







# SONDER

## MEMOIRS FROM GRAFTON HIGH SCHOOL

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#grafton  
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*Yorktown, Virginia*

# #grafton memoirs

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*For all the readers who find their lives parallel to our own*

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# HOW I GET THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

Kaija Craft

High school. These two words kinda sound like a death trap, if you ask me. Your alarm wakes you with a blaring noise at six a.m., way too early for any teenager to be awake. Then, provided you catch the bus to school, you walk through halls that are basically a traffic hazard. You have to do that awkward dance around people to try to get by. Someone in front of you stops, so you think you can move forward, but then you both go at the same time and run into each other anyways. You have to weave in and out of different cliques and teachers pushing roll away carts to get anywhere. It feels more like a maze and you're a lost puppy trying to find its way home than a student trying to get to class on time.

Once you finally reach your destination, which is like traveling to Narnia at this point, you get to class and notice that you don't like a good percentage of your classmates. Whether you find them an-

noying, class pets, or just people you don't get along with, there's always a reason to roll your eyes. Then, of course, you get assigned a group project. Since no one else was paying attention, you have to do all the work because you don't want your grade to fall. You are saved by the bell!

You return to the traffic hazard of the hallway to get to gym class. Unfortunately, the middle schoolers are using the big gym, so your class is forced into the small gym. The smell of sweat and ranch dressing hits you immediately, like a ton of bricks. For the next hour and a half, you are stuck in a small room with gray walls, gray floors, wearing gray shirts, and there's no clock. These are all things in common with a prison, but the orange jumpsuits are more attractive than our gym uniforms. Next, you get pecked to death by dodgeballs because some genius gym coach thought that was a really good idea. This only occupies half of your class time. You are now left to do whatever physical activity you please. For the less sporty, the only option is walk and talk, where you are left to ponder life or wish you were you doing your homework. You could be lucky enough to be taking Driver's Ed instead of gym. That's the class that makes you cry because they show videos of car crashes, so make sure you don't wear mascara on that day.

The lunch bell rings, and it's like the sound of heaven's gates opening. If you are buying lunch, I seriously hope for your sake that it's not mystery meat with "healthy" sides day. It is better to just close your eyes and eat the lunch than to question what it is. Make

sure to avoid the bathrooms (a.k.a. the makeup counter, where the girls act like they are putting on makeup but are really just looking at themselves in the mirror) at this time of day. One more block to go, and then finally, you taste the sweetness of freedom at 2:05.

There is a silver lining. High school will end, and the horrific times will not seem quite as bad in retrospect. You will soon realize that these little details do not matter, and certainly will not matter in your future. You may truly hate this place and cannot wait until you graduate, but high school is what you make of it. If you can figure out something to make it worthwhile, like a class that opens your minds to thoughts you've never had before, a teacher that changes your own view on the world or a few friends to make it suck less, I promise something good will come out of it.

# WHAT LIES BEYOND APPEARANCES

Jessica Sprouse

*Judgements prevent us from seeing the good that lies beyond appearances.*

WAYNE DYER

“Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy . . .” I groaned and settled myself underneath the warmth and comfort of my bedspread that protected me from my obnoxiously loud alarm. After a few minutes, I rolled over to unlock my iPhone to see what time it was. The bright, white numbers that blinded me read 4:47 a.m. *Really? Why am I up at this ungodly hour? No person wakes up this early without a reason. Oh, yeah, that's right.* I sighed before removing my safe haven from over me and got up to stretch. It took at least twenty minutes to find a decent outfit in my closet that could compare with those worn by people I imagine resemble models that just stepped off the runway at Fashion Week, but I finally found it. It consisted of a dressy, pink blouse topped with a teal, cheetah print scarf, dark wash

jeans, and my favorite pair of black Vans. After dressing to perfection, I hurried downstairs to eat breakfast. Throwing a cinnamon raisin bagel in the toaster, I quickly organized my backpack and set it by the door. Once the bagel was finished, I stuffed it in my mouth, grabbed my backpack, and took off for the bus stop.

While sitting on the uncomfortable seats of the bus, listening to my Taylor Swift playlist on shuffle, I couldn't help but let my mind drift to the uneasy thoughts that have been running on replay for the past week. I run the scenarios through my mind too naturally to be healthy. It starts with the fake, conceited bottle-blondes ganging up on me at lunch. Next comes the many embarrassing moments in front of the insanely attractive upperclassmen guys. In another, I sit by myself at lunch due to being spurned by all the other kids in the school. Also, I appear as Ugly Betty while walking next to the model-look-alikes to my advanced classes. Finally, is the most threatening one, where the backstabbing clique of the most popular girls in school throws me under the bus by starting rumors about me being goth and pregnant. That last one is a bit out there, but I would like to personally say never watch *Mean Girls* two nights before you start the most important four years of your life. It will get you absolutely nowhere, trust me. Anyways, I noticed the bus slowly pulling up to the jail-like building that is my high school, and I wiped my sweaty palms along the legs of my jeans. *Here we go, I can do this.*

\*\*\*

As I walk through the people scattered around

outside, I take a look up at the building I will be residing in for the next four years. Old creme bricks set up a boundary to all students, while the roof stretches to a towering three stories. The windows have musty, blue blinds covering them from the inside to assure the only things you think about are your studies. The four doors set to the side are approaching quickly, and I know that once I step foot inside, there is no going back. My future starts here, and I can only think of the scenarios running through my mind this morning. I walk through the double doors shaking with fear and fake enthusiasm. I feel my heart race and palms sweat. I follow the crowd of people who just got off my bus around the corner. There I see all the groups I dreaded earlier. I first notice the newbies, like me, standing off to the side with their heads to the ground avoiding any contact from others. *Now that's not how I need to start off in this school.* Next are the band kids, around twenty feet away talking aimlessly about their new music courses and instruments. About ten steps away from them are the kids obsessed with their studies, disconnected from the world of high school. Like a barrier, the empty space separates the different cliques from socializing. It stretches across the room, where no one dares to step foot, fearing for all excruciatingly, acute attention to be set on them. On the opposite side of this imaginary wall are the more diverse groups. These include the more popular freshmen joking with each other, the sophomores who gossip together about the unattractive people in school, the junior class that picks on the newbies fresh into their territory, and then, we

ultimately have the high-class seniors who drive to school and walk through the doors like they own it, intimidating everyone in their paths. I take a chance and step through the “barrier” quickly to include myself with my best friend, Brianna, and a few others.

“Hey, girlie!” she greets cheerfully with a hug.

“Hey, babe, are you nervous for today?” I replied with the best smile I can muster up, while my stomach churns uneasily.

“Um, somewhat. Yeah, I’m nervous towards the people, but other than that, not really.”

“I’m the exact same!” I answered with my first real laugh of the morning. With that, we continued talking like normal, but we both were brought back to our anxieties when the bell rang through the school. Turning to look at each other, we gave quick reassurances and a hug, then left to find our classes with the same thing running through our minds: *Here goes nothing.*

\*\*\*

Walking up the stairs to my Algebra 2/Trigonometry class from Gym, I can’t help but watch the other high schoolers. We have a rare diversity that brings us together that subconsciously tears through the walls we put up around ourselves. Thinking in more detail, I imagine it a little like our main staircase. The way everyone uses it, creating a block in the hustle and stress of our studies. Also, how separated you feel when the fifty kids around you are pushing up the stairs while you try to make it down without getting swallowed whole. It is the central bond holding the school together, and one small crack could lead

to disaster.

Now that I think about it, you could easily relate these stairs to the popularity ladder. At the bottom, you see the newbies vying for a step up. On your way up, the lost catch your eye. They aren't quite last in the race due to an acceptable fashion sense, but their lack of social skills and confidence keeps them stuck like cement. Reaching the middle platform, a few freshmen have ascended for dating an upperclassman, and the occasional senior who gets too obsessed with their studies are immediately labeled as just another leaf in the pile. Almost to the top are the athletes dedicated to their sport, studies, and future. These are the kids everyone knows for their athletic abilities and, for the fortunate ones, good looks. They are looked up to and cheered for on game day just for sporting a jersey while strutting through the halls. And, finally, you are at the top. Here stand the gorgeous girls with the unnaturally attractive boyfriends walking like royalty to their next block, holding hands. This is where everyone thinks about being at least once in their high school career-Some more than others, but the thought still haunts your mind. It will make girls jealous, guys angry, make or break people, or turn you into the one person you vowed that you would never be. The most important thing here is to be strong enough to get back up once you have fallen through the mental traps high school plays on you.

After making a note to be myself through thick and thin, I step out of my over analytical thoughts and through the threshold to my next class.

\* \* \*

The cafeteria. That one place in movies where everything occurs. Whether it is getting tripped and the remnants of your spaghetti drenching your expensive, new shirt, or the huge fights between people over the pointless drama getting spread around the school, it all happens here. Why, might you ask? Well, I have come to the conclusion that it is so because it's such a populated area. If that one girl who hates you for wearing the same shirt as her says a bunch of crap behind your back, it will spread like a wildfire due to everyone sitting with their friends. Also, if your clumsy and awkward alter ego decides to make an unwanted, guest appearance and you trip to face plant onto the disgusting floor, everyone's attention is stuck on your humiliation for at least a month.

So, with that in mind, I ventured my way into our school's cafeteria trying to find at least one person I recognized. As I passed through the most populated part of school, I tried my best to look like I was the most confident person in the world, when, in reality, a rock could have been more assured than me. I smiled at some of the people that looked my way, fighting for that reputation as a friendly person. I finally found Brianna sitting with some other friends, so I decided to pull up a chair next to her.

"So, how has your day been so far?" she questioned right off the bat.

"Erm, it's okay, I guess. Not as bad as I thought it would be. You?"

"It's actually really good, a lot better than I expect-

ed. I love both of my teachers so far, but I'm still depressed we don't have any classes together."

"Oh, trust me, I am, too, but it's all good. We have lunch together on A days." After that we continued with our meaningless banter on topics ranging from upperclassmen to softball. About ten minutes later, the bell rang, signaling that my break for the day was over, and I scrambled to my feet, gathering up my belongings, giving Brianna a hug, and calling out "see you later." And with that I left to finish out the day.

\*\*\*

Judgmental. That's the last thing I have ever wanted to be. The girl who comes off as condescending and cocky. A person who looks at others and immediately jumps to a conclusion without actually getting to know any of them. Someone who walks through the halls labeling the people I pass by as "fake," "desperate," or a "try-hards." I had always stopped myself from thinking those awful things about people. I promised myself not to change to fit in with the other kids who do these things as a joke. I always said to myself look for the positive in a person, even if all you see as a first impression is negative. And you know what? I broke that after one day in high school.

I have always known that people go through things that no one else can imagine. Things that have a long-term effect on mental and physical aspects of life. Sure, no one will fully understand what is going on because everyone has a unique story, but that doesn't make it right for anyone to judge you for it. I knew this, too. It's what upsets me the most, knowing how

ridiculous it is to judge a person after seeing them in the hall for about three seconds. No, I technically never said any of this to anyone, but it still makes me disappointed in myself to know those thoughts could even enter into my mind subconsciously.

*Three Weeks Later. . .*

“. . . And here’s my number, so call me maybe. . .” I rolled to my side, pressing snooze on my alarm, and stretching to get up with a smile on my face. I hurried to the bathroom, so I could claim it before my brother. After washing my face and putting my contacts in, I got ready, throwing on a casual shirt, light wash jeans, and purple Vans. I clumsily walked down the stairs to eat my breakfast which consisted of a toasted cinnamon raisin bagel. Gathering up my bookbag from the floor, I ventured down the street to my bus stop while listening to my The Fray playlist.

The ride to school was relaxing, just listening to music, being excited for the day to come. Soon it was over, and I was stepping through the clear double doors. Walking through the school, handing out genuine smiles to everyone who caught my eye, I reached my best friend, Brianna. Today, the band kids were talking with the athletes like they have been best friends for years. The seniors had small conversations with the various underclassmen walking by. Then, I saw the people who have smiles of happiness engraved on their faces while walking to class. These are the people who I admire. They couldn’t care less about all the nasty rumors or judgements being made about them. They

see the positive through any situation, even when it's like looking through a brick wall. They are their own person, and that is all they ever want to be.

# THE PROBLEM PATTERN: A GROWING DIVISION

James Robinson

I live a fairly average life. I go to a public high school, am not athletic, and tend to focus more on my education. I, like everyone else, trudge on, hoping to endure all that life throws at me. However, I tend to look at things from a slightly different perspective. Most people see a group of jocks hanging out at lunch; I see another example of my Norm / Anti-Norm theory. In the turmoil of modern life, most become obsessed with the *what*, not the *why*, and, if you look a bit closer, patterns arise.

I gaze around the cafeteria, watching my classmates go about their business, talking and eating. They go on absentmindedly, ignoring anything outside of their bubble of direct influence. They mindlessly eat and talk, talk and eat. I wander from table to table, working my way towards the lunch line. It is obvious where the Norms, often labeled as popular, sit, their

obsession with media evident. They are clad in over-priced brand clothing and athletic gear, and a continuous stream of voices filled with references to popular culture and so-called “stars” comes from their general direction. They readily accept their social labels and go on with their days.

As I walk between tables and students, I wander within earshot of a table populated by the Anti-Norms. Their characteristic dark clothes, vibrant hair dyes, and shirts portraying punk or goth bands make them easily identifiable. They spew forth a murmur of talk about their “individuality” and what makes them different from everyone else. They seem to fail to recognize that they are no different from anyone else. They refute their social labels, yet they can be labeled as easily as anyone else.

This look around Grafton High School cafeteria shows us one of the most basic divisions in high school society. It is the division of Norm and Anti-Norm. The Norm, as illustrated above, is the set of people who accept social labeling and go with it. The Norm stereotypes are often the older, more accepted stereotypes. The Anti-Norm is the opposing set, those who reject labeling and pretend to be independent and individual. These stereotypes are usually newer, having emerged in the past couple decades (there are a few exclusions; this isn’t a universal rule, just a generalization). These two camps have decided that they shall view the other as their enemy. They divide and, consequently, weaken themselves by cutting off different viewpoints and ideas that, in a sensible society, wouldn’t have been shared.

The vast majority of these people find it difficult, even impossible, to label themselves, probably because, as Americans, we have been told since we were small children that we are totally special, and no one else is the same as us. We are taught that we are “special little snowflakes,” and that we have been, are, and forever will be completely different. This leads us to find difficulty associating ourselves with something so widely viewed as negative like a stereotype. For example, I like to think that since I am able to recognize these differences when others can’t, I don’t really belong to any of the common stereotypes. However, if I had to pick one to label myself as, it would be the “nerd” stereotype, since I prefer mental knowledge over physical prowess, and focus on things like books, video games, politics, history, and science as opposed to athletics, popularity, and social image.

We all do the things we do for the same reasons: social acceptance, momentary material satisfaction, and advancement in the squabble of high school politics; but we do it in a way that divides us. This division (and lack of recognition of it) is one of the major things weakening our society. We have become soft and weak, with people often unable to withstand even the feeblest of mental blows. We seem to be more vulnerable, and often cannot take insults or criticisms. We rely on higher powers, such as teachers, parents, and even the government, to solve our problems instead of manning up and settling things by ourselves. We have become reliant on others to uphold our self-images and lifestyles for us.

# THE WORST OF BEST FRIENDS

Cori Dodd

Jessica P. is the meanest, stupidest, and fattest girl in all of Shalimar, Florida. Her hair is curly, ugly, and greasy. Her face is too fat, her lips are too skinny, and her forehead is more like a fivehead. Her teeth, grossly yellow, are crooked. She is always talking French around me, which is disgusting, because I just know she is talking about me in her little "secret language." Gosh, I hate her, but her food she has at her house is always so good, and the toys she plays with are always the newest and the coolest, and her pool is always open. She is my best friend.

One day I was feeling pretty low, and none of my other friends were answering their phones, so I called her.

"Hello?"

"Umm . . . Hi, is . . . er . . . Jessica there?"

"Yes. Just one second, Cori." In the background I heard a loud, manly voice yell, "Jessica!"

Then a squeaky, mouse-like voice yelled, "Coming!" followed by the sound of someone running down the wooden stairs.

"Hello?" the squeaky voice said.

"Jessica, guess what?" I said, annoyed.

"What?" she said, more interested than ever.

"My mom says I have to get a haircut. My dad says he's gonna make me cut it all off," I said in a tone almost suggesting I would begin to cry, but I held it together.

"That's horrible! You don't really think they'll make you cut it all off, do you?"

"No. I don't think my mom would let him do that."

"Okay, well maybe after you get it cut you can come over?"

"I'll ask. Do you want me to stay the night?"

"Duhh... let me ask real quick." In the background I hear the squeaky voice from before say,

"Can Cori spend the night?"

A deep voice that may have belonged to a woman replied, "Whatever."

"You can."

"Okay well we're leaving now. I'll call you when I'm on my way."

"Kay, bye."

"Bye."

The salon was in a small, pink building, with the word "Le Petit" written in curly letters with some scissors at the end. Inside, a very clean and colorful room greeted me. It smelled like coconut and peaches.

“Hello. Do you have an appointment?” There sat a tall woman with midnight black hair, thrown up into a tight ballerina bun. Her eyes were a dark, seaweed green.

“Umm.. yes. For Cori Dodd.”

“Mhmm, right here. You’re not scheduled for another three hours though.”

“What? I made her appointment for two o’clock in the afternoon. I know I did,” my mom said, her voice loudening.

“Oh well,” I say. “Guess we can’t get my haircut today since you and dad have reservations at six.” I run towards the door, a huge smile now covering my face.

“Oh darn, I’m sorry, I was looking at the wrong person. Could Cori Dodd take a seat right here please?”

“Well, since since you’re politely asking, then I will politely deny your offer,” I said, looking mischievously at my mom. She shot me a mean glance, meaning, “sit now.” As I did, a short woman with bright red hair and a lot of facial piercings approached. I found her terrifying.

“’ello love, my name’s Janet, and yours?” she held out her hand towards me, as if asking me to shake it,

“Umm.” I cleared my throat. “Cori,” I said nervously.

“Right Cori, do you know what you want to do with your hair today?” She asked in a kinder voice, apparently noticing my despair. My mom showing up out of nowhere, suggested a bob. I didn’t know what

the could be, and the woman made me nervous.

“S’that alright with you, doll?” I nodded my head. “Right then, so I’m gonna wash your hair first, then I’m gonna cut it. Is this too short, love?” Again, I nodded. After finished combing, cutting, drying, and layering my hair, she turned my chair towards the mirror. She smiled at me, and I began to cry.

My mom paid the secretary, and we left. I cried all the way to Jessica’s house, and I wasn’t surprised when she insulted my hair nonstop all night long. Finally, I decided that I had listened to this for too long. So I told Jessica everything I didn’t like about her.

“You know what, Jessica?” I said. “You’re a mean, nasty, horrible human being. You have friends because you have money. They don’t really like you, they like your stuff. I stuck by your side for too long, and you know what else?” I said in a disgusted voice. “Your self-esteem must be horribly low, because instead of complementing your friends’ on how nice they may be, or how pretty they look, you constantly put people down.” Then I packed my things, and walked out her door, and called my mom to come get me, while I waited angrily on the street for her to come and get me.

Even now, Jessica still lives in Florida. But she’s lost many of her friends, and doesn’t everything she wants anymore. She tried to contact me via email a while back with nothing but mean and dirty things to say. I reported her. We don’t talk, but my friend Rachel keeps me updated on my worst best friend.

# THE INVISIBLE GIRL

Erica Hass

## *The Struggle Begins*

I walk up the bus steps in silence, dreading the ride to school. The dimly lit bus is quiet for now, with only a few students seated, staring out of the windows. I walk to the back and sit down. The bus jerks forward and we continue to the next stop. Sleepy students pile and the small space crowds, but I remain alone. The bus comes to a stop, and he gets on. I feel my stomach clench as he walks to the back seats. The dull grey seat covering has many holes in it from people poking it with pencils. There's a name written in Sharpie on the corner near the window. My hands are sweating, and I try not to fidget. My eyes dart around looking for something to focus on, anything but him. "Bitch," he murmurs as he sits down across the aisle. I slump back in my seat. Heat rushes to my face as I clench my jaw. My throat feels tight and it's hard to swallow. My friends stare at me, but no one says a word, not even

me. I have put up with this for a week now- I thought he was joking at first. His words hurt, and I feel my self esteem drop lower and lower each day.

And to think I had feelings for him. The usual chatter starts up and I'm excluded from the conversations. I speak up, trying to comment on a conversation, but am silenced by his voice cutting me off. "No one cares, you whore!" he yells, a cocky smile plastered on his face and tortuous look in his eye. The arrow hit the target, and he knew he got a bullseye. I swallow and my breath comes out in angry pants. I want to say something but can't. My words are stuck in my throat. I shoot him daggers and turn to look out the window. My face ignites in a flame as furious blood pumps through me. *I'm so sick of this.* "Wow, what a loser. You have no friends, and nobody likes you. Look you even sit alone on the bus!"

As usual, no one comes to my rescue. No one cares. Every day is the same. Every day I pretend like I'm okay, but every night I cry myself to sleep. No one knows of course, but I try to stay strong.

When we arrive at school and they let us off the bus, I walk to class alone. Big surprise there. We are about a month into school now, and I already hate it. I hate it all, except for a few classes where I actually feel visible. I arrive at geometry and take my seat in the back next to Isobel. I just met her this year and we are already really close.

But last year I was popular. I had tons of friends and people used to fight over me, but not anymore. I lost most of them to popularity. Now, theres only a

handful of people that I can actually be myself around. I guess people are manipulated into being something they aren't by the media and their peers. I try to be myself, while others change to fit in. The geometry classroom is dark, all the lights are off except for a single projection on the wall in the front corner of the room. I'm at an angle where the picture isn't visible. The white walls are lined with posters displaying formulas that I often use to help me during the tests. Mrs. Marx says we have to memorize the formulas, but why should I if they are literally right in front of my face? Other students, my classmates, file in and take their seats. Maria smiles and laughs at something Nick says. I feel a pang of jealousy and try to hide my discomfort. Maria was my best friend, but it kind of faded when the year started. *It's not fair that she continues to ditch me for Nick and his friends.* The sunlight peeks through the blinds and barely illuminates my paper in a ghostly glow. Mrs. Marx starts the lesson and the day slowly begins with the learning of formulas and equations. I hate math.

### *Raindrops Start to Fall*

I watch my mom as she furiously works on dinner. She quickly stirs the pot on the stove and turns the heat down. I wait for her to stop before I begin. "What's wrong, honey?" she asks, her voice full of concern. Her eyes search my face for an answer. I feel my throat tighten as my eyes begin to blur. "He's still doing it, mom," I manage to croak out. "He's still calling me those awful names."

"I think it's time you go to the principal about this, considering it has continued non-stop," she says giving the pot another stir. I nod my head and wipe my tear-stained face. My mom gives me a reassuring hug and an understanding look. She went through the same thing in high school. I leave the kitchen and go upstairs to complete my geometry homework.

I open my eyes and slide out of bed. I feel my desktop, looking for the source of the annoying beeps. I smack the snooze button and sit down on my desk chair, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I twist the switch on my desk lamp. My eyes squint shut, and I begin my morning routine.

The bus pulls up, and I march up the steps. I quickly take my seat and wait. *This is the last time, the last straw. If he does anything, I'll waste no time.* He gets on and takes his usual seat. I ignore him until we get to the stoplight near the school. I send a quick text to my friend and set my phone down in my lap. A few seconds later, out of the corner of my eye, I see him lunge. He grabs my phone and sprints to the front of the bus. He turns around and sneers. I panic. *Oh God. What is he gonna do?!* I yell his name and start to get up and go after him. "Sit down," commands the driver. I start to say that he has my phone, but get cut off yet again. I can see him scrolling through my messages. His fingers quickly type something, and I feel the familiar prickle of tears behind my eyes and the knot in my stomach. *He could say anything, and people would think it was me!* He laughs on his way back to his original seat, throwing the phone in my lap. I snatch it up and go right

to my inbox, reading his message. He texted my dad and told him I was going gay. I text my dad explaining what happened and that it wasn't me. *I figured it wasn't you*, he replied. In geometry, I tell Isobel what happened, and she agrees that I should go to the principal. I tell Mrs. Marx that I need to go to the office, and she hands me a pass.

I walk into the guidance office and fill out a complete report on the occurrence. The guidance counselor asks me to read it out loud to her, and I hesitate. I force myself to read the graphite on paper. She listens, in silence and by the end tears are streaming down my cheeks. She asks for a list of witnesses and tells me everything will be okay, but I know it never will be.

### *The Physical Education Phantom*

"Alright, you ready?" Savanna asks, backing up. I nod my head and prepare to catch the ball. The football flies through the air, spiraling in a brown blur. I jump up and catch it as it almost soars over my head. I return the throw less gracefully, and Amy and I laugh as it lands on the ground off to Savanna's right. I adjust my gym uniform and smooth back the tendrils of hair that escaped my ponytail. A bunch of other students join our group and I wait, and wait, for a pass. But it never comes. I get bored and leave. As I walk around the field alone, feeling invisible, I look over at the group of people I left only to realize that they don't even know I walked away. Along the edge of the field, my shadow slithers behind me. I feel like a phantom, a ghost of the girl I used to be. He never stopped calling me names,

I'm invisible during majority of my classes, and my grades are slipping. I have become an empty shell, consumed by depression hidden behind a smiling mask. I feel empty inside, like something is missing.

I trudge back to the locker rooms without a sound. My limbs are heavy with dread. The hallway is dark and cool as I near the locker room doors. I open the door and unlock my locker. I pull off my shirt and shorts, stuffing them in the rectangular capsule. I pull on my shirt and jeans, then my hoodie. I hear snickers and laughter from the other side of the locker room. Laura walks out from behind the wall. "Nice granny panties," she giggles. *Just because I don't get the lacy, slutty underwear that you wear doesn't mean that I wear grandma underwear.* "Oh, and we'd like to appoint you president of the tiny titties committee," she smirks. I pull my hoodie farther down around my waist and walk out.

Thunder shakes the window pane as I lean my head against the cold glass. My room is dark and quiet. Lightning illuminates the black sky and the skinny outline of trees in the distance. I close my eyes as the rain begins to pound on the clear barrier.

#### *Upperclassman Underdog*

I sigh and step onto the field. *Maybe I should just quit the team. I don't play in the games anyway.* Kayla, our pitcher, throws the ball at me, hard. My hand stings through the leather of my glove. It's gone numb from the pain. "You're hurting me," I tell her. She shrugs and claims she's just doing her warm up. Kayla is younger

than me, but damn, that girl has attitude. Coach stops our practice for a water break. Kayla was a good friend of mine last year during softball season, but she's been really rude lately. I try to joke with her, but she looks at me like I have five heads.

We all stand in line waiting to get water from the cooler on the bleachers. I try to be funny and slip into line, unfortunately right in front of Kayla. I bend my knees and lower my face to get water. Two hands push me from behind and my face hits the hard metal of the bleachers. My cheek is throbbing and I step out of the line. "Thanks," Kayla says in a teasing voice as she fills her water bottle. I roll my eyes, ignoring my bruised cheek.

I get my batting gloves and wait for Coach to give us instructions. Kayla appears out of the corner of my eye. I can feel her watching me. I turn and look at her. I react quickly, jumping back as icy water hits my legs. She laughs and turns around, walking to her bat bag.

*I'm so sick of this. She's treated me like this ever since the season started.* I'm about to go after her and give her a good smack. I don't care if Coach kicks me off the team for hitting another player. I advance three steps, but the team captain, Andrea, stops me. I glare at her, and she stares back. Andrea is one of my closest friends, and I know she means no harm.

My gaze softens, and I shake my head. I pull my batting helmet out of my bag and put it on, picking up my bat.

### *Epilogue*

After experiencing these events as a younger individual it made me realize how badly we treat people, sometimes without realizing it. Through these events I became closer to God and deeper in my Catholic faith. I have also become a stronger and better person because of what happened. I wasn't just mentally bullied through name calling, but physically, too. I eventually went to the principal and my coach to cope with these issues.

I've known the boy for a long time. He was a friend of mine before eighth grade. Over the summer I had feelings for him. I eventually told him I liked him but was rejected. I shrugged it off, and got over him. A few weeks later he started to bully me, and I didn't understand why. I started seeing other boys, and he picked on me because of who I chose to date. By the end of the year I hated him, and he was relentless. This year is different though. He's finally come to his senses and now acts more mature. I haven't had a problem with him since.

As for Kayla, after the season ended, we didn't talk much, and when school ball started the next year, she'd changed. I don't really know why she acted this way, but I think it was because she wanted to seem better and cooler than the older kids. She picked on others, too, but it was me most of the time. Other players saw how she treated me, but Coach was oblivious. I'm looking forward to the new season with my head held high.

# CLAY MOMENTS

John Bednarek

## *The Fight*

My trouble with bullies began in third grade, the first year of school after I came back to Virginia.

I was a perfect target. My growth spurt had still not begun, so I looked like I fit better in a first-grade class. Also, although my intellect had developed well over the years, my people skills were underdeveloped. I was like a tadpole whose siblings had started to crawl around while it had no trace of legs at all. As a result, I usually avoided most conversations or entered them suddenly and without much tact, annoying the others involved. Less savory students locked onto me like missiles, harangued me about my height, and repeated the universal bully creed that "smart is lame." A couple of them went above and beyond the call of duty to make my life as painful as possible, much to my dismay.

Fourth grade was worse, but not by too much.

Like third grade, I found the bullies annoying but still tolerable. By fifth grade, again, the situation had ratcheted up a notch, but I personally did not notice. My attention was turned toward two great friends I had made that year, both brothers, one of whom was in all three of my class rotations. I still have great memories of third rotation science class with him, when we would finish our work and have nice chats. No matter how often I was belittled, I could ease the pain somewhat thanks to him. Maybe that is why we are still very close friends today.

By middle school, unfortunately, the heat was truly on. In sixth grade, I had almost no classes with any friends of mine, and the usual suspects were dead-set on keeping me from making any more. Snide remarks and threats followed me constantly wherever I went, and I got tripped, pushed, and shoved. As a result, I became reserved at school, depressed at home, but I still carried on. After all, I told myself repeatedly, what choice did I have?

That year of middle school was the worst time of my life. The sheer amount of negativity in my overall environment surprised me, and I was still suffering from system shock by the time summer rolled around. Summer became a sanctuary, whether I was doing the required summer homework or just relaxing. I never wanted to face the halls of the middle school again, even though I knew that summer would only last so long.

I went into seventh grade prepared. My social skills had improved, and I had created a list of come-

backs to many of the typical verbal attacks. I also had the fortune to have some friends in classes, and made a couple more that year. Yet for all of the improvements, I still felt buried under the weight of the insults. The depression had faded over the summer, but still hung over me, threatening to return.

As always, the worst class for me was gym. I had no friends there to talk to, and never found anyone who would even agree to become a friend of mine. Worse, the gym teachers had not gotten any smarter about preventing bullying since my kindergarten days at Nolanville. Their philosophy was that it was best to avoid being disciplinarians in cases of verbal abuse. The kids needed to just suck it up when bullies went after them, and if that was a problem, then too bad. Their inactivity angered me, but there was nothing that I could do about it.

Even death threats were nothing new to me. I had received my first in fifth grade and panicked, but by sixth grade I had figured out that most of them were empty, hollow, and just another attempt by bullies to get a reaction from me.

You can imagine my surprise one afternoon, two kids actually jumped me in the hallway outside the locker rooms. One of my attackers was kid even smaller than me, but pure evil, and he was accompanied by his thug buddy—a kid only slightly taller than me but out-massing me by probably a factor of two. A small crowd gathered, chanting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

What neither of these two realized was that I had been going to a mixed martial arts school for two

years. My first reaction, quickly turned into a grim satisfaction. Finally, my time had come! Their first move, initiating the fight, was to trip me, which failed to knock me over. Then they started pummeling me with punches, but my adrenaline was already flowing, and all I felt was a series of taps. They hurt so little that, although I had been taught how to block them, I did not even bother.

They pushed me into the wall and I fell to the floor, then surprised both of them by getting back up and continuing the fight. I felt like a robot: I felt nothing and would continue to operate until I was utterly destroyed. While shielding my face, I used my right leg to deliver a short but hard kick to the larger thug's shin. They pushed me in unison, and I hit the wall, but not with as much force as before. I got up again, and I used the same kick as before, to bring the thug down with a thud. The scrawny kid's eyes widened with fear, his plan's keystone collapsed to the floor. A warm feeling ran through me, as I thought, one down. It was at this point that someone finally got between me and the scrawny kid, officially breaking up the fight. Despite my pleasure at having my long-time wish granted, I had secretly been unsure as to how I would end the fight. He spared me the trouble of doing so.

Of course, the coaches took all three of us to the office, where we had to fill out "incident report forms." I felt a little sore, but was not in any real pain. It was difficult for me to believe that I had won and triumphed over the bullies; usually I felt like the loser whenever I interacted with one of them. Triumph, ec-

stasy, and pride in my performance filled me until I thought I would burst. The larger thug, meanwhile, was far worse off, clutching his leg and crying, and likely imagining the repercussions at home and school for picking and then losing the fight. For weeks after the fight he sat out during gym, and when he finally showed his leg again, there was a bruise on it the size of a grapefruit and the color of blackberry juice. I took a silent pleasure whenever I saw it.

We all got suspended, but my parents were not angry with me because I acted in self-defense. I had finally shown the others that I was no longer a safe target.

# AN OVERLOOKED HOUSE

Kandace James

The most beautiful places are the easiest to forget, but I will not forget you. Yes, I remember where you were, a little community called Summerville. That's where my family lived. I visited you every several years, where you stood there waiting for me. I will not forget you. As I rode in the back seat of my mom's pearly white car, I spotted you out of the many rundown houses. I saw your wooden walls masked in cream paint, staring at me through the smudged car window. I will not forget you. You were so old, but still you stood tall, and for that will not forget you. Then there was the door. The ashen door. It had a few chips in it, revealing a cherry wood surface underneath. As my mom opened the door, the slight scent of Pine Sol seeped into my nostrils. I will not forget you. Your lightly painted pale-green walls stretched across the entire room. Inside that room were two twin sized beds covered in a fluffy, lace comforter. It reminded me

of those uncomfortable, puffy dresses I was forced to wear every Sunday. A little television sat in between the beds on a white nightstand. There were other rooms, but I do not remember them. I will not forget you. You protected my great grandma Edna for eighty-nine years, while she rocked in her white rocking chair. Now you're gone; you died because she left you. Your debris still lies there, blanketed in dirt. You have left, but I will not forget you.

# MOVING THROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ruth Ann Beaver

## *Stabbing the Wall*

I retreated tearfully into my room. With blurry vision I could see the ugly green walls, the blue couch covered in rubbish with my violin perched haphazardly on top, the stuffed bookshelf next to my unmade bed. I fell onto the bed and stared at my lap. Moving. I was moving. A lump wedged itself painfully in my throat. I had spent all my life in Charlotte, I simply couldn't leave now.

I *wouldn't* leave now.

I paced my room furiously, glaring at the walls like they had done me personal harm. Then I stopped in my tracks. The walls! I opened the lower drawer of my desk and pushed aside papers and plastic oddities. My fingers closed around two brass knitting needles. Clutching one in each hand, I approached the wall.

There was a glint of gold and then the knitting needle was embedded in plaster. I swung my other

hand. We weren't moving until someone bought the house. Nobody would buy a house with holes in the walls.

### *Sobbing Over Books*

It was 10:00. I sat in my dad's fake leather chair, my back aching from hours spent in a frenzy over homework due the next day. I pulled out my worn agenda and ran my finger down the messy page. I let out a tired sigh of relief. *Just Social Studies left.* I pulled a bulky textbook out of my backpack and then consulted my agenda again. *Read chapter 2.4, then answer questions 1-15 on 154.*

I flipped to the first page of chapter 2.4 and began to scan the page. *The People's Republic of China has two special administrations created in 1997 and 1999 . . .* I read the first sentence over and over without realizing it. *The People's Republic of China . . .* If I had this much homework, then how much homework did the kids in China have? . . . has two special administrations . . . I was so tired. . . *created in 1997 and . . .*

“Ruth Ann! Wake up!”

“W-what?”

I jerked awake. My mom was standing over me with an exasperated look on her face.

“Ruth Ann, it's 10:30, go to bed,” she said sternly.

I was sorely tempted, but then I looked at the homework on my dad's desk. “No. I can't. I have one more assignment.”

“Alright . . .” My mom walked slowly out of the room.

I decided upon a different tactic. I flipped to the questions. *1. What are the main religions of Turkey?* With a sigh, I flipped back through the pages of minuscule text crammed tightly between pictures of strangely clad people and even stranger religious festivals, scanning for a hidden paragraph on Turkey's religions . . .

"Mom!" I called. "I need your help!"

"What is it now?"

"I can't find the answer!"

"Ruth Ann, it's late. Put it away and do it in the morning," my mom murmured.

"No, I need to do it now!" I insisted, though I was tired beyond measure. "I don't have time in the morning."

With a sigh, my mom consulted my textbook. "The People's Republic of China has two Special Administrative Regions created in 1997 and 1999 . . ."

Realizing she was about to read through the whole chapter, I sat down, feeling the beginnings of a headache.

Suddenly it was all too much. School, moving, sleeping in a room that wasn't my own, having no books to read. . . . Tears ran down my cheeks and I buried my face in my hands.

My mom looked up from the textbook mid-sentence, taken completely by surprise by my breakdown. "What's wrong?"

"I miss m-my stuff . . ." I found myself moaning. "Why did we have to pack it all up f-first? I miss m-my books!"

My mom bit back a smile.

