET, appreciating that they were finally free from the restraints of my tight black sneakers. I let out a long puff of air as I dropped and sank into the cool leathery couch. As I lay there, I took a deep breath and slowly let it out as I reminisced on the week that had finally come to an end. It was a rough week at school. Not because of any EOG testing or homework or anything of the sort. I was going through the phase in every young one's life when they have to leave the fun and games of elementary for a higher place of learning. For a place where the walls don't hold rainbows, where the hallways are never-ending, where the cafeteria holds the worst food, and where a simple accidental bump of the shoulders because of the cramped hallways could start a pointless "Oh no you didn't!" fight. Sounds beautiful, right? The "oh so heavenly and divine" place I am referring to is middle school.

I was sitting at my cold desk with my friend beside me and we were chatting away like any kid does when the teacher is out of the room. The exact conversation doesn't come to mind, but I know our topic wasn't quite stimulating. I looked down and then up at her face again; the sight of forty-three muscles working themselves into a disappointed frown emerged on her face, and I'm pretty sure she could see the same on mine. My best friend frowned because of me.

Before I even started kindergarten, my aunt and uncle (my dad's brother and his wife) who lived in an apartment complex babysat my brother, sister, and me. Directly beneath the room my uncle lived in is where my friend lived. Luckily, we both ended up going to the same elementary school, were in the same kindergarten class, and were around each other a ridiculous amount of time day by day for the past six years.

Here we were now, basically saying goodbye as if one of us were going to die. In a way I guess that feeling was going in the right direction. I wasn't dying and neither was she, but the fact of this sudden change in plans would affect our friendship so bad we could possibly end up being strangers.

I was on the bus on my way home, and I looked out the window just to see the beautiful motion picture of Earth outside the window, to clear my head and slip into the blissful serenity I usually experience when the long day is finished. Sadly, the only thing I could do was think of how it's going to be once I leave this school. I wasn't bummed out about all the work that middle school would be, the number classes, or even the bullies. I was going to go to Durham School of the Arts, a school I had never heard of and the school that only four people I knew were going to. Luckily, three of them were friends. At least I'd have somebody to keep me company and be able to talk to. That is, if I got into the school. Since DSA worked on a lottery, there was a chance I wouldn't get in, but even with that hope, I still looked at the darker side of things. I was going to be separated from not only my best friends but all of the people that have surrounded me for most of my life. Classmates, all of my other friends, and, heck, I was even going to miss the staff, all of my old teachers from my main classes and electives.

It was hard for me to think of leaving people, and I already felt something weird happening. I couldn't even enjoy recess! All I did the whole time was just sit on the swing and hope I would not get into the school. I was so focused and saddened about possibly having to go to DSA that I forgot to push myself so I could sway on the swing. But at this point, I took the whole playground for granted anyway. I wouldn't go and play soccer with the guys, I wouldn't play on the monkey bars, or even talk to anybody. All of the thinking and sitting still under the powerful sun caused me to become exhausted and severely irritated for the lack of energy. I resented the feeling of a having a long, tiresome day, and the moment I could sink into my cool leathery living room couch was pure heaven.



It was summertime now, and the enormous sun brightly shined day by day, the ice cream truck cleaned me out of my parents' mon-

ey, and the scent of barbecues filled the street. I was enjoying every millisecond of the summer, to its last blissful drop.

It was about mid-July, and a neutral day to me. I didn't expect anything special to happen as I calmly walked down my driveway, stopped, looked from left to right, and crossed the street toward the mailbox. I mischievously browsed through the mail, just expecting nothing but my mother and father's names to be printed on the envelopes, and suddenly I saw what seemed to be the blue outline of a bulldog and my name under it. I jetted toward my front door while keeping a firm grip on the mail in my hand. I flew through the door and quickly turned to hand my dad the mail . . . well, most of the mail.

I slid the envelope under my leg as I took a seat to try and catch my breath. As I did, I kept debating in my head whether I should open it or give it to my dad to open. Even though I knew for a fact that my dad was not a psychic, I kept fearing that at any moment he would jolt up from the couch and exclaim that the card from DSA was missing. Mentally, I confirmed that I was too jumpy to open the card, not to mention take the news that was inside, so like a ninja, I tossed the DSA envelope right next to my dad's feet and told him that he had dropped a card. Knowing how I felt about going to a different school than most of my friends, my dad picked up the envelope and waved it around with a mocking grin. Seeing that I was not amused at his sense of humor, he sat and started to tear the envelope open. Surprisingly without even reading a word off of the letter, he handed the note to me. Skipping through all of the introduction and such, I saw the word congratulations, and I couldn't take it. I let go of the piece of paper and jogged to the bathroom.

Whenever there is a time I get emotional or mad, I just lock myself in the bathroom and sit on the sink counter because the bathroom is as private as a room can get. If there is a time when I just need to let myself go, I can just turn the air on to cover my sobs. All I could do then was be very angry with my dad for even signing me up for the school lottery without even asking me about it in the first place. I would just have to wait.



I never wanted this dreadful hour to come. I honestly did not want to be sitting on my black couch just waiting for what was coming. Suddenly, I heard a very familiar clang at the door as if something hit the metal doorknob. I checked the TV, hoping it wasn't, but it was . . . it was time. The door still rattled as I stared in anticipation for my dad to open the door and stomp his feet first on the door mat outside, next on the little door step, and then the door mat inside to make sure as many little dirt and dry cement particles stay off of my mother's newly cleaned floors. I said my greeting, and he softly replied back.

I could tell today was an especially tough day. From the looks of it, my dad didn't shave this morning. His new yellow boots were now tan from the water. His boots were soaked and worn, his smooth navy bottoms splattered with hundreds of almost microscopic specks of dry cement. The sewn-on name tag on his blue and white striped button-down shirt had come loose, and the stitching around his sleeves had also come undone. His face was a dark shade of red, yet still illuminated.

I prayed it wasn't the day but sadly yes, it was. August of 2008. I dreadfully slipped on my sneakers, trying to take the most time possible, and then grabbed my sixth grade class schedule. As I walked through the doorway, down the steps, and down the short driveway toward the car, I didn't lift my head once. The least my dad could do for me was to feel guilty for what he was doing to his daughter: stripping her from the people she has been around for most of her life without even letting her have a say.

Once I settled into the passenger seat, I watched as my dad placed the key into the ignition. Just as he was about to turn it towards the right, I whipped my head away and shut my eyes to try and block out the rumbling engine that proved the car was on. All I wanted to do was stay home. The car ride to the enormous college-like school was quiet, way too quiet. I didn't have my iPod with me, and my dad didn't even play his loud Spanish music that usually would have annoyed me. I needed something to break the tension in the car. Eventually, the overwhelming silence and awkwardness in the car caused my mind to drift lightly into the past, the happier past.



I wasn't much different back then. I was shorter and desperately needed glasses, but hated my appearance with them on. An ear to ear smile on my face was as common as the morning sun rising into the sky. I was in love with the new playground that was constructed the previous year, when I was a fourth grader. I didn't love it because of the bright colors that decorated the objects of play; I loved it because of all the ideas that came about on the playground, whether a simple class assignment idea or a brand new, unofficial game. I remember when I'd get to the playground at recess, it would be a mental debate on whether my time would be spent soaring forward and back on the swings or taking on the vigorous monkey bars. I had chosen the "dangers" of the monkey bars. I hung from the bright yellow metal bar and proceeded to the next, then the next, and then the next until there were no more. My skinny arms gave in to gravity, and, as my dusty black sneakers hit the ground, a running figure came into my peripheral vision at full speed. I felt a slap on the arm and heard "Tag!" The chase was on.



As my mind started to strut back into reality, I could still see my younger, ten-year-old self run out of the frame. As the happy image abruptly ended, I flinched forward, trying to save the memory, but sadly it couldn't be done. Disappointed, I settled back into my seat with tears threatening to drop, to highlight the curves on my cheeks and then plummet onto my white T-shirt. Trying to be tough and not wanting to cry in the car in front of my dad, I fought back the moisture in my eyes. Not being able to completely make them go away, I settled for watery eyes, hoping I wouldn't shed a drop.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to go to a school I'd never heard of. Maybe the high schoolers would be nice to my little sixth grade self. And maybe I could make new friends. No problem. As my dad made his way into the DSA parking lot, I placed a secure grip on my seat belt and stared at the enormous school. I turned my head in my dad's direction, and he looked back at me, but uttered nothing. I couldn't even hear him breathe, but I knew what he was trying to share with me. This will be fine, I will be fine.

middle school is in the past

tyler perry

how I met my bff

AS I WALKED INTO FIRST PERIOD SCIENCE, eyes scrutinized me from every angle. I felt like an ice cube in the sun. This being the first day, I was really nervous. Not that you could tell because I kept it hidden on the inside. Once that class was over, it was time to go to math. That was where I first met her. She sat across from me at my table.

When class started our teacher told us a little about himself. Then he told us that we were going to get to know each other, too. We started talking. I told her my name was Tyler and she told me her name was Kimberly. She had light brown hair, big brown eyes and a nice, light complexion. She told me her favorite snack was Hot Cheetos, which happened to be my favorite snack, too. When class was over we realized that we had the same class next, so we walked there together. While we walked, she invited me to eat lunch with her and her friend, Valeria. I said yes.

When I got to lunch, I searched for Kimberly. I spotted her and sat beside her. I started to eat my lunch, but soon spit it out. The catfish nuggets I was eating were squishy, slimy, and gross. I never wanted to taste anything like that again. So, Kimberly and I talked and talked about things like our favorite singers, shows, and what we liked to do. Lunch was over suddenly, but Kimberly and I turned out to be friends for a very long time.

the day I turned thirteen

To me, turning thirteen was like the moment a baby bird flies away from the nest into the world, to the clouds all by itself. I went to talk to my mom to see what she had planned for my birthday.

She said she was going to get a cake, and I could probably hang out with my friends or something and eat at any restaurant I wanted. I said, “Okay,” even though deep inside I knew that that was boring. I asked her why I couldn’t have a party, and she said that I could have a sweet sixteen party when I turned sixteen.

Come on, I thought. *That’s like a million years away!* So I just dealt with the fact I would have to wait three years. All I did the rest of the day was call my friends and ask them if they wanted to hang out at the mall tomorrow, and then I watched TV. As the day ended, I looked forward to tomorrow. I was so happy I couldn’t sleep.

Finally, May 21st had arrived. I was actually thirteen. I jumped out of bed joyfully, ready for the relaxing day I was going to celebrate.

My mom wished me a happy birthday first, then my sister (a fraternal twin, so it was her birthday, too), and, lastly, my brother. We both said thank you. Then my mom said she had to leave to go get the cake. She said that once she got back, my sister and I could go to the mall with our friends. We had invited seven of our closest friends, but only one person showed up. We didn’t care, we still had fun. We tried on clothes, tested makeup in Sephora, and had some tasty smoothies.

After our friend left, it was time to go out to eat. My sister and I decided to eat at Friday’s and I had a delicious crab and shrimp pasta. When I ate it, I felt like I was in heaven. We got back to our house, and it was time to do the cake. It read, “Happy Thirteenth Birthday Taylor and Tyler.” We lit the candles on the cake, made our wishes, and blew out the flames. As we were eating the cake, I started to realize I didn’t care about having a big party and everything, as long as I had my family to share it with.

my first cell phone

I had butterflies in my stomach. I had never ridden on a train before. I was heading back to North Carolina with my sister and my dad. Over the summer, my sister and I had stayed with our dad for a week, but it was time to come back. Our dad was joining us on the trip so he could spend a little more time with us and, because

we had never ridden a train, he didn't want us riding alone. While we were on the train I explained to my dad how I wouldn't really be able to call him to talk that much. He promised to get us cell phones so that we could. "Yeah, whatever," I said. I thought he was kidding.

Once we got off, and I saw my mom waiting to pick us up, I hugged her because I missed her so much. We got in the car and I told my mom that dad said he would get us cell phones. My mom just said okay because she didn't think he would actually buy them.

"Well, how about today?" he asked.

"Really, you would buy them cell phones today?"

"Yes." He told my mom that we could even go get them right then. All of a sudden I felt so happy on the inside. I was going to get a cell phone! So when we got to the phone store, he actually bought us cell phones and even upgraded his phone to a new one.

I wasn't as happy as I expected I would be, though, because it was a flip phone rather than a touchscreen. He told us we were too young to have touchscreen phones. We were sad but still grateful that we even had cell phones.

I immediately began putting family numbers and some of my friends' numbers in my new phone. I then started calling and emailing my friends to tell them that I finally had a cell phone.

eighth grade graduation

I would be officially done with middle school. It was just twenty-four hours away. Today, I would be shopping for the perfect graduation dress. I could already tell it was going to be a long day. We started at Ross. They had a few cute dresses, but none of them were cute enough. Next, we went to T.J. Maxx, where I almost got a dress, but changed my mind. Then, we decided we would go to just one more store: Dot's. There, my sister and I found a few dresses and went to try them on.

I tried on this black dress with buttons on both sides and a mini jacket connected to it. When I looked at it in the mirror I stood frozen as if I were a block of ice. I had found the perfect dress. I showed my mom, and she thought it was pretty, too. Only some-

thing was wrong . . . My sister had tried on the same dress! I told her I was wearing it to graduation, but she argued that it looked better on her. Eventually, I caved. I hated like dressing like twins.

That night I couldn't sleep. I was so excited to finally graduate and see my friends one last time before summer break. The next day at 8:30 a.m., I was only thirty minutes away from graduating. I walked up the steps to where everyone was waiting to go into the auditorium. As I walked down the aisle, I felt all eyes on me. I took my seat, and started to think about all the memories from middle school. I thought about the time my friend jumped on a table and broke it, all the times me and my best friends fought and made up, and all the relationships I'd had.

My name was called out: "Tyler Perry." I walked onto the stage, grabbed my certificate, and my teacher gave me this little plastic duck with a graduation cap on it.

I did it! Middle school was in the past.

the day I got drunk

luis dimas

It was New Year's Eve when families got together to celebrate and drink. I was setting up chairs and tables for the party that we were going to have. While I was setting up the chairs, my cousins and a friend named King Sharrpi arrived out of nowhere.

"What up nigga? Watcha doin', cuz?" he asked.

"*Nada*, fool. *No más* setting the party, foo' y tú?" I responded back.

"*Orale*,¹ fool. You want me to help you? I got nothing to do," he told me.

"*Orale pues*² foo'. I heard you tryin' to get wit my ex, cuz!" I told him with excitement.

"Nah, foo, I don't have to, foo. 'Cause I already did, *puto*!"³ he said, laughing.

"Nigga, you trippin', cuz. *Orale* then cuz don't be saying *nada* when I be with your girl hugging and kissing, in front of you y *tambien si me la qollo, pendejo*!"⁴ I said, mad as hell.

He said, "*No mames guey. No mas estoy jugando*,"⁵ nigga, don't be tripping, *vato*.⁶ Anyways *tu bella*⁷ says she loves you. She won't do that to you, fool. You know how much *te quiere*,⁸ but I don't know about chu fool." Damn, I couldn't believe he said that to me. He knew how much I loved my *vieja*.⁹ I knew I had been a bitch, but I had changed a lot. I hadn't played a girl in a long time.

It took us a while to set up the chairs and tables. Once we were done, my cousin came and started talking about how we were going to have a "gangsta-ass time" like always, but this time it involved

1 Cool
2 Cool then
3 asshole
4 and also if I fuck her, asshole
5 Don't fuck with me, dude. I'm only playing.
6 dude
7 your beauty
8 she cares
9 woman

alcohol. I wanted to say we shouldn't because I knew that we were going to get fucked up as hell.

"Aye, nigga, so is we or what?" my cousin, Ranger, asked.

"A *huevos* way,"¹⁰ I told him all weird, like if I didn't know what to say, like when you say something that means something else. Yeah, just like that. After we were done saying what we had to say, we turned our heads to Sharrpi.

"What are y'all looking at? I know I look good but, damn, not that good," he said to us, as if we were stupid or something.

"Nothing, fool, we just wondering if you going to drink, 'cause we still remember the time you said that you was going to skip with us and go drink," Ranger told him with a straight voice.

"Ma-a-an, that was last time. This time I am going to go. Word on king," Sharrpi said, as if he had mad rank.

"*Orale* then, *vato*. If you back out then that's a violation, *homie-to*.¹¹ That means you getting your ass beat by all of us foo's for, like, thirty seconds 'cause you said 'word on king', fool, so get straight, cuz," I told him with a serious face. Then we made our mysterious plan. Man, it was genius. I mean, like, for real, we were goin' to get drunk and not remember anything at all.

We were thinking about playing soccer, until, out of nowhere, my dad came in with boxes of beer and alcohol. Once we saw the boxes, our eyes popped out, as if we were cartoon characters.

"Aye, man, you tryin' to go now and get the water, Luigi?" my cousin Ranger asked me in code. It was like were doing a mission.

"Nah, man, we got to get the water later at night. That's when the people come and they be in and out my crib, cuz," I told him, confident in what I was saying. After that, we went to my cousin's crib right down the street from where I live. It took almost an hour and a half for the people that were invited to get there, but once they did, the music started, and people were dancing, drinking, and eating food. It was a good time to get wasted.

"Aye, cuz, it's time to get wasted, foo'. Y'all ready?" I told my *amigos*.

"You already know, cuz," Ranger told me.

10 Fuck, yeah.

11 bro; a mix of homie and vato

*“Chores, tu primo, ya sabes homieto,”*¹² Sharppi told me in Spanish.

As we were going in my house my dad saw us and gave me “the look,” the look that says, ‘What are you going to do this time?’

On our way to the room where the beer and alcohol was supposed to be, my cousin Rafa came and told us that my dad knew about what we where going to do. Rafa offered us some help. He said to us, “If y’all wanted some damn beer, y’all should have told me. I would have got it for y’all, but now your dad is going to be on y’all the whole night. But I gotch’all. Y’all just need to wait a little so I can get the stuff for ya.” We waited for almost an hour before he came out with half a bottle of alcohol for us to drink. I think he drank the other half.

“Aye, man this is all y’all need to get drunk. *Vatos orale*. I’ll see y’all later. I’m going to sleep, *homietos*,” Rafa told us. The only thing I thought that minute was, *Man, we are goin’ to get so wasted*.

12 Chores (Ranger’s pet name), your cousin, knows what to do, bro.

remembrance and affection

john trollingwood

I.

I WALKED UP THE SLIPPERY BRICK STEPS; the glimmering coat of ice gave them an intriguing sheen. I breathed out a hard, visible breath, watching as the vapor disappeared in the air. I gracefully opened the large, wooden door and entered the warm bliss of the house. The bright lights were stark contrasts to the darkness outside, save for a few lights covering the exterior. Clutched in my hand was a cold soda, which did not help the situation whatsoever. It felt like someone was going to have to amputate my hand from frostbite. I walked through the main foyer, and the whole house had a cozy feeling. It was almost as if, wherever I went, I was with family. As I walked into the main room, I spotted a large group of people huddled around a television. On it, they were playing an intense match of some sort of fighting game. I walked over, and waited to have a go at the game.

It wasn't long until I did, and it was a group game of free-for-all, where the object was to knock out, or knock off, the opponents. After a fierce game, I claimed victory. My nine-year-old self felt great satisfaction at this, and I went on to do other things. I walked into the kitchen, where the appetizing aroma of food could be detected as I got closer to the area. Inside was a cornucopia of food, all being prepared for dinner.

"Dinner's not ready yet, John," my mother noted as she cooked.

"How much longer?" I asked directly.

"Not much. Go play with your cousins for a while."

With that, I walked into the main family room, and over to the towering Christmas tree. I looked up, admiring the ornaments, most of which were from my relatives' childhood, which was alien to me. Pictures adorned the tree, faded and torn, as if to represent how the memories must feel to them. I looked down, and the real plunder

greeted me. I admired piles of presents, all addressed to different people. I scrounged through the pile looking for any assigned to me. Suddenly, I lifted a tag off of a small box, and read it:

From: Uncle Bob

To: Joh—

“John! Dinner’s ready!” my mom called from the entrance of the room. I abandoned my search and walked into the dining room, where everyone was awaiting the Christmas dinner with great anticipation. As the food arrived, people began to dig in. Everyone talked merrily, enjoying the great food and family. As everyone began to finish, people slowly left to go sleep off the full, boisterous meal they had just enjoyed. I left soon after talking to my older cousins Kyle and Caroline and went to bed.

Once there, my mind raced about the next day. What was I going to get? This question was stuck in my mind. But I was also excited simply because of the buildup for the day. We had been here for a week, and this was the climax of the whole trip. After thinking for a few minutes, the day started to wear on me, and I drifted off to sleep, my head filled with pleasant dreams, no doubt about the coming morning. As I awoke, I heard commotion downstairs.

Jumping out of bed, I quickly got ready and ventured downstairs. Everyone was cheerful, slowly collecting towards the Christmas tree. After a brief hiatus, everyone began to open their presents. I happily ripped the paper apart as I unveiled my gifts. Small gifts that showed different family members’ appreciation were exchanged and opened.

This is the first childhood moment with my extended family that I can recall, and it always brings back memories of the warm cozy house, and the bitter Virginia winter. After New Year’s, we would always go back home. We’ve done this ever since, except the next year; we went to a magnificent somewhere that I didn’t quite understand instead.

II.

I was in another world; I felt like an orphan turned millionaire. I must have been around ten at the time, and I had no idea we were going to visit a very grand and famous place.

I grew anxious sitting in the seat of my aunt's van. The ride was fairly long, and the idea of a Christmas brunch sounded excellent. Suddenly, snapping to reality, the vehicle slowed to a stop, and the sound of everyone's hurried shuffle to escape the van was unmistakable. As I climbed out, I caught sight of the giant building in the distance. At first glance, it appeared to be some kind of grand mansion.

I hurriedly walked with my other cousins and parents, and we soon reached a door. Someone opened it, and we all piled inside the restaurant. It was well-furnished, and held rich maroon carpet and wood-paneled walls. After a quick search around, I spotted the table where we were going to be sitting, a large rectangular table that could easily seat twelve people. I sat down and talked to my cousins sitting next to me as we waited to order our food.

I was completely confused. I had no idea where we were or where we were going. I was just at my cousin's house, where we had been staying for a few days. Everyone else seemed very humble and appreciative, to go to this "country club." I had just gone along, not really realizing what we were doing.

Soon, our food had arrived, which pleased us greatly. Everyone was happy, rejoicing in togetherness and the fortune of our family to be sitting here at this place eating brunch. A look out the window gave me a view of the beautiful northern Virginia forest. After we were done, our stomachs full, and our wallets the opposite, we exited the restaurant, and entered the main area of the club. As we walked down the wide hallways, I was mystified by the short maroon carpet, and the huge towering trophy cases. I walked alongside my cousins, who seemed to admire the place as much as I did, but unlike me, actually seemed to understand where we were.

III.

Our car gave a disastrous lurch as the we swung around the windy road. We were quite literally on the edge of our seats as we crossed the majestic yet terrifying Blue Ridge Parkway. Set high in the mountains of western North Carolina, the view was hard to beat. I stuck my head out the window and felt the cold crisp mountain air surround me. As we hit an overlook, I saw the pull

off for cars and several people taking pictures of the vista ahead. As we hit the bend, the view was startlingly beautiful. It seemed I could see for thirty miles or so. Countless mountains entered my view, some dotted with signs of civilization, and others completely covered in natural wood. The view had me stopped for a second, simply taking in the sight, but soon we turned, and it was cut off by trees.

After a laborious drive on the Blue Ridge, we were finally getting close to our prize. We were near a small town when, suddenly, we saw it.

Huddled behind trees and forests, and on a gravel driveway, we spotted the area we would be staying at for the next week. As we pulled in, a very cozy house came in our view.

The walls were lined with comfortable-looking lazy boy recliners. It was quite small, and the fit would be tight for everyone who was staying here. My mother, my sister, two of my aunts, two of my cousins, and I would all be staying in this tiny mountain retreat. Of course, my cousin and I would get a couch. There was also a one-room guest house near the water. In fact, that was the main feature of the house. It featured a “swimming hole,” the local name for spots on the country rivers where it was deep enough to swim. The one here was a secluded pool about four feet deep, fairly small, with a small rock that fed into it. You could slide down into it, and it had a nice path from the house.

This was the high point of the house for us. After waiting for several hours, my cousins and my aunt Trisha arrived, and there was a large greeting accompanied by a tour of the house. Rather quickly after that, we got dressed and were ready to check out the water, but there was overcast weather, cooled further by the covering of tall trees. As we finally reached the pool, there started to be some hesitation among us. I walked up to the tip of the water, and I dipped my foot in the water. I recoiled quickly, shocked by the freezing temperature.

I was not used to this water at all yet, but soon we would all grow accustomed to it. After we got settled, we traveled around the surrounding area and went to places that we would return to many times. This trip was the start of a tradition, for we have ventured here every summer since. Memories of this area—memories that I

hold dear but, to most, would seem normal or even monotonous—fill my mind: the annual game of Monopoly, the almost daily trips to Hemlocks, and the old favorite mandatory trip to Walmart, the only link to civilization as we knew it.

IV.

I walked through my aunt's house, looking at the endless cycle of cooking, a common theme at our family get-togethers. It was quite cramped compared to usual, mainly due to this house being much smaller than where we usually accumulated.

I felt the warmth of the inside and was glad not be outside in the bitter D.C. cold. When I saw the Christmas tree, I noticed the small amount of presents under it. In fact, I realized that having this here was much more of a symbol, and I recalled the first Christmas I had spent in Virginia and how different this environment was. This was not the huge family gathering in a large snowy house that fit everyone; it was a just a few family members in a cozy urban home.

I reached the stairs and took a quick glance to my right, spotting the mystery of this house. It was the forbidden fruit: the elevator. We weren't allowed to use it, but only to stare with jealousy at its mysterious features.

I walked up onto the carpeted steps and into the room where my cousin Kyle was sitting. "What's up?" I asked.

"Not much. I think we're going on a walk soon, though," he answered.

With that, we talked about something inconsequential, and when we were ready, we walked outside and into the bitter cold. The snow was piled high on the embankments, and the sidewalk was slightly slick. I looked downwards at the beautiful sight of downtown Georgetown. It was set on a hill, with a gently sloping road lined with older houses, which I assumed weren't exactly cheap real estate. We walked up the dark street, and the early night sky cast a soft light on the pavement. Soon, we reached a path leading up to a stone area where we could sit, and we relaxed there and talked over the moonlight.

I remember this fond memory very well; something about the simplicity and environment of the area just brings back feelings of nostalgia. Everything about this trip from the mysterious elevator to the cold night makes me think of this as one of my last memories I can really recall as a fond childhood recollection.

V.

“Three, two,” the TV announced, “one!”

Everyone jumped up, and we saw the massive sphere close over Times Square. There were thousands of streamers dropping over the rowdy crowd like police controlling rioters. Everyone jumped out of their seat, and talked feverishly about the new year. I honestly didn’t care too much about it, but the energy in the room led me to simply enjoy the moment. After things cooled down, I walked over to my cousins, who were also on the vacation. “We should go into the ocean,” my sister suggested.

“That’d be pretty insane . . . I like it,” I commented.

With that, we decided to head out. I walked out on the back deck, and the cool coastal night air gave my skin goosebumps as I peered out into the serene view of the distant, black, mysterious ocean. We reached the bottom level, and walked out of the underside of the beach house, which was on stilts to protect against an unexpectedly high tide. We reached the long wooden walkway to the beach access, and the splintery wood was rough on my bare feet.

As we reached the end, we stepped off the walkway and onto the surprisingly cool sand. Now, ready to jump in, the freezing wind whipped at my exposed body with no sand dunes to block its power. We all started to run toward the ocean, my feet digging into the sand, my run slowing to a dysfunctional shamble. As we reached the water, the brim bit at my feet like a cold burn, but we didn’t stop. I got about knee deep in the water, and soon we completely entered it. I was freezing, but something about this seemed almost spiritual: a baptism by cold water. In that moment, I felt absolutely connected with myself. I realized something. At any given time, I could do whatever I wanted. I could run out and jump into the ocean on New Year’s at 12:30 in the morning. I was in control of my own destiny.

With this realization, we all got out, laughing, and made a run for the house. The cold breeze now was multiplied as we were soaked with freezing water. *Why didn't I bring a towel?* I thought as I crossed the sand like it was a virtual minefield, careful not to trip. As we made it back inside, we were all happy to be in the warmth, but not one of us had any regrets.

* * *

All of these memories were disconnected, but yet connected by the very fabric of their existence. Your childhood and family experiences in many ways govern how you view your life as a whole. If you cannot recognize the past, then you are avoiding a part of yourself. At first, I had trouble thinking of things to write about for this memoir, but after thinking about it, I realized just how many great experiences I had and how I should appreciate what I have, as some are not fortunate to even have a loving family like I do. These memorable, nostalgic experiences are something that I should not take for granted, and I should look back on my now-waning childhood with remembrance and affection.

frosty paradise

emerson short

1. a not-so-rude awakening

AS I LAY IN A JUMBLE OF SHEETS, HALF ASLEEP, my dad's gruff voice prodded into my ears.

"Emerson, get up. Come on, get up."

"Nu-uh," I groaned, burying my face into the bed. "I duhn wannah." With nine hours of inactivity heavy upon me, my brain didn't fully form the words before my tongue shoved them out of my mouth. My body fought both voluntarily and involuntarily against waking up. As I moved my arms and hands to the pillow and pulled it over my ears, I relaxed and fell into the warm blackness. I sighed comfortably and wrapped the blankets around me like a cocoon, enveloping myself in warm insulation. I was seconds away from drifting off when a loud noise shot into my ears and rattled my brain.

"E-m-e-r-s-o-n." He spelled out my name, emphasizing each letter. "Get. Up. Now." He wasn't yelling, just speaking much slower, louder, and deliberately, like he was talking to a two-year-old. I was only four years old, but I still had a sense of comprehension, except, of course, when I was drunk on sleep.

"Emerson, if you don't get up, you're going to miss the fun."

Fun? What is he talking about? I thought. I was then about half-asleep and was able to catch something in his voice that I hadn't noticed before. *Is he . . . excited?* I wondered. I could hear some anticipation in his tone, and I knew that must mean something. "What?" I said, sitting up. "What is it? What happened? What did I miss?"

"Take a look out the window and you'll see."

"Huh? The window. . . ?" By now, curiosity had overcome my desire to sleep, so I crawled to the end of the bed and opened the blinds. Instantly, I jumped off the bed and landed on the floor. I was barely standing up when I started to run down the hall while struggling to regain my balance.

"Snow!" I shrieked, causing an echo in the narrow corridor. I fell and hit my face on the floor but quickly got back up, recollecting myself. A dull thud resonated both down the hall and in my skull, but I could have cared less. I skidded into the family room and began tearing apart all the piles of clothing I could find, desperately searching for some garments that would be adequate for the cold and wet.

"Jesus, Emerson, are you all right?" Mom asked from the couch, concerned. "It sounded like you just gave yourself a concussion in there."

"I can worry about that later! Where are some clothes?" I asked as I continued to dash around the room in my frantic search.

Mom got up and went over to the closet. "Here, I'll find some for you," she offered as she began leafing through some jackets. I sat down on the couch and tried with all my being to stop the spasms that involuntarily racked my body. *Good lord!* I thought. *It looked like there was six feet of snow outside!* And while I knew it wasn't that much, it would sure be the deepest snow I've ever been in. Mom returned with several layers of clothes, and I began to get dressed as my mind raced with anticipation.

2. one small step for man . . .

After I jammed my feet into boots and threw the laces together, I got up so fast that I nearly tripped and fell into a wall. I sprinted to the door, screeched to a stop before my nose and the doorknob got to know each other too well, and tore it open, feeling the sudden rush of cold air blast into my face.

"Slow down there, bucko!" Dad called from behind me. "You're going to kill yourself before you even get outside!"

"I don't care!" I yelled to no one in particular. I continued in my frenzy to escape the house and tripped my way crazily down the porch steps in excitement. A white expanse of wonder was splayed out in front of me, and I planted a single foot into it. I marveled at the snow's softness; it was like a pillow full of feathers cushioning my leg.

Wait a minute, I thought. *My leg?* I looked down and noticed that I had failed to realize that I had kept going after my initial

step, and now I was on a collision course. *Oh crap.* I face-planted into the snow with a little *wumph*. I lay parallel to the ground, like a plank in snow as wet as a public restroom. *Oof*, I thought. *Didn't mean to do that.* I poked my head up, and couldn't find the rest of me. *Where are my limbs?* I thought frantically. I quickly pulled myself up and then saw that the snow reached up above my knees, at least a foot and a half deep. I felt a grin spread across my face until it stretched my lips, and then wild, ecstatic laughter erupted from my lungs.

"Woo!" I yelled as I leaped and dove back into the embracing cold. I kept jumping around like a maniac as Dad came out onto the porch.

"I guess there's no waiting with you," he said, shaking his head. "I might as well go to the garage and get the sled." He turned and walked back inside, leaving me in my frosty paradise.

3. the arctic pack

The aging sled came creeping around the corner, sliding across the frozen gravel while my dad led it like an old, tentative dog. The rusty rails scraped against the ice, and the numerous scratches across both the wood and metal stood out on its frail frame. This same sled had carried my dad down many hills when he was my age, and now it was returning to relive its glory days. The waterproofing synthetic on the wood still gleamed in the sun, as if the old thing was saying, 'I'm ready for more!'

"Okay, let's go!" Dad said, walking up to me. "Go ahead and hop on there." He gestured at the sled. "I'll pull you."

"Yay!" I said as I hopped onto the wooden boards and situated myself comfortably. My numerous layers of clothing provided a very cozy cushion, so I leaned back and relaxed. My older brother was already out on the street, chucking snowballs at Mom, who had no chance against him.

"Stop it! Cut it out, Oliver!" she yelled as she tried in vain to guard her face.

"Well, I'm tired of waiting for Dad and Emerson to come out, so I'm entertaining myself until then," he replied as he picked up another lump of snow.

We came out of the driveway and joined them on the sidewalk.

"We're here," Dad announced. "You can stop abusing your mother now."

"Finally! Alright, let's roll!" Oliver demanded. He fell in line behind Dad and the sled while Mom took up the rear as we walked down the icy sidewalk, admiring the winter wonderland our street had become. Dad took long, heavy steps that gave the sled a rhythmic rock as he pulled it over the snow-laden concrete. He turned back and looked at me with a warm smile on his face, his rough black-and-gray beard forming an outline that further defined the upward curve of his lips.

"I bet you're relaxed back there," he said.

"More than you know."

He winked at me, and then turned back to lead our arctic pack through the snowy wastes of our street.

4. the blank masterpiece

We continued trudging along the road. I looked in all directions from the sled, in awe of the sheer beauty that my eyes beheld.

I'm a hot-blooded person, you could say. I like the cold, and I'm not bothered by it. My preferred time of the year is winter. Snow is my favorite gift from nature: it has so many uses, and not just for fun, either. But one of the most amazing things snow is capable of doing is creating some of the most astounding beauty the world has to offer. It can make a common place like my street into a masterpiece that even Michelangelo would be humbled by.

I viewed that masterpiece now in all its glory. A thick, white, wool blanket covered the yards and roads, smoothing all imperfections in the earth and unifying everything into a perfect picture. The trees, though bare, now looked as if they bloomed with white flowers that covered the entire length of their branches, and, at the slightest touch, a powdery waterfall would cascade off of the slender wooden cliffs. The feathery clouds that covered the sky blended with the white horizon; I could not tell where one began, or where the other ended.

The chill of the air penetrated my flesh and heightened my senses. The white of the snow seemed very bright and vibrant

while the wind whispered and whistled past the edges of my ears, and the soft crunch of my family's feet on the icy ground rang out sharp and distinct. I shivered and simultaneously smiled.

"Hey, Dad," I called. He turned to look at me. "Thanks for waking me up."

He laughed, warm and rich. "Anytime."

third grade bites

jeric taborn

THERE WERE HAPPY, SAUCE-COVERED FACES and orange juice spilled all over the floors and tables, but even our teacher was having fun. This was a normal lunch period routine where everyone got involved. We all got our lunches, sat down, cracked jokes, and chatted. “Last night’s *Power Rangers* was awesome,” and “Nuh-uh, *Power-Puff Girls* was better,” were some of the things you might normally hear.

“Hey Jeric,” Gabe greeted me, “I heard there are dogs outside on the playground.”

Gabriel “Gabe” Thomas was a soft-spoken black kid, who was at most 4’ 5”. He had dark lips, low-cut hair, and slanted, dark almond eyes. His shoulders slouched because he was always hunched over his school work. He wore collared polo shirts and pressed Levi’s.

“Really?” I asked, “That doesn’t seem true.”

“Well, I saw ‘em!” Jonas said.

Jonas was the type of guy that would ask for your lunch before you started eating it. He was a chubby, light-skinned kid that dressed like a farmer. He had a curly afro and didn’t make very good grades. He lied like a court lawyer.

“There aren’t any dogs outside,” I said. “At least it’s unlikely.”

“Well, I . . . saw one goin’ down a slide,” Jonas explained with a mouth full of pizza.

“Shut up, Jonas,” I retaliated. “You lie about air.”

“Your mom lies about air.”

“Ladies please, there’s enough of me to go around,” Gabe said, and with that cue of sarcasm we lined up, ready for recess.

Gabe and I were assigned the duty of playground equipment carriers, so we grabbed a handful of jump ropes and other toys. We had to go to the classroom to get the stuff while everybody else was outside playing. It wasn’t a bad job since we knew we could play when we were done. *Could there really be dogs outside? Other*

classes are out there right now. I don't hear any screaming. We began making our way to the exit that led to the playground. I was a horse at the starting gate, ready to get out there and have fun. I used my back to open the door. As soon as I was outside, I dropped the equipment and ran.

Automatically, I jumped into an intense game of *Power Rangers*. According to the yellow ranger (Jonas), the *Power Puff Girls* had been possessed by the evil poison monster (Stephen). We used our mouths to make all the sound effects, but I must admit, we may have gotten too deep into character. I stopped to catch my breath.

Meanwhile, my pal Gordon was on top of a hill, so I decided to run up and join him. Once I was up there, we began to talk man-to-man about third grade topics. We were the only two up there, so we leaned back and began to tell which clouds look like what cartoon characters.

"That one looks like Timmy Turner!"

Ten minutes went by, yet we never got bored. I got up to stretch. Out of nowhere, I saw everyone running and screaming.

"Oh shit! Everybody run like hell!" I heard from Jonas's sailor mouth. I couldn't figure out why everyone was running and yelling.

"Don't run! It'll chase you!" Ms. Elston shouted.

Finally, it hit me.

The dogs! Gabe was right; there were dogs outside. I saw him getting chased by two vicious pit bulls. He ran in between the dogs. The dogs collided like two rams. It had no effect on them. They just kept running. *Oh no! He's gonna get killed!*

I had to think fast. I waved the closest thing to me at the dogs, which happened to be a stick. *This is never gonna work.*

Luckily, the dogs stopped chasing Gabe. Unfortunately, now I was on their radar. They ran at me with heads full of steam. "Why would you wave a stick!?" Gordon shouted. I ignored the stupid comment and ran like my feet were on fire.

I began to run down the hill. *It's so steep I'm gonna fall!* Head over heels I went. I rolled down the hill like a snowball on a mountain. Finally I smacked the bottom, did a Batman roll, and kept running. "Rarf! Arf!" was all I could hear from the dogs. I turned around to see if it was over, but it had just begun. The pit bulls slid down the hill as if they were on ice, but they crashed harder than I had.

“Jeric! Stop running! They’ll chase you!” Ms. Elston screamed. She was so loud that I thought she was right next to me. I turned around ready to embrace warm and caring comfort from her, but all I got was more dogs.

At that point, it became a little annoying. I ran through a crowd of kids trying to save their own butts, and they still chased me. *Really? Go for someone else.* I began to realize that may have been the end, but it was hard to think with the whole school yelling and screaming. *I got one shot. I have to head to the bushes.* At my elementary school, there were rose bushes that no one went to. I went there once to get a ball but received only scars.

It’s now or never. I decided to head for the rose bushes. I made my way out of the crowd of sissies. I ran with what little bit of energy I had left. I had only been sprinting for two or three minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. The bushes were in a huge ditch. The teachers called it a latrine, but I didn’t know what that was, so we called it a ditch or the Evil Fortress. The latrine was steeper than the hill where we relaxed. But that didn’t matter at the moment, for I was a man on a mission. Or so I told myself.

Finally the time had come. I was sure the dogs were a little ticked off because of all they had been through to get me. I stood, ready to head into the bushes. The dogs were making their way into the ditch. They finally reached the bottom. *This is it!*

I ran through the bushes. It stung so bad with all those thorns piercing my flesh. *Now I know how Jesus felt. I’m going to church from now on.* I could hear the dogs begin to whimper. As I ran, I glanced down at my arms to see the damage; it looked like a tiny Freddy Krueger had attacked me, but at that point I didn’t care. I kept running.

I felt like a soldier on the battlefield. I was being shot at, but I knew that if I stopped, the twin missiles would hit me. So I continued running. Through all the pain and fear, I held.

My rampage run came to a halt as I turned around to see if the monsters were behind me. They were gone. I began to walk around the garden to get back to the playground. Two minutes after I arrived, the dogs were being hauled away by animal control. Or as I like to call them, my heroes.

After returning to the playground, I was welcomed with a heartwarming, “Why did you run!?” by Ms. Elston. But I didn’t care. I just hugged her and cried away the pain. I was taken to the office to have my wounds treated. I was just an injured private, but I felt like a veteran. *I just outran dogs. Where’s my freakin’ medal baby!? Yeah!*

In the office I had time to gather my thoughts. *What just happened? I really saved a life?* But all I could hear in my mind is the sound of Ms. Elston yelling, “Don’t run! They’ll chase you!”

playing bear

cole c.