Tears gushed down faster as I pictured my crammed bookshelf in all its former glory. The books were organized by topic, author, then color, with my favorite books within easy reach on the middle shelf. *Harry Potter*, *Warriors*, *Animorphs* . . . All my escapes were gone when I needed them the most.

### *Saying Goodbye*

I trudged across the thick grey log that lay over the creek, then my feet hit the forest floor with a crackle. The wind whispered through the treetops, spreading the news of my return. I pulled up the hood of my jacket and crunched through the crisp, cool forest. Muted shades of brown and gray surrounded me. As I passed, I gazed at a dilapidated fairy village, an ancient wooden post covered in emerald moss, the unfinished skeleton of a fort.

I stopped at a thicket of sharp brambles. Following the narrow path through them, I avoided the swords pointed at me and vaulted over a fallen tree. I ducked into a cave formed by vines growing up against the fence that edged my world. A heap of cracked, muddy CDs that had once been a part of a top secret spy mission carpeted the floor. Two plastic, white chairs had been dragged in, and wedged between them was a styrofoam pedestal.

I traced my footsteps back out of the cave and then walked down a muddy path to the pond. The clear water was edged with viridescent moss, the picture somewhat at odds with the whoosh of cars speeding by only meters away. I followed the road back across

the creek, past a line of overturned plastic flowerpots, to a tree with a metal pipe fastened to it. I remembered tying it to the tree with my best friend as part of an elaborate entrance signal to prevent the little kids from discovering yet another one of our hideouts. For old time's sake I took my hand out of my jacket to bang on the frigid pipe with my knuckles, then continued on. I crunched past a maze of bushes and pushed my way through a thicket of cedar saplings. Their bark felt splintery and rough on my hands, and their spicy scent filled the surrounding forest.

A lone, blue boulder caught my attention. I paused for a moment to sit on its cool surface, fingering the gritty pockmarks and craters that covered it. The musty dust of hay drifted through the forest. After some time, I slid onto my feet and walked between a collapsing wall of hay and a whitewashed fence to a tunnel of fallen trees. I sat again on top of the prickly needles that covered the ground. They felt dry and brittle, like the rat skeleton I had once found there. I remembered myself eating a bitter crabapple on a dare when I was five. With a sigh, I hauled myself up, following the path I had taken into what was, for the last time, my backyard.

“I’ll be back,” I choked, but the trees whispered goodbye.

*So, You Want to Play Flute?*

“And she wants to take band.”

“Okay,” the counselor nodded. “What instrument?”

“Flute,” I squeaked.

“But she has no past experience,” my mom interjected.

“Alright, I’ll phone Mrs. Stone and see what she says.”

I ran my sweaty palms over my jeans repeatedly as the counselor dialed. My parents had chosen an inopportune time to move. What if the band director said no? It was the second quarter after all, and even the beginning band would have been playing for months now.

“Hi, it’s Yvonne,” said the counselor into the phone. “Yes, I have a student who wants to join beginning band. No, she hasn’t played flute before. Mmm-hmm . . . Yes, that makes sense. Let them try it out and see how it works . . . Yes, of course . . . Best to give them a chance and see . . . Okay . . . Yes . . . Bye!”

The counselor hung up and turned to me. My heart beat hopefully and I sat up in the chair.

“Mrs. Stone says you can try it out,” she said, “but she said you’ll need to take private lessons to get caught up.”

I smiled excitedly.

### *I Have a Flute . . . What Do I Do with It?*

I ran up the stairs of my grandmother’s house and set my brand new flute case down reverently on the bed. I opened the latches carefully and gazed upon three shining tubes of metal. I grabbed my dad’s laptop and pulled up Google. *How to put a flute together.*

I looked at a few pictures and then gingerly slid the tubes into each other. I picked it up, and then put

it back down. I consulted Google again. *How to hold a flute.* I put the flute hesitantly up to my face. It was heavier than I had thought it would be.

Eagerly I pulled up YouTube and typed: *How to play flute.*

### *First Day of School*

I glanced at the map on the back of my brand new agenda and cautiously made my way to the gym. I could barely get my mind around the fact that another middle school existed outside of the balmy islands of South Charlotte. Everyone here actually knew what they were doing. They knew each other. They had private jokes, friends, enemies, and crushes. This was their second year here and they knew their way around. I felt like an imposter on an alien planet.

I walked into the crowded gym and was immediately surprised by the color of the floor. It was blue. From the feel of it under my feet, it was made of some sort of rubber. Were all the gyms in Virginia like this?

“You must be Ruth Ann!” A tall, skinny adult with short blonde hair and a whistle around her neck approached me. “I’m Coach Sperling.”

“Uh, I’m . . . .” Wait, she already knew my name. “New?” I finished lamely.

“Right now we’re doing walk and talk. When we call the class to squad lines, come find me,” she said.

“Okay,” I said slowly, and then she walked away, leaving me in a current of unfamiliar seventh graders to fend for myself.

I frantically surveyed the crowd. I couldn’t just

walk up between two people and start talking to them, but I couldn't walk alone. Aha! A girl with wispy brown hair and a muscular build was walking alone. I sped to her side.

"Hi, I'm Ruth Ann. I'm new. What's your name?" I asked.

"I'm Taylor," she said in a rather quiet voice.

"Umm . . . so . . ." I began.

### *Band Class*

I sat nervously beside another girl holding a flute. I discreetly noted how she had put hers together and imitated it with my own. I pulled out a shiny, brand-new copy of *Essential Elements 2000 for Flute* and set it carefully on the music stand.

Mrs. Stone stepped up on the podium and the band went silent.

"Everyone, this is Ruth Ann; she's new here," she began.

I blushed as the whole band turned to look at me.

"Flutes, if you could help her that would be great."

All the flutes smiled at me.

"Hi, I'm Hannah Hrbeck," introduced the girl beside me before Mrs. Stone interrupted her.

"Everyone, turn to page fifteen."

I opened my book and flipped through violently orange pages.

"We'll start with exercise thirty."

I looked at the first note. It was an E flat.

"Hannah, how do you finger that note?" I whis-

pered quickly.

She held her flute up and I copied her fingerings.

“I remember it because you push down every key except your right pinkie and pointer finger, and E is for everything.”

I smiled and thanked her. Mrs. Stone started the band, and I proudly squeaked the first note along with the rest of the flutes.

I walked out of band class toting my lunchbox, flute case, and several books. I uncertainly followed the other band kids. Nobody asked me to sit with them. Nobody told me where to sit. After a few moments’ debate, I sat at the table next to some girls I recognized from the clarinet section. The table stayed empty for the rest of the period.

### *A Genius in Math Class*

I absentmindedly doodled a cat on my finished worksheet as most of the class labored over the second problem. “Do you think anyone could become a genius?”

“What do you mean?” asked Josh, the boy sitting next to me. He had finished his worksheet barely seconds before me, though I had not admitted it.

“Well, you know how Cadel is a supergenius?” I said, referring to the main character in one of our favorite books. “He was born that way, but could someone work really hard and then become a genius?”

Josh snorted. “Of course not! He was born with superhuman abilities to visualize technology, you can’t just decide to develop a talent like that.”

I frowned. "But if someone studied a subject really hard then they could become a genius in that subject, right?"

He shook his head. "What, are you going to do it?"

I raised my eyebrows and offered him a jaunty grin. "Yep. I'll prove you wrong!"

"Good luck with that!"

### *The School with No Homework*

I lounged aimlessly in the kitchen as my mom bustled around making dinner.

"Why do you have so much free time?" she asked irritatedly. "Don't you have homework?"

"No, actually I don't," I answered. "I think it's because of the Science Fair. The teachers are probably giving everyone a break."

"I've heard a lot about Grafton, and it's a really good school," my mom said, "so don't get used to the easy workload."

I watched a pot simmer on the stove, wondering if I could keep it from boiling.

### *What Used To Be*

I sat in my room staring at the purplish brown walls. The second and third quarters had passed without single scrap of homework. What was I supposed to do? I wandered around my room for a while before picking up my sixth grade yearbook. The phrase "I am" topped the cover and was followed by words like competitive, hardworking, capable, artistic, spir-

ited, and extraordinary. Even the title suggested South Charlotte had been better than Grafton.

The spine cracked as I opened it. My heart throbbed painfully. There were those tiny lockers that somehow fit more books than the ones at Grafton . . . I remembered how they had been color coded in coordination with the floor to help you find you way around. And there was the gym that was so much prettier than Grafton's odd rubber one. The school colors were so much cooler: turquoise and purple. A picture of my old egotistical homeroom teacher who had taught the two hardest classes I took that year. A kid had used the word whimsical to describe tuba in an interview. Actually, all the interviews were creative. I belonged at South Charlotte, not at stupid Grafton.

Then I hit the sixth grade pictures. My vision blurred. Kylie, Sean, the three Samanthas, Kimberly and Patrick from my kindergarten class. Then Jake, Hayden, Austin, Michael, and Patrick from elementary school. There was Justin Trapani, who I used to think looked like Sharkboy from *Sharkboy and Lavagirl*. McKenzie and I had done swim team together.

Liam, whose name spelled backwards was mail, had been one of the first people to read the novel I started in fourth grade. Yasmine, Michelle, and Samantha, my three best friends. Avery Goodson, who owned the world's most hilarious name. Warren, Lauren, Hannah, Cailin, Jennifer, Maddie . . . They were the kids I had grown up with, and they were part of who I was. I might never see them ever again. As they grew up, they would all change and forget me. What if I

never had as good, or as many, friends again? I angrily brushed the tears off my cheeks and slammed the yearbook shut.

### *Left in the Dust*

I excitedly stepped out of the car and led my mom into TCBY. There they were! Cheryl, Sara, and Samantha, sitting at a table waiting for me and chatting happily. I sped over to their table.

“Hi!” I said brightly, expecting a warm welcome from the friends I hadn’t seen for ages.

“Oh, hi Ruth Ann!”

My smile flickered uncertainly as they quickly finished their conversation without me. I didn’t even know what they were talking about. Why?

We all walked as a group to the self-serve yogurt and filled our styrofoam cups with fro-yo and toppings, paid for it, and sat back down.

“So, what’s been going on?” I asked.

I was immediately flooded with answers. Our old teacher’s son had a crush on Samantha, Cheryl had made Chamber orchestra, and they were all in a math class higher than I was. Instead of feeling happy like I thought I would, I felt my heart sink to my toes.

“Awesome. Great,” I said, forcing a smile. My friends had continued on with their lives without me.

In the car I stared out the window sadly. Even if I did magically get to go back to South Charlotte I would be behind in everything. The hole that had been left when I moved was now gone. Someone else sat next to Yasmine in orchestra, someone else talked with

Sarah at recess, and Cheryl constantly called someone else for homework help. I didn't belong at Grafton, but South Charlotte wasn't my home either. I was torn between the two schools-- I was homeless.

### *A New Beginning*

*Beep-beep! Beep-beep!* I lunged ninja-like at my alarm clock, and then returned to my regular, early-morning zombie state. Today was the first day of eighth grade, and I wasn't going to mess it up. However, my chances of making friends on two hours of sleep were grim.

I shuffled down the stairs and poured a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats while staring into space. In a few moments I would be at school, and there was not room for shyness. I wasn't going to be the partial outcast I was in seventh grade. *I'm not moving back to North Carolina, so I might as well have friends* was my reasoning.

For the first time, I rode the bus to school, sitting behind a tall, blond boy in my grade who went to my aunt's church. He was joking around with his friends. I felt sad that I could relate more to the timid sixth graders.

After taking a few brand-new books that I thought I might need, I trudged into Civics and Economics, still yawning from lack of sleep. Ms. Moss began to talk about class expectations and other things that my tired brain couldn't focus on. Instead, my eyes wandered the room, landing on a bright poster sporting the phrase "Smile! You look so good in happy!" In a desperate attempt to seem friendly, I grinned painfully for

the whole class period.

The next class was English, which passed by slowly. I was beginning to panic, I still had no friends. On my way to band, I vowed I would talk to the first person I met. Walking confidently through the doors, I shrank at the sight of a whole band that already knew each other. Of course! I had skipped intermediate band, but all these people had known each other since sixth grade! I awkwardly sat in a seat all by myself, my confident resolution flying out the window.

Mr. Menefee began to call roll.

“Rachel Blitt!”

“Here!”

“Kirsten Carter!”

“Here!”

“Lynne Frecker!”

“Here!”

My eyes widened. He didn’t have my name on the role. What was I supposed to do if my name wasn’t on the role? I sat in my chair, wide-eyed and gulping in air, until Mr. Menefee finally called out “George Zorn!” who was, of course, there.

I looked around nervously, almost missing when he said “Is there anybody whose name I haven’t called?”

I tentatively raised my hand.

“Oh, Ruth Ann, I’ll mark you down.”

I let out a slow sigh of relief, only to tense up again as he explained what we were doing. It was yet another cheesy icebreaker activity. It doesn’t sound that bad, but in a class where everyone else knows every-

one but you, that's not fun at all. I grimly stared down at the half sheet of paper that had been handed out. It had a bunch of squares filled with statements like "has lived in another state" or "has a cat." I had to find one person in the class to fill as many boxes as possible.

I grimly got up and joined the fray. My eyes darted around. Ha! I saw someone who wasn't talking to anyone else. I speed walked over to her.

"Um . . ." I began lamely. I cleared my head. "Uh, do you have . . ."

"Let me just take your paper," she suggested.

I blushed and handed it over. She shoved hers into my hand. I wrote my name in "has a dog" and handed it back to her.

Some crazy force possessed me to say, "I'm really shy, so this is kinda hard for me." I tensed, waiting for her to think I was weird. Why had I said that?

"Yeah, me too," she answered, to my surprise.

As I walked away to find some other person, I wondered if I hadn't just made a friend. Maybe I wasn't so hopeless after all. (Or maybe cheesy icebreaker games aren't as pointless as they seem.)

After band, I walked dejectedly to lunch, expecting to sit by myself like last year. I sat down at the long red table and opened up my nearly empty lunchbox with a sigh. Then I looked up and was surprised to see an Asian girl with wavy blonde hair sitting across from me. It was the girl from band class.

"Uh, so, what's your name?" I asked bluntly.

"Hannah," she said, "What's yours?"

"Ruth Ann."

I munched on my ham sandwich in silence, racking my mind for something interesting to say.

“So, what instrument do you play?” I asked, remembering my dad’s tip of asking the other person about themselves.

“Flute,” she answered.

“Hey, me too!”

Silence.

“So, what did you do over the summer?” she asked.

“Not much, I went to a summer camp.”

The long and awkward conversation continued along those lines and then the bell rang for math.

The next day I found myself sitting in the bleachers in gym. Since the gym teachers couldn’t think of anything better for us to do, they intended for us to sit in the bleachers for the whole block. I was sitting next to another Asian girl who I remembered from gym class last year. I had really wanted to be her friend, but we had never spoken.

I opened my mouth, and then closed it. Why would she want to talk to me? I stared at the other end of the wall. I needed friends this year. I had to steel myself and do it. I opened my mouth again, and shut it. What could I say?

I continued arguing with myself for the next thirty minutes or so, until I finally squeaked, “Hi, my name’s Ruth Ann, what’s yours?”

“Oo un,” I heard.

“I’m sorry, what?” I felt really bad for having to ask again.

“Sunyun,” I heard her say a little louder.

“Sunyun?”

“Soohyun.”

“Oh, Soohyun.”

I gulped, then said, “What’s your favorite class this year?”

“Uh, I really like Spanish the best so far. What about you?”

“I like Civics and Economics.”

“Who do you have?”

“Mrs. Moss.”

“Oh, I have Mrs. Martin.”

“Cool.”

As we talked, I began to feel like quite the socialite. Here I was, casually having a conversation with someone I had never spoken to before. I could hardly remember what being shy was like any more! Then a red-haired girl sitting in the front row caught my eye. She was sitting all alone, just a foot away from me, and not speaking to anyone. I had to use my new social superpowers and include her. It was the noble thing to do.

“So, what’s your name?” I ventured boldly.

“Kirsten,” she answered.

“What Spanish are you in?”

“Spanish One.”

“Really? Me too! I feel like I’ve seen you in my Spanish class. When do you have it?”

### *A Typical Day*

“Ruthie!”

“Hannah!” We were beginning our day in the band room, as usual.

“My tea is so good this morning,” she said happily.

“Yeah, I can smell it from here,” I said, wrinkling my nose as she screwed the cap back on. I didn’t like tea.

“Oh-my-gosh!” I jumped as someone crashed into me. “Kirsten!” I groaned.

She laughed. “Wow, Hannah, your tea smells great!”

“I know, right?!” agreed Hannah.

“So, are you guys dressing up for Spirit Week?” I asked.

“Spirit Week?”

“Amanda told me that the week before homecoming there’s a week where you dress up.”

“Maybe I will, but what about homecoming?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not going,” I said firmly.

“I hope I get asked,” Kirsten interjected.

We were interrupted by the warning bell. The large crowd of band geeks and guard girls that were starting their day in the band room surged through the doors and off to class. I headed to Latin where my jolly, white-haired teacher was waiting for me with a flashcard.

“Eadem,” I answered. “The same.”

“Good!” he said, handing me a plastic poker chip.

I sat down next to Soohyun, who was fingering a

poker chip.

"I guessed we both made it safely to the underworld," I joked, alluding to the name of the flashcard test: the charon element.

"Yep," she smiled, "our souls get eternal peace until the next A day."

We sat through Channel One and then the lesson began. We were learning about verb endings, which I found complicated and hard to remember.

"Now, you've got to remember verb endings," Mr. Warren said. Then he climbed up on top of a desk and stood on it.

The whole class held their breath, sure that he would fall off.

"Now that I've got your attention, will you remember to study it?" he shouted.

We all nodded nervously.

"Good!" Suddenly the desk toppled over. The whole class gasped as he landed on his feet and assured us he was fine.

In the next class, Geometry, we had a quiz. After I finished, I took the time to draw a ninja hippo on the back of my paper, hoping that it would improve my score.

"Have I got all the quizzes?" asked Mrs. Ashby. She put the neat stack on her desk and then assigned some textbook work to do during the class. Hannah and I worked together, as usual.

"What's six hundred thirty-six divided by twelve?" I asked, already working out the problem on my own paper.

“Se-se-seventy- seventy-one?” Hannah stuttered.

“What? No it’s fifty-three!”

Hannah and I burst out laughing.

“I was on a different problem,” she explained, “and I got sixty-nine, but I thought the answer was seventy-one.”

I imitated her.

“It sounds like I was rapping!” she laughed.

We sped through the rest of the problems and finished them before the end of the class.

“We’re such ninjas,” said Hannah.

“Hippo ninjas,” I declared.

Then we ate lunch in the band room and watched a video of our latest marching band performance. Mr. Kirsch pointed out the highlights, including dancing drum majors, tubas marching off the field, and a little boy in the stands dancing to our music.

Throughout AP Human Geography I kept looking at the clock, willing it to go faster. Finally it was 2:03, time for marching band practice. I changed in the bathroom and then walked into the band room where Kirsten was putting together her saxophone. I fished my dot card and piccolo out of my backpack.

“Where’s Hannah?” Kirsten wondered after we had waited for a while.

“I don’t know, maybe she’s already gone down to the field,” I guessed.

We both meandered down to the practice field where we found Michael and Rebecca, but not Hannah.

“Does this sound in tune to you?” I asked Rebecca,

playing an A on my piccolo.

She played an A on hers. "Well, I'm sharper than you."

I pushed in my headjoint and she pulled hers out.

"Ten, nine, eight . . ." The drum majors were getting ready to call us to attention.

Kirsten, Rebecca, and I rushed into our practice block spots. I went to the thirty yard line and counted off two steps from the hash, then went ahead into attention.

"Two, one," the drum majors called. "Detail, atten-hut!"

"Hut!" shouted the band.

Hannah approached and took her spot right next to me as Mr. Kirsch began to lay out the plan for the day.

### *Moving . . . Finally*

I dropped my backpack, heavy with books and homework. It bumped against my rickety wooden bookshelf and a shiny, white volume slid off.

I picked up my old sixth grade yearbook. I cracked it open and flipped through the colorful pages. A smile twitched at my lips as I remembered sixth grade. My high school classes were just as hard as everything I had done at South Charlotte. If I hadn't moved I would never have joined marching band, fife and drum, taken art classes, or applied for Governor's school. At South Charlotte I'd had a great time with the friends I'd had all my life. Sure, I might never see them again, but I would always have memories. Besides, I have new friends now. Grafton is my home.

# LACKING REALITY: AN INTROVERT'S PERSPECTIVE

Celina Pearson

I walk up the driveway, slamming the back door of my parents' white van before striding over to the front porch. I pause to inspect the object obstructing my path to the front door. A package. *That's strange, we almost never get packages.* I crouch down to get a closer look at the shipping address. *Yep, that's us. I wonder what it is-* Suddenly, it hits me. My video games. I shout at my parents, who were inspecting their garden in the front yard.

"Hey! My games are here! I'm opening them!"

"What game?" my mother hollers back, confused. I pretend not to hear her as I rush into the house, figuring that she'd eventually remember.

Attempting (and pathetically failing) to open the package, I fly upstairs and get some scissors to help speed up the process.

*They're finally here. After . . . what, almost a month? Finally.* After tearing my way past the bubble wrap, I

came to a small plastic bag. Carefully cutting through it, I remove the small cartridges and spread them out on my desk- red, green, blue, green, red. Pokémon Ruby, Emerald, Sapphire, Leaf-Green, and Fire-Red. The familiar images woke faded memories in the back of my mind, murky and clouded with age. For a few minutes, I lose myself in thought, desperately trying to bring those memories to the surface.

Eventually, I snap back to my senses and remember what I intended to do. With one final burst of energy, I rush into my old game room, heading directly to the small night stand next to the couch. I slide the second drawer open with a quick precision, and grasp the object of my mission. My GameBoy Advance. A sense of relief engulfs me as I walk back to my bedroom. I slide a cartridge into the small, square console— my favorite game, my first game. I let out a nostalgic sigh as I absorb the intro music. The title scrolls into view.

### Pokémon Sapphire

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I swung my feet back and forth in anticipation. *How much further do we have to fly? How much longer are we going to be stuck here?* I groaned, overcome with boredom. I glanced down at the familiar, metallic blue object in my lap. I'd been trying to sustain my urge to play with it for as long as I could, determined to make the battery last for as long as possible. Whatever patience I had left completely dissolved as I gazed at my distorted blue reflection.

I snapped the upper screen open quickly, but not so quickly as to damage it. No, hurting it would

be bad. Very bad. Switching the power on, I began to impatiently tap the “A” button in order to quickly get past the title sequence and into the game.

## Pokémon Sap-

Just as I have done so many times before, I loaded my saved game, and opened the menu to check on the Pokémons in my current team. I smiled to myself, seeing that they're all still there, and with such high levels, too. They were all in perfect health. Good. I'd never wish for them to be hurt for the long period of time that I was gone for.

*Sure, maybe they aren't actually real, but at least they can always stay with me.*

I thought back to my Kindergarten friends from Germany. *Hasn't it only been a day or two since I left? Why does it feel like so long ago . . . ? I'll never be able to see them again . . .* I quickly blinked and rubbed my eyes, desperately trying to keep them from growing more wet than they already are.

Ricky, Mikey, and Rhiannon's faces appeared in my mind. My best friends. My first friends. *Stop it. It's no use thinking about them. You're not going to see them again. You're never going to see them again. Ever. You're never, ever going to see them again . . .*

I forced the muscles in my mouth to slant upwards in what I hoped looked like a smile. *You still . . . You still have Mommy and Daddy. And you still have your Pokémons. They won't leave you.* I returned my focus towards the dimly lit screen, directing a single thought towards the inanimate characters in the game.

*I'll never leave you.*

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I find my eyes moist once I get past the introductory tutorial. This game was my most trustworthy companion when I was little. Whenever my parents dragged me along with them on their various voyages in Europe, this game accompanied me during the long car rides and boring tours. This game shaped my childhood. The nostalgia brings a smile to my face once more.

#### *Unrelated Relative*

I stare at the bright screen of my DS, trying to ignore the stale, silent atmosphere in the van as my father drives us home from the airport. The dry air has the slightest hint of the scent of vanilla. The old air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror has been there for over a month, slowly losing its fragrance as my parents continue to neglect it.

Rubbing my eyes, I decide to pause my game and take a short break. Looking up, I check on my parents. My dad, of course, looks forward as he drives. The sound of light snoring is barely audible, coming from the seat in front of me. My mom must be asleep. I sigh. I'm reminded that Jacob, my half-brother, is sitting next to me when he begins to tap his fingers lightly on the seat. After adjusting my seatbelt, I run my fingers through my hair. I smoothly sweep my head to the left, acting like my hair is in the way, just so I could take a glance at him. Noticing that he isn't looking in my direction, I take the time to observe him a little more.

He's wearing a dull gray T-shirt and faded jeans that are a little too long. One of the legs are rolled up higher than the other. Both articles of clothing look unnaturally large on his tall, scrawny body. Countless freckles dot his skin, from the backs of his hands to his arms to his angular face.

His entire teenage form is foreign to me. We have an age difference of what—six years? I'm going to be ten years old in two months. Which means he must be around sixteen. He seems so *old* . . . But now, at least I might have someone to play with. Even if it's only for a month or two.

Just as I turn to get back to my game, he swerves to face me, startling me so much that I nearly drop the DS into my lap. I push some hair away from my face, acting as if I didn't just embarrass myself. Suddenly, his Southern drawl breaks the silence.

"What'cha playin'?" he inquires politely.

Surprised that he actually bothered to speak to me, I mumble briefly in reply: "Pokémon."

He leans next to me, taking a look at my screen. He points at one of the game's sprites.

"What's that one?" Encouraged by his curiosity, I sit up a little straighter.

"That's Kyogre. He's really rare. I found him in a place called the 'Cave of Origin,' and it was pretty much a boss battle. It actually took me a pretty long time to—" I halt my proud babbling midsentence as I realize that he probably has no clue as to what I'm talking about. One glance at his face confirms this. Nonetheless, he smiles sweetly.

“That’s cool,” he remarks.

I upturn the corners of my lips slightly in response, just to be kind, despite my disappointment in his lack of gaming knowledge. As I turn around, I make eye contact with my father through the rearview mirror. He’s smiling, probably happy to hear that Jacob and I are getting along. Why wouldn’t we? I’m not a hard kid to get along with. Sure, maybe I haven’t made a million friends after we moved here, but it’s not like that’s my fault. The kids at school just aren’t exactly . . . my kind of people.

I look out the window.

We’re almost home.

### *Wake-Up Call*

The sound of a blaring siren slams against my eardrums, jolting me awake. I groan, struggling to open my eyes just enough for me to see what time it is. 6:00. A low, growling sound comes from my throat as I struggle to sit up. I am not a morning person. I slap the snooze button on the clock, just to get it to shut up until I actually manage to turn it off. I hear yelling downstairs.

“Celiieeeaaaaaaaaaa!”

*Would it kill her to wait for a little bit? Did she somehow not hear me turn this stupid, noisy alarm off?*

“Okay, okay! I’m already up!” I holler back grumpily. Like I said, I’m really not a morning person. Generally, I’m a pretty calm, not-grouchy person. Mornings tend to be an exception.

I stumble to the bathroom, where I splash some

water on my face before pulling on a pair of jeans and a shirt. *How long has it been since I've had to wake up so early? I don't think my old school made us get up as early as 6:00. Then again, I wasn't in middle school last year.*

I almost walk out of the room before I remember to check if I actually look presentable. I take a glance at my bedroom mirror. My hair has curled in directions and angles that I didn't think possible. It looks more like a lion's mane than an actual head of human hair. The sheer ridiculousness of it causes me to emit a slight chuckle before I grab a hair band and wrestle my hair into a decent ponytail. I take a look at my clothes. My jeans are a little long, but I don't have the energy to bother changing into another pair. The grey shirt and dark jeans that I'm wearing make me look a little dull and gloomy, but that's okay. I'm allowed to look dull and gloomy— it's the first day of school. Finally approving my appearance, I go downstairs.

I come down to the living room to find a tray on the coffee table with a banana, yogurt, a glass of milk, and a plate of steaming hot chocolate chip pancakes.

*Thank God my mother actually bothers to make me a decent breakfast.* Skipping the fruit and yogurt that I'm supposed to eat first, I take a bite of the pancakes. Whole-wheat pancake mix. I frown and glare in my mom's general direction. After I sit down and begin to munch on my breakfast, my mother joins me on the couch to browse the internet. I finish off my food and rush upstairs before she could start listening to one of her opera videos on YouTube. I brush my teeth and haul my backpack downstairs only when I finally feel

that I'm safe from having to listen to any of that high-pitched, incomprehensible wailing that my mother seems to love so much. I give her a quick kiss, and then I'm off to the bus stop.

The bus doesn't come for a while, forcing me and the two other kids at my stop wait in the chilly morning breeze. Finally, it arrives. I climb on, and sit in a seat towards the front. I put my backpack next to me to ensure that I'd have the entire seat to myself. The bus pauses twice to let a few more people on. Except for the sound of passing cars, the entire bus is silent.

I, along with everyone else, get off the bus and slowly trudge to school. Hundreds of backpacks bob up and down as everyone marches to the entrance. Once I finally manage to make it inside the building, I miraculously find my first period class on time without getting lost. Foundations of Algebra II. Everyone around me bustles and chatters endlessly about their summer, their classes, and their lives in general. I find the desk with my name on it, and silently sit down. I seem to be the only one sitting. Out of habit, I look at the figures standing around in the classroom, searching for a familiar face before I stop and mentally kick myself. *What am I thinking? I just moved here, I don't know anybody.*

Strangely enough, I'm oddly okay with that fact. *Is it normal for me to be this happy about being in an unfamiliar place with nobody I know? I contemplate for a few moments, when it dawns on me. I don't need other people to be happy.*

After my sudden revelation, a group of girls gather

next to my table, seemingly oblivious to my existence. I don't intend to listen to their conversation, but they make it kind of hard not to—they speak at about the same volume as a jet engine.

"Ohmigosh, Ohmigosh, did you guys, like, hear about Ali? She, like, dated an 8th grader during the summer!"

"OMG was he, like, hot? Is she still, like, going out with him?"

I frown with disdain and shift my eyes to the left. I never was able to understand why anyone bothers dating at this age—there's little to no likelihood of them staying together until high school. Even if they do graduate from high school together, chances are, they're probably not going to the same college. *If they even get into college*, I think as I overhear another group of students arguing as to whether or not penguins have feathers.

Eventually, class ends. And then the class after that. And the class after that. Before I know it, school is over. Throughout the day, I take some time to think. Luckily, nobody bothers me. Generally, if I don't talk to anyone, they don't talk to me—and today I'm not in much of a talking mood.

How could I have not known that I'm... What was the word for it? It strikes me like a lightning bolt.

*Introverted.* The corners of my mouth curl upwards. What other things have I yet to discover about myself? It's interesting how you could go on for so long not even knowing about yourself. It's just as interesting how you actually end up learning these things. I never

would have guessed that I would discover more about myself by listening to a bunch of kids babbling about their summer. But I guess that's how most things are.  
Unpredictable.

### *Cross-Examination*

"Did you make new friend?" my mother interrogates, speaking in her all-too-familiar Korean accent. After nearly seventeen years of learning and speaking the English language, she still has occasional errors. I don't blame her. Sometimes, English is complicated even to me, and it's my first language. Although it's generally my job to correct her grammar, the look on her face tells me that it would probably not be a good idea to do so at this moment.

I stride to the kitchen, grabbing some pretzels and a glass of milk as an after school snack.

I slowly crunch on a pretzel as I struggle to think of an adequate response. I am unsuccessful.

"I, um . . . no." Her eyes bore a hole deep into my soul at this response.

"Why not?"

"It was only the first day. We were busy," I lie through my teeth. Speaking the truth would only get another lengthy lecture from her. She narrows her eyes at me, as if trying to see into my mind. I innocently return her gaze, hoping that my sweating palms wouldn't somehow betray me.

"Who'd you sit with at lunch?" The interrogation continues.

"Some . . . girls in my class that seemed nice."

“Did you talk with them?” Her eyes break me. I can’t do this; I hate lying.

“Not . . . really.” She releases an exasperated sigh.

“You need to talk more!” *Here comes the lecture.* I let out the universal response for teenagers everywhere. I roll my eyes—not in her view, of course—before mumbling a response.

“I know.” Gulping down the remaining milk from my after school snack, I grab my backpack and make a break toward the stairs. Before I can even make it up halfway, she hollers after me.

“You need to make friends!”

“Oka—”

“You need to be more sociable!”

I freeze in my tracks. Why? Why do I *have* to be sociable? Not that I dislike having friends, but I’d really rather not speak to every single person I come in contact with at school. Recalling the dreadful conversations I overheard earlier today, I shudder.

“What?”

The sound of my mother’s voice brings me back to reality.

“. . . It’s nothing.”

She lets out one more sigh before speaking, this time in a gentler tone. “I’m only saying this for you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Try to make lots of friends.”

“. . . Okay.”

\* \* \*

To be completely honest, I probably haven’t made

as many friends as my mother would like. But that's okay with me. I've learned that everybody is different, and should do what they find is best for themselves. Some people enjoy having many friends, and frequent company, and there's nothing wrong with that. Other people may tire from constant human interaction, and there's nothing wrong with that, either. Personally, I've found that I don't need—or want—an army of comrades to accompany me for every second of my life. I'm perfectly happy with the group of friends I have now. We smile together, laugh together, and occasionally complain together. And that's enough for me.

# EMBRACING THE GOOD IN THE BAD

H. J. O'Neill

“Well, H.?” a voice asked.

My foot tapped feverishly on the expensive rug centered on the mahogany floor of the extravagant office as I trapped my hands beneath my knees to prevent them from revealing how nervous I felt. I tried to avoid eye contact with the man behind the gigantic oak desk by looking through the glass door just behind him. A gloomy feeling crossed the room as I glanced at the darkened sky and the patches of dull green grass that had unorderly stepping stones scattered around the small area. The environment was certainly a change from the previous psychologist’s office, which didn’t even have any natural lighting due to the fact that there were absolutely no windows in the cramped room. This room lowered my anxiety level, with its eight windows, glass door, enormous amount of space. I even felt relaxed if I didn’t think too hard.

My mind was scattered and strained as I felt a

need to answer Dr. Johnson's question, but the problem was that I couldn't exactly remember what he had even asked in the first place. Dr. Johnson needed me to answer, which resulted in a painful silence as my stomach flipped like a roller coaster on a gigantic loop.

"I don't know," I replied to the unknown question. I could hear my mother's sigh and saw her rest her head on her hand out of the corner of my eye.

"You have been saying 'I don't know' all session, H. Are you not at least a little bit sure?" he asked. He wanted an answer, and I almost replied with my default answer just to see his reaction. I honestly never knew, but you kind of have to pretend to know in therapy, or the therapist has to struggle to continue the conversation, and that defeats the whole purpose.

"I honestly don't know. . ." my voice veered off, turning into barely a whisper like it always does. Dr. Johnson nodded and wrote down something on his clipboard, which gave me an uneasy feeling.

"Well, that's the end of our session today. Do you have the next one booked?" he asked my mother who looked at me, clearly bothered by the fact that I didn't directly answer any of Dr. Johnson's questions at all during this session.

"Yes, we have them all booked up to December." She forced a smile. Dr. Johnson smiled back at her as he ran a hand through his gray moustache and opened up the large oak door that lead to the lobby.

"Ready, sweetie?" my mom asked me with an over-the-top smile.

"Yeah," I answered because it's not like I could say

no and refuse to leave the office.

My mother and I passed through it as he entered a different door that lead to another office. My mother took my hand in hers, which felt ice cold, as we passed through another glass door that lead to the damp outdoor air.

My mom practically dragged me to her car until she released me from her grip to slide onto the leather passenger seat. She seemed troubled by the way she held back a frown and slammed the car door, but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to face the dangerous storm that slowly crept towards me.

The first five minutes of the drive was enveloped in complete and utter silence. I waited for my mother to say something, to scold me for not speaking up in therapy, for pushing Dr. Johnson away. I waited to defend myself, to say that I never pushed him away, to say that I just had no idea what to say because I never know what to say. Apparently that's a side-effect of depression. So is not showing any interest in the things that excite normal people, along with wanting to socialize so badly, but not being able to because your words just get twisted and foreign until the words you had in mind get swallowed back into your throat and you're left standing there looking like a fool. But there are also spurts of happiness that seem so unreal until you're crashing down from the overload into an abyss you can't climb out of.

Depression has impeccable timing.

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My mom's lecture started after ten minutes, which

I tuned out after listening to a minute of it. I wanted to listen, but her strong words always ended with her saying how she understands, how she went through the same thing, and then it usually evolved into a power speech on how she is the great woman she is today.

I rested my head on the cold closed window of the moving car as I stared at the dull scenery we passed. I slowly placed a headphone in an ear as my mother glanced at me, but kept talking even though she knew that I wasn't in the conversation anymore. I closed my eyes as the *Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack replaced the words coming out of my mother's mouth.

Time barely passed for me, but the creaking garage door jolted me out of my thoughts meaning that at least ten minutes had flown by. I carefully opened the passenger door and trudged through the unlocked back door as the old garage door softly hit the concrete floor.

I kicked off my shoes as I passed the cramped storage room where the shoes and litter resided. My bare feet sunk into the plush tan carpet until they hit the cold linoleum flooring of our kitchen. I flipped the switch on a silver kettle as I heard an obnoxious bell approaching. I opened the wooden cabinet and placed a green mug on the small counter that we used for beverages as the bell came nearer and nearer and an intruding cry accompanied it. The source of the noise skidded around the corner and rubbed herself against my leg.

"Hey, mamas," I greeted as I lifted the ball of fur

up into my arms. Sissy, my cat purred slightly until she decided that she detested being in the air, and flipped out of my arms.

I sighed as the kettle clicked and I dropped a tea bag into the green mug and filled the cup until it reached a couple centimeters short of the brim. The back door slammed shut as my mom's heels clicked onto the linoleum and she dropped her purse onto another counter. She lifted up the cat and greeted her too until Sissy jerked out of my mom's arms. I smiled slightly as I grabbed a teaspoon from a drawer and the bottle of milk from inside of the fridge. I fished out the tea bag and rushed it to the trash can before it could spill onto the floor. I uncapped the milk bottle and watched as the dark tea morphed into a lighter color. I returned the milk to the fridge and slammed the door shut with my foot as I split open a packet of sugar and poured it into the drink, stirring until the coloring was perfect.

I picked up the mug and started walking up the stairs with it, leaving my mom with the cat.

I placed my mug on a desk by the side of my bed before flopping down. I yanked my iPod out from the left pocket of my jacket and placed an earbud in my ear as I scrolled through a list of songs. I chose one of my favorite songs, written by the Beatles of course, as I flung my cardigan onto the floor and hugged the duvet around me.

Even though a cheerful beat ran through the entire song, I still pictured myself on a beach with a wave running over me, except that it did more bad than

good. The wave didn't commit physical harm, but it slowly washed over me, I got sadder and sadder.

I fell into the abyss.

\*\*\*

My thoughts ran away from me and I could feel myself leaving reality, just drifting off despite the super cheerful music ringing through my ears. This time was different though, this fall felt different. I felt like I could actually pull myself out of this abyss—and I realized something, something that I had understood for a while, but was too ignorant to realize.

This world is filled with many terrible things. Yes, this world is filled with many horrible things, including some people with twisted thoughts and beliefs, but at the same time there are so many good things too. No matter what happens to us, whatever hardships we face, something remarkable occurs at that moment. When someone's grandfather dies, at the same time a mother could be giving birth. When all hope seems lost, a toddler could be walking their first steps, a couple could be picking out a dessert colored paint for their first family room together, a soldier in the Middle-East could be Skyping his children for the first time in months.

For some reason I remembered Christmas 2004. My mother and I were at home while my dad was in Iraq fighting terrorism. To this day we still don't know what he faced, and apparently we'll never find since he's bound by contract. I was only six and didn't exactly understand the concept of the fighting in the other countries, but I did understand that my dad was miss-

ing Christmas. I still felt happy and smiled all day, but the empty seat at the table still haunted me. While my mother and I sat on the couch watching a Christmas special on the evening of Christmas a knock on our back door startled me and my mom urged me to go and open it. As I hesitantly opened the door, a package attached to a colorful parachute welcomed me and I realized that it could be from only be from one person.

After I opened it only minutes later with the presence of my mom I read the small note card attached to it and learned that it was indeed from Santa and he had been sent by my father to wish me a Merry Christmas. He had been advised that I wanted a Baby Annabelle doll, which I was thrilled to see was attached to the parachute's string. I later slept happily warmed at the fact that my dad told Santa the present I had been waiting for for more than a year while everyone else already owned one. I missed my dad more than anything at that moment.

Why I remembered that memory in particular, I don't know, but it does fit with my theory.

Depression is like an ocean. Depression is like an ocean that tries to constantly drown you until nothing is left, but things that you enjoy are like a life raft that floats by you when the going gets rough. If you cling onto these things and never let go, the tide eases. The harder you try and the more you hold your raft, the more likely you'll make it to shore.

Joy feels so much better than sorrow.

# INDEPENDENT

Katy Lynn

## *A Little Piece of the Past*

My childhood wasn't awful. I was just living in a different environment than other kids. I remember when I was about five, I had my kindergarten Christmas play. I was Mrs. Claus. I had on my dress and wore mistletoe in my hair. I remember looking to my dad. His face was creased with worry lines, frowning, his brow caved inward. My mother was in the hospital at the time. He told me, "You can't participate in the play. You have to visit your mom. I'm sorry."

As I stood by my front door looking past my father, my heart sank. I was confused and worried. Who would be Mrs. Claus now? But looking back, seeing my mom was more important. I was the last thing keeping her sane.

There's a painting in front of me. A coral and beige starfish. It has little speckles on its five legs. I can hear my dad on the phone, "What? Ummm, mhm, where

again? No. No, I'll be there soon. Okay, thank you. Bye, sir."

"Ow!" I wailed. Shampoo had slipped into my eyes. I grabbed the cup in front of me, a Seven Eleven big gulp cup, with a NFL player on it. The Super Bowl was soon. I rinsed my hair out and drained the tub, not bothering to condition. I got out of the bath and reached for my night gown. Dora and Boots were placed in the center of the purple gown. It was warm, just out of the dryer.

As I walked into my kitchen, I looked up to my dad. He looked concerned, possibly panicked. "Daddy, what's the matter?"

I was used to this. My mom wasn't the best when I was younger. She has schizophrenia and depression, and is also bipolar. When I was younger, she wasn't medicated, and I looked out for her mostly. You know the usual mother and father take care of daughter? Not my family. It was daughter takes care of mom while dad takes care of daughter. But dad had no one to take care of him.

We arrive at the pool in my neighborhood. I'm drawn into the scene: flashing lights. Red, blue, white; red, blue, white. I see my mom standing off to the side. Ponytail, eyeliner, mascara, lipstick. The usual look. Casual. There is a younger girl standing off to the side, too. Long, black, thick hair, lengthy arms and legs, lip piercing. Her posture's bad compared to the woman standing next her, who appears to be her mother. All I could ask myself was, *What happened?*

My mom was my world, and still is. I love her. I

care for her, but most importantly, I will always protect her. All the things I've seen has given me so much respect for her. She deals with so much, and even though she messes up, she's never given up on me. So I will never give up on her.

My dad is my rock. He understands what I've been through and he has probably dealt with worse. This man has always been on his own taking care of me. He wasn't a single parent, but the only real adult who was mature enough to understand the value of my life. I always felt bad for him. A wife who is mentally ill, who's in and out of mental hospitals. A daughter who had to give up her whole childhood to keep her mom sane, and had to see everything he wished she would never have to experience. This man, my father, is the strongest person I will ever have the pleasure of knowing.

#### *Beautiful Surroundings, Ugly Truth*

The beaches were lovely, with the smell of seafood in the air coming from our neighbors boiling crabs. As I walked along the beach, I stopped. I looked back at the imprints my feet made, and smiled. *I have come so far*, I thought to myself, reminiscing. I claimed this place Corolla, as home.

We (my mom, Tosha, and I) moved there after seventh grade, when my parent's divorce was finalized. When I left, I remember looking back at my dad. He was sobbing. I missed him the whole time I was living with my mother, the main reason I moved back with him.

The whole three hour drive was awkward silence. When we arrived, we unpacked everything. This took about six and a half hours, since our house is four stories tall and dark. The odor was strong of liquor and saltwater, from previous owners. My room, although, full of light, smelled like chlorine. My view was breathtaking, the dark blue water mixing with white sea foam crashing onto golden sand.

This home is memory filled. The aztec look of the stucco, the windows that brought light, the many stairs that just made the stroll to kitchen with groceries that much harder. But most importantly, our “observatory.” Our top floor we named the observatory, because it was full of windows showing us the ocean laying underneath the sun. The way the sunrise reflected off into the water, painting the most heartwarming scene. Dolphins jumping, sailboats with fishermen casting their long lines into the water, catching the most colorful fish. This floor was extraordinary, my favorite place to be.

Tosha. The one name that makes me cringe. She is my mom’s girlfriend. It’s bad enough she destroyed my parent’s marriage, but the things she did were unacceptable. She changed my whole life within two days.

One the first day, I awoke unexpectedly to see her in my room. She moved the black drapes that flowed around my bed. Our eyes met. “Where are your summer clothes? And the bikinis,” she asked in the most serious face I’ve ever seen. *Why, why did you wake me up at seven a.m. to ask a dumb question?* I point-

ed to my dresser by my patio door. "Top four, and my swimsuits are hanging over my deck railing on the west side by my hammock," I impatiently informed her. She walked past my boxing gear and the dresser that stored my summer attire, straight to my patio door. She walked outside, leaving the sliding doors wide open. A bee flew into my room. I grabbed some Windex and sprayed at it, until I successfully killed it. Tosha walked back into my room and waved me out of bed, holding my bikinis. She walked out of my room into the guest room on my floor, putting them into a bin on the ground. Then, she came back into my room.

When she was done, she put the bin in a closet, then locked it. *Why?*

I saw my mother later that day, she looked stressed out. No make up, frizzy hair, wearing sweats in the middle of June. I went on with my day, going to the pool in the one two-piece I got to keep. After tanning, I decided to go to the clubhouse to pick up our mail. I got on my bike, put my sunglasses on, and slipped on my Sperrys. The clubhouse was a half mile away, but I didn't mind the exercise. I got to Interstate 12, and waited for some kindhearted person to let me cross the street. When I got to the other side, I noticed twelve teenage boys playing a shirt/skins game of basketball. I spotted my friend Christian who was teaching me to surf, he was a skin. His sun kissed dreadlocks were past his shoulders, laying in between his defined shoulder blades. I hopped off my bike to go hug him. When he saw me, he noticed my swimsuit. "Why are you wearing a skirt? Gunna mess those tan lines up,

Veva love," he jokingly said.

"Ha, Tosha locked a lot of my clothes up this morning . . . I have no clue what's going on! Ew, Christian! Your dreads are all frizzy," I told him.

"I know love, I have to tighten them," he informed me.

"Veva love" and "love" were his nicknames for me. I called him either "Chris" or "C.C", his initials. We have been friends since the day we met at the beach. I ran into him, I guess you could say. It was more like swam into his surfboard.

"Wanna ride to shore?" he had said. "You look tired, you're pretty far out." Then he smiled at me.

"Um, sure, I guess, I mean that would be great actually." He had helped pull me onto his board. I fell off almost as fast as I got on, so I ended up just holding onto the fin at the bottom..

He gave a ride to shore. I lucked out meeting that kid, my best friend.

When I got home, I put the mail on the side table by the door. Then, I climbed the stairs to the kitchen. It was already dinner time, so mom ordered a margarita pizza and garlic knots. After I ate, I crashed on the couch, only to be woken up at six a.m. later.

"Get up! Go down stairs! Did you leave the house last night? Why are you up here? You were snoring so loud, Katy Lynn. Go to bed," Tosha said to me, thinking I would just magically wake up and answer all the questions she fired at me. I went down to my floor and crawled into bed, to notice someone was in my room earlier. All my dressers were open and halfway

empty. When I woke up the next day, I saw that all my makeup was gone, along with my hair products. I didn't really care, because it was summer and I rarely wore makeup. I put on some of my shorts that were still in my room and a crop top and left after I brushed my teeth. The beach was packed. Tourists everywhere. I reached for my phone to notice I forgot it in my room. Just as I was about to go get it, a group of teenage tourists called me over to play volleyball. I played most of the day with them. One of the perks of living on an island is that everyone is friendly. You can walk up to everyone and they will smile back at you, because they were relaxed by the sound of waves crashing. When I went home later that day, I immediately regretted it. I had just walked into a war zone, but not between my mom and Tosh, but between them and me. It was the fight that would send me back home with dad.

Without Corolla, I would have never gotten over my anxiety. The one person to thank for that is Tosha. Even though she made me mad and gave me rules, she cared about me.

#### *The Day I Moved Home*

“We've missed you. How was Corolla? Are you excited to see your new room?” my stepmother questioned me. My dad walked to the front door, waving my mom goodbye.

“I missed you, too,” I said. And I meant it. I love my family. The normal family life I now have. “Did you finish painting it?” I ignored her first question.

She nodded yes. Then, she flashed me a bright

smile. "Follow me to get your things," she told me. She lead me into the garage. Warm, and bright, my belongings were in black storage bins with pink tabs on them that read "Katy Lynn."

I grab the bins one at a time while my dad and Celinda move my furniture into my room. As I walk up the stairs, my stepmom's dogs trip my feet. A small black dog, Toto, and a small white dog, Buster. Yippy annoyances.

"Nate will be here soon, Jen. he's lifeguarding today," she informed me. Nate, my stepbrother, and I are almost exact replicas of each other. Our personalities are almost identical.

I see my stepmom talking to my dad. Her hair is red, a light, delicate wow factor against her pale skin and baby blue eyes. My dad is so happy with her. He deserves her, and she absolutely loves my dad. June 16, 2012, they got married, the day before my birthday. They had a small beach wedding. Elegant simplicity. My new older brother escorted her down the aisle, tears of joy in his eyes. I looked at my hands, yellow and blue flowers, and some baby's breath wrapped in white ribbon. Her ring in my hand. As I stood by her, I could see how happy she was, and how my dad smiled in a way I'd never seen, as Nate beamed in happiness. And I smiled, excited for my new life and for the blessing that is my new family.

"Dad! Dad, come here!" I screamed. "Look, my room is done! It's amazing, come here." My dad hastily walked into my room. His expression was priceless. He was expecting some mediocre room. I, on the other

hand, am a designer by heart.

"Wow, Baca, this is amazing. . . How'd you put that up by yourself? And did you just move your dresser over there?" My dad asked, astonished.

"Yes, and yeah, it needed to move. It was blocking the light from coming in. I think it looks better there. . . Don't you?" He looked over to the window, his bright blue eyes tinting from the white sunlight.

"Looks great!" He immediately answered. As I looked over my new room I noticed all the small details. My creamy purple walls, against the dark black tree and bed. The pictures perfectly placed, the framing of it with vintage crystal flowers so carefully arranged to create balance around my family photos. The closet door covered by a huge mirror, that reflected back the whole image of my room. Letters friends had given me lay on my dresser in a big pink binder labeled "Memories." My window brought in natural light, that gleamed on my dance medal that hangs from my door. Black and white polka-dots varying in size covered my door.

When Nate got home later on, he ignored me, acting like I never existed. Typical of him. I knew he only did it to bother our mom. She glared at him all night, whispering, "Nate, go hug her. I know you missed her." Nate just smiled at me, and acted like he didn't hear her. After my dad and Celinda went to bed, Nate and I talked about what we did while we were separated.

Around two a.m. we feasted. Ramen Noodles boiled, croissants toasted, tuna mixed, bacon fried, hot

sauce spilled all over the counter, and a late night craving of Taco Bell meant that after this meal, we would be driving to get quesadillas, nachos, cheese, and guacamole. *Breaking Bad* on in the background. Nate, doing what he always does, grabbed a noodle and flung it at me, it stuck to my forehead. *It's on.* I grabbed a noodle, and when he wasn't looking, I threw it at him. I missed. It went right by his head and stuck to the microwave. Nate smiled at me and grabbed a grape off of a vine in our fruit basket. *Crap.* "Ow!" I screamed, he had pelted a grape at my thigh, leaving a purple stain on my white sweatpants. I grabbed three big juicy grapes and pelted them at his back, leaving one giant stain on his shirt. By the time we were worn out from fighting, the floor was sticky, and our cat had started playing with the deflated grapes on the floor.

The next day, Nate was already gone for work, and my stepmom was at school organizing her classroom. I searched for my dad, nowhere to be found. He was probably at the Saturday morning car show, staring at old shiny cars with '80s-themed interiors. I decided to get dressed and go find my friends. Maddie, Taylor, Max, Tyler, and Mica were all out behind my backyard playing baseball. I jumped my fence to go to the field behind our yard, and hugged everyone.

"Katy Lynn! We missed you, wanna go to Hardwood Mulch?" Max asked, while Maddi, his sister and my best friend was still hugging me. "No, actually I wanted to play baseball with y'all. Then maybe we should go to the pool," I said.

"We can't, Mica, Max and I have swim meet to-

night," Maddi told me, with a pouty face.

"Oh, well, then let's just play," I declared. We played three rounds of baseball, then I had to go home. My dad had called saying we were going out to eat for lunch, which meant, him, Celinda, and I were meeting up with their friends at some restaurant to sit, eat, and talk for a couple hours.

After lunch, we got home and watched *The Big Bang Theory*. It was a usual family event to lounge on the couch and watch an intelligent, humorous show. My stepmom paused the T.V. halfway through the episode to answer a call from one of her friends, "Hello? Hey! No, no not at all. Of course! When? Okay, in twenty minutes, okay? Bye.' That was Jennifer's mom, she wants to have us over for a cookout in twenty minutes. So, Katy Lynn go get your bikini, and a towel. You and Jen are going out on the paddle boat," she told me.

She wore a white lace top that displayed a Hollister eagle at the bottom, bright, obnoxious, neon pink shorts. Big brown eyes, the type I've always envied. Long brown hair, perfectly straightened. Jennifer's my friend, but also an enemy.

Both of our parents, including Jen's, think we are best friends, when in reality, I cannot stand her. She's spoiled and demanding. While I am simple, and grateful for anything I get. To make a long story short, we have major disagreements. That night was no fun. I ended up faking sick just so my dad would take me home early. When he dropped me off, I noticed Nate's car was there. So when I got inside I expected to see

him . . . but he was already asleep in his room, so I ended up just going to bed early.

That whole week was just me adjusting back into life with my dad, texting, longboarding, hanging out with friends, the pool, late night snacking with Nate, and visiting family. He taught me how to longboard after a week of being home, and I was instantly hooked. “Go! Just push off. No! Not like that, Katy Lynn . . . really? Just take your leg and push off,” he impatiently, but sympathetically explained to me. After I finally got the hang of it, it was all I did. Bombing hills was my favorite thing to do. The feeling of a constant strong wind flowing around your body, as if you were flying for a split second, like being in the eye of a hurricane. Disaster surrounds you with strong winds; one wrong move and you’re in trouble. I am in the eye, the one piece of the storm that is at rest, watching the world spinning around me.

# ROUTINE

Sidney Kassel

The plush carpet softened my footsteps as the overhead light gleamed. The ideal scene to start my puzzle. The shiny polish of the almost new card table seemed to inspect me as I sat down. I gazed toward my reflection, reassured.

I let the puzzle box down, just so I could hear the pieces rumble together. The bump sent a quiver down the table as it wobbled. I forgot that this table had one leg that was vertically challenged, but was not yet so appalling that we'd buy another. I had tried to restore it by placing a cloth underneath the table leg, but it would slowly compress the cloth and sink into its previous position. Wobbly that is what I was competent with.

After an instant of silence, I extracted the pieces from the soon empty box, and placed them so that every segment faced up. The only guideline I had was the illustration of my family on the box's underside. I

started the puzzle, observing the fragments, searching desperately for the corner pieces. I jammed segments into each other, forcing them fit.

With frustration, I gazed at the few pieces in the proper places. But I stalled I realized that the picture would have to remain incomplete. There were no more pieces visible. There were pieces missing out of my brother: his shirt, his left foot. This left the majority of my family picture puzzle finished, with the final segments of Stephen sealed away somewhere.

## 1

Getting up at seven thirty was no easy task for a six-year-old. My outfits, like many other first graders, consisted of the most outrageous patterns. My personal favorite attire was my purple striped dress, topped off with flower stockings, and red sparkle flats. Breakfast was sugar, accompanied by some sort of protein. I would then slip on my pink princess backpack, dreaming that I too would have a prince, and head to the bus stop, leaving my twin brother behind.

Every day I got the same response, when I tried to start a conversation with him. "How was your day, Stephen?" I would ask, looking interested.

"Bad. I had to roll over the ball again." He flinched as he tried to use the right sound for R. "I am tired of that." While I spent my days at school, his were "wasted," according to him, at therapy.

"Well, what did you do?" I'd say, struggling to keep the conversation alive.

"Stuff," he would reply and run to the comfort of

his room. I would ask every day because it was part of his routine. Any change to this conversation would end in disaster.

2

I awoke to hear the cries of my brother early in the morning. I would hear yet another brawl between him and my overly tired parents. I could tell that his disability was starting to take over his train of thought. "I hate you," he shouted sharply.

I could envision the war scene downstairs. Furniture toppled over. Holes punched in the unevenly painted wall. My lost parents, struggling to remember what they had read in all those now useless parenting books. Worst of all, my brother. Sweat dripping down his forehead and around his bloodshot eyes, as tears stream from them. His clothes, bearing vast holes that he had created. As more visions unfolded, the more heated I became at myself and at Stephen for not being able to control himself. I heard another bang, like cannon fire, and decided to crawl under my bed. I tried to muffle the sound by positioning the thickest pillow over my head. More cannon fire. More tears. More anger.

There was moment of silence, and with every nerve in my body shaking, I inched my way to the stairs. "No, I didn't want that. I said I wanted ceweal, like I always do!" He blurted out, holding back tears. With confidence, I strutted down the stairs. *I am sure that I can cheer him up, it's only cereal, right?* My mouth dropped. Stephen looked at me. His red eyes glistened

with tears. He stared right at me. I wondered if he could sense the fear and concern in my body. It wasn't just cereal. It was about his routine. Stephen was used to having cereal every morning, but I had asked for eggs the night before. My heart dropped. I froze.

*I caused this, I thought. I caused this . . . this disaster.* My mom came quickly to the rescue, shoving me back up the stairs, not saying a word. *I caused this.* My heart began to beat faster. *I can't believe I asked for eggs.* My mom patted my back, and said trying to sound calm, "It's not your fault." But it was too late. It was already hammered it into my tiny brain, that it was my fault. His disability was my fault.

## 3

My family finally decided to make a complex schedule for Stephen. He would wake up at seven thirty and forty seconds. He then would brush his teeth with the blue toothbrush for two minutes, starting with the teeth in the back and bottom of his mouth. He would then come downstairs and get ready for breakfast. Using the same spoon design with swirls outlining the sides, he ate peanut Cheerios with no milk in the same black dining room chair every morning at eight o'clock. In between spoonfuls, he would tap on the table at an attempt to keep busy.

I tried to keep him off his routine as much as possible. This, I knew, would only end in punishment for me, but I would still continue to bother him, not knowing that it only aggravated his disabilities.

4

He had taken my necklace and turned it into a sling-shot, so I was plotting revenge. I woke up extra early and turned his alarm off. Smiling, I snuck downstairs and took out all of Stephens's special spoons. I crept back up to my room and waited.

When he woke up he was crying hard, and I suddenly felt remorse. I knew that I had messed up his entire day. I quickly dashed downstairs again and returned the spoons in an attempt to make things better, but it was too late. My mom came into my room with a disappointed look on her face.

"We need to talk."

Usually when I would make Stephen angry, my parents would handle things differently. I would get the punishment and continue with my life, but this felt different. She sat down on the side of my bed and sighed. You could hear the faint sound of my brother sniffling in the background. "As you know, your brother has been acting a lot different than other little boys his age," she said somberly. "Stephen is not like everybody else because he has"—she paused—"autism."

My mind began to race. *How? What? How long?* I couldn't think straight. My mother continued, "Autism is a developmental delay. He personally struggles with social interactions. That is why it is hard to keep a conversation going with him."

I ended up crying, and stayed home that day from school. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that my twin brother was autistic. I worried that I would "catch it." Being twins, we shared so much, so I just as-

sumed that autism could move into my body as well. I also wondered why he was the one who had it and not me. I learned that autism affects a higher percentage of males than females and that I would have shown signs by now if I had it, too. Although I felt guilty, deep down, I was relieved that I did not have autism.

The focus became not on why he had it, or where it came from, but on how to live with autism successfully. My mom has a bumper sticker on her car that sums up our family motto: "Autism is more than a label. It is a way of life." My parents taught themselves through reading every book they could get their hands on, attending lectures, and going to support groups to learn how other families were coping with autism. They were open with Stephen and I about his diagnosis and taught us what they were learning as well. Their hope was that Stephen would become an advocate for himself and I could be more sensitive to others who were going through the same thing. I think twice now before I judge people because someone I love, acts differently too.

Another key to the improvement of my family was finding the right medication for Stephen. Autism usually comes with ADHD, sensory issues (sound, touch, taste, and smell), eye contact problems, as well as other things. The hard part is finding a medicine that can help him to control the things that aren't desirable without making him into a zombie. It took several tries and lots of failures until we found the right medication. Stephen responded so well to this particular medicine that our family felt a renewed sense of

hope. We continued on with a routine schedule and the new medications, and Stephen was able to return to elementary school with only a few bumps. It was nice to have him back on track with his life, but at the same time I had enjoyed the break from him while I was at school. It's good that I am a grade ahead of him and can help him with things that he finds challenging: I know which teachers might be more understanding with him, understand school projects and can help him with them, and know where things are. Even though technically I am the younger sister by fifty-five minutes, I have always looked out for him.

5

Looking at Stephen today, most people would never guess he has autism. He has learned to cope so well thanks to the hard work we all put in. He is funny and has lots of friends. He is super smart and does really well in school. Occasionally, he melts down, but not to the extent that he did in the past. He is still a creature of habit so we are working on helping him to be flexible and "go with the flow." We are still very different people, but we are finding more common ground. We share some friends, both enjoy being in band, and are both doing well for ourselves. My family has reshaped itself several times and continues to change as we figure out what works and doesn't work for us. Autism has its challenges, but it also has its blessings. We are the living proof.

# LIVING IN THE DEVIL'S SHADOW

Kareem Hamid

As always, she walks in at three thirty with a stone cold stare and a tightly locked jaw. She stands only five feet tall with frizzy hair and unmatched clothes. She glares at me and says the one line that always kills me: "Shouldn't you be studying? You need to if you're going to surpass me." Being the disappointment of the family, you can see that line cuts deep. Aiming her chin towards the sky, she goes upstairs to the bathroom and to admire her reflection. She examines her perfect eyebrows and white teeth and skips off back to the hallway. I just smile and say, "How was your day?" as I grind my teeth.

"Oh, just as amazing as every day, guess what I got on ma quiz," she said with extreme confidence.

"A thirty?" I reply sarcastically, already knowing what the answer would be.

Flaring her nostrils ferociously she exclaims, "No, a hundred of course." She walks off with perfect pos-

ture into her room and slams her door shut. As I walk into my room, I can hear her humming off key.

### *Morning*

The loud interrupting sound of a duck woke me up when I was dreaming of my favorite thing in the world: sleep. Throwing off my blanket, I furiously slammed the button on my iPod to stop the infernal quacking and recovered myself. *Ugh! Why did I even set my alarm to a quack anyway?*

I finally got myself out of bed after a good five minutes and went through my morning routine: get my clothes, pray, brush my teeth, glare at my sister, eat breakfast, and finally wait on the couch until my iPod's piano alarm goes off and says: "Get on da bus foo!"

Sitting there, alone with my thoughts, I reflected on my life. *I am a prisoner, my sentence is four years. I am forced to do the same repetitive tasks everyday: wake up, get dressed, go to school, learn nothing, try my hardest to swallow lunch, go back home, sleep. Rinse and repeat. As a prisoner I have no other choice. I can't make my own path because of the cr- Oh wait, I didn't commit a crime, I did nothing wrong! I'm serving a sentence that shouldn't exist! I have do-*

"Get on da bus foo!"

Apparently I was thinking that for a while, because my alarm rudely interrupted my train of thought with some Beethoven.

### *Bus Ride*

I walked down the tar black streets covered in tears from the sad grey clouds above me. Like every

other day I slogged to the bus stop, I thought the same thing when I saw all of my fellow bus riders: *These idiots get Bs and Cs and they get congratulated for not failing their classes.* When I got to the bus stop I put on my happy mask and said, “You guys ready for another fun-filled day of school?”

A few of them glared at me, and two or three yelled, “You betcha!” in a sarcastic voice.

*Alright, math homework, Spanish essay, biology project, and English . . . crap not again, I forgot my English essay!* Growling, I zipped up my backpack and angrily slam my back against the chair. *You idiot, how could you forget something you've worked on for three months?* Face palming, I thought, *That would be fail number one.*

### *Spanish III*

We got to school and stood in the auditorium until the bell rang, like we always do. When the bell rang, we all walked to our classes, dreading the tsunami of boredom that was sure to crash upon us all. I walked into my 1B class, Spanish III, and screamed, “*¿Dónde está?*” Feeling proud, I marched off to my seat with delight in my knowledge.

My Spanish teacher just laughed and said, “*¿Dónde está?* means where is.”

*Fail number dos.*

As everybody laughed at my now obvious mistake, I thought, *When will I ever need this anyway, it's not like my job is going to be talking to Mexicans!* I soon realized class had started. I kept telling myself, *This is the only advanced class you have an A in, stay awake!* But it

seemed my body had other plans, and within five minutes my snoring probably could be heard throughout the classroom.

By the time I woke up, looked over at the clock.  
*Crap! Did I really sleep through my whole class!*

"And there will be a test next class on what we learned today."

*Fudge! Fudge! Fudge!*

### *Backpack*

The bell went off to change classes, and everyone ran out the door. I threw on my backpack, and I couldn't help but grunt a little. I had hoped just carrying two notebooks and a textbook wouldn't be too much for my ripped failure of a backpack. I was wrong.

When I walked out the door, my teacher stopped me. "I expect that essay to be turned in next class for a late grade." At that moment I realized I hadn't turned in my essay that counted for sixty percent of my grade. *Fail number three.* The policy in his class is "turn in the homework at the beginning of class or it's late." I turned my essay in for a ninety, and when I walked out, I swear you could have seen the steam coming from my head. I was so angry I could break a piece of steel in half. Stomping down the hallway I passed the devil herself: my sister. She sneered at me with darkness in her eyes. I was thinking about returning the favor but, it was too late by then; we had already split paths.

After getting a seventy on my math test, winging a quiz I hadn't studied for in biology, and writing about Disneyland for an English paper about a traumatic ex-

perience, the day was finally over. Everyone ran out the doors and sprinted to their buses. I could tell what they were all thinking, Freedom! We all got onto our busses with huge sighs of relief that school was over. Everyone smiled for a second, until the realization of homework made it go away.

The bus dropped us off at our bus stop just like every day and we all walked to our houses. I went to my room, slammed the door, threw my backpack on my bed, turned my computer on, and shouted in my head, *Alright don't do anything until your homework is done!* Five seconds later I was watching YouTube videos and chatting with James and Cobe about Minecraft.

By now you should be able tell why I'm such a disappointment to my family. Besides the fact I was, and still am a complete slacker, my dad has a PhD in engineering, my sister is the salutatorian of her grade, and my other sister is off in D.C., being the head of a division of something.

After about an hour of doing nothing, my vision started getting dark, and the sound of the YouTube videos grew fainter and fainter. I started to realize what was happening, but it was too late. By the time I "woke myself up" it was 6:25 p.m. and my dad was yelling at me to go downstairs for dinner. Pushing the unopened backpack off the bed, I screamed, "Coming!"

### *Dinner*

I moped downstairs for dinner, at about 6:30. When I saw my dad, he had a cold disappointed look in his eyes. "I was checking your Edline," he said de-

pressingly. "You got a C on the test, why is tha-"

"I didn't realize it would be so hard!" I exclaimed.  
"I studied really hard, honestly!"

"Obviously not, your sister didn't get one C in her freshmen year."

"Stop comparing me to her, I'm nothing like her," I growled. "It's not fair that you compare me to her, c'mon she's clas- I mean second in her class!"

"Exactly, and you would be too if you didn't spend your free time on the computer all day playing games and wasting your time. Video games are useless brain killers!" he stated fiendishly, how else would someone who knew everything say it?

I looked at him for a bit, then I said mockingly, "Oh, here we go again, what is it the six hundredth time you've said this?" I exclaimed. "Back in my day, we had none of yer video games and whatnot, that's why we were smarter," I laughed.

"Okay, that is not how you treat your parents, you treat them wit-"

Impatiently, I interrupted him for the second time. "This argument is stupid, and a waste of my time. I don't care anymore!" I stomped upstairs, leaving a trail of hate behind me.

"Don't stomp! You'll break the floor, and you'll have to pay for it!" he said muffled through the floor.

"You don't even give me an allowance for the crap I do in this house!" I was so furious I could burn a hole through the floor I was standing on. I reflected on my childish behavior and I figured I should apologize. *Eh, don't bite the hand that feeds you*, I thought feeling my

stomach growl. I walked downstairs every step swallowing a little more of my pride.

“You done crying?” my dad mocked.

Glaring at him, I dreaded the next to words I was about to say. “I’m sorry.”

He accepted my apology and we had the usual father-son conversation. “I’m not mad; I’m just trying to help.”

“I know I’m just stressed.”

Blah blah blah, you get the idea.

### *The End*

Dinner had ended with my sister expressing her perfectness and my dad telling me about “better ways to study.” Still furious about my life not being perfect enough I jumped onto my bed with heinous destructive thoughts rushing through my head. I was so furious I could punch a hole through the wall. It took about five minutes, but I cooled myself down just a little, the same way I always do. Think of a simpler time.

It was a warm summer afternoon; my brother, sisters, and I were playing in the cul-de-sac with the rest of the neighborhood kids. We were just playing around having genuine kid friendly fun, no grades to give us stress or expectations to meet except to enjoy ourselves. I can only imagine the thoughts going through our heads: *Dang it Jimmy, give the ball back! Man, maybe I should tell his mom, and then he’d have to give it back.* I only wished my problems were still that simple.

I calmed down. I came to my senses and went downstairs to apologize for my little tantrum. Of course, I was just apologizing so I wouldn't get the evil eye from my dad for the rest of the night. But now I realize whenever my dad tells me I've done something wrong or tells me to fix something I know he does it because he cares and wants me to grow up to become a smart, organized, mature adult.

When I get a bad grade on a test or a B in a class, I sit down with my father and talk about it instead of screaming and arguing like a four-year-old brat. My father doesn't expect me to reach my sister's standards; he expects me to make my own and surpass them, try my hardest and then try harder. As long as I do that, I could fail all my classes and he would still be the proudest father in the world.

# THE BOX

Risa Grandon

I am a box. As a child I would start a new coloring page if I colored outside of the lines. As a student I restart notes if the first line is not written neatly. As an athlete I redo core exercises if I lose count of what number I am on. Everything I do, school, sports, music, or clubs, form a side of my box. These activities must be done flawlessly, just like every side of a box needs to be even and sturdy.

When I began consistently receiving grades below what I had been used to earning during the spring of last year, my perfect box began to collapse. In desperation to improve my grades, I would stay up late studying. The lack of sleep eventually took its toll, forcing me to go through my daily routine like a robot. School had a domino effect on other aspects of my life. Even track, the sport I was so passionate about, committing hours of practice each week, qualifying for states since freshman year, and receiving All-State recognition for

relays, was just another chore for me to complete. My once ideal box was on the verge of crumbling and the thought of this was unbearable.

“What is *wrong* with me?” I asked myself. I could not figure out why everyone else seemed to have a grip on their life, while I was struggling in tears and near exhaustion. Needing guidance, I confided in my track coach, whom I looked up to. He encouraged me to reassess, and then figure out what was necessary in order for me to reach my goal. If it did not include running, then so be it. His advice inspired me to let go.

Letting go is still not an easy concept for me to accept. I realize now that perhaps I am not in the box I thought I was; rather, I am a flexible structure.

# MY COMING OUT STORY

Haley White

“I don’t know how to say it.” That’s what it all started with. We were on our way back home from a holiday at my grandma’s house.

Mom said, “Just tell me. You know I’ll love you no matter what.”

So, I said it. “I think I’m gay.” It felt like an eternity waiting for her to say something back. The silence was completely deafening.

“That’s it?” she said. “Oh, that’s nothing. You know I’ll always love you.” After I heard those words, I knew everything would be okay.

I had tried to be with maybe one or two guys before I realized this, but those “relationships,” if you could even call them that, were definitely not serious enough for this kind of realization. Looking back, I think the fact that maybe I didn’t really want to have anything serious with them might have had something to do with the fact that I don’t like men. I thought

maybe I would just be content and live with a bunch of cats, but in the end I decided against that. I figured someday I would find someone that was meant to be with me, and it would happen sooner or later. I'd just have to wait for that day to come.

To my surprise, sooner or later came pretty fast. While talking to a friend of mine in Texas, I was introduced to Emily. We are a few years apart, but we didn't think any of that mattered, and we still don't think it has a huge impact on our life together now. Emily and I talked over the internet for a while. We talked over the internet for a summer that should have lasted longer, with occasional phone calls when the time zones weren't awkward. I didn't think of her as more than a friend, but I knew I really liked her personality. When her internet was shut off, and we lost all forms of communication. About two years later in January of 2011, we began texting and talking over the phone that she bought, which rekindled our friendship.

June 6, 2011, that's the day we began dating. After getting to know each other again, we both realized that we liked each other as more than friends. Neither of us had ever been with a girl before, so I was hoping this relationship would last and hopefully turn out better than my previous ones. Emily had been in other relationships with men, but she said that she never had the kind of feelings she felt toward me. She said that it was different, and that she finally really knew how love felt. I told her when we started talking again, that I didn't want to rush things. That was kind of a bad thing, because as the months went on I was going crazy and

desperately wanted her to ask me to be her girlfriend. That job ended up being mine.

On August 2, Emily and I met for the very first time. She bought a plane ticket and flew from Texas to Virginia just to see me. Sadly, we only had two days together before she had to go back to Texas for her job, but those two days were wonderful. She soon told me when she was back in Texas that her family was having financial issues, and that she might need somewhere to go. After about a month and a half of pleading to my mom, she was finally convinced to let Emily move in with us. Not many moms would let a complete stranger move in with their fourteen-going-on-fifteen year old.

Emily's parents were also supportive of her move to Virginia. I've never met her parents personally, but occasionally we say hello on the phone and they are very accepting of the life she lives. Any parent would be hesitant to let their child move halfway across a country for a girl they've never met before, but they were more than supportive of her choice.

Most of the school year, I was busy doing homework and she was busy at work so we didn't have much free time together. Now is just about the same, though I wish we had more time together. On the days we do have together, however, we sometimes go for a drive, or go to the mall, or the beach, or have dinner and a movie. Then finally, summer arrived.