I sat in the back of my mom's Honda. The seats were soft and tan. The smell of old soup filled my nose. I didn't feel nervous; I had butterflies of happiness. The part right before the trip was my favorite because during the trip I was always thinking of how it was going to end soon.

My first school was Carolina Friends. They do things differently than most schools. For example, going barefoot is the norm. We also have what are called "advice groups," which are groups of kids and one teacher that you're put with at the beginning of the year. First years always get to choose which teacher they get, so I chose the teacher that reminded me most of my family members. Henry Walker taught science and liked bears—I mean, he *loved* bears. He resembled a grizzly himself, except he could be even more fierce, but, at the same time, he could be as quiet and peaceful as a mountain, so I chose him. My group consisted of Scott, Elizabeth, Jennifer, Erin, Rhiannon, Lucas, Cathlene, Xavier, Adam, Jennifer, and David. I didn't know all of them well at first, but I did after a while. We went on trips together, and the trip is different for each group. Our group always took a trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Henry has a cabin there where I'm about to go.

Our car pulled up along the curb. I saw all the minivans lined up, and my group scattered around them. I took a long time to go through the ritual of goodbye-ing with my parents. My mom hugged me and kissed me on the cheek twice. I started to walk toward my dad, but she hugged me again. I squeezed her tightly, said, "I love you," and stepped over to hug my dad. It was a little much for just one weekend, but I didn't complain. Walking over to the van I would ride in, I tried to look as mature and non-mommy-adored as possible. I imagine I failed.

I stuffed my duffel bag in the trunk and stepped into one of the minivans that would caravan up to the Smokies. I sat in the seat

in the middle of the van next to Adam, in front of Cathlene, and behind Scott.

* * *

We stopped at a Kangaroo mixed with a fast food joint. When we went back into the car, almost everyone had bought a caffeinated drink. This did not bode well for the rest of the passengers, especially the driver.

Adam looked crazed with caffeine. "There once was a moose!" he shouted to the car as a whole. We repeated it back to him, giggling too hard to get the notes right.

"Who liked to drink a lot of juice!" he sang, dragging out the last words

"Who liked to drink a lot of juice!" we echoed.

I had just drank my own gas station Starbucks and found everything about the situation hilarious.

"He liked grape and apple!"

"He liked grape and apple!"

"He liked to drink juice and Snapple!"

We sang camp songs a long time. Entertainment mostly came from Adam and Xavier, but everyone loved it best when Henry randomly joined in, singing songs by Journey.

"Don't stop . . . believing!" he said.

"Hold on to that feelin'!" Cathlene called out, throwing her arms outward dramatically.

We made several stops on our way up, one of which was at Krispy Kreme. I usually couldn't stomach so much sugar in a single sitting on a car ride, but drinking water in between bites helped.

* * *

When I saw mountains in the distance, I pointed out the window. The rest of the people in the car looked, too. The mountains were pale blue and barely noticeable against the blue sky. As we got closer, the green started to come out in them. Soon, we saw Gatlinburg. Driving through, I remember how tacky it was, going into a shop exclusively for hats. Then we started driving up the

road that Henry's cabin was on. It was familiar and welcoming. First chance I got, I climbed the huge cedar tree in the front yard. Then I helped lug duffel bags into the front room. After locating my scattered items, I found the red room (the girls' room) and put my stuff down in the middle of the floor. I then got the cot out from under the shelf in the hall because there were five of us and only two beds. Someone had to sleep on a cot, and I always volunteered for fear of kicking someone off the edge of the bed. Also, I liked my sleeping bag a lot.

As the sun slowly slunk away, the quiet and darkness of the house put everyone to sleep. That is, after we ran around the house in the dark screaming, for we were playing Bear. It was a game invented by some fatherly mountain guy, no doubt. It involved one or two people being it and the rest of us running around acting like poltergeists. Tapping on the high notes of the piano in an eerie way was a favorite. The laundry room was where tagged people went and the rest of us could tag them to let them out. This game usually lasted for forty minutes, ending with much protest at around 10:20. Nevertheless, everyone did go to sleep because we knew what waited in the morning.

* * *

"Way down in the nest, the bluebirdies rest!" came a huge bellying voice from down the hall. I pressed a button on my phone to wake it up. Seven o'clock. My head plunked back on my pillow.

Henry opened the door and stuck his head in. "Don't wake the baby bluebirdies!" he shouted, ducking back out before my sock hit the door. We heard him going down the hall to the boys' room singing in an opera voice. "When the sun hits your eye like a big pizza pie, it's the morning!"

The other girls groaned, got up, and went down for breakfast. I followed shortly. When I arrived in the kitchen, everyone was already there; some had already eaten. I shoveled down cereal and joined the others at the creek. Rolling up my pajama bottoms, I waded in to the sandy part. My feet started to go numb, and I looked down to see little fish around them. I tried to step out slowly so I wouldn't scare them, but as soon as I did, they swam off quick

as a flash. Erin, Rhianon, Scott, and Cathlene were building up small boulders as a dam a short way upstream, but I preferred to walk along the stream to the farthest point either way and pretend I was an elf in her natural habitat. When my feet got too cold, I went back in the house.

Lucas and Adam were playing chess. I walked over and called playing winner. Lucas beat me, too.

"Anyone want to play hide and seek?" called out David. A few other kids and I responded enthusiastically. The cabin had tons of good hide and seek places. David, being very tiny, actually wedged himself onto a shelf in a closet the first game, and then somehow got himself into a drawer in the second. I usually stuck to hiding spots that were easier to get into. David was a pro though, and it sometimes took twenty minutes before we either figured out where he was or gave up looking. Playing hide and seek could last us an hour, and then we would pause doing whatever it was we were doing for lunch, but there was so much to do in the cabin. It was filled with the music of the piano being played by Scott and constant laughter.

* * *

After dinner, I went upstairs to plug my camera into its charger. When I was walking down the stairs I saw Adam and David standing sheepishly at the bottom.

"Hey, Cole?" whispered David. I stepped down to stand where I could hear him better.

Adam said in low voice, "Xavier's . . . he's upset."

I wondered what was wrong. They looked like they were scared of something.

Xavier is a really sensitive person who acts like a small child most of the time. In truth, he's one year younger than me but not much taller, and he has a very babyish face and Bambi eyes.

"He's on the porch," said David.

"Wait, how come you guys are telling me?" I asked. "Shouldn't we tell Rhiannon?" She was the oldest girl there.

"Well, you're all motherly and stuff," said Adam. I smiled to myself. The people in my group were like family members. I was glad that I was being entrusted with the duty of comforting.

I walked onto the huge porch. There was no light except for what was cast through the screen door from the cabin. My eyes adjusted slowly. Mounds of sleeping bags covered the floor and bench. Xavier was atop his own, facing the huge back of the brick chimney. I walked over to him, careful not to trip. I sat down beside him and put one arm around him. I could hear small sniffs coming from him. He told me that he had messed up a door by swinging from it.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly.

"I want to be home," he said between sniffs.

"I know Henry can be scary, but it's not actually on purpose. He still loves you. He's probably not even mad about the door anymore."

Later, I saw Henry go on the porch. I knew he would talk to Xavier and things would be fine. This was concluded after Henry announced the second game of Bear.

During this game, I was the bear at one point. My tactics involved hiding in shadows and then springing out at anyone I saw. This usually resulted in some girly screaming from Cathlene and Adam. Henry couldn't hide himself well because of the size issue (six feet tall and a squarely-built man) so I found him the easiest. Scott was the hardest to find. I eventually found him giggling while sitting on top of the chimney.

"Why is there a long-haired monkey on the chimney?" Elizabeth burst out laughing giving away both their hiding spots at once.

The game ended with all of us hyped up, and no one wanted to sleep. But there would be even more fun tomorrow, so we brushed our teeth.

After I crawled onto my cot, I pulled the covers around me. I had a view of the window and the night sky. Stars were everywhere. I was tempted to climb out of bed and walk around in the woods. I fell asleep thinking about the next day and how much I loved where I was.

party on the water

justin sharpe

I.

WE HAD BEEN DRIVING FOR A LONG TIME—well, a long time being six hours. The drive went by slowly, the landscape was dull, the colors, the plants were dull. Now, though, we were closer, much closer. As we pulled up to the tall, beige hotel, Wesley couldn't stop moving around, side-to-side, up-and-down. I knew he was only nine years old and that was normal for a child his age, but he still annoyed me to the point that I was seriously going to explode.

I was sitting in the very back of our spacious silver van. Wesley sat right in front of me. He kept trying to tell me everything about this new game he was playing while the volume was all the way up. I stared at him angrily for a good twenty seconds, if not more. I was furious. You know when some people say their anger level is above their head? Yeah, that was me right then. "Wesley! Will you close your big mouth?" I yelled. "You can't just be quiet and chill out?!" Yelling at my younger brother is something my parents generally hate with a deep passion. By deep passion, I mean as deep as the ocean goes type of deep. So I immediately mumbled, "Sorry. . . ."

This obviously wasn't enough for my strict parents. They then gave me yet another extremely boring lecture on how I should be nice to my younger brother. At that point, I just got out of the car, seeing that we were at the hotel in the almost packed parking lot. I decided to go ahead and get some bags out of the car; I was not in the mood for dealing with more fiery tension that day. I wanted to get to the cruise already. Unfortunately, I knew we would have to wait until the next day. But that didn't matter then. We were hungry. Luckily, there was a Cracker Barrel across the road. We dropped in for some delicious food. I was much happier. It's amazing what food can do for you when you're grumpy, even if it *is* calorie-packed, greasy, fried food.

II.

I witnessed drunk people all over. There were bars everywhere. Every one hundred feet or so there was a bar. People often drank themselves silly on the cruise, which was delightful to see. I knew of the dance club (“for adults only”) that stayed opened for a long time at night.

I went up to the club the first evening with some people I had met that day. You have to be eighteen or older to get into those types of clubs, so we sat outside of it in some bright red chairs with purple and gray tables in the middle. At this point it was around one a.m. We watched people foolishly stumble out. Some, of course, tried to get out as soon as possible because it was crazy in there. Then out came these three guys, completely drunk, all around twenty-five years old. They came over to the four of us and started talking. They told us about the girls inside and how some people were in there sleeping. I guess they passed out. I watched the one with the green hat as he held his beer can, which was half full, and stared at a chair. A few seconds later, I watched him dump the beer on the chair and yell, “Screw the chair!”

We all just watched.

III.

In the middle of the ship there were these glass elevators where hundreds of people could see you. It was the perfect place to do something stupid.

I had made a few nice friends on the cruise that I still keep in touch with today. We thought that in addition to pulling an all-nighter on the last day, this would be something fun to do as well. What were we going to do? We were going to dance. We were going to dance like crazy in those elevators. Everyone would be able to see us. It was only around 2 a.m., with plenty of people still out wandering around. We decided to get in an elevator. People already thought we were odd. We didn’t care. At least, I know I didn’t. We played music on our phones. As we started dancing, we could see numerous people looking at us. Some people boarding

had to see us, but tried to ignore us. As the elevators glowed their many colors, we kept on for about fifteen minutes. I swear that the next day when I walked around, some people looked at me funny. The glass elevators were definitely the place to be seen.

IV.

It was decided. It was the last night, who even cares? Why wouldn't we do this? There was food and room service twenty-four-seven, so something was always available. We could make it. We were going to stay up all night. I wondered what it was going to be like. I had stayed up before in my own house, but never on a ship holding three thousand people.

The four of us were ready. There were plenty of "last night goodbye" events, like huge buffets and dancing on the deck. We went to one or two. The last one available on the ship went until about one a.m. From there on out, we would go to whatever we could find to occupy us. We went for more food. I guess since it was the very last night, they wanted to put a lot out. Chocolate, candies, they had everything in the buffets. It was heavenly. We spent a good forty-five minutes pigging out on just sweets. I felt like I was flying on top of the clouds.

After we had completely stuffed ourselves, we went to go walk around. It was going to be a while before we reached shore. We saw a few other groups of adventurous people our age staying up all night like us. At this point it was around three a.m. We went to the front of the ship and walked outdoors.

We watched the ship pass through the black ocean. The moonlight revealed itself to us on the waves. Watching the creamy moon in silence was quite something. It just really gave me time to think about what has been going on.

After ten minutes or so we went back inside. We started talking about how we would all miss each other. I had gotten close to these people during the last week. I actually do still miss them.

We ended up walking to Krissy's room. It was on the sixth floor, which was the middle of the ship. It was late, and I wished that there was more time for us on the ship. I think we all knew what

we wanted to do: order room service. Mallory called down to room service for us and got four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with juice and chips. They told us that we would have to wait around one full hour. This was fine though, we ended up almost napping on the bed while watching the same thing over and over on TV. The screen was showing us how close we were to reaching Florida. Once the food arrived, we swallowed all of it almost whole. This wasn't going to be the end of the night. I didn't want it to be.

We walked outside and found our way to the front of the ship again. Everything looked familiar except that it was somewhat light out, and we were docking.

It was the worst part of the whole week.

Again, in silence, the four of us stood, watching, waiting. This was decided for us.

my renaissance: sunnyside elementary

alexandra jackson

1.

CROUCHED LOW TO THE DUSTY GROUND, I hesitantly laid my hand on the white, ribbed trailer. My small frame was well-concealed behind the length of the building; only my slim legs could be seen. Creeping slowly towards the corner of the trailer, my short, huffed breaths were the only noise I dared to make. Shining with excitement and caution, my brown eyes darted back and forth, scanning the open space between each trailer and behind me. The once empty and lifeless trailers were transformed into a dark forest filled with dangerous predators lurking in the corners. Exploring this alien world was dangerous for a lone adventurer like me, and the promise of a swift end hung in the air like fog. Stopping at the edge of a particularly large tree, I took a moment to regain my breath and relished the sweet feeling of adrenaline that flowed through me.

My expedition into the unknown had been an idea thought up by my friend Sam, a clever boy who had a lot going on in his mind and a dark side that kept most kids away. While enjoying the crusty, stale rectangles that were referred to as pizza in my school, he had created a type of game that combined the thrill of catch and the excitement of hide-and-seek. His idea was a perfect combination of two of the most prevalent factors in all of the other games we played: endurance and creativity. We were well-known for our epic game Jail and the well-thought-up Saga of Superheroes we created. Hot tubs in a lair weren't a widespread idea back in fourth grade until I included it in ours. In retrospect, the only real goal in our games was to get a good laugh and use up all of the pent-up energy we had accumulated during the day. So, Sam started what we would now call Trailer. (Very little of our boundless creativity was used in naming these games.) This was a purely physical game that would let us tackle, scare, and outsmart the others. We

all felt an excitement that had previously been only achieved during Christmas.

A *coo-coo* echoed from the top of the trees, the creature hidden in the dense vegetation. As my hand trailed along the rough bark of the nearby trees, I felt a pair of eyes watching my every movement. I scanned for shadows, but couldn't detect any with the small amount of light peeking softly through the treetops. While my mind whirled with far-fetched ideas on how to possibly regain the upper hand, a wave of panic washed over me. Routes to freedom were few; crawling to the undergrowth and trying to sprint to a new spot would both only make me vulnerable to predators. None of the tree's branches were within my grasp, so climbing to safety was not an option either. It seemed as if I could only wait for the inevitable discovery of my position and hope to be able to run away.

The space around me became smaller and smaller as I felt the presence of someone else. I felt them coming towards me fast; they were about to get me, so I scrunched my eyes closed and tensed my whole body. . . . *Wham!*

A cold arm grasped mine tightly. Feeling a little disoriented, I slowly opened my eyes and smiled ruefully at the person in front of me. I'd been discovered by Sam behind Trailer A. Giving me a quick smirk, he ran off to find Andrew and Katie while I headed back toward the track. Inside, my heart beat hard as it recovered from my time in the wild.

2.

The bright August sun peeked over the tree tops, its light playing in Andrew's hair. His shaggy brown locks perfectly framed his tanned face. A wide smile that shined through his brown eyes challenged me to continue.

"How about this, I'll give ya a five second start," I told him cockily. With my arms bent at my hips and a mischievous glint in my eye, I was clearly up to no good.

Chest puffed out proudly, he replied, "Yeah, like I'm gonna need it."

I shook my head, a smile displaying the great mood our ban-
ters always put me in. Truthfully, every time we got together, a
great time ensued.

“Okay, you ready? . . . Go!”

Andrew quickly turned and shot off through the playground,
speeding towards the school’s barren track. I slowly counted off
five on my fingers; the anticipation ate at my stomach, telling me
to follow. Watching him run through the group of people loitering
about, almost reaching the patches of grass peaking through the
desert-like land, his trademark pink Obbiggidish T-shirt and tan
cargo pants helped me keep track of him.

Five seconds having gone by, I hurriedly sprinted after Andrew.
My worn-out sneakers dug deep into the dusty ground. Adrenaline
pumped through me. I ran faster until I caught him, when both
of us tumbled a bit from the impact of my grabbing onto his shirt.
Laughing loudly, I ushered him back towards the playground, my
hand lingering on the cloth.

california skater

bronson ungricht

1. life in vista

ONE DAY IN VISTA, I DECIDED TO ACTUALLY LEAVE MY HOUSE and go outside to get all my friends and go skate. I'd skate to their houses one by one to get Mario, Trey and Jordan, Chapo, and James. Then we'd all skate down the hill to DeDe's house. I was once unwelcome in this neighborhood: there was a night that, on my way home, my girlfriend at the time tried to scare me by jumping out of the bushes. I acted like I was scared, to make her happy, so I grabbed a flagpole, swung around it, and it snapped. Everyone saw. After that, I wasn't welcome in the neighborhood until I apologized. Which I had by this time.

We'd go from skating to racing down the hill—we'd bomb down the hill after kicking all the way from Dede's house to the top. Our feet tingled because of all the speed, our eyes watered against the wind, our boards trembled with speed and wobbled as if we hadn't been practicing. We would fall with the board or jump off and fall. All we could think of on our way down was jumping.

We bombed the hill to the Chase Bank parking lot, dodging cars on our way. They were everywhere. We got off our boards, blinking our dry eyes and enjoying the numbness in our feet. There we'd play bumper cars. The goal of the game was to send someone home with holes in their pants. We'd line up on our boards at the top of the bank entrance, ready to collide at the bottom. After slamming over two speed bumps, dodging cars, I'd look out behind me, trying to dodge those coming at me and trying to hit those who were already down. It ended with almost everyone on the pavement, only a few left on their boards. Whoever made it without getting knocked down got the first chance to take down the others in the next round. Somehow this game transformed into Cops and Robbers; it was us stealing people's safety and them calling the cops. Once, I flew

right by the front of an old lady's blue-green truck, barely missing the front tires. As I passed by the car, I crossed my arms over my chest to avoid hitting the undercarriage. I never wear helmets. I knew I wouldn't get hit. But she called the cops. They came five hours later when we were just about to leave. Trey and Jordan were already gone, but Skylar and I were still hanging out. I threw my Arizona into the dumpster, and we headed home. A police car pulled over, knowing it was me who the old lady was calling about. The officer informed us we couldn't skate on the sidewalks, and we knew it was illegal to skate in the streets. "We were just messin' around," I tried to explain. Once he drove off, we got back on our boards. We weren't back for three days. And when we did come back, I practically broke my tailbone and ruined my board.

2. hanging with friends

When I would hang out with my best friend, Alec, we would have sleep overs. We would play our PS3s and go skate right after, and when we weren't doing that, we would talk on the phone with girls. For several hours we would do that and then go in and play more games. The main game we played was Black Ops.

There was this one day that I stayed at his house for the night, and we ended up going to our friend Ethan's, but we had to go down a small hill then go up a really steep hill. That's normally when Alec decides to put our life in his hands and jump up and down as we're going down big hills and turning. The first time he did that I was yelling at him because I hated having to be cautious about open wounds.

After we played at Ethan's, we would ride down the big hill by his house on Alec's bike. He would be on the pegs and I would control the bike so that when we got to the turning point at the bottom of the hill, he would start jumping on the pegs until we fell. Miraculously, he would jump off the bike before we fell and crashed. Most of the time he wouldn't make it, and he would hit the ground hard.

There was this time he came to my house, and there was a big hill right by it, so he went down it with me. He tried to jump off his

board, but he was going so fast that he rolled down the hill. He got cut up a little but not too bad.

3. a brush with the law

My best friend and I have known each other since we were three. We grew up together, and we did get in *some* trouble with police, adults, and our parents, but in the long run we've learned a lot about survival.

In Vista, there were a lot of bums, and people would give them change. I was pretty much the most popular person in my neighborhood, and kids and their parents knew me. Sometimes, while we were skating, my friends and I would hear bullets fire and see people get knives pulled on them. There was this part of Vista where three kids on skateboards got hit by cars. From that point on my mom would not let me down there to go to the gas station, but I still went and I'm still alive. The streets sounded like battlefields because of all the skidding and speeding cars and roaring engines. At night, a patrol officer would come and sometimes he would come early because people got sick of hearing our skateboards and they would snitch on us. I got caught one time but did not lose my board because they let me go home. Somehow, I ended up going back out, and the cop did not come back for like a month. When he did come back, we were all about to bomb a hill, and he arrived when we were halfway down, and we all ran from the cop to save our boards. Two of my friends got caught, but were allowed to keep their boards.

4. carlsbad

Before we decided to move to Carlsbad when I was about eight years old, my mom convinced me to get dreads. All it took was for her to say the girls will love it—but not too many did. Once they started getting long it was okay. But I still did not like them even though I had them for eight years. I finally cut them when I made the big move.

We ended up moving to Carlsbad in California, a block from the beach. Just standing at the door, you could smell salt. There were these things called potato bugs; they looked like they were half-cricket and half-ant. They had big eyes and would look at you. There were a lot in Carlsbad; they liked the moisture in the air.

For almost two years we could walk down the street to the beach. I'd bring home buckets of sand crabs. When the waves would crash on the sand, as soon as the water would roll away, we would dig a hole and there would be tons of them. We would shovel sand and crabs into the buckets. They would always die because they need fresh salt water and it needs to be cold. My mom hated me bringing them home. She thought it was cruel and thought they should be able to live freely, but I loved playing with those crabs.

About a year later, my Aunt Liz moved in. We had a small house, so my mom let her move into the living room while we looked for a bigger house. Aunt Liz sleeping in the living room messed up my plans of sneaking Fruity Pebbles at night. But she would invite friends over, and we would play with the cats together.

One day, we had a huge barbecue with friends we knew from all over California. My mom would throw these parties almost every year to get all of her friends together because everyone was so spread out over the state. We would spend the day playing board games, card games, dominoes, ball games, eating hamburgers and hot dogs, and playing with the cats.

A few days later, Aunt Liz invited her girlfriends over to go to the beach. Halfway out the door Liz turns around and says, "Oh, Bronson might want to go to the beach." I got my shorts on real fast. We passed a box of free kittens at the beach, looked inside, and saw one last kitten. He had a white face and a white belly with tiger markings all over his back. We told the people if he was still there when we came back we would take him. I knew my mom did not want any more cats. We had two adults and four brand new kittens at home already.

We went back to look before we left the beach, and the kitten was still there. We took him home, but when my mom saw him she immediately said we couldn't keep him. Liz gave him to her and said, "I know you want him."

My mom is a cat lover so she said, "Fine." A few hours later, Liz's friend came over and one of her kids was Cooper. The little kitten would crawl up and sleep under his arm, so we named him Cooper, too. Cooper was still such a small kitten that he suckled off our kittens' mom. We finally adopted the name "Uncle Cooper" because he was a little bit bigger than the rest of the kittens. When he started to get bigger, he would crawl all the way up into the cat food dish, and the only thing hanging down was his tail. We have lots of pictures of our cats; they are a part of our family.

5. moving to durham

We would skate till we started to sweat then go to the 7-Eleven to buy chips, drinks, and then skate more. It was fun until school started and we began packing. Next thing I knew, we were on the plane to North Carolina. I really don't mind it here, but I'd prefer to be in California.

The move from Vista, California to Durham, North Carolina was very intense. It felt like it took forever. Luckily, I got to fly there instead of driving. My mom and I flew here on October 15, 2010, and I started going to Githens Middle School. In December, my mom flew back to California to pack our house and drive our stuff here with our four cats. We have Cooper, William McBillionson, a.k.a. Bill, Butta, and Omo. They drove in the cab of the truck with my mom and her friend. The cats hated it for the first day or so and then got comfortable with it and would just sleep the whole time. The drive is three to four days, depending on how fast you drive and how strong your driving endurance is. They only stopped for gas and at night to sleep in hotels. I was already in school, so I couldn't go with her and drive back. She said I would have hated it. She was miserable the whole drive.

We moved to Durham after my mom met her boyfriend while she was here helping my aunt Kim last year. She flew out here three times last year for a month at a time to help my aunt and made good money. She would organize my aunt's house and their architecture office. I would stay with my grandma while she was gone; I really enjoyed that. On the first day of her second trip out

here, she met her boyfriend. They are getting married soon. His name is Andra, and his son's name is D'Andra, so we call him Dee. He's sixteen. He would have moved to California, but his job wouldn't let him, whereas my mom's business could be managed from anywhere on her cell phone. She owns a drain service called Dawg's Drain Service. I've always wanted a little brother; I have a brother, but he's older.

Dee came to stay with us from Atlanta, where he lives with his mom and her boyfriend. He was only supposed to stay for the summer but will probably be with us until Christmas time. His mom was having a hard time, so they thought it was best that Dee stay with us for awhile. He goes to Hillside High School. We have the same bus stop and bus driver but we go to different schools. The hard part about him being here is that we have to share the same room now. We have the biggest room in the house, but I've never had to share a room before. Luckily, we get along most of the time. The hardest thing about moving here was leaving all my friends, having to make new ones, and moving away from my grandma. I used to see her every day. But overall, I think I've done pretty good adjusting so far.

epilogue: going to dsa

I am glad I got to go to DSA for a couple of reasons. First, my cousin Ben Isley goes here; he is in ninth grade, too. We both registered for the lottery for ninth grade, and we both got in out of all of the kids who tried. My mom tells me how lucky and blessed I am to have been given this opportunity. I think so, too. I think getting into DSA is what I need to succeed in high school. School has always been very tough for me.

I have tough teachers and a lot of homework. I don't get away with anything because my mom talks to my teachers all the time to help me stay focused. It can be frustrating; all I want to do is go outside and skateboard for a few hours then come in and do my homework, but I don't have time. I usually only skate on the weekends. I get home on the bus at 5:15, or if my mom picks me up after a tutoring session, I get home around 4:45. My mom says I have to

do homework first, and I'm not usually done until I have to go to bed at nine thirty. I get to watch TV in bed until ten.

I used to get locked out of the house every once in awhile until I got my own key. When I would get locked out, I would have to go around the back and climb up onto the second story patio to get in. It's a three story house. It would take all of my strength because I couldn't use my legs, just my arms.

I'm also glad to be here at DSA because I hated all the drama at my middle school in Vista. I went to Rancho Minerva Middle School and had two more years left there. I didn't like the kids. There was one kid there named Chase; his dad worked for my mom. We were friends in the beginning, but he was the worst kid in the school. He was always getting suspended and always rallied all the bad kids to do bad stuff with him. I would end up getting into trouble defending myself. He was a bully and a pest. My bike tire got slashed one day while it was locked up at school, and I know it was him. He was on a behavior contract with the school and was at the point of getting expelled when I moved.

I like that DSA has no bullies, no hard-heads, and no pests. I think DSA is good for me because it's so hard and is so strict, even though I may not like that it is. I think my time here will be a successful one. It was a hard start, not what I'm used to, but I think I'm getting it together now. I've never had this much homework in my life. My mom has been telling me all summer that I'm in for a treat. High school doesn't mess around, especially DSA.

freshman
versus nature



grayson

kinsey everhart

the call

I HEARD THE PHONE RING. The caller ID said “Thomas Jackman,” my grandpa. I answered it, and to my surprise, it was my sister, Sarah, who is two years older than me. She was on her spring break in the mountains with my grandparents. Her voice sounded different, but it was a good different.

She was almost screaming in my ear, she was so excited. She said, “A calf was born today!” I jumped up and ran to my room upstairs so we could talk in private. I started to ask her all kinds of questions, like what color it was and if it was friendly. She told me it was gray and it was a male. The reason why we were so excited was because I had been showing goats since I was nine and I was really getting tired of it. I finally had my chance to show a steer, which was one of my life goals. My mom told me that we would go see him when we went to go pick up Sarah.

bottle feeding

Sarah had stayed with our grandparents in the mountains that whole week. When that weekend came, my mom, my little sister Kendall, and I gathered our things and hit the road.

For hours, I sat in the front seat, flipping through the radio stations trying to find one that would pick up and was not playing country music. I couldn’t wait to see the new calf, my favorite place in the world, and my family.

We finally pulled into my grandparents’ long, rocky driveway. I started to change out of my nice sneakers and, instead, put on my brown, dirty, work boots. They were covered in mud, and rocks were stuck in the tread; they laced all the way up to my shins.

My mom parked in the backyard. I flung the car door open and went soaring out. I gave each of my grandparents a joyful hug. Then I took off past the woodshed and flew over the chunky gravel, dodging the chickens that were flying frantically up in my face, trying to get away from me. I headed to the barn where I knew the calf would be. I had forgotten all about Sarah, but I looked over my shoulder to see her flowing brunette hair and her beautiful, bronze skin. I remembered I had always been a faster runner, so I stopped and waited for her to catch up. We jogged to the barn together, laughing and reminding each other how much we missed being together.

As I opened the gate, I saw him. He looked as gray as if he had been rolled in an overcast sky. I walked toward him cautiously, not knowing how he would react. Once I got up to him I ran my fingers through his soft baby coat. It felt like velvet mixed with fleece, downy and soft. The name Grayson came to mind. He look very much like a Grayson, too.

I got to bottle feed him later that night. I remember how fast he drank his formulated milk, a gallon at a time, and how messy he was with it. I watched it shimmer down his gray neck and then his legs. He ate so much and so fast, but he was so small. He was still hungry afterward. My grandpa said that was a good sign.

My time there seemed to fly by. Before I knew it, I was sitting in my math class Monday morning, floating on the memory of a wonderful weekend. I couldn't pay attention; all I could think of was the next trip up there.

I asked my grandparents about Grayson every time I got to talk to them. I could not wait to see him again. I went up two or three more times before we brought him down home.

trip to my house

I felt the rope sliding through my hands, burning them. Grayson pulled on the other side as hard as he could. My weight and strength were not enough to pull him into the trailer, even with my mom and grandpa pulling him from two different sides of a rope that was around his hind legs. We had to use our brains and come up with a way to take his mind off the huge scary trailer and trick

him in to walking in without any worry. So we got a food bucket and tried to coax him in that way. He was too smart for that, so we stood there thinking, and as we stood there he pushed me out of the way playfully and walked in. *Well, that was easy.* We finished loading him, shut the trailer, and headed down the twisty mountain roads.

The drive home seemed to be shorter. I could hear Grayson stomping in the trailer. It was like he would break through the floor. We stopped twice just to check on him, and, before I knew it, we were home unloading him and showing him his new home. He seemed to like it.

Every day when I fed him, I took him out and walked him around my house. He only got away from me twice, and that was because we would run instead of walk. Although he was faster than me, I almost always managed to get control of him again.

About a month before the show, I washed him. That day was cold. I washed him with Suave shampoo and conditioner, then dried him with a pink hairdryer.

A week before the show, I clipped him so he would be all ready and look his best. He looked kind of rough the first couple days after being clipped. You could see all the little lines I had made. By the day before the show he was looking good. He had turned an off white color since he was a baby. You could almost see yourself in his coat, he was so clean.

the show

Most people did not comprehend why I was so upset that I was selling my steer at the market. Truth is, I was selling my best friend. I know it sounds really bad that a thirteen-year-old girl's best friend was a steer, but it's true. Grayson was my baby. I had raised him from a bottle, and we were going to our last destination together.

On my way to the cattle show, all I could think was, *It's entirely my fault. I did this to you.* I thought it as if he could hear and understand my every thought. In the past, when I was upset about failing an important test or someone close to me dying, I always felt like he understood. I still believed it was my fault. Looking back now, I

know I gave him the best life he could have ever gotten. I still wonder what would have happened if our lives never crossed paths.

I held back the tears for the rest of the car ride to the 4-H show in Orange County. I needed to get my head together so I could have a good first steer show. I needed to remember what to do in the show ring.

Once we arrived, I unloaded Grayson and the six goats my two sisters and I were going to show later that day. I started grooming the grayish-white, coarse coat that had cut my fingers only days before when I had washed him.

It was about ten o' clock, right before I had to take Grayson up to show. I put his shiny black show halter on under his blue cotton halter so I could just slip it off and walk in. My grandpa, who had given me Grayson, was on the right side holding one rope, and I was on the left holding on to the black leather of the show halter, leading him to the ring.

We got to the ring. Grayson being Grayson, he tried to show off by pulling me around the ring and trying to get to the steer in front of us. This nine hundred fifteen pound steer was dragging me, a one hundred pound, blue-eyed, blonde girl. *Wait, Grayson what are you doing?* I tried to compose myself so I did not look so angry for my first class, showmanship.

Showmanship is judged on how you react with your animal and the judge. You have to keep one eye on the judge and one eye on your animal to show that you are paying attention. It sounds easier than it is. You have to have your animal's legs in a perfect rectangle. It is hard to remember and even harder to do.

I was in an age class with six other people. I ended up with fifth place out of seven. I was happy because I had never done this before and Grayson *was* practically dragging me around.

First event down, one more to go. I was on to the next and last class with Grayson. I was trying to enjoy every minute of it, knowing I did not have much more time until I had to say goodbye for good.

I walked into the show ring that I had been in not too long ago. There was one other girl in there named Lauren. She should not have even been in that class with me because her steer was a finished and mine was only a feeder. The difference is finished steer are done growing and ready for market, while feeder steer

still growing. Lauren's steer's frame was bigger than Grayson's, but he was going to get a lot bigger. *Too bad it's based on politics and not what the animal looks like on the show day*, I thought. Lauren ended up with first.

I was okay with it; no big deal. I was just dreading what I knew was coming next.

the auction stand

I stood there with my chin scrunched up, trying to hold back the tears. The more I held back, the more they came streaming down my face like a fountain and the less time I had to spend with Grayson. I remember standing there in a small, square pin, waiting for the auctioneer to stop rambling the numbers that Grayson would sell for. It felt like a life time just standing there looking at his potential buyer. The auctioneer said "One, o-o-one, one dollar, I hear one dollar, do I hear a dollar, ten, ten, I hear a dollar ten, do I hear dollar fifteen, do I hear a dollar twenty." There was a pulse of silence. The auctioneer announced "Sold for a dollar fifteen a pound to Durham County Farm Bureau." Farm Bureau always bought my goats in the past, but now it was Grayson's time to be put in that huge gray trailer. Just knowing where he was going and that he would no longer be with me, I knew it was my fault that it had to go this way. By this time, I was out of my mind. I could not think straight. I loved him as much as a mother loves her child.

I went to the back of the show barn where all the sold animals go to wait for their future. Once I got to the back, I met up with Morgan, one of my 4-H friends I had competed with in many live-stock competitions. Many say we look alike and that we could be twins, even though she is eighteen and I am thirteen. I take it as a compliment. She took Grayson from me and took his halter off, gave it to me, and put a neon red rope halter on him. She then tied him to a huge wooden post that held up the whole barn. By this time, I was hysterically crying. I was losing a best friend, and it was all my fault.

I went to the back of the barn where he was, buried my face in to his silky, clean-smelling, grayish white coat, and cried out loud

to him, "I love you, Grayson. Don't you ever forget it, and whatever happens, I'm sorry it had to be this way." I told him goodbye one last time. Then I left, to go home, to get ready to be brave, to try and hold it together at school the next day.

the place to be

sam joel

river nantahala

IN THE EVENING, I LEAN ON THE RAILING OF A GENTLY ROCKING BRIDGE. The metal is cold on my tired hands. I take in a deep breath of the clean mountain air and cherish its freshness in my lungs. The river innocently flows beneath me. Small ripples appear in the crystal clear water as trout feed on aquatic insects scattered across the river's surface. I notice every smooth multicolored stone on the river bottom. A calm mist hovers just above the river like one giant cloud. Its tiny droplets coat every tree, plant, and rock on the bank. The last rays of warming sunlight creep over the treetops and pierce through the mist to create a deep golden haze. Massive green trees and towering rock outcroppings line the banks of the river, watching over like sentinels. The river is peaceful here, unlike the violent sections we kayaked earlier that day.

About a hundred yards upstream lies a steep drop down the terrifying Nantahala falls. A raging current rips through the water, pulling and tugging at anything that dares to cross its path. Our kayaks were thrown down the river like flotsam. The whitewater had the ferocity and strength of a wild grizzly, but the intimidating runs were followed by deep, calm pools. The water seemed to be made of pristine glass, fragmented only by our boats as they calmly sliced through its perfect surface.

The sun beamed down from above, warming the ground, the water, and our stiff bodies. We had been soaked by the frigid water. An air of respect loomed above as we neared the unloading point at Nantahala Outdoor Center. It was a day well spent at the mercy of the river.

hiking mount pisgah

It was a clear, windy July day; the cloudless, blue sky lingered above, unmoving. After packing our hiking supplies, we crammed ourselves into the van. I gazed out the window and admired the towering green mountains; they were ever-present walls surrounding us at all times. The sun shone down on us intensely. The ride was painfully long; my sister, our friends, and I nagged like seagulls with our constant chirps of, “Are we there yet?”

My mom would answer, “We’re only five minutes away.” I detected an air of annoyance in her voice; according to her, five minutes ago we had been five minutes away.

After several long hours of driving, we reached the trail head at Mount Pisgah. An old wooden sign showed the names and distances of the different trails. Ours was the longest: six miles to the peak and back. My family, friends, and I grabbed our backpacks and put on our hiking boots at a nearby picnic table. Before we left, we had stuffed them with our water bottles and snacks to the point of bursting.

The trail was hardly a trail at all; it was littered with stones, roots, and monstrous boulders glaring from each side. The strong aroma of the evergreens reached my nostrils as I took a breath of the clean air. I admired the chirping warblers and caught a glimpse of chipmunks skittering away into the brush. Now and then, a trickling creek would cross our path. Salamanders sat, proudly perched on top of their rocks.

Suddenly, the trees began to clear. I reached the peak and stopped breathlessly. Nestled between the mountains were small towns and villages. A crystal blue river meandered through the valley below. The sky was cloudless, and lakes and ponds dotted the landscape. My friends arrived behind me and gazed out across the landscape in awe.

dupont state park

As we trudged down the steep path leading into the gorge, I heard the roar of the falls. We took a sharp turn, and there it was.

It was steep; water cascaded, tumbled, and slid down the massive, granite outcropping. On the right side, it was raging. Thousands of gallons seemed to rocket down the smooth slope. Part of the falls were in the shape of a ramp; water blasted off of it like a fire hose and rained down on everything below. A mist was born as the cascade of ice cold water slammed against the hard granite at the base. Like a moving cloud on a windy day, it rose up off the ground, creating a rainbow. The left side was calmer; a wide, fast stream slid down the dark granite.

A dark navy pool lay at the base of the falls, the edges a fiery orange created by the beaming sun reflecting off the yellow sand a foot or two below the surface. The pool was surrounded by boulders of all shapes and sizes.

A wide, energetic river lay below the pool. It gurgled, twisted, and turned between the cold, wet stones. Small ripples danced across the water. The river then calmed to a steady, glistening flow. It was almost a shame to disrupt its beauty as we flipped off the banks, destroying the pristine, fragile surface. Stones and pebbles dotted the bank and the bottom of the river. I watched the dark outlines of camouflaged trout hovering just above the bottom as they lay in wait for prey.

big creek

Fly fishing is an art that takes skill, patience, and countless hours of practice to master. The lures, called flies, are made of hundreds of different materials, but mostly consist of bird feathers. The flies imitate aquatic and terrestrial insects, small fish, frogs, and anything else in the diet of the targeted fish species. The line on a fly reel is thick and heavy, but the type we were using floated. Fly line has to be heavy because it's used to cast flies that are practically weightless. In order to attach the minuscule flies to the end of the line, I had to use a tapered leader. These leaders were clear and tapered to the base where I tied on my fly. The fish were unable to see the leader, which resulted in them seeing only the fly bouncing along with the current. This is a popular way to catch trout in the Smoky Mountains.

As my dad and I walked down the path along the river, we scoped out the best place to start fishing. In November in the Smoky Mountains, the trees were just starting to lose all their fiery leaves. The air was moist and pure. My ears were filled with the sound of the easy flowing river and the crunch-thud of our wading boots on the path. We had our vests full of flies, our rods and reels, and our polarized sunglasses to help cut glare on the water.

We found a worthy spot to start fishing, and waded into the river, slowly making our way upstream. I selected a fly called a midge out of my fly box. It's one of the insects that hatch in the fall, loved by the trout. I finished tying on the midge and searched the water for fish. I fixed my eyes on some large, submerged rocks that formed a trench. In this trench was a school of tightly packed, nicely sized rainbow trout. "Dad!" I exclaimed, "Look there!" I jerked my pointed finger towards the fish.

My dad looked up from his drifting fly and smiled. "There's some nice ones in there."