During the first summer she was here, Emily and I went to the public pool together just for a nice day out. Apparently, two girls holding hands was very dis-

turbing to a few of the people at the pool, and we were asked not to show “PDA” because it was “making people uncomfortable.” Extremely frustrated at this comment, we immediately left the pool and went home. This day really brought something to my attention: today’s society has a hard time with acceptance of homosexuality, but never really occurred to me and how much it actually bothers them.

In today’s society, kids are bombarded with the idea that, “homosexuality is a sin” and “if you’re gay you’re going to hell.” These phrases are very discouraging to today’s youth, specifically children dealing with their own sexual orientation. These types of comments, including telling me not to be myself at a public pool because it’s making someone “upset” makes children afraid and it makes them more afraid to come out to their parents than they probably already are.

Love is supposed to be a sacred thing, but people constantly view it as a male/female relationship which sets the wrong example for today’s youth. I think our society and our world needs to teach children that love is not only between a man and woman. Love is supporting; it’s showing the other person that you care about them; it is showing that you would take a bullet for them. Love is love, whether it is between a male and female, a male and male, or a female and female.

Society is fixated on showing that only one male and one female belong together. This view on love, in my opinion, shapes children very poorly. Children should grow up having the knowledge that it isn’t wrong to love who you love, they should be confi-

dent and happy with themselves, and know that real love doesn't just have to be one man and one woman. Children need the knowledge of love instead of hatred. Children need to grow up without ignorance shaping their views and opinions.

Love is love and I personally could not be happier than I am with my girlfriend. She has helped me through so much. Being in a homosexual relationship is no different than being in a heterosexual relationship. The only difference is the gender of people; their love and support for each other is no greater and no less. Hopefully one day, we will have the individual right to marriage in all states throughout the country. Hopefully, soon, something will change the way people view homosexuality, and everyone can actually be equal.

The love I have for my girlfriend is the best feeling in the world, and I couldn't ask for anything more than to just be accepted by my friends and family, and hopefully one day, to be accepted by society.

# DISTANCE, LOVE, SACRIFICE

Alexyss Richmond

## *I. Distance*

Every family has at least one happy moment. My family and I once had one too. We were what most people called “one big happy family”—at least at the time.

We were at a movie drive-in, where you sit in the back of your car next to other families, looking up at the bright gleaming stars and the huge screen. There were other families sitting next to us laughing. My mom was laughing, smiling happily at my father. My sister and I were playing with each other in the back, tugging on one another’s clothes, just to irritate each other. We were all piled up in the back, enjoying each others company. It was a good day.

When I was younger, I had a theory that once a family was torn apart, they would always find their way back together. I know now that I was seriously mistaken.

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The living room TV was up to full volume, and

my sister was crying over nothing, yelling in my ear. I could hear my dad's voice, a deep, stern thunder coming from the kitchen. He and my mother were arguing, screeching in voices to be heard from a thousand miles away. My mother was against the wall; her eyes were bloodshot red, little sobs of tears ran down her cheeks. I was lost in the midst of everything. Ever since then, things haven't been the same.

Since my parents' divorce, what we had once called a family drifted apart. We stopped talking as much, but it never bothered me. My mom was always there for everything. It was as if she was the hard worker and my dad was the big boss who claimed he did all the work, when in reality he didn't do anything. My mom hated that. Every time we thought or talked about him, her face filled with frustration and anger. She'd say, "Your father is no good and sorry," in the same hard, aggressive tone.

My father called every now and then, but it wasn't anything normal. I was so use to him not calling, that when he did, I wouldn't answer. He lives in Maryland with his other family. Most of the time I forgot about it, almost to point where I forgot I even have a father. I would hear kids talk about their fathers' jobs and hobbies. They would say how their fathers had done great things, while I thought mine wasn't much. He had left his family for another woman with her two sons. Her name was Lawanda.

From the start, my sister and I didn't like her. I guess it's because it felt as if she was trying to take our mother's place. It was like a Cinderella story, only in-

stead of two ugly stepsisters, we had two ugly step brothers. Every time we called her Mrs. Wanda , you could see her cringe. The fact that she wanted us to be one big happy family makes me chuckle. That will never happen. Ever. She took my father away from us. I know most kids just use this as an excuse because they don't like their new stepparent, but this isn't that situation.

She really did take him away from my mother. He had been seeing her while he was still married to my mother. That was the real reason for the divorce. I was thirteen when I found out. My sister and I knew as we were growing up that there was more to the story than "they just stopped loving each other." It was like we'd been trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle for eight years, but could never figure it out.

We were at my father's house when we found out the truth. He had been questioning why we didn't want to stay with him for the rest of the year. His eyes glistened as if he was going to cry, like the idea was killing him. He'd say our mom was poisoning our minds with lies about him. But only they weren't lies. She was always on our side when it came down to him. After the frustration died down, we talked. He sat us down. It felt like the walls were going to close in on us. "When y'all were younger, I started seeing Lawanda while I was with your mother. I don't call it cheating but your mother may say otherwise." The words that came out of his mouth were staggering pain. My heart raced with fury. I didn't know what to say or do but leave, so I did. Ever since, things haven't been the same. Maybe

one day we can have another happy moment, but for now chances are very slim.

## *II. Love*

She had never really been in a relationship before; he was her first. She had done crazy things just for him, but she didn't see she was the one who was going to get hurt in the end. Her name was Nicole, and she was mad in love. It was the beginning of sixth grade when I met her. We were the best of friends. She was like my other half; we knew each other's every move, thoughts, and feelings. It was also around this time that she met him. He was tall, slender, with light brown skin and light eyes. She was short with long, black hair that ran down her back, big light brown eyes, and light cocoa skin. They only dated for three weeks, and before it went bad, it seemed like the happiest she had ever been.

They rode the same bus; that's how they met. They were close, but not close enough for her liking. In December she started telling me about it. She'd say, "Why does he always go for other girls instead of me?" It was true although, they did everything together like they were the best of friends and sometimes more. She used to think something was wrong with her. She didn't know if she wasn't just his type, if she was just simply ugly in his eyes, or is he just wasn't interested.

In April she finally got what she wanted. They were the most perfect couple people had ever seen. I would walk with them to class and they would hold hands and he would put his arm around her; they were

always together. But after the two week mark things started to go bad.

I could see how things started to change between them. He stopped walking with her as much, and stopped talking to her as much too. She would tell me how things were okay and still normal between them, but I never took her word. We would usually tell each other everything, so why would she hide her pain from me? It was confusing and so unlike her. You could feel when they were around each other that there was tension. It got almost to the point where it was almost awkward for me to be around.

He would try and make her do things she wasn't ready for. It was in May when her friend, Alanna came up to her and said she had been seeing him with Danielle lately. She didn't think anything of it at the time, like she should have.

Everyone in school was talking about it, it was like this one tidbit of information spread in seconds, across the school like a wild fire. So she finally confronted him about it. Of course he denied it. He didn't want to get caught. We were sitting at lunch when Nicole saw her. Danielle was yelling about how she was going to fight her. At first we were both confused, wondering who and what she was talking about. But we soon realized that it was she was talking about Nicole. Nicole didn't know why this was happening to her.

Nothing else happened, though. Danielle would make faces at her in the hallways but never did anything. She was all talk. Nicole soon decided to break up with him. He was no good. She called and said how

she just couldn't do it anymore, and he simply said "Okay," indicating that he just didn't even care anymore, like it wasn't as important to him as it was to her. He explained to her why he cheated and did things behind her back. He says he cheated because he wasn't getting what he needed and things were getting boring between them. She was heartbroken, and I had to be there to pick up the pieces he had destroyed. It was horrifying to watch her in such pain; I felt what she was going through. I think it took them awhile to start dating because somehow he knew that he was going to hurt her in the end. He admits that he's a cheater- that it's just how he is.

To this day they are still off and on. I never understood why she keeps going back to him, even though she knows he's bad for her. But she doesn't care if the words he says manipulate her into thinking he actually cares and will change and get better. We all know that's never going to happen.

### *Ill. Sacrifice*

"Why don't you ever trust me?" he screamed through the phone in frustration. "Cause you always do this!"

"One minute you want it, the next minute you don't," I yelled. "And when things don't go your way you get mad." My eyes were filled with pain from fighting back the tears. I was deeply frustrated and confused, with all sorts of thoughts racing through my head. I felt as if my heart were going to jump through my chest.

"Brah! Can't you see that I'm trying witchu! That it doesn't matta dat you all the way down there and I'm way up here. The fact that I love you." I'd heard those words come out of his mouth on too many occasions. At first I believed him. But I couldn't believe him this time. He'd said this every time something would go wrong. They say in stories that love is supposed to be filled with caring and passion, but they also say that nobody really knows what love is. I guess this is one of those stories, only it's real.

I could tell his voice was filled with sorrow and frustration, as if he was trying to get at something, but couldn't get the point across. I was stuck making the most difficult decision I had ever made so far in my lifetime.

"I'm not trying to hurt you purposely," I muttered through my teeth, trying to hold back the words. "I just. . . I just don't know what to say right now." The words coming out of my mouth felt like a staggering sword trying to cut through skin. My hands were throbbing. I could feel my heart pounding against my chest.

"You just don't get it," he whispered.

"I know, just give me some time to think."

"Aight."

It felt like one of those fairy tales that every girl dreams of. Where you live happily ever after, only they leave out the part where Cinderella gets a divorce. I was staring at my blank white walls deep in thought. As I stare, I start to remember when we first met, how it all began.

It was the first day of school of my eighth grade

year. I was in Mr. Strittmatter's class, and next to me was a boy who had soft cocoa brown skin. His brown hazel eyes were full of determination, but he looked angry at the same time. It was Tuesday, September 6, 2011. He turned and started giving me compliments on my eyes. That was the first time I saw him smile.

From then on, we became the best of friends. We would text each other all day, everyday. He'd walk me to class and take the chance of being late to his class just for me. Even when I told him to stop, he wouldn't. Everything was perfect. It's weird how you think you know someone, but suddenly they turn on you when you're not paying attention.

On October 28, 2011 at 6:35 am, he asked me out. I was shocked. At the time, I never really thought of us like that. I made him wait a week for a response; then, after thinking about it, I said yes. Everything was great. I was the happiest I'd been in a long time. Everyone thought we were the most perfect thing walking around school . We were always with each other no matter what.

But things got really bad March 21, 2012. We had been dating for almost five months. It was early morning, and I was getting ready for school; it was great. I was talking to him, and it seemed like he had attitude, but I didn't think much of it, how he just wasn't a morning person. I didn't like it. The emotions came over me and I tried to end our relationship over something so stupid.

We were at school, and he had been looking for me. Unfortunately, he found me. He was trying to

make things right, but I wouldn't let him. Anger was building up inside of him, like a volcano trying to explode. He called me a b\*\*\*h. I lost it and chased after him down the steps. It felt like another person came over me; I had no control. I came up to him and asked him why he would do that. He told me to leave, but I wouldn't; I was demanding answers that I wanted answered. With great force he pushed me on the floor. I could hear the rest of kids gasping in shock at what just took place.

I couldn't take him putting his hands on me anymore, so I got up and started thrusting punches to his jaw and cheeks. His glasses fell to the floor. His face filled with tears. Scratch marks creased his skin. Things were at their worst.

We were suspended. As soon as I got home, I realized the damage I had done, and I regretted it. I wish there were a rewind button to go back and fix everything that was destroyed. A few hours later, I reached him. He said I was lucky he didn't hit me, and that he didn't know if he could ever forgive me for what I had done. I don't blame him. It's crazy how you can lose somebody that close in just three minutes. During the suspension we had been talking. On our last day, we decided to get back together, but things weren't the same, so we decided to end it again.

We still had so much aggressive anger towards each other from the past. It was too much. Now we don't talk at all. If we do talk, something bad always happens. I guess I don't have the best relationships in the world, but in a way, that makes me stronger.

# BEAUTY AND THE GEEK

Jack House

“Jack, you know how I’ve been going to Waters Edge church lately?” she asks.

“Yeah what about it?” I say.

“Well, there’s this guy there. His name is Bryce. He’s really nice he teaches the youth group. He invited me over to his house to teach me some stuff about God outside of church. I don’t know why, but the only time he has free is at night,” she said with a smile. *Hmm . . . I don’t know if she should go do this. Like it doesn’t really seem like she’s known the guy long enough to go over to his house to learn about God. But whatever, I guess it’s fine, I can’t control what she does.*

“Um sure, go ahead, but I would have someone else there if I were you,” I respond.

I’m walking towards the main door looking for her. *Jack, I’ll be sitting by the door on one of the benches.* As I turn the corner to the area where the benches are, I hear her scream “Jack!” I turn my head to see her walk-

ing up in a Flintstones shirt with ripped skinny jeans and Mickey Mouse sunglasses. Her big, red lips curl up into that beautiful smile. She takes off her sunglasses as if to show me her eyes. They're a mossy green color I've never seen before. She flips her long dark brown hair out of her face and smiles when she looks up at me.

Out of nowhere, I feel someone run into me. My eyes shoot over to a short chubby little kid. He must be a sixth grader. I glare at him, then look back at Charlotte.

"Well, let's go!" she says. I swear she's blushing. We start to walk towards my house to go get money for Sno Zone. As we're walking, her small hand brushes up against mine. Her skin is cold to the touch, so I take off my jacket and put it around her without a word.

"Thanks, I needed that, I've been cold for a while just didn't want to ask."

"It's alright, no problem."

After about half an hour into our conversation she says, "I don't know... I think it would be weird to date or kiss someone younger than me."

"Yeah, that would be kinda weird . . ." I mumble, barely heard over the loud pick up truck that zooms by.

As we walk, I see a river, and realize that we're a mile from my house. We both laugh and turn back to head in the right direction. I feel tiny raindrops hitting my forehead, barely noticeable. Suddenly those little raindrops turn into a downpour.

We hide under a tree until it stops. *That was weird;*

*there was barely a cloud in the sky.* I need to think of something to say. Then right before I do, she says, "Not to make anything awkward or to make an awkward silence or anything . . . but you should kiss me." I think, *What? is she serious?* So I ask her if she is, and she says, "Yeah, I really want you to." So then I kiss her. And right when I do, round the corner. We get into Mom's car and drive Charlotte home. The whole way home not one word is spoken between us, but I look over and I see her blushing with a smirk on her face.

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A loud ringing shoots me out of my slumber. My eyes are hazy and I can't see what's going on. Then I see my phone is lighting up, that's what's making the noise. My eyes shoot over to my clock. It's three o'clock. I grab my phone, not checking who it is and I answer it. A gentle but frightened voice speaks. "Jack I trusted him. . . I snuck out and went to his house thinking we were just hanging out, I was wrong. He tried to hurt me Jack. I don't want to go to my parents, but he tried to hurt me!"

"Wait who? Who tried to hurt you? What happened?" I answer.

"Bryce did! He picked me up from my house, I thought he just wanted to hang out and when we got to his house, it was all fun, we were just hanging out. Then he tried to kiss me, I pushed him away, and he hit me. I kept trying to get away, but he kept trying to—I got away, but I need help." She starts to cry.

The next day, I go to her house and talk to her dad. I tell him what happened. He is furious. He thanks me

and immediately goes to find her. After a lot of yelling, he ends up calling the cops. The cops go to Bryce's house, and they pick him up and take him to jail. He hurt her, but for some reason I feel it's partially my fault.

They were only two streets down from me when it happened. I just can't help but think if I wasn't asleep I could've done something to stop it. When I tell her this, she says, "Jack, it's not your fault, I shouldn't have snuck out. There's nothing you could've done to stop it. Don't blame yourself."

She was right, but I still can't stop feeling as if it was my fault. She got put in counseling every week for about six months and never once told me how they went. *I hope she got better. I do know one thing . . . if it ever happens again I promise to God I'll be there for her!*

# RACE DAY

Kayley Martin

“Kay, you don’t have to be so nervous, you’ll be fine!”

“I know Ava, I know.”

“You’ll wake up in the morning, go to the race, and have an amazing time.”

“Whatever!”

I’m sitting in the passenger seat, my stomach tormented by butterflies. The ferry rushes through the once calm water that is now crashing up against its disruptive intruder.

I nervously look out the window over to the brownish-green river, imagining the many fish lurking in its shady depths.

*It’s the summer before seventh grade. The sun shines brightly through my window. I have nothing else to do, since everyone else is at work and none of my friends can come over. I’ve been forced to resort to Facebook. I see a status update from my friend, saying he’s going to camp in a few*

*days. I scroll down to the comments, and see that his friend Jack commented “Where is the camp?”*

*Being the dork I am, I comment back, “Stalker!”*

*He takes it the wrong way, basically telling me to shut up. I go to his profile to inbox him apologizing and see his profile picture. He’s got the prettiest eyes! We would look great together. I wanna be his girlfriend, but I bet he already has one.*

The boat swiftly pulls in to the dock, a relieving sight to the line of cars waiting to board. The sides of the ferry scrape and bump into the wooden beams planted into the river bottom.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” I hear my mom ask.

*Jeez, why does she have to know?*

“I’m just nervous to see Jack, mom.”

My best friend in the backseat giggles obnoxiously, and starts to sing, “Jack and Kayley sittin’ inna tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

“Shut up!” I say, sighing dramatically.

I look down at my phone, trying to ignore anything they might say. I scroll down my call log, and all of them read *Jack<3* We spoke for almost five hours the other night, and not for the first time.

After just fifteen minutes of winding roads and little red arrows, we’re at the race. That familiar sweet, tangy smell of the motocross fuel lingers in the air when I open my car door.

Ava knows how nervous I am, and takes my hand as we walk down the crumbly dirt path to the start. I can hear the bikes running, and men talking to each other, having to shout over the noise. Almost there, just

a few more steps.

“Kayley!” I hear some girl yell at me.

I look up, and it’s Riley. I haven’t seen her in forever. She’s holding hands with some boy. He looks nice. She asks me what I’m doing here, and of course, I tell her.

He’s sitting on his bike, getting an earful of pre-race pep talk from his dad. And I’m just a few feet away, whisper-yelling at everyone to stop pushing me toward him. Ava pushes up against my back while Riley grabs my hands, pulling me forward. Her boyfriend asks me why I’m so nervous. I know Jack can hear every “Stop pushing!” and “Oh my god, he’s so cute,” which makes matters worse. Speaking of worse, those stupid butterflies seem to be having a party.

They finally push hard enough, forcing me to look up at him.

*Kayley, say something.*

“Are you scared to talk to me or somethin’?” Jack asks with a smirk on his face. There’s that familiar deep voice, causing me to smile from ear to ear.

*You know that voice, stop acting like it’s something new. Stop being such a baby and talk.*

“Uh . . . yeah,” I mutter awkwardly, staring down at the dirt below my feet.

“Why’re you so nervous? We’re best friends,” he says looking down, squeezing his handle bar.

*Yeah, duh. We’ve been bestfriends for pretty much three years. But, I want more than that. I wonder if this means he doesn’t?*

“I dunno, good luck today,” I say with a forced

smile.

“Thanks, beautiful!” he says grinning at me, his big dimples making me weak.

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Empty bottles lay on the counter, tools and riding gear on the shelves. On the left there’s another shelf, with more tools, and racing fuel. I look down at my muddy vans, thinking to myself.

*I wonder if he thinks I’m pretty? Or do I look fat? Does he still like me? Shut up, you’re being stupid! Stop arguing with yourself!*

“Kayley?”

*What? Woah, he was talking?*

“Oh um, I’m sorry what?” I mumble awkwardly, my cheeks now rosy red.

“I said, can I ask you something?”

*Oh my god. Is this seriously happening?*

“Well yeah, sure. Shoot.”

The sun shines through the back of the trailer, making his sandy blond hair seem golden. His blue eyes have a slight twinkle in them; I know if I look into them for too long I might not be able to look away.

*That freckle under his eye is so cute!*

“Will you go out with me, Kayley?”

*Ah! I mean, I knew this would happen, but jeez! I can’t talk, I’m blushing like crazy. I know he can see how red my face is. Ugh how embarrassing! Stop being so girly. Just say yes, get it over with. Stop looking down at your feet like that.*

“Hey guys, whatcha doin?” my mom says, popping her head into the trailer.

*Are you kidding me?*

“Just sitting here talking. Can you go away please?”

We’re both looking at my mom with wide eyes, knowing she probably heard the conversation.

“Alrighty then, lovebirds!” she says obnoxiously.

“Well?” Jack says, looking up at me, into my eyes.

The blood rushes back to my cheeks, and I feel light-headed. I can’t help but smile at him.

“Yes.”

We both start laughing, unable to be serious for more than two seconds. He gets out of his chair, and slips his hand into mine as we walk out of the trailer. I look down at our hands, and finally I’m not nervous anymore.

# THE BOAT RACE

Jason Blaha

## *The Morning*

My little brother Allen and I went into the garage to gather supplies. We grabbed everything that looked useful. My brother dug through the recyclables and pulled out as much cardboard as he could carry. I headed over to the shelves in my garage and grabbed duct tape and a box cutter. After I helped Allen with all the cardboard, our mom called us in for breakfast.

She made my favorite, two waffles stacked on each other with creamy peanut butter and grape jelly in between. On the side I had a nice tall glass of milk and some juicy strawberries. My brother had a bowl of his favorite cereal, Cinnamon Toast Crunch. After we finished, I went back up to my room to brush my teeth and get changed.

When we got into the car we buckled up and I turned the radio up loud and let the lyrics of each song sing in beneath my skin. I let every word give me mo-

tivation. When we got close to our destination, I started discussing possible design plans with my brother. Once we agreed on some god plans we became silent again. As we pulled up to the building, my counselor, Tyler, opened my door, and I smelled the cool morning air. It was right then and there that I knew this was the year I would win the boat race.

### *The Team*

I sat down with my group. As the summer progressed I started to see my fellow campers as friends. I learned to trust them, so I was confident that everyone in my group was going to do a great job on our boat.

My group consisted of eight people. The leader of our group was our counselor, Tyler. We all loved him because he was creative and always found new ways to entertain us. Also in my group was Allen, my brother. Allen was probably the craziest out of the whole group, and he usually had the most energy. Although at times we got frustrated with him, he always did something to make us laugh and make it all better. Another close friend of mine was Benjamin, who was very fun to be around. He had a great charisma and always told the funniest jokes. The fourth member of our group was Frankie, a unique person who was almost as crazy as Allen. They both were very mischievous. They were kind of partners in crime. The last two people in the group were Emily and Dana, best friends. They both were extremely creative and were fun to be around.

After we exchanged hellos, we got down to business. We piled all the supplies we grabbed from our

homes on a table. As I looked through the pile I saw some useful items for boat building. Everyone brought cardboard so we weren't going to be in ny short supply of that. I also saw a lot of duct tape and lots of empty two liter soda bottles. There were some interesting supplies, like and empty plastic container, that i guessed used to have gallons of milk inside. Someone brought in two tree branches, which made me chuckle a little. how could we use two sticks? But I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I didn't mention it.

### *The Dragon*

It was going well. So far, our boat was looking great. We decided that we were going to make a small raft out of soda bottles to make it float in the water. It took us a little time to tape all the bottles together, but after a few stuck fingers and some frustration, we got it done.

Now that we had a nice strong base, we had to decide what we were going to put on top. Someone suggested that we just leave it bare, for the weight, but we didn't just want our boat to win, we wanted out boat to look the best. We built a small border around the raft out cardboard. Emily wanted to paint a dragon face on the point, so we sent Allen and Frankie to go sneak into the camp's art supply room and grab some paint for the project.

When they got back, they told us that one of the other groups had a canoe shaped boat and it looked very fast. Tyler looked at us and told us not to worry; he had an idea that would help us. After he shared his

idea, we all smiled.

After a couple of hours, Emily and Dana had painted the whole boat to look like a dragon. We decided that Allen would be a good choice to man the boat when we raced because he had some much energy. They painted his face to look like a dragon also, but on his face the dragon was also breathing fire. For paddles we cut the plastic milk carton in half and taped the halves to Allen's hands to simulate the webbed feet of an amphibian.

We were all finished. Our boat was called the Dragon. We had a cardboard border that slanted in to look like a body of a dragon. It was painted dark green with scales all over. We placed the two sticks on the sides of the boat and we cut paper and taped it to the sticks. After we colored them, they looked like wings.

### *The Race*

We placed our boat in the water. To our left was the canoe. To our right was a sleek looking boat that had cool designs all over the body. As Allen slowly entered our boat the announcer started to tell us the rules.

"Each boater must make it to the other end of the pool," he announced over the loudspeaker. "Each boater must reach the other end of the pool with part of their original boat still with them. The race will start in five minutes."

I looked around and I saw all the other competitors checking their boats and looking at everyone else's boat to see if the had a chance. But my team was calm and relaxed. We knew that out secret weapon would

almost guarantee our win.

"Boaters get ready!" the announcer yelled into his microphone.

"You ready for this?" I asked Allen.

"I was born ready," he replied.

"On your mark!"

"Let's go, Allen!" we all started to cheer.

"Get Set."

Allen took his hands out of the water and put them inside the boat.

"Go!"

As soon as Allen heard the word he pulled the string inside his boat. When he pulled it, the two wings were released straight out in front of the two boats next to him. The boaters on either side were so shocked for a second all they could do was stare.

They couldn't do anything about the wing so they started to paddle, since the wings were in front of their boat they were also pushing Allen through the water. Allen just laid back in his boat and relaxed. Because we were positioned between the two fastest boats, we were also going the fastest.

Everything was going great. We were all cheering and clapping. Allen was smiling because he knew he had the victory in the bag. But then it happened.

About halfway down the pool one of the wings broke off. As soon as the canoer realized it broke off, he started speeding through the water. He got almost a full boat length ahead of Allen before Allen realized what was going wrong. Allen had to act quickly. He broke off the other stick to make our boat weigh

less and move faster. Allen's desperate hand's moved through the water so fast all I could see was a blur. For the lat stretch Allen had pretty much caught up. He was only about two inches behind.

I couldn't hear anything over the roar of the spectators. I knew I was screaming for Allen but I couldn't even hear myself. Allen was so close, there was only about 10 feet left to go. Then the boat started to fall off, leaving Allen with only half a boat. But it turned out to help us. He could now kick with his legs, which gave him the boost we needed. They both touched the wall at almost the exact same time. I was afraid we had lost. But then I heard it.

"The winning boat is the Dragon!"

### *The End*

Our group ran over to Allen and picked him up out of the water. We started high-fiving, patting Allen on the back, and hugging, yelling, and laughing. We put Allen on our shoulders. We started to take a victory lap around the pool, but about halfway Allen got really heavy so we had to put him down.

The rest of the day was great. It involved laughing and teasing the other teams that came behind us. The other teams were disappointed but they were good sports about it.

As the day ended the excitement started to die down and people started to go home. I said goodbye to all my friends then my brother, my sister, and I found my mom, got in the car, and started to head home.

The whole ride home I couldn't wipe the smile off

my face. When my mom saw me smiling, she asked me what was so funny. I just told her that I had a fantastic day.

# HAPPINESS AND FREEDOM

Patricia Masons

I hear the clatter of metal against the cold, hard, cement floor. Curious knickers begging for some type of treat. An earthy smell combined with dust and the scent of straw fills my nostrils, tickling my sinuses, making me sneeze. When I walk through the aisle I see the faded blue paint slowly peeling off the walls. Spiders cover corners with their webs, making their homes.

I take in the palominos, paints, roams, and bays looking out their windows. The jumpers, hunters, and pleasures longing to be outside. Their strong muscles ripple as they try to keep the flies away. Coats and manes, silky and soft, are covered in dirt and mud to stay cool. Eyes, big and brown, sparkle with innocence.

Most of the tack is dusty from not being used, but not Clua's. I feel the leather oil rubbing into my skin when I lift it. I put my hand over the animal's nose

to keep her head down. I gently place my thumb between her teeth, asking her to open her mouth. I feel the saliva coat my finger as she slowly takes the bit. I pat her neck and shoulder, praising her. She used to hate the bit but I have been working with her for such a long time, she has gotten much better.

As we walk out to the arena I listen to her metal shoes clatter against the cement floor. I can tell she just wants to trot out there and go run, but she knows she can't do that. When I walk outside a small breeze passes, making Clua's mane flutter like a butterfly's wing. Over the treetops we have a view of the oranges, yellows, pinks, blues, and purple combining to make a sunset. I put my foot through the stirrup and jump up. My heart immediately shoots with happiness. I feel like I fit on her, like I was meant to be on her back. I feel her muscles react as she starts to walk on.

Soon we are exercising at the trot, and it feels like all of my problems have vanished. Sometimes if I ride for a long time, I forget that there is a world with so many problems and so much drama that I have to face. I forget that there are other people in the world and it feels great . . .

*Up, down . . . up down. It's a pattern, Patricia! Keep the pattern! Move with her shoulder. Check to see if you're moving up and down at the same time as her shoulder.*

"Stand straight up over the pommel! Legs back, heels down! Tighten up your thighs and legs around the barrel so you have better balance!" my instructor says loudly to the girls in the lesson.

*Tight thighs . . . Tight legs . . . Heels down . . . Look*

*up!*

"Whoa . . ." I whisper to Clua to slow down.

It's always easier to stand straight up when your horse is going slower. When they go slower they get smoother. It is extremely hard to stand straight up when your horse is doing a fast trot and--

"Everybody walk! Make sure the stirrups are in the right place on your feet," my instructor reminds us.

I check my stirrups to make sure they are placed right before my toes start to form. I tighten my reins and adjust myself and push my heels down. An advantage of riding for such a long time in the same place with the same people and the same instructor is you know what they will do and know what to expect. I know we are about to canter because Pauline always says her stirrups piece before we start to canter.

"Canter!" Pauline orders.

I have her trot a few steps and then I let her canter. Of course she gets her right lead and is collected. When she wants to go fast but I have to keep her collected she makes a loud breathing sound from her nostrils. But that's only when she's not comfortable and she wants to go fast. When I'm riding her bareback she always go slower. Some horses just know and they go slower so it's safer for the rider. People say horses never know what they are doing . . . but they do.

A family comes to sit down and watch the and riders. I sometimes think that Clua knows when there are people watching. When people come to watch she always becomes perfect. She is normally good but not

perfect. It's funny. She's always smart. She naturally starts collecting and looking pretty, of course. The family probably belongs to one of the younger riders in the group lesson. I remember when my family came to watch me ride. They never come anymore. They are too busy because I have two brothers that do sports too. But it doesn't bother me.

"Walk!" Pauline tells the us loudly for everyone in the back to hear. "Everybody walk and go get a drink if you have one. Then we will get in line for jumping," Pauline told us.

The horses and riders all crowd around the fence where their waters are. I go stand next to Pauline. I never have a water. I can tell by her face that she is thinking about what we are jumping. Jumper line? No, it's Tuesday. That means we do Monday courses. We never do big jumps or jumper or equitation lines because it is only the first or second ride of the week and they could hurt themselves, like break a leg or not jump high enough and hit the jump and get a nasty cut.

"Outside line, blue line, and red line. Five, six, five," she tells me.

The outside line and blue line and red line are the lines that I am jumping. And the numbers are the number of strides I should get in that line. If we get more than that number, then we're too slow. If we get less than that number, then we're too fast.

I cluck her on and she starts her canter.

*Ho . . . Slow her down. Wait, no, let her go, Patricia! Or she will be too fast! You slow her down a few steps before the jump!*

Before I know it we are already at the jump.

*Heels down! Put all your weight in your heels! Eyes up! Jumping position!*

I really say that before every jump. I always do. I sometimes even say it to myself out loud rather than in my head.

After the lesson I walk her out and bring her to her stall. She is slightly sweating when I take off her saddle. I take her bridle off and she opens her mouth to drop the bit into my hand. I go to hang it up, and I grab a curry comb on my way back to her stall. When I get in there I start to comb her coat in circles to break the sweat down.

I give her a handful of grain and hook the lead rope to her halter. I swing it over her head and walk out. There is no need to lead her because she just follows me.

I walk her out to the pasture and let her go. I tell her goodbye, get my longboard, and crawl under the fence out back. I will have to wait another day before I can return.

This has always been my favorite place, and always will be. The one place I have the most happiness and freedom.

# CHEER

Taya Eastwood

## *Chapter 1: Yokota, Japan*

Most children at the age of three play with dolls or trucks. I wasn't like most children. Instead, I'd rather learn choreography from the shows or movies that I used to watch or still do. This began the path that would lead me to a life-long passion, something I would live, breathe, and perfect: cheerleading.

The car drive there was suspenseful by itself. I remember walking into a large gymnasium with a good number of girls running around and screaming like maniacs. At least two or three were crying about not wanting to be there. I looked up at my mother nervously. She knew what I must of been thinking. My mother told me not to worry and walked me over to my cheer coach.

My coach looked the part: she wore a red and white Nike sweat suit with matching K-Swiss shoes.

Her brunette hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and around her neck was a shiny silver whistle.

"Hi, you must be Coach Simmons," said my mother.

"Yes I am," started my coach. Her voice was a little intimidating. As she looked down at me with an enormous smile, she said, "What is your name?" I was so shy that I hid behind my mother and hugged her right leg. My mother just shook her head and introduced the two of us. Eventually, she got me to stand in front of her and shake her hand. Other mothers followed after and introduced themselves to both the coach and my mom. The coach then gathered all the girls and placed us in spots she called "windows."

Some of the girls would not stay in the spots that the coach had given us. One girl was on a sugar high and kept jumping in her spot, as if each leg had spasms. Another girl ran over to her mother to cry in her lap after the coach placed her in a spot. The mother of that girl picked her up, placed her on her hip (as a mother would holding a young child), grabbed their things, and left. All of the other girls would not stay still for similar reasons. Only me and two or three other girls waited patiently in our spots. We each received gold star stickers for waiting (it seemed so much cooler to a three year old me than it does now). Eventually, the coach had gotten the girls all back together in their spots. Then we began.

First, we learned the cheer. It was a piece of cake for me. I looked over to my left and right and discovered some of the girls were struggling. Then, we

moved on to some of our dance routine. The song to the routine was “Hey Ya” (it was popular back then). Again, it came easily, almost completely naturally, like drinking water or breathing (but it did help that it was one of my favorite songs). While the other girls were collapsing and confused, I was taking the routine with ease. Those girls needed help, so I decided to help them with both the cheer and dance. The moms thanked me. One mom even said that she was proud of me for helping her daughter with part of the dance that confused her. Sadly, practice had ended. Just as we were about to leave, the coach called us over to talk.

“Your daughter seems to be taking to cheer and dance easily. I think she should join the older girl’s team,” my coach told my mother.

“I don’t know, what if the older girls do not accept her? I mean, she is four years old,” said my mother.

“Well, if you change your mind, just call my number. I am the cheer coach for that team as well,” said my coach to my mother.

I was already too young to be on the team I was on right now. I was supposed to be four years old, and I was only three. Adding more of an age difference could be intimidating. So, I stayed on the team I was already on. I would learn everything ahead of time so I could help the other girls while the coach is busy. That was when I fell in love with cheerleading.

### *Chapter 2: Fame Allstars*

“Alright girls, remember to smile!” exclaims my coach as we walk on the matted stage. The bright

lights shine in every direction. You can see the blinding camera flashes, and hear them as well. The judges, who looked like retired eighties stars with big, poofy hair, give us a flat look. To me and my teammates, this means we had better bring back the first place trophy. The crowd cheers louder than before and the lights grow brighter and brighter . . .

“Hey Tay, I found a website that I think you might like,” says my mother from across the kitchen.

“What website?” I ask as I pour the rest of the milk in my cereal. “If you’re talking about another clothing website, I am pretty sure I found them all.” I chuckle at the thought. I walk over to her and start to eat my cereal.

“No, take a look.” My mother insists that I do so that instant. I sigh and place my bowl on the countertop next to the computer. I scroll to the very top of the page and read the title: ‘Fame Allstars Competition Cheer.’ *There’s competition cheerleading?* I think to myself in surprise. I immediately read through the rest of the page, forgetting my cereal completely.

“This sounds like it would be fun! When do I start?” I say.

“I knew you would like it.” My mother gives me a smile. “Evaluation tryouts are in a few days. This is so they can see what level you are on. It says here,” my mother pointed at a paragraph which surprisingly I did not read, “that they are tomorrow afternoon. It also says you need to wear a pair of sneakers, a work-out top and bottom, and your hair needs to be pulled

back in a ponytail." *I cannot wait until tomorrow.* I take a spoonful of cereal and place it in my mouth.

"Dang it, I forgot about my Cocoa Puffs. It is all soggy now," I say, but I didn't care. I was too excited. Both my mother and I laugh hysterically.

When it was time for evaluation, I was nervous. I saw a large number of girls grouped together in one large room. All the parents were in a separate room to avoid the girls from getting distracted. I wonder what was in that room. Maybe there is a TV that they are watching us with. If so, are they watching my every move? I was so nervous of what was to come.

"Next is number seventy-eight," said a low voice. *Oh my, that's my number!* I thought in my head with a screaming voice. *Here it goes.* I walk to the front of the evaluators that were sitting behind a table covered in papers. They had me stand in front of them. I take a deep breath and calmed myself down.

Tryouts weren't bad at all. In fact, I didn't even have any use for my outfit. All that the evaluators did was ask me a few simple questions. They asked me questions like, if I had any tumbling skills and if I stunted before. They decided to put me in level one because I have never tumbled or stunted before.

Days later, practice finally began. I met my teammates and my coach. This was more of a team bonding day rather than a practice. All we did was sit in a large circle and introduced ourselves. Eventually, more and more practices came until we got to learn the routine. It seems like the practices ended faster than usual. Then,

our first competition came.