For a while we switched up flies, experimenting to see which ones the fish would eat. Trout are finicky and can be spooked easily; sometimes they even refuse to eat. Finally, after about twenty minutes, my dad selected a fly called a Brassie that I had tied myself back home. He cast about ten feet above the pool and let his fly drift down just under the surface of the water, right between the two rocks. A large fish inched forward and seemed to inspect his fly. After several seconds he slurped it into his mouth with minimal effort. "Yes!" my dad yelled as he fought the fish, and then reeled in the fifteen inch rainbow trout. Rainbow trout are a gleaming silver with a pinkish red line down each of their smooth sides. They're covered with small specks, usually black or brown, that fade towards their stomachs. The trout glistened under the sunlight as my dad held it, half in and half out of the water. I looked on as my dad admired his catch.

"You just got lucky," I mumbled in a teasing manner.

I took out my fly box and selected the fly my dad had just caught his fish on; it failed to work for me. Next, I tried a fat, fuzzy fly called a Woolly Bugger. I casted with precision, placing it perfectly between the fish. I then hooked a powerful thirteen inch trout. I played the fish for a while so it didn't break the extremely

thin leader. Playing the fish is a technique that tires the fish out. I scooped it up in my net. After admiring it, I released my fish and casted again.

“I got another one!” I yelled as I hooked a second trout. My dad watched me catch two more fish with no success of his own. He progressed downstream to a different pool. I could see him standing on a rock, scanning the water for fish. He was determined, his strong jaw clenched tight and his head poked out like a hawk searching for prey. After no further success between the two of us, we headed back to the car, satisfied.

life off the worn trail

m. fibonacci

OVER THE YEARS, I SPENT SO MUCH TIME CAMPING beneath towering pine trees and above sweeping valleys that I am almost more comfortable there than in my real home. I could navigate Yellowstone National Park at night better than my bedroom. Out west and in the mountains was where I lived, and burrowing into a sleeping bag because of altitude-induced cold was what I lived for.

awe

I plodded along the curving mountain trail at a steady beat, with the occasional syncopated step caused by something blocking the place my foot meant to fall. The group consisted of my three brothers, my only sister, my dad, and myself. As we closed down on the end of the short hike, a young me complained about the speed of our walk, and got put in front to set it. After a few minutes of lackadaisical hiking, my dad informed us that the end of the hike followed right after a wide, U-shaped curve into the mountain side, then one more around a rocky corner into the parking lot. I sped up slightly, ready for the cool AC that awaited me in the car.

As we came up on the last curve, Adam, my closest sibling in age, pulled ahead of me slightly, no longer having to walk slowly to keep up with a young leader. My gaze was fixed on the complex pattern of roots in the tan soil, and I didn't take note of anything that wasn't on the ground in front of me. As I placed my feet into the gaps between the overgrown roots, a pair of feet came into view. I recognized the shoes as Adam's and thought nothing of it until I noticed they were stationary, and trembling slightly. I glanced up to see the reason the group was halted, and my annoyed frown turned into an open-mouthed gape when I saw the cause of the halt.

The huge black form seemed to absorb light, and her mouth was parted slightly, letting out a heavy pant. Behind the sharp, pointed snout was a pair of huge brown eyes. Ears poked out of her head in the only cartoonish feature about her. A cub followed, still brownish in color as a result of its adolescence, shuffling its short legs to keep in step with its mother. She turned her head toward Adam and me, and for a moment the Earth stopped rotating. The air was so thick that my body didn't respond, and I stumbled backward as slowly and steadily as my jerky muscles would allow. As soon as I had retreated into line with the rest of my family, we stood still, waiting to see how she would act. My heart was beating in my ears, and I felt sure she could hear it. After an eternity, she tossed her head forward, plodded down the steep face, and crossed a small, babbling brook. After she and her cub had moved well on, we resumed our walk toward the parking lot. As we turned the corner, a crowd of people were waiting, all shouting what was about equal to, "Did you see it?" For the first time since the event had transpired my face changed from a open-mouthed look of shock to a broad grin.

"Yeah," I declared. "We saw it."

fear

The road underneath the car grew older and progressively more forgotten as we drove into the plains. I stepped out onto the dull, cracked asphalt and inspected the surroundings. We had parked in the one section of shade that provided a break from the unrelenting heat. As I looked to the left, the few trees that had remained fell off into stretching plains with rocky hills on both sides. Short shrubs stood to the sides of me, and a tumbleweed was snagged on a thorny bush, preventing its roll. At least in the unrelenting heat, we wouldn't have to deal with clichés. Our hike started by a wooden post that was driven into the ground and attached with a short message from the park rangers about leaving no trace.

As we stepped onto the strip of tan dirt that cut through the shrubs and short grass, we heard a loud squeak echo through the dry valley. After this first squeak came another and then another.

As we looked around, we saw a small army of prairie dogs, half-way out of their hole, staring at us and occasionally opening their mouths slightly to let out a shrill cry. We walked through the verbal assault, and as we grew out of range, it quieted. This promised to be an interesting hike, as wildlife in the badlands of North Dakota included prairie dogs, buffalo, and, most mysteriously, wild horses. We walked on, and the land did not disappoint. Less than halfway through the four and a half mile hike, we came to a lone buffalo, hiding from the sun under a rocky ledge. As we posed in front of it from a couple of hundred yards away for pictures, we realized something sad. He looked to be an old male who was driven out of the herd. We walked on, and just as we turned a corner around a small buttress, we saw them. A group of five wild horses stood proudly atop a cliff face. They grazed on the thin grass and trotted along the ridge. They had an unsheathed energy that had long since been bred out of domesticated horses. Their coats shone in the high noon, reflecting the smooth colors. There was one majestic black horse that stood among the others. I chuckled.

“Black Beauty,” I said to myself.

As we reached about the halfway point of the hike, we crossed another trail. We were confused by the piles of stones that are universally known by hikers as a trail marker, and we went down the wrong side and off the trail. Not realizing our mistake, we moved on through the shrubs and searched for the creek crossings the park ranger had described. We came to a quickly flowing shallow creek with a muddy bottom, and decided it must be the crossing. A number of stones poked out of the top of the creek. Some were balanced precariously and required careful skips. A few of them required jumping onto sloped rocks that were slick with the water that would occasionally flow over. Needless to say, a number of us slipped off of stones and took a step into mud that sucked at our shoes.

As we continued to follow the false trail, we got more and more lost in the wilderness. Soon, we were pushing through overgrown thorns and fighting against the black flies that were biting incessantly. There were hordes of the viscous things, and they had a painful bite that was felt deep in the muscle. The worst part of the monstrous little beasts was that when you swatted at them, they didn’t stop biting. To get them to disengage from your skin, you

had to swat at them, and then flick away whatever vampiric parts were left.

We walked on, crossing the river many times and enduring the flies for what may have been hours. We had transformed a four and a half mile moderate trail into an arduous hike that may have exceeded seven miles of stomping through overgrown thorns. Several times during the ordeal, I nearly lost it under the mental stress of knowing I was lost. The heat reminded us that we had not brought water for seven miles, and it would not last forever. The flies were unrelenting and only got worse as the sun lowered. When we finally caught sight of the road over a hill, my brother Adam and I bent down and began bowing to the road in an only semi-ironic display of thankfulness. As we waited on the side of the road, thumbs thrust upwards, trying to signal down the few cars that passed by, the black flies were as prominent as ever. Our attention could now be turned fully to ridding the world of as many of these horrible creatures as we could before a red-faced park ranger saved us in a small, green pick-up truck.

peace

Though a hike in the plains can make nature seem a vicious leviathan, that is only true in part. Yes, nature has a dangerous side, ready to strike, but it also has a peaceful, monastic side. The natural world is home to a sanctuary in which I practically grew up. This sanctuary is the town of Aspen, Colorado, nestled in a shallow valley beneath snow-topped peaks.

We woke up early and packed into the car. It rolled into the shadow of the intimidating Aspen mountain. It stood above us, covered by trees with spots of grey rock like asphalt in a jungle. A large rectangular building stood at the foot, and grey steel cables extended up the side to an identical building at the top, with cables feeding into it. Boxes rode up and down, swaying slightly in the early morning wind. The top of the mountain was hidden daily behind a shroud of fog. My four siblings, my dad, and I hopped into one of the boxes and sat down. Two benches ran parallel at either end, and each had a thick, cushy pad topping the seat and the back rest.

The cable car started with a sudden jolt, and a slow ascent brought us up the mountain. We could see a few hikers who plodded along the meandering trail up the steep mountainside through the thin mist. They walked atop a thin cover of shale that coated the mountain. Trees stood at either side of the cable; a path was roughly cleared to provide the towers supporting the cables enough room to stand. As we reached the top of the mountain, we entered the thickest portion of the mist, and visibility dropped to roughly a hundred feet.

We all stepped gingerly out of the swaying car and onto the metal platform. Our shoes made loud clanking sounds, announcing our arrival. A first glance revealed the obvious tourist attractions that had taken the mountain's top. A fake rock wall stood to one side of the cleared space, and a gift shop stood across. A scenic outlook would be where we'd have lunch once the day wore on. We headed straight for our favorite pastime of the mountain: disc golf.

We each grabbed a scraped disk and a score sheet, complete with a stub of a pencil. We followed the crudely drawn map to the first hole. There were six of us on the mountain, meaning the game took a very long time. Most of the time was spent admiring the tall trees and discussing the trip thus far. The game was a tradition that was upheld until we stopped going to Aspen. It provided a good opportunity to get away from the urbanized image of "nature" that Aspen had tried to create. Everything in Aspen had become processed and packaged for the "nature experience." We always put forward a noted effort to stay away from the tourist attractions whenever possible.

As we neared the end of the eighteen-hole game, the mist started to clear, revealing the breath-taking view before us. Expansive mountains cut across each others' corners, some with steep, corniced, rocky overhangs that looked like scoops had been taken out of the mountainside. As soon as the mist cleared, visibility increased, and you felt as though the atmosphere was empty. It gave the impression that the horizon ended only when the curvature of the Earth stole away the distant peaks.

Taking this as our cue, we finished up the game and headed over to the scenic outlook for our picnic. To be honest, the view from the outlook was no better than the view from the woods, and

less-modest visitors dotted the telescopes. The one thing it did have was picnic tables, which came in handy when you didn't have a pre-made lunch and needed to build your own. We scarfed down the sandwiches and sipped on water from the bottles we brought.

The rest of the day was spent meandering through the last untouched portions of the peak we could find, scrambling over rocks and dodging trees. Though this was among the most heavily tourist-infested areas I had been to, it was one I regarded as special. On the slopes of the mountain, my siblings and I laughed and bonded, never voicing complaints about the conditions, but truly just relaxing.

return

Years passed, and children were sent to college. The homework load increased as we all moved up through school, and time for adventures to the west was scant. It felt like the end of the era that had started when I was only two. The thought of not being able to take long road trips was haunting, and I couldn't comprehend how anyone dealt with being stuck in one place. I thought the ties that held me to nature had been permanently severed, and all that remained was a number of old war stories. Then, in the winter of 2010, a glorious solution came into my life that rekindled my love for the natural world. Rock climbing.

Oddly enough, my pilgrimage back to the natural world began in a plastic arena. My brother Jonathan had come down from college in Boston for winter break, and as a treat, he would take us out to do something he had picked up in college. We sat through a fifteen-minute car ride to the closest indoor rock climbing gym we could find. As we turned sharply into the parking lot, we saw a building that looked the same as any warehouse. The one hint that something out of the ordinary lay inside was a sign reading "Vertical Climbing," which sat next to a sign for a bingo parlor. I stepped out of the car and looked up at the blank exterior wall. Spiderman figures were suspended from the ceiling by thin strings and could be seen through a window. I jogged up a shallow ramp and pulled open the double doors. The inside had what seemed like towering

walls, and a small cave nestled in the back. Everything had strange angles, and there was hardly a vertical wall in sight. Much of the first day was spent with Jonji, our nickname for my brother Jonathan, giving us a basic lesson in how to climb “correctly.” That first day was enough to get us hooked, and we had to come back for more. Initially, the blisters on our hands and the weakness in our muscles kept us at only the occasional visit. But over time, our hands calloused and our muscles strengthened, and we began looking for other gyms where we could go more often that were more cost efficient. We found one, and inside the walls of the Triangle Rock Club, we honed our skills. We worked diligently, over the summer coming more than five times a week, training hard, and learning new skills. We had improved enough to be ready for outdoors.

My dad called up a friend of his who lived near Pilot Mountain and climbed there, and she agreed to guide us. My brother Jonathan was back in town for summer and had brought a rope from Boston, so after a short trip to REI for supplies, we were ready. The car ride was two hours along bland highways, but right at the end, out of nowhere, it appeared. Pilot Mountain, standing above all other small hills. A large, rocky pillar, which was its trademark, emerged from the foliage on the mountain. I eyed the knob in anticipation. Noting my eagerness, my dad turned around.

“The knob is closed to climbing. You see that small bumpy ridge to the left?” he said, pointing at the mountain. “That’s where we climb.” I sat back, saddened, but excitement soon triumphed, and moments later, I was straining to see the cliffs we were to climb.

As soon as I got out the car, everything felt right. The wind came up the mountain, flowing from the valley below me. I was slightly above the cloud base, giving an interesting view of cottonball mountains that spread into the distance. The morning sun warmed my bones, and hawks played on the invisible thermals. Everything felt second nature to me as I picked up a backpack loaded with water, and started down the worn trail. After a short time, Cory, the friend who was guiding us, turned onto a barely visible path and left the well-marked trail. After five feet of walking, the trees cleared, and, suddenly, I was in open air. The valley below us was expansive. There were patches of developed farmland, and Winston-Salem sat on the horizon. The view seemed un-

natural at first glance, but as I stared at the outlook before me, the forest melted away, and all I could see was Aspen and the Rockies. I was home.

freshman
versus loss



forever? never.

kasey sorrell

1.

I NOTICED HOW DISTANT THEY WERE BECOMING. The two beds in their bedroom, the arguing. I saw it all. My dad began packing, as did my sister. I was waiting for a “family meeting” or something like that. Would they just leave? Or try to explain to me why they were packing? I don’t know what they were thinking. I don’t even know what I was thinking.

I just watched, as everything around me collapsed. My sister was the one who broke the news to me. “They’re separating,” she cried. I knew this was going to happen, I just knew it. I never wished any of this upon my family, for they were the best thing that had ever happened to me. Well, at least up until things started going bad. They all meant so much, I just wished we all could stick together. Love prevails, right? Wrong.

The tension in the house seemed raw. It was quiet, except when the subject of money was brought up. Money and alcohol were probably the reasons, I’m thinking, they got separated. It was clear; the separation was meant to be. I always felt that I was overreacting. I’m sure I was, I just couldn’t dare believe it. My mom was always teary, and my father was always stressed. I tried to give them space, thinking it would help the situation, I really did. But I did not succeed. There was just no stopping it. That was it. Over. Done. And just like that, my world crumpled.

My sister decided to move in with my dad, who she thought would give her more freedom, which was wrong as well. Sure, he let her do stuff that my mom wouldn’t, but he’s a great father; he wouldn’t let her do anything that would lead her the wrong way in life. I decided to live with my mom due to the fact that we were closer at the time.

Divorce is defined in the dictionary as ‘total separation.’ That’s for sure. My family went off in different directions, totally sepa-

rated. It was hard getting used to not seeing my sister or dad everyday. It was just impossible to stop. I understood, though: if you don't love someone, you leave. The word is rather complex. Love. You can't see it, touch it, or feel it.

Their rooms were clear, and the car had left. Then I knew this would be the first of many unfortunate events to come.

2.

"How do you like it?"

"It's pretty cool, I guess," I replied. His new apartment smelled of wood and cleanser. His bright blue eyes seemed relatively happy to see me, and of course, his curvy smile somewhat showed it as well. He shifted over to the kitchen to check on the boiling pasta. He's always been great at making spaghetti.

You could tell he was still upset at seeing me only once a week. His awkward movements shifted towards the TV; he attempted to change it to something I like. It was very quiet in the apartment—well, at least until my sister got there.

"I'm back!" my sister yelled as she's walked through the front door. My dad glanced up at her with a grimy look. I'm glad I wasn't the only one who noticed her shady boyfriend standing in the doorway behind her.

My dad's hair, mustache, and small beard were turning rather gray. He couldn't keep still, like he was distracted. The supposed whites of his eyes were a light shade of red. He opened his pursed lips to tell us it was time for dinner. His eyes seemed stressed. I figured I shouldn't comment. His tall figure stood beside me and watched as I scooped some pasta for myself out of the pan.

It was soon time to leave this relaxed environment. I would be heading back home with my mom. Her car pulled up, and she honked twice, just to be sure I heard her. I hugged my dad goodbye and headed down the steps. Trips to his house always made me—and I'm pretty sure him—happy.

3.

It was the call. The call that I knew would change everything. We had been expecting the call. There were full boxes already lying around our empty house. After my dad moved out, no one was paying the bills. This was the call that told us of the foreclosure.

Mom broke down crying. The home daycare she had been running ever since I was born would soon close down. The children just watched as their 'Miss Jane' stood still, crying. Confused and seemingly sad faces viewed her from afar.

There is no telling how fast tears can spread and conquer your emotions. Before I knew it, I was crying. Our house had been foreclosed. The house I've lived in since my first breath. I became so attached to its big backyard, its comfortable carpet. I was upset. I knew we'd have to leave sometime, but I just wasn't ready. Thirty days, that's all I had left of my family, my home, and my neighborhood friends.

We had moved all of our things into the new house: beds, clothes, computers, couches, TVs, and much more. It was our last day there, so I just lay on the empty floor and wandered around the quiet backyard. This was goodbye to all of my childhood memories.

4.

While moving into our new house, my mother's and my relationship had been simply torn, like a sheet of paper. Once it's torn, there's no way of putting it back together. The family I knew became the family I once knew.

Moving in was chaotic. We had so much stuff, we could barely fit it into the little space we had. I kind of enjoyed the house as it was: empty. There was nothing in the way, nothing to walk around. It was obstacle-free.

Unpacking with my mom was like getting ready for school to start back up again after a long, relaxing summer. Of course, I was dealing with both at the same time. You have to buy new things, get used to the schedule, and there's always that pressure of timing. You have a ridiculous amount of stuff to do in very little time.

We began to argue more and more, even over small things like laundry and dishes. Nights like those were very quiet. I'd always just say, "Okay, whatever," and walk into my room. I was a bitter, young kid. I always worried what other people were thinking, and I was annoyed with everyone and everything. I was a Debbie Downer most of the time. We were both very sensitive and never failed to hurt each other's feelings.

Eighth grade was coming up, and Mom was trying to find a job. Both of us were stressed and alone. I thought I was "too cool" to hang out with my mom. Plus, I didn't think I would ever be able to call our house home. I hope she knows that I never meant to hurt her.

5.

My soccer team had just won our game; I kept looking at the stands and in the parking lot. I noticed my dad parked out there, sitting in his car, avoiding my mom. I heard my sister yelling her simple cheer like, "Go Kasey!" . . . *She's unbelievably loud.* Her brown hair has been dyed so many times, I'm sure you can find each shade somewhere around her head. This would be goodbye for both of them. My sister would be moving to Pennsylvania, and my dad would be moving to Indiana.

I slowly walked off the field, sweaty and hot. I tried to procrastinate, keeping them a little longer. This was the last moment I would be with them physically until who knows when. I held in all my tears as my sister let go of hers. There she stood, sobbing. Her bright eyes were a sad blue, and her tall, skinny figure was slouched.

"Bye, Kase." She hugged me. "I love you." I thought for sure I would start tearing up or something, but oddly enough, I didn't. I walked up to my dad and gave him a small, yet sincere hug. He handed me a twenty dollar bill.

"Have fun, I'll miss you. Text me once a week, please!" he told me. I told both of them bye. My dad stood tall and teary-eyed. We went to our separate cars, and headed off.

That was the hardest part. I don't like seeing people I love cry. It's all I thought about on the way home. The car was silent except

for the dim music in the background. I was alone with my mom; she was sad to see my sister go. I didn't know the next time I would be able to see her or my father.

I still wasn't sure about my new house or my new way of living. I've been questioning myself, and everyone else since the beginning. But after a while, you just have to let it go.

life without chuck

anitra allen

SINCE MY DIAPER YEARS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN ME AND MY MOTHER. So when my father decided to come around for a short period of time, it shocked me. Reacting happily to this event remained hard for me until his arrival. We were never as close as we should have been. These next few months headed towards a emotional roller-coaster, and I was unprepared for this extremely long ride.

1.

Chuck Herring was a tall, mocha-colored man. His hair was curly, favoring one of Michael Jackson's earliest hair styles. Chuck was a laid-back, down-to-earth type of person. He was also a liar; he lied right through those perfectly white teeth of his. Chuck Herring is my dad.

I was going away for a whole weekend to spend time with him. I knew it was a lie. Yes, I was going to Raleigh, but no, I wasn't going to be with my dad. Instead I was going to be with my stepmom, half-sister, and my stepmom's sister and her two kids, in their house. Slamming my hand down on my dresser out of total anger made me burn myself on the zebra printed flat irons. This was a sign. This weekend was going to be terrible.

After hours of waiting and changing outfits just so I could look great for my dad, it was finally time for me to head off for Raleigh. I kissed my mom goodbye which was unusual because I never did that. I was really nervous, at this moment I would do almost anything to stay home with her. Walking out of the house with my head down was a bad idea. It only lead to questions from my stepmom. She had come to pick me up. My dad was no where to be found. It was just like him to send someone for his child. But now I didn't even feel like his child. I felt more like a piece of trash.

I wasn't nervous, but some type of feeling did circulate through my body. I wanted to cry, scream, run, fight. Too bad I didn't let my anger get the best of me. Maybe if I would've acted crazy, my dad and stepmom would open their eyes to see that I am important, too. The ride to my dad's house made me feel like I was on my way to war. Most of the time I exaggerate about my relationship between me, my dad, and his other family. This time was different. The feeling of being trapped somewhere that I didn't want to be was the worst. I didn't want to be here with my dad or with his big, happy family.

Me and Tina didn't arrive at my dad's house. We pulled into a rocky driveway that lead to a big, beautiful home. My eyes became as wide as the great blue sky. Shiny white paint covered the outside of the house, reminding me of the fancy houses I often saw when riding past rich neighborhoods. Did my dad move without telling me? If he did, this was definitely the icing on the cake.

Getting out of the car, I slammed the black rusty door to give Tina a hint that I felt mad. I didn't bother to ask any questions. I wanted to be surprised when my dad told me that this beautiful house became his new home. Unfortunately Tina ruined that surprise. She told me that this wasn't her and my dad's new home. We were only meeting up with a couple of family friends to go shopping at local flea markets. They were taking me shopping, and I couldn't believe it. My dad never spent money on me unless it was a holiday. Maybe Tina and my dad did open their eyes. Perhaps I finally decided to close mine.

Going out this weekend with my dad's family and his friends wasn't bad. In fact, it felt great. For once, I felt like the best thing that had ever happened to him. When going there Friday, I immediately wanted to leave; I absolutely didn't want to be there. Now was Sunday and I didn't want to leave. My dad was taking me home, and I knew it would be a long time before I saw him again. Him finally driving me home instead of his wife meant a lot to me. This made me feel like my dad did care, and he did actually love me. Maybe I was being overdramatic; it made me feel bad. I shouldn't have judged him. Just because he wasn't there for me, doesn't mean he didn't care or that he doesn't love me. Somehow it was love—in disguise.

2.

"So," he said, "what are you going to get out of here?" His deep voice waited for an answer.

"I don't know yet," I answered. "Whatever I like." This awkward moment made my skin crawl because my father and I never really had conversations with just the two of us.

"Come on," he replied.

I got out of the car patiently because I didn't want him to notice my excitement. I'd rather just seem calm.

My dad's Blackberry rang. He looked at his phone. I loved my dad's phone; its perfect keyboard always caught my eye. The shiny letters made my fingertips tingle. His little brown eyes studied the phone carefully.

"Hello," he said. "Nah, I'm with my daughter. Let me call you back."

"Who called you?" I questioned.

"Nobody important," he replied. My dad and I entered the store. Walmart was always crowded, no matter what time of day it was. I glanced at my dad's curly black hair. The light beaming down on his forehead showed the beads of sweat running down his chunky brown cheeks. I watched the sweat roll down his temples to the tip of his chin. It was interesting watching him sweat. It was almost sixty degrees outside, and he was sweating like summer weather filled the air. I guess this is just another thing that happens to old people. Generally, I hated going into Walmart. The crying babies, noisy carts, and people talking loudly gave me a terrible migraine. But being with my dad was worth it.

Dad's strong cologne overwhelmed me. I felt like I needed a gas mask. It made my migraine worse. I didn't say anything, though. I wouldn't dare ruin this moment. I spotted a pretty zebra print backpack that I needed. Dad said I could get anything I wanted, so without asking I tossed the eye-catcher into the cart. I wasn't used to shopping with my dad, so after the backpack, we walked around the store for fifteen more minutes. I couldn't find anything else that I liked or needed. Finally I was ready to end this journey.

"Dad," I said calmly, "can we go now?"

"Yeah, let's go," he answered.

"Thank you for shopping at Walmart!" cheered an overly happy cashier. "Have a nice day."

Exiting Walmart, I frowned a little only because I knew that after this I probably wouldn't see my dad for a while. This was just one of his surprise visits that he did. I couldn't even imagine him stopping by tomorrow, or doing a surprise pick-up from my school.

I couldn't complain, though. I should have been used to this by now. It's been going on ever since I resembled the babies on the Gerber commercials. My dad hit the button to unlock the car. I threw the bag in the backseat as I hopped into the front. The ride home was short, and I desperately wished it weren't. Pulling into my mom's driveway, I could feel tears approaching. I didn't let the tears get the best of me. I didn't want my dad to see my cry. He always gave off the impression that he knew when I was happy and when I wasn't. He would probably think it was because of something else and not because of him.

"Bye, Dad," I said shakily. I leaned in for a kiss on the cheek, which I hated.

"Bye, baby girl," he mumbled. "Have a nice night."

3.

Not going to school today felt great, and my best friend, Krystal, being here with me made it even better. Today we were going to attend our eighth grade semi-formal. I had been waiting for this day since the first day of school. Tonight had fantastic written all over it. I could picture my dad dropping me and Krystal off at the main entrance, then kissing me on the cheek, and wishing me a great time.

Too bad that my fairytale entrance wouldn't happen. My dad had no time to take me to a silly formal. In this screwed-up fairytale, my Aunt Priscilla would take over my father's responsibilities. She would carry me and my best friend to our lovely event. Priscilla looked like a beauty queen. She had incredible brown skin, big brown eyes, and short black hair. Her fragrance lingered across the room whenever she strut by. Before tonight ended, I wanted to be as beautiful and confident as her. That would transform my nightmare back into a fairytale.

After Priscilla spread blush over my chunky cheeks, it grew closer to the arrival time.

“Anitra, smile!” yelled my overdramatic mother.

“You look so beautiful,” said my aunt.

For once, I felt like a true princess. My fairytale had taken a total U-turn from earlier that day. I felt great; my family provided me with tons of love and laughter. I didn’t need my dad to be here for me. More people replaced him. Entering the polished navy blue Toyota that feeling clung to my entire body. The ride seemed long, and I remained calm until we arrived. Then, my heart skipped beats, and, overwhelmed with anxiety, I inhaled a deep breath of air. Finally, after the long nerve-wracking hours, my night had begun.

4.

I haven’t seen my dad in some months now, so when he called my mom and said he wanted to come to visit, my mouth dropped to the floor. I pictured his curly black hairstyle, his beard, and his thick black glasses. When my dad looks at me I somehow become trapped in a box. The smudges on his glasses cancel me out. Looking at him, I feel invisible. He never looks me in the eye. Instead he looks over me. I wish he would clean those smudges; maybe then I’ll feel important.

He could pull off being known as Rick Ross’s twin if he wanted to. Deep down inside I grew happy that my dad wanted to come visit. He only lives a few minutes away in Raleigh. It only seemed like he lives hours away because he never bothers to come around. Hours had passed and my dad still hadn’t arrived. I held my ground though because he never came on time.

“Your dad is going to be late to his own funeral,” my mom declared.

My mom always says this when she thinks Dad isn’t going to show up. I agreed with her. There was no reason for him to be this late. Thoughts raced in circles around my head. I wondered if he bought me something, but it didn’t take three hours to do that. As I thought more and more about the situation it made me heated. Where could he be?

I thought about if he is going to surprise me with a new iPod touch. He should, I’ve been passing all my classes with A’s and B’s.

I deserved this reward. I was tired of waiting, and a nap seemed like the best thing to do.

Dad never showed up, and since that day I haven't seen or heard from him. I will always love my father. But loving him from afar would be the best decision I've ever made. I know that he will come around, but only when the time is right. Until then, I plan on waiting.

I might have saw an owl

laura chaparro

my grandmother

AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN IN HER LATE SIXTIES. Short black hair always tied back out of her face in a ponytail. She wore glasses and had a small face and a tiny nose. She was tall, thin, and looked as fragile as a baby deer. Her eyes were small and the color of chocolate. Her voice dragged when she spoke, but there was a warm comfortable sound to it. I didn't call her grandmother. I didn't call her by her first name, either. I respected her, so I referred to her as Ms. Carmen. Her food was cooked with love and genuine care. She bathed me with happiness, and she enjoyed my squeaky high-pitched laughs. She laughed soft and subtle, eyes closed as her big toothy smile grew across her face. She seemed happier than normal recently. Playing with the bubbles in the bath, I asked her about it.

"Well dear, I met this man, and he makes me want to do the jig twenty-four seven!" she replied. I watched her dress move smoothly in the air as it twisted back and forth with her moves. Giggles echoed through the house, and my drenched hair dripped as I joined her in dance. My cold wet feet touched the warm carpet as I stepped out of the bathroom and ran to my bedroom, where Ms. Carmen dried my hair and dressed me in my pajamas. A glass of warm milk and Oreos awaited me by my bed. Ms. Carmen sat me in the bed as we had our quick snack then tucked me in under the plush quilt. Everything seemed to grow calmer as I lay down. She sat in a wooden chair beside my bed and watched as I floated off into dreams.

in the motel room

I crouched on the edge of the sidewalk as the adults conversed loudly in the dank, sketchy motel room. One of the lights on the

sign had neared died out. The room number on the door was suppose to read E64, but it read E 4. The adults creaked open the door a little bit then slid through like mice, as if hiding something in the room.

It smelled awful when the door opened, a stench of rotten cheese, sweaty socks, and molding fruit, almost as if something had died in there. My mind loves jumping to conclusions, so I just let the thought drift away.

The sky had begun to darken; meanwhile, cops came out and escorted everyone to their cars. I followed my mom, trying to grasp her hands. A reflection shined off her face. A river flowing down her soft plump cheeks.

My hands went numb like I had symptoms of frostbite. I shoved my cold hands in my pocket and hung my head like a rag doll. I kicked the dirt and it jumbled around as I sped up, noticing my mom slamming her door closed.

“Let’s go, darling,” she said with a trembling voice that made me quiver. The whole ride home I traced the cracks in the streets with my eyes, letting them wander the flaws of the road as we drove over them. I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for my mother and I wanted to ask why she sobbed so terribly. My mind decided I should ask her what stayed on her mind and in that motel room. At the same time, my heart decided that I should let her calm herself and wait until afterwards to figure out the story behind this mess.

surprise encounter

“Are you ready?” questioned my mother as she fixed the smooth ribbon in my long, dull hair. We were standing in by the car parked in front of what seemed to be an old church that I used to go to every Sunday. I wondered why I was dressed up. I walked to the doors of the church with a long, white dress that made me look like I was floating. I forced open the elegantly carved wooden doors with all of the strength in my scrawny, limp arms.

“Mom, what are we going to see in the church?” I looked around. Bright, eye-catching lights filled the room and showed every flaw in my skin. I saw lots of friends and family members sitting in the

church. The women were hysterically crying while the men were consoling them with boxes of tissues and uplifting words. There lay a big pile of flowers on top of a box. I hovered toward it.

“Stop!” my mother yelled. Creeping my eyes over the edge and into the box, I saw a recognizable woman, with soft worn eyebrows that were lowered. The woman seemed like she was in slumber. I looked at her from head to toe, and saw the pale and chalkiness in her skin. With my curiosity, I poked her arm and felt a chill tremble through my sensitive, fragile body.

It was a woman clothed in a long, flower-patterned dress; one glance at her necklace and I instantly knew her. There were bruises on her face and legs. Cuts that seemed like they were never there before I recognized her. I felt a deep stab in my stomach in reaction to this shocking discovery. I could not believe it even if it slapped my face and I touched it myself. I licked my lips and tasted salty water. Wiping my cheek, I found the backs of my hands were wet. I turned away, feeling like the next one to be in that coffin was me.

justice for all

It was the day of the trial. I was dressed in a magenta sweater with jeans as I clomped around in big, heavy, yellow and purple zig-zagged rain boots. My mother said, aggravated, “Laura, could you please sit down?” Sitting in this waiting room with white, smooth, blank walls made me yawn. I was tired yet eager for what we came here for. I wanted justice. I wanted him to pay. I wanted revenge not just for me, but for the whole family.

He had taken the person most dear to me. She was not family, though she felt like it. She was caring and genuine to everyone. I felt like an awful person for wanting that man to suffer in a cell for a lifetime. Even if he was a criminal, he was still a man. I had no choice. It felt like the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do.

Deep in thought, I realized what the murderer must have felt. Why do murderers do what they do? Life was gifted to an amazing person, and, as easy as that, in a blink of an eye, it was taken by a person so evil and empty-hearted. Murder is cruel and evil.

That woman loved you and took care of you, and you still wanted to take advantage of her. My life would have been different if you did not meet her. Her life would still be here if you did not meet her.

I wanted him to feel sorrow and regret for the things he had done. I felt absolute anger towards this man I had never met or talked to before. Actions spoke louder than words or first impressions if you ask me. I did not have to meet him. It would disgust me even more to see his face or establish a connection to this person. The thing that bothers me the most is what went through his mind in those moments. Was he ever really in love with her? Could you kill the person you love for something as simple as money?

one less pair of shoes

jessica miller

this was my mother

HER BLUE EYES WERE TRAINED ON THE ROAD. I watched my mom's face as she coasted down the fairly crowded highway. The sunshine bled through the smudged and finger-printed car windows, accentuating her mildly greasy hair and lackluster blue eyes. They were the same as mine, yet different somehow—sadder.

"Mom," I said, in a cautious tone.

"Yes?" The monotone of her voice frightened me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she lied.

"I'm not stupid," I said matter-of-factly, sitting up in the passenger seat, facing her directly, ready for battle. I asked again, "Something happened. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Jessica!" I could see it in the way she kept her eyes trained on the bumper of the car in front of us instead of looking at me when she spoke. I could see it in the way her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel tighter and tighter with each passing inquiry.

"Mom! Just tell me!" I said, my voice frantic.

"I'll tell you when I'm ready."

"I knew it. Why can't I know?!"

"Because I'm not ready to tell you. Now, enough."

I threw myself back into the recesses of the seat, slouching, arms crossed and eyes blazing, angry for not being let in on the monumental secret. I wanted to help her fix whatever was bothering her. I'm protective of people I care about, and this was my mother.

just another fall day

It had been frightfully cold for October. I'd spent all of two seconds moving from the house to the car, and the crisp, dry wind had chilled me to the core. Not that it mattered. I had already grown numb. I stepped into the passenger seat, setting my bag at my feet. The heat from the vents rolled over my pale skin. There were three empty tissue boxes laying on the floor next to my bag and an abundance of used tissues that Mrs. Reid had tried to contain in a plastic bag. The drive lasted about forty-five minutes, and other than a hello, an apology, and an explanation for all the tissues, we didn't talk much. We let the radio DJ fill the silence because neither of us knew how to proceed verbally.

Kassie hadn't been in the car. It was just her mom who had come by on her way from the airport to pick me up. She seemed nervous . . . like she didn't know how to act around me anymore because of the divorce. Like she needed to step carefully to avoid shattering me into a million pieces. That was okay with me. I didn't really feel like talking.

When we turned into their neighborhood, I think we both relaxed. Mrs. Reid told me that Kassie would be home when we got there. I nodded, smiling weakly. I loved how no matter what happened anywhere, there was always someone somewhere else whose life just kept marching on. I was greeted by the sight of my best friend walking down the block, her Northface zipped all the way up, shielding her mouth and nose from the cold. Her hands, covered by mismatched gloves, held two leashes, a dog walking energetically at the end of each. Mrs. Reid pulled over a bit and I got out to walk with Kassie and the two dogs. Her mom drove off, and we just stood there. I think she expected me to burst into tears right there on the side of the road, like you'd see in a movie, but I just stood there.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah I'm fine."

She looked at me like she knew something about me that I didn't. I hated it when she gave me that look, but I didn't hold it against her this time. She couldn't understand what I was feeling, I don't think anyone really could. I rolled my eyes and hugged her, cutting her off, as she was about to start lecturing me on how it was okay,

that I was not fine. We linked arms, and walked the dogs back to their house in a familiar, comfortable silence, going out of our way to step on crunchy fallen leaves, as if it were any other fall day.

9:21

I had been in my room most of the night, confined in a jail cell of creme-colored walls and dim lamplight. She appeared in my doorway, a ghost of the mother I once had. She hovered there. She appeared blank, absolutely void of emotion.

“Do you want to talk now?” she asked. I looked at her from the vantage point of my bed. Nodding, I got up and followed her down the hall. I had noticed my father drifting. He wasn’t around when we wanted him. He wasn’t around when we needed him. I had learned to not expect him to be at dance recitals or soccer games. I had adapted, and that’s all there was to it. I was never very close to my dad, but I won’t deny that we had had some good times. I thought back to when my mom told Alex. Tears sprung to my eyes. Alex, my seven-year-old brother, was close to him.

It was the day of the ultimatum, the “you need to be completely moved out by seven tonight” day. It was a Tuesday, the night when my mom, my brother, and I went to have pasta with family friends. We left the friends’ house around nine thirty. I knew that when we got home, there would be one less pair of shoes by the door, that there would be one less toothbrush on the bathroom counter, but Alex didn’t know. We were driving up a street close to home when my mom turned down the music and looked at my brother in the rearview mirror. He had been humming along with the music, nibbling at a cookie that he had saved for the ride home while lightly kicking the back of my seat. I tried to block out the words that were slipping from my mother’s mouth. Then the kicking stopped.

I turned around in my seat, and saw the shocked look on my brother’s face. Then he smiled and laughed a little bit. “You scared me. I thought you were serious!”

Tears blurred my vision. I faced forward again, biting my lower lip and trying not to cry. My mom explained how they were getting a divorce. Half of the cookie in his hand crumbled and fell to the

floor. I could tell he was holding back tears. He shook with the effort to keep himself composed. I unbuckled and climbed into the back seat, wrapping my arms around my little brother, feeling him breathe in short bursts, then deeply, trying to control himself. As I held him, I tried to subtly wipe away a single tear that had formed in the corner of my eye.

Now, I was following her down the hall, walking toward the end of everything. She sat down on the couch, its worn threads supporting her, keeping her together at the seams. She motioned for me to sit down next to her. With each slight movement, I grew more and more anxious. I was second-guessing myself. She was going to tell me, whether it was something I wanted to hear or not. I became the prisoner, chained to something terrible that I couldn't identify.

I placed myself next to her on the couch. I did not face her. I faced forward, bracing myself. I kept my eyes on the clock. She explained to me how my father wouldn't be living with us anymore. Renegade tears escaped and raced down the side of her cheek. She continued, saying that things wouldn't change too much, that I would still be able to see him.

I didn't care. I wasn't listening anymore. I stoop up, fists and jaw clenched, and walked back to my cell, leaving my mother crying on the couch. It was 9:21 p.m.

and that's the way the cookie crumbles

We had been sitting silent in the car. Trees were passing by the window in a blur of brown and red. I hardly noticed what was going on around me. I was lost in thought. I felt like I was supposed to be more upset than I actually felt. I had cried, I won't deny it, but sometimes I have no idea why. I had let myself cry. Against all odds, I really didn't care that much, and that worried me.

a son's sleepless nights

pmw

family

THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED. My mom stood there for a second, shocked. She was a slender woman, not too tall, not too short. Her dark hair was cut short around her head. Her green eyes filled with pain as she collapsed on the couch. I had no idea what to do, being four or five years old. Tears rolled down her pale, white cheeks. She had taken her glasses off. I rushed over to her and gave her a hug because I knew that was what she would do for me.

She eventually calmed down. She looked at me and whispered, "It's going to be okay." It sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as me. She stood up from the couch, and the old springs creaked. She sent me to my room after that.

I looked out the window. It was the end of a beautiful summer day, with the sunlight just dappling the grass and trees, and the sticky pine sap beginning to roll down the tree trunks. I could hear my mom crying again and talking to her friends on the phone. Without knowing it, I drifted off to sleep.

I was woken up by a big slam. I thought it was my mom walking outside and closing the door too hard, but it was my dad. Judging by his tone of voice and the way he was talking to my mother, he was still mad. He stomped back to his room and packed a bag full of his clothes, and then left the house. I didn't understand it. I thought that my dad was being forced into a business trip or something that he didn't want to do. As it turns out, this changed for my mom's benefit, and he never came home after that. My mom cleared the rest of his stuff out of her room, and we carried on without him.

a new home

It was a long drive to my grandma's house, way back in the woods. Well, at least it felt like it was at the time. My dad was in the driver's seat next to me. He was not a big man, but he also wasn't weak. His hair was already starting to thin. We pulled up into the carport, and I cautiously got out of the car, not knowing what to expect. My dad unlocked the back door, and we walked in.

The first room we entered was the kitchen. It was spotlessly clean in an unusual way. Almost too clean. All the surfaces shone with the reflection of the overhead lights. The house had that old person smell about it, which didn't help my nerves about living here. My grandmother wasn't home, so my dad showed me around. He had grown up in this house and knew a lot about it. First he showed me his old bedroom where we would be staying. The door opened up to a large, open room consisting of two small single beds that were sagging with age but still looked comfortable. In the other corner of the room was a battered desk that had a computer on it. My dad said that I would use it. There was also a small living area that had a comfortable black vinyl recliner and a creaky love seat.

Then he showed me the basement bedroom that he had moved into when he was a teenager. It felt damp and was full of junk. I couldn't imagine him living down there. He showed me the full-length deck, which looked off into the woods. He walked me back through a sliding glass door and showed me the living and dining rooms. He showed me where his mom's room was, but he didn't show me inside because the door was locked. My dad said that the door would be locked every time she was out of the house. But I soon found out that I could crawl between two closets and get into her room without anyone knowing.

a night of darkness

"Alright, turn off that light." At my dad's words, I closed the book I was reading and clicked off the light. The room fell into instant darkness. I hated the dark. It seemed to press into your eyes

if you looked at it for too long. I always thought that I could see shapes and creatures forming in the dark.

Crack! My book fell off the bed, scaring me and causing my mouth to go dry. I could hear my heart in my ears. The gloom pressed in at me, and all sorts of scary things surrounded me. My ears pricked for the slightest sound, and my eyes kept scrutinizing every millimeter of the room, like prey trying to detect a predator. So great was my fear that I wished, not for the first time, that I was back in my safe and comfy bed at Mom's house. I wanted to turn the light back on and read myself to sleep, but I wasn't sure whether or not my dad was still awake. I tried to move across my bed to get a drink of water, but my bed creaked and squeaked loudly. I decided not to get any. I lay in bed for awhile, thinking about tomorrow. I would get up, and my dad would take me back to my mom's. Thinking about that took my mind off of the situation I was in.

I had just started to fall asleep when it happened. I had to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't get out of bed to go the bathroom, let alone even move an inch in the bed. *No*, I told myself, *I'm going to go to the bathroom*. I slowly swung my legs out from under the covers, the bed creaking and groaning. I hesitated. My feet hovered over the carpeted floor. What if some monster came and got grabbed me while I went to the bathroom? I let my feet touch the floor. Nothing happened. Emboldened by this, I ran to the bathroom, and a few minutes later, I was asleep, my bedcovers like a fortress around me.

regression

I wished that my parents lived together in the same home. As I got into bed at my mom's house, I couldn't believe that I had just turned four. My mom came into the my room to talk about her and my dad. I was so sad to hear her talk about the divorce even at that age. As she was talking I couldn't help but think about a happier time when I still had a family.

It was my third birthday. I was splashing around in the water like a pro, even though I had never swum before. My grandparents took a lot of pictures during those times. The pictures show a nor-

mal, happy-looking family that had no clue it was heading for such a sad time.

My mom stood up from my small bed, the springs creaking. “Okay,” she sighed. “I guess that’s enough talking for one night,” she said. “You want the fan on?”

“No,” I mumbled. I just wanted to go to sleep so I could go to preschool tomorrow and forget that all of this was actually happening. My mom turned the fan on, turned out the light, and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

I tried to close my eyes and go to sleep, but a scary feeling started to creep into my heart. I had to go to sleep at my dad’s house tomorrow. I had never liked going over to my dad’s house, or my dad’s mother’s house. It was always creepy over there, like no one actually lived there anymore. I wanted to close my eyes and go to sleep, but I couldn’t. Then I thought about how much fun I could have in preschool tomorrow and drifted off to sleep.

home again?

Several years had passed since my parents’ divorce, but my dad had only just bought a new home and moved out of his mom’s. We pulled up to the house, our car scraping the new driveway underneath us. The house was a Cape Cod style, green, and had no grass left out in front of it because of its recent construction. We walked inside. I had already seen the inside of the house before we moved the furniture in. But now the change was startling. It was just . . . different. It felt more like a home. There were two big difference between this one and my mom’s: this house had two stories, but it was also a lot smaller. The kitchen, living room, and dining room were all joined together to make one room.

I left my dad looking at the various kitchen appliances and walked up to my room. The bedroom itself wasn’t very big, but it did had an adjoining bonus room, which made it a lot bigger. It was colored pale blue, and when the light shone on the walls they looked like the early morning sky. There was no furniture yet except for my old bed tucked into the corner of the room with an overhead light above it. It was a nice cozy room and a nice house,

but I still didn't want to live there. I just wanted to live at my mom's house.

Several hours later, I was climbing into bed with a good supper resting in my stomach. I was tired and ready to fall asleep, but I was nervous about sleeping in this house for the first time. What noises would I hear? Would I be able to fall asleep? *I have overcome this problem before*, I told myself.

By following strategies that I have used and come up with in the past, I was able to overcome this and other obstacles that would be thrown my way by my parent's divorce. I would take it one step at a time. Those strategies would take me through the next couple years and probably the rest of my life.

The next morning, when my dad left the house, he slammed the door, causing the walls to shake slightly and reminding me of a day long ago.

a family affair

samone lunsford

IT WAS A CLOUDY DAY, and my mom had picked me and my sister up early from school. I tried to figure out why she was picking me up so early, but before I got to ask her, she just burst out in tears.

“Mommy, Mommy!” I shouted in a frantic voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, Mommy has some really bad news to tell y’all. I don’t know how y’all are going to deal with this, but I know I’m going to have to tell y’all sooner or later.”

“What is it? What is it?” we asked sadly. I knew that it had to be something really bad because I had never seen my mother cry like this before.

“Your father went to jail today.”

I just couldn’t believe it. *What could he have done to go to jail? Maybe he stole something, or maybe he had gotten into a fight?* “Mommy, what did he do?”

“Your daddy was involved in a bank robbery.”

My heart dropped.

I was shocked. He should have thought about the consequences for his actions. I know everyone makes mistakes, but this was truly one of his biggest.

Not seeing my father every day was hard. My daddy and I had a close relationship. He was like my best friend. He was always there for me. If I needed anything, all I had to do was ask him, and he would get it for me. If I needed a shoulder to cry on, he was always there for me to do so. All I did was stay in my room all day. I barely even ate. It was hard for me that first year.

* * *

A year and three months had passed since I had last seen my father. My mom knew that something was wrong with me because I wasn’t acting like myself. I was very quiet and kept to myself.

One day, she sat me down. She had a serious expression on her face. "Baby, I know you are really sad because you haven't seen your dad, so I am going to take you somewhere that's going to make you really happy."

"Where? Where?" I asked, bouncing slightly.

"I can't tell you!" she replied in mischievous voice.

We pulled up to a big, tan building. It had a lot of windows, and it was huge. "What is this, Mommy?" I said, jumping up and down. "Are we going to see Dad?"

"You'll see. Just be patient. I promise you and your sister are going to love it."

We went inside the building. My mom had to fill out some papers. After she filled them out, we had to sit in this waiting room until they called us. While we were in the building, I saw police officers. I had an idea where we were, but I didn't say anything. It took about ten minutes until they called us.

We took an elevator to the fifth floor, where there were windows and people sitting on opposite sides. The place was packed. We took a seat in one of the chairs. Out of nowhere, my dad appeared. I squealed. Tears of joy rolled down my face.

His face glowed with happiness like a shining star in the sky. He had on an orange jumpsuit. He had to wear the same kind of clothes everyday. My father was buff, and the waves of hair were neatly cut, showing his oval face with slim cheeks. I was so glad to see him, even though we were on separate sides of the glass. I wanted to reach out, but he seemed so far away, it was like trying to swim to the bottom of the ocean.

In order for us to hear each other, we had to talk through a phone. "How are my sweet little angels doing?" he asked.

"I'm doing okay, I guess. I really miss you! I've been having a hard time dealing with you being away from us."

"Baby, I miss you, too. Trust me, I'm having a hard time to dealing with it, too. I'll be out soon." My eyes started to water. I was upset that he couldn't come home with us when we left. I was thinking that my daddy would never get out. Just thinking that made me cry.

"Ma, don't cry," he said in a sad voice.

"Okay, Daddy," I said, wiping my tears away. We stayed there for thirty minutes. When it was time to go, I didn't want to. Mom

had to drag me and my sister out of the prison. We screamed and kicked, crying for our lives.

* * *

That night, my daddy called us. When we were on the phone together, we reminisced about the good times. My eyes started to tear up. I wished that he was home with us still. My daddy was like my best friend. We could talk about anything with each other. He always listened to what I had to say and he was always giving me good advice. He also knew what to say to cheer me up. It was hard for me to end conversations on the phone with my dad because we are always saying “I love you” to each other before hanging up.

* * *

We heard a knock on the door. I went running to see who it was, but when I opened the door, nobody was there. I just so happened to look down. When I did, I saw a big, brown, cardboard box. Wow, what could it be? I called my mom and sister in the living room. My mom read the package label.

“The box is from your father,” she gasped.

I was excited. My sister and I were anxious to see what our daddy had sent us.

We tore open the box and looked inside. We were surprised at what we saw. It was big and tan, with black trimming on the top. An oval shaped object with handles on each sides. On the object was a red flower located in the center with all of our names going around it.

We took the object out of the box. “My daddy made this vase!” I shouted. How could he do this? We were all were amazed. I felt like someone who’d just seen the ocean for the first time. I was glad that my dad thought about us and made this. *I love him!* I thought.

* * *

Daddy sends us letters at least three times a month. The letters he writes make me want to cry. He says the sweetest things

to us. My daddy always tells us that he is proud of us, and I am always happy to hear that. It makes me want to do more good things to make him even more proud of me.

* * *

We would have to drive for hours in order to see my daddy because he got moved to so many states. The most memorable state was Kentucky. It took us twelve hours just to get there. When we were inside the prison, my mom would have to fill out papers. After she filled them out, the sheriffs would call us to go through the metal detector. When we were all done, we got to go back there to see my daddy. They would take us to this big room with a lot of chairs. It had snack machines and a movie room for the kids.

In the prison, we got to be face to face with our dad. My adrenaline would rush waiting for my daddy to come out. When I saw him, my sister and I would run and jump into his arms. It made me happy just to touch him, kiss him, and hold him tight. It was one of the best moments of my life. My sister and I would fight about who got to sit on Daddy's lap first. Every time we had a conversation with him, he would always ask us to forgive him and tell us he was sorry for doing what he did, and not to follow in his footsteps.

He helped me to know that even though he was not with us, he still wanted us to do the right thing and make wise decisions. I will always thank him for being a good father to me and teaching me to do the right things and not to make the same mistakes as he did. I am very blessed to have a daddy like him.

forever friends

clare james

the news

“Pass,” I say, my hands reached out ready to catch the basketball. Michelle bounces the ball in my direction. I dribble and shoot but end up missing, sadly. I glance at Michelle, who is looking at her cell phone, her short black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. She’s wearing gray skinny jeans tucked into her black, ankle-high boots along with a green shirt that she cut along the bottom.

“How was school?” she asks.

“Eh, it was boring, as usual, but today, Mr. Sikes gave me two blue Jolly Ranchers, my favorite,” I gasp, breathless from chasing the ball down the street.

“Lucky. My teacher only gives out homework,” she sneers.

This was how a typical afternoon went for us, bragging about how great school was, or what the latest gossip was, or sometimes, we would just sit there and listen to the radio.

But this afternoon, Michelle, my next door neighbor and best friend, seemed different. I stood there watching her as she went to fetch the ball from the close patch of poison ivy, which I am deadly allergic to. She walked over, wondering out loud, “How can I be a basketball star and not make a single shot out here?” I laughed, telling her that in the gym the basket isn’t crooked and the net isn’t ripped. She gave me a funny look.

“Wassup with you?” I asked. “You seem weird.”

“Thanks,” she said with a sarcastic tone. “It’s nothing. . . . Well, when I called my mom last night, she said that she had gotten a job.”

“That’s great,” I say interrupting, getting ready to shoot again.

“Well, kinda. It’s in New York,” she said bluntly.

Right as she said that, I shot, and the ball went flying through the air, landing nowhere near the basket. I looked at her in complete shock.

"We're gonna be moving there in the middle of the summer."

"Oh."

What else could I say?

"And you can't tell anyone because we're still not sure about everything," she added.

We had played in this exact spot countless times, shooting the basketball or playing pretend. And now she was leaving?

"Clare?"

"What?" I blurted out.

"When are your ERB's?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Um, March, I think," I said.

How could she be so calm about this? I wanted to curl up and die, but she acted completely normal. I guess other people handle this kind of news better than me.

When it got dark, my mom yelled at me to come inside. I shot to my house like a race car, nothing in my way. I needed to be alone, to think this over for a while.

We had known each other since before kindergarten. Almost ten years. I could feel my eyes start to water. How was I supposed to go to high school without her? What about summer? No one to hang out with. I was feeling super bummed at this point. And I couldn't tell my mom or sister because she said not a lot of people knew and didn't want to make a big deal out of it until everything was for sure.

I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about her and New York, and how those two things didn't seem to fit together. I don't know how long it was before I fell asleep, but eventually I did, though I didn't sleep well.

here comes summer

As summer came, the temperature rose well over ninety degrees, and we both began to get ready for eighth grade graduation, one of the last milestones we would share before she packed up and left. Even though we went to different schools already, we liked to talk about how the teachers lectured us on education and what our friends wrote in our yearbooks.

I was over at her house a few days after, recuperating from the end-of-year dance and graduation itself. My eyes wandered around her clothing- and box-covered room. She got ready to begin packing up all her stuff, throwing things into piles. There was the Barbie lying there on the floor. We had cut her hair, and, to our disappointment, it had never grown back.

"So how was the dance?" she asked.

"Interesting. Deirdre and I danced like crazy!" I said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"Packing is hard."

"Well, that's 'cause you're a messy packer," I add.

I looked to my left, and on a little table lay a small, white photo album. I stood up and grabbed it. It was cold and dusty, looking as though it had not been looked through in awhile. I turned to the first photo. It was a picture of Michelle as a baby with her mom, dad, and brother. I turned the next page and there was a picture of Michelle, Anna, and our old neighbor, Josh, and me sitting inside a bounce house. We were giggling. I could tell because Michelle's almond-shaped eyes were squished by her chubby cheeks. I try to think of when this was taken and where. I kept scanning the picture, searching for clues, and there, on the side of the picture, were the woods. I knew right away that this was taken at Josh's old house across the street from Michelle's. It must have been one of our first neighborhood parties because there is a bounce house every year now. I keep flipping through the album. The rest were mostly family photos or pictures Michelle had taken.

The next few weeks went by like normal, and were spent going to the newly-opened Jewish Community Center, doing our nails, and listening to the radio.

one word I regret saying

I walked to Michelle's house taking the same path I have taken hundreds of times. But this time was different. My head down, it felt like there was nothing around me but two empty, cold, grey walls leading me to her back door. I walked onto her back porch and knocked ever so gently, trying to face what lay ahead. She opened

the door. We watched each other. Thousands of years seemed to pass, both of us waiting, thinking about the other one, memories flying through our eyes. She was in her red and black plaid pajama pants and a gray T-shirt. I was in my black leggings and a loosely fitted top, ready to sit in the car for five hours. I felt lost, like I had been wandering through a desert only to find nothing on the other side. Even though it was eleven a.m., it felt cold and dark.

Time began to freeze around me; this was the moment I had been dreading. Goodbye. A word we both have said at least two million times, but never in this context. Patrick the Cat began to rub my leg. I looked down, breaking the stony gaze between us.

She was the first to speak. "Do you wanna come in?"

"Yeah, I can only stay for a few minutes though. Aunt Mary is coming to pick Anna and me up to take us to the Outer Banks," I said monotonously.

"I am going to miss you so much!" she blurted out.

"Me, too!" I said, wrapping my arms around her.

We stood there for a while like that, holding each other, whispering to the other how much we would miss her, telling each other to Skype every night and text every day.

I heard a faint voice calling my name. It was my mom, telling me to come home. I hugged Michelle one last time, telling her I would text her when I got to the beach. She opened the door. I walked out, my head down so she would not see the tears building up in my eyes. I didn't look back. I just began to walk to my house. I knew she was crying too, and to see that would make the heart-break even worse.

I reached my house, glancing over at the basketball hoop at the end of our street, wishing we could play just one more time.

in a wink of an eye

gaby molina

This is dedicated to someone special who made my life change in one simple wink of an eye. Rest in peace, my beloved Mary-Ann Smith.

I.

WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, my biological parents and I lived in a small, blue, suburban house. From what I remember, my parents, Yolanda and Jose Luis, were the perfect couple. My mom had brown, short, wavy hair that went down to her shoulders. She stood around five feet two inches tall. Her oval face made her honey-colored eyes stand out, always matching her eyeshadow. She looked like she did when she used to work as the cashier at the store, unlike my dad, who dressed like a casual businessman with his brown-colored Dickie's brand pants and his fresh blue button-down shirt.

So what was wrong with them? My dad cheated on my mom. My mom knew about my dad cheating on her, but she decided not to confront him. He did it to her several times. She let my dad do this to her until she couldn't take it anymore.

"What are you up to?" my mom asked my dad.

He replied, "What are you talking about?"

"Don't act stupid with me, you know exactly what I'm talking about! All your late night coming to the house and all the women you be with. You think I haven't noticed yet?"

He looked shocked and stayed quiet for a few minutes. Finally, he responded. "I don't know what you're talking about." But my mom was persistent. My dad finally couldn't deny it any longer. He hit her.

He admitted that he had been with many women. But there was one thing that he said that never left my mind.

He said to my mother, "I no longer love you. I have fallen in love with another person."

My mom broke down in tears. I was five years old. I got scared and didn't know what to do. I remember what my mom and teachers told me: If there is anybody hurting you or your family members call 9-1-1 immediately.

When I called, a lady answered the phone. The lady on the line asked me, "9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

I told her, "I need the police to come to my house."

She responded, "Where are you at? Are you okay?"

I replied, "I'm at my house. My dad is yelling at my mom and hitting her. Yes, I am okay."

She asked, "Are there any weapons there, like a gun or knife? What is he hitting her with?"

"No," I answered. "He is hitting her with his hand."

She replied, "Okay, I will send a police officer there."

As soon as the policeman arrived they got my dad and took him to the police car. My mom and I were outside while they were asking her questions about what had happened and checking to see if she was okay. I could feel the cold windy breeze on me like I would feel during winter. The night was dark and cloudy, just like the ones that they would show in Michael Jackson's music video "Thriller." I remember seeing my dad being pushed into the police car. I started crying like a newborn baby.

I asked my mom, "Where are they going to take my dad to?"

She told me, "They are going to take him to jail."

At that moment, I regretted calling the police on my dad. I also felt sad, worried, and confused because I did not know what would happen next. I saw my dad crying. The last words I heard him say to me were "Go inside the house and don't forget that I love you, my little princess."

Those were the last words that I heard him say to me.

II.

When the problems were over and the police got everything handled, we had to go to court to decide who had custody of me.

We went to the Durham County Jail in downtown Durham. It took about two or three days until the judge finally made his decision. Custody was given to my mom. From there, my mom decided to go and live with her friend and my dad stayed in the suburban house.

During that time, my parents didn't see each other at all. I felt very sad and confused because of the simple fact that I didn't know what was going to happen with my dad. I asked myself, *Will I ever see him again?*

As the days went by, I missed my dad, but the place my mom and I stayed at didn't turn out to be so bad. It was a suburban brick house with nice, green, fresh-cut grass that stood out from the rest. I was able to hang out with the kids that were there. They helped me comprehend what was going on since they had gone through the same types of situations.

When we first moved in with my mom's friend, I felt kind of weird and uncomfortable because I did not know her like that. But as the days went by, I started to like it. About two or three months later, my mom found a place for us to stay. We moved to a yellow house that was in the middle of a Hispanic and black neighborhood. I liked the house because it was big, and I finally had a room to myself. I also liked how I was able to help my mom decorate.

As the years went by, my dad was out of the family picture. Until he decided to look for me.

When I heard my dad was trying to reconnect with me, I had all types of feelings. I was mad because several years had gone by, and he just now decided to look for me, but I was also happy because I felt that he actually did care for me.

My mom and dad talked about their problems and how it was affecting me. They came to the conclusion that I would be with my mom during the week because of the school I went to and on the weekends I would be with my dad. I was so happy to know that I was going to be with my dad again and that he was going to be in my life.

During the time we got to be together, my dad and I would go to the movies, Chuck-E-Cheese, restaurants, and other fun places. I would also take advantage of the time we had alone to ask him why he hadn't looked for me before and what it was that led to the divorce.

III.

While the days, weeks, months, and years passed by, my dad and I developed a better father-daughter relationship. Later on I would even be able to have sleep overs at my dad's house. During this time, my dad lived with my stepmom, Mary-Ann. She was a beautiful, slim, nineteen-year-old lady. She had delightful, shiny blond hair. Her eyes were hazel colored, and they stood out from the rest of ours.

When I first saw Mary-Ann, I thought she was going to be as mean and evil as the stepmom from Cinderella. As I got to know her more and started visiting her and my dad where they lived, I started to like her, and we got along. They lived in a medium-sized, brown cabin-type house. When I went over to my dad's house we would usually go out to restaurants, the movies, or stores to buy either clothes or toys for me.

I was around eight years old. It was always fun when I was over there. Even if we did not go out, we would sometimes order pizza and watch movies. My mom, on the other hand, was not accepting that I hung out with my stepmom and my dad at the same time. My mom was not very understanding. She didn't know my stepmom that well, and therefore she had no reason to trust her. However, I was able to understand my dad more as we spent more time together, and I started to forgive him. Later on, I saw that as time went on, my questions were getting answers. Then, in a wink of an eye, things changed. My mom and stepmom started to get along just fine. It seemed as if they had known each other since they were small.

My mom got pregnant, and she had my little sister, Maria Isabella. Since my mom did not have anybody to take care of her (I went to school and my mom worked), my stepmom volunteered to help. My mom accepted.

Mary-Ann had always had various types of sicknesses. She had diabetes, asthma, and many other problems. She would sometimes be good, but other times she would get very ill. She was always there for us. To show us how much she cared for my mom, my sister, and me, she would sometimes buy us things.

When Valentine's Day came, she took me to the mall. I remember she bought me a balloon that had music along with it. She also

bought me a teddy bear that I have to this very day. It is a white and pink angel. It has pink wings and a pink headband with white flowers on it and on each foot it says, "Wind beneath my wings." It also plays a song. All that I have to do is push the belly and the nice and peaceful song plays, reminding me of Mary-Ann.

IV.

Mary-Ann and I had good memories together. I remember how we used to play with Bebe, a small, white, cuddly, furry puppy. We would always take her out and play with her. But one day, during a family reunion, Mary-Ann got really sick and had to go to the hospital. The doctors were able to keep her stable for a couple of hours. Then, her body started to reject the medicine. Doctors found that she was getting worse every day. Five days passed and doctors said there was no chance for her to live.

One of her friends, Rachael, decided to take off the medications as well as the oxygen she needed to breathe. The doctors did as Rachael said, and Mary-Ann died. Mr. Smith, Mary-Ann's dad, called us letting us know that she had died. When my mom told me about that, I started crying as if I had been stabbed in the heart.

Mary-Ann meant a lot to me. She was there whenever I needed her during both the good and the bad times. I would tell her my secrets and things that were going on with me. Now who was I supposed to tell my secrets to?

We went to her funeral. She was only twenty-five when she died. She did not want to be buried, and her last will was to be cremated. Her ceremony was held just where her grandfather's ceremony had been five years ago. Family members from Virginia were there. I remember seeing my dad, uncles, aunts, and mom. While we were all walking to go inside, my dad told me, "Open the door."

I did just as he asked. When I had my hand on the brown wood door, just about to go in, tear drops started falling from my eyes, as if someone turned on a switch to force me to cry. I felt like passing out right there, but I was strong and decided to continue. We went into the room where the ceremony was to be held. People cried and said a few words to us after the priest was done.

The room was decorated in white with flowers on the sides. The seats had white curtained decorations. People were all dressed in black. There were pictures of Mary-Ann all over the place. Also, when everybody was done saying their last words to Mary-Ann, there was a slideshow of pictures of her from when she was a baby until she was a full grown lady.

V.

After the years went by, things were different for me. I didn't have my stepmom with me anymore. I stayed in my room and locked my door, and I would barely eat anything. I would also dress differently. I wore dark-colored clothes instead of the colorful clothes I used to wear.

Mary-Ann's death was a big hit for everybody in our family. It turned out that Bebe, the puppy Mary-Ann had, stayed with Rachael. I wanted to stay with Bebe, but I couldn't because the rules where we lived specified that we could not have pets.

I would still go and visit Mr. Smith every once in a while. I would go and see how he was doing, physically and emotionally. Sometimes I would even go and help him with his business. I would talk to Mr. Smith about Mary-Ann and what she was like growing up. He would tell me that she was tremendous, wild, and loved to have her own rules. She would also get in trouble in school, but deep inside of her, she had a loving heart. She cared about nature and about other people's feelings.

Now that I sit back and think about all the memories Mary-Ann and I had, my only regret was not being there on her last days of life. At least I have pictures of her, and the last flower that was given to me at the funeral.

Rest in peace, Mary-Ann Smith, wherever you are.

summer of 2009: life comes from death

daniel garcia

1. the news

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK were the only sounds I heard coming from the floor above me. My mother walked down the stairs in her silver-heeled shoes, white and brown Dashiki African top, and her white high-water pants.

“Mom, where are you headed off to?” I asked as she passed.

She replied, “To see Gerri at the hospital.” Mom paused while she packed away food for my relatives.

“Now, guys, make sure the house is clean! Your uncle—” The doorbell rang.

“I wonder who that could be?” I inquired.

My mom walked over to the door and opened it. There my cousin Josiah stood, peering into the house to see what we were up to.

“Hey, Joe, what’s up?” I asked.

“Nothin’ much,” he replied. “My dad says that I could stay here while your mom goes to see Gerri.” Hearing this, my brother Justin jumped up in down in excitement.

“Whoa, is that Gears of War Two?” Josiah exclaimed.

“Yes, it is,” Justin replied.

“Dude, let me play!” he demanded. Even though happiness seemed to be my emotion, the memory of earlier that morning caused me to still grieve over the loss of my aunt.

Rudely awakened by my brother at eight o’clock in the morning, I stormed out of the room. Entering the dark, I walked downstairs to find my mom. The only light in the gloomy living room came from the TV, which had been turned to Fox News. I found my mom laying down on the recliner in her pink robe. She had just gotten off of the phone with my aunt Bernadette.

“Daniel,” my mom called out.

“Hu-u-uh,” I yawned.

"Your aunt has died," my mom said.

With the look of disbelief in her eyes, her stuttering, but calm voice continued on, "Last night, at midnight, she went into cardiac arrest." My mom continued, "While walking to her bedroom." I just went into a state of shock as these words trespassed into my ears.

"What?" I yelled. "This can't be. We were just talking to her the other day. No, no, no!"

A tear trickled down my cheek. Our conversation had woken up my father. He grumpily walked downstairs to see what had caused the commotion. "What is going on? What's with all the noise?" he asked my mom.

"Janice died last night."

"Oh my god, no. You're kidding!" he gasped.

My dad instantly turned on the computer and went directly to Facebook. Seeing the amount of comments regarding the passing, he instantly believed what my mom had said.

How does cousin Lisa feel about her mother's passing? I asked myself.

"Danny? Danny! Can you hear me?" Josiah asked.

After realizing that I had been daydreaming, I instantly snapped back to the current moment. "Oh, sorry guys, I started to daydream," I stammered.

I realized that time drew near for my mom's arrival, and the house was in disarray. Panic swept across the three of us, and we scurried around to neaten up a bit.

Justin looked outside and saw that my mom approached the door. Of course, that made us panic even more! The door knob started to crank as my mom turned it. Perfection claimed the living room except for one small area on the carpet. Bits and pieces of paper and cracker scattered on the floor were one of the many things that my mom did not tolerate. Instantly Justin dove on the floor to hide the pieces. Fortunately, we didn't get caught.

"Hey, Mom!" I said.

"Hey, what? What's up?" she replied.

"Nothing. . . . Hey, how did it go?"

"It turned out to be great," she replied. "We'll see how things turn out tomorrow. She will more than likely give birth tomorrow."

I said, "Okay, that's great."

My uncle entered the living room and broke it to Josiah that he had to leave. He groaned, but was shut up at my uncle's demand. He and my uncle exited the doorway, and we followed to wave them goodbye.

2. karon

The gnashing of metal between the wall and automatic doors, the silent, fresh-scented lobby of the main building beat the infinite roar of engines outside. We walked past the huge stairway that extended from the floor to the second installment. All around us we could see disabled and sick patients as well as regular visitors. When my uncle checked us in to the front desk, all four of us received name tags. We followed closely behind my uncle to the elevator. The banging of metal against the elevator door and the soft jingle occupied our ears as the floors passed around us. We were so high up in the hospital that when you looked out the window, the entire area of Chapel Hill and Durham was visible. We walked past three rooms before we approached my cousin's room.

On the door it read, "George, Gerri-Lee." I excitedly swung the wooden door open. I walked into the quiet room, familiarizing myself with it. The only light in the room came from the large window across from me. The eight cabinets were set high above my exhausted cousin. The fairly large hospital bed she laid on tilted itself, causing the soft brown blanket that was spread across it to start pointing towards the floor. To my left were the three wooden closets, the sink, and trash can. The quiet conversation slowly built up. My aunt told us to thoroughly clean our hands before we touched him.

With tears beginning to build up in her eyes, my mom whispered into Gerri's ear, "Oh, Gerri, he's so beautiful!"

"I know he is," my cousin replied in exhaustion.

I searched for my newborn cousin. He was in the incubator next to where Gerri lay. His eyes looked so pure and precious. His seemingly dry skin felt soft and smooth. I peered over my cousin to see him in detail. His skin color headed into a faded shade of pink, which made him even more beautiful. They wrapped him up in a

purple-, white-, and blue-striped blanket. He wore small resting room garments and a blue-striped hat. My cousin Avell sat over at Gerri's side, just as he'd been most of the previous night. He, too, looked exhausted. Karon started to twitch, which led to Gerri's mother, Dianne, coming over to rock him back to sleep. My dad wanted us to gather around my aunt and cousin for a group picture. We ended up taking several photographs. In most of them, my cousins and I weren't paying any attention to the camera because we were so "baby-stricken," according to my mom.

We, unfortunately, had to leave because of Josiah's game. As we exited the hospital, I wondered to myself, *When will I ever see him again?* We were there for about two hours, but at least we enjoyed ourselves. We drove out to the field where most of Josiah's team was situated, and we ran out of the van like newborn gazelles would after successfully learning how to walk.

3. "we're going to new york!"

"Dude, Joe, that game rocked!" I told him.

"Yes, we've been practicing ever since January!" Josiah replied.

Exhausted at ten p.m., we traveled home from Chapel Hill to Durham. My uncle's van pulled up to our destination. Without hesitation, we all jumped out and ran to the door. I knocked on the door multiple times, but before I could knock again, my dad swung it open. We walked inside to see what went on while we were gone. At that moment, my mom called me.

"Oh no, I'm in trouble!" I told Josiah.

"Danny," my mom continued, "Dad and I have been talking, and we decided that we should take a trip up to New York!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, Mom," I said. She loved to play around, so I didn't believe her at first. Plus, she had already said that we were not going to New York. So, of course, my dad, being the person he is, stepped in.

"No, we're not," he sarcastically said to me. Whenever my parents use sarcasm, I know what they are about to say before they say it.

"Yes!" I screamed, running around the living room, up the stairs, and then finally outside. I loved New York City. New York

has always been my favorite place since I was five, so this was a big moment for me.

“Oh, thank God!” I cried. “We haven’t been there in, like, five years!” I asked when we were leaving.

“On Friday,” my mom told us.

I ran upstairs to my room and packed. Despite the reason why we were going to NYC, I was excited.

4. our connection

The force of cars rocked ours as they sped by. We were on our way to Walmart because the big day drew near. We ran everywhere to try and get everything ready. We stopped by Gerri-Lee’s. When we pulled up in front of my cousin’s wooden house, I forced my dad to hurry up and park. I wanted to see my cousins so bad that day. When he finally parked, I jumped out of the car and ran to her front door. From outside, I could hear that both Karon and Gerri were having difficulty. The empty milk bottle that Karon drank from was upsetting him dearly. I waited until he calmed down to hold him.

Gerri handed Karon to me, but I was not really comfortable with holding him because of how fragile he felt, and I had butterfingers! But eventually I convinced myself to do it. When I laid my hands on Karon, a feeling of connection rushed through my veins. My mom was giving some guidelines on how to hold a baby, but Karon took my attention off of my mom by tightly grasping my finger. I looked down at him to see a reason for his action, but I found he was beginning to open his eyes! Those calm, beautiful orbs of brown formed butterflies in my stomach. This made me want to hold Karon even more now, but I had to hand him over to Gerri. Twenty minutes after three o’clock, we left my cousin’s residence. The time we spent in Gerri’s house was the greatest experience ever.

Later on that evening, we left North Carolina to arrive in Brooklyn. The trip to New York made the entire week better. That’s when I thought that the funeral wasn’t going to be too bad. The next night at the viewing was even more emotional than I thought it would be.

5. the viewing

“Don’t worry, Lisa, it’s going to be okay.” My relatives tried to comfort her but were unsuccessful in doing so. My cousin, Lisa, could not bear the sight of her mother. I was shocked. How could this all happen? Just last week, my newborn cousin Karon was given life, and here lay my aunt Janice in her lifeless state—a victim to death. The emotional atmosphere of the occasion didn’t help those who grieved. As if it couldn’t get any worse, the host announced to us, “It is now time to come up to view the body.” Most of my family dreaded going. I went up with my mom and brother. As we approached the glossy, wooden coffin, we could smell my aunt’s fresh fragrance, the perfume that she had always worn.

I was about three feet away when I saw her up close. Grief-stricken, I observed my aunt’s corpse. Her dark skin before had become so stiff and pale. I watched her calm, bloated face, the face that she would always greet me with. She had an expression of relief when I saw her, as if she died with no concerns. She wore her oriental tan and cotton dress, the one which she had worn for my cousin-in-law’s wedding. Beautiful shades of brown and red subdued her facial features. She also wore the pearl necklace that we had given her the Christmas before. *Well, at least she’s going to heaven in fine style*, I told myself. I quietly checked my surroundings, and reached for my aunt’s face.

As my hand met her face, reality struck me. I instantly broke down into tears because now I knew that she was gone. Just gone forever. There was no chance to say a goodbye or even an ‘I love you.’ I looked over my shoulder and watched my relatives try to comfort my cousin. I felt compassion for her. Immediately, I ran over to Lisa, holding her in my arms. I tried my best to comfort her, but it just didn’t work. We both broke down into tears as we prayed to God and asked him for comfort. I remembered the comforting bible verse about death: “Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never allow the righteous to be moved” (Psalm 55:22). I kept reciting it in my head, and then to my cousin. Because of it, we were both comforted.

“Thank God,” I said.

The rest of the time viewing wasn't so easy. The families sang songs of praise and comfort to try and ease the stress. Many people dedicated a song to my aunt, and broke down in tears in the process. That night was stressful, but we came through.

As we returned to our seats and sat down upon the pews, I glanced up at my mom, to see a tear trickle down her cheek. To comfort her, I said, "Mom, life comes from death."

cutting into my emotions

sara adams

confused mind

“HELLO,” my dad sputtered as he answered the phone.

“Derek, this is your mother.” It was Granny’s firm but quiet voice. An awkward stillness came upon his face as he continued to listen to his mother talking.

“D, what happened? What’s going on with your mother?” my mom questioned Dad curiously.

“G, Dad is at his last breath.”

My mom came into my room, turned on the big light, and rummaged through my closet. I could barely see what she was doing. All I heard was the noise of clothes being pulled from my closet and drawers. “Ma, what are you doing?” I yelled, still half asleep.

I wiped my eyes. She had thrown a bright pink, floral sweater and blue jeans into a bag. She didn’t reply to my question, so I got up and put on some gray sweats, my field day t-shirt, and white tennis shoes without any questions. Dad evenly packed the bur-gundy bags into the car, one by one.

weary dreams

Dad and Mom had just packed the last two bags of luggage into the Enterprise rental car when we went off to Highway I-85 to 295, toward Philadelphia. I was shocked to see cars out on the road at 5:45 in the morning. I squealed, then fell back in the car seat as my dad nervously pulled in front of an SUV.

“Daddy, why are we going so fast?” I yelped in pain from being thrown quickly back into the car seat.

“Princess, I can’t talk right now—I’m driving!” he snapped. He

was going to make it to his destination, his home in Philadelphia, to his father so that he could say his final goodbye.

I looked at my brother to see if he knew what was going on, but he was snoring so loud it sounded like a marching band. I slowly started to close my lids to drift to a place I like to call wonderland. Before I knew it, we were in Philadelphia. Seeing the tall and stocky buildings made me feel like I was dreaming on top of a cloud.

“Guys, wake up! We’re here!” said Mommy.

“We’re up, Mom,” Marsalis quickly stated as he woke from a long, restful sleep.

We got to a white house with the barbed wire fence in front. After walking up the rocking wooden stairs, my cold feet slowly touched the warm and plush but slightly dirty carpet just for a quick second before I touched the cold, hard wood again. I looked into Grandpa’s eyes. He looked so peaceful lying in bed despite the many machines hooked up to his body that would beep when he stopped breathing. His lips were crusty and dry, his pale face was sinking into his bones, and his hair was completely gray. Though in pain, he still managed to crack a joke to my dad. On the white table right next to the hospital bed a bowl sat waiting for Grandpa. I could smell Grandma’s home-cooked soup, and the Ritz crackers that she had smashed into the bowl.

“I love you,” I whispered in his ear. He smiled. He could not speak, but his eyes twinkled. We stayed for a few hours while my dad and mom talked to Grandpa and Grandma about the good old days and memories of the summer cookouts.

regretful laughter

My body felt scandalized and disillusioned. I wanted to know if he was going to be alright, but I didn’t want to let my family see me sad and worried. I put on a fake smile and went with the deal. I didn’t know whether to feel happy because he was going to be in a better place, or sad because he would no longer be with us, no longer at family gatherings, and no longer able to call so I could hear his voice. So, to get over my sadness, my aunt, Kathy, decided to take us to a movie for a little family fun.

"Y'all, let's go!" she screamed.

We all packed into the car. Pulling out of the driveway, we landed on a pothole which jolted the car. My whole body pulled like a trigger on a gun. "Whoa!" Mommy exclaimed.

The drive from Aunt Kathy's house to the movie theatre was only five minutes. Before I knew it, I was on my feet again. The smell of the salty, buttery, freshly popped corn rose into my nostrils and travelled down to my bronchial tubes. The bright red carpet led me to the concession stand. My eyes gazed upon the bag of Sour Skittles like it was a pot of gold.

"Ma, can I get some Sour Skittles, please?" I whined.

Patiently, she said, "Yes, Cookie."

The lines had gotten longer, so I decided to wait until after the movie to purchase the Skittles. I looked at my telephone for just a quick second when—*Boom!* "Oh my dear, I am so sorry. I'm so old my eyes go in and out." This chatty country lady kept apologizing continuously.

Stopping her in the middle of her sentence, I replied, "No, it was my fault!" I had been the one looking at my cell phone and not paying attention.

She gently gave me a napkin to wipe the fallen buttered popcorn from my shirt and off I went, strolling down the hallways. I anxiously walked into the movie theater to get comfortable in a cozy seat and watch a good movie, my mind was racing like I was running from a tiger in the jungle.

cautious spirit

A rush of rage came over me. The look on his pale rotten face set into my emotions and ate them up like a last meal. I couldn't stand to see him like this, so I rushed downstairs to telephone the funeral home. It was time to celebrate his life.

silent tears

I don't know what to feel. Am I supposed to be sad, regretful, or disappointed? Church bells rang when the hand struck twelve

o'clock p.m. in the church hallway. It was time. We all crowded together into one pew so that if we cried, we would have a shoulder to comfort us.

I walked up to see him; my mom held my left hand in a tight grip. His face looked normal, except the scratch above his left eye was gone. His wrinkles formed a silly smile. He had on his favorite black suit with a royal blue tie. He looked so peaceful, so happy.

I walked back to the pew to see how everyone was letting go of their sorrow. Tissues were being passed around, and so was the trash can to collect the wet ones. By the time the trash can came up to my pew, it was already full. I walked back to the bathroom and threw my tissues away. Thirty minutes later, it was time for my dad to speak.

Standing on a plush red carpet that led to a podium where a gold cross reflected the sun, my father grabbed the microphone off the stand and started to speak, bending his knees for support.

He cleared his throat. "My father was a . . ." He stopped to hold back tears. "Taught me everything I know, and I love him." It was times like these when it became clear to me that no matter how little I knew him, it still hurt.

Grandpa was dead. It was time to let him go. My dad's phone rang. As he spoke a little bit more, you could see the perspiration dripping off his hands and down to his polo sweater. It was time.

the story of my cousin and my friends

leslie vijil rodriguez

I AM GOING TO TELL YOU THREE STORIES OF MY FRIENDS' LIVES. Two are from my friends that have passed away and the last one is about my cousin, who is in prison.

one

Carlos never liked his dad because he left him when he was about to turn six years old. Then, Carlos met some boys who knew he wasn't happy because of his father. They told him to start rebelling against his mother, like going to parties and not listening to her. Carlos did what the boys told him. Carlos started smoking and became addicted. A lot of his friends told him to stop because the doctors told him he had cancer. We told him that he could go to sleep and not wake up the next morning. We warned him, but he did not listen.