. . . The music was about to start. My heart was beating faster than I thought possible. *Could they hear it? Could they hear my heart about to beat out of my chest?* Thoughts like these scrambled around in my mind as we lined up. The music blared from the speakers. At that moment my body knew exactly what to do. The routine had begun. We all cheered and danced our hearts out, and because we did, we won first place.

### *Chapter 3: Middle School*

It was my first middle school game and the fire underneath us pushed us to a boiling point. I made sure I looked perfect: makeup that sparkled, a nice clean uniform, skills as sharp as knives, ready to serve up a masterful show. I was confident that I would do well.

We each walked one by one onto the field, balanced, in harmony, proportioned perfectly. Our uniforms screamed with pride to our school. The skirts and vests' colors, those patriotic colors, called out to the school. Our white shoes gleamed with purity. Our cheer bows resembled butterflies about to fly away, but not yet. For they have a job to do: dazzling the crowd.

When we finished the routine, the crowd paused at what seemed like a few seconds. In those few seconds I felt nervous. That pause of silence actually scared me. Then the crowd cheered loudly. I had felt so relieved that they liked it. I'm sure that everyone in our team felt the same.

"Good job girls," said my coach as we walked off

the field, “just one thing.” *Uh oh, here it comes.* “You girls could be a little more sharper. Overall, not bad.” I tried to take this as constructive criticism, but, I kept hearing a voice in my head shouting: *I work my butt off and all you tell me is you could do better?!* I also heard some girls mumbling but I didn’t join in. I had too much respect for Coach Jackson.

The following practice I was determined to prove to Coach Jackson that I could do better. The night before practice, I stood in front of the mirror doing motions at every angle to practice sharpness and tightness. I made sure it was perfect not only for coach, but for myself. At the following practice we went over the routine several times and I was determined no matter how sweat covered and exhausted I would show my coach I could be the best. Coach then surprisingly pointed me out as a good example for tightness. When practice was over I knew I could leave with the satisfaction of knowing that my hard work was paying off.

#### *Chapter 4: High School*

I sat on my living room couch as nervous as ever. *When will she call? Has she lost or forgotten my number? What if she doesn’t call at all because I am that awful.* I tried to watch some TV to get my mind off things, but my eyes kept slowly drifting off to the clock on the wall. Waiting for the phone to ring felt like watching grass grow or paint drying. I heard my mom’s phone starting to ring in that familiar ringtone of a xylophone playing.

“Hello,” my mother answered.

"Hi, this is Coach Wright, may I speak with Taya?" she asked.

"Sure, hold on a second," she responded. "Taya, it's Coach Wright," she told me. *This is it, the final results . . .*

It was the first day of tryout practice and I was ready. My hair was tied up in a perfect ponytail, I wore my Soffe shorts and tank, and I wore my cheer shoes to wrap it all up. I walked into our school's back gym with confidence until, I saw some of the girls flipping all over the place like ninjas. At that moment my confidence dropped, like a fly, and got stomped on. I continued walking until I saw some familiar faces. Cheerleaders from the middle school team were sitting in a circle in the center of the mats that had been laid out for us chatting. I sat with them on the mat and we started talking.

"Hey Taya, are you ready for this?" asked Alex.

"I thought I was until I saw all these girls. We have got some competition this year," I told her.

"I know, right? It sure is going to be tough this year," says Madison. We all continued to talk until the coach and two other girls had finally arrived.

"Sorry girls," started the coach.

"And me!" shouted Isaiah from across the gym.

"And Isaiah," the coach giggled at Isaiah. "I just came back from a meeting, but I'm here now. So, let's get started," the coach finished as she set down her papers. The coach then split the girls into two groups. Each group was lead by a single leader. The leaders

would teach us the dance, cheer, chant, and the jumps. I was thinking they'd all be like middle school tryouts, real easy and quick, but I was wrong. It was a little bit tougher, but I managed to keep up in the end.

For the next two days it was repetition. Do the dance, then the chant and cheer. Even though the practices were two hours long, they went by so fast. I couldn't believe that actual tryouts were coming up. The night before real tryouts, I was up until eleven o'clock at night practicing. I needed to perfect every motion in order to make the team. I was too anxious to sleep.

# READY TO PERFORM

Sabrina Lingenfelter

## ACT I

### *Scene 1*

Posing, I look into the comforting black room filled with rows of squeaky chairs and curious bodies. I say lines that have played on repeat in my head for weeks as I walk from one side of the stage to the other. It's almost magic: words are no longer just letters with a definition. Each word, each line, carries me into relief.

The old, scratchy costume reminds me of the smell in my grandmother's house as I wait for my cue. Dreading when the whole cast comes up to bow and the curtain falls, I do what I can to make the moment last. The voice of the cast members beside me echo as they yell out their lines for everyone to hear. The set is a new, unexplored place, made just for me, just for tonight. In between scenes the floor creeks below me and breaks the silence. As I say my last line and take my last bow, I hear the sound of a hundred people clap-

ping as the theatre erupts with joy.

### *Scene 2*

“You’re like the freaking devil! You live to ruin my life!” I stormed up the steps to my room like any seven-year-old would.

The door slammed behind me as I tried to escape from my brother’s criticism. *Why does he always have to be so mean to me? I hate the way he always bosses me around. I’m not his little dog, sitting there waiting for his command. I didn’t do anything to him. If I was the older one, I would be a lot nicer, but now this is war. What should I do to him this time? Put salt in his toothpaste? Set his alarm clock to go off at four? Or lock him out of his room when he’s at drama practice?* The slamming of the door caused a picture to fall. It crashed to the floor and I whipped around to pick it back up.

It was last year’s skiing picture. The four of us: my father, mother, my brother, and I all standing, smiling. Pretending to be happy, trying to fit this image we had in our minds of the perfect family. I glared at my brother and looked at the little red fire circles covering his frosty cheeks that marked the only sort of color on his pale face. I placed the picture back on the wall. It was the closest to perfect we would ever get so I might as well hang it nicely.

“Sabrina, dinner!” my mom yelled from below. You could hear the clanging of glasses, plates, and silverware as she set the table. The smell of the chicken she made filled the air and made me even hungrier. I raced down the steps, trying to beat my brother. *It’s so*

*not fair—he gets to do cool things like be in plays and read scripts. He got to be in Chicken Soup For The Teenage Soul and The Brick and The Rose. What have I been in? A little skit at church camp where I only had two lines. If I became an actress, though maybe he would stop being mean to me. And that might just be the perfect payback.*

### *Scene 3*

The TV echoed through my room as I let my thoughts wander. Every now and then I heard the clanking of dishes from the kitchen below. My stomach growled as I waited for my mom to yell, “Dinner!”

“Sabrina, come down here,” my mother yelled up to my room while she prepared dinner. The tone of her voice seemed new; it wasn’t angry, but it wasn’t quite happy either. *What did I do? Did one of my teachers call her because I did something wrong? Did I get a bad grade?*

“Yes,” I replied to my mother as I arrived downstairs.

A smile emerged on her face as her lips parted. “You’re gonna be in a play. It’s for Earth Day.” She handed me a packet containing the script. The packet was the size of a book and I stared in amazement at all my lines.

I started smiling. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” she said with a smirk. I quickly grabbed my script and started reading.

### *Scene 4*

“Sabrina Lingenfelter and Kara Bracco, you’re next.” The sound of my name triggered my nerves.

This was my first audition, my first real time to shine. I left my props outside not wanting to overdo it. I was greeted with kindness; not many sixth graders auditioned. Getting a role in this play and getting accepted in the club would be huge. I knew I could do it-- after all, I know how well I can act. The room was warm, bright, and stuffy, just like the cabin I stay in at camp. The tension between Kara and I increased and made it uncomfortable. She clenched her hands into fists and looked around nervously in an attempt to start a conversation.

“Okay, whenever you’re ready,” said Mr. Alis, my brother’s favorite teacher. *Here we go, time to tell my story.* I stood tall, confident in my piece.

“I ran to grab my book as I ran out the door. . .”

*Sweet, I started strong, stayed strong, and finished strong. And I almost know for certain I made it. I have to—I was great.* Walking home, I skipped in between steps listening to the sound of cars roll by. It felt good to do something big.

### Scene 5

My name written in black ink, in his movie star handwriting, *Sabrina Lingenfelter - Mind Wanderer*. It was right there for the world to see. I did it, I made it in the club and in our school play. Grinning, I turned to face my friends, and we all screamed. One hundred thirty-five people tried out and only twenty made it, and I, a little sixth grader, got picked over seventh and eighth graders. I grabbed a rehearsal schedule and skipped to class.

*Scene 6*

I prance around my room dancing to my favorite CD. Falling to the ground, I stop. I crawl over to my closet and open the door. My old dance costumes taunt me, begging me to put them on. Memories start to play in my mind, reminding me of what I'm missing not dancing at a studio. Then it hit me: my brother could act, but he could never dance. *I can be a triple threat. Wait—no, I can't sing. That wouldn't work. I can be a double threat though, something my brother never was.* Reaching for my phone I start to dial my best friend's number.

"Hey, sup," Alex's voice comes out of my phone.

"I want to start dancing again."

"What? Why did you need to call me? I want to too but this is kinda random."

"I have been dancing around my room for, like, months, I can't stop thinking about dance, and I want to start performing again, you know. And I know you aren't cheering this year so I was wondering if you wanted to start dancing with me again." *I already know the answer, but I might as well ask.* "I want to do Hip-Hop, Ballet, and maybe Jazz, you in?"

*Scene 7*

"Alex, you ready?" I laughed as I looked down at what I was wearing, "I look like a ninja, wearing all black," I spoke with excitement. I was about to become a dancer again, and this was my first step.

"Yeah," she stopped for a second to think about it and laughed. "It's definitely gonna be interesting. I'm

gonna, like, know nothing."

We walked into the studio: warm, big, painted blue, with ballet barres bordering the back wall. The floor looked old and scratched and smelled like glazed oak. Other girls filtered in and began to talk with their friends.

A lady with short brown hair and baggy sweatpants walked in. "Thirty crunches, thirty push-ups," she yelled at us. We all flopped to the ground and begin to count. It took Alex and I a little longer than the other girls-- we hadn't done anything like this at our old studio. The lady walked back in and started to play music. She led us in our warm-up, and we all broke into a sweat. Chaos began as we started dancing. Alex and I both looked at each other, realizing that this felt like nothing we had ever done before. At the end of class we walked out smiling, with sweat covering our foreheads.

### *Scene 8*

We drove by the familiar gray buildings and little patches of grass where my mother worked. The day had come, my name would finally be out there. I was going to audition for my first real play, perform seven nights a week, and get my name in a real playbill. My mom parked and we walked to the backstage door of the theatre I knew so well. Leading my mom through the theatre I recalled the many memories I had already made there. We approached the waiting room where arrogant mothers and their children sat bragging.

"At three years old Robby here was already on TV. He's a real star and never gets turned down," one of the mothers said. *Please, that kid? He looks like a doughnut. I haven't even heard him talk yet, and I know I have more talent than him. And some of these people could really use a makeover. This audition is going to be unbelievably easy.* A middle aged woman, hair starting to gray, came out and talked to us for a little while. Her voice seemed excited; she was ready to crush some dreams. The first two people walked in as I grabbed my script to read over one last time. My hands began to shake as the mothers continued to brag. My name got called along with a tall high schooler's name. We entered the room together joking around, trying to lighten the mood.

"Please introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about yourself, and why you want to be in *Gone with the Wind*," the director said in a calming voice. I looked at the boy standing beside me and motioned for him to go.

"I'm Cha-Charley," he stumbled. *Yes, please mess up again. I want this part more than anything.* When he finished, I looked up and began my introduction.

"Hi, I'm Sabrina Lingenfelter," I introduced myself and added in as many interesting facts as I could. A smile appeared on the director's face as I talked. *Ha, in your face! She likes me better than you. She didn't even smile at you.*

When I was finished she looked up. "Okay, so Sabrina, you can be Wendy and Charley, you be John."

"May we use a chair and some props?" Charley

asked. *Thank you, now we're thinking alike.* We grabbed a chair and a few other things from around the room. Lines rolled off our tongues as we reenacted a scene from *Peter Pan*. *He's good, I thought, maybe even as good as me.* We finished our scene and turned to see the director and her assistant clapping and smiling. *Yep, I got the part no question about it.* Or so I thought.

## ACT II

### Scene 1

The doughnut dude must have actually been good. He got the part and, well, I didn't. I sat on the cold, hard ground in my room trying to keep myself together. As I thought, a tear rolled down my face, cooling as it made its descent. I tried to stop, but a soft sobbing could be heard from my room. *Why didn't they pick me? Was I not what they wanted? I know I nailed the audition. I remembered all my lines, did all the cues, and the director adored me. Maybe I'm not as good as I thought.*

Then she came, her tail wagging. She held her head low, as she knew I wasn't happy. She sat down beside me and placed her paw on my leg. Her big pink tongue began to lick up my tears as they fell to my cheeks. At first her tongue would warm my cheeks, but as they began to dry my cheeks cooled. My sobbing stopped when I decided to lay down. I looked at her through a haze and reached out to touch her sleek black fur.

"Never give up. You're gonna do something big," her eyes told me. I pressed her body against mine as I gave her a hug.

"Thank you," I whispered in her ear.

## Scene 2

The alarm beeped at 4:30 a.m. I woke up cold but eager to start the day. I threw on a pair of fuzzy yoga pants and a t-shirt, and tossed my jazz shoes into my backpack. The smell of cinnamon filled the air in my kitchen as I toasted a slice of cinnamon bread. I got ready as fast as I could, saying my short monologue any chance I could. A blue van pulled into my driveway and my friend came out to get me. I walked outside facing the cold of February. Her parents dropped us off at our school, where we took another ride, this time on a bus to School of the Arts. The bus ride felt long, and my nervousness increased with every passing minute. The bus turned the corner and the school came into view. My fellow classmates cheered. We all reported to the theatre to get briefed.

A reading test marked the first part of my audition. I looked down at the test and felt overwhelmed: I had to read a fifteen page packet and answer thousands of questions in twenty five minutes. My head started to ache, but I had to focus on tackling the challenge ahead of me. When the bell rang, I finished and had to move on to my next station. My monologue seemed short and there's not much to say about it, but when I got asked to sing, I froze. *I can't sing, and if this decides my future, I'm doomed.* I scrambled to find a song and gave it the best I could.

I moved to the next part, dance. We had five minutes to learn a routine and then perform it for judges. It went fast and parts got jumbled in my head, but I managed to do it. Finally, the teachers and judges inter-

viewed my peers and me. The ride back was strangely quiet. We were tired and scared. We all knew we had made mistakes in our auditions.

“I forgot a line,” said a girl near the back of the bus.

“I messed up on the last part in the dance,” another complained.

It was weeks, but the letter finally came. I ripped open the white envelope open bearing the School of the Arts logo and my name and removed the contents. I read it, then I read it again.

I had made it in, and I was ready to perform.

### *Scene 3*

“And Best Actress goes to... Sabrina Lingenfelter!” Cheers had erupted from the room as I walked up to get my award. It was my favorite memory from last year. It was something that was only given to one special actor and my brother had never gotten it before. This year, I had returned to defend my title. I received a lead role this year and every performance felt perfect. I knew I had done well enough to get the award again, but no one had ever received it two years in a row-- it just wasn’t possible.

It was time now, the moment of truth. The room tensed up and everyone got quiet. I prepared to congratulate my best friend who sat beside me. She was smiling, but she was looking off in space. I wasn’t sure if she was nervous or if she just didn’t care. She had to get it. It only made sense.

“And Best Actress goes to...” Everyone held their

breath except for me. I knew who had won it: Allison Chambers, my real life friend and my sister in the play. "Sabrina Lingenfelter!" I began to clap then stopped, realizing my name was called not Allison's. I stood up. My heels clicked on the floor as I walked up. My hands reached out, ready to accept the shiny new toy. Mr. Alis talked about me for a while, doing all the bragging for me. I gave him a hug and could feel the strength in his arms. I walked back to my seat, all eyes on me. It had been my show, I had worked the hardest, I was the one who earned it.

#### *Scene 4*

The cold chair pressed against my legs. The smell of hairspray filled the room backstage. My friends beside me chatted about their dances and their favorite parts of each dance. I searched for my shoes, getting ready for my finale. After reaching my hand into my dance bag, the shoes were nowhere to be found. How could I have forgotten them? They were it, they were all. I didn't need anything else except my shoes.

It was early January and I yawned, still getting used to going back to school after winter break. Sitting on the floor, I put on my leather jazz shoes. They formed to my feet as though made just for me. The light, plastic soles cushioned achy feet from the hard wooden dance floor. The cold breath of January crept in through the door and circled the studio as we waited for warm ups to begin. I floated through the room the way I could only when I had my shoes on. As odd as it seemed, it felt like emotion and artistry came up from

my shoes, entered through my feet, and poured out to the rest of my body. Just yesterday I had thought about giving this up forever. Today, almost like magic, just by adding the shoes, a fire started under me. And now it's the day of our big show and they're at home, not with me. I couldn't dance without them.

I ran to my mother, who was on the other side of the room helping dancers to get ready, and I explained how I had forgotten them. She called my brother and commanded him to bring them to me. He agreed, finding no other option. Relieved, I sat down, the cold chair pressed against my legs.

### *Scene 5*

I would flying out of the nest. It was my last time performing here. I didn't want to step off the edge quite yet, so tonight had to be perfect. But the time had come for me to leave, and I had to leave with a bang. Walking onto the stage, we began our show like any other night. We made it through the dangerous forest though and took our bows, warm hands locking tight.

Proud mothers, friends, and brothers clapped. Well, not from my brother. It wasn't like he was actually going to support me. *Gosh, I don't see what the big problem is with going to even just one of my performances. No he has never been to anything that was for me, not a single dance recital, play, or even showcase. I'm just glad he will be gone in a few months. He'll be in college, and I'll be here.* We waited for the lights to rise and the audience to exit the theatre. Leaving through the door backstage, I felt free, but I knew it was the end of something

great. I approached my friends slowly. I didn't have the energy to do much else. My eyes began to water as I reflected on the last three years. My friends asked me what was wrong, but I didn't know. I didn't know if they were happy tears or sad tears, but I couldn't stop. I excused myself and went to the dressing room to gather my makeup and clothes.

My thin white dress didn't protect me from the cold school, and I started to shiver. When I turned the corner, I saw him. Tall and wise, he stopped me to ask why I was crying. It took me a minute.

"That was my last performance with you, Mr. Alis. I'm leaving the comfort of performing with you and now I'm going out into the world. I don't know what to expect. I will never perform with you again. It's over."

He gave me a hug and he looked at me grinning. "Sabrina, the whole world is waiting for you. This is only one theatre in a world full of them. If anything, I'm holding you back. The world is a dangerous place, but it's nothing to cry over. You will fly, you will soar, and every now and then you will fall. Remember, everyone can act, but not everyone can be an actor."

# MY LIFE AS A DANCER

Elizabeth Ballman

## *First Recital*

I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world. I wore a tiny yellow dress with sequin embellishments, my hair was twisted into a delicate ballerina bun, and my lips were bright red with my mom's new favorite lipstick.

"C'mon, let's go!" I yelled to my mom who continued to toxify the bathroom as she applied hairspray onto her already stiff hair. I jumped into the blue minivan and buckled myself in the car seat as excitement ran through my four-year old veins.

As we pulled up to the Virginia Beach Pavilion, my mom asked me, "Are you nervous for your recital, sweetie?"

I looked at her with a befuddled face and asked, "What does 'nervous' mean?" She just laughed, took my hand, and we walked through the big double doors of the theatre together.

In the spacious dressing room, it seemed everyone was in nonstop motion. Moms safety-pinned shoulder straps onto costumes, tucked entire packs of bobby pins into loose ballerina buns, and touched up their daughters' makeup before the great production began. I walked around until I found the little desk with my name in bold letters: "Elizabeth Ballman." There was a Barbie coloring book and a plastic bag filled with Schneider's pretzels, Hershey kisses, and gummy bears. I felt like a star! As my mom helped me put on my ballerina slippers, an announcement came on the loud intercoms and said, "All moms must find their way to the audience as the show is about to begin."

My mom took my hand in hers, wished me good luck, and bent down to give me a wet kiss. I waited until she turned away to wipe the lipstick and saliva she left on my cheek. Just before she walked out of the dressing room door, she glanced back at me and said, "Smile pretty!" I nodded and watched her leave until her bright pink sweater and the sound of her heels clicking on the tile floors vanished down the hall.

### *It's a Hard Knock Life*

The tiny hairs on my arms stood on end while I observed their graceful bodies move in unison, as they made every turn, leap, and jump seem effortless. I dreamed of someday having the ability to dance with the same beauty and elegance as the company members did. Being in company was considered an honor at Wilkins School of Dance. Company was a select group of dancers chosen to perform the opening and finale

numbers at the much anticipated recital at the end of the year. Every year I watched the talented dancers execute each dance move with precision and dazzle the audience as they performed the opening number. My mom always said to me, "All you have to do to reach your dreams, sweetheart, is work hard and stay true to who you are." I never understood what she meant by the last part of her advice. I mean, how could I be anybody else other than myself? But I did understand that in order to achieve my dream of becoming a company member, I would have to work hard. And that is exactly what I did.

We practiced and practiced and practiced our jazz dance number for the upcoming recital. I was eight years old, and my muscles ached from the countless jazz squares, *pirouettes*, and *battements* I had done in the past hour. "Kick those legs higher, ladies! The recital is in only a couple of weeks!" my dance teacher told us what seemed like a dozen times.

"I couldn't kick my legs any higher if I tried," I whispered to my friend, Katie. Every year, Ms. Amy acted more and more apprehensive with each day closer to the recital. At this particular rehearsal, she worked my class until we couldn't feel our limbs.

"All right, one more time and you guys can leave for the night," Ms. Amy said as she pressed play on the CD player. Katie rolled her eyes at me while sweat dripped down her face. We got into our places, put on big smiles as if we felt no pain, and began to dance the song, "It's a Hard Knock Life."

On the night of the recital, just a few minutes

before show time, my heart began to beat as fast as I had ever felt it beat before. I tried to review all of the moves to the dance in my head. *Grand jeté, step, leap, hop. No . . . That's not it! Step, leap, grand jeté, hop! Ugh!* Although I had practiced it millions of times in front of the mirror in my room and even more times at the studio under the instruction of the apprehensive Ms. Amy, some of the steps escaped my mind on the night I needed them the most. My stomach felt like it was about to drop to the floor. Just then, I thought back to a time when I didn't even know what nervous meant. It was a time when candy was handed to me for free and my mom was always there to cover up my pain and fear with a kiss. I realized I was no longer four years old. Part of growing up meant that I had work hard for what I wanted and what I deserved. Like the song said, "It's a Hard Knock Life."

Katie interrupted my thoughts when she came up to me and said, "We are on in three minutes!" she saw my solicitous expression and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Just a little nervous, that's all!" I said with a weak smile.

"Well, no time for that! We need to go!" Katie exclaimed. She grabbed my hand and we ran down the hallways until we made it backstage with the rest of the girls in our dance class. I took a few deep breaths, lined up behind Katie, practiced my flashy stage smile, and waited for the first notes of the song to begin. Once the music started, we found our way to our correct positions on stage.

Every one of us perfectly performed the number,

our jazz squares, *pirouettes*, and *battements*, executed beautifully. At the end of the piece, the crowd roared. I smiled wide and proud as we ran off the stage. Back in the dressing room, my dance friends and I squealed with excitement.

“Did you hear the audience scream?”

“We stole the show!”

“That was our best performance yet!”

After the recital, Ms. Amy came into our dressing room and said, “I have some exciting news for you ladies!

“By unanimous vote, the other dance instructors and I have decided to make you our new members of Company!” My class screamed so loud, I’m sure people heard us throughout the entire Pavilion Theatre. I couldn’t stop smiling.

#### Friendships

We were like a dozen tiny stars, all unique and beautiful, yet shining with the same intensity, no one star brighter than the other. Katie was super nice and extremely talented, Monica could always make me laugh, Mabree could help me every time I had trouble with a dance step, and Kelly knew how to cheer me up whenever I was feeling down. We were such a great team.

It was the first class of the new dance season and I was ecstatic to dance with my best friends again. We were all in the lowest Company class called the Dynamics Company, which was the same class we had been in the previous year. I loved being a Dynamic. A lot of younger dancers looked up to me, which gave

me a sense of pride and self-confidence. But there were still other dancers I could admire, such as the girls in the Junior and Senior Companies. They helped me set a goal for myself and motivated me to continue working hard in hopes of being on their level one day.

My friends and I gossiped about relationships and summer romances and laughed as we joked and teased one another in good humor. As I listened to Monica tell a story about how her little sister was chased by a flock of pigeons, Ms. Amy entered the classroom with a warm smile on her face. Her ivory skin was tanner from the summer sun, and her hair was even more bleach blonde than the last time I had seen her.

"Hello Dance Dynamics! I hope you are all excited for a new year here at the studio. I know I am!" Ms. Amy said to us with her familiar, sweet, voice. "This year, though, we will be making a few changes with this particular Company class."

Kelly, Monica, and I exchanged confused looks and continued to listen intently.

"I will be moving some members of this class up to the Junior Company," Ms. Amy continued. My heart began to race and thoughts crowded my mind. Would all of us move up? Why would she ever tear us apart? I looked around at my friends. By their facial expressions, I had a feeling they had the same thoughts, but no one spoke.

"The girls that have earned a spot in the Junior Company are Katie, Elizabeth, and Mabree. You will now be dancing with the Junior Company on Wednesday nights from 5-7. Congratulations!" Ms.

Amy exclaimed.

I didn't know what to do. Had she really called my name? Why would Katie, Mabree, and I move up without Kelly, Monica, or any of the other girls? It didn't seem right. I always thought that being moved up into the Junior Company would be a happy and rewarding experience. Why didn't I feel happy or rewarded? My eyes locked on Kelly's and Monica's. Where they happy for me? It didn't look like they were. Maybe they were jealous. There was a silence among the group for a long time.

Ms. Amy broke the silence when she announced, "Alright ladies! Let's get to dancing!" The remainder of the class was awkward and unusually silent.

When I got home, I told my mom what happened. She congratulated me for being moved into Junior Company, and then told me I should be proud of myself.

"But it's hard to be proud of myself when I am not going to be able to dance with all of my other friends," I complained.

"Life isn't always fair, Elizabeth. I know you love Kelly and Monica, but you will meet more friends in the Junior Company. Plus, you can still see your old friends outside of class and at school," my mom said, attempting to brighten my mood.

"But it's not the same," I snapped. I already missed the days in the Dance Dynamics when I shone as one star in the dozen, not one star shining brighter than the others.

*Body Image*

While I was in Junior Company, I grew and matured a lot as a dancer and as a person. I learned how to do triple *pirouettes*, mermaid leaps, and pointe ballet, which was a whole difficulty level higher than regular ballet. I also got a brilliant new ballet teacher, Mr. Michael, who taught me more than just ballet. Friendships had grown and developed within the Junior Company, and we were like a big family who depended on and trusted one another.

I also grew physically and became more aware of my body. Turning thirteen came with experiencing changed in shape. I began to gain weight in places I had never gained weight before, and I started to become really self-conscious. Each time I would put on my spandex leotard for dance, it felt tighter on the areas that grew. It also didn't help that the walls in the dance studio had mirrors that surrounded me and reflected my image. The mirrors seemed to say to me, "Look at you. You're fat. All of your other friends haven't gained any weight. Why are you so different from them?"

I didn't like the mirrors—they put negative thoughts inside my head—but I couldn't refrain from looking at them during dance class. Since dance used every muscle in my body, I was supposed to use the mirrors to analyze my body and make sure I executed new and unfamiliar dance moves correctly. I saw all of my other friends in their spandex leotards that fit in their skinny bodies just right, then I looked at my body and saw my leotard hugging my fat in the most

unflattering ways. The portraits of tiny ballerinas on the walls of the studio also didn't help. Why couldn't I have looked like the dancers in the pictures? I convinced myself that in order to be a dancer, I had to look like the ballerinas that were on the walls because they were skinny.

One night, I came home from class feeling terrible about myself. I ran up to my bedroom, cried, and complained that I was fat as I squeezed tightly onto one of my pillows. When my mom heard me, she came into my room and attempted to console me. She cooed, "Elizabeth, sweetie, why do you think you are fat?"

"Because everyone else in my dance class is skinny, and I have pudge all over me," I wailed between sniffles, leaving snot and tear marks on my pillow.

"It's because you are growing, sweetheart. You are turning into a mature young woman, and the other girls just haven't started that process yet. You need to learn to accept yourself for who you are and not compare yourself to others."

"But the recital is coming up soon. I am going to look so fat, and I probably won't even be able to fit into my costume."

"Don't be ridiculous, Elizabeth! You are going to look beautiful at your recital, no matter what. I have no worry about that."

My mom's pep talk cheered me up, but it didn't stop the thoughts that consumed my mind for weeks and weeks. When I looked into the mirrors at the dance studio, I didn't see myself as beautiful at all. I knew that if I looked fat at the recital that came in a few weeks, it

would be utterly embarrassing. I had mental images of myself walking on stage, wearing a tight glittery costume that showed every inch of my pudge, while my other friends in my dance class looking stunning with their skinny bodies fitting into their tight glittery costumes with ease.

When the recital rolled around that year, I put on my costume, and it fit like a glove. When I looked in the mirror, I actually felt beautiful, but I was still nervous about what the audience might think. For some reason, when I went onto the stage that day, all of the negative thoughts and feeling about my body vanished from my mind. All I could feel was the movement of my body and my love for dance. Dance always brought out my self-confidence. As I performed the routine with a smile on my face, I felt gorgeous.

I thought about when my mom would say, "All you have to do to reach your dreams, sweetheart, is work hard and stay true to who you are." I finally realized what she meant by staying "true to who you are." I began to accept my flaws and appreciate my special and unique gifts. When I looked in the mirrors at the dance studio they seemed to say, "You are Elizabeth Ballman, and you are different from everyone else in your own special way. You have faith in yourself and that is what makes you beautiful."

### *Overcoming an Obstacle*

It was my second year in the Senior Company when I began to feel the symptoms of my first major dance injury. The pain in my toe would fluctuate from

sometimes tolerable to almost unbearable. I mostly felt the uncomfortable irritation during pointe class with Mr. Michael. Each time I would attempt to gracefully rise onto the balls of my feet and onto pointe, I would feel a sharp pain in my middle toe on my right foot. Although I was filled with agony on the inside, I never showed any sign of discomfort on the outside.

I made the mistake of not mentioning my physical affliction to my parents or dance teachers in hopes that my pain would one day just disappear. I kept my secret because I was afraid of what a doctor would say about my toe. What if he said I could not dance for weeks, or even months? What if he said I could never dance again? I had such a strong passion for dance that I could not imagine the ability to dance being taken away from me.

I also didn't want to show any sign of weakness to my older peers in the Senior Company. They were all such effortlessly talented dancers. They danced as if they were fragile and delicate when truly they had incredible physical strength. I would be so embarrassed if they were to think that I could not handle the challenge and pressure that came with being in the Senior Company. Also, if I had to refrain from dancing for a certain amount of time, I would be so behind on skills and choreography that I felt I would hold the Senior Company back from their overall potential.

I had been feeling the pain for about one month when, after one ballet class, I could not take the suffering in my toe any longer, and I decided to tell my mom about what I had been going through. I told her every-

thing she wanted to know and she quickly prepared a warm tub of water with Epsom salt and gave me an Advil that she claimed was perfect for my pain. Then, unsurprisingly, I found myself soaking my injured foot in the warmth of the tub of water while listening to another one of her lectures.

“Why did you wait so long to tell me about this?” As I looked down at my foot twirling the undissolved Epsom salt in the tepid water, I explained to her how I would feel embarrassed, and I was afraid of what a doctor might say if I confessed. “I’m glad you told me about this,” my mom replied, “but you need to learn to listen to your body. If you are hurt, you need to say something so that we can fix it before the pain gets any worse.” I knew she was right. She was always right. “Do you want me to call a doctor to check on you?” I thought about her question from a while, but decided I was still unwilling to go to the doctor.

“No, Mom. What if every night for the next few weeks I soak my feet in Epsom salt and take Advil before I go to sleep? If it doesn’t feel better by then, I guess you can take me to the doctor,” I answered. My mom agreed with my plan and for the next week, that is exactly what I did.

The next week at dance class, I didn’t feel much pain and I felt hope that my toe would eventually completely heal. Until the last ten minutes of class: once again, the pain crept up on my little toe. The pain was so severe that I didn’t even realize the tears that had started to gather in my eyes. When Ms. Amy saw me crying, her brows furrowed and she asked me, “What’s

wrong?"

"My toe just really hurts," I said in a shaky voice. After Ms. Amy told me to take a break and have a seat, I could not even control the tears that began to stream down my face and dampen my leotard. I was in so much pain, and felt so embarrassed all at the same time that my emotions were going wild. I sat down and watched for the remainder of class, feeling like a failure.

After class Ms. Amy called me into her office and asked me to explain what was wrong. I confessed, "Well, I have been feeling this terrible pain in my toe for a while."

"And why haven't you told me before?" Ms. Amy asked with the same sternness and concern on her face as Mom. I could tell she was a wonderful mother, just like mine. I decided to answer her question with complete honesty.

"I felt I would look weak in front of the older girls, and I was afraid that if I had to stop dancing for a while, I would be holding the entire Senior Company back," I said, as my eyes started to burn with the saltiness of my tears.

"Elizabeth, I put you in the Senior Company because I knew you could handle it. Neither I, nor any of your classmates, will ever think you are weak. And secondly, dance is not your life. I care more about your health and happiness than I worry about you holding back the company. I want you to rest your toe and get a doctor to check it out."

I felt so much better after I talked to Ms. Amy.

My mom and I decided to go to the doctor the next day. The doctor informed me that my cartilage broke down as a result of the pressure that pointe toes had on my young and undeveloped toes. He said if I had waited any longer to get it checked out, I would have had serious arthritis. After a month of resting my toe, it was finally healed. I was able to dance on my toes with a smile on my face again. The absence of pain reminded me of the many challenges that I overcome as a dancer.

# LITTLE THINGS, BIG IMPACT

Jessica Coleman

## *What Nowhere'sville Taught Me*

I'm from New Bern, North Carolina. Where? Exactly. Actually it used to be the capital of North Carolina. It's where Pepsi was invented. (That's why I hate Coke.) It's pretty close to ECU. (Go Pirates!) We have painted bears around the town. (I think that's cool.) Other than that, it's your run of the mill country town. There are good parts of town, and bad. And by the age of eleven, every child already knows they want to leave. That's New Bern.

In spite of all this, I've learned a lot from that small place. I've learned about acceptance and tolerance. There's pretty much an equal number of Hispanics, black people, and white people. Your neighbors are most likely a different race than you or mixed up. When there are those few ignorant racists, most people rally to the defense of the ones being persecuted.

I've learned about being grateful for what I have.

New Bern isn't exactly the Hamptons. It's poorer than most places, yet we make due and still are able to help others. I think it brings a sense of community. And I've learned about the importance of togetherness. No matter what drama, issues, or rumors are going around, when tragedy happens, all the people come together to help one another.

No matter how much I, or any other person, complain about New Bern, we all know it will always be home.

### *Self-esteem*

"But mom, she's prettier/smarter/taller/nicer/skinner/better than me!"

I don't remember how many times I said this growing up. For a long time, I felt like no matter what, I was never enough: I was constantly comparing myself to, well, everyone.

After a while, my mom told me one day, "Jessica, it's called self-esteem for a reason. No one else can make you feel good about yourself. You have to do that yourself." At the time, I just thought my mom was being a meany butt. I was thinking, *I'm over here whining, and she tries to give me advice?* But as time went on, I started thinking about what she told me. I realized the only person putting me down was me. I figured out that if you keep looking, you'll always find something about yourself you don't have that someone else has.

I started to like myself more. I actually told myself I looked nice instead of pointing out what was wrong with me. I stopped comparing myself to everyone.

Some days and situations were harder than others, but I still make raising my self esteem a point in my daily life. I'd come to the conclusion, if you can't be nice to yourself, how can you expect anyone else to?

*It's Not That Serious. Seriously.*

My family is huge. And there are a lot of kids. We fight, play, and get dirty, like normal kids. When I was 8 and running about, playing with my cousins, I stepped on a briar sprout. And it hurt. A lot. It was embedded in my foot to the point I couldn't even put weight on it. Like I said, it hurt.

I hobbled back to my house, wailing and screaming, "Mo-o-om, I'm dying!"

My mother slowly and calmly walked towards me, in that annoying way parents do when you're upset, almost like they're mocking you. She just looked at my foot and said, "Pull it out." *Pull it out!? I'm sitting here dying, and she tells me to just "pull it out"?* I was livid, fuming. She had walked back into her room by then, so I was just sitting there by my lonesome, waiting to die, almost like a bug when you hit it, but don't kill it right away.

I had already established in my eight-year-old mind that my mother obviously hated me, and that's why she wanted me to die, but hearing the other kids outside playing made me resolve to deal with that later and, gulp, pull out the briar. I won't lie, I was terrified. I mean, I was about to perform a major surgical operation. On myself! But with the help of tweezers, a bunch of napkins, rubbing alcohol, Bratz Band-Aids, and a

dream, I did it! I pulled it out!

I was so proud of myself, I ran to my mom's room, yelling, "Mom, Mom, I pulled out myself!"

She just looked at me for a moment and said, "Good job." *Good job? That's it? Would you tell a doctor who just performed brain surgery "Good job"?* I was utterly and totally offended.

"Mom, I pulled out a briar on my own! That's a big deal!" Once again, with that slow, calm, annoying way parents have about them, she said, "It was a briar sprout. They're everywhere. Don't make something more serious than it has to be. Now go back outside."