Carlos was tall, had a round face, small ears, and looked like a little boy. He was sweet and cute, but he had a short temper. His mom is very pretty, but never cared about what Carlos did. His dad would hit any woman.

I was leaving church when I found out from Luis that Carlos had passed. On the phone, Luis told me he wasn't in a good mood. Luis found out from a boy named George about what had happened to Carlos.

When we all found out about Carlos, Luis got twenty white T-shirts with September 8, 2011—his death date—his name, and his picture printed on them. I have it hung in my room to remember him. His mom was especially sad, but we don't hear from his dad anymore.

two

It was sometime in May when Carla started following Lucy, and I knew something bad was going to happen. It was Lizzy who was her best friend, and they told each other everything. Carla told her she hated her life.

One day when Carla and Lizzy were talking, she told Lizzy that she hated her parents and wanted to end her life. Carla was only fourteen years old, and Lizzy was thirteen. The next day our friends had a party, and the two best friends and I went. Carla didn't get back home until two in the morning. When she went back home her mom said, "Carla, where were you at all night?"

"Why the f*** do you care?" Carla answered. She ran to her room and slammed the door. She locked it, turned on the radio, and set it on full volume. She called me and told me of all the fun times she had had with her dad and said, "If you ever see my dad, tell him that I love him with all my heart," and I answered by saying, "Okay, I hope you feel better."

The next morning Carla woke up, got ready for school, and met a girl named Lucy who was going through the same thing. She said that her mom never had time for her since she was always at parties. Carla asked Lucy what she did to be happy, and Lucy answered by saying that she forgot about her mom and turned "emo"; that's what made her happy. Carla asked all her friends what they thought about what Lucy did to her life. We said that Carla shouldn't follow Lucy's way, but she didn't listen.

Three weeks had passed, and no one heard from Carla. I went to Abigail and asked her if she knew something about Carla, but she didn't either. I began to get worried. Soon, we found out she had killed herself. Carla had told us that she was going to commit suicide, and she did. Instead of listening, she did what she was going to do. She had tied a rope to the ceiling of her room, and hanged herself on it.

We will never forget about Carla. She was like our little sister; she will always be part of our life even if she isn't with us, and we still talk about her as if she is here. When Carla's mom finally found out what happened with Carla, she cried every day.

three

This is a story about my cousin. His name is David, but we call him Chris. He is only sixteen years old, but he has to be in prison for forty-eight years for something he didn't do.

Chris is tall and cute. He changed at ten when his mom started to let him do everything he wanted to. He started coming home late, and hanging around with the wrong people. He has a nice, muscular body and five tattoos. One has his mom's name, the other his gang's name, and I don't remember the rest.

Chris lost his family over something stupid.

A man killed his mom's boyfriend. His mom told the police, so they found all the people that were there—including Chris—and they all went to court the next day. The judge put it all on Chris because he didn't say anything; he was the youngest one there, and he had seen what had happened but didn't tell. He was sent to jail for forty-eight years.

Chris had a pretty girlfriend. She helps his mom pay so he can get out. She still does, even if they don't date anymore. There was a day when we were in church and a prophet said to Laura, Chris's mom, that he was going to get out of jail before Christmas, that it would happen by the twenty-fourth of December.

epilogue

Carlos, Carla, and Chris all helped me learn important lessons from their lives: everyone makes mistakes, and teenagers think they have the worst lives. None of their parents listened to what they were going through, and the three never listened to the advice we gave them. I hate that these things can happen. It is wrong that I had to be involved in stories like this; they didn't deserve it.

the big news

itzel gomez

I SPUNTED TO THE ALARM CLOCK LIKE IT WAS A TIME BOMB. When I arrived to diffuse it, I was breathing so hard that I was panting. I had had another nightmare. This one made no sense at all.

I went to my brother's room to see if he was up so I could distract myself, but he wasn't there. *Bang, bang, bang.* I could hear the door open and close. Three seconds passed until my mom yelled out, "The wedding pictures are here!" My dad and I ran down the stairs together.

"Let me see them," he said with a big grin on his face.

"Wow," we all sighed in unison.

"Is that my new uncle?" I asked. Looking at my auntie's picture, I squealed. "Wow, she's beautiful." My dad commented that the new couple were off on a honeymoon, and he decided to call his parents. They talked for a long time to each other. I knew they were talking about my uncle and auntie. It was too bad that we couldn't go to Mexico and see them. It would have been fun to see my auntie and uncle during their wedding, but at least we got the pictures.

For the rest of the day, I just kept thinking of the dream. When my dad finished his phone call, we all went out to eat. He was so happy for his sister. He couldn't stop talking about her, how much he loved her, and how he was always there for her. I thought it was sweet of him to say so many good things about her; he was a big brother, and he was proud of it.

* * *

The house phone was ringing so loud that I jumped out of the bed. My heart raced so fast that it hurt. I had the nightmare again. I had a weird feeling that something bad would happen.

I went downstairs to check on my mom. Her face was in shock. Tears dripped from her eyes, soaking her face. My mom looked at

me with her light brown eyes, and in seconds her sadness slapped me in the face. *What is going on?* I thought to myself. My mom looked at me and asked, "Where is your dad?"

"He's sleeping," I said. "Is everything okay?" I had never been this worried before. I took the phone from my mom and gave it to my dad; I knew it was his mom. His smile slowly melted away as I went to ask my mom what had happened. She said that my uncle had just died.

I was speechless. It was like my brain had been switched off. I couldn't feel anything at all. *How did he die? . . . I didn't even know him.* My mom seemed to read my mind and said that he had drowned on his honeymoon. I stood there like a statue, dazed.

Minutes passed before I could walk toward my dad. I saw him crying, saying how bad he felt because he wasn't there for her this time. I couldn't imagine the pain he was in. This was the very first time I had seen him cry, and I wanted it to be the last. When he looked up, I felt water on my cheek. I hugged my dad and together, we cried.

* * *

Five weeks passed by slowly. I thought that my dad had forgotten about what happened. My mom yelled out, "We're going to the beach!" My brother and I screamed in delight.

When we got to the beach I ran to the water. We were all hopping from foot to foot because the sand was so hot. I got to the water and saw kids all the way to the yellow marking in the water. I wanted to go, but it had been so long since I had gone swimming. I waited for my dad to come to the water, but he stopped me from going in. He said it was too dangerous.

When it was time to go, I realized why my father had been so scared. I had forgotten about my uncle. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to apologize, but I was too scared to talk to my dad. What if I said something wrong?

* * *

A month passed, and one morning, I woke up and went down to the living room. I could smell the rich, creamy, smell of coffee. I

knew it was my dad's coffee because he is the only one who likes it with milk. Somehow, he looked happier.

Smiling, I told him "Good morning, Dad. How are you?"

"I'm doing great, thanks for asking," he responded, in a deep but loving voice. The way he was acting made me feel good. It was like a TV show, when the house is haunted, but by the end, everything is back to normal. My dad has been haunted by sadness and now, finally, was back to normal.

a new start

lory galdamez

AS I GOT OFF THE YELLOW SCHOOL BUS, I started skipping down the street, thinking that it was going to be another good day.

“Skip, skip, and skip to the Lu, skip, skip, and skip to the Lu, and skip, skip, skip to the Lu my darling,” I sang. As I skipped passed by my neighbor’s house, I remembered that their house had a curse on it: “The Bloody Dogs of the Streets.” I hoped that the ugly, bloody dogs wouldn’t chase me all the way home.

When I finally passed my neighbor’s house, my neighbor yelled, “Linda, could you be quiet for once?”

At that moment, I could hear the bloody dogs barking at me and a man like a soldier yelling. I knew today was a rare day, so I ran home crying.

“Linda, come inside now!” my mom yelled.

I walked into my parents’ room, not knowing what was happening. I saw every single item of mine packed in a bag or suitcase.

“Why are all my clothes and toys in my Dora bag?” I asked.

“We are leaving the house,” my mom replied.

“Why?”

“Your father and I are getting a divorce,” she said.

I ran outside in tears, looking for my dad. This was the first time I had seen a sad expression on my father’s face, but I tried to look strong. His small, watery eyes were turning pink, but somehow they turned back into a light brown color. His cheeks looked like chubby tomatoes. He had half of a smile on his face, and it sounded like he was losing his voice. *I thought boys weren’t supposed to cry.* The saddest thing I ever saw was my own father falling into tears. I had an idea to write my father a note, saying that I was leaving the house. I wrote the note in the last five minutes I had before I had to leave.

It said, *Dear Daddy, you are the best daddy in the world. I’m sorry, but I’m leaving the house today with mom and Andy. I’ll only*

see you on the weekends, starting next week. I love you and will miss you because you are my one and only daddy in this whole wide world. –Linda

I ran to his room and put it in his drawer where his work pants were. I hoped that he would at least see the note in the morning before he went to work, or at night before going to sleep.

I got into the car and waved goodbye to everyone in my neighborhood. Every house in my neighborhood that I passed was another tear drop that rolled down my face.

My mom turned right into our new house, 48 United Street. I got out of the car and saw monstrous green trees and an apple covered with ants, and I decided that I already didn't like our new house. I opened the glass door to see how it looked. The color of the floor was similar to Duke blue. Everything smelled brand new. I looked for my room, and found that it was all the way down the hall, the last door on the left. It was a small room, and I had to share it with my brother.

My mom said, "*Linda y Andy*, come and sleep with me for the next few days."

Andy and I responded, "Yeah, *claro*."¹

"*Gracias*," she said.

"*De nada*."

Just by looking into her eyes, you could read her story. Seven years of marriage now a waste. They looked like pink lemonade. Just by seeing her move, you could tell that her head was down, and she could barely even fake a smile. But that didn't mean she couldn't find a way to put on her strong face for us.

1 sure

too many pieces

jazmine harris

MY TWISTED PIG-TAILS BOUNCED AGAINST MY CHEEKS as I ran to my mom's car. My mom had a burgundy Saturn station wagon with back windows that didn't roll down. There were two on the block just the same, but I knew that this was the right car 'cause of the different colored headlights. I opened the door to the back and flopped down inside my booster seat. Reaching behind my shoulder, I grabbed the safety belt and strapped it across my skinny flat chest. I was excited to see my dad; I hadn't seen him in a while, nor haD he been back home since he left.

My mom's shoes clung against the road with each step she took. Her dangling gold earrings swung against her long neck. As she sat down in the driver's seat her Victoria Secret fragrance flew into my face.

"Let me hold your hand, Jazmine," said my mom. I quickly placed my hand lightly inside her palm. She slightly gripped my hand, and carefully guided me across the road, dodging speeding cars. I stretched my hand across my face, wiping dirt from my eyes. I was highly agitated that every car that passed flung dirt into my face and eyes.

I pranced back and forth down the narrow hall covered with thick, white center blocks, trying my best to waste time. In the room across the hall stood an empty stool on which I decided to spin. Using the railings on the far side of the wall I spun round and round, so fast that the objects around me turned into a big blur. I felt as if my head wasn't attached to my body; the heaviness of my head made me feel like I might turn over and fall out of the chair. I stopped spinning by placing my feet on the hard floor. *Maybe I shouldn't have spun that long.* Shifting to my to my feet, I was extremely dizzy and everything around me continued to spin while my body stood camped in my unsteady position. I wobbled back to the room where my mom still sat quietly, twiddling with her fingers.

"What are you doing?" she asked. I looked at her and shook my head, indicating nothing. As I propped myself on the tall grey stool, I heard the metal door slide open. I peeked over the counter, looking through the thick glass. Behind the police officer was my dad dressed in an orange jumpsuit, with bold numbers printed on it. My dad's skin was the color of my grandma's coffee, and his single-plait braids covered most of his black, bushy eyebrows. His glistening brown eyes caught mine, and I could see the disturbance across his face. He sat on a stool behind the glass, placing his hands under his chin. They talked about things I couldn't understand, almost like they were speaking a different language.

Before visitation ended I asked my dad if he would come home with us.

"I can't, but I'll come as soon as I can. I promise," he said.

"But why?" I asked, almost bursting into tears. I stood on top of the stool stamping my feet, crossing my arms on top of my chest.

My mom quickly picked me up off the stool and sat me down on the floor. "Stop that fussing, you're embarrassing me. Now you get yourself together. It's time for us to go." She wiped the wet stream of tears that had escaped down my cheek.

* * *

Ms. Fuller paced back and forth alongside the whiteboard in the front of the classroom. Her grayish-blond hair swayed in the atmosphere as she continued to write notes on board, covering up the white blanket with coats of red ink. She wore a long, tan skirt that drifted in the air too as she moved back and forth in front of the whiteboard, leaving her sweet scent settled in the front of my nose, a scent so strong you could reach out and grab it. I propped my chin over my fist, rubbing my scar that stuck far out from my knee. I heavily sighed, later closing my eyes shut.

"I'm winning, I'm winning," I said with a burst of excitement. I ran with my arms stretched out in front of me, slightly in front of my dad. He chased me close behind, making me laugh real hard, causing my chest to hurt. He played along with my fantasy, letting me win the race instead of dashing in front of me. He purposely let me win just to make me happy.

Turning my attention from over my shoulder, I tripped over a tree root and fell forward onto my hands, scraping my arms and knee. My face got all hot as I tried my best not to burst out crying. I hugged my knee into my chest, tightly snuggling my arms around it. I blew at the burning scrape that now trickled with red blood, as it slowly made its way down my leg like running water. "Aah, it doesn't hurt that bad," said my dad as he picked me up onto his left hip. I laid my head on his skinny shoulder and wrapped my arm around his neck. He took a look at my knee with his dark brown eyes, and poked it with his right index finger.

"Ow, that hurts!" I said smacking his hand away, almost jumping out of his grip.

"You'll live," he said, smiling at me to reveal his two front teeth, perfectly symmetrical. It's hard to remember exactly how I got all my scars, but it's easy to remember this one because my dad was there to pick me up.

"Jazmine, there is no sleeping in class!" Ms. Fuller heavily and viciously nudged my shoulder, waking me from my quiet moment of remembrance. I subconsciously rubbed my eyes, looking at all the giggling faces around me. I felt embarrassed to see all those faces, and I spontaneously blushed, turning back around to face the front of the room. I slouched in my seat with my arms folded thinking about how much I missed my dad. *How long can they keep someone cooped up in one place with gross food? When will I see him again?*

* * *

When my dad first came home from prison he practiced a new religion and considered himself a Muslim. He came home with all these new tactics, but no longer does them now. At first he didn't eat meat and was a vegetarian. Now he eats chicken but refuses to eat pork. That's just stupid. Might as well not eat meat at all.

The one thing I hate the most is how he considers himself the family's "designated drunk driver." Even though he drives well under the influence, I'm still self-conscious about being in the car with him when he's not sober. His signature move is speeding around cars that are going too slow. He waits for all the cars on the oppo-

site lane to clear and then dashes into the empty lane and speeds in front of the slow-moving car. I don't know how, but he stays out of the cops' view.

I guess it's just a thing that we people do to find excitement before giving it up and moving on to something new. Maybe that's why he's different, or maybe it's just the whole jail experience. It doesn't really matter because at the end of the day he's still my dad.

* * *

"Have you talked to your dad?" asked my mom.

"No, not really. Why?"

"You know, it's good to talk to him every now and then."

"I know, he just never talks about anything. It's just a waste of time to even bother calling." I don't know what it is about him, but he never has anything to say anymore, and my mom knows that. So why was she asking me this dumb question? Before my dad left, I could talk to him about anything that crossed my mind, or maybe that was just due to the fact that I was only four years old.

I couldn't help but think that she was trying to be funny, or she wanted something. Ever since my mom and dad split up, she never makes any contact with him whatsoever. And I do mean never. For instance, if my brother needed some new socks she would tell me to tell my dad that my brother needed some new socks. Then he would ask me why she didn't tell him, and the story never ends from there.

* * *

"You know, sometimes your dad can be a little too self-confident," said my grandma. She leaned back in her recliner kicking up her heavy legs. She had just hung up the phone after having a conversation with my dad. I could tell by her facial expressions that he had really ripped her off. Her thin, black eyebrows pointed downward, colliding with her nose wrinkles. Her eyes did not blink for several moments at a time, as she blankly stared off into space.

A few minutes passed before I decided to reply to her comment. I heavily exhaled and said, "Yeah, I know." I slouched over on the

edge of my seat, putting my fist up against my cheek. Continuing to look at my grandma, I noticed that I sat like a basketball player on the sideline watching his teammates. I was observing every movement she made.

"I don't know Jazmine, I just don't understand how someone could change personalities. It seems like he was more mature before he went off to prison, than he is now that he's free." To a certain degree, I felt the same way. Before my dad went away, he was the best dad anyone would wish for. But he's no longer an outspoken person who listens to my problems. He's more anti-social than I can remember.

It's just that he's different, dummy! I thought, listening to my grandma. *Stop going on and on talking about how things have changed.* That was something she talked about all the time.

Being that my dad was only a teenager when I was born, he had to grow up quite fast. He could no longer hang around with his friends and be the boy he wanted to be. This was the same for my mom, too.

* * *

Family sometimes falls apart without your control; you just watch everything slip through your fingers as you try to catch it and miss. People contribute to the downfall and so do events; even the smallest things that you wouldn't suspect add to the mess.

You know how you try to put a puzzle together, but when you're almost finished you find that pieces are missing? I just *hate* that. Then what makes it so bad is that when I'm not looking for those missing pieces, I find them in random places, places I barely visit. Like my cousin's car seat or my brother's pants pockets. Sometimes I feel like family can be like a puzzle that you just can't keep up with—*my* family anyway.

I have the type of family where this person thinks he's better than all the rest, or she thinks she's top-notch 'cause she graduated from high school. I just don't get it. Every year my dad's side of the family has a reunion in Atlanta, Georgia, but we never go. My grandma always makes up this excuse that "We don't have enough money to go there right now." That's bogus if you ask me. She has

plenty of family members that will be more than happy to let us snooze with them for that particular weekend, or so I've heard.

* * *

It's funny how my brother would always cry out for my dad whenever my mom made him mad, but now that he's home he acts like he doesn't even want to be around him. But who could blame him? Our dad was sent away when Damien was just ten months old. I've never really asked him why he went away for so long, but I was still curious as to why someone would be locked away for six years.

Could this have been the reason Damien's behavior was out of control when he was smaller? Before my brother was more manageable, he had to go to therapy on Wednesdays every week. He had gotten so bad that his teachers suggested to my mom put him on Ritalin. His teachers thought that he may have had ADHD.

Sometimes I would overhear my mom and grandma talk about my brother and things that may be wrong with him. One time, I heard my grandma say that my brother may have problems coping with his feelings, and instead he shows them through his behavior. His therapist said the same exact thing before. I think it's just because my dad wasn't around while he was growing up.

My grandma also tells me how Damien acts the same as our dad did when he was the same age. When my brother was playing with a book of matches on the side of her trailer and our neighbors brought him home, she was so furious with him. "You act so much like your father, that it's a crime and shame," said my grandma. She pointed and shook her finger, squinting her eyebrows as she talked. I balled my knees into my chest, trying my best not to laugh. She sat on the very edge of the sofa, like she was ready to jump up and attack her prey. As she continued to viciously talk to my brother, I could see the guilt all over his face. He couldn't even look her straight in the eyes.

* * *

The smell of mocha coffee filled the living room, an aroma so thick it could knock you over. This was one of the many things that

my grandma would do when she was highly agitated, or just plain ol' pissed. I could see the steam spread into the air like cigarette smoke, spilling out alongside the floral-trimmed coffee cup. Flowers stretched across the endless surface, clumping together like puzzle pieces. She wrapped her long fingers around the coffee mug, pressing her lips around the rim. As she sipped her eyes restlessly closed, she then heavily exhaled, placing her mug on the kitchen counter.

* * *

Sometimes my dad gets on my last nerves for no apparent reason. He can be so childish at times, that he even gets on his girlfriend's nerves. Every weekend that they get paid, we go out to the mall or just hang out for that Saturday. By the time we all would have made it to the mall, they would have probably disagreed on about thirty different things and argued about what we were eating for that night. I swear they act like an old married couple, and they aren't even married! They can't go a day without arguing over something dumb, like who's going to wash dishes. I know teens who have more stable relationships than they do.

* * *

My hair was freshly twisted and my eyebrows were waxed. I thought I was the prettiest thing to walk into Frankie's Fun Park. I wore a zebra-striped romper with matching shoes and zebra-printed stud earrings. My long twist swung from side to side as I trotted my way through bunches of crowded people. Feeding into my own happiness, I smiled as I caught the eyes of other people staring, so I knew I had their attention. Now you know you're bad when other people of the same gender turn their noses up at you, or stare at you for over two seconds. I just kept on smiling as I walked alongside my dad.

The only time I really enjoyed being around my dad was when he had his locks twisted to the roots and his gear was tight. People, even my friends, say that my dad is a very attractive guy, and even more people say that I look exactly like him. *If he's attractive, then I am too!* I think. When we're in public I tend to stick close beside

him, so people can stop and ask, "Is that your sister, because you guys look just alike." We get mistaken for brother and sister a lot, so much that I start to say yes when people ask. When my dad first ate lunch with me in sixth grade, Ms. Tuttle thought he was my big brother, but all I could do was laugh because that's exactly how he acts sometimes. My dad doesn't act like a dad; he's more out of the way and less sociable. He's too funny to be a dad if you ask me.

We made our way to the line outside, which was way shorter than the ones inside. I leaned against the counter waiting for my dad and Aleace to finish their second disagreement of the day. "How about you go half on their cards, and I'll pay for my own?"

"No why can't we both go in half on their cards, and I go half on our card?" said my dad smiling as usual. He never took anything seriously unless it had something to do with his money being invested in someone besides himself. These two buffoons had just argued for our entire car ride from Chapel Hill about Aleace taking forever to get ready this morning. Aleace was a very prissy woman and was the type that never walked out the house without her make-up on, even if she was just going to work. On average it took her about an hour and a half just to take a shower and put her clothes on, so you can imagine how impatient my dad can be when he's the first one dressed.

I've noticed how my dad is confident about his looks. He expresses almost a sense of arrogance, he talks so passionately about himself. I find it amusing that I've come to this conclusion because whenever my mom would say that I get upset and take up for him. My mom makes me real mad when she talks down on him because in my mind I feel that only I can do that.

leaves falling

l. b. brennan

coming home

I WAS ALWAYS HAPPY IN VIRGINIA.

The James River made me feel so tiny, and yet it gave me a sense of freedom. As I wandered through the waves near the shallows, the boats roared by, creating massive waves that knocked me over and made me squeal. Everything seemed perfect: sunny light and shining skies over our heads with only a hint of dark clouds on the horizon. Just enough to notice, but not enough to care. I was looking forward to seeing my grandparents, and in my excitement, I was soon too tired and slept through the car ride. I dozed against the window, lulled by the movements of the car and the downpour of rain and the clouds that crept over us. Normally, it wouldn't bother me that it rained on our way up, but waking up in the middle of the car ride, it surprised me how dark and foreboding the air around us had become.

Looking around, I saw the leaves glisten in the light from the low-hanging sun, a glowing orb presenting itself for inspection. I moved slowly, still coming to terms with my memories. Collecting my thoughts, I stared into the space between the leaves, like screens through which my memories poured. Forgotten pieces of laughter were brought back to the surface before delving back into the creases of my brain.

My parents don't really talk much in the car, and today was no exception. Yet somehow it seemed strange, like they were trying not to think about something. Neither I nor my brother dared make more of our fuss than we had usually done in the past.

When we finally got to my grandparents' house, which was within walking distance of the edge of the river, the sky was dark and the clouds covered most of the light from the moon. I got my stuff up to the room my brother and I shared on our visits and

pulled out the bed. My parents were downstairs talking to my mother's parents.

I slept on the higher trundle, and he slept on the lower to make it an easier fall if he fell off the bed, as he sometimes did. After a while he asked me to tell him a story. "Will you?" his child's voice whispered out of the darkness, frightened by the nightmares that terrified his tiny body.

Looking over at him now, wandering through the trees to the road, I see a young man, far beyond fairy tales, at night with his big sister. His shoulders part the sunlight and his silhouette is round and hunched, curled around in a position not unlike that in which his nightmares used to come. I drifted back to my memories and drew away from the present.

I obliged, finally rolling over away from my comfortable position on the bed to face him, fighting the seduction of sleep.

"Once upon a time . . ." I started with the usual opener for fairy tales and then continued, "there was a boy. His name was Nick Jontress, and he wanted to find a princess. Now, princesses," I added, "are very careful not to be seen in public." My voice turned expository, explaining everything in mock seriousness, my brother hanging on to every word. "Princesses live in great glass towers that are guarded by giant dragons, who seem really ferocious, but are actually gentle and sweet on the inside. Now, Nick Jontress knew this and so he thought, *Well this will be easy!* But it wasn't to be so." I paused dramatically, building up the suspense for my story. "So, Nick went wandering down, across the seas, through countrysides, and into the caves of dragon glory and princess fright. 'Come now,' Nick stuttered, beside himself with nerves and wonder. 'You can do this, Nicky ol' boy. You can save a princess.' Walking up the gigantic stairs, Nick almost balked at the challenge, but Nick, though he almost gave up, thought of the glory he would receive once he rescued a princess, and that drove him on in a fury of passion, already half in love with the princess he was to save. Nicolas Jontress made it to the top and came face to face with a dragon!" I stopped here, partly too tired to go on, but partly because of the fact that I love suspense and thought it would be cool if I finished it tomorrow.

I smiled at the memory coming to the surface; it was one of the few that didn't hurt when it came up after everything that had hap-

pened. I slowly got up from my position on the ground and walked away, hoping to push the rest of the ignorant memories behind me so I didn't have to face them ever again.

"Are you asleep?" There came no reply from the soft lump below me, sleeping. I rolled over, finally allowed to sleep without the mutterings of my brother, and I smiled. My head was still filled with stories and ideas, and as I slept, I dreamed about each and every one.

morning glory

I woke up before my brother, my heart fluttering. I wasn't used to seeing his tiny body in the bed next to mine at 6:30 in the morning. Creeping down the wooden steps in my bare feet, I hardly made any sound as I tiptoed past my parents' quiet bedroom. Walking into the kitchen, I grabbed the stool by the cabinets and climbed up to get a bowl. I had always had a fondness for sugar when I went to my grandparent's house, and today my younger self was no exception. Grabbing the white rough edges of the sugar bowl and a spoon, I sat down to pour myself some cereal.

That's when I heard the soft pattering of feet on the carpet behind me, and I hurriedly shoved the sugar bowl into the dark corners of the counter, my guilty pleasure hidden from view. At that moment, my brother came in along with my father and sat down beside me. While my dad made coffee for himself, I grabbed the sugar bowl from its place and scooped a few spoonfuls into my cereal before putting it back again, my brother following my lead.

After our breakfast, my brother and I headed out to the garden behind the house and explored the bamboo forest that had become our biggest adventure. While we explored the tangled forests of bamboo and grass, the adults sat inside, letting us have our fun. After playing for a while, we decided to spend our time more wisely and go spy on our parents.

I went into the house first, through the front entrance, and made my brother look out for anyone coming. Sneaking inside, I slid along the wall into the little-used dining room, and from there into the kitchen, to the place right by where the trash can was. The perfect eavesdropping spot.

"So, it's real. . . ." my mother trailed off, holding my father's hand, tears brimming in her voice.

"Yeah." My grandfather looked sad and held my grandmother closer to him. "It is."

"What do the doctors say?" My mother's voice became stronger, clinging on to that one little hope of the doctors.

Doctors? I thought. *Is someone sick?* My mind churned. *No one seems sick, so what is she talking about?*

"They say six to eight months." My papa's voice sounded hollow, and my mother gasped as my father held her tight and whispered in her ear.

"It'll be alright honey. It will." His words were designed to comfort, but I could tell they weren't working.

Around this time, my brother crept in beside me. Feeling like he shouldn't have to see my mother cry, I sent him back out, saying I had left my flashlight in the woods and asked if he could go get it. Being kinder to me than he is now, my brother left to go look for the fake flashlight. As soon as he was gone, I walked into the room, determined to find out what was going on.

Immediately, everyone straightened up and tried to look normal. That ploy would have worked had I not already heard the conversation and seen my mother's tear tracks on her face.

"Who's sick?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"Papa is, sweetie," my father said for everyone, then changed the subject rapidly. "Where's your brother?"

"Outside," I said promptly. "Why are you all so sad? Don't the doctors treat sick people?" My question made my family smile slightly at the naivety of my question, but almost as instantaneously, the smile turned into a tight, repressed line. I shuddered, knowing something was wrong. "What's going on?" My voice betrayed me and my mother ushered me out of the room.

"This is grown-up talk, sweetheart. We'll tell you later." She led me outside and told me to go play.

"No." I stood stock still in the door frame, surprising everyone with this vehement stance.

My mother sighed, "Okay, sweetie." She sounded defeated. "Papa's sick. It's a very special sickness called cancer, and he might not get better."

"Oh, okay." I didn't understand, and I wouldn't for a while. I went out to play with my brother and forgot all about the six to eight months he had to live. My naivety got the better of me. Two days later, we left, only to come back again in a few weeks' time.

star light, star bright, won't you shine your light tonight

"Let's go look!" His grizzled face, so white against a stark dark background, smiled at me. He pulled me along.

"But Papa," I almost sounded whiny, "it's late today. I thought it was time for bed?" My question hung in the air behind us as we walked along the stumbling brick path from his house.

"Shh," he said quietly, stopping us right before the end of the walkway and setting my feet on the steps through the yard.

I stared at his face, wrinkled with the thought of the words that wanted to spill from his pale lips. His eyes, usually cold and calculating, were warm and filled with smiles. Even in the dark I could see his stark white hair falling out in spurts and his clothing straightforward and clean.

"I want to tell you a story," he whispered, as if it was a secret only I could hear. "See the stars up there?" He pointed to the sky, and my eyes followed the movement as I nodded. "They are really giant beings stuck in the sky who can't get down." He stared up at the little pricks of light, and the light from the house threw his features into sharp relief.

"So the stars are really giant people?" I scoffed, laughing at the impossibility, not believing in silly things like people made of stars. I was seven after all. I was all grown up now.

"Yes!" He looked at me sharply, eyes cold, and then softened. "There are pictures of people in the stars. They fight against the bad and guide us when we are lost." His voice was sad, as if he was the lost one, as if he was the one who couldn't find the right stars to guide him home again.

"But Papa, if there are people in the stars," I questioned, "why can't I see them?"

Papa, looking at me thoughtfully, spoke with a seriousness that I had already come to know him by. "Because you don't know

how to see them yet.” His tone changed abruptly and he winked at me. “But soon you will,” he said playfully. He was trying to hide his excitement, but it was already contagious.

“What?” I almost yelled. “I want to know how to see them! I want to see the people!” Bouncing up and down on our little brick walkway, my voice rose with excitement, and he pushed his finger to my lips, silencing my yells of excitement.

“Shh.” His hushes were lost as he broke into soft laughter with me. The old man and the young girl laughing with the sky. “You will, you will.” His eyes sparkled for the first time in ages. “But first you must sit down, little one.” Mockery stirred the underbelly of his tenor voice, but I sat, wanting to hear the stories. I wanted to learn.

His voice gathered strength slowly, as if it were a fight to speak about it all, and he began. As he spoke, I gradually calmed down. I watched his face and became mesmerized by his voice and by the stories.

First came the tale of Cassiopeia, the beautiful queen of Ethiopia who offended the gods. Next came the tale of Artemis and her mortal enemy, Orion, to whom she sent a scorpion to battle through all eternity in the sky, separated from each other by the seasons.

After a while, his voice grew hoarse, but remained ever steady and my thrall became greater as I seeped in the tales of the sky, with the tale of the Great Mother Bear and her son who shot her on accident and, for his crime, was lifted into the sky with her as the Little Bear.

When he stopped speaking the silence deafened me for a moment, surrounding me with volumes of nothing, and I looked up to get away from it, not remembering I had just learned how to see the stars, more focused on the silence I didn’t want to hear.

I gasped.

I smiled.

I could see them. *I could see them.* It was dizzying, craning my neck to see the sky, the brilliant lights swirling into Orion fighting his scorpion against the skyline. Spinning around, I looked to the shipyard and watched as Cassiopeia looked in her pearled mirror and fought off the guilt that tormented her after she had sacrificed her daughter for her own stupidity.

All this, all the wonders, opened up my mind like a book, and I watched as they swirled into wonderful pictures.

battlefield surrender

I pushed the door open, my tiny hand forcing the hinges to creak from the lack of oil that had always seemed befitting. Peeking around the corner, I saw the big, white bed with its giant aerated comforter surrounding the person I had come to say goodbye to one last time.

My brother swung in, pushing my body against the paint-chipped doorway, disturbing an otherwise quiet moment, and then he swung out again, laughing at his new game.

For one brief moment, I heard a muffled sigh as Papa turned to face the dresser and I tiptoed in to see him. Eyes closed, he breathed softly, barely hearing or even sensing I was there until I was by his bedside, looking down at his face. Tears slid down my cheeks, artillery fire ripped my heart to shreds, and I lost the grip I had on myself at the sight of him. The man I was looking at was no longer a man, just a shell of his former self—face gaunt, eyes nearly caked shut with gunk. The hands I held in mine were distorted with loss of muscle and fat. They were pale, almost see-through, and the veins stood out against the trenches carved into his skin between mounds of pulsing blue blood. His nails were ragged and the pads of his fingers fleshy and moist with sweat.

I sat there and watched as my grandfather was dying. It had finally hit me; it had come to my attention with a bang and a shout that he wasn't going to make it, that he was never going to come back. I would be leaving soon to go back to my house, and when we came back, he would not be there. And never again would he come to our house for a surprise visit. He would never leave his bed again.

He was a ghost on a battlefield of a long, hard-fought war against cancer. My voice shot through with a crack, surprising even myself as I choked on my words: "I'll miss you." My tears dripped onto his skin, following the pattern of his veins. My mother passed by the door and saw me standing there, a solemn look in

my eyes. She walked in to take me away without saying a word. I started sobbing as she pulled me, hugging me tight as we walked, half dragging me from the devastation that was my grandfather's body. "I love you, Papa!" I whispered and gave up fighting to stay. Instead, I went to play tag with my brother, tear tracks on my skin, my heart not in the game.

Walking down the road, my feet thumped along the pavement, following my brother back to our house. I sighed, knowing that the memories racking my body at this moment wouldn't go away. I would have to face them and learn to not blame myself for how it turned out.

That night I went to sleep crying, my mother holding my hand, comforting me and driving my nightmares away.

nightmares

The monsters woke me. Their dark, slimy hands reached across my skin and I shuddered as the bile rose in my throat. I sat up slowly, looking around at the shapes and sizes of my terrors, and I shook. My eye drew to the lamp, dark and forbidding; eerily, it reached toward me, becoming a stick-like figure. Slimy hands crawled along the floor, gliding over the cushions and reaching toward my throat. A sob escaped my lips, and I grabbed my brother's hand in mine, trying to rid myself of this demon, this monster that wanted me dead.

The door swung in without a sound. It seemed a ghost stepped through in the form of an old lady; I screamed, terror rising within me, my body shaking horribly.

"Get away from me!" My voice should have woken the whole neighborhood, the whole town; it should have woken the other residents of whatever place I was in.

"I'm here to help, darling," she whispered, her voice soft and kind. "I heard you wake up and thought I'd try and comfort you while your mother is away."

"Where is she?" My voice shook with the effort of vocal movement, the shock of my mother being gone resonating within me. As my brother began to sob for our mother, I turned to hold his hand in front of me.

"Oh, honey, your papa . . . He's gone. . . . Your mommy's gone to see him." Her voice was comforting but held a trace of sorrow.

Shock covered my face, smothering my sobs and my sounds, and I reeled back, not understanding. "I just saw him yesterday—yesterday!" My mind swamped itself with pictures and puzzles, trying to put together the meaning of gone. Gone like my dog Dylan was gone? Or gone like my daddy when he went to work? I didn't understand, I didn't get it, and the creepy old lady standing in the doorway trying to comfort me didn't understand why I wasn't responding to her half-hearted attempts to calm me down at 3:30 in the morning.

At that very minute, I was working on bellowing screams of rage and sorrow. My mother, rumped, in all her glorious bed-head, came in and took one look at my face, my brother's curled up body, and the old lady trying to comfort us before she ran to us and hugged us.

"It's okay, it's okay," she whispered, our tears mingling.

"Where's Daddy?" My brother's question shook my mother from her state of shock, and she turned to answer.

"He's back with Nannie," she whispered, holding my brother, comforting him and looking back at the woman. "Thank you for watching them." Her voice sounded hollowed and rough; she was fighting back tears.

"Oh, it's fine, dear!" The woman looked on at our scene and sighed. "I'm going to go over and see what I can do," she turned away and went back through the door.

"How's Papa?" I whispered in my mother's ear, crawling over. She swayed with the effort of keeping both me and my brother close.

"Papa's gone."

Her voice broke and she lay me and my brother down on our sleeping bags. Without another sound, she fell between us.

No one talked; everyone just sighed slightly as the slithering tears from our faces pooled on the hardwood floors. After a couple minutes, or maybe it was hours, my dad walked in. Only I turned to look at him as he put everything down and went to lie down beside my mother, his eyes filling up with tears he hadn't yet had time to spill.

epilogue: legacy

I had pushed myself till my feet were bleeding after a day of dance, and then scratched my skin till I couldn't take hurting myself, all because I didn't say goodbye. I didn't stop it. I didn't make his cancer go away.

Walking back to my house, all these memories still swirling in my head like the leaves falling around me made me smile. I was happy now. I didn't blame myself for what happened; I didn't blame anyone anymore. Instead, I understood that it was natural. A cruel twist of fate, but natural, and that was finally fine with me.

Sure, I wanted to change it, make it so he got better, but, instead of the six months he originally had to live, he lived eighteen months.

When I walked through the door, I went straight to my room and grabbed the round book sitting on my desk, pulling the sheets from the blue leather covering; I unveiled diagrams and sheets of different stars and constellations. Looking through them, my smile broadened as I realized what my grandfather, David Wible, had given me. He had given me a sense of curiosity.

freshman versus destiny



quakers vs. bulldogs

noah byck mlyn

JUST LIKE DUKE SCHOOL, I think, as the teacher known only as Andy sits down next to a student in Foundations of Literature to ask her a question about the book. He faces her and scratches his chin like a concerned father. I recline on the old, itchy sofa I'm on—I have only been at Carolina Friends School for about an hour, but it already feels way too familiar, like the warm side of my pillow when I can't sleep.

I focus my attention back on the class. Andy is pacing round the room, free-associating about infant psychology while the ten or so students lounge around like beached whales, piping up whenever they're so inclined. I can't help but realize how comfortably bored the students seem, as if they'd spent their whole lives with this man, in this room—and they're all freshmen.

A kid in the corner bounces on an exercise ball. His face is lacking expression, and he's biting his nails—but he's not disengaged. And then I realize that's what eager looks like here. This school prides itself for having an engaged student body that loves learning, but I feel like that love is being overridden by this lack of experiential diversity. My parents can go on and on about how intellectually vigorous and stimulating this school is, but in the end, everyone's bored. A few trailers in the middle of the woods can only provide you with so much of an experience.

Andy drags the class through the rest of the lesson slowly but surely, each student looking neither unhappy nor excited. Class ends, and I leave the room. I roam aimlessly for a while, wandering down paths and between buildings. It smells like a forest; damp and earthy, and I can't deny that I feel very relaxed. But this wasn't what I wanted. I couldn't spend any more time staring at a map of what my life is going to be like.

* * *

Walking downstairs, I'm too groggy to think about my future. It's seven a.m, I have geometry in half an hour, and I still need to pack my lunch, eat breakfast, and get to school. All I'm thinking about, as my mom likes to say, is "the task at hand."

Which is why I'm so confused by my mom's greeting. She's unloading the dishwasher in her running clothes—typical enough. It's what she says that throws me.

"So when are you gonna tell your friends?"

"What?"

"When do you think you're going to tell your friends about CFS?"

"What about CFS?"

"Come on, Noah. That you're going there for high school!"

Immediately, I'm blinded with fury.

Not that I had expected something different. I had been pretty sure for a few days now that I was going to be forced to go to CFS, but the combination of hearing the final verdict and the obnoxious, casual way in which it had been delivered to me is too much.

I stare at her, the meanest stare I can manage, as she begins her slightly sarcastic and extremely infuriating routine of pretending to not understand my anger.

"It's not a surprise. I mean, you basically already knew that, right? Let's not be so dramatic about this."

Who are you to be preaching about dramatics? I think. You're the one who just informed me of your decision about the next four years of my life in the most passive aggressive way possible!

Talking won't help. I can't stand my mom when she's like this. I unconsciously decide that appearing a little immature in front of my forty-eight-year-old mom with an angry eighteen-year-old's personality isn't too big of a loss, and promptly let out a sort of yell/sigh/curse that says rather clearly 'I can't believe I have to put up with you *and* this private school BS for four more years,' before storming out of the room.

* * *

I stare at the letter. *Congratulations, and welcome to Durham School of the Arts!* it reads. It doesn't sink in immediately, and even once it does, I'm not thinking straight.

My first reaction is, *Yes! I'm going to DSA! I don't have to go to CFS!* As I said, I wasn't thinking straight.

I curse much louder than I mean to once I fully have my wits about me, causing my parents to shout from upstairs, "What? What's wrong? Noah?" I bound up the stairs and into my mom's office. I throw the letter onto her desk without a word.

She laughs. My mom reads the first few sentences and laughs. "Wow, Noah. A little too late, I guess." She seems tentative.