"Don't make something more serious than it has to be..." Those words resonated throughout my entire body. My outlook on life, small as it was at eight years old, completely changed. My mom remained calm throughout my sobbing about whatever boy I liked that week, when I assumed my neighbor's cat was a demon because it didn't want to play with me, and when I went through my melancholy phase modeling my looks off Wednesday Addams. Those situations honestly weren't that serious.

Life forces you to be serious. When something comes up that doesn't require it, I don't force it to be there. When I get mad/sad/like totally ticked off, I just breathe and remind myself, it's not that serious. Seriously.

### *Mini-Hippie, Dude*

I love flowers. And trees, and plants, and animals, oh my! But don't expect to find me traipsing through a

nature trail out in the woods somewhere. I don't spend twenty minutes on my make-up every day just to go outside in the wilderness. I'm perfectly content to sit in my backyard and play with the flowers and the grass and the birdies.

As a child I always watched Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel. One day, on a show they talked about how people are chopping down trees and polluting the oceans and air. I nearly had a stroke! (I was a very dramatic child.) But I couldn't believe what I was hearing; how could people destroy the wonderful world around us?

After that, I made a vow to save the world. I planned, single-handedly, how I would save the trees, oceans, and all the animals. Except bugs, of course. How did I plan to do this? Well, I'd ask the people to stop. That's how everyone did things, right? So I started writing to our gas company, to Animal Planet, and to our church. I figured if anyone could help the environment, it would be my church. I worded my letters very strongly, well, strongly for an eight-year-old. I used phrases like "I'm highly angered," and "I even told my mommy!" I knew that would strike fear into their hearts. And I was proud of myself: I had actually stood up for something I believed in.

The Gas Company and Animal Planet didn't write back; I assumed it was because my letter struck too much fear into their hearts. However, my church did. They "applauded my vehement campaign for the health of the environment." I was on top of the world. Maybe next I'd send a letter to the President.

*Fashion Isn't Just Clothes*

To some people, fashion is just clothes and shoes. But to me, it's more than that. When I was younger, I used to just wear what my mom made me wear, until one day, my dad took me to Build-A-Bear Workshop. I was overwhelmed; the choices were endless. I ended up choosing a cat with pretty makeup. After I stuffed it, it was time to choose an outfit.

I looked toward my dad, thinking he would pick it out for me like my mom would. But he encouraged me to pick my own. I took forever, picking up things, trying them on Kitty. Finally, I picked out a white tank top with camo shorts, pink sandals, and sunglasses. (I would never pick out something with camo now, but childhood mistakes, you know?)

As my dad and I went to pay for the toy, the cashier lady commented on how "fashionable" my toy was, and how I should work in fashion when I grow up. I thanked her, even though I knew it was ridiculous. What did "fashionable" even mean? And I wanted to be a princess when I grew up, thank you very much. I went home and showed my mom Kitty and told her about the cashier's ridiculous statement. My mom just laughed it off, but, surprisingly, the next day, she let me pick my own outfit. Yellow babydoll top, dark wash capris, and white flip-flops, complete with yellow barrettes. I got so many compliments that day, from students and teachers alike. That's when I decided, I would give this fashion thing a try.

I researched all about it: I read books, went on countless websites about it, and watched all the fash-

ion TV shows. As I grew up, fashion became more and more important to me. I realized how what you wear is your personal statement. It is the first thing people see when they see you, their first impression of you. To others, fashion is simply clothes and modeling and magazines. To me, it's a movement. It's how I silently introduce myself. How I make a statement. Who I am.

# CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

Joshua

## *North Carolina*

You probably won't find this interesting but when I was younger, I remember dirt. Not dirty words or rumors or mud or sandy gravel, but soil. The kind that's dark and rich, that's cool underneath your bare feet. The kind with little white grubs squirming around. The kind with a heavy, fresh scent, which fills your lungs as you lay there staring up at the clouds, floating by like giant warships going off to some distant place. The warm sun covers your body, and a slight breeze rustles the trees. The mountains in the distance stand, like a wise old man watching over you. I heard my name faintly at first, then louder. Will came running up the long driveway with his bike and pellet gun yelling, "Come on man, me and Alex are going down to the bridge."

"Alright I'm coming," I yelled, as I jumped up, leaving my homework in the dirt. I ran down to the

garage and grabbed my shoes and my bike. I hit the garage door button and I was off; the wind whipping through my hair as I sped down the driveway. I slow down some as I get to the top of the hill, then down again, flying down Old Greenlee Road with Will and Alex right behind me.

I saw it coming; I knew we were moving, leaving the mountains behind. I saw the sign first, for some reason I didn't think anything of it. I didn't even take a last look when we drove away for the last time. It all felt so sudden, like one day I was there and then the next day, I was gone. With only memories to remind me, I still dream of those years; running through the hills, feeling the cool dirt beneath my feet.

### *High School*

Vocab, vocab and more vocab. A hundred and fifty in all, there was no way I was going to memorize all of them. Verbs, nouns, and adjectives from a different language all being crammed into my head. Study, that's all I could do; flashcards and practice quizzes, over and over again. I knew them backwards and forwards; I hoped, if I could just focus and not go too fast this should be an easy hundred.

This new school was different, the classes harder and the teachers were merciless. Simple details were mentioned once, then not touched until the day of the exam. Suddenly, I found myself studying, all the time. It was weird, but never mind that, just keep studying.

Finally, the quiz day was here, the first twenty-five of them against me. The sheets came out, and I began.

English word, Spanish definition, good that's how I studied them. Five sentences that show meaning, easy, I was done in less than fifteen minutes.

Did I finish too fast? Should I have looked over my answers one more time? Did I remember the accents? I put my name right? I just hoped I did okay. The rest of class we spent reviewing the imperfect tense of conjugating verbs. I tried to listen, but I already knew how to do this, so what was the point of listening? As the monotone voice droned on, my mind slipped into a stupor.

I was at the United States Naval Academy with my Dad, walking in front of the steps at Bancroft Hall. Its massive stone walls towered over me, reminding me of how small I really am. Tecumseh's angry statue watched from a distance as I wondered at the size of the buildings. A couple of shell-shocked plebes walk by with deep bags underneath their eyes and piles of books in their arms. Wow, this place is cool...

The bell rang and I came out of my day dream with a start, kicking the girl's chair in front of me. A couple of people laughed as I pushed my books into my backpack and ducked out the door and on to math class.

### *Swim Practice*

I was tired, and the bed was warm. The clock beeped five o'clock pm and my dad busted through the door, with a stupid grin on his face singing, "Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!" I groaned and rolled over, trying to hide under the covers.

Undeterred he pulled off the covers and dragged me out of the bed. I knew what was happening, but I really thought it was two o'clock just a couple of minutes ago. My dad had been talking for weeks about how I should start going to the senior swim practice on days I didn't have high school swim. Now that it was time to go, the fear began welling up in my throat, like a rock it stuck there making it hard to swallow. I didn't know any of the other swimmers; they were all undoubtedly faster than me, not to mention the maximum age was supposed to be thirteen. Most of the kids there were still in middle school. I had no idea how hard the workout would be, but they swam six days a week, so I knew it was going to be hard.

I packed my bag and put on the Speedo. Like a criminal condemned to the gallows, I walked to my dad's truck. The ride to the Coast Guard Base didn't take long enough and before I knew it I was standing in front of a group of eleven and twelve year-olds. I didn't know any names and only recognized one or two. The coach told everybody I'd be swimming with them on Tuesdays and we began stretching. A couple of girls came over and tried to talk to me. They told me everybody's name as well as a complete psychological report on each of them. There were the twins, who looked nothing alike, Jeremy, who always had a blank expression on his face and told creepy jokes, Miles, who was better than you and made sure everyone knew it.

As we got ready to get in the water, I looked at the work out sheet: 6 x 200 odds free evens IM drill swim.

Even the warm up was going to be hard. After that there was a whole bunch of individual medley with 2 x 500 freestyle between everything. Just a normal work-out for them, me, I had no idea how I was going to survive.

Two and half hours and 4,500 meters later I was ready to die. I don't know how, but I made it.

### *The Tales I Remember*

It started out with *The Lord of the Rings*. Story time, every Friday night my family gathered as my dad narrated the story of Mr. Frodo Baggins and his company. My brothers would laugh as my dad spoke like a complaining dwarf, then they would hide under the covers as he spoke with the voice of Gollum; moaning and wailing for his precious. I would sit transfixed, wondering how Frodo ever got through all that.

So when the opportunity came to write a creative story for English class, I knew exactly what I was going to write about:

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far, away, there was a hobbit who lived in a hole. He was not the ordinary type of hobbit; he had a queer sense of adventure about him that was not so common for his kind. He loved to fish, and explore, and he grew up hearing stories of the far sea and school for magical people. He always dreamed of traveling and going on adventures. The neighbors thought this quite odd, and no one was sure what was wrong with him. Some say it was the loss of parents and the funny scar on his forehead that made him like this, but no one knew for sure.

He was out hunting for his uncle when he found an egg. Not a chicken egg, but a large blue egg, in the shape of a football, with ridges and a smooth enamel like shell. He hurriedly stuffed it in his knapsack and ran back to the fence, carefully slipping between the wires which no longer hummed with electricity. At the market in the abandoned spice warehouse, he took the egg to the grain stand. Not knowing what he had in his hands, the hobbit traded the egg for a sack of flour and some beans.

This is where our story begins, two stories really, two stories of adventure.

Now as it goes with buying and selling that egg, which most people assumed was simply a painted rock, was traded for a necklace, then for a bag of coal, then for a goat until it came to a boy who took it home and hid it under his bed...

This was going to be great, a little unoriginal maybe, but I liked it. These were all the stories I remembered reading. These were ordinary people doing extraordinary things. They left home, they never gave up, and they kept fighting. They charged headlong into the goblin horde without a second thought. These characters were unforgettable.

No one else had thought of combining these stories right? I just hope Ms. Balsamo would see it that way.

### *Driving*

I tried arguing, but I already knew I had lost. Now I was just trying to buy time before he made me get

on the road. Normally driving is not that big of a deal, unless there's a ton of traffic. That's when it gets hairy. But this was different; I had just spent the last twelve hours sitting in the woods in my deer stand. My clod-hopper boots were caked in mud and I was tired. The worst part was that this truck, with its off road wheels and CB radio, was a manual.

I tried telling him that I'd only practiced switching gears a couple times in the parking lot, and I seriously didn't want to get someone killed. But my dad wouldn't budge. He just got that stupid smile on his face and kept saying, "You'll do fine." Over and over again, it's like that was the only thing he knew how to say, "You'll do fine." I hoped he was right. I took a breath, pressed the clutch and started the engine. "See, that wasn't so bad," he said. I ignored him and tried to take off. The car lurched forward and the engine sputtered, then died.

There I was in the middle of the road, stopped, not moving, just waiting to get plowed by a Mack truck. I felt panic rising in my throat. I jammed the clutch, started the engine, and we were off. I switched to second, then third gear, this wasn't so bad. It was then that my day informed me, "Son, you went the wrong way."

I groaned and began searching for a place to turn around. I pulled into someone's long driveway, stalled out a couple of times, and then got back out on the road. This time it went much smoother. There weren't any other cars or stop lights and all I had to do was keep my foot on the gas.

As we pulled into the parking spot and got out, my dad gave me one of his big bear hugs and said, "You're a good kid. You're going to turn out just fine."

# WITHOUT A BREATH

J. M. Uniszkiewicz

## *Warm Up*

The snapping of cameras could be faintly distinguished over the dull roar of the busy street a few yards in front of where a group of teenagers were standing. Ten of them had been lined up next to a blue, fifty by fourteen foot charter bus in matching crimson and navy Virginia Swimming uniforms. They had a yearning look on their faces, like they were expecting something. They were excited about competing against twelve other states at Eastern Zones.

Eastern Zones is a swim meet that follows States every year. People qualify for Zones through states by earning themselves a cut or by swimming a top two time in each event at States. If somebody in the top two decides to opt out, the person in third place gets a chance to go, and so forth. That's the reason some people go to Zones when they place 15th or 16th place, when they don't deserve it. I had been one of those few

to qualify with cuts. I had seven in total even though six was the maximum you were allowed to swim.

A few of my teammates had met the minimum requirements and only earned two cuts, and I felt superior, even though deep inside I knew that we each had our strengths and weaknesses. Some others in the line were special at one or two strokes. Some were sprinters and some were good at distance. I am an all around swimmer and will be decent at whatever I swim. These thoughts swirled around my head as our parents took photos of us in front of Jefferson Avenue.

After we said our goodbyes, we all piled onto the buses and sat towards the front, because the back had already been filled up with swimmers from different clubs. We put away all of our bags and took out our treats. We had gone through at least ten pounds of food before the chaperones told us to stop because we were so disgusting. We put all of it away, and started talking about the meet.

We arrived at the Collegiate School Aquatic Center (CSAC) in no time at all. The pool stood at the foot of two large hills occupied by a Ukrops grocery store. *At least there will be food nearby.* I smiled at the thought. It wasn't the first time I had been here, but it was the first time that it actually stood for something, besides being the Olympic Trials pool in 2008.

After the Olympic Trials, the pool had been repurposed for Poseidon Swimming after they bought it. The model was given to the team, along with some pieces of the wall where Olympians had signed. I didn't care for most of them. They were either too cocky or arro-

gant towards other swimmers and the media. I promised myself not to look for the signatures, and just to focus on the meet.

As soon as we parked, everyone was released off of the buses to the CSAC. We were directed to the front doors, and into the lobby. In the center was a spiral staircase, leading up to the spectator balcony. Flanking the right of the staircase were three doorways, two of them being a concessions and swim store. We were directed through the middle hallway to the pool.

I passed the locker rooms, and opened the glass doors into the wet arena. The breeze of cold, chlorinated air rushed past me into the hallway. I stepped onto the deck and didn't feel anything. The thrill I expected to happen seemed to just pass me by and directly to the people behind me. I heard gasps and saw stunned silence as the horde passed through the double doors. I probably didn't feel the same as them because I've been to nicer pools at Chapel Hill, Raleigh, Blacksburg, and D.C.

"Line up and shut up!" barked a booming voice to my left. I quickly turned and grinned when I recognized my old coach, Mark. He had previously switched from my club team to Poseidon; it was his second time as a head coach for Zones. Almost everyone stopped talking immediately, while me and friends of Mark started laughing at everyone taking him so seriously. He turned, saw me, and plastered a smile on his face. We exchanged a shoulder bump, and he whispered in my ear, "Light it up baby."

After the brief exchange we had, everyone was

instructed to line up shortest to tallest. I knew most swimmers were tall, but I was surprised to be one of the last people in line. The people standing behind me were all older than me, except for a twelve year old who was 6' 2. *He will burn out quickly*, I said to myself. One by one, we all climbed onto the bleachers to take a team photo. The process took at least fifteen minutes. Finally, after everyone had been positioned perfectly, the local swimmers were ironically the last to show up. We waited another five minutes for every last one of them to run in late and make their walk of shame to the bleachers.

The meet warm up was fairly short, and I got to see how my teammates and competition swam. I knew that most of them weren't trying too hard, and neither was I. We finished warm-ups and went to the locker rooms to change. I made a new personal best and was out in less than three minutes. Thoughts swirled through my head, but I cleared them out and stuck to living in the now. Right now I was leaving.

### *Race*

I had made up my mind to go all out for my signature event, the 400 IM. The 400 Individual Medley requires endurance, precision, and being well rounded in all four strokes. I did not like swimming it then, nor do I now, but I have to since nobody else will.

I had already finished warm up and the team pep talk, so now all I needed was to pump myself up. The team had my back and they would be cheering for me the entire time. I kept thinking to myself that lane eight

was perfect; outside smoke. I knew that this was the day where I would come out on top. Being in heat five out of six, meant I would be the slowest in that heat swimming, but time didn't matter here. Right now the only thing that mattered was staying focused on winning.

I felt a little inferior to the other swimmers as they stepped up to the starting block in their \$400 water repelling suits while my faded one only cost half as much. *It doesn't matter, I told myself, so what if their parents have money? It's not like the suit makes you fast.* I started my routine in stretching and loosening up. Before I knew it, the whistle blew, and I stood up on the blocks. Right before the start sounded, I whispered to myself, *Light it up baby.*

The second I made contact with the water I felt my body go stiff, then instantly adjust to the chill, the same as it always does. I burst out of the water, feeling like a fish experiencing the air for the first time. At the turn I looked up and saw about twenty people in Virginia shirts yelling at me to 'go.' I rolled through the rest of the 100 butterfly. *Michael Phelps would've been impressed,* I joked to myself. I turned for my next stroke. Backstroke, my weakest of the four. I lost the lead I had earned from the last two laps. I saw my teammates again, urging me to keep on going.

*I'm halfway there, I just need to hang on.* I put all of my power behind the breaststroke portion of the race, but I still couldn't tell what place I was in. I turned for my last 100, freestyle. I pounded my legs off of the walls, and was finally able to see how well I was doing.

I only saw two people doing significantly better than me. The rest were either next to me, or slightly behind. Luckily for me, they were not endurance swimmers and started to slow down, while I took off. I greeted the wall with a smile and pounded off of it. I could tell my teammates were excited too, they were running along the edge of the pool and pointing towards the finish. I kept breathing towards them to see what they were trying to tell me. Then it hit me, this was no longer a race between eight people, but two.

Both of the end lanes were dead even with each other. It was time to put it into fifth gear, I used what remaining strength I had to get my hand on the wall first, but we noticed each other at exactly the same time. Neither of us were letting the other one win. Fifteen meters, ten meters, we were still even. Five meters, no change. The wall, we had been almost synchronized. I took a gasping breath and immediately spun around to see the results on the scoreboard. Uniszkiewicz 5:02.10, Truong 5:02.25. I out touched him. If I had taken one or two more breaths, I would have lost.

Eventually, the roar of cheering started to come to me. I turned to Virginia's bleachers and saw them all on their feet yelling and clapping. I smiled and leaned against the wall to take my well deserved rest. I hopped out of the pool and went straight to my team's area without a second thought, and went up to Mark. I almost flew back when he gave me a high five. "That's how we swim!" he said enthusiastically. I grinned and went back to my seat bumping into claps on the back and high fives.

# CARELESS SPLASHES

Natalie Cox

## *Starting Off*

I walked into the large brick building, every bone in my body trembling, like a groom anxiously waiting for his bride. I wanted to walk out. I didn't want to be here. I opened the tall glass doors with the squeaky hinges as the aroma of chlorine filled my nose. The jitters stopped. I felt at home. I felt a sense of purpose.

My eyes began to wander around the pool deck like a child in a candy shop. Four ten foot tall life-guard stands surrounded the twenty-five meter, nine-foot deep, pool. I went through my bag and pulled out my purple goggles that smelled like grapes and my matching cap. I dove into the room-temperature pool, the water kissing every inch of my body. I pushed my hands downwards causing me to slowly glide towards the surface of the water.

### *How I Wanted to Quit*

Have you seen those *Spongebob* episodes where Squidward throws his hat on the ground and stomps on it when he quits the Krusty Krab? I felt like doing just that. I wanted to quit, I wanted to give up everything I worked so hard for. In fact, I *had* given up. Or so I thought . . .

I hated being compared. To my sister, especially. She beat me at everything. Reading, drawing suns in the corner of your paper, you name it—she always one-upped me. I felt like I played the role of the annoying turtle shell that was meant to be stepped on, and she got to be Mario. Coincidence or not, as soon as I grew a liking for swimming, my sister, who is four years older than me, became coach. This meant she pushed me harder than everyone else. She yelled at me more. She had less patience. I remember getting out of the pool during mankillers, and just standing there, staring at her. Her words went in one ear and out the other. I threw my purple goggles, with a now broken strap near the lens, on the ground. They meant nothing to me now. There they lay on the tiled pool deck soaked from our careless splashes. I walked to the wooden door reading “Girls Locker Room,” my muscles trying to resist every movement I made, my heart pounding, both satisfied and regretful. I grabbed my swim bag and headed towards the door, doing the walk of shame. *What have I done?*

### *Getting Back into Swimming*

The pitter patter of the rain accompanied me as

I sat down on the old, white, wooden chair to do my homework. I began to look out the window, and next thing you know, my mind was heading into some sort of wonderland. Every moment I have had with swimming, including the tiny details, crept through my head.

What I thought to be music playing in the background started to sound like the whistling heard on a crowded pool deck. The rain eased as the images inside my head became less vague. The cheers grew louder, the whistle blows clearer. *Why did I quit in the first place?*

I loved the smell of chlorine late at night after a long stressful day filled with endless running of teenage girl's mouths. I enjoyed how strong the bond of a team was after only knowing each other for a month. It all came down to whether or not I saw myself swimming in the future, and the answer to that was yes. I may not have been a speed demon, but I certainly was not a turtle in this race.

I alternated between scavenging through my closet and looking through swimsuit designs online. All of the stress from my parents arguing every time my little brothers went to bed, to being upset because I was losing someone close to me, to the frustration of my math grades dropping because I am the last person who could be able to tell you what a linear equation is—it all left momentarily.

### *First 200 Breaststroke*

It smelled like chlorine and sun block, the per-

fume of every swimmer. The sun was about to set, and the air was beginning to crisp. I was standing on the handmade, wooden block covered in purple paint. I admired the penmanship of the bold number four, as I heard the words "Event Number thirty-one, boys six and under twenty-five breaststroke. Swimmers, please step up!" My friend, Kevin, dove off the wobbly block with as much grace as a six-year-old could. The timer was soaked and gave off a faint laugh as his thumb pressed the top left button on the dark yellow stopwatch. He reached the second set of flags hovering over the pool, and as soon as he did, my stomach was invaded by a swarm of butterflies. It was turning and I felt like I had to throw up. I didn't know what to do. I turned to the person behind me to assist me with my cap, and then put on my goggles as Kevin neared the wall. The intercom beeped loudly, and just seconds later I heard the words "Event number thirty-two, girls six and under twenty-five breaststroke. Swimmers, please step up!" I dove in, and, being that I was six, my legs looked like directionless noodles. My instincts were to look hesitantly at the people next to me, and I did. The only problem being, I didn't see anyone. As I came up to take a breath, I was hearing beep after beep. Little did I know this meant that I had false started, and was supposed to go back to the block. My face turned a cherry red and I swam back in shame. Things could not be worse.

"Natalie, you can do this. I know you can. breaststroke is your best stroke. Have a little faith just pretend you're at practice racing Kendra," my coach told

me as I was getting ready for my 200. I don't know why I was so nervous; it was nothing I hadn't done at practice before. It could have been because it was my first time doing this event in a meet, or because I was racing the one and only Hallie Norman. She was a speed demon with red hair, green eyes, and broad shoulders. She was known to coaches for her technique and to swimmers for her speed.

My teammates had my back. They comforted me with their words, and the nerves quickly went away. I got up on the block, heard the beep, and dove in. I pushed my arms in a downwards motion, kicking my legs sideways at the same time. I took a quick look to my right, knowing not to, but I was behind Hallie. My arms went into streamline as I kicked sideways once again. I stayed in streamline as I glided through the water. I neared the wall, and took another look at Hallie's lane. She was nowhere to be seen. Several negative thoughts ran through my head: *She's ahead of me. I'm going to lose this race for sure. Why am I still trying?* I touched the wall and looked over. Hallie wasn't at the wall. In fact, she was still a good twenty yards behind me, nowhere near the wall. Nobody was. *Had I actually beat Hallie Norman?* A grin on my face complemented my win, and I waited for the other swimmers to touch the wall. I shook hands with those next to me, and hopped out to be greeted by Erica screaming with joy.

It's been a year since I've gotten back into swimming, and not once have I regretted it. My strokes have improved, and my speed is slowly increasing. My best friends, Maryam, Katie, Chloe, and Daniel are there to

provide me with encouraging words and I feel blessed to have such a great group of friends to call my swim family. Breaststroke is still my best stroke, my favorite stroke of all time. Gliding through the water will always make me feel like I'm in an alternate universe, and that's all I could ever ask for. So, my advice to you, is if you ever love something, never lose faith. If someone tells you you're no good, strive to be better just to prove them wrong. As cliche as it is, chase your dreams.

# VOLUNTEERING WITH ART

Courtney Hargrove

Picture a long wooden table lined with markers, crayons, scraps of colorful paper, scissors, pencils, glue sticks, and tape. With little direction and a vague knowledge of the craft, I eagerly awaited the children's arrival. Before I had time to breathe, I heard the sound of little feet racing up the stairs to the room with their parents' slower steps in tow.

This is the scene that was presented to me when I walked into the Peninsula Fine Arts Center to help teach a new craft activity to the young children who were soon to come.

At the start of the project, the parents kept a respectable distance from their children and just observed. However, as time went on, they all gradually crept closer and closer, either out of curiosity or to help their children construct the mask. Towards the end of the activity, the parents were just as enthralled as the children and started making their own masks. The par-

ents had reverted back to a simpler time when an art project could captivate them. As I witnessed first-hand, art has the ability to even change a group of mature adults into excitable young children.

# PAINT IN MY HAIR

Daniel Strickland

Last year, I spent the first week of summer painting houses at the Ohio Valley Work Camp. I'm not the kind of guy that enjoys leaving home for more than a day, so I was skeptical. My youth group leader Roger persuaded me to go, along with my best friend Jeff and four other girls from our church.

Sunday morning, I got to the church building, where we all met up, got in a sorry excuse for a van, and headed off to the edge of West Virginia. The trip was just as boring as any other road trip I had ever been on, except now I had three more girls than normal, making the ratio of men to ladies, far more equal than our manly 4:1 family trips. The only real impact that these ladies caused was the ear shattering-blast of a certain boy band—One Direction. So to combat this pre-pubescent menace, Jeff and I were forced to seek the sanctuary in a single ear bud in one ear and a very uncomfortable finger in the other.

We arrived in the valley before set-dinner time. The setting sun cast a deep orange tint in our dorms, where Jeff, Roger, and I were all together. Lucky for us, someone brought an air mattress, a much better sleeping option than the claustrophobic bottom bunk. Unpacked, we strolled through hordes of crowded halls to find our awaiting dinner. It was a typical American get-together: we ate pizza, chips, and cookies. After dinner, I eagerly awaited sleep because the six hour trip was a pain in the back. But Roger snored. Loudly. But even worse was the broken blinds—the turn handle that opened and closed them was broken, so the 24/7 lights from the parking lot shined into our room all night.

In the morning, I was greeted by a breakfast buffet. They had almost everything except eggs and French toast, plus I soon learned that Hardee's makes a mean sausage biscuit. For actual painting, I was prepared, and not prepared. I had failed to bring enough clothes, which wouldn't have been a problem if the college had a laundromat. After we crossed the Ohio River, I happily lugged my full backpack containing everything I could ever need. Every day, I'd bring along a tan hat and some aviators, which along with all my clothes, got war scars from painting five days straight.

All week I heard complaining about the heat. Yeah, it was in the nineties, and sometimes got up to one-hundred, but in all honesty, being from Texas, I barely noticed the sun. The bus from the college carried thirty of the five-hundred teens that came to the Work Camp. On our street, there were three houses

soon to be invaded by serving teens. Every step I took walking down the street, I kept thinking about which house was ours, who our homeowner was, and if I was going to have fun or not. But none of these things really mattered because we all came to serve God and set an example.

Our home was just a faded white, with a porch in the front and back, and two stories high, not including the attic. Our homeowner was a very nice fellow. His girth reminded me of Santa Claus, and, in our favor, he was a Christian and eager to have his house painted. With nine other people, we had almost finished by Thursday. Scraping was done the first day, and was the most painful. Half of us brave folk got on the back porch, and tried to scrape off the fused paint and wood mixture, with no luck after thirty minutes of pathetically scraping the same spot with all our strength. So, we decided to prime over it and eventually forgot about it.

I had never actually painted a house before, so everything going on was completely new. Jeff and I were two of the only guys who volunteered to climb the ladders to paint the second story. It was like like playing Russian roulette, but with your friends. Odd, I know, but I had to put all my trust in Jeff's two hands to keep the ladder still, otherwise it would get messy. As I climbed the ladder, my grip on the paint bin grew increasingly tighter, until my knuckles turned bubble-gum pink. Each time I finished climbing another step, the ladder would sway back and forth real quickly, like Jell-o. And I couldn't have my feet too far or too close

together on the rungs of the ladder, otherwise they might hit the next rung up, startle me, then boom-plop down on the ground with a broken neck. Sometimes I would scream down at Jeff for not doing his job.

So we primed, painted, and painted again, 'til our house was picture perfect. Our technique was to paint as far as your arm can reach, then move over six feet and switch jobs. This worked with both houses and took very little time.

Jeff and I were being complete bosses when it came to painting houses. By the end of the week, we had painted our original house and helped finish two others in the neighborhood. After we finished our original house on Thursday morning, we left the group to go help with the house down the street, which was being painted a mix of red-ish and tan-ish (I say "ish" because I'm color blind; sad to say, Jeff would tell you completely different colors). Here, we painted the house's second story using our technique from before, and later got to touch up the shutters in the front of the house. The shutters were a lot of fun. Their ultra-conductive metal wasn't, but getting to unscrew them was simplicity in arm with satisfaction. The shutters were thrown off the roof, into Jeff's arms, and then put on the lawn. We later painted them the next day, but at the moment we needed to paint the porch tan-ish.

Over the week, we got a lot of hype around the tri-state area. Luckily, Dr. Doofenshmirtz wasn't there to ruin the day, but we did grab the attention of the local news. The news station's segment explained what we were doing, and interviewed a lot of the

painters, from rookies to ten-year vets. After all of this hype, our weary, paint-dried hands passed around cold treats. And the best part of the whole week was the Popsicles. Yes, Popsicles. Why not? These pieces of heaven were "God's manna" as described by our original home owner. The fabulous, frozen treats pounded my salivary glands with grape, cherry, and orange. After working under the sun all day, Popsicles are defibrillators.

After we finished the second house on Friday, we spent rest of our work time helping a house on the other side of our neighborhood, where Roger and one of our girls was at. This house was painted neon green. Not very appealing, but hey, it's not my house. The work that we did was just painting white the trim around the house. The awesome thing about this place was the homeowner had a refrigerator on the back porch filled to the brim with anything you could want. The hospitality was a great change compared to our normal lives back home.

The time came to leave, the house just barely finished. We loaded up on the bus, and after getting ice-cream, we got went to the college. That night, all 41 groups invited their homeowners to a banquet, where we reminisced on the hard work we put in that week. Along with the dinner, a slide show had before and after pictures of every house, and all of them were beautiful. From peeling paint, to high gloss finishes, the changed houses were obviously greater than before, and all homeowners were joyful.

After the banquet, we packed up and cleaned our

room, feeling very content with our efforts. Saturday morning, we left the college before breakfast and headed back home on the same road, but this journey was much more enjoyable. Instead of One Direction, no music played through the van's speakers and I finally got to enjoy some peace and dozed off. Until we hit the city limits of Newport News, traffic wasn't a problem. But when we were just fifteen minutes away from home, it began to downpour, and traffic halted. We spent an hour in the same spot, only moving a few feet every minute. When we finally got past the choke-point on the highway, we rushed to the church building, where the parents of all the teens were waiting to pick us up. We dragged our limp bodies home.

The week had been so crazy; so much work had been done on so many houses and by so many teens. Teens came from all around the east, and worked their butts off to honor God and impact the community. For me, I was very worn down by all the work, but just the fact that I helped so many people made all the pain go away, and gave me a foundation for the whole summer.

# MAYHEM FESTIVAL

Trevor Mathes

While people tend to think of summer as a time of excitement and adventure, I myself find the summer is a time of peace and relaxation, where sitting back and letting the world pass me by is the main attraction. However, last summer I decided to change things up somewhat, and asked my parents if I could attend the Mayhem Festival.

For the non-metalheads out there, the Mayhem Festival is a day long metal extravaganza, celebrating awesomely loud and aggressive music. It is also a prime event to go to if you want to lose your hearing. My parents agreed to order tickets for me, my brother, who is an avid fan of metal himself, and my dad, who had to drive us to the concert. And so, on an early July morning, my brother, my dad and I set out on the three hour drive to Washington, D.C. As I was accustomed to waking up at noon during this time of the summer, waking up at nine in order to arrive on time

to the concert caused most of my senses to be rather dulled during the car ride. I was able to sleep for the majority of the trip.

When I woke up, we were almost at the concert. As we found a place to park in the grass field functioning as a temporary parking lot, I felt dregs of sleep leave me, replaced by excitement. My dad, wanting to take some time to get to know the area, gave my brother and I our tickets and let us go ahead. As I stepped out of the van, the day's heat reared its head again, only now, with this being an outdoor event, there was no air conditioning to find relief in.

As we neared the entrance to the concert area, I began to hear the sounds of a band playing. It was powerful, abrasive, and most importantly, loud. I realized two things. One, that the concert was split into two stages. Second, was that the area around the secondary stage was a hard-core fan's paradise. There was no seats, no roof, and the ground was composed of dry dirt. There was just open space, sweltering heat, and concession stands for refueling. Oh, and the fans had kicked up a rather large amount of choking dust. This was going to be fun.

The first band that I had been eagerly anticipating, Anthrax, came on. I could tell that the crowd, which had grown since my arrival, was as excited as I was. A sense of energy came over us. As the bassist unleashed the first booming note, we all started yelling, and were swept up in the awe of the pounding, driving music that the band was producing. While I didn't get involved in the thickest part of the crowd, I still kept up

my own antics, jumping and yelling at the top of my lungs. After a while, the song ended, and after our congratulatory cheers, the band started up again. We felt a sense of animal excitement come over us.

The sun began to fade into a red haze, and the day shifted into evening, the crowds carried me and my brother to the primary stage, where mercifully, we found our seats. When the first band of the major acts, Asking Alexandria, began to play, I took it as an opportune time to rest in my seat before the bands that I came there to see came on. Not that I doubted Asking Alexandria's talent, its just that the shrieking style of their vocalists wasn't my thing. Once they finished, however, Motorhead, one of the pioneers of metal came on. Finding myself suddenly reinvigorated, I instantly added my voice to those in the crowd whose voices rang with anticipation. Once the band began playing, we listened in awe as the living legends in front of us belted out song after song, loud and aggressive, while still retaining that classic rock feel. Just as I began to wonder how those grizzled rock veterans were going to be able to keep it up, Motorhead finished their set list. My voice died down, waiting for the next, and most intense act of the day. Slayer.

While the tech people were setting up the stage for Slayer, a large curtain was dropped over the stage, blocking our view of it. We soon found out why. The first ominous notes wailed from the band's two guitarists still behind the curtain. The bass and the drums joined in, and the crowd grew restless. Finally, as if they could sense that we couldn't wait any longer, the

curtain dropped, and we saw fire. The fire was in the shape of the band's logo, and it burned menacingly above the band. And at the same time, the band began to play, we all went crazy. Whipped into the frenzy by the showy pyrotechnics and relentless, brutal music, we simply screamed and head banged with all we had until we were a raging maelstrom of noise and activity.

Collapsing into my chair, I couldn't help but wonder how the last band on the program, Slipknot, could possibly top that. It turned out that we had to wait quite a bit to find out. They used the same curtain that they used for Slayer to set up for Slipknot. As I waited for the show to continue, I looked around and noticed that a substantial portion of the crowd had left after Slayer had performed. A pity. As soon as that thought crossed my mind, the stage darkened, and the crowd hushed.

The curtains dropped, the lights flared, and we were bombarded by Slipknot's signature style of insanity. The screams, growls, and manic ranting of the lead singer mixed with the guitars, pounding drums, and eerily focused base joined to create what can best be described as harmonious chaos. Their orange jump-suits and sadistic looking masks only adding to the look of madness. They asked us to join in on many of their songs, and naturally, we went ballistic. We sang, growled, and howled along with them, like an orchestra following their conductor. Finally, it was all over, and my voice was reduced to a raspy whisper.

My brother and I dragged ourselves away from the

concert, we found our dad waiting for us by the exit. I noticed how dark the night seemed, compared to the mininova that our concert was. I could feel the tiredness gnawing at me. When we reached our hotel, I was the first to stumble into our room, and I collapsed.

# PROMOTION

Christopher Rambali

"Last call for Tabb cadets!" I yelled through the cafeteria. The bus that would take us from Grafton to Tabb had just arrived. I gathered my cadets and hustled them onto the bus. All who were left behind could not attend the company formation. We have one every quarter, but this one was special. I was being promoted to the rank of Petty Officer First Class. It is very rare for a sophomore to be selected for this rank, which definitely made it more special.

We arrived at Tabb about an hour early to prepare. We had pizza, drinks, and other snacks, but those were for later. Our first priority was to form up into our assigned platoons, or groups, and stay in the gym. I knew my moment was near and I could barely stay still. Finally, Commander Johnson took the stage and explained to the audience, filled with our parents, what would take place. He explained that we would stay in the gym for awards and promotions, then make

our way to the classroom for pizza and socializing.

The award ceremony began rather slowly. As they called each cadet up for their award, I grew impatient. My legs were shaking and I kept staring at my mom, who was taking a picture every other second with her phone. First, they called cadets who were receiving ribbons for service they have done in the community and in the unit. Then they got to the promotions. The CO, or commanding officer, started with the lowest rank promotions, Seaman Apprentice, then worked her way up to the highest enlisted rank, Petty Officer First Class.

Finally, she announced the cadets who would be promoted, my name was called last. I stepped out of my platoon and walked attentively to the group that was called before me. While up there, Commander made a speech about how we have reached the highest enlisted rank in NJROTC without becoming chiefs. I was so proud of myself. The CO walked up to me, handed me my rank, and shook my hand.

I told myself I wouldn't cry, but when I looked up at my mom for the picture next to all my fellow cadets being promoted, I saw a single tear roll down her face. I choked up, and I couldn't help it. I began to cry. I tried to hide my face so that nobody would see me in the state that I was, but then I realized—everyone was crying. Tears of joy dripped from our eyes as the whole company applauded and congratulated us on our outstanding achievement.

"Congratulations, Cadet Rambali!" I heard from behind. I looked up to see my former CO, Josh Price, now serving in the Corps of Cadets at Virginia Tech.

“Thank you sir, I mean, Josh, I mean . . .” I stammered. I felt so stupid, but I was sure he knew what I meant. Everything about that day was perfect.

# BECOMING A JEWISH ADULT

Samantha Lazarus

"You have been working so hard this year. We have so much faith in you. We know that you can do anything. So go out tomorrow and do everything like you have practiced it, and you will do *great!*" say my mom and dad.

"Thank you! Good night. Love you guys!" I respond.

I wake up this morning, and my heart is racing. I am so unbelievably nervous. I sit on my bed, take deep breaths and reassure myself that I know I can do everything awesome. So I get up, brush my teeth, put on my blue and black zebra strapless dress, and my friend does my hair and makeup. *I look pretty good!* I go downstairs and eat a Poptart. Me, my mom, and my mom's friend get in one car. My dad, brother, and friends from Pennsylvania (which are pretty much like family because we have known them forever) get in the other. While I am in the car I read over my speech once more.

When we get to the library, it feels like everyone is already there. The ceremony is at the library because my whole family could not fit in the Temple, which is where we would typically have Saturday morning services. The library is in Colonial Williamsburg, so it has an old-timey feel to it. When I walked inside for the first time, I felt like I was going to see a play at a theater, the space was so big. A couple months before the actual day my mom, the Rabbi, and I went there to check out the space and make sure that it was going to work out well.

“Sam, you know that if we do the service here, you are going to have to be extremely loud, right?” asked the concerned Rabbi.

“Yes, I know,” I replied.

“You just have to pretend like you’re yelling at Zachary,” said my mom, for the five hundredth time.

Now I set up my notebook, my prayer book, and a water bottle (in case my mouth gets dry), on the stage and then go outside to take pictures until my mom comes out and says, “It’s time to start.”

There, in front of me, are hundreds of pairs of eyes staring at me. I start to shake. I keep messing with my dress out of nervousness. Rabbi David comes up to me and gives me a sign to say that we are going to begin. He stand next to me and speaks to the congregation. “*Shabbat Shalom* everybody.”

As a group everyone replies, “*Shabbat Shalom.*”

“This morning we are going to start with the traditional Bat Mitzvah *Negun*, a wordless joyful melody. If you don’t know this, you will soon. I think you will

be able to catch on fast," Rabbi David explains. It's true because the whole song is "la la la la," pretty much the whole time.

"I would like to welcome you to the Bat Mitzvah of Samantha Lazarus. At this time I would like to invite up Samantha's parents to place the prayer shawl on her." They stand on either side of me with the silk blue and violet fabric lifted over my head, as I say the *tallit* blessing. As they drape the shawl around my shoulders, I can feel the cool, soft silk fabric touch my skin, but it gives me a warm feeling inside. Then my parents sat down.

I like being able to take charge and be the leader of the service. I read from the prayer book, chant the Hebrew and ask the congregation to read and chant with me. The songs fill the room with a beautiful sound and the prayers read together by the congregation seem like one voice. Towards the middle of the service we do something called a Torah service, which is when we take the very old, handwritten Torah gently out of the wooden Ark. I then carry it up and down the aisles of the library (it was very heavy) and as I walk through, the congregation sings. After that, we set it down carefully on a table, take the hand-embroidered cover off, and read part of a story from it.

Months before my Bat Mitzvah, I asked family and friends if they would take the honor of joining me in reading a part of the story out of the Torah, or saying the prayer that comes before reading from the Torah. This is an honor that is given to important Jewish people in your life. There are seven different read-

ings (as the one story is divided into seven parts), and then mine, a prayer thanking God for the gift of the Torah. These are all done in Hebrew. As each person comes up to say a prayer or read, I sit on the stage and follow along in the booklet, realizing how lucky I am to have these amazing people supporting me on this special day. After the fourth Ayliah, or reading, a special prayer of healing is chanted for people that are sick or need help in any way. This part is led by the Rabbi, and the congregation has an opportunity to say people's names that are in need of support. Once my family members finish their readings, it is my turn. My heart is racing, my palms are sweating, and as I stand up I get more and more nervous. But I know what to do, as I am prepared and ready for this. I take a deep breath and say to myself, You can do this.

I start, "*Baruch et adonai hom-vo-rach*"<sup>1</sup> I chant as loudly as I can.

The congregation responds, "*Baruch adonai hom-vo-rach la-olam va-ed.*"<sup>2</sup>

Then I repeat and finish by saying, *ba-ch-ar banu me kol ha. Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha olam asher a mem.*"<sup>3</sup>

Then my eyes go over to the Torah and begin what I have been practicing since June of last year. The words just start flowing out of my mouth like water

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1This prayer is the prayer for reading Torah.  
Bless THE INFINITE, the blessed one!

2 Blessed is THE INFINITE, the blessed One, now and forever!

3 Blessed are you, ETERNAL ONE, our God, the sovereign of all the worlds, who has drawn us to your service, and has given us your Torah. Blessed are you, ETERNAL ONE, who gives the Torah.

out of a fountain.

When I complete the chanting my mom says to me, "You read so smoothly, it was like you had been chanting your whole life." After that I have one more big part to do and then I can stop stressing. I have to read an interpretation of the story from another book all in Hebrew. The final part is a paper I wrote about how this Torah story has to do with my life today and why it is important to me. It had been hard to write but easy to read. I am also able to thank the important people in my life at the end of the reading. The service went fast. I am a little relieved and a little sad it is over. I feel a great sense of accomplishment though. I have worked so long and so hard for this day and *poof* it is over just like that.

# MRI

Gray Harris

On a dreary, rainy day, this summer, I had to go to Portsmouth to get an MRI on my shoulder. Turns out, the weather was just foreshadowing the dreadful time I was about have. Some background on why I needed an MRI seems necessary, so I will share. The previous spring, I missed the whole high school baseball season due to an unidentified arm injury. I had been to multiple doctors about the injury, which was, to put it simply, a wild goose chase of searching for answers. It eventually got to the point where the doctors just recommended that I get an MRI, as that would help us in finding a concrete answer. The whole process had been so frustrating for me that I didn't even care anymore I was just tired of being injured.

The morning of the MRI, I had to wake up at 4:30 in order to make it to my appointment on time. Apparently, there was some road work going on that morning so my father and I ended up in traffic for a

solid hour. When we finally found a parking spot and got into the hospital, we had to sit in the waiting room for a little while. Some of the people's ailments made me feel lucky to be as healthy as I am. When I was finally called back, I felt a small sense of guilt, as if the people I got to go before deserved to see the doctor more than me. When I got to the next room, I waited. The TV was turned to Nick Jr. since it was so early in the morning but the children's shows that were airing did not help distract me from my visions a big needle entering my arm.

After waiting for another half hour or so, a nurse finally came and called me back to the room where the initial procedure would happen. The only things in the room were a small patient's table, a cabinet, and a rather large x-ray camera. The nurse proceeded to ask me a number of medical questions confirming that I was in stable health conditions to be getting an MRI done. Finally the nurse asked me if I had any questions. I responded, "How big is the needle?"

"It's nothing to worry about."

The doctor soon arrived and got right to collecting the things he needed in order to carry out the procedure. Basically, he was going to take a really big needle and use it to inject a colored dye into my shoulder joint, so he would be able to see if there were any tears in the muscle. When he got out the needle I realized it was definitely something that I needed to be worried about. The needle was about seven to eight inches long, and it was a whole lot thicker than the needles used for flu shots.

The first thing the doctor did after he got out all of his materials was lay me down on the table in a position that would allow the x-ray camera to see into my shoulder. After he had done that, he washed my skin with a liquid that was a sickly orange color and smelled strongly of peroxide. He then took a pen and began marking an "X" on my arm where he needed to stick the needle. When he finished, he began to put the needle into my arm, searching for the proper spot to inject the fluid. As it turns out, my shoulder joints were so tight that it made it nearly impossible for him to find the correct spot. At this point, the needle was about five inches into my arm, and every time he moved it, I could feel a sharp pain zing up my arm, like electricity through a cable. Finally, he found the correct spot and began to inject the fluid into the joint. As he did, I could see the color inflate like a balloon on the x-ray camera.

After the injection was done, I lifted my arm to help push myself up off the table. It felt like my shoulder was about to burst right through my skin because of all the fluid now inside it. The next and final step of the process was the MRI itself. The nurse escorted me to the next room where I was asked to put on a little hospital gown because my clothes would get in the way of the MRI images. Then I walked to the room where the MRI machine actually was.

For those who don't know what an MRI machine looks like, just picture a block that has a tiny circular opening in it barely big enough for a human to fit inside. It's the torture chamber of the medical world. Oh, I almost forgot, it makes super loud noise too. The

MRI technician who would be helping me said that he could play music through some headphones so I didn't have to hear the noise that the machine made. I wanted that.

When I got into the machine my first reaction was a sort of panic. I am not usually the type of person who's concerned with being in a confined space; however this machine was so dreadful that I felt pretty horrible. On top of that, the position I was laying in made my shoulder feel like it was going to explode. Then I heard the technician say over the microphone, "It's about to get loud."

The machine started to make high-pitched sounds that kind of sounded like a leaky faucet. My music was also not playing. In addition to the noise, it was also about one hundred degrees in the machine, due to the fact that the technician had placed a blanket over my legs and he hadn't turned the fan on. After I had been laying there for about an hour, the noise finally stopped.

Before I could breathe a sigh of relief, the voice came over the intercom again and said, "We're going to have to do it again. You moved so much that the pictures got messed up." The noise started back up. As I lay restless inside the machine, I couldn't stop thinking about how warm I was. I could feel the hospital gown starting to stick to my skin from sweat.

At this point, all I really wanted was my music. At least that way I would have some sense of time. Even though it felt like I had been in the machine forever, the voice came over the intercom one last time

and said, “Good job, you’re all done.” Getting out of the machine was one of the best feelings I have ever had. I changed into my clothes and began to leave. As I walked through the door I heard a voice say from the lab, “Whoops, I forgot to press play on his music.”

# WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

Rachel Rippy

It all started with four words: "Your daughter has diabetes." Those four words were all it took for my entire life to be flipped upside down.

At the young age of five, I was the definition of normal. I had brown hair, blue eyes, and cute puffy cheeks with just a tint of pink.

However, halfway through first grade, things started to change. My teachers noticed, my friends noticed, and my parents, especially, noticed. It started with the drowsiness. I would take naps, which was unusual in itself. But they became more and more frequent until it got to the point where I would fall asleep in class. I also became extremely irritable, which was unusual because I was usually such a bright and bubbly person. Then, I became extremely thirsty and would drink large amounts of water. But the thing is, I hate water.

It had been about a week when my mom decided to keep me home one day. It was mid-November, and

the crisp air nipped at my exposed face as we made our way into my GP's office. I sat in the cold leather chair while my mom talked to the nurse behind the tall counter.

When we were situated in the, sterile exam room a nurse came in and started prepping me for blood work. She fastened a blue rubber tie around my arm and quickly felt around for a vein. She slid a sleek, silver syringe into the crook of my arm. Soon the warm, dark blood had filled the shiny tube.

We waited about an hour and my dad showed up at the doctor's office to join us. A short time later, the doctor came in. She looked very worried. The wrinkles around her mouth and eyes had become deeper and darker, the ridges stood out like specks of white on a black canvas, and her face drooped with sorrow. She sat down across from my parents and looked them in the eyes. Her tone was grave and full of sympathy as she said those four words, "Your daughter has diabetes." She went on to explain that my blood glucose was very high and that I needed to be taken to CHKD immediately. My mom started sobbing and my dad just looked troubled and lost. I didn't understand.

When we arrived at CHKD, two nurses ushered my parents and I through the long, stark white hallways until we got to a small admittance room. It was a cozy, baby blue room with an array of rainbow fish painted on the walls and ceiling.

One of the nurses exited the room while the other whispered in a hushed voice to my parents. When she first returned she had a silver tray bearing small plas-

tic packages as well as antiseptic and a pair of gloves. She explained that she was going to be prepping me for an IV.

I had no idea what it was, so I was calm until she pulled out the long syringe. I immediately cringed and tried to hide. In a split-second, the other nurse was holding me down as if I were some type of prisoner on the verge of a full mental breakdown. I thrashed violently and screamed for my mom and dad, but they couldn't do anything to help me. It was as if they were in a completely different room looking in on me through a thick, cold pane of glass. After one particularly powerful thrash I broke the needle the nurse had been trying to insert in my hand. At this point I was so tired all I could do was cry and watch helplessly as they brought out a new IV and sheathed it into my tiny veins.

When they finally attached the long tube leading from the plastic bag to my slender

hand, I was overcome with cold. My arm felt hollow and icy, almost as if my limbs were dying one by one as the contents of the plastic bag spread through the small blood filled channels in my body.

Eventually I was moved to a quiet room on the eighth floor. Where my mom would alternate between listening to the doctors and silently weeping, as if someone had died.

I stayed in that place for four days, during which time my family all came and visited me or took me up to the playroom on the tenth floor where I would play on the Playstation or drive around in a small pink elec-

tric car.

When I finally left the hospital and went home, I thought I would never have to see another needle ever again.

By the time I arrived home, I felt as if I was a human pin cushion. I always had someone jabbing me with a needle.

The first thing I did was go into the garage and walk over to the tall white fridge in the corner. I eased the cold metal door open and slid a Capri Sun out. I then plopped down on the big leather couch in the living room. My parents were outside at the time, so I was pretty much by myself. They entered the house through the front door and came into the den. My mom screamed and lunged at the juice in my hand.

In a split-second I began to cry. I was scared, I had no idea why my mom had done that. When my mom and dad had finally got me to calm down, they explained to me that I could never have juice, regular soda, candy, sweets, ice cream, or anything like that again. I was never going to be like other kids. I was never going to have a normal childhood. And just like that, at the age of five, my world crashed down around me. I felt empty. I started to shake as choked sobs racked my small body.

Over the years, things became easier. I got used to the sugar free and low carb foods. It became second nature to count carbs: *Okay, so I'm having an apple, that's 20. Then there's the granola bar, that's 35. So total, that's 55 carbs.*

I got used to the needles. The long, sleek syringes

became as familiar to me as the bed I sleep on. But they are always there, a constant reminder that I will never be like other people. They are a reminder to other people that I would never be like them.

# GRANDPA'S TOMATO GARDEN

Alyssa Kidwell

The garden was so small.

It was a tiny square of land, cut into a huge yard of trees, un-raked leaves, and withering grass; one speck of vibrant life in the world of brown surrounding it. Yellow squash, deep green cucumbers, tangled vines. But out of all these things, I remember the tomatoes the most. They were the large, red, and round kind of tomatoes that you just don't find in Food Lion.

It was for them that I arrived at my grandparents' house that day, clad in gardening gloves and a determined disposition. I had a job to do, and I, more than anyone else, understood how much of an honor it was. Not just anyone could work on Grandpa's garden. Not just anyone could tend his tomatoes. And yet there I was.

In retrospect, I didn't do all that much. For understandable reasons, I was not given the job of tending the tomatoes themselves, but rather the stakes that sur-

rounded them. I'd been told of how vital this job was, though seemingly trivial. The tomatoes had to stay upright, they told me. Otherwise, they plant could very well die. The lives of Grandpa's tomatoes were in my small, eleven-year-old hands.

Walking past the tree stump that Grandpa has cut down to create a table-slash-dance floor for my siblings and me a few years beforehand. I remembered how Grandpa and Grandma used to warn us away from the garden, telling us not to play over there; we might step on a squash. But today I stepped with one small foot right into the middle of the garden, with the other planted safely on the dry, tan grass. I didn't want to completely expose myself to the dangers of having two feet in the garden quite yet. This was safer.

The garden was so small. But so was I.

I went about my work, beating the wooden stakes into the dirt around the tomatoes, avoiding the squash and cucumbers that lay beside them. My grandpa stood on the screened-in porch smoking a cigarette. The pressure was on.

I don't remember it taking long, but time is known to do far stranger things to memories. Surprisingly, I also don't remember the response—was Grandpa satisfied with my work? I'd like to think he was, but after all of that, I don't remember his words, whether his long, brown, leathery face had pulled into a smile or a frown. . . nothing. Only the tomatoes. Pounding the wooden stakes in the small box around the twisting vines. The sun, white hot, peeking through the trees that surrounded the house. Avoid the squash. Don't hit

the squash.

I don't know how I could have forgotten. It was so important to me that I succeeded in making him happy. But I just can't remember. The other question in my mind, the question that no one in my family can seem to answer with complete confidence, is how sick Grandpa already was.

It wasn't long after that, no matter who tells the story, that my grandpa passed. He's never liked the doctor, never liked hospitals. So naturally, when it finally got bad enough that dad forced him to go, the cancer was simply too big. We'd all told him; even I had tried to get him to quit because the man from the D.A.R.E. program said smoking was bad.

My parents both say that they think my grandpa didn't know how sick he was when he watched me put the stakes around his tomatoes. But I could swear to anyone and anything that it was after the doctors told him that there was nothing more the hospital could do. My dad told me later that I was the last grandchild he ever saw in person. The last picture I ever sent to him was one of my little sister, eating a small piece of yellow squash.

Those days are all a blur. It's tough believing that he was only in chemo for three weeks. It seemed much longer. Did he smoke a cigarette on the screened-in porch, or was it all he could do to stand and walk outside? I just don't remember.

Keep the line straight. Avoid the squash.  
Don't step on the squash.

# A GRANDPA'S LOVE

Gabrielle Hernandez

## *Finding Out*

I was on the school bus coming home from school, looking at the new book I had received. I couldn't wait to show it to my parents. When the bus came to a stop, I flew down the stairs and started to run home. Out of breath, I finally reached our house in the little town in Aviano, Italy. Since my dad was in the Air Force, we moved around a lot, and at the time, we were stationed there. I opened the green door and saw both my parents sitting at the dining table. It was unusual for my dad to be home that early since he usually arrived at five. I immediately noticed that my parents looked different. My dad's face was red and his eyes were swollen, and my mom looked sad. I walked over to them and I showed them my new book. "Look! My teacher passed them out today! Can you read it to me?"

My mom looked at me and said, "Not right now. Why don't you go to your room and play, right?"

"What's wrong?" I asked. My mom told me that it was nothing, and she told me again to go to my room. I was a little mad because they weren't telling me what was wrong, and I was excited to explore my new book, but I just walked across the living room to the stairs up to my room.

I had stayed up in my room for about half an hour when I started to wonder what was going on downstairs. So, being the nosy child that I was, I walked out of my room into the hallway. I heard muffled voices and I couldn't hear exactly what my parents were talking about, but I heard them say something about flying back home to Texas. Texas? I wondered why we would go there at this time of the year. It wasn't Christmas time, or my birthday. I gave up in frustration and went back to playing in my room. I mean, how bad could going home be? At least I could see my grandpa whom I missed so much.

After I had played for a while, my mom called me downstairs. I went down and I smelled something really good.

"What are you making?" I asked.

"Just some chicken noodle soup, your favorite!" she replied. Mom told me to sit down on the kitchen table, and I did. My dad was there, too. As she reached into the cabinet to get a bowl, she said that we were going back to Grandma's house in San Antonio for a while and that I would be missing some school.

"Yay!" I exclaimed. "What for?" I was really excited to back to Texas since I never see my family frequently. My mom smiled as she placed the bowl in

front of me and said, "You remember how Grandpa has been very sick lately, and had that heart attack a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah, is he okay?" My mom slowly sat down in the chair next to me and said softly, "Well your Grandma called us this morning and told us that he had another heart attack and, well, your Grandpa has passed away. We're going back home for his funeral." She came to give me a hug, but I didn't return it. I couldn't believe it. I loved my grandpa so much and we had so many good times together. He couldn't be gone. Even though we only spent a little over five years together, I felt like I had known him forever.

"Really?" I asked. I couldn't get anything else out of my mouth. How could I respond to this?

"Yes, honey. I'm sorry, we're all going through a hard time right now. But all of our family will be there. We will have so much support." I suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of sadness, but I couldn't cry. I wanted to, and I felt like I had to, but I couldn't. I walked up to my room and just lay on my bed for a while, trying not to think about the terrible news I had just received.

I heard footsteps on the stairs, and immediately knew it was Mom. She walked up next to my bed and asked if I was alright. I told her that I was fine, even though I really wasn't. She started to talk to me about something, but I wasn't really listening. She gave me another hug and walked out of my room. After she left, I had a feeling that I needed something to remember him by, as if I would forget him soon. I walked over

to my jewelry box, and pulled out a gold necklace my grandpa had given to me right before we left to Italy. Finally, after looking at the necklace in my hand and remembering our great memories together, I started to cry.

A couple days later, at school, my teacher came up to me and said, "You need to go to the office, your mom is here to pick you up!" I was really happy to see my mom so I said goodbye to all my friends as I walked out to the hallway. Shortly, I reached the office to see that my mom was talking to the receptionist. They were chattering about something really funny, it seemed, because they were both laughing.

"Hi Mommy!" I exclaimed.

"Hi honey!" she replied, and came over to grab my backpack from me.

"Just sit down in those chairs and draw," my mom said, pointing to the chairs. "I'm just talking to this lad for a quick second." I walked over to the chairs and picked up a book instead.

Soon, my mom said that it was time for us to go. I waved to the nice lady and walked out to our car. Once in the car, my mom said that we would be leaving to Grandma's house in about two days and that she took me out of school so we could start pacing. I truly didn't want to go because I was very unhappy and I didn't want to believe that my grandpa was gone forever.

"Fine," I muttered.

Our first flight was not too long, but our layover was. When we got off the plane, we ate and waited and waited until our next flight. We had a total of

three flights we had to take just to get to San Antonio, Texas. After getting our bags from the conveyer belt, we walked out. Standing right by the gate was my grandma, my two aunts, and a couple of my cousins. I was greeted with, "You look so grown!" and , "I've missed you so much!" After hugging and reuniting, we put our bags in my Grandma's truck and drove to her country house in the middle of nowhere.

I had always loved my Grandma's house. Every time my parents dropped me off for the day, I never wanted to leave. Still remembering every room, I walk to the guest room and start to put my stuff away. My mom comes into the room and tells me to take a shower and get ready for tomorrow. The funeral was the next morning and I really wasn't looking forward to it. I had never been to a funeral before, and I did not know what to expect. Dreading the next day, I lay in my bed, thinking about my grandpa and how much I already miss him, until I eventually fell asleep.

### *The Necklace*

"I have a surprise for you," my grandpa told me, with his hands behind his back.

"Really? What it is?" It was about midday and I was spending yet another day with my grandparents at their house. My parents decided to go watch a movie and needed somebody to babysit me, and who else better than my grandparents? A day with them was really enjoyable to me, and we always had the most fun times together.

Standing in their backyard in the heat of the sun,

I was thinking of why he was giving me a gift when it wasn't my birthday or Christmas. My grandpa had never given me a gift personally before for no reason, so I was surprise and couldn't keep my excitement inside me much longer. Was it another stuffed animal? A book? What could it be? Whatever it was, I knew I would like it, since my grandpa knew me so well. "What is it? Show me already! Please?" I begged. I wanted to find out what this present was so badly. Suddenly, his hand were now in front of me, holding a small, delicate necklace. It was gold and the pendant was a tiny rose painted on a little white stone. It was the most beautiful necklace I have ever seen.

"Thank you so much! I love it," I practically yelled. I held the necklace in my hands as gently as I could, as if it would break at any second. My grandpa smiled and patted my head.

"Can you put it on for me, please?"

"Sure. Come here." He put it around my neck, and he said that it looked really pretty on me. I smiled as big as I could. I gave him a hug, and ran back inside the house to show my grandma. She was in the kitchen, cooking lunch for all of us.

"Look at my necklace grandpa just gave to me."

She turned around and said, "Oh my gosh, that is so gorgeous!" She smiled at me then held the pendant in between her fingers, examining it.

"Have you seen how it looks on you?"

"No, no, not yet! I need a mirror."

"Go into the bathroom and see!" I ran to the down-stairs bathroom, and looked in the mirror to see the

necklace on me. I thought it was so pretty and how terrible it would be if I lost it.

“Lunch is ready!” my grandpa yelled from the kitchen, interrupting my thoughts. I smiled, turned off the light, and walked out to the kitchen.

Later that day, my grandparents and I were sitting in the living room watching a movie. I was still wearing the necklace and playing with the pendant around my neck. I noticed my grandpa looking at me, when suddenly he coughed obnoxiously. I looked at him like he was crazy. Then, he exclaimed that he had painted the flower on the stone himself. I sat on the sofa with my mouth open looking at him, not believing that he had painted that intricate, tiny flower. Then, he started laughing.

“What?” I questioned.

“I didn’t paint that silly! Do you really think,” he could say before starting to laugh again. I started laughing, too. I wasn’t ashamed for thinking that what he had told me was true. I believed that my grandpa could do anything.

### *Sparky*

My grandpa always knew the right thing to make me feel better. My family and I were visiting my grandparents in Texas during Christmas time, since we had left for Italy the year before. I always loved Christmas time. My mom and dad were big on the holiday and would put white glitter on the floor as if Santa Claus left snowy footprints while putting my gifts under the tree and, because of this, I was always excited every

year for this occasion.

During our vacation, my family and my grandparent took a trip to the mall. I loved going to the mall because to me, the mall was a huge building with a blur of stores. I always ended up getting a toy and I never left my mom's side as I was afraid of getting lost. We were walking around when, suddenly, I saw a very cute black and white stuffed animal dog and I immediately fell in love with it. I took it off of the shelf to show my mom. I gave it a hug and noticed that it was very soft. I walked over to my parents and showed them my dog, and they said it was very cute but told me to put it back. I was devastated and hurt. I wanted the stuffed animal so much and when they said no I started to cry.

"Why not? Can you buy it for me, please?" I kept crying, but they never gave it. My grandpa said that he would buy it for me but my parents said no again. I sulked back and put the stuffed animal back on the shelf, while still whining. I continued to whine for a while, and I realized that maybe if I stopped and behaved the rest of the time, my mom would buy the dog for me. Soon, this became my mission: to be able to take the stuffed animal home with me.

We were shopping at the mall for a while, and as soon as I realized it, we were about to walk out of the mall. I stopped and pulled my mom's hand and asked her if I had behaved. She looked at me, a little puzzled, and said, "Yes, you did. Why?"

"Well since I didn't act bad, can I have the dog now, please?"

She looked at me and sighed, "No, Gabby, I already told you. Maybe I'll come buy it for you for Christmas." I knew Christmas was only a few days away, but I didn't know for sure if she would actually buy the stuffed animal so I started to cry again. My grandpa came up to me and asked why I wanted this so badly.

I told him, "I don't know, he's just so cute and I want it!" He laughed a little and told my parent he was going to go to the bathroom before we left. My grandma went with him.

I continued to whine, and walked through the parking lot crying and crying. We had waited in the car for my grandparent for a long time when my dad complained, "Where are they? How long does it take to use the bathroom?"

"Maybe we should go check up on them," my mom replied. Right then, we finally saw them walking out of the mall, so we drove to the curb and picked them up. My grandpa hopped onto the seat next to me, laughed, and told me my face looked like a tomato. I looked away angrily and he whispered, "Gabby, look!" I hesitantly looked at him and saw that he was holding the cute black and white dog! I screamed and grabbed it out of his hands and gave it a hug.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I shouted with joy. My parents gave me a wink and started to laugh again. My parents looked to see what all the noise was, and when they found out what had happened, they rolled their eyes and turned back around. I was so happy and right away I made up a name for

my new favorite toy: Sparky.

### *Tricks*

"Alright! It's time to drive to your grandparents' house!" my mom exclaimed. They had lived in a condo on the outskirts of San Antonio, Texas. Their neighbors were miles away, so they had a lot of privacy. Since they lived in a place where temperatures were hot and the climate was dry, there weren't many trees. What they did have though, was cacti. Every time I would visit, I'd wander around the condo and examine the flowers on the cacti, seeing how long I could poke one of the needles without it hurting my finger too much.

We had just arrived at my grandparents', and even though it was winter, I noticed that the flowers had grown even larger since our last visit. Wild daisies grew enormous and very tall. They weren't the small, fragile daisies that grow in parks or front yards. They were weeds, hard to pull out of the ground, but I always managed to pull a few. After picking them, I would return to the house with a bunch of dirty wild-flowers crawling with bugs and hand them to my grandma, whose favorite flower was the daisy.

My grandpa loved to play jokes on me, and he was pretty good at them. I had just finished eating, when I went into the living room to watch some cartoons. My grandpa was on the couch, and I was sitting on the floor. He changed the channel to my favorite cartoons and I watched for a while until, all of a sudden, the show stopped. It had paused in place! Then, as soon as it had paused, it played again. I thought that

maybe something was just wrong with the TV. After about ten minutes, the cartoon paused again, but this time, it became blurry, stopped, and started playing again. I noticed that it was at a whole other part of the show now and that I had missed what was in between. I turned to look at my grandpa. He looked back at me and shrugged, as if he didn't know what had happened either. I crossed my arms and turned back around. Then, I heard him chuckle. I figured he had something to do with this. So, when after a few minutes the cartoon stopped again, I quickly turned back to him, catching him in the act. He was holding the remote up toward the television.

"Grandpa!" I gasped, "it was you the whole time!"

He gasped, with his hands up in the air and a hurt look on his face. "I have no idea what you're talking about. You're just imagining things. Turn around." I knew he was just playing with me, so I continued to look at him through squinted eyes. He finally gave in and started to laugh while pointing at me.

"You should have seen your face the first time!" he exclaimed. I started to laugh, too, and we continued to laugh together until our stomachs hurt.

Later that day, after dinner, my grandpa called me from the living room. I ran over, and he was holding a big tin container with Christmas print on it. I immediately recognized it as one of those popcorn buckets, which, inside, was divided into three spaces to hold caramel, white cheese, and cheddar popcorn. The popcorn buckets were a tradition between us, and every

year we ate a whole tin. I rushed over and sat next to him as he pulled off the lid.

“Which one do you want to eat first?” he asked.

“The caramel!” I responded quickly, since that was my favorite kind. He opened the bag and poured it into one of the divided spaces. He then opened the other two bags and poured them in the tin as well. I could smell the mix of flavors and my mouth started to water. Finally, it was time to dig in. It took us a while, but we finished the whole thing, and we were stuffed.

My parents had already come to pick me up.

“Just one more hour!” I cried.

“No, it’s time to go home. It’s getting late, and you have to get ready for school tomorrow,” my parents responded.

“You can always visit another day, Gabby.” I gave in after a few arguments. My grandma always put together a snack bag “for the road,” even though the drive back to my house was only about twenty minutes. I took the bag and immediately started to eat what was in it, which was usually just trail mix or goldfish. I gave my grandma a big hug, then went to my grandpa to give him a hug, too. He gave me a kiss on the cheek, and I could feel his mustache on my face, which tickled, causing me to laugh. He chuckled and said, “See you next time. Come back soon!” We walked out of the condo to the car and, while driving away, I looked out the back window and waved to my grandparents who were standing by their doorway, waving back.

*The Funeral*

I hated waking up to the loud ring of my alarm clock. That morning, it seemed way more noisy and annoying. I hit the snooze button and got out of bed. My mom was already awake, like she always was. When I asked her why she always wakes up so early, she said, “Why not start your day earlier and have a longer day?” I was thinking, *To sleep longer?* But of course I never told her that. I walked into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. That’s when I smelled something really good and noticed my grumbling stomach. I walked out of the room to my grandma’s kitchen and saw that she was making bacon, my favorite breakfast food. My mom, dad, and my two aunts sat at the dining table drinking coffee. There wasn’t much talking. We exchanged our “Good morning” and “How did you sleep?” greetings. My grandma served me a plate and I sat down along with my family.

After a quiet breakfast, it was time to get ready for the funeral. My mom told me to fix my hair and put on the dress she laid out for me on the bed. When I walked back into the room, I looked at the dress. It was black with a bow around the midsection. I had never worn a dress like that and wondered how it would look on me. I went into the bathroom and grabbed a brush out of our bag. I brushing my hair soothed me. My hair was very short and straight, so I didn’t really have to do much. I put on my dress and waited out in the living room. My mom always took forever to get ready. While I waited, I turned on the TV and flipped

through channels until I reached Sesame Street. Finally, after about thirty minutes, my grandma, aunts, and dad were ready. We were just waiting for my mom, now, as always. After a few more minutes, she showed up in the living room, and it was time to go.

I had never been to a graveyard, so I felt a little unsettled and shy. While I walked to the gravesite, I looked at the stones, examining every name and description. I started to picture what my grandpa's stone would say.

"Gabby, catch up!" I snapped back to reality when my dad interrupted these thoughts. I hadn't realized I was far behind the rest of my family.

Getting closer, I noticed a big tent and under it were a lot of white chairs. I also saw a lot of people dressed in black, many of them crying. I didn't really know most of them, so I stuck next to my mom's side. A lot of people came up to my grandma and said they were sorry for her loss. At the time, I didn't know what to do or say when people said that to me. I would just smile and nod a little. I really did not want to be there. I wanted to be at home, away from all this sadness and these people I didn't know. I wanted to be with my grandpa.

Mom told me it was time to sit down. The chairs were split evenly in the middle by a walkway. My mom, dad, and I sat on the right side in the front row and my grandma and aunts sat on the left, also in the front row. In the center, I saw a big, black stand with a jar on top. I didn't know what it was. I thought there would be a casket like they usually had in the movies

or TV shows. I asked my mom what the jar was and she told me it was called an urn and that Grandpa was inside, with his heart and lungs and everything. At first I thought that she was crazy since he could not have fit in there. I must have been looking at her like she didn't know what she was talking about when she said that Grandpa was cremated. She said that his ashes were in there. I still didn't really understand exactly what cremated meant, but I decided to drop the subject. I just looked at the jar, trying to imagine Grandpa in there.

The rest of the funeral was a blur. I remembered praying, a preacher talking, and a lot of people crying. I looked over at my grandma and noticed that she was crying hard and that people around her were comforting her. It made me really sad to see her like that. I hated being there, and I desperately wanted to leave.

Later that night, I was lying in my bed, about to fall asleep, when my mom came into the room. "Hey, are you about to sleep?"

"Yes. I'm really tired after today."

"Yeah, me too." She sat on the edge of my bed and continued, "How are you feeling?" I said that I was alright but still sad, and that I was going to miss Grandpa.

"Who is going to laugh and make jokes and give me advice and make me feel better when I'm sad?"

She said things would get better. "I'm sure you and Grandpa had many great times together and you have those memories with him."

"Yeah, I do," I said, before drifting off to sleep.

# FAMILIES CAN BE TOGETHER FOREVER

Narin Ha

## *The Seoul, South Korea Temple*

In the month of February, year 1986, all six members of my family, not including my little sister and I, were sealed forever in the temple. Although I was not born at the time, I envision it clearly when my mother tells the story. My mother first shows me a picture of the Seoul, South Korea Temple, then describes the appearance of it. The sun's rays fell on each of the limestone bricks, each one shining the purest white from deep inside. The gold steeples, one with the angel Moroni, gave the temple the finishing touch. My family walked the grounds toward the entrance with feelings of peace and happiness. My mother explains to me that when families become sealed together that it means that they will be together forever.

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I opened my sleepy eyes. The rays of the barely awoken sun filled my room making the glow of my

night light look fake and artificial. I sat in my bed trying to recall the dreams that I had just awoken from when I realized that it was Christmas. I rushed downstairs, jumping every other step, eager to see the stack of presents under the tree. Seeing the living room made me stop, frozen in midair, The tree was lit up and the presents' wrappings reflected the lights creating the illusion of fairies fluttering around the tree. *7:00. A new world record for the earliest time to wake up.* I rushed to the presents, my jaw dropping as I picked one up. The present was the size of a baby elephant wrapped with golden-yellow paper that looked like it came from the sun itself. It took all my willpower not to tear the wrapping paper off. I placed the present back in its spot and waited for everyone to wake up. The next thirty minutes felt like three hours until the rest of my family finally came downstairs. I casually walked to the presents not paying any attention to my family, who sat on the couches around my mother, who was opening the Holy Bible.

"Narin, what are you doing?" my mother asked.

"Aren't we going to open presents?" I answered with a confused look on my face.

"Don't you remember? We always read the story of Jesus' birth before we open presents. You know the one when Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem and Jesus is born in the stable," she said.

Feeling ashamed of myself, I quickly walked over and sat on the end of the couch. I kept my eyes on one spot of the rug to keep from looking into anybody's eyes until my mother finished reading the story.

But even after reading the story my mother was the lady in charge when handing out the Christmas presents. After a few moments the living room looked like it had been hit by a tornado of colorful wrapping paper and ribbons. For the rest of the day we took our presents out of the boxes and watched Elf while snacking on popcorn and hot chocolate. Although I was a young child I'll never forget thinking how much I loved my family that evening.

### *The Phone Call*

My sisters and I sat on the couch downstairs with feelings of loneliness and sadness hovering above us like dark clouds. Our emotions felt like they've been rocked back and forth. Finally: "You guys can never see or have any connections with her again." Just hearing those words made me just think how unbelievable they were, but of course this all wasn't a dream. No one said anything till finally my mother came back to tell us that lunch was ready. My sisters slowly rose from the couch and followed my mother in hopes that food would help make their minds think about other things.

I stayed behind for moment, thoughts racing through my head like the speed of light. *I can't believe it. It's all a big, phony dream. This could never happen. Ashley is still part of the family and we'll all be together forever, no matter what. Yes, that's it! Its all a big test for something, maybe we have to prove something.* But as I continued to rationalize to myself that this whole thing was just a little fight I trusted less and less in my reasoning.