My dad looks up from his laptop. "What is it?" he asks.

"Noah got into DSA."

"Huh," he murmurs. That's about it.

I decide I just need to say it. "So . . . can I go?" I blurt out.

They both chuckle. "No, of course not," my mom says as casually as if she was telling me the time. "We've made a commitment to CFS."

I look at my dad. He's sitting on a chair with both his legs and arms crossed, as if he's trying to create a barrier between himself and my stupid question. His furrowed eyebrows and sweaty forehead don't give me much hope either. Not that this is unusual body language for my dad; it's his default. It's just that right here, right now, it takes on a new meaning and purpose: to convey a harsh and decisive message to me before he says a word.

"No, Noah."

* * *

"Nine years of private school is enough. I'll suffocate at a high school with thirty kids in my grade."

I say it, but I can't hear myself. I've been saying the same thing for over a month and I'm starting to forget what I mean. All I know is that I have planted a fundamental urge deep inside of me to resist going to Carolina Friends School at all costs, and that's the only thing that drives me through these endless, sickeningly redundant arguments with my parents.

"Noah, we just want you to go where we think will be best for you. We have this great opportunity, why not take it?" My mom keeps talking, but I don't listen. I've heard it all a before. I tune her out, and for a moment, I feel true hatred toward her. Why can't she understand? Why is she doing this?

My anger fuels my mind and I start to think of dozens of arguments. I'm so sure that I'm right and I have so much to prove it . . . but for what gain? I'm very familiar with my mom's stubbornness at this point, so I know that nothing I say will progress this argument. Discouraged and frustrated, I shut down. When my mom finally stops talking, I can do nothing but revert back to my opening statement.

"Nine years of private school is enough. I'll suffocate at a high school with thirty kids in my grade."

* * *

I stare out of the backseat window at the scattered streetlights and storefronts illuminating the warm summer night. Aside from the dull tapping of my sister texting in the front seat and the soft rattle of my mom's keychains dangling gently from her car key, the car is silent. But not in a bad way. Before my mom says a thing about the dinner she just had with the Letsuky's, I know my high school was a topic of conversation. And not just because my sister tipped me off with a casual, "Mom might be convinced."

"Noah," my mom says, glancing at me before turning back to the road, "Dad's and my decision has just gotten a lot harder."

"Has it?" I say, as casually as possible. "How so?"

"Well, I'm really starting to see this from a different perspective. Noah was really lobbying for you."

I smile. She isn't, of course, saying I'm lobbying for myself. My mom is referring to Noah Letsuky, the oldest son in the Letusky family. Noah is a senior at Durham Academy and, although he advocated fiercely for the school in ninth grade, he is beginning to advise people against choosing DA, and, consequently, lobbying for a public school option. Noah is a bit disillusioned with his high school, and he seems to have joined my team by trying to convince my mom to let me go to DSA.

"He argued really passionately," my mom continues. "I think he really believes public school would be the best place for you. And you know what? I'm not so sure he's wrong."

I can picture so clearly the whole exchange. Noah's the kind of guy who gets really into arguments. I can hear him stuttering

with excitement as he launches into an impassioned rant about the toxic, sheltered social environment private high schools create or interrupting my mom to correct her on a statistic, and I feel nothing but gratitude. *I may have a victory here, I think, and I owe it to Noah Letsuky.*

At this point, I realize how lucky I am and how much progress has been made. But I just can't stop here. I need a number.

"So Mom," I say slowly, hoping I'm not stretching my luck. "What are the chances?"

My mom frowns and looks into the distance as she grips the wheel. I can see she's trying to figure this out as much as I am. Slowly, she comes to a conclusion.

"Fifty-fifty."

* * *

I bike into the parking lot, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. I've just come from Duke Young Writer's Camp—which reminded me just how much I don't want to go to CFS, for the camp was another parent-forced activity—and I'm stopping by my dad's office on my way home. My parents are supposed to have made a decision by this point.

I bound up the stairs to the second floor and his office, knowing that every step I take is bringing me closer to either four more years of familiar, boring, suffocating private school or, hopefully, my first public school—or as I like to say, real world—experience. When I get to the top of the stairs, I take a deep breath and collect my thoughts. *You're not going to do anything stupid, Noah, I reassure myself. Whatever he says, you just have to roll with it. There's nothing more you can do.*

I open his office door and sit down at his desk across from him.

My dad's office is normal enough—fairly large, with beige walls, high book shelves, and tons of pictures in frames and gifts from co-workers. But today, it's the other things that I notice. I notice the cluttered, disorganized desk my dad is behind, the paperweight on the very edge of a table, ready to fall off, and especially my dad's ever-tapping fingers and darting eyes—all screaming for help, crying out with anxiety. I take a deep breath as I sit up in my chair.

“Hey, bud! How was your day?”

Hmm, I think, would he be so cheery if he was about to tell me I didn't have to go to his dream school?

“Um . . . you know. Kinda sucked.”

“Still, huh?”

“Yeah . . . it's really boring.” I reach for a cherry Tootsie-Pop from his signature lollipop basket.

He turns to check his email.

I wait.

I don't want to say anything. . . . I guess I'm afraid I'll jinx the verdict. But I can't wait any longer. I'm about to open my mouth when . . .

“So Noah, Mom and I have made our decision,” my dad says as he turns towards me. I'm sweating a little. I'm ready to cheer or scream, although I know I'll do neither. I lean forward in my chair.

Why is he taking so long? I think, Spit it out already!

“You know our preference, but we've decided you can choose which school to go to.”

I can't believe it. He said yes! I reversed the decision! After all this, I'm going to get to go to DSA! I run around the desk and give my dad a big hug as he laughs.

“I guess you finally got what you wanted, eh?” he says.

“Yes, I did,” I say, beaming.

from the top

elizabeth kline

out of my control

WAITING IS THE WORST PART. The room was crowded, filled with parents and kids nervously anticipating their turn. It was very noisy. There were kids practicing and talking to their friends or parents. Some were even crying after their audition. This added to my nervousness because I wasn't sure why they were crying, but I knew it had something to do with their audition. I tried to concentrate on the words and the tune of my song, "The Wells Fargo Wagon."

It was one of my first auditions. My mind was going a mile a minute, imagining every possible way the audition could go. What if I walked in, sang the sixteen bars, and then they automatically cast me? What if it was my turn to sing and I completely forget the words of my song and all I can do is awkwardly stand there?

There were a lot of girls who knew each other, and even though they hugged, you could tell they were thinking that the other person didn't stand a chance.

"OMG! Hi. I can't believe you are auditioning for this," one girl said with fake enthusiasm in her voice.

"Oh, hi! Well I have done a lot of shows with this particular director, so my mom thought that I should audition. Are you nervous?"

"Oh no! I've done too many auditions to get nervous anymore. Did you hear that I was just in a short film?" she boasted.

The other girl stood with her arms crossed and eyebrows raised. She looked like she was trying to stifle a yawn and resist the urge to roll her eyes. "Oh . . . cool. Well . . . good luck. Love you, girly," she said with a forced tone.

"Good luck. Love you, too."

Then they both walked off in opposite directions, rolling their eyes.

You could tell who was the “star” because she knew everybody and walked around with a confident smile. It was intimidating, being around girls with jam-packed, nine-point-font resumes, new head shots, and binders filled with songs; they were clearly pros at auditioning. As for me, I was just the little girl doing this for fun.

Some of the parents were worse than the children. They would have their noses stuck in the air and walk around with an attitude of, ‘my child is the best, so your child has no chance at all.’ The only reason they would talk to you was if they wanted to pry for information or scope out their competition. Of course they would be nice to your face, but you knew they would push as many people out of the way as necessary to get their child on top. Two moms huddled in a corner. I looked over at them curiously, hoping this would take my mind off my audition. I could hear snippets of their conversation.

“Cassie was very excited about being in the movie. She really deserved it. She worked so hard. She was obviously the most suited for the part. Too bad that Virginia and Cassie can’t work together,” a mom said with a smug smile.

The other mom let out an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes. “Well. I would never let Virginia do that part even if she got it,” the other mom says defensively. “It’s too inappropriate for a young child to be a part of. It would be *very* bad parenting if I had let her. She only did that audition for the experience. Virginia has too many things going on, anyway.” She then turned on her heels and sauntered off, leaving the other mom looking content.

I heard the assistant call a bunch of numbers, and sure enough, one of those numbers was mine. I felt my heart beat faster, and my mind went blank. *Oh my gosh. I can’t remember the first line of my song.* My throat went dry, but I didn’t have time to get any water.

All of the girls whose numbers were called went in as a group. I saw a long table of about five people, obviously the artistic team. These were the people I needed to impress, because they would be the ones casting me. We all had to sing the same sixteen bars of a song from the show. This made me even more nervous, because I couldn’t help but compare myself to the other girls. Finally, it was my turn to sing. I glanced at the artistic team while I sang. Most of them were scribbling down notes, barely looking at me, and two people were

even talking in hushed voices. *Does that mean I'm not good or that they don't like me?* The auditions were quick. How can a director tell if he wants you for a certain part with such a quick audition? I guess I did well during the singing portion because they called my number again, indicating that I had made it to the next round. Some girls were eyeing me up because they hadn't expected me to make it.

I wasn't prepared to dance. I had no idea what we were going to do during that portion, and I didn't even have the proper shoes. A girl, a little bit older than me, took pity and let me borrow her jazz shoes. She was genuinely trying to be nice, unlike some of the other girls who probably would have thought that I was pathetic, doing pirouettes in flip-flops.

I had never danced before. The choreographer gave us a short combination very quickly. I couldn't keep up with him. Then he gave us a minute to go over the combination. The steps all scrambled in my head. This was obviously not the type of audition where you would ask questions. What would I ask anyway? Can you go over the whole combination again, slowly? Can you show me how to do most of the steps? That would probably not go over too well. I luckily was not placed in the center, but I was still closer to the front because I was shorter than some of the other girls. I hoped the artistic team wouldn't notice me, but how could they not? During the whole combination, I was a beat or two behind everybody else because I was watching those in front of me. Based on the confused and overwhelmed expression on my face, I did not fake it very well.

On the way home, I spent the whole time looking out the window. I didn't feel like talking to my mom. I tried to pretend that I was not disappointed that I got cut, but it didn't work. My mom told me to take it as a learning experience, and that she was proud of me. Even her reassuring comments didn't make me feel better. I was exhausted and ready to go home, but I knew this would not be my last audition.

own the night like the fourth of july

I was engulfed by the smell of popcorn, funnel cakes, and hot dogs. I stopped at the entrance to breathe it in. The smell reminded me of summer. I watched all the people racing to get in line for food

before the game started. These were the people who I would be singing for, and there were a lot of them. Some glanced over at me. I could understand why; I was wearing a new, pink, halter top floral dress and matching pink shoes. I didn't care. I was too happy to care.

It was July seventh. The July fourth game had been rained out, so they were doing fireworks today, which meant that there were a lot of people. I had auditioned in May to sing the National Anthem at the Durham Bulls game. The National Anthem is not an easy song to tackle, especially as an eleven-year-old. But I had worked on it for months with my voice teacher so I would be prepared for the auditions. For that day, my parents rented one of the party boxes to celebrate. The party box was an indoor room that provided food, TV, a pool table, outdoor seating so you can watch the game, and even a barber. Why would you want to get your hair cut at a baseball game? Naturally, my dad was the only one out of all our friends to get his hair cut.

I walked down to the field with my voice teacher and a guy who worked for the Durham Bulls. I was handed a mic. The sun was bright, but the wind was blowing. I looked out at the crowd. There were more people than I have ever seen at the park.

I could spot my friends, who were smiling and giving me a thumbs-up. I had a choice to either look at the audience or look at the American flag, or rather, the virtual American flag. I was amused that the Durham Bulls did not have a real American flag. Instead they just display one on a fairly large TV screen. I was a little intimidated by the number of people that were at the game, so I decided to face the "flag." The baseball players came out and took off their hats. I knew that at any minute, I would have to sing. My name was announced over the loud speakers, echoing throughout the park. I was worried I would be off key, so I ran back to my voice teacher, who was standing at the side of the field. She gave me a reassuring smile and the first note. I walked back to home plate. Everybody rose from their seats and the park was completely silent. It was a weird silence, like being at school on a day off. I took a deep breath and began to sing.

On the big note at the end, on "free," the whole park erupted into applause and started cheering. I could pick out my friends' voices. I couldn't stop smiling.

When I went back up to the party, I was immediately greeted with hugs and compliments. For the rest of the night, I enjoyed hanging out with my friends. It wasn't like we actually watched the rest of the game. I didn't even know who won. Baseball was just not our thing.

In the middle of the party, I was pulled out by my voice teacher and the same guy who worked at the Durham Bulls (I wish I could remember his name) to inform me that I would have to sing the National Anthem again, before the fireworks, because the person who was going to sing it had backed out at the last minute.

This time it was dark, with only the florescent lamps shining. There were even more people because of the fireworks. I couldn't believe the park could even hold this many people. I positioned myself on home plate. A cool breeze ruffled my hair. *Great. I just brushed it.* A group of military people, or at least they looked like they were, marched out with an American flag. I felt a little more confident this time, but I still felt the overwhelming rush of excitement and nervousness.

When I sang the last note, fireworks exploded. Everyone cheered. I assumed it was more for the fireworks than for me, but we all have hopes. I gazed at the beautiful sky, bursting with colors. It was a perfect night.

A few months later, I watched the video of that night. I was surprised to hear how slowly I sang it. It was the slowest version of the National Anthem that I have ever heard: four minutes and thirty seven seconds. I just took my sweet time. The guy who worked at the park even told my mom and voice teacher that the second time I sang it, I needed to speed it up a little bit, so they could stay on schedule. It was obviously not that big of an issue because I was asked to sing the National Anthem again the following year.

so close

When I got home, I raced inside. I found the email with the cast list. My mom was right behind me, eagerly looking over my shoulder. I scanned the list for my name.

Townsperson.

It hurt, like stubbing your toe. The excitement quickly drained from my face. I sat there staring at the screen, thinking about the long hours of rehearsing, the agony that I had spent preparing for this one particular part, all gone to waste, just slipped through my fingers.

I looked up at my mom. Her eyebrows narrowed, but her eyes were loving, with a hint of disappointment. She had also put in a lot of time and effort in helping me prepare for this role and hated to see me upset. I looked at the rest of the list and scrolled down to the part I wanted.

I saw my friend's name next to it. It was like stubbing your other toe, double the pain and another band-aid. *I'm not surprised. I mean, why should I be? We were there at the callbacks together. She auditioned right after me. We both had equal chances of getting the part. The only difference was that she was pleased with her call back and I wasn't.* I still thought I stood chance because I was a more experienced singer. There was obviously still a piece of the puzzle missing, or a page of the book, or the cheese to the pizza, because I didn't get the part.

My mom put her arm around me and pulled me in for a hug. "You deserved the part just as much as Courtney did, but they could only pick one girl," she soothed in a gentle voice.

All I could respond with was, "It's not fair! I should have gotten that part."

I was uninterested in doing anything. I went in the living room and plopped down on a chair. The intricate stitching dug into my skin. I had never liked sitting on this chair, mainly because it was itchy and uncomfortable. It was an antique, so you could probably guess that it didn't feel good. I mean, there was nothing wrong with it; it served its purpose well. Other people sat on it. It was just that I had never liked it. I guess it's the same way with directors: you can do the job and you have the talent, but sometimes they just don't like you as much as someone else. We eventually got that chair reupholstered, and now I sit in it all the time.

The rest of the afternoon, I was distracted. I got a message from Courtney congratulating me on getting in and telling me how excited she was to spend six weeks with me over the summer working on the musical. *Oh great. I'm going to have to spend six weeks*

standing on the sidelines watching her play the part that I wanted. The last thing I wanted was to hear her chipper voice.

"Elizabeth, you need to be a good sport and call her back to congratulate her," my mom insisted.

I grudgingly picked up the phone and dialed her number.

"Hey, Elizabeth! How are you?" she said in an overly bubbly tone. *Great. Just what I need.* But I knew I had to try and sound happy for her.

"Fine," I said in a forced tone. "Anyway, I just called to say congratulations. You're going to be great."

"Aww, thank you. Congratulations to you, too! I am so excited! I couldn't believe I got the part. I thought you would have gotten it because you're so good. I was so happy with my call back. It's going to be such a fun summer! We're going to have to have a lot of sleep overs. I can't believe we get to spend six weeks together!" she gushed.

You would think that this would have made me mad, but she actually made me feel a little bit better. It was nice to hear how excited she was. I knew she was proud of herself and wanted to celebrate with a friend. I was honestly happy for her. It was just hard to face rejection.

all the world's a stage

The dressing room was crowded. Makeup scattered the counters, clothes covered the floors, and an undeniable nervous energy filled the room. I liked hanging out in the dressing room. It was a large room, with mirrors covering the perimeter, one in front of each chair. They weren't just any mirrors; they were the ones with lights surrounding them, and each one had a name on it. I felt like a movie star. My friends and I nervously chatted as we attempted to do our makeup. I looked around at all the friends I had made, and sadness quickly filled my heart. I couldn't believe, after six weeks, that this was finally over. Memories flooded my mind. We were like a family. I wasn't ready to leave them or the show. I pushed those thoughts away and decided not dwell on them. Instead, I was going to enjoy it while it lasted. The intercom was fuzzy, but I could hear

our five minute call. Everyone raced around to finish putting on their costumes and makeup.

The theater we were in had many entrances. Mine was from the lobby. I had a little bit of time before my call, and I was hot from wearing a thick, long-sleeved dress and tights. As I waited for my cue, something caught my eye. Gelato! It looked very good, so I went in my costume and each performance I asked for a gelato sample. Luckily there was a different person every show.

It was dark and quiet. My heart was racing. I felt like I was on a sugar high (even before the gelato), or about to pass out, anticipating what was about to happen next. I heard the music begin, which was my cue. I took one last look at the other people in the cast and went on stage. After all our preparation, we finally got to shine. The lights blazed on my face. It was hard to see, but I could tell that we had a full house. I got so caught up in the moment that I forgot about the audience altogether.

When the last song was finished and the music faded away, I heard the roar of the crowd. It was the best feeling in the world, knowing that people were clapping for me. I couldn't help but smile. I grabbed the hands of the other people in the cast and took a bow.

trouble don't last always

demario tatum

pray before sleeping

IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST THAT DAY. One minute, I was on my phone listening to music. The next, I was being air lifted to Wake Med Hospital in Raleigh. It seemed to happen when I first drifted off to sleep. No one saw it coming, and I'm sure it surprised everyone who was in the fifteen passenger church van. It's funny how these things always happen to me. I see now that life is too short to play around; if I didn't believe in God then, I certainly do now.

On July 10, 2011, twelve of my family members and I woke up at five o'clock in the morning to go to Florida. Every summer for the past five years we had gone, and this would be our last time for a while. As always, my brother Marcus was the last to get into the old church van that we were given for this occasion. He was incredibly slow in the morning. By about 5:45 a.m., everyone was packed up in the van and ready to hit the highway.

I stayed up for the whole ride until we stopped for breakfast. After we were done eating, my grandma pointed out that one of the right tires looked a little low. We all shrugged and agreed that it would be alright. I became bored very quickly when we got back on the road. Like most teenagers would, I pulled out my phone. I grew too excited to sleep, so I began listening to music, which would surely calm me down.

We were driving along the dangerous highway when suddenly the same tire that my grandma spoke about being flat blew out. The driver, my grandma, drove off the road to try to avoid hitting another car, but that caused the van to swirl around to face the traffic. On the second full circle, the van began to flip. It turned a total of four rotations. While it was spinning, I was fully ejected from the van, along with my aunt and cousin. I may or may not have been awake when it happened, but if I was, I don't remember.

I hit my head on the pavement when I was launched from the vehicle. My injuries consisted of broken bones in my back, a fractured pelvis, a broken right hip, a contusion in my left calf muscle, a cut liver, a closed head injury, and a bruise on my brain and lungs. At least that's all the doctors knew of.

Everyone who did not get ejected from the van had only minor injuries compared to us who did. My grandad had a broken foot, my dad had a closed head injury, and my uncle had his middle and ring finger cut off because he kept the windshield from caving in on my grandma. My little cousin, my mom, Marcus, and my grandma were the only ones who had no injuries. For my cousin and aunt, they had almost exactly the same injuries as if being mother and daughter had dictated their movements that day. They had facial lacerations, which are deep cuts in the face, and fractured pelvises like me. My cousin and I landed inches away from the tires of the van. We were so close that the right wheel landed on my cousin's hair. Two or three more inches and we both would've been angels.

Everyone scurried out of the van to safety, while I remained dramatically stretched across the highway along with my cousin and aunt. Thank God that as soon as the other drivers saw our tire blow out, most of the traffic stopped in its tracks. Bystanders stopped the cars who refused to slow down or acknowledge the chaos. Everyone began to look for my aunt, cousin, and me.

When they found me, my family and the strangers began calling my name to make sure I was alive. When I heard my mom's voice, I attempted to get to my feet. I was moaning with pain and my eyes were glued shut as I struggled to my feet. Everyone told me to stay down, but I proceeded to my feet because of my mother's voice. My mom noticed this, backed off, and let the strangers handle me while she tended to the other twelve passengers that were hurt.

The ambulance arrived at least twenty minutes later. I'm glad I wasn't completely on my deathbed because my brother Moe explained to me later, "The ambulance took forever to get there." I'm glad it was me who was lying there and not anyone else, especially my grandparents because it may have killed them. I'm also glad it wasn't Marcus that I saw lying on the street. I have a closer bond with him than anyone, including my other two brothers, my dad,

and even my own mother. Don't get me wrong, I'd rather it be me than any of my family, but mainly I'm glad it wasn't Marcus.

No one was allowed to ride with anyone who was hurt to the hospital. As I was loaded into the ambulance, my mom tried to come in, too, but they stopped her, so I rode alone. My dad was in an ambulance as well as my aunt, my cousin, my grandad, older brother, and two uncles. "Marcus really stepped up," my mom explained. "He went and found our clothes and other items from the destroyed van. He did everything that was necessary." My dad thought he was sweating at first, but as he sat on the side of the road, he realized in shock that it was actually blood gushing from his head.

a second chance

I still hadn't come back to my senses in the hospital in Savannah, Georgia. My uncle and my mom's dad drove up from Durham as fast as they could. I was sound asleep when everyone came to see their close family member with a tube in his throat and nose because his lungs refused to function.

My family stayed at a hotel for nine days and migrated from place to place buying clothes. We were only going to be in Florida for a week, so we only had one week's worth of clothes. Family members that I did not even see once a month came to see me. It's a shame that it took a serious injury for them to show their faces.

My mom explained to me, "The doctors had to tie your hands because you were trying to pull the tubes from down your throat." That same day was when I finally opened my eyes. I was so doped up on medicine that I only peeked my eyes open for minutes at a time. My mom and dad would call my name for me to open my eyes and look at them.

On the third day of my wonderful vacation, the doctor finally took the tube out of my throat. When they took it out, I exclaimed, "Y'all forgot something." That's when they took the tube out of my nose. I always told my parents there was still something down my throat, but there wasn't anything there anymore.

The bishop from my church came to see me. This was ironic because just days before he arrived, I spoke to my mom about him

saying he needed to pray for me. My mom's dad, who rarely comes to see us, traveled from Virginia to visit.

One day I began to speak differently to everyone. My tone and personality completely transformed. It all started with Marcus asking me if I was hot. I replied with confidence, "Yeah, man, it is hot as hell in here." This was unusual for me because I never swear, at least, not in front of my family. That got every heart's attention in my room. Everyone stood in shock as I mumbled on to myself.

The rest of my time in that hospital was insane. I showed my private area to nurses on numerous occasions. I told a nurse that I did not mean to feel her butt. I even cursed at my own mother. It was as if I had another personality. And I don't remember any of it.

I finally came to my senses a day before we arrived at Wake Med in Raleigh. I cracked my eyes open only to see my dad staring at me. All he told me was, "We are about to get on a plane to go back to North Carolina." He did not tell me what happened or where we were. I was too sleepy to ask anyway.

Nurses wheeled me out the back of the hospital to a small red plane. I remember my dad saying that the weight limit was four hundred pounds on the plane. There were four of us and some boxes. That was the only thing that scared me throughout the whole experience. As they pulled down the ramp of the plane, I forced my eyes closed and began thinking about things like what my grades would hopefully look like and if I would like my new teachers. This put me to sleep because, of course, the thought of school bored me.

On the ride back to North Carolina, I constantly peeked at my dad who was always staring at me. I remember asking him why he was staring at me. I thought I knew the answer already: he was concerned. Sadly, I was wrong. "I was concerned," he told me later, "but the real reason I was staring at you was because I was nervous about the plane's weight limit."

The next time I opened my eyes, I was being taken out of the plane. As I was wheeled through the hospital, I had a feeling everyone was staring at me. I wheeled past others on stretchers and wheelchairs. Some people pointed at me and whispered to each other. I remember passing a snack machine and falling into a deep sleep.

I must have been asleep for a full twenty-four hours because when I woke up, my mom looked surprised. “Good morning, Mari.” That’s when I finally recognized her. I tried to smile.

faith without work is death

“Good morning,” I spoke quietly.

“How was your flight?” my mom asked.

“Man, it was cold. And why am I so tired?” My mom was smiling the whole time that I was talking. The conversation only lasted a few minutes because I drifted off to sleep again.

I was awakened about forty minutes later by a nurse named Allison. She had brown skin and long dreadlocks. She smiled at me as she introduced herself, gave me my medicine, a pen, and paper, and said, “Here is your menu for the next week.” Too bad nobody told me that hospital food tastes terrible compared to home-cooked meals.

For two days, I lay in my hospital bed. The only thing I could think about was my phone because I had a poker app that I was addicted to. My phone had gotten lost in the wreck. It had been my only solution to boredom; for now, all I had was a TV.

My mom watched TV before I started watching it. She always watched female friendly shows like *Basketball Wives* or *Two and a Half Men*. This of course made me start liking those shows. Besides, there was not really anything else on anyway. There was one show that I had not watched in years that involved a talking sponge. I’ll leave it at that.

I woke up as if it was a normal day in the hospital though you could never have a normal day in the hospital. I couldn’t bathe myself or put on clothes on my own, but I could at least brush my teeth. I laid in bed and began watching *Spongebob*, which I liked to call “my stories.”

About twenty minutes later, a lady walked in smiling. “Hey DeMario, my name is Katy. I’m your speech therapist.” I was confused. Then it all came back to me. Allison had told me yesterday my therapy started today, but I had forgotten all about it.

I smiled at her when this came back to my memory. “Hey,” I replied to break the silence. We started with simple math. It was

too easy, but I knew it was to make sure my brain was functioning right. My speech session went by faster than I thought it would. I was deeply annoyed by the elementary school work though, so I lay down as soon as my session was completed. It seemed like as soon as I closed my eyes, it was time for my next session, which was occupational therapy.

My occupational therapist looked as if she was middle-aged, and she had a gorgeous smile. She is the only one whose name I don't remember.

After this session was the main event, physical therapy. It's funny how they left this as the last session. My physical therapist's name was Heather. I thought this session was going to be harder considering I couldn't even sit up for a long period of time. I was right.

As I attempted to do the stretches, I peeked across the physical therapy room to see an old man doing the same stretch as me. This lowered my self-esteem a bit. Then I tried my hardest to do better, but still I failed.

After this stretching I had to see how long I could stand while holding onto two rails on either side of me—a simple task. I'm pretty sure I stood for about forty seconds, maybe less. The pain then skyrocketed from a five to a twenty-eight on a scale of one to ten. I felt like crying but I had too much pride to do so.

I thought the session was over after this, but I was wrong again. We did more stretching, and then she asked me to stand again. I looked up at her, thinking, *What more does she want to see from me?* This time I probably lasted about twenty-five seconds before I collapsed. Therapy was then over when I decided to throw in the towel and just wheel back to my room and ignore all Heather's commands to stop.

As soon as I wheeled back into the room, my mom helped me out of the wheelchair and into bed, where I gave out a big sigh. Heather smiled, having chased me down the hall. When she left my room, I fell asleep. If the accident didn't kill me, I was sure physical therapy would.

For the rest of my time in speech therapy, we did educational activities like math, vocabulary, and making shapes. The only thing I really remember doing that was closest to my grade

level was slope. I didn't remember how to do this but then Katy taught me.

For occupational therapy, I remember some things, like transferring from my wheelchair to a bed and doing things in the kitchen, like washing dishes. My favorite part of this session was making cookies. We made peanut butter cookies which are my favorite kind. We made about fourteen and boy, did they smell delicious.

Of course I leave physical therapy for last. I remember an awful lot of things from physical therapy. My accomplishments included standing up for twelve minutes and learning how to walk on crutches and a walker. I played the Wii every now and then against other patients. The same old man who did the stretches with me on my first day of therapy played against me in bowling and beat me. I didn't care this time because I knew my time in Wake Med was coming to an end.

nothing bad stays consistent

I knew I was getting better when they stopped giving me so much medicine. Now there was no doubt I was becoming the same person as I was a month ago. My time in Wake Med was a total of two weeks and five days. I stopped taking the percocets, oxycotin, and other various medicines—or at least I didn't take them when they wanted me to, only when I was in pain.

Over the second week I was in the hospital at Wake Med, I went through a series of tests, such as x-rays and MRIs. My nights in the hospital got more and more depressing. Every day I watched the same old shows, saw the same old visiting family members, and ate the same plastic food. It seemed as if I would spend my whole first quarter of the school year in the hospital whether I was healed or not.

There was another test to be done. Another boring MRI. I forced my eyes shut before they could even put the cup over my nose and mouth because I already knew the routine. I fell asleep quickly as they rolled my body into the machine, which stretched up to my chest. All this became my new lifestyle. The MRIs, x-rays, therapy, and even the plastic hospital food were now my daily activities. The tests were my varsity sport. Therapy was my school.

I woke up that afternoon to a bunch of people staring at me, smiling. I frowned, because I knew for a fact that they had found something else wrong with me. Every time the doctors told me something about my injuries, they always smiled as if it wasn't so bad. Then, to break the silence, my doctor announced, "Your results came back already." I wished he'd just tell me the news already. I hated all the suspense. "And guess what, man?" he continued. "You're going home Friday."

My mouth dropped. I tried to keep a straight face like I was cool, but then I started cheesing like never before. All my hard work finally paid off. Just when you think something is hopeless, it all comes together.

Friday was two days away, and I excelled in all my therapy sessions. During those days, I packed up all my clothes, snacks, and gifts people brought me. I wasn't going to leave anything behind but the percocets.

On Friday morning, I woke up to all of my immediate family, nurses, and doctors. Now this was the type of farewell I wanted. Before leaving, of course, I gave out hugs and said my goodbyes. I only miss my therapists and that's it. I did not miss the actual therapy sessions, just the therapists. I missed none of the food or medicine. It felt good to get in the car and ride away from the hospital.

On the ride home, about fifteen minutes after we left, I began to experience a lot of pain because I could now only sit for about ten minutes or a bit more. Because of the amount of pride I have, I attempted to tough it out. I sat there for the whole ride from Raleigh to Durham through pain.

As soon as we got home, my first objective was to flop down on my bed. Being the independent guy I am, I walked up the stairs without holding on to anyone or anything. Yes, this hurt me really bad, but I pulled it off.

After I flopped on my bed, I began to think. I thought about what I'd learned from my experiences. One, always wear a seat belt, and two, your life can end at any time, any place. So make the most of it, and be something you are proud to be. I realize I could have been dead, and that life isn't just a game to play. Make something out of it, and don't live in sin. As of now, I'm saying goodbye to the old DeMario. It's time I live my life to the fullest.

time of change

artago jones

THE YEAR OF 2005, I WAS THE CHUBBIEST KID in my whole elementary class—I might have been the biggest in the school, and that is not the greatest feeling at all, especially if you have to catch your breath every five steps, or are always gasping for air between every sentence, and that was an everyday thing. I saw nothing wrong with being big; I felt like I was cool—like nobody could touch this.

That's how my mom felt. She met a tragic end on a Wednesday, one I care not to remember but find myself coming back to.

I remember my father saying she was going to be okay, but we both were not sure. We waited impatiently for the ambulance to move for about five minutes, but just as my father was about get out of the car, the medical truck blared its sirens and sped off down the street before taking an immediate left turn.

We both shared our expletives and took off to match the trucks. It was hard following them because we had to obey all the traffic rules while trying to keep up, but we ended at the hospital at the same time as they were just wheeling her out.

As we got into the hospital, I sat down in the waiting room while my father checked to see where my mother was going; as soon as he did, an argument between two ladies turned into a fight, and they were going at it, shouting about how the mother had let her daughter die and the aunt not being there for her. A security guard came in and broke it up, patting one of them down, making sure she didn't have a concealed weapon.

Dad came back and told me that my uncle and his girlfriend were on the way. Then he went back in the operating room with my mother. It took about twenty minutes for them to arrive, and they went to the back, also.

Ms. Tammi, my uncle's girlfriend, decided it would be good if we went outside and got some fresh air. I thought that would help, but still felt something bad was going to happen. We were out there

a good while, the time just going, when my uncle came, tearing up like he had been hurt bad. I ran up to him and asked what was wrong. He looked at me and shook his head.

“Momma’s gone.”

We all rushed into the operating room, and there she was, lifeless, her hands gone limp. At the sight of her, I thought, *Why her?* I would never wish anybody dead. I just kept asking, “What did she do to deserve this?”

I was the first to make the call to my dad’s family. My aunt sounded so cheerful over the phone, and I really didn’t want to ruin her good mood, but I told it to her straight. She was in shock. She believed me, but she didn’t want to. She was crying over the phone and told me, “We’re on the way.”

It was around seven o’clock when all the family members started to roll in, except me. It’s not that I didn’t love my mother; it’s just that I had too much pride, and I didn’t want my defenses to be torn down and cry in front of my family. So I just stood there with a blank expression. I couldn’t say a word, wouldn’t look at anybody, just stood there, looking at her, and asked again, “Why her?”

The next big step was to tell my mom’s parents, and that would be the most challenging part. My uncle called. No reply. I called. No reply. Dad called last, but, again, no reply. He left a voicemail instead, and, maybe an hour later, we got a call from them asking us why we sounded so troubled.

We told them. It was bad. Cars kept rolling in.

My life is forever changed. For better or for worse, I don’t know, but I do know this: Sheila Dennis Owens Jones died a Christian woman, an honest businesswoman, a great wife, a wonderful mom.

Rest in peace, angel.

the worst night of my life

pinky

I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD IN THE SUMMER OF FIFTH GRADE when I decided to travel with my uncle and aunt by plane to Mexico. On the way to the airport, they told me that I would be seeing my grandparents from my dad's side. I felt absolutely excited, though nervous at the same time, but my parents were there by my side, telling me that it would be very fun and that I would always be safe.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as the large airplane started to move slowly. The time passed so quickly that the next thing I knew, I was stepping out of the airplane with my uncle and aunt. We began to walk through the airport. As our feet stepped outside the twin doors, I saw my grandparents standing there in front of us, smiling as if they'd just won the lottery.

I spotted my grandma first. Wrinkles took over her pale face, and her dark, fearless eyes shone. My grandpa, on the other hand, had light blue eyes as clear as the ocean, brown silky hair, and a few scars on his left cheek. My grandmother said, "*Hola, cómo estás?*"¹

I responded by saying, "Alright, I guess, *abuela*."²

My grandpa just stood there with a large grin on his face. We all went inside an old, filthy, green truck. It looked as if someone had thrown buckets of dirt on it. We were on the way to my grandparents' house.

When we got there, I opened the door and stepped out of the truck. I spotted dogs and trees everywhere. I also realized that there were rocks all over the place. All the houses were made out of bricks and looked really old. As we all walked through a trail of rocks, we finally found my grandma's house. It appeared white, with weird designs on the windows, like an abandoned house that had been there since 300 B.C.E.

1 Hi, how are you?

2 grandmother

My grandma pulled out a small silver key and unlocked the dark door in front of us. When she opened it, a scary, curly-haired, white dog came out running like a beast. Looking around again, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that it was getting dark already. I didn't want to go to sleep yet. My grandma looked at me and smiled. "That room right there is where you and I will sleep dear," she explained as she pointed her crooked finger to a door.

I just smiled back at her and said, "Okay."

* * *

It soon got really dark, and we all raced to bed. My grandma and I slept in the same room, as she had said before, and in a blink of an eye we fell asleep. I awoke suddenly around 2:30 in the morning, and couldn't get back to sleep. I decided to go get something to drink. Quietly, I opened the door and walked to the small kitchen like a ninja, quiet so that nobody would suspect I was awake. I finally reached the cold floor of the kitchen, got a refreshing glass of water, and started to walk back to my room.

I was about to put my hand on the door handle when I heard a cold, deep, rusty voice say, "What are you doing out of bed this late?" I turned my head around and saw a tall man looking at me as though I had just killed someone. I looked closer and realized it was my grandpa standing there. Goosebumps spread over my arms, and my breath came in cold puffs. I didn't know how to respond, but before I could even speak he said, "Come here." I started to walk toward him, and he told me I should lay down with him; that I looked real tired and, since I was eleven, I wasn't sure if I should say yes or no. He was my grandpa, so I decided I could trust him. As I lay down on the bed, he told me I was growing up so fast and that I was pretty. I said thanks, but I still didn't understand why he would tell me that all of a sudden.

I was starting to become very sleepy, but then I felt rough hands on me. I knew it was my grandfather. He was touching me in places I didn't want to be touched, and I didn't understand what was going on.

I started to feel very uncomfortable, and I didn't know what to do. I finally reacted, and pushed him off. Quickly, I ran to the room

where I was sleeping before, slammed the door shut, and locked it. I guess the noise awoke my grandma. I started to cry, and told her what my grandpa had just done. She looked at me as if I was crazy.

*“Estás loca, cómo puedes decir algo así?”*³

I responded by saying, *“Pero abuela, estoy segura.”*⁴

She just looked at me and yelled, *“Para de mentir!”*⁵

That’s when I realized I couldn’t trust anybody. I felt alone and scared. I got up and left, running out of the house. I walked to my other grandma’s house. I knocked on her door, and when she opened it, she asked why I was coming to her house this late. I just told her that I didn’t want to sleep with my other grandparents, so she let me sleep with her. I decided not to say anything; I was scared that she would not believe me, but what I was really scared about was that she would tell my parents, and that they would get divorced.

I was confused, and I felt filthy. That man I had looked up to for years now seemed like a stranger to me. I never wanted to experience that ever again. That night I couldn’t go to sleep; I couldn’t close my eyes because every time I did, I saw his face looking at me.

* * *

The days went by quickly, and the day for me to leave was coming closer and closer with each moment. The time of our departure had come along, and I suddenly found myself packing everything in my pink glittered bag. We soon started to fill up the truck with a bunch of heavy bags. We were all on our way to the airport, but I still couldn’t get what happened that night out of my head. It was torturing me. We finally arrived at the airport; I hurried out of the truck so I could leave for sure. I didn’t even pause to say goodbye to my grandparents. I didn’t feel safe around anyone anymore. It all happened so fast. The next thing I knew I was already at my house, unpacking my stuff.

* * *

3 Are you crazy, how can you say something like that?

4 But grandmother, I’m sure.

5 Stop lying!

Three years passed, and each day I felt the pain of that night; it continued to torture me. In those three years I never told anyone, or thought about telling anyone. I didn't know how to deal with the situation, and I started to cut myself.

No one noticed what was happening to me until one Tuesday afternoon, after I came back from school, my mom saw a scratch leading to my arm. She turned my arm over, and saw more and more cuts. She asked why I did this; I knew I would have to tell her the truth, and I did. She talked to my dad; they were both very angry with my grandpa and with my grandma for not believing me.

I went to therapy for months, and it really helped me. Now I know that sometimes, you can trust people.

what came of it

osvaldo garcia perez

I.

“DUDE, DO YOU TRUST YOUR GIRLFRIEND?” Toryan asked.

“Yeah dude, I mean, we had only one fight, but I fixed it mainly because I didn’t like to go to sleep mad at someone,” I said. “You know, trust and honesty are the things that make relationships last.”

“I know, that’s why I have no one,” he laughed.

“Wow, man,” I laughed. Toryan and I were on our way to Hot Topic to buy two pairs of headphones. We were going to go to Hollister too. As we walked through the new clothing smell of the mall, Toryan broke the silence.

“Hey, dude.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Isn’t that your girlfriend, Samantha, over there?”

“She’s babysitting; she couldn’t be here right now.”

“She’s babysitting alright, babysitting that guy’s lips.”

“What?” I exclaimed. I turned around anxiously, and saw it with my own two eyes. I felt as if my heart had shattered and burned in the fire known as betrayal.

“Dude, you okay?” Toryan asked.

“Yeah, dude,” I muttered.

Suddenly, Samantha saw me and came over. “Hey, sorry I lied about babysitting.”

“Yeah, I know what you really did. You were cheating on me with that b——!”

“Oh my God, you saw that?” Her face was masked with shock.

“Yeah, I did.”

“I don’t know why I did it, honest!”

“Well, either way, you did it, and you can’t change that!” I yelled. “How many more lies are there, huh?”

“No more, I promise!” she cried.

"Pathetic!" I yelled. As soon as I did, I turned around and walked quickly to the parking lot to wait for my ride. My feelings poured out of my eyes, drenching my hands in wetness and making a puddle on the ground. I felt as if my life had just ended. The air felt tense as I waited patiently. I was glad my friend was there; he made me feel more confident of what I had said. My ride rumbled as it came to pick me up.

On my way home, I sat quiet as a mouse. Never had I felt more betrayed in my whole life. I felt as if my heart had been torn out, thrown to the ground, set on fire, stabbed several times, and tossed in the trash. Life to me seemed like it was worthless at the moment. People say that the hardest thing about ending is starting again. I guess they were right.

II.

Thinking about what happened, I felt no emotion. As soon as I got home, I grabbed my skateboard and left for the streets. As I skated, I told myself it would release my stress. I felt the tense air go through my hair as my wheels quickly rolled on the concrete. If life brought pain, what would death bring? I wondered. I knew there was a reason for life, but it was very vague at the moment.

Sometimes I wished I was dead so I could find out how much my life was worth. As soon as those thoughts came, I tripped and fell. It gave me the idea of committing suicide. I know some people think it's crazy, and others think it's sad, but they weren't me. Those were their opinions, and they'd have to see it through the eyes of others in order to understand.

I walked up to a street and started writing a suicide poem. I felt like a poem would make a better impact than just a letter. I had made my decision.

III.

Air still tense, my day shadowed, I felt as if I was about to free myself of misery. I closed my eyes, dropped my poem, and leapt into

my fate. *Beep, beep, bee-eep*—the car sounded as it hit me. I felt numb, happy, yet unsatisfied. Was this how suicide felt? I didn't know.

"Are you okay, young man? Help, someone, help!" a man yelled, frightened at the sight of me looking dead.

My last words were, "Thank you," but my last words weren't really my last. I blacked out, feeling as if my life was fading away. Suddenly I found myself in La La Land, a place that makes my dreams feel more exciting.

"What brings you here?" a deep voice said. It came from a man of small stature. He was transparent and covered in a black, glowing silhouette.

"I know who you are, I think," I said.

"Really?" he asked.

"You're Truth, aren't you?" I asked.

"Why yes, how did you find out, hm?"

"I had a hunch," I said.

He walked up to me. "So, you tried to commit suicide? Nice way of dying, but unfortunately you're still alive—you only have, like, three broken bones," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because I'm you, your Truth, your fate."

"Well then, I guess I have to regain consciousness now, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah. Goodbye," he said, with an evil smile on his face. As I tried to regain consciousness, I realized I'd seen and been through a lot. I guess that's why I met Truth.

IV.

"Ugh, what happened?" I asked as I woke up.

"You were knocked out from the car that hit you," the doctor said. Sometimes I wonder what he would've said if I had told him I tried to commit suicide; I told a lot of people about it, but it didn't seem safe to tell everyone right at the moment. Would they call me a freak? I didn't know; I thought that they probably would. When I awoke, there were only three people in the room: the doctor, my friend, and me. I wondered where everybody was—did they not

think I was important? Either way, I now knew who my true friend was: Toryan. In slang words, I would describe him as friggin' epic, awesome, beast—there were way too few words to describe him.

"Dude, you okay?" he asked.

"I've been worse," I answered.

"Dude, you are one crazy a——, dummy," he said.

I laughed. "I guess, dude."

"You really liked her, didn't you?"

"Yeah man, crazy how it hurts at the end, but always makes you smile later on." I laughed again. "Weird."

As he left, my parents came in, asking me if I was okay and what happened. All I said was, "It's all good now. It's all downhill from here."

"Well, as long as you're going to be okay. I'm glad you didn't die," my mom said.

I was at the hospital for about a month until I recovered; it made me think about what life was. I realized that people do care for me, and if there was actually a perfect girl, I had to keep on living in order to see her and actually live a "happy" life, whatever that means. Well, I guess a lot of stuff has to wait a while until I become ready for it.

I had left the hospital and was on my way home, but I wanted to make a stop at the mall to buy a new skateboard. On my way there, I saw that there was another guy who wanted to do the same thing I had attempted to do. I told my dad to let me off on the side of the road and walked up to him, hearing him sobbing, I asked him, "Why are you trying to do that, dude?"

"Because I have nothing to live for. I was betrayed," he said.

"You may not know this, but I did the same thing a month ago and now I'm all right, I guess. There are actually people who care for you. Even though it may not show, many love you, and if you died they would be really upset."

"But why does life have to hurt?"

"Because we need to learn from mistakes, then after we die, we'll fully understand what death actually brings, which I guess is the best thing—but not right now it isn't. You have to live your life to its max to understand it fully."

"I guess so, dude. Thanks for telling me that; it seems like I overreacted. Sorry for giving you such trouble," he said.

"No problem," I told him. I wanted him not to suffer as much as I did. I felt good making a person's life a bit better than what he thought it was. On my way back to the mall, I felt good about something I never thought I would do.

V.

The air around me finally calmed down. It felt as if all emotions I used to have vanished magically, as if I was more of a person now, as if I wanted to live and make something out of my life. I went to a store and made a skateboard deck there. The design was a stick figure standing in front of a cracked mirror, and the stick figure's reflection showed tears on his face. The picture made a great impact on what I thought. It made me think of what I saw while I was blacked out. As soon as I remembered that event, I reached into my pocket and saw that my suicide poem was there. How did it get there? I opened the crumbled up piece of paper.

*Dear Creator,
 Sorry I wasted my life.
 All I wish now is to die.
 That's all I hope,
 That's all I want.
 To live is such
 An awful taunt.
 I love you, Mom,
 I love you, Dad,
 Sorry for the times
 I've made you mad.
 Now I leap,
 For Death must reap.
 So long life,
 It's my chance to die.*

After I finished reading the poem, I felt as if I remembered everything I used to think. I wondered: if that's what I used to think, then why am I thinking differently now? Why did I think suicide

was the only option? I guess I was caught up in the moment. As soon as I left the shop, I saw *her* again. The only thing on my mind was hatred, but she still came up to me.

"I heard about what happened. Sorry I made you do that to yourself," she said.

"Sorry? Really? I really don't think you mean that. I chose what my body wanted to do."

"I told you, it wasn't my fault. I did what I did."

"Sure, just keep believing that, just like how I believed all the bull you told me."

"Ugh, I hate you so much!" she said.

As soon as she said that, Toryan came along. I felt like I should say something amusing when he came because of the great mood I was usually in whenever he was around.

"Then why don't you go back to your little boyfriend?" Toryan and I said in unison. We laughed our way to the exit. I felt as if my life began as a new person, actually feeling as if I wanted to keep on living and doing things that would bring me happiness. As I left, I noticed a friend that I had gone to school with the year before; she looked sad for some reason. I walked up to her and asked her what was up.

"I went with my boyfriend to this mall, and he told me to meet him here, and I was getting tired of waiting, so I walked across the mall to see where he was . . . and I saw him ch-ch-cheating on me!" she sobbed.

"Dang, I've been there. It stinks being the one cheated on, but if you keep on going by yourself you'll realize what really matters, and you'll find the right person. Everyone has a match, but only the lucky ones get to find them," I told her.

"You're right, I'm gonna dump him as soon as I see him and go hang with my other friends."

"Good for you. Now go out there and get in the game!" I said. Two people in one day—I felt like Doctor Phil. Sometimes, feelings are the things making people blind these days, and as soon as they start seeing the truth, it's all downhill from there.

the series of hurt:

the theory behind the phrase

it's all fun and games until someone gets hurt

bryona borden

new jersey spit paper

“BRYONA, PASS THE BALL TO ME!” a boy said, anxiously awaiting my throw. A soft mist of cold air blew quickly, making everyone outside shiver for a moment. I threw the football with my left hand, and it landed two feet away from me.

The boy sighed and then mumbled under his breath.

“See, that’s why girls shouldn’t play football!” he ramped. “I guess it’s all in the cooties, huh?” he asked himself, walking away to another group of boys.

I turned my head and walked the other way to play with my friends who were enjoying hopscotch and jump rope. I began playing hopscotch, making up new rules as I went. After a while, I got bored, so I rounded up some friends to play Ms. Señorita, the game where we circled around while one person danced in the middle. The old classic brought fun to us in a new way every time we played it, which was every day.

This was how my recess went almost everyday at Delair Elementary School, unless it was raining. We didn’t have a field to run around in or a court to throw a basketball in, but we had a wide long driveway in the back of our school to play each and every game, and when we played, we did it with imagination.

* * *

I was one of the many elementary kids that played imaginary games, chased boys, played on the concrete, and came home with swollen feet. I was the kid in the cool crew and was always getting in trouble for something. We did things like telling someone to shut up, or hitting them, but nothing extreme. The most violent thing we ever did was trip someone in the hallway while the teacher wasn’t looking.

Normally, I would just keep my comments to myself or say them to my friends as quietly as I could, but this time I could not contain myself with all off this nastiness coming my way. All I could think about was germs, germs, germs that would drip down the crisp white paper I worked hard on.

It was a calm, cool afternoon in Pennsauken, New Jersey. The morning dew still showed on the grass, the sun still shined through the windows, and the birds still chirped with their beautiful melody. I walked into my class to find that there were new seats, and I waited to see who would sit next me.

In walked a short, light-skinned girl with long, brown hair. Her nails were chewed short, and so were her toenails. I sat patiently, hoping she would not have to sit next to me, but she did. Trying to have a good attitude, I smiled and so did she. She sat down slowly next to me and I figured nothing too bad could go wrong. She didn't stink.

But then it happened, and the clouds began to cover the sky. The girl began to rub the soles of her feet, which were stained with deep blackness. I gawked at the image and moved my chair over just a little, trying not seem as disgusted as I was. I also tried to move past the fact that after she had touched her feet she began nibbling on her nails, which she couldn't even bite.

The teacher continued on with a lesson that no one was paying attention to until she said to take out the homework and trade with you partner. I looked over at the girl sitting next to me, seeing warm saliva sizzling at the tips of her nails. I decided that I was not going to take her paper and she wasn't going to take mine.

When the teacher told us to trade papers, I said simply and politely, "No," and when she asked why, I replied, "Because there is spit on your hands."

"Mrs. Bosco! Bryona won't trade papers with me!" the girl said in a whiny manner.

"What did you say, Crystal?" Mrs. Bosco said. Of course, all teachers act like they can't hear. Crystal repeated the phrase again.

"Bryona, now you stop that! You know better. Trade papers with Crystal."

"But do you know she has spit on her hands?" I exclaimed, now getting annoyed. I'm sure she wouldn't want spit on the papers she

grades, although she probably wouldn't even notice it. Mrs. Bosco was an older lady who had been teaching for years; after a while, she probably stopped checking for snot and spit on papers and just figured it was water.

After hearing my exclamation, Mrs. Bosco sent Crystal to go wash her hands, which she probably didn't do, and then turned her attention back to me. Instead of saying she was sorry for almost making me touch a spit paper, she gave me lecture on how we should be nice to each other. *You have got to be kidding me. This girl could have given me a disease from her spit, and I am getting in trouble?*

When Crystal came back in, she had a sorrowful look on her face, as if she was hurt. I looked at her for a moment and turned my head, because there was nothing to be to be sorry for, even though I knew I was just being stubborn. Honestly, if the teacher hadn't told me to, I wouldn't have said sorry in the first place, and if I was really angry, I wouldn't have said it even if she told me to.

Once again, I was the bad guy for speaking my mind and trying to keep germs out of the world. I tried to make sure I didn't have to sit next to her any more for the rest of the year.

But that was in New Jersey. I am now in Durham, pronounced like Door-ham, North Cackalacky. I guess you could say that the next couple of scenes are karma for this one, but I think not.

north carolina teeth knocker

Kids running and playing around the large space could be seen for miles. The area consisted of a bowling alley, a skating rink, and a movie theatre. I was one of those kids running and playing around while eating pizza and soda at the same time.

I sat down, eager to put on my skates after finishing my food. I was ready to dance to my favorite songs while gliding on the wind.

"Hey," a deep but high-pitched voice said from behind. I turned around to see it was the infamous Tyrese, known as the class clown and the most dramatic of everyone.

"Hey," I answered back and began putting on my skates.

"You skating, huh?" he asked me. I looked at him cock-eyed. Clearly, I was putting skates on, and last time I checked, you don't

walk in them for fun. But I had to remember who I was dealing with: the royal annoyance.

"Yeah," I said, this time getting up slowly from the bench I had been sitting on, hoping not to fall.

I rolled away slowly onto the rink. Bright neon colors of green, pink, and orange appeared on the white walls from a disco ball. I saw a couple of friends, and we began to roll under the bright lights to my favorite dance tunes. A couple of times, my friends fell, but never me. I was determined not to let anyone see me fall or struggle. I had to be the amazing Bryona. Plus, if I had fallen, I would have had a bruise, making it harder for me to skate.

After a while, the lights began to change depending on the song being played. Once I felt comfortable with skating, I began dancing and rocking to the music with my friends and the others around us. For the rest of the day, that was what we did. We ate, skated, and drank while the dance music played in the background until it was time to go home.

When the buses that had dropped us off came back to pick us up, we were all eager to get back to school. I was maybe third to last and eager to get on the bus.

"Stop!" I said, turning around responding to a light tap on my shoulder. It was none other than Tyrese.

"Stop!" he mocked in a whiny matter, as all boys do.

I gave him a dark glare and got on the bus, turning away from him. Little did I know, it was just the beginning.

* * *

The buses dropped us back off at Place Elementary school half an hour later. With the hot sun blaring down on each and every one of us, chaperones and students alike, we quickly headed into the air-conditioned school. When we got inside, our teachers lined us up according to whether we would be a car rider or not. My parents, fortunately, were there, so I figured they would just take me home.

"Let's go!" I said with a smirk on my face, heading to the exit. I turned around to see my parents smiling back.

"Let's go!" they mocked, and headed to where I was standing. They pushed open the large glass door and then held me back.

"Me and mommy are going," my dad said with a smirk on his face. "You're not."

The smile I originally had on my face vanished into confusion. *Why wouldn't they just let me go with them?* I thought.

"So, you're not taking me home?" I asked looking at my mother and father.

"No. It is only 3:00, and you get out at 3:30. So we will see you later!" my mother chimed in. I gave them both a glare that told them I was not happy with the results, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't drive home, and I certainly could not walk home, so I stayed. Besides, staying a little longer at school with my friends would be fun.

I walked away from my parents, saying, "Bye," on the way and felt a slight tug on my shoulder. Naturally, my back hand was beginning to raise, until I heard that same deep, squeaky, little voice from behind.

"Ha, got you back."

I turned around, hit Tyrese on the shoulder, and walked away, but I kept my hands in front of me just in case he tried to hit me again. I walked down the narrow, white concrete path and into the building where the car riders would be waiting half an hour for their rides.

I walked slowly into the building, almost into the door, and checked my surroundings. I felt a huge tug on my shoulder and was suddenly knocked to the ground.

I opened my eyes and held my mouth. Thinking it was a bad dream, I began to close my eyes once more and kept my hand on my mouth. When I closed my eyes this time, I felt an excruciating pain coming from the nerve of my tooth. It started from the top and went to the middle, like ice finally cracking.

I began crying as the pain was too hard to bear, and when I opened my eyes again, there was a crowd around me. Suddenly, I was picked up and taken into the bathroom. All of it happened so fast, I could barely see who was picking me up.

The figure in front of me went to the sink and began running cold water. The feminine voice told me to swish it around in my mouth. I immediately recognized Ms. Spencher's voice and did what I was told. I spit the water out and then watched the red watery fluid travel into the sink and down the drain.

This became repetitive for me and each time I saw the blood go down the drain, I cried even more. The blood from my tooth was coming down like rain in a bad storm. I couldn't believe what was happening, so for a while, I just went with the flow.

But then it happened. I was told to put some more water into my mouth and a big gush of blood came out making the *whole* sink fill with blood. I began to get anxious and worried about what was going on. Was I dying? If so, why would I be dying from a tooth ache?

I tried calming my nerves, but that wasn't successful. I got so antsy that Ms. Spencher had to keep my head up, so I couldn't see the blood in the sink. I had so many emotions running through my body, I couldn't contact the one place I needed: my brain. I couldn't figure what happened to get me in this mess.

After another five minutes of washing and rinsing, Ms. Spencher let go of my chin and told me she contacted my parents. She gave me a napkin to wipe the water from my chin. I looked down to see a surprisingly clean sink. No blood in sight.

I walked out the bathroom to get my things, and that was when I saw my mother and father rushing toward the building. I looked up and tried to smile, but it hurt too much. When the door opened, I was bombarded with questions. I couldn't even mouth the words, so I certainly couldn't say them.

My parents got the story from Ms. Spencher and rushed me to Duke hospital. When we got right around the corner, we were stirred into afternoon traffic. The ride was mainly quiet and I was asked if I was okay a couple times. I was upset that I couldn't remember anything until my dad broke into my thoughts.

"Bryona, I am sorry I didn't take you home," he said.

I nodded and that is when I remembered what had happened. It all came back crystal clear. I was walking into the car riders class and got knocked down. I had hit the door frame. Hard.

Clean squeaky floors, high ceilings and hand sanitizer filled the halls of a large building. Pink, orange, white, and yellow scrubs walked around, pacing to different areas. I was in the emergency room waiting for them to take me in.

In less than five minutes, I was being wheeled into a room in the children's side of the hospital so the doctor could examine my tooth.

"Well, Miss . . ." He looked at me with a confused face. I already knew what he was implying.

"Bre-auna," I said as clearly as I could. He nodded.

"Miss Bryona, your tooth is chipped. A piece has come off of the surface of your right tooth. We are prepared to fix it." He paused, looking at my parents and smiled. "But I am going to tell you now: this will be a long term fix, even after surgery."

I just stared down at the floor, not even paying attention to what he was saying. I just really couldn't believe this was happening to me.

After three hours of surgery and numbness, my family and I headed to Taco Bell and got some food for me since I could only eat soft food.

* * *

"Bryona's back!" my friend said, running up and hugging me while the others stared in admiration and pity.

I had my two front teeth tied together with a small brace. I could only eat soft food and chew slowly as if my food had to take an hour to get down my throat.

"Yeah, I'm back! Thanks for the picture," I said remembering the picture she and some of my other friends sent me while I wasn't feeling so good. I was in a lot of pain, my teeth still getting adjusted.

I stopped and hugged everyone else around and then walked into the classroom beside them. When I walked into the large, white-walled classroom, all smiles were on me. I smiled back knowing everyone was happy to see me at school. Earlier in the day, I had gotten many comments, like, "Are you okay?" and, "Glad you're back!" along with stares from people trying to figure out what happened to me.

I didn't want to make a big deal about it. Besides, my mouth still kinda hurt, so I had decided I would just smile and say thanks. Plucking me out of my thoughts, Mrs. Hitcher began speaking. "We are glad to have you back. You feel okay?"

I smiled and replied, "Yes, thank you," and I walked over to give her a hug. All the other students were sitting on the big blue rug in the middle of the classroom so I walked over to sit with them. Boy, was it cold in there. I was starting to shiver. Every

time I did that my teeth would come together for an excruciating pain making my teeth hurt from the root to the core. The brace on my teeth would do nothing but make my teeth bang together even more. My face began to turn red as I felt the pain coming. When the pain was over, I started to get angry just thinking about why they had to have the air conditioning on sixty degrees in the first place. But I decided not to show it. I had just came back to school, and there was no need for an attitude.

“Hey, Bryona?” a voice said from behind. I recognized the voice immediately.

“Yeah, Tyrese?” I said as clearly as I could.

He took in a deep breath. “I am sorry I hit you into that frame. I really didn’t mean to.”

His voice wasn’t deep and loud anymore; it was soft and sincere. He handed me a piece of folded white paper that leaked with colorful marker ink. I decided not look at it until I got home. I thanked him and walked away.

For the rest of the day there were more stares, polite hellos, and many questions. I just simply smiled and said thanks like I had decided. I was very happy and felt grateful toward the people who cared so much about me. That meant a lot.

By the end of the day, my teeth started not to hurt so much and I was excited to see my mother and get some soft food that would take an hour to get down my throat. Something like tacos or apple-sauce. I was ready to eat anything and go to sleep.

When my mother pulled up in the car lot, I hopped into the car, closed my eyes tightly, and began to drift away into my dreams, still thinking about that soft, chewy food.

* * *

After hearing this, I guess you can form your own opinion on whether it is karma and whether you believe in it or not. I realize that maybe I shouldn’t have overreacted about her paper, but it was nasty. And maybe I hurt her the way that frame did my teeth, but I just know that I learned this lesson first hand: it’s all fun and games until someone gets hurt. And it’s not really fun when you’re the one who’s hurt. Believe me.

the obamas and optimus prime

joshua cousin

I. a dream realized

IT'S A REGULAR-SIZED ROOM, I GUESS, with its share of gigantic windows, a tan-tiled floor, and deep brown furniture. My mother decorated the room. She wanted it to feel warm, but oddly the tile and windows make it one of the colder rooms in the house. My father says that it's his favorite room. There are two huge pictures on the wall. Both of them depict two women with pottery in their hands. One is wearing a golden dress, while the other is wearing a maroon colored dress. You cannot see their faces, as they are painted silhouettes. I spend a lot of my spare time in this room because it has the one thing my room lacks: a television. Usually in the early mornings, the sun room gets its name from the warm rays of the sun gently lighting up the room, unless there's a cold front or a thunderstorm. It's a nice room to be in if you feel the need for watching television or taking a nap after a day of work. This room is where I made some good memories. For example, this is where I discovered I could draw; it was also in this room that I witnessed something amazing.

It was after a long day at school in November 2008, and I was tired. The one night I actually wanted to go to sleep, my parents insisted that I stay up. This made me upset, but I sat in the sun room anyway. My parents were watching television, and I began thinking there were going to be some different outcomes in this election year. No one could have predicted that the two remaining candidates would be Senators John McCain and Barack Obama.

It all started in May 2008, when my parents made me dress up right after school and go with them to the North Carolina Mutual building, right down the street. When we arrived, we took the elevator to the top floor of the building, where a crowd of people were all together in one room. As we made it inside, my father disappeared into another room. My mother, my sister, and I started asking each

other where he went. After what seemed like a few hours, but was really fifteen minutes, I saw him walking towards us excitedly. Before my mother could even ask where he'd been, he told us to turn around. As I turned, I saw a tall figure, dressed in a dark blue suit with a Tar Heel blue tie. I was so small then, I had to look up. As he was being introduced, I happened to be standing next to him, and he turned and looked at me. He bent down so he was closer to eye level and shook my hand while saying, "How are you doing?" About this time I heard the man introducing him say, "I present the next president of the United States, Senator Barack Obama!" I was shocked that Senator Barack Obama shook my right hand! I don't remember anything else that was said after that moment. When he finished speaking, we were able to take three pictures with him, which have become treasured possessions.

So, on this night in November 2009, when my parents made me stay up, I watched history being made. I felt dumb for not wanting to watch this event. Now, right here, in this regular-sized sun room, with its bronze-colored walls, I watched Barack Obama become the first black president of the United States.

The sun room seems a little warmer now.

II. an interesting encounter

It was another typical school day. The hallways were crammed with the shuffle of kids making their way to the bus lot. The rain gently fell onto the ground as I trudged slowly toward my mother's green van. My backpack felt as if I was carrying the weight of the world.

"How was your day?"

"Pretty good."

"How much homework tonight?"

"The usual amount."

"Well, you have to hurry up and knock out your homework, because there's something special happening tonight at NC State that I would like us to attend."

She drove slowly down the highway, quietly singing along with the radio, as I stared out the window, trying to keep my mind off

the stressful days ahead of me. She pulled into the driveway, and I took off into my room to begin the mountain of homework my teachers had distributed. My mother's friend, Ava, wanted to drive us to the event, so I had to guess on most of my homework. I could barely think about my homework when something spectacular was about to occur.

Ms. Ava waited for us in her silver Jaguar as I grabbed my gray coat and rushed out of the door. The rain rhythmically tapped against the windows as we drove down the highway. Before I knew it, we were pulling into the parking lot of the large university. I thought to myself, *How are we ever gonna make it to this thing on such a large campus?*

After almost getting lost, we began following the sound of loudspeakers and conversation. We walked into the giant basketball stadium, where we were surrounded with loud Stevie Wonder songs and a multitude of people filling up the stands of the stadium. Since Ms. Ava already had some friends waiting for us at the event, we were able to get close seats towards the stage. I could tell my mother had been anticipating this event because she had a small grin on her face.

Before long, the music stopped, and the crowd's deafening conversations began to quiet down. All faces were turned toward the stage, waiting like the calm before a storm. I held my mother's camera tightly in my hand as I anxiously stared at the podium. Suddenly, the loudspeaker came on, stating: "Students and residents, I introduce to you the future First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama!" The crowd began to roar with excitement as I saw a figure make its way to the stage. On her way toward the podium, she stopped to greet some of her die-hard supporters.

The speech she gave was powerful, though I cannot remember exactly what she said. At the end of the lecture, the sea of people made their way toward her for autographs and photo opportunities.

"I want you to get in line and talk to her," my mom said.

"I don't know, it looks like it'll take a while."

With no more discussion, my mother softly pushed me into the wall of people. I felt like I was back in the school cafeteria at Durham School of the Arts. It had the same characteristics: non-stop pushing and shoving as people tried to skip their way toward an

opportunity. You would have thought someone had said that the university was ablaze. I was just about to get out of line when she finally reached my part of the line.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Josh.”

“Isn’t it way past your bedtime?”

I laughed. “Not even close.”

“So, who do you think is better at speech, me or my husband?”

“Well, I think you do a really good job at speeches,” I said. She started to laugh and gently tapped the top of my head. I said, “Have a good night,” and slowly pushed my way out of the crowd. I couldn’t believe it! Michelle Obama and I had a real conversation. My mother witnessed what had occurred, and she was as shocked as me.

III. brawling robots, aliens, and mummies

Drawing. It was not the type of activity I’d believed I’d excel in. Since before the fourth grade, the one thing I would never stop sketching was stick figures. Whenever I had to draw something, I resorted to that. It was quick and easy. My mother and my older siblings were all excellent artists. My mother likes drawing people, while my brother makes pictures depicting his fascination over Ancient Egypt. My mom would always tell me to try something new every once in a while.

One day during the eighth grade, I decided to draw something major. I wanted to break down the Stick Figure Barrier. While sitting in my sun room, I decided to draw Optimus Prime from *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, my new obsession. I know what you’re thinking: Optimus Prime? That’s insanity! How do you go from stick figures to Optimus Prime? I decided to draw Optimus Prime because my friend and I were having a contest to see who was the better artist.

I grabbed my sketchbook, found a picture of Optimus Prime, and I just let my hand go free on the paper. The drawing had to be finished in two days or less, so I eagerly began. A few hours into the drawing, my left hand began to cramp up. I decided to take a

break and let my hand rest for a little while. After eighteen hours of near non-stop sketching, I stepped back to look at my work. It looked amazing. I couldn't believe what I had achieved with paper and a regular pencil. The next day, after shading and adding a few finishing touches, and with a little tutoring from my mom, my art was ready for my peers to behold.

Since my first drawing experience, I have not stopped. I just started taking an art class every Tuesday with Ms. Maynard and a few other students. With each drawing, I try to increase the difficulty level. I post my drawings on Facebook once in a while, ranging from Invader Zim to pictures from the movie *The Mummy*. My art has even been considered for display in a local art college library.

It's amazing what you can accomplish with an open mind, a steady hand, and the willingness to try something new. I love drawing now because it's a simple way for me to relieve stress about other matters. Now I find myself drawing in my spare time. It's gotten so bad that sometimes my mom takes my sketch pad away to make me focus on something else or just go to sleep.

IV. if you could read my mind . . .

"Josh, come here for a second!"

I lethargically crawled out of bed like a sloth and stumbled downstairs towards the commotion. It had been a long day at Durham School of the Arts, and with the advantage of having no homework, I decided to get some early rest. Dragging myself toward the illuminated sun room, I found myself staring sleepily into the eyes of my parents.

"What is it?" I grumbled.

"There's a special event happening tonight in Chicago, and we didn't want you to miss a part of history."

I sighed. "Well, can you at least save it 'til tomorrow?" I pleaded.

"No."

I quietly slipped onto the warm leather couch. The aroma of my father's Sumatra blend coffee that he sometimes, strangely, drinks before bed drifted gently into my nose. I glanced up at the flat-screen television, to witness what looked like a cold November

evening in Chicago, Illinois. The area looked particularly crowded, so the event was probably very important to witness. The harsh winter air sliced through the night. People wore long leather jackets, and thick brown coats to keep themselves warm throughout the night. They were statues, waiting. I realized that tonight was the election of the next president of the United States.

Surrounded by the heating vents in the sun room, I became increasingly drowsy, like a lazy house cat sunning on a windowsill on a summer afternoon.

After a couple of commercials, the television finally returned to the moment we had all been anticipating. The once frozen expressions on the people's faces showed many emotions. So many that it would have been impossible to conceptualize their thoughts. They were smiling, laughing, crying, hugging, clapping, and shouting. Fully awakened now, I stood by my parents, awaiting the results with the world.

I couldn't believe my ears! Barack Obama had been elected the first African-American president in the history of the United States! My parents began to cry tears of joy as even I gave a smile. I couldn't keep myself from shedding a tear at the victory. "Why are you all crying?" I asked.

"Your father and I imagined this, but we never dreamed that we would ever see this day arrive." The cameras panned throughout the crowd, revealing their response. People were holding each other and screaming in disbelief and joy. The camera even showed Oprah Winfrey weeping tears of happiness. The first family slowly made their way toward the podium, smiling and greeting the crowd. *Yes we did!* kept running in my mind, like a skipping record. I was lost in the moment. I couldn't believe what had just happened. This event was something that neither I nor my parents would ever forget. Anything can be achieved with love from your family and the belief that you can make a difference in the world.

everything happens for a reason

anoviua rush

1. disappointment from every angle

“WE NEED TO TELL HER,” my dad said quietly, almost in a whisper. I peeked around the corner of the hallway, and both of my parents spotted me. I knew it wasn’t anything good because they had been having arguments and little secret conversations like this many times over the last two months.

“Anoviua,” they both said in harsh tones. I went, palms sweating, heart beating hard. Nervous? Oh yes, for sure. I sat on the floor in front of them.

“Yes?” I asked in a low voice.

My dad looked at me, and then dropped his head. He began to say, “Baby girl, mommy and I - I - ” He collected himself, and continued. “Honey, your mother and I are getting a divorce.”

I didn’t want to believe what I heard. I couldn’t believe that this was happening to me. I began to cry, hot bolting tears fell from my face onto my night pants. My nose turned a shade of scarlet, and I begin to feel sick. I had strong words that I wanted to say, but I, only being seven, didn’t know the words that would make them feel the pain that I felt.

“Maybe if it rained all day you would see that you two need each other,” I suggested, having no idea what that would have meant at the time. That didn’t work. My mother picked up the phone and proceeded to have an important conversation. In the meantime, my father tried to calm me down. He took me to go lay down so that I wouldn’t burst into tears again. For some reason, every time I would have an uncontrollable outburst, laying down would be the only thing that would calm me because it would make me tired, and I would eventually drift into the second consciousness that many know as sleep. I lay down, and so did my father.

He pulled the cover over me, and then said, “Baby girl, everything will be alright,” and kissed me on the forehead. He went back into the living room, where he and my mother begin to squabble again. After a while, I blocked the noise out and fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of the divorce that was yet to come.

2. the unbelievable

“Mom, it’s hot,” I said to myself, rolling down the burning metal handle to the window of the scalding car. The cool, refreshing, early summer breeze hit my warm face. After ten long minutes in the car roasting to death, my mom came out of the store with only one thing in her hand: a bag of skittles. We drove off from the store, arguing, her reminding me that she was the parent and that I needed to stay in my rightful place. What came out of her mouth really didn’t matter at that moment. I just wanted to go to my aunt’s house. It was still hot in the car because the air conditioner was being occupied by her form. The rest of the ride was in silence and anger. I remember the fact that my mother does the dumbest things, then when someone gets mad at her about the things she does, they at least try to sit down and talk to her without arguing. Unfortunately, no matter how much people try, the “talk” always ends up being a shouting match. It has always been like that with her.

We finally arrived at my aunt’s house. My mother always waits a couple of minutes to talk to me before I go to my aunt’s house.

“Anoviua, be on your best behavior. Don’t let your aunt come back and tell me that you were being rude to her.” I looked at my mom as if she was dumb. *She always makes it seem like I’m the bad one here*, I thought to myself. I reached for the handle on the car door to get out and say my goodbye to my mother. But instead of her letting me out the car, she grabbed me by the hand and said, “I love you.” I sighed, gave her a little smile, and said it back.

As soon as I stepped one foot out of the car, my mother began to scream and yell at me, telling me that I had to hurry up and go get my aunt. I ran as fast as I could, banging on the door hoping that my aunt would open it so she could go see what in the world was

wrong with my mother. I had never seen my mother cry so hard before. She scared me.

I beat upon the door until someone opened it. "My mom, my mom!" I screamed frantically, "Sh-sh-he she wants you." I sobbed. My aunt ran past me, towards the car. She got in the car without asking any questions, like she knew what was wrong with my mother. I began to cry from fear and guilt. My cousin pulled me in the house so the nosy women next door wouldn't interrogate my aunt when she came back.

I had three cousins, two older than me and one younger. They didn't know why my mother was crying, or why their mother had run out the house to hurry into my mother's car. They were as clueless as I was. I sat down on the couch; I couldn't think straight. What if my mom's mom died? What if my parents finally got their divorce and my mom just found out? What if something happened to my father? I began to chuckle a little. My cousins all looked at me and then one of them asked, "What are you laughing at over there?" I didn't reply, I just shook my head, then went to watch TV for the time being.

When my aunt and mother came back, I could tell it wasn't any good news. My mother and aunt came through the door with either shocked or terrified faces. They looked as if a part of their soul had died. What I didn't know, is that a part of it had. Almost too suddenly, I found out that a part of mine would, too. My aunt and mother sat me down. A tear fell from my mother's eye, and my aunt was already crying to the point where she couldn't raise her head to say any words. I looked at both of them, feeling lost and scared. My mom took me by the hands. She had wet, clammy hands from wiping her tears off her face, and said, "Daddy's not coming back."

I remember being lost and confused. Being only seven, I thought that Daddy had to stay late at work. But why would Mommy and Auntie be crying over him staying late? Or had he finalized the divorce and Mommy was just finding out? But, then why would Auntie be crying over their divorce? "Is he staying late at work?" I asked, feeling confident that that was going to be my answer.

"No, Anoviua. Just listen, your—" she paused, to collect herself. "Your father got into a car accident coming home from work." She looked at me and I stared back. I looked into her eyes, and

they said it was no joke. She was serious. I looked at my aunt and she got up from the table, tears falling out of her eyes faster than raindrops falling from the sky in a thunderstorm. My whole world stopped. I dropped to the floor, only to hit my head on the table on the way down. My mother tried picking me up and calming me down, but I just jerked away. What was she telling me? How did it happen? Why did it happen? He's not coming back.

My mother finally got me up from the floor and onto the couch in the living room. Reality hit me straight in the face, just like the kitchen table. I was too young to handle all this stuff on my own.

3. it gets worse

It had been a week since the death of my father, and I expected things to be different, but not so quickly or dramatically. We had been staying at my aunt's house for a week, and everyone acted as if nothing had happened, mainly for the sake of my aunt and I. We were the closest to my dad, and it really affected us. On the other hand, my mom ignored the fact that he was gone. I guess that was her way of putting off the pain. It was still crazy to me the way she reacted. I remember thinking that her life had just begun, and that mine had spontaneously ended.

One night after my mom began talking to me, telling me that there would be some major changes, I began to wonder what type of big changes there would be, but I just left it alone and went to sleep.

That morning my aunt woke me up and said that I had to get ready to go. She said that I had to pack up my things. *Pack up my things?* I hurried off to get the week's worth of belongings that I had brought to my aunt's house and went to the car. Before leaving, I ran back to say goodbye to my cousins, not knowing that that would be the last goodbye, and the last time I would see them for a long time. I wasn't too happy about going back to my mom's, but I had no choice.

When we got there, the house looked empty. I had seen my mom come out the house with boxes, and then a light went off in my head. "Where are we moving to?" I asked with excitement. For

once, I was happy about moving to a new house. The one we were living in would bring bad memories back to me.

My mom then smiled and said, "North Carolina." Once again, my mom ruined my day. I began to pack without saying a word.

4. important memories last a lifetime

My head hurt from all the arguing, my eyes burned from the crying, and my stomach was turning from the acidic bubbles popping inside it from the thought of having to move. It was all pain for me. That night I went to sleep with a head full of grudges that I would hold against my mother. I remember telling her that we wouldn't be moving if my father were still alive. She didn't speak to me for the rest of the night.

It was the last day in my old house, and I just had to take a personal tour to feel, to remember what it was like before my father had died. I got up to the last room, my mother and father's bedroom. I felt the tears coming, so I ran down the stairs and out the front door to where my mother was. We got into the moving truck. While pulling out of the driveway, I blew a kiss to the house to say my last goodbye. We would be leaving New York to live elsewhere. The house became a shadow of the past, and we drove off to start our new lives.

5. everything happens for a reason

"Why won't you talk to me?" my mom asked as we passed a sign that read, 'Pennsylvania: 3 ½ mi.' We had been driving for about two hours, and I hated it from the moment we got into the moving truck. I had finally accomplished one thing I said I wouldn't do: moving from my hometown. I had family up there, friends, a nice place to call home, and a life back in New York. My mother took it all away from me just because we had a big loss, and minor issues that would've been resolved in a matter of time. Many signs passed us; we were getting closer to the South. All the open land and calm streets were disconcerting. I mean, I was used to being

around huge buildings and crowded noisy streets. Plus, hearing the Southern accents would be a change, but a change I would have to take and deal with, like an irritating dog that wouldn't hush and every time you would think you got rid of the darn thing, it would just keep coming back.

I'm a city girl. I long for big buildings towering over me, for skyscrapers, their amazing, gleaming, grand lights shining on me from every corner. Big posters with bright writing going across buildings. New York was full of excitement and wonder, yet every time I visited North Carolina, it wasn't. I loved being in New York, especially in the winter. Busy streets crowded with people day and night—I was going to miss that, all of it. Tears fell from my eyes without a sound, and I cried in silence at the thought of coming to North Carolina to live, not to just visit Grandma for two weeks in the summer or for the holidays. This time, I wouldn't be leaving. I would now have to find a home down here in North Carolina, make new friends all over again, and, on top of it all, pretend that I had no problem with their accent.

We were long gone from New York. I started spacing off in the dark as my mother drove closer and closer to the house. I knew we were getting closer because my mom had told me that there would be a bunch of lights on where moving men would be taking our things in. We pulled up to the new house.

My mother and I had been in the new house for about an hour, and I was unpacking my stuff in my brand new room. The room was small; it was as small as my closet back in New York, but hey, everything is bigger in New York. I finished unpacking and lay down on my bed. The house smelled as if someone had some very dirty cats and that the previous owner attempted to cover the smell with air freshener. I was sick to my stomach about everything, from the day my father died, to the day we moved from the comfort of my old home. Now that I'm here in North Carolina, it's not that bad. I still miss home, don't get me wrong, but now I know that everything happens for a reason.

the story of the next great ventriloquist and stop-motion animator

t. e.

1. how it all started

“WHERE IS THE PAPER? Did you lose it?”

“No, man, I had it in my book bag.”

This was a conversation that my friend Kevin and I were having about several comic books we had created in the eighth grade. They were very funny. The only problem about that was he would make the comics a little nasty at times. One of the major comics that we wrote during that time was called *Midget Madness*. We wrote five spiral notebooks full of comics in the eighth grade and a whole three-ring binder worth of comics in the seventh grade. Unfortunately, my friend has all the comics, but he still adds to our collection.

What started the interest in drawing comics was our seventh grade English teacher, Mr. Wong. He gave us a comic book project. We had to pick a comic book, like Superman for example, and had to compare a new version and an old version of the books. I did *The Simpsons*, and it was quite hard. This is what gave us the idea to make our own comics. We even tried to publish them. I still like to draw comics to this day, but it just isn't the same without my buddy.

2. stop-motion animation

After some time drawing comics, I decided that I wanted to become a stop-motion animator. I first realized that this was my passion when I was sitting on the couch watching *The Adventures of Wallace and Gromit* created by Nick Parks. I was completely mesmerized by the way the characters were moving across the TV screen. I thought to myself, *How can the characters move this way if they are made of clay?* I thought it was some kind of trick and

that these characters could not be moving on their own. It turned out to be a group of pictures moving at a rapid speed making the characters look like they're moving. I always liked how the characters came to life across the screen. It sparked the ventriloquist part of my story. I decided to start my animation process.

One day, while my father and I were out and about, he said that he would buy me something that I had been asking him for for a very long time. I was excited to go; I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted some clay so I could start my animation project. It was the best clay that I had ever bought. What made this clay so special was that it didn't stain my hands from the color and the texture stayed consistent. The first thing that I did when I got home was start to make my characters. They were the best ever. I was able to really show my creativity and youth. I still couldn't start animating the character because I didn't have all the supplies that I needed. I needed animation programs, a computer, a camera, and a camera stand. With all of these supplies, maybe I, too, could what I witnessed on TV.

3. ventriloquist

I was watching Comedy Central one day, and a stand-up comedian came on. *Who is this weird person?* I thought. He came on the stage with a briefcase and a little table. The man went on to say, "Hi everybody, my name is Jeff Dunham, and I have a friend that I want you to meet. His name is Achmed the Dead Terrorist."

A dead terrorist! I thought for a moment. He went to his briefcase and he took out a puppet that looked like a skeleton. At first I knew that the man was going to move his mouth and the dummy was going to talk, but that's not what happened. The dummy was speaking while the man's mouth was still. I was thunderstruck! I have never seen this before. I said to myself that I would become the same kind of entertaining artist that I witnessed that day.

I'm setting out to learn how to be an entertainer. I have researched online to find out some techniques and materials used in making these dummies. I even tried to build one myself. The farthest I ever got was taking a wooden dowel, some foam, zip-ties,

clay, and sculpting the head. The only reason I couldn't finish my puppet was that I needed a lot of chemicals that I did not have. In order to make the puppet, you have to make a rubber mold of the clay into a shape of a head and then make a fiberglass head by using the mold. I still have the head at my house and plan on finishing the dummy since

I think that I will become a professional ventriloquist and a professional stop-motion animator. They both have the same basic ideas to them, which is making the characters come to life.

4. the research

After some time dreaming about becoming a stop-motion animator and a ventriloquist, I decided to start researching some famous people in these fields. One of the most famous stop-motion animators that I found was Nick Parks who is the creator of *Wallace and Gromit*. Parks was born in Lancashire, England. He grew up on Greenland's Estate and started animating in 1985 and Aardman Animations in Bristol. He has written over five different editions to the *Wallace and Gromit* shows which are movies called *The Adventures of Wallace and Gromit*, *Shaun the Sheep*, and *Timmy the Sheep*. All of these animations were made by using stop-motion creations.

The ventriloquist that I researched was Jeff Dunham. Jeff was born in Dallas, Texas in 1962 and decided to become a ventriloquist in the sixth grade. He's had over ten puppets. He still uses Walter, Peanut, José the Jalapeño on a Stick, Bubba J, Sweet Daddy Dee, Melvin the Superhero Guy, Achmed the Dead Terrorist, Diane, and Achmed Junior when he performs on stage. He has made all of those puppets on his own. I hope to be a professional ventriloquist like him. I also hope to have the skill to design my own puppets as he did.

5. cost

The last thing I still need to start my process is a puppet and a computer. The puppet will be used to create the illusion of ven-

triloquism, and the computer will be used to create the stop-motion animations.

The puppets that I want to buy range from one hundred to seven hundred dollars. They range from puppets that can just move their mouths (with the operator's help, of course) to puppets that can move their eyes, brows, and limbs. After looking at several different types of puppets, my favorite of them all is a Santa Claus puppet. It is 599 dollars. I can probably start off by getting a puppet that is not as high quality as the other dolls just to see if I could even do it.

Most of the laptops that I have looked at are about three hundred to five hundred dollars. Instead of asking for a laptop for Christmas last year, I decided I wanted a crazy dwarf hamster. What was I thinking?

the drummer within

malik hester

“GRANDMA, COME HERE.” I looked around and found a box full of old records. I noticed that some were jazz and some were classical pieces. My grandma told me that they were my grandpa’s and that he had collected them over the years before he passed away.

“Why does this one have his name on it?” I asked.

“You didn’t know your grandpa played in a jazz band?” she questioned me.

At first, I thought she was being sarcastic. But I looked closely at the cover of the dusty record cover and saw a picture of him playing the drum set. I was amazed. Could this be the reason that I loved to play the drums? I asked her what she thought of the situation.

“Well, it could be a talent that was passed down to you.”

Now that I knew my grandfather played the drums, it made me more anxious to join my school band. I wished I could have learned to play the drums last year, so I wouldn’t have to be embarrassed about playing percussion with all the little sixth- and seventh-graders.

“Malik, breakfast time,” my mother said. As soon as I walked through the door, I could smell her hot, sweet grits. I loved my mom’s grits because she put in cool butter along with milk for a smooth, creamy texture, and then she topped them off with sweet cane sugar. The smell of the sweet cane made me forget the rest of my breakfast. She had also made me a side of egg omelette with melted cheddar cheese in the middle. While I ate at the table, I asked my mom if I could join my school band for percussion. She responded with an immediate positive.

* * *

“One, and two-e-and-a, three, four,” the band teacher said. The pounding of the drums made my heart beat. The vibration flowed through the air and made my heart race as though it was shocked.

Finally, it was time to switch classes, and I managed to catch the band teacher right after class. He asked me what my interests for music were. I told him how I've always had a passion for beats. I gave him an example of how sometimes in class the teacher is talking, but I feel as though I'm in another world with beats going in and out of my ears, and I miss what the teacher says.

"Can you play something for me on the set?" he asked.

"Well, I've never played on the set before, but maybe I can by play by ear," I said

"Let's hear it, then," he said. As I walked to the set, I finally got a glance of a drumset up close. Finally, I wasn't the crowd member watching the drummer. I was the drummer. My hands got sweaty, but I knew that I had to show him my potential. He saw that I couldn't decide what to play so he asked me, "Do you know how to play 'We Will Rock You'?"

"Yep," I responded. He told me to play the bass drum on beats one and three, and play the snare drum on beats two, four. I stared at the snare drum. It had a glossy look with dent marks all over the drum head. My right foot started the bass. *Boom, boom, bah*. I couldn't believe it. I was able to play the beat. I got ahead of myself and tried to freestyle, but I couldn't play fast, and my wrist got tired when I did. I tried to speed up, and I would slow down unwillingly. He told me to stop. I was confused. Did I offend him?

"You can't rush it. If you keep straining your muscles, you'll damage them."

"What do you mean rush and strain?" I asked him. He told me that I was too tense and my technique wasn't that good.

"If you let me teach you, trust me, you will become the drummer that waits inside of you."

fragments of the heart

cassie keesee

STRANGE FAMILY MEMBERS—WE ALL HAVE THEM. My grandmother is a living personification of that word “strange.” Just last week, my mother was telling me about my grandmother’s most recent trip to Brazil which involved riding on a yacht, drinking, and swimming in the ocean. All I can say? Yep, that’s my grandmother.

embarrassment

“Which earrings do you like?” my grandmother asked, noticing me staring at her earring bowl.

“The dangly ones,” I replied automatically. “Can I wear them, please?”

“Sure,” my grandmother replied breezily, plucking a pair of silver, dangly earrings with a small, clear bead on the end and handing them to me.

Once I had the earrings, I put them in and was set for the White Squirrel Festival. This was an annual festival in which there would be stalls lining the streets, activities for children, and the White Squirrel Race. Almost every year, my family would go up during spring break for this event. This time, I was going with my grandmother and mother since my brother and father didn’t want to go.

We perused the streets, looking at all of the different stalls, when suddenly my grandmother saw someone she knew and dashed off. *Again?* I thought, alarmed. *Oh, now she’s waving us over. Great. This is so embarrassing.* I looked around, noticed that people were staring at us, swallowed my embarrassment, and walked over. *This better be good,* I thought sullenly. It turned out she just wanted to introduce me to the vendor of the stall, whom she knew from bingo. *That’s good.* I felt relieved when I heard that.

If she just wants to introduce us, then this should be over quickly and we can get back to shopping.

I smiled and introduced myself to the woman, as did my mom. However, we did not go back to shopping after that because my grandmother decided to stay and talk to her for a long period of time. I shouldn't have been surprised, as this had happened before. Oftentimes, my grandmother could talk to her friends for hours on end, so I was determined to drag her away before that happened.

"Hey, Mom, can we just go?" I asked discretely, not wanting to offend my grandmother.

"We can go, just let me tell her," my mother replied. She then turned to my grandmother, who was deep in a conversation about clothes, and said, "Hey, Maria, we are going to go on to watch the race. Do you want to come or stay here and meet up later?" Maria is my grandmother's real name, but my brother and I call her Vovó, meaning grandmother in Portuguese.

"Sure," Vovó replied, and bid farewell to the vendor. "Let's go!" she said, walking ahead of us. I smiled and followed my grandmother. The remainder of the festival passed uneventfully: we were able to get to the race in time, and I even was able to buy an elegant silver bracelet. It matched the silver earrings I had borrowed from my grandmother, and I couldn't help but smile.

confusion

Closing the door gently behind me, I stepped out onto the carpeted floor, and the bland colors stared up at me. I was heading toward the kitchen downstairs, hoping that my grandparents had stocked their pantry with cookies and potato chips. My venture didn't go unnoticed, however; my grandmother's sharp eyes spotted me the moment I stepped out of the room.

She was on the phone, speaking rapidly, and I had no idea what she was saying for two reasons. One, my grandmother has a very heavy accent, making it hard to ever tell exactly what she's saying. And two, she was not speaking in English, but rather Portuguese.

When my grandmother saw me, she smiled and put the phone down, as if to say something to me. "*Ah, olá lá. Estou falando com*

a minha sobrinha, ela está morando em Recife. Nós estávamos apenas eram apenas tomando."

I was like a monkey, just nodding my head but not really grasping the meaning. I think I mumbled something in response to my grandmother before quickly dashing away from the situation. I didn't want her to speak to me again in Portuguese for fear of her asking me something important and me not being able to respond or understand. I had always known she had been able to speak Portuguese, as every year she traveled back to her hometown, Recife. Portuguese was the main language there. *Why did she think I could understand it?* I thought as I headed down the stairs. *Maybe she didn't mean to; maybe she thought she was speaking English to me or something.* My stomach growled, silencing my thoughts on the subject. *I'm starving; I hope there's Apple Jacks.*

Once downstairs and out of danger from any unfathomable questions, I quickly opened the old, wooden cabinet doors, removed a box of cereal, and headed to the table.

As I was eating my cereal, I noticed a magazine lying on the table and curiously looked at the cover. According to the title, it was a *Carnival* magazine. *Carnival* is an elaborate event in Brazil, and is sometimes referred to as the 'Greatest Show on Earth.' There are often parades and large feasts, and the one on the magazine's cover, the *Rio Carnival*, is one of the most well known in the world.

As to be expected of such an event, the cover immediately caught my eye with large, colorful pictures of the extravagant costumes and detailed floats. I was eager to read it, but, to my dismay, the magazine was in Portuguese. I was able to console myself with the fact that there were lots of nice pictures that I could browse through. When I had finished looking at all of the pictures, I decided to try reading the magazine, as I knew some Spanish, and Portuguese seemed to be a similar language. I managed to read bits and pieces of one paragraph before giving up. I was only able to read something about the importance of colors in Carnival, and something about the outfits the dancers wore. Though the languages seemed close, as they were both Romance languages, many of the words were too different from their Spanish counterparts. And seeing as I only had a basic grasp of Spanish, there were also many words I didn't recognize at all. *If this happens when I am*

reading it slowly, analyzing each word, how am I supposed to understand it when it was being spoken to me at a break-neck pace? I sighed and put the magazine back down on the table, going back to eating my cereal.

exotic

“There it goes!” my brother and I said in unison, watching with expectant eyes as we dropped a shoe down the laundry chute. The shoe would fall through the chute, which was just a small hole in the hardwood floor of my grandmother’s closet, and drop neatly into a basket filled with clothes only five feet below. “Let’s go get it!” we would cry, running out of the closet and downstairs, heading towards the laundry room as if our lives depended on it. It was a fun game to play for a pair of kids who were around seven and eight years old, and it kept us out of our parents’ hair. Unfortunately, we could only play this game at our grandparents’ house, as only they had a laundry chute.

After collecting the shoes we had dropped, my brother and I would storm upstairs in the same fashion as we had come down. Once back in the closet, we would drop the shoes down again. I remember one time when my brother and I wondered if we could fit through the hole. It was only a short, five-foot drop, so we assumed we could make it without getting injured.

As the older sibling, I had the right to go down first. Or in this case, brave the perils of the laundry chute, which now seemed like a gaping chasm into a dark abyss. I managed to get my foot into the hole, and then up to my mid-thigh. Thinking back to it, I wonder how we had ever managed to think that a small, foot long hole with a half-foot width could ever fit a medium-sized child. That’s probably the reason why our parents allowed us to play there in the first place, as there was hardly any chance of us getting injured. After pulling my leg back out of the chute, my brother told me that he wanted to go outside. I didn’t want to go, however, so my brother went without me.

All alone now and not knowing what to do, I began looking through the closet out of boredom. Soon, I was no longer doing it

out of boredom, but rather fascination. Silken cheetah print dresses, blood red embroidered skirts, lots of colorful tops and other such clothing made it seem as if I had stumbled upon a tropical rainforest. I was almost struck speechless—how had I never noticed this before? *This is amazing*. Such were my thoughts as I gazed upon this treeless forest. I then came to a realization: the shoes had to be as exquisite as the clothing!

I wandered over to the shoe section, pushing through the clothes like an explorer pushing through dense leaves. After one last push, I came to the shoes. Instead of the throwing devices they were before, they were now priceless treasures.

There were high heels, platform sandals, colorful flip-flops, and velvety slip-ons, but there wasn't a single tennis shoe in sight. I immediately tried on a pair of white platform sandals—they were far too big. I still put them on, and attempted to walk, coming out of the closet to see my grandmother and mother sitting on the bed, conversing. "Look at my shoes!" I exclaimed proudly, pointing to the results of my closet conquest.

"Pretty," my grandmother, Vovó, replied, "though they're far too big for you now. You can have them when you're older." I was excited to hear that. But when I was older, my taste in shoes, as well as my feelings on her clothes, changed. I still loved bright and colorful clothing, but now I wanted to keep up with the latest fashions and even wear plain colors sometimes. Tan and black have replaced the cute pinks and purples of childhood. But if you look in my shoe closet, past the shoes neatly arranged in a line, you might see a pair of white platform sandals peering out from under a pile of old ballet slippers and flip-flops.

unusual

Sometimes, my family would bring out our home videos for us to watch, to "Aww" over, and to reminisce about. One time, we were watching a Christmas video, in which my brother and I were dancing around the Christmas tree with our grandmother. We were only about three and four at the time, but I'm sure if we had been older, I would have definitely remembered this scene.

There were holiday lights strung around the Christmas tree, illuminating their surroundings with a cheery yellow glow. The fireplace was occupied by a row of stockings, each one emblazoned with a different name. Scooby-Doo lights lined the mantle of the fireplace, and Rudolf stood on the right end of the mantle. They contributed to the festive atmosphere of the day, as did the Christmas music that came blaring out of our radio. My brother and I were dancing to the music, stumbling around and swinging our arms in a childish portrayal of what my grandmother was doing.

Vovó was dancing with us; sometimes she would pick me up and spin me around, and other times, she would spin and twirl like she was half her age. It was not this behavior that would have made me remember, but her outfit. She was wearing a pale peach cut-off shirt, complete with khaki pants and jewelry galore. Her bracelets jingled as if trying to imitate the bells of Santa's sleigh as she waved her hands up in the air. I didn't notice the bracelets though; I was completely captured by the shirt. *What is she wearing?*

I immediately voiced my thoughts to my parents, saying, "Look at what Vovó is wearing! Please don't tell me we had gone out that day with her wearing something like that!" My parents just laughed at me, shaking their heads in response. "Good," I breathed in a sigh of relief. The shirt had shocked me; there was no way I would ever wear something like that, and it surprised me that she would. Even if it was just around the house, I knew that I would never wear it in my lifetime. Or at least I hoped I wouldn't. It worried me that I might end up like that in the future. Dancing around with your grandkids I could accept, but that outfit was horrifying.

I chuckled to myself; there was *no way* I would end up like that. My common sense wouldn't allow it. With that fear out of the way, I refocused on the video, smiling as I watched my younger self dance around.

mortification

"Which do you like better?" my mom asked, holding up two undershirts, one navy and one black.

"The navy one," I replied, taking its hanger from her. "Where's Vovó?" I asked, realizing that my grandmother was no longer in the junior clothing section of Belk's with us. "Nevermind," I added quickly, the sound of my grandmother's distinctive accent rising above the bustling clamor of the crowd.

She was standing by the register, chatting with the clerk as she rung up purchases for the customers. My grandmother's bright red hair, spurting away in wild spikes, stood out from the crowd, making her presence known even though she was shorter than most. Seeing us, she began waving rapidly, much to the annoyance of the other customers. They were already irritated at the fact that she wasn't even buying anything, just standing there and talking, but that coupled with the fact that she was now waving grandly to us seemed to infuriate them more.

"What is it?" I asked, following my mother dutifully over to where my grandmother was standing.

"Cassie, this is one of my friends." Vovó smiled at me. "We were just talking about you." She rested one of her hands against the counter, her many silver bracelets clinking against the cold, wooden top. I was about to respond to her, but Vovó began speaking again, and I knew how hard it was to get to say something to her sometimes. "Oh! Is that what you got? It's beautiful," she said, grabbing the undershirt from my hands. "Look at it, it's so pretty!" she said, pointing it out to the other customers who now seemed resigned to the fact that they could do nothing to stop my grandmother from annoying them. I looked at Mother, silently asking her to do something about this situation.

"Cassie and I are going to go look at shoes. Why don't you come?" my mother asked cordially.

"Okay," my grandmother replied, and she began to follow me and my mother as we led the way toward the shoes. I remember looking back at the faces of the customers waiting in line. I know I saw a few expressions of relief, and I also knew why. It was because my grandmother was eccentric. Maybe it had something to do with her Brazilian heritage.

I smiled to myself, remembering a joke I had made with a few of my friends. 'It's normal in Brazil!' is a saying that I will probably remember for a long time, as I find that it explains my grand-

mother well. By this time, my mother was the one waving me over, she and my grandmother having found a pair of shoes they liked. I smiled and quickly walked over to join them to continue my shopping excursion with family.

* * *

Even though I have lots of embarrassing memories of myself with my grandmother, I have lots of fond ones as well. I remember one time when she took me out to get my nails painted for my birthday, she wearing her many bangles, and I wearing my simple silver bracelet. I looked down upon my bracelet, smiling softly as my nails were painted. We almost matched in a way. I was like a softer shade of my grandmother, my nails a light pink, hers a deep red. My wrist only decorated with one bracelet, hers with many. She's extreme, while I am moderate. We may not resemble each other on the outside, but on the inside, I'm not so sure.

the colors of simplicity

una healey

the good one

THE SHINY STREAK FLASHES PAST MY EYES and screams into my ears as it races past quick as silver lightning. Red lights, yellow lights, and noises surround me. It's as if everybody fast-forwards through their motions as they speedily scurry around.

"I know that this subway station is huge," says Mama, "but it's going to be your job to get us on the right subway car." She glances over her shoulder to make sure I can hear her voice over the commotion.

"Uh," the designated sound of uncertainty escapes my mouth. "I don't know if I can," I mumble under my breath.

It's overwhelming to be part of underground chaos for the first time in your life. On top of the fast action, hurried movements, and unrecognizable surroundings, I do not have a very keen sense of direction.

"I'm sure you can lead us, and if you get on the wrong train car, we'll just have to get off and try again." Mama reassuringly pushes me onward.

Please don't let me read the wrong sign! I think to myself as I stop right smack in the middle of a walkway to look up above my head: Blue Line → Red Line ← Green Line → Yellow Line ← I read from a sign printed in small, white letters.

"Don't stop right in the middle of a walkway while people are trying to pass!" Mama declares as I stand on my tiptoes squinting to decipher each word. Even though my eyes are set on the words directly in front of me, my peripheral vision makes it seem as if they are flickering to each of the scurrying colors and shapes.

The train cars make thundering, blowing noises like elephants, which reflect off the stone walls. Then, they charge off out of the station as if they are elephants charging across the Serengeti des-

ert. After stepping aside to take one more look at the map clenched in my hands, I motion to Mama which subway car I've chosen. I feel like a roly-poly in a land of worker bees, all buzzing with specific jobs, knowing exactly where they're headed, while I tumble and roll. There are other confused tourists, and as we walk to our stop, I take a moment to breathe, enjoying the rush of the city's vitality.

The train car clammers to a stop before us. We step onto the worn, rubbery floors along with other travelers. We flop down in the slick plastic seats. The accelerating pace of the subway car reminds me of an amusement park ride, the Himalaya. It makes a screaming loud siren noise and sends the riders speeding around a circular track, stopping and starting frequently.

"Thank goodness I chose the right car; they all look the same," I say as I turn my head to look at Mama.

"I'm glad, or it could have been a long afternoon!" Her face exhibits approval. I'm satisfied now that we're on the right car, heading in the right direction, but just to prove nobody can have it all we happen to be sitting across from the wrong kind of guy.

I gaze across the aisle and notice that an older man with hair the color of polar bear fur sits directly across from Mama. He reads a *Sports Illustrated*, and he wears a red T-shirt and jeans. He sits upright in his seat in a courtly manner, his black sneakers grounded flat on the floor. He seems to be a normal guy. . . . Hold up . . . Wait. I do a double take. An enormous golden ankh (the Egyptian symbol of life) hangs on a thick gold chain around his neck. He might as well be wearing a sphinx on top of his head. The ankh peers out as if to announce itself from underneath his magazine. Then, he peers out from over the cover to make direct eye contact with Mama. When it seems as if nothing more queer could occur, he loudly proclaims, "I *am* the Good One!"

His blue eyes, the color of coral reef pools, pierce into Mama's eyes. His tone sounds as believable and true as a saint's.

"Yes! Yes! You *are* the Good One!" Mama replies enthusiastically, her face turning rose petal pink.

Please don't let this conversation go any further. . . . I squirm in my seat. Then, without further ado, he proceeds in stiffly standing up and strolling down the aisle to talk to another person.

Mama's face displays a bright strawberry red. I'm probably pale from shock. We burst out laughing. Our whole bodies shake from

the comedy of the moment. The hysterics of my very own Mama agreeing with a crazy old geezer that he is . . . God! Ha!

"This is why you never make eye contact with strangers," Mama tells me through laughter that lights up her face.

"Goodness! You would have thought that the ankh around his neck displayed a sign to beware," I tease her.

"I didn't notice until it was too late, and by then I was practically hypnotized."

"I've learned my lesson." I look to her with satisfaction.

The subway car rolls to a stop, but our laughter does not. As we step out of the station, our smiles do not fade. We have come to our destination. I have learned not to make eye contact with strangers, and the city continues to dash around us, as each individual plays his or her own unique role. Some are businessmen or doctors, some are tourists, some sell items at booths, some wash windows, some work in banks, and some think that they are God.

the acorn princess

On a cool, Maine summer's day, I am given the exclusive title "Acorn Princess" from Uncle Tom. Today Uncle Tom, Mama, Kathie, and I sit in their greenhouse or "glassed in" porch that extends off the side of their colonial home. Uncle Tom's light tan-colored face displays a look of utter intelligence, and his angular nose resembles Mama's; the Italian gene makes its way around the family. His cheekbones are high and strong. His wife, Kathie, reclines in a porch chair, her fair hands continuously looping, winding, and twirling her blue yarn between long, wooden needles. We listen as Uncle Tom talks.

"Squirrels try to reach the bird feeder, but instead fall off the line, flipping through the air, and land onto the grass. They have a way of climb—"

A flying acorn interrupts him as it careens onto the glass roof.

"Can we please go outside? We can play a game . . ." I suggest in the most luring tone possible.

"What kind of game?" asks Mama.

"Maybe a game with the acorns," I reply.

"Sounds fun."

"That does sound interesting," states Uncle Tom. "I guess we can give it a try."

"I don't think I'll be joining you guys, but have fun!" Kathie says as she smiles one of her small, jolly, I'm-not-going-to-show-my-teeth-unless-you're-really-funny kind of smiles.

Dodging the grey cat, Fritz, who plays a game by sneaking quickly and silently among human feet, Mama, Uncle Tom, and I open the door to the backyard. We stroll over to the oak tree where thousands of acorns lay scattered on the ground. Acorns galore! We invent our first game in minutes. The purpose of the game is to pick up the most acorns in sixty seconds while standing in the same spot. The simple rules are as follows: If the player's feet leave the ground, the player's turn ends. Each player must hurry to put or throw as many acorns as they can grab into the nearest clay flowerpot. We elect Uncle Tom as the "designated counter," and when he starts, we go nuts!

Imagine acorns flying by our faces while our feet are "stuck" to the ground, and we're flailing our arms like madmen determined to win the short, enticing game.

"Time's up!" Uncle Tom yells after sixty seconds.

We count our acorns (no cheating: trust policy), and the player with the most acorns wins . . . with an immense sense of pride. Anyone who can gather acorns like crazy can be a winner.

The next game resembles the golden oldie, skee ball. Four flower pots are aligned about three feet apart. Players grab acorns from a flower pot, step up to the starting line, then throw their acorns into one flower pot. When all of the acorns are gone, the player with the most points wins. One after another, we aim. A chorus of "Oh!"s and "Ah!"s fill the backyard as we throw and shoot in hopes of acorn swooshes.

I received the title Acorn Princess after winning game after game. I must be skilled . . . or lucky . . . or just plain weird to be able to come out on top against two of my elders.

These games remind me that maybe 21st century people need more simplicity. We constantly rush around for "the next best thing," when maybe the next best thing is not a thing at all: it can be found simply in imagination and play. Give anyone an oak tree and some flower pots, offer to play, and just watch their face light up with ex-

citement without worrying about a new e-mail, a new text, or life's struggles. We learned to play with the joy of children again.

the ocean

We talk about her teenage days as she loosely holds the steering wheel with delicate, chestnut-colored hands. Turning in my passenger seat, I peer at the side of her angular face. Her eyebrows are arched only slightly at the edges exhibiting the sharp spunk of her fighting spirit. She always fights for what she knows is right. We drive down the jam-packed street, with cars left and right, but instead of irritably honking with impatience, everyone acts calm and chill. That's what we call a Maine summer's day at the beach. We are in Old Orchard, one of the beach towns on Maine's coast. As we turn down a small road with adorable old homes, Mama slows the car and points out the window saying, "This is the house where I lived when I was a teenager."

"Wow. So you actually lived walking distance from the beach?"

"Yes. It was wonderful to be able to watch the waves and listen to the calming sound each day," she replies with a sigh.

Her beach baby spirit still flickers in her deep midnight blue eyes. She is content when she is beside the ocean because it helped to raise her.

"My good friend Jeannie and I first met in the field between these two houses. We always met by the apple tree in the middle," she speaks softly, as if each word is a snapshot in her mind.

I hope to someday have such a close friend, I think. Somebody living in my backyard. Someone who cares about me even when we drift literal miles apart, but who always stays close to the heart. My Mama got quite the draw because she and Jeannie needed each other. When rough times crashed down like the swell of waves, they kept each other afloat with encouragement and by learning from each other's choices.

We pass quite a few beach shops and a vibrant little amusement park before arriving at our destination: the beach. Ocean Park joins along with Pine Point and Old Orchard to form one long stretch. We apply sunscreen, although our light brown skin shows

that neither of us care for it, and we walk across the parking lot to the magnificent body of water.

Imagine looking left and right, forward and backward, and all that can be seen are the colors of the rainbow. From lizard green to dolphin blue, from seagull white to starfish pink, all of these colors dot the sand in the shapes of hundreds of umbrellas. "This is amazing," I say, dumbfounded by the sight.

Occasionally we jump into the cresting waves as we walk the seven miles all the way to Pine Point. One thought goes through both of our heads: lunch.

"Mama's hungry. . . . I think it's time to find lunch," Mama says, laughing at herself. When hunger overcomes Mama, feed her or leave her.

"My stomach is growling like a monster," I anxiously reply.

The saying "No Shoes, No Service" doesn't stop us from crossing the street barefoot, but it does stop us from eating at The Oyster House. It stops us from getting water at a small restaurant. It stops us, hungry monsters, from getting food for another hour. Continuing on the hot asphalt a few more blocks, we find cheap flip-flops to buy with the ten dollars Mama has in her pocket. We walk into a beach shop the size of a hobbit's home that's packed with items from sandals to soda to little toys. A small lady works in the cramped space. She speaks barely any English, sees our shoeless state and sells us two pairs of flip-flops, which we purchase for six dollars. Throwing on the flimsy plastic sandals, we continue on until we find a small cafe in an old beach house the color of evergreen trees. The smells of sugar, vanilla, and toasty breads waft through the screen door to our noses, all just a few steps away. A friendly young girl with dark brown hair greets us as if we're locals. I gobble down a toasty everything bagel with egg, bacon, and cheese.

Satisfied, we meander over to the arcade. Inside, teenagers play all kinds of games. There's a fortune teller whose expression looks quite alive, even though she's been broken for ten years. There are pinball machines blinking and flickering.

Once we finish playing, with full bellies, flip-flops, and happiness, we walk back down the beach. The afternoon sun shines over the water. The umbrellas seem to shimmer. Mama's wavy hair shimmers. The sparkling water shimmers. My spirit shimmers.

Oh! what it feels like to fall into a soft bed of billions of sea shell remnants. We bask in the late afternoon sun. Our warm, sun-splattered, sand-speckled skin shows that Mama and I now share the same second home. The ocean.

the museum

It's a fresh, brisk morning, and the sun beams down with a warm light. According to the South Portland Herald newspaper, there isn't any chance of rain. Yet, there are chances of umbrellas. Mama and I eagerly eat breakfast, before driving into downtown Portland. We plan to catch the 7:50 a.m. ferry to Peaks Island. We chat while we ride in the car with our bathing suits and walking shoes, but no umbrellas. Little do we realize, we should have brought the covers. We purchase our tickets, then board the classic yellow and red ferry, and grab seats at the open air top level. "I love this feeling of cool wind blowing my hair," I tell Mama, relaxed by the breeze.

"Yes. I do, too. It's so calming," she replies.

After a short time, the ferry's blaring horn announces our arrival. We pull up to a large dock, where we are let off onto the island, the perfect size to see in a day. Small, welcoming shops stand alone or in groups dotting the streets. There aren't very many cars. Most of the people who stay on the island come to rent summer homes, or if they're tourists like us, they get around by bicycle. A short walk from the dock, a bike shop sits at the bottom of a hill. A young boy and his father run the joint. We walk up to the front of the shop, operated out of a garage with a wide open door.

"Hello," we greet the boy.

"Oh, you're new here, huh?" he replies curiously.

"It's our first time ever coming to Peaks," Mama says.

"No problem," he replies. "Well, I know you'll enjoy it. Just give me your names and I'll get you a bike." He scribbles on a white sheet of paper resting on a ragged clipboard.

"Do you think you could show us where to bike on a map?" Mama asks.

"Sure, but you must know the island is very small," he smiles.

He traces with a highlighter around the border, then warns us

not to go up a certain extremely steep hill. The route looks uncomplicated and easy.

We choose our bikes, and we're off. The island is simply stunning. Each turn we take is another view of the ocean. After touring for hours, our bellies grumble, and we stop for homemade sandwiches. We return our bikes, and head back to the ferry. Along the way, we come upon a tiny white home with a colorful sign on the chain link fence.

"Book Launch Party," I read. "For Uncovered and Exposed," *Uh, oh!* I think. "A guide to the world's only Umbrella Cover Museum."

Mama begins to chuckle, while I stare in disbelief and suspense. *What could possibly be inside?* I think. Right as we step inside the answer is revealed: The World's Only Umbrella Cover Museum. A short yet confident lady named Nancy Hoffman greets us. She has reddish-brown hair that sits upon her head in a slightly poofy and wavy manner. A little warm, a little wacky, and a little stylized, this lady knows who she is. A sparkly purple accordion rests across her shoulders. Once I get my senses back, I listen as she leads the group in a small tour around the room while explaining her mission.

An umbrella cover is simply the package or case that a brand new umbrella comes in. Sexy covers (leopard spots, shiny pink, paisley), normal covers (black, navy, brown), and even homemade covers (wooden, hand painted, hand sewn). They hang from the ceiling. Tacked on posters they cover each wall with their categories written in funky letters. This small room is as vibrant and far-flung as the Amazon rainforest made from fabric. We sit down with a few other travelers on the fuzzy blue carpet. She shows us a video about her museum that broadcasted on the Weather Channel. We conclude our visit with a sing-along, guided by lyrics typed in fashionable fonts on printer paper. Her small fingers briskly bounce across the accordion keys while she sings loud and clear with the confidence of a movie star.

the hidden garden

The glistening silver buildings reflect the sun's rays; light pierces through the atmosphere to land upon the statuesque, sky-

high hotel windows before bouncing back into the clouds. The sky looks as if an artist painted it parrot feather blue, with fluffy white clouds, and streaks of white that remind me of cream spread by the hands of mother nature. In front of this backdrop, red and blue, and green and white airplanes fly. Their distinctive shapes and loud noises make them noticeable from hundreds of feet below. The grand Hilton beside the Logan International Airport marks the destination of travelers from all over the world. Inside, the smell of new carpet, luggage, colognes and perfumes fill the man-made headquarters of travel. Outside, the smell of crisp summer's air and car exhaust fills the street. At the hotel, the noises of airplane motors, bellboys, and cars speeding down the highway can be heard.

Crisp white sheets folded flat on top of rectangular mattresses. Flat screen TVs. Windows wiped down so many times they glisten. Breakfast brought to you. A blue sky. Rays of sunshine so bright they light up the earth. Puffy white clouds. Tan baby sparrows that hop around. Green grass trimmed to perfect lines. Bushes cut into cubes. Man attempts to make the world look a certain way, even trimming nature into lines.

Men in suits grab bags from hotel buses, then hoist them onto carts to be taken inside. Some smile at travelers; others turn their heads to frown. Travelers carry their purses, coats, umbrellas, or hats while they enter and exit through the glass doors. Their shoes click along the grey stone walkway, glossy loafers, satin flats, leather boots. Some men wear striped ties. Some women wear satin dresses. Some children are so spoiled that their faces have permanent pouts, while other children look awestruck. The large building contrasts with the bluebird feather-colored sky, the ever-changing backdrop that we have no control over.

Our hotel room looks like a luxury store. Our bags have been carried up for us. I shake off my sandals and tie my sneakers so we can take a stroll outside. Mama and I walk on the soft carpet down the hallway, and ride down the elevator. In the huge open lobby, two fake-looking Roman statues tower from a ledge. Even though this is a fancy hotel, the builders obviously used cheap materials. They only cared about how it would look to the short glance of a businessman or woman who may never discover the secret that we find outside.

We walk outside onto the trails that surround the sprawling landscaped lawn. The sun warms our cheeks. Along the path, tucked away, is a small garden. The flowers are small, with many buds, planted not too long ago. There are pink buds that only grow a couple of inches from the brown dirt, and there are tall stalks that grow above our heads creating a little flower forest. There are bumblebees buzzing around to choose the perfect flower, landing and shuffling their tiny legs to collect pollen. These small creatures pollinate so many plants, creating this stunning expanse of color. Butterflies seem to flutter aimlessly, yet they have paths that they must travel and places that they must go. To them, the world must move slowly, while to us it must move quickly. The wind blows them to and fro, and their tender paper wings are affected by the slightest rain. They only fly at the speed of their instincts and ability. This whole miniature ecosystem holds bugs, butterflies, and flowers that prosper with the rain and sun as their guardians.

Someone had a vision of colors, a vision of a special place where words are not needed to express cheerfulness. Throughout this trip, I experienced a feeling that I was just as small, special, unique, and easily blown as a butterfly in a land of flowers, bumble bees, and beetles. I always viewed each event in a distinctive way as my own unique person. All around me were different people, different colors, like bumble bees that I could not communicate with, yet we all shared the same home on earth; we all worked together, even if not consciously for the same purpose, living life to the fullest.

This five-foot flower garden may be easily ignored by many travelers, but it is not easily ignored by people who escape from the hotel's distractions. We're all busy, but unconsciously we have an effect on each other and on our surroundings. Without the Good One, there would be no life lesson. Without Uncle Tom, there would be no Acorn Princess. Without Mama, well, I wouldn't have learned to call the ocean home. Without Nancy Hoffman, why would anyone ever think twice about an umbrella cover? And, without this small flower garden, contrasting with the bustling airport, I would not have such a powerful memory. I smile and enjoy the moment . . . today.

the end

charmecia rose

the ending before the beginning

WHAT IS LIFE? When does life truly begin? For some unfortunate others, why does it end before they get the chance to begin it? Why does life come with death? But most importantly, why does life take away those that are dearest to your heart? These are all questions that rush to the mind of a nine-year-old, maybe in a different form, when an unknown tragedy occurs. But for a certain nine-year-old this was more than just a tragedy. This was the loss of love and the death of her soul.

I grew up like a true child: careless and invincible. I had the state of mind that nothing could happen to me, nor could anything happen to those I loved and cared about. I believed bad things happened to those I didn't know or those I cared the least about. This would change eventually, but who knew the change would occur so soon? My lifestyle changed with the sudden death of my uncle. I say sudden because, although those around me declared that this unfortunate event would be soon, I dared not to believe it, not even for the slightest second.

My uncle was the closest person to me. He was closer to me than my own mother. Uncle Wayne understood me, not only as a nine-year-old, but he understood me as Charmecia Rose, his outspoken, overly imaginative, dramatic niece with a certain intelligence that would get her a long way once she discovered it. He was more than my uncle; he was my best friend. His soft, warm, brown skin soothed me: it was how I knew everything would be okay.

the beginning of the end

Just when I thought things could not get any worse, I looked out of the daintiest little window to see rain pouring down from the

cumulonimbus clouds. I found it interesting that it chose to rain on such a day. Such a day when my thought clouds were jet black and my emotions were scattered like confused raindrops in the wind.

Never one to show my emotions, I kept a slight smirk, even though nothing was humorous. My insides felt shredded, my eyes felt heavy like a dam blocking a flood, and my heart didn't even seem to have a resting beat, if it had any beat at all. I don't know if it was guilt because I hadn't been to visit, or anxiety for what was highly anticipated. Somewhere in my heart I knew the depiction of Death was knocking at my front door, but I was too stubborn to open it and accept Death for what it really was. *His tomorrow may never come*, was the only thought that rushed to my mind as I sat there with my head in my lap.

I was sitting near a window, and somewhere in my mind I wished the window would open and I would fall out, flying however many stories down without even having the wind, the trees, or the ground to break my fall. This was a silly thought, but the damage that would be done to my best friend could never be undone.

The moistness of my hot breath caused the dusty window to condensate. The drop of dirt water rolled down the window, and simultaneously all my emotions rolled into a single drop and exploded. Before I knew it, I was a mess; deep ugly sobs bellowed from my chest, the disgusting taste of yellow and green mucus clogged my esophagus, and salty tears rushed from my eyes. I could see my reflection from what little light did hit the window. I looked repulsive, and I was all alone.

"Why are you dead? Why did they have to take you instead of me? What did you do? What is God punishing me for? What? What is it?" I begin to think aloud, as if he could hear what I was saying. For a slight second, I actually believed he'd hear me and respond, sort of like I had seen on the television. Unfortunately, reality was back and out to get me.

I watched my uncle Brock, my aunt Freda, and my mommy walk out into the waiting room with the sympathetic-looking nurse. Her job must be hell. Their faces were as unattractive as mine, if not worse. My aunt's wig was twisted, my uncle's hair seemed grayer than usual, and I could see all of my mommy's emotions by the way she held her head. It made me cringe to see her so weak.

Sitting as far away as I was, I only heard fragments of the conversation, but those fragments were enough. “How did it get so bad?” That was mom’s voice. I recognized it because that was the same tone she had used the day of the phone call. *Uh-oh*. My eyes got wide and real frog-like. I was at attention.

“I’m so sorry. You can have one last look, but you’ll have to excuse me,” the nurse said sympathetically as she rushed down the hall and then out of sight.

My heartbeat sped up drastically, my breaths got shorter, and the tears were back, but this time I didn’t care about anyone seeing them. I was not strong anymore, and I was not that courageous little girl everyone once knew. Instead I was a fly, a confused little fly, headed toward a gruesome spider web.

I began to feel eyes on me. Two eyes, four eyes, six eyes—all eyes were on me, every little pupil there was fixed on me, even the eyes from the TV. I felt hands on my back. The room began to spin. I heard faint voices, too faint to recognize. The lightning crackled, the thunder boomed, and the rain came pouring down faster, faster, faster. For a second, I thought I saw him, him in his happier days, before the medicine and before all the treatments. I squeezed my eyes shut as tight as possible. I just wanted to get away, to be free. I just wanted to hear his voice one last time. I just wanted that chance to at least say goodbye. He had left this world, and because of my fear, mine was not the last voice he heard. With that came the ultimate hurt and the most overbearing guilt. Everything froze.

good times

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi,” I sang aloud.

“There goes a red one and a black one!” he said excitedly, as the car’s old engine rumbled to a stop when it approached the bright red stop sign. We were counting cars, and we both giggled at the sight of this. As we laughed, he began to tickle me. I laughed louder, almost outrageous-like, kicking and fighting him off all at once. But this laughter was interrupted by the instrumental tunes of old nursery rhymes.

"Ice cream truck!" I screamed, running to the side of the street and waving my hand, motioning him to stop. This made my uncle quite furious. I was already at the truck, running my hand along the colorful patterns that decorated the truck when Uncle Wayne got there. He pulled me aside and threatened to beat me if I was to ever do such a thing again. I had never seen him look so stern. I frowned, hugged him, apologized, and he bought the ice cream anyway.

As the sun's beaming, hot yellow rays settled in the sky above, our ice cream began to slowly melt. I only wanted Spongebob's eyes; they were gumballs. So I just let the ice cream drip down the sides of my hands as I watched my uncle finish his. His rigid coffee-colored skin showed tiny sweat beads as they rolled off his face and disappeared onto his neck. His bushy eyebrows, usually quite tense, were relaxed today, the slight wrinkles in his forehead were calm, and his huge mocha-colored eyes, soft and pretty, were fixed on the ice cream sandwich. I giggled a little. He tilted his big peanut-shaped head at an angle so it would be easier to face me. I roared a great, big, enormous laugh after taking a look at his nose, which seemed even bigger due to the tilt of his head. His rough red lips parted into one of the prettiest smiles I had ever seen. His dimples were showing as he shook his head and patted mine. We exchanged a long glance, and his huge body tightly wrapped mine. I felt the thudding beat of his warm heart. I smiled hugely into his shirt, then pushed away, tagged him, and ran off the porch.

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