After spending much time pondering about the situation, my eyes started to fill with tears.

My dad's words were still ringing in my ears. My little sister persuaded me to eat some lunch. "Just a minute, I have to go put on some warm clothes," I lied. I quickly went to my room and closed the door. I slowly sat down on my bed soaking in what had just happened. Finally my emotions took over and cold tears started to trail down my cheeks. I cried myself to sleep, dreaming about a dark tunnel that never ended.

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The next day the air had the light scent of spring-time, and the birds were merrily chirping in the big oak trees. I woke up feeling refreshed and energetic, eager to face whatever came my way.

But then I remembered yesterday's whole fiasco. *Ugh, of course. So typical for the weather to be absolutely perfect after something absolutely horrible has happened.* "Thank you Mother Nature!" I said sarcastically to the sky as if it were a direct phone line to her.

Glumly, I walked downstairs, bracing myself for the worst. Instead I was greeted with scents of warm pancakes and sounds of delightful chatter. *What in the world?* I went into the kitchen to serve myself some pancakes when something caught my eye. Inside the garage next to the stairs sat a brown box. Curious, I opened the box. Seeing what was inside, my heart started to break. The blue background of the photo clashed with my sister's eyes, but she looked beautiful no matter what. Her smile tried to give me comfort that everything would be okay, but I didn't really

know what to believe anymore.

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It was close to nighttime, the sky grew darker, but the stars started to peek their twinkly faces out one by one. I sat against the bed, waiting for my eldest sister to tell us news.

"So recently I met someone while going with my friends to Buffalo Wild Wings. His name is Deron, and I think he's a pretty nice guy," she said.

"Okay, have you told mom?" my sister, Kelly asked.

"Yeah," my eldest sister Ashley replied.

"What about dad?" I questioned.

"Don't worry, I'm going to tell him soon. He'll understand. Don't worry 'bout a thing," she replied confidently.

Kelly and I breathed a sigh of relief trusting in her words. But little did we know that things would change dramatically over the next months.

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*Yes, only one block left and then freedom! Can't wait for it all to end! Big plans for this summer. I eagerly watched the clock, just dying for the last few minutes of class to be over. Jumping from my seat I quickly walked to my cubby hole to pack up my backpack. Then, moments after saying farewell to my friends and teachers, I made my way to Bus 54. After waiting for what seemed to be ten hours, I finally walked through the front door of my house. Summer has begun! No more days of learning or doing schoolwork. Now I can spend my days reading books or going swimming.*

After endless days of swimming in the neighbor's pool and spending time with friends, my family was greeted with some interesting news. After a day of swimming in the pool I was dead tired ready to fall into my comfortable, cozy bed. As I walked through the garage door into the kitchen my mother stopped me from proceeding any further.

"I have to talk to you," she said in a quiet tone.

"Okay, Mom. So what's up?" I asked in a casual tone.

"So I just got off the phone with your eldest sister."

"Oh how is she?" I questioned.

"Apparently she and Deron . . ."

"What? They didn't break up, right?"

"No they're still together, but they're actually engaged."

"Ha, you're joking."

But seeing the serious look on my mother's face made my sense of humor vanish as quickly as you could say Swiss cheese.

"But this is a good thing right? I mean it's great that she's getting married."

I sounded so fake, trying to make the whole situation seem as if there was nothing wrong with it. But we all knew what this was going to turn into. After that day we tried our best to act as normal as possible. We smiled to my dad and tried to strike up conversations with him. We acted like this everyday, waiting with held breaths to hear the phone ring. One day we were all at home doing our normal activities; doing

the laundry, reading books, surfing the internet. I was in my room reading one of my favorite books, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. I was in the middle of reading about Harry sneaking off to go to Honeydukes when I heard someone speaking very loudly. I walked down the hallway approaching the source of sound with hurried steps. It was coming from my father's room. He was sitting in his favorite armchair shouting into his cell phone. I quickly walked downstairs, jumping every other step, desperate to see my mother. I saw her sitting on the couch with my other siblings. All of them had expressions of worry. I walked over and squished into a spot between Kelly and Shani. I glanced at my mother and knew from just looking at her that it was my eldest sister on the phone. We sat there in silence hardly looking at each other. Finally, we heard my dad stomp down the stairs, making it sound like a dinosaur was walking through the house.

"From now on you guys can never see or have any connections with your sister again," he said.

We sat there quietly not risking a chance to lift our eyes to look at him. My dad left the room clomped back upstairs and closed his bedroom door.

My mother finally broke the silence and told us that she was going to make lunch. As she left the room, my brother Julius followed behind her to go to his room. My sisters and I stayed on the couch, trying to process what had just happened. I didn't want to start crying like my sister so I tried to focus on something else.

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It was a hot day, the sun was out and beating it's ultraviolet rays onto my face. After a long afternoon of marching band practice I am ready to take a nice, long cold shower.

"So are you excited for the competition?" my friend, Sidney, asks.

"Hmm?"

"I said are you excited for the competition?" she says.

"Oh yeah, sorry. I'm really tired," I replied.

"I am too. I have so much homework to do! I also I to go out and . . ."

I started to zone out, forgetting all about what my friend was saying. We continued walking back to the band room, almost dragging our instruments along the ground since our arms were so tired. Seeing the entrance to the band room gave me a burst of energy to walk faster. I quickly packed all my things, said good-bye to Sidney and walked out to the parking lot where my mother was waiting. I placed my things in the back seat and slid into the front with my mother.

"So how was your day?"

"Good. . . I checked the mail today."

"Really, was there anything good?"

"Actually there was a letter. . . from your sister."

I froze for a second. *My sister? It can't be, last time I heard from her was four years ago.*

"What did it say?"

"Well, she lives with Deron in Maine. She has a son named Gavin, who is two years old. And she is also pregnant with twins."

“Wow . . . So are you going to tell dad?”

“Yes . . .”

*This is it I may be able to see her again! I'm also an aunt! And the future aunt of twins! Yay!* Thoughts flew through my head, thinking of how Dad would react. I stayed in this state until I could hear mother show dad the letter. At first there was a lot of shouting, then hushed conversations. Later, after my dad went to sleep, my mother told me what happened.

“We have permission now to see her,” she said.

“Really?” I said with excitement and confusion at the same time.

“Yes, and I'm planning to help her out when she's due in January.”

I walked back to my room and closed the door. I sat down on my bed breathing hard. I can't believe it. Then I started to cry tears of relief from over four years.

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It's been a huge challenge and test for my emotions to live through this drama that's been going on in my life for four years. Although my heart has felt like it has gone through a thousand roller coasters, I can still remember all the past events that has made me proud or happy. Like seeing my sister, Kelly, graduate and helping her move into the University of Pennsylvania. And watching my younger sister, Shani, dance in her adaptive dance recital. Also receiving many emails from my brother, Julius, talking about all the experiences that he faces on his mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I often wonder about

the ending, whether my dad will finally see the bigger picture and forgive my sister or continue making our relations in the family weaker and weaker until the thread will finally break. But I've learned a valuable lesson. Choosing the way to respond makes a difference, even if it changes everything or things stay the same.

It reminds me of an article that I read about agency and accountability. In the story, a grandson is taught a lesson from his Cherokee grandfather. The grandfather talks about how there's a fight inside of him between a good wolf and an evil wolf. The one that is evil is filled with anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, inferiority, superiority, and ego. While the good wolf is filled with joy, peace, love, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The grandson asks, "But which one will win?"

The Cherokee answered, "The one you feed."

At times I have felt frustrated and angry at my dad because he just needs to do something that he should have done years ago. But what's more important is how I choose to feel and act when things don't get better or become worse. Now I'll always have that one question in my head before reacting: "Which wolf will I feed?"

# TO REDD, WITH LOVE

Morgan Hale

It won't happen in a day. For months, we will watch as you leave us. Your legs will start to shake under a weight too heavy to carry (shrinking bones protruding from luscious fur). Your strong, threaded muscles will slowly disappear (where will they go?). The food you used to swallow so voraciously will sit stale, untouched in that cold metal bowl.

We will watch as that sparkling light (of life, vitality) leaves your eyes. You will grow infinitely old when the puppy comes (or will we just notice then?). Discretely, you will stop playing. No more barking laughter as Dad twists you around in his arms. You will trade that spirit for lying exhausted on the wood floors, in the grass, on the bed.

You will still smile, for her. She will make you light up in the way none of us can. We will crave your grins, so innocent and comforting, even as pain tinges the corners of your eyes. We will know that it's coming

soon, but in those smiles, you will still be with us.

I will remember that night (warm and wet, something already missing). The night when we will know. We'll rush you outside, body still choking. We'll stand at the windows as you sink deeper into the grass (sink away from us).

It won't happen in a day. But it will only take one to realize that you're already gone.

# THE TYPE OF MEMORIES PEOPLE DON'T USUALLY REFLECT ON

Cassidy McQuaig

## *What Happens when Monkeys Jump on the Bed*

We were living in Germany in the summer of 2002. My brother Caleb was only three and decided it would be fun to jump on my parents' bed. My five-year-old mind found nothing but fun in the idea. We began to bounce, getting higher and higher, when suddenly I was lifted into the air. My dad began mercilessly tickling my sides, and my giggles bounced off the walls. Caleb laughed unabashedly and, knowing his turn would be soon, began bouncing around all corners of the bed. My mother was in the shower in the adjoining bathroom and could only hear promises of more 'punishment' for doing something potentially dangerous and peals of childish laughter. My dad was having fun, playing the monster that would come and get us.

"That's a warning, right there," my dad advised Caleb. He had this Cheshire grin on his face and, hold-

ing up his hands, wiggled his fingers warningly.

Caleb and I ran around the bed with the occasional bounce and trip-up. My dad would catch us, tickle us for a moment, letting the other laugh, and await the signal to run again. After about five minutes of this, Caleb tripped on the corner of the bed and fell into the side of the wall under the window with a thud and a sharp, metallic ping. He'd hit our solid metal space heater. My dad was quick to scoop him up in his arms, expecting some crying or screaming. Caleb just sat up straight, blinking every so often. He seemed perfectly fine. I noticed something on the side of his head after a moment, though, and pointed it out to my dad.

"Daddy," I paused, gaining his attention. "Was there red paint on the heater? Caleb has some on his head."

My dad combed through Caleb's hair around where I pointed and, finding the spot of "paint" that I had seen, immediately put him down on the bed and ran into the bathroom. My mother ran into the bedroom, grabbed some clothes, and darted back in. While my dad went to start the car, she took Caleb down-stairs. She told me to follow her, explaining to Caleb that she had to wrap his head with a bandage and that everything was fine. While she wrapped his head in gauze, she told me that he would want to take it off, that he would be scared. She said that I had to be the big sister and take care of him, to make sure he kept it on, and to comfort him when it hurt.

While we were in the car on the way to the hospital, I told Caleb how cool it was that he looked like

a mummy. I kept him laughing the whole way there, trying to stop the tears that had started flowing. With my left hand in his right, and with our giggling and whispering of jokes, it was almost as if nothing was wrong. The telltale signs, however, were in the panicked gaze of my parents, my dad's speedy driving, and the thick bandage around my baby brother's head turning more red than white by the second.

I called him Frankenstein for a while since he had so many stitches in his head. He laughed at the nickname despite the occasional ache in his head.

#### *The Curiosity of a Child Can Be a Dangerous Thing*

It was the fall of 2006, and my little sister Emma couldn't have been older than three at the time. We were living in a small, four-bedroom, one-story house on Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. We'd moved to Illinois three years prior, right after Emma was born in Germany. I was about nine, and Caleb was two years younger than me. We were all curious children, always getting into things we weren't supposed to. I think I was grounded more times before I was nine than most children are grounded in their entire lives.

Emma was a cute and tiny little thing; with her blonde ringlets and big, blue doe-like eyes, she could've passed for a china doll. She was always running around the yard and getting into trouble in the house, but who could stay mad at an angel's face?

I had a diary at the time with a set of three silver keys all on one ring. She was fascinated with it, how the rings shined in the light and how they jingled

when you shook them. My mom told me to keep them away from her, that they could be dangerous, so I hid them. Apparently, Emma caught me hiding them one day without my knowing.

My mom was using the desktop computer that was against the far wall of my room in a tall cabinet facing my bed, just a mattress on the floor. With our mother's back to her, Emma swiped the keys from my hiding place. Emma was good at keeping quiet when she felt she needed to be, so my mother had no idea what she was doing. I was in the living room watching a movie with Caleb, and my dad was at the fire station working. He was on call that day and had to come home a little earlier than planned, and not for a reason any parent wants to hear.

Emma had decided that she wanted to stick my diary keys in the light socket above my mattress. I don't know what made her come to that decision, but apparently it seemed like a good idea to her.

As soon as she stuck in the diary keys, she was electrocuted. We learned this at the hospital later, but the electric current had gone up from her hand holding the keys, to her heart, through it, and came back out through her other hand. All we registered at the time was one thing: her piercing, pain-filled scream.

My mother immediately whipped around, registering the sight of her youngest daughter lying motionless on the bed. Caleb and I came running to my room to see what was going on. I was told to get the phone and call 911 immediately. I brought the phone to my mom, who had Emma in her arms and was qui-

etly asking her in a cooing voice what hurt. Then, she talked to the 911 operator in fast, clipped tones, answering questions and looking over Emma simultaneously, examining her for any obvious injuries. When the operator asked my mother the reason why Emma was hurt, my mother looked around and saw one of my diary keys lying on the bed, blackened and burnt. She looked up at me for a moment with accusing eyes and a look that said, 'What did I tell you?' But she continued with her fast conversation. She hung up about a minute later and told Caleb and I to watch Emma for a moment while she grabbed everything we'd need for the hospital.

Seeing my baby sister lying there, whimpering in pain on my bed with blackened hands and tears flowing out of her blue eyes, I felt the guiltiest I've ever felt. While waiting with my brother in the kitchen, clutching some overnight bags and watching my mother hold Emma and fuss over her, I felt like the worst sister in the world. What kind of big sister lets her baby sister get hurt? I wondered. Did this make me a terrible person?

While the paramedics rushed in to take my sister into the ambulance, my dad came in wearing his fire gear. He explained that when the paramedics were called, so was the fire department. He was scared while looking over the paramedics' shoulders, though he comforted my mom and told us everything would be okay. I wasn't so sure.

My parents' best friends had to come and get us at the hospital since my mother didn't want us to have

to sleep there. Caleb and I stayed the night with them, praying that our sister would be okay. The next day when they took us home, I ran around the house looking for my mom and Emma.

"We're in here!" I heard my mother scream from the bathroom.

I darted in to see that my mother was helping my sister bathe. She looked the same as she always did. her short, dark-blonde hair was all curled and wet, and her bright blue eyes filled with glee as she laughed and played in the bubbles. It was like nothing had happened. My mother explained to me that my sister's hands hadn't been burnt, just blackened with soot from the electric shock. Her body was just fine, but if there were any problems we had to go back to the hospital. It seemed that all was well in the McQuaig family for the moment.

Before we moved from that house in Illinois, when they took my mattress out of the room to be moved, I had to clean up the floor. There, I found two diary keys on a ring, blackened and misshapen.

### *Bad Luck on Vacation*

During the summer before I moved to Germany for the second time in 2010, my family went vacationing with my grandparents in Helen, Georgia. We rented a cabin in the woods, and it was a fairly nice wooden one with stones inlaid in the bottom half and many windows through the two floors of the building. Upstairs was a loft for my grandparents, and downstairs was the living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms

with adjoining bathrooms. One bedroom was for my parents and Emma, and the second was for Caleb and I to share. In our bedroom was a giant wooden bunk bed. Its ladder was wooden, too, but it wasn't connected to the frame. The ladder just leaned against it, which no one saw as very safe.

I slept on the top bunk, and on the first night I was up and into bed with no problem. The second night was a different story. My brother was already in his bottom bunk, just watching me climb up. While I was climbing, the bottom two legs of the ladder rapidly skidded across the smooth, wooden floor towards the far wall, pulling the rest of the ladder, and me on it, very fast with it. The legs of the ladder hit the wall and stopped, but I kept sliding down the ladder toward the wall. The wall had an outward-facing corner, which caught me directly in the middle of my spine as I was hurtled into it. I had the wind knocked out of me and blacked out for a few minutes.

The next thing I remember was lying on the floor about four feet from the ladder. All I heard was screaming. Not only regular screams, but some high-pitched screams that sounded far away. I didn't know where they were coming from, but they were pretty annoying and I hoped they would stop soon. I vaguely felt someone trying to hold my arms down, and I realized that I was thrashing around. I tried to stop and focus, but it was so hard with all of the screaming.

I could hear my brother with his desperate pleas. "I didn't do it. I don't know what happened," he repeated like a mantra.

I could hear my father's voice yelling in my ear as well. "Where does it hurt?" he kept screaming. "Do you think we need to go to the hospital?"

So the high-pitched screaming had been coming from me, then. I focused on calming down, but there was this pain that covered my entire body from the neck down. I told my dad that my back hurt, that I had hit it on the corner of the wall. It had hit me square on the bottom of my spine, shooting pain into my nerve endings throughout my entire back and all the way up to my skull. I was crying so hard that every other word came out in hiccups, but he got the gist of it. He had me lay over on my side until the pain calmed down enough so we could try and see if I could get up. It took me ten minutes with the help of my parents to be able to stand up and walk down the hall to the living room to lie on the couch. My grandparents, who had been watching for the past few minutes in sympathy, got some medicine for the pain and, after making sure I was settled, went back to bed. My parents said the couch would be my bed for the rest of the trip, and my mom made her way back to her room. My dad went to the end of the couch opposite my head, picked up my feet gently, and sat down while putting them in his lap.

It was uncomfortable to lie down, and I would have a huge bruise all the way down to the bone covering most of my back, which meant I couldn't wear a bathing suit without attracting unwanted attention from strangers. My dad said I couldn't do much for the rest of the trip, but tried to make light of the situation.

“Cheer up, Cass,” he said, nudging my right foot with his hand. “It could have been much worse. Gosh, if you’d hit that wall at any other angle, you could have permanently damaged your spine!”

My dad’s attempt at lifting my spirits failed, but I appreciated the effort in the gesture. I managed a smile for his sake, then let out a sigh of relief that my luck wasn’t as bad as he said it could have been. My dad soon got up from the couch and kissed my forehead, wishing me goodnight. It took me what seemed like forever to fall asleep on my makeshift bed, and when I did sleep, my mind was filled with nightmares of what could have been.

### *The Accident*

My family and I were living in Germany for the second time during the winter of 2010. We’d only been there for a few months, and thankfully my back had been pain-free before the almost full-day flight from Georgia to Germany. During the months that we were settling in, my father heard my brother and sister and I beg every day for a new canine addition to the family. We’d had a male Lhasa Apso named Max for six years, and decided that we wanted another dog, a girl this time. After the constant pleading, my parents gave in, and we got our wish. She was a Miniature English Bulldog, and we named her Annabella Marie, but called her Bella for short. She was so tiny when we first got her that I could pick her up with one hand. Max didn’t like her much, and didn’t care for the fact that she soaked up most of our attention.

We had a fairly large fenced-in backyard at our house, something most German houses didn't have. Max and Bella both loved it out there, but Bella still had to be on a leash. Max had free reign of the yard and stayed toward the back or at the very front when they were outside together. In the backyard, close to the house on the left side was a drop-off. It had three concrete stairs leading down to our driveway, which was barely large enough to fit our car. At the end of the driveway was a gate. It covered the whole end of the drive and resembled prison bars, but the bars weren't that close together, maybe a little less than a foot apart. Max loved to just lie down in the driveway and look through the bars. So when he went down the stairs to the driveway when I was walking Bella in the backyard, I didn't think anything of it.

I heard the screeching of tires first. People loved to drive fast down our street because at the end of it was a country road leading up to a hill. When they drove down the hill, they'd come into the street at breakneck speeds. They wouldn't slow down until they got to the end of the street leading into the more populous part of town. Car tires screeching wasn't an uncommon sound. However, I panicked when I heard a yelp of pain.

Maybe I didn't want myself to believe that it was my dog that got hit by that car. My dad soon leaned out of the kitchen window to ask what had happened. I told him it sounded like a dog had been hit by a car. While I was bringing Bella back inside, I heard the doorbell ring. It was our neighbor, Marco, telling my

dad that Max had been hit and was running back up the driveway. That seemed to bring some relief to me because if he had run into the backyard, he couldn't be that seriously injured.

I went out the back door to check on Max. I found him lying in the grass in front of the drop-off. He was on his side, panting and whimpering in pain, covered in blood and loose fur that had come off against the asphalt. My dad came up a few moments later to check on him. He told me to go back inside, that he and Marco were going to take him to the closest English-speaking Veterinary Hospital. The rest of my family and I just waited.

My mom got a call about an hour later from my dad. She talked to him for a minute and, with tears in her eyes, handed me the phone. My dad explained to me that the accident had severed Max's spine, broken two of his legs, and might have damaged his brain. He would never walk again and was in so much pain that it would be better to put him to sleep. He told me that I was in charge of telling Caleb and Emma and asking them if they wanted to say goodbye or not. That was probably the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, besides saying goodbye to Max.

### *Thirteen*

Usually, turning thirteen is a happy moment in a child's life, but I dreaded it. It wasn't the principle of the age or finally being considered a "teenager" in the eyes of others. It wasn't that I was anxious to go into seventh grade, or that I was dreading getting older. It

was a story my father had told me that made me dread the age thirteen.

My dad had a hard life from the beginning. His mother was a scatter-brained woman, always thrusting herself into bad situation and causing fights. His father was relatively tame, always trying to keep his wife from getting into too much trouble. When my dad's younger brother Michael was born after he turned three, his parents file for divorce, His father went to work out of town, and his mother became even more irresponsible and reckless. She basically threw her life, and her children's lives, away. She had a new "boyfriend" every week, "boyfriend" being a term I use very loosely. They were never the best of characters, usually heavy smokers and drinkers or abusers, not the kind of guys you'd think a mother would let around her children. My dad and uncle were abandoned by her by the time my uncle Michael was one. Not completely in the literal sense of the word, but emotionally, though sometimes literally. They would be left in a room alone while their mother went out with her guy of the week. My father never mentioned that abuse was involved, but one might guess it happened.

My granny, my dad's grandmother, a remarkable woman now and an equally impressive one then, with her quick tongue and refusal to accept things she didn't like, had had enough by the time my dad was six and Michael was three. She took custody of them while her daughter had her "fun life" that she believed she had, full of drinking, smoking, and partying. My grandmother, someone I'm not close to, didn't sound

like any form of a mother. She had abandoned her children. My granny raised my dad and Michael with her husband in their little house back in the woods of Folkston, Georgia. Their father started to visit them regularly in between his long shifts at work and his new family he had started in a town close to his job.

My grandfather would bring toys and things for my dad and Michael when he'd visit. One particular visit, when my dad was thirteen, my grandfather brought with him two matching He-Man toys. Michael was ecstatic, getting Granny to open it for him immediately. My dad wasn't as pleased, saying that he didn't want the same thing as his brother, that he wanted another toy. They argued for a little while, and my grandfather took the toy back, saying he'd get my dad a new one. My grandfather was supposed to pick up my dad and Michael at school the next day to take them to Disney World, but he never showed up.

He'd gotten into a car accident on a road close to the town's border. It was a drunk driver that hit him in a head-on collision. My grandfather was killed instantly, while the drunk driver got out of the car unharmed.

My dad lost his father when he was thirteen, and explained to me that it was the reason we always said I love you often. When his father left Granny's house that night, my dad didn't say he loved him, which he says was the biggest mistake of his life. We say it more often than most people do, multiple times in phone conversations, before we leave a room, every night before we go to sleep, and just any time there's a chance you'll never see the other person again. I've

only seen my dad cry and handful of times. He cried watching The Notebook with my mom, he cried with Max died, and he cries when he tells the story of his last time with his father.

After he told me the story, when I was eleven, I developed this irrational fear that I would lose my dad when I was thirteen. I spent the next two years worrying that I was going to lose one of my heroes, one of the people I looked up to most in the world. It was terrifying to imagining growing up without my dad. I didn't think I could face that, so I spent every moment possible with him. I was the person waiting for him at the door to come home from work every day, worrying when he was only a few minutes late. Thirteen has passed and gone, but I said I love you more times than I could have counted.

# I MISS YOU

Zoe Frank

I remember the last time I spoke to you. It was only four months ago, the week before the last week of school. I was wearing my light denim shorts and my black Mr. Zog's hoodie. My hair was down, long, thick, and straight. You were wearing, what else, a hospital gown and your signature golden bracelet. The same bracelet your son now wears only on special occasions. You were a little slow, I could tell you were tired, but you were cracking jokes like always. I was quiet and calm on the surface, but on the inside I was involuntarily thinking what I would do if the worst possible thing happened: if you didn't make it through surgery. But that was no surprise; I was overthinking things, like I always do. The rational part of my brain was telling me to chill out; everything was going to be fine. I tried to listen, to stop tears from forming in my eyes. I've never been a crier, especially not in front of other people, and luckily that day was no different. You kept

asking us if we thought you were going to be okay, we all truthfully said yes. You're a Frank, so of course you were going to be okay. The operation was incredibly simple and you were getting transferred to the hospital at VCU, where the best heart surgeon on the East Coast. He would know what to do, no problem. Plus, you were way too young to die. You were like fifteen years away from being in the danger zone. Still, the worrying part of me crept back in. I started thinking the worst again. What if you wouldn't be at my wedding? When I got my first car? I couldn't wait to leave. We all hugged you and told you we loved you, and that we would see you in a couple of weeks.

When I got home, everything was back to normal, and I quit being so dramatic. We all knew you were going to be fine, but that little part of me was still over-thinking things. Little did I know that part of me was right all along, and now I will always regret how quiet I was the last time I spoke to you.

# THE CHRISTMAS OF '08

Taylor Batte

## *Finding Out*

It was a chilly evening and everything was quiet except for the consistent beep of the heart monitor. All things seemed tense and no one was speaking. *Wheel of Fortune* was playing on the TV in the room across the hall. I heard the patient say rather loudly to the TV, "Even I woulda figured that one out, you dummy."

I was sitting on the air conditioning unit by the window playing Go Fish with my usually full-of-life aunt, but my mind was racing. Everything seemed so normal a few months before . . . My mom was the invincible mom I had always known and trusted, until this.

I don't remember what Santa brought me in my stocking, or what delicious food we all ate, or even what the biggest present under the tree was that year. But I can tell you, everyone in my family remembered the five days before the Christmas of '08.

The past few months my mom had been in pain, but she didn't know what was causing it. After visiting many doctors and talking to many people, they all concluded that it was her gallbladder, and she would need it removed—a minor surgery. She would be back on her feet and running full speed by Christmas. But that wasn't the only thing removed in her surgery. They also removed two feet of intestine and a cancerous tumor.

The tumor was non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a blood cancer like leukemia, that could spread anywhere in the body. Normally older males, not middle-aged women, are burdened with this cancer, but my mom was an exception. Roughly seventy thousand people a year get diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma and about 65% of these people survive. But lymphoma is also on the rise: since 1975, the frequency of lymphoma has increased about 83% and is increasing by 2.5% a year.

My mom never smoked, never did drugs, never drank a lot, and was never overweight. She was probably one of the healthiest people I knew. Experts say that you can prevent cancer by leading a healthy life, exercising daily, and watching what you eat. Life just threw her a curveball, I guess.

My never tired, do-everything mom was now lying motionless on the hospital bed with her mom, husband, sister, and son all petrified by the news the doctor had just told them.

I realized it was my turn to pick up a card from the deck.

### *The Road Ahead*

Five days later, my mom had come home from the hospital, and it was Christmas morning. I was coming down the old, creaky stairs in my house anticipating the delicious scent of egg, sausage, and cheese casserole, a Christmas treat I always looked forward to. But it wasn't there. It was then I realized a lot of things were going to go away. My mom wasn't going to be able to make her usual lovely dinners every night, or do everything that I, and everyone else, was expecting to her to do. Even the simplest of things would become difficult.

She started chemotherapy right off the bat after getting out of the hospital. It became so intense that my mother would go for just a few hours and the next few days she would sleep like the dead. Everything she did, and still does, makes her absolutely exhausted. Cleaning the upstairs or making one dinner ends in a long bath with Epsom salt to rest her legs. If she goes to one of my football games, she might sleep in the next day until four in the afternoon. Her energy wasn't the only thing she lost. Her once gorgeous long, brown hair that everyone would comment on, fell out, leaving a pale dome with hairs covering it thinly like a newborn baby.

We all knew that it would be a long road to recovery, with roadblocks and helpless wandering until we found the right map. We might look at a sign the wrong way or go down the wrong path and have to turn around, but even if we got lost, we would make it, that was for sure.

*Another Obstacle: Telling People*

I was seated in the back of the room in Mr. Borak's fifth grade class. We were going around the room and saying what we did over the break and it was the usual, "I got a . . . for Christmas!" or, "Santa brought me . . ." I remember Mr. Borak's deep, friendly voice calling me to go next. I was the last one to go and my mind didn't know what else to say except, "Well, I found out that my mom has cancer."

Time seemed to stop. It can be a good thing and or a bad thing when time stops. This time, it was bad. I could feel every one of my classmates turn around in their seats with interest and shock. I think that they were all just waiting for me to say the punchline, but it was no joke. As the pause continued I heard in the background Mr. Borak clear his voice and say, "What?"

"Yes sir, cancer," was my response.

"Wait, are you *sure* it's cancer?"

I felt as if he thought I was dumb or something. When we finally got all of the details squared away (Yes, it was cancer; Yes, I am sure; etc.) he called my other teacher, Mrs. Christianson. They immediately called the principal of my school, Dr. Grass, and let her know of this situation.

Every night, a parent of one of my classmates would come by our house and drop off a home-cooked dinner. My best friend at the time, Abraham Flores, brought us flour tortillas from his great-grandmother's special recipe one night. My mom, to this day, will pull this recipe out and make it when I am sick or not feeling well. It wasn't just my friends that gave us food;

people that I had only seen in the halls would come over with a whole ham and sides and greet us like we had known them for years. It was so special to come home from practice or school and be able to sit down with my parents, smell the beautiful aroma and eat a delicious dinner every night even during this hectic time. These carefree dinners brought our family closer. It saved time for my dad who was working constantly, and it saved energy for my mom to get better.

What makes this so special is that the teachers at my school helped organize this. They didn't have to, but they did and it helped us out immensely. Sometimes even teachers would come by and drop food off and visit for a little while. My elementary school means so much to our family.

#### *Walking for a Cure*

One thing that I always look forward to every year is the Relay for Life Walk. It is almost like a big reunion of all the cancer survivors in the York County area. Everyone comes to a local high school to support the fight against cancer. People cook out, sell t-shirts, play music and games, and some even spend the night on the football field in tents. The goal is to walk around the track and raise money for research to find a cure for cancer.

At the beginning of the night, it is a tradition for the local firefighters, EMTs, policemen, officials, and anyone else that is there, to surround the outside and inside of the track while the Survivors and their Caregivers do what is called the Survivors' Lap.

During this time you celebrate the journey of the survivors, no matter how tough. Everyone applauds your hard work and dedication to fighting the disease. You realize as you are walking that quarter-mile how many people support the fight against cancer. It is truly a humbling experience.

At the end of the night they do what is called a Luminaria Ceremony. People who have lost a loved one to cancer place a candle around the track in memory of that person. I remember the scent of freshly cut grass. All of the lights are off, but the candles at our feet light the way. Everyone is very quiet. Some people pray and others video the experience. My mom and I walk arm in arm, watching everything that is going on. Some kids are playing football in the middle of the field and I see their mother running over, trying to quiet them. I turn around and see an older couple decked out in Relay For Life attire holding hands and crying silently.

My mom and I have gone to this event pretty much every year, and it is the only fun thing about cancer, though I don't know if "fun" is the right word. Relay for Life is not only raises money for cancer research but also helps the families get through everything. Cancer doesn't affect just the patient; it affects friends, relatives, anyone around that is close to the patient.

I walk the Survivor Lap with my mom in place of her true caregiver, my dad. He has not been able to go these past four years is because he is always working. He should be the one escorting my mom around the

track, since he has done the most for her. He takes her to doctor's appointments, picks up medication, talks to her about how she feels, encourages her, works almost every night, and I still have never heard him complain. When someone asks what true love is, there is your answer. No other human being could do a better job than him because without my dad I am sure my mom would not be here.

### *It Is Just the Beginning*

My mom and I were sitting at the counter in my kitchen. Water was on the stove boiling, my elbow noodles ready to go in. We were reminiscing about the football game I had just played in. It was our biggest game of the season and I had gotten into the game, my first real varsity action when it mattered. I had done what the coaches told me to do and I was very pleased with myself (I scored, tying to boost us into overtime) even though we lost the game in a triple overtime thriller. My mom was the proudest mother alive; it meant so much to see her like this. She was telling me about how parents were congratulating her and some of my friends were coming up to her and hugging her after the game. Two days before, she had come to my JV game, too. The next few days were not going to be good for her. She handed me the bowl of noodles and sprinkled some pepper on them. She was smiling ear to ear.

"I can't wait for your father to hear about this. He is going to flip out," she laughed.

"I know. He is going to be mad he missed it,

though. But he'll definitely watch the film," I replied.

I knew the conversation had ended when she turned to slowly walk up the stairs and asked me to bring the clothes up.

I sat at the counter for a second and wondered what life would be like without cancer.

# THEY SAID IT GETS EASIER, THEY LIED

Jade Fire

It was October 1, 2012. I couldn't help but be upset. I thought about how difficult it was going to be without her. Schoolwork, drama, household work, all of normal life. Without her. Everything would be a mess. Nothing would go right. My father and I usually relied on her for everything: appointments, advice, care giving. Now, we would have to manage everything by ourselves. *Why does this have to happen during the most important time of my life? Every. Single. Time,* I thought to myself while my mom packed.

"Do you have everything?" asked my father.

"I sure hope I do," said my mom nervously. "Let me check off my list."

I sat on the floor, staring at a picture of my family, thinking about how much I would miss her and how little time we got to spend together. I had an overwhelming sensation of regret. My mother and I fought constantly. It would get so bad that my father would

have to threaten to leave the house before we made up. We yelled and screamed at one another. It would always be resolved in the end with a few tears and a long lecture. *Tell her how you really feel before she leaves you*, I told myself.

“Mom,” I said solemnly, “I don’t want you to go. I’m going to miss you too much.”

“I don’t want to either,” she said sadly. “Trust me, I’ll miss you guys, too.”

I looked at her and saw the depression in her eyes; she didn’t have to tell me. In fact, she tried to play it off as if though she was perfectly fine. We got all of her bags, loaded them into the car, placed ourselves inside onto the seats, buckled up, and drove off. My mom looked out of the car windows; I knew what she was thinking: *This is the last time I’ll see that house for a whole year. The last time I’ll see my pets, my family, my friends. All of it. Gone.* It was basically written on her forehead. She didn’t break, though. She wouldn’t. She was a strong woman and she didn’t want her family to see her like that, even though we had before. I guess that’s just not how she wanted us to remember her.

My father was worried for her and how she would do on her own. He looked scared and frustrated. I was listening to Sleeping with Sirens, one of my favorite bands, the whole ride there, holding back from bursting into tears. My parents were talking. I didn’t know what about, but I’m sure it was something important. We arrived at the airport about forty-five minutes later. We parked the car in the short-term parking lot, got all of her bags, and headed inside. *She’s not gone yet, don’t*

*cry now, I told myself.*

We walked into the crowded airport. It was too much. I just wanted to be at home, downstairs with my family, watching television or something. I wanted to be anywhere but here. I couldn't stand the thought of her leaving us again. She had her bags checked, paid for us to get through security and my parents went to the restroom. I just stood by the chairs. Then, it hit me. At first I thought it wasn't going to be a lot of tears, but I was wrong. I didn't want my father to worry about me so I turned away. I just stared at the wall—the only detail it had was photo of a traveling woman in a flight attendant's uniform—tears falling one by one very quickly down my cheeks. My father didn't notice and when my mother came back, neither did she.

That's exactly what I wanted. I didn't want them to worry about me at all. Today was about her, not me. We walked over near the escalators and my father asked me if I was alright. I nodded my head so he couldn't see my face.

"Jade, look at me," he said in a serious tone.

"What?" I asked angrily. I didn't want to be bothered.

"You know it's okay to cry," he said. "We're all sad today."

I couldn't hold back anymore. I cried, taking short gasps of air through the tears. I put my head in my father's chest and just wept. He hugged me and kissed my forehead, but it didn't help. All I wanted was for my mom not to leave. Not to go to a foreign country. My dad told my mom to go to the restroom and get

paper towels; there were going to be a lot of tears shed today. When she came back, she hugged me.

“Time will go by fast,” she whispered to me. “I promise.”

I just hugged her tighter. I didn’t want to let go. When she let me go, we got on the escalator to go to her boarding gate. I kept my head down, my eyes still puffy and face bright red. When we reached the top, we paused to look for security. It was right past the food court. It smelled disgusting. We walked through the large seating area and arrived at the line for security checks. It was painfully long. After waiting for about fifteen minutes. My father and I had our passes scanned. After that, they scanned my mother’s boarding ticket. We walked to the conveyer belt to x-ray our things. I removed my shoes, belt, jewelry, phone, earphones, and gum from my possession. It was a hassle for someone who didn’t want their family member to leave in the first place. My family’s things glided through the machine without any issues, luckily. We moved to the chairs to put everything back on. As soon as we finished going through security, we walked down an endless hallway with gift shops and travel stores. My mom was set. She had her iPad with her so that would provide her some entertainment. We arrived at her gate. My heart seemed to beat faster.

I was worried. What if something happened? What if she didn’t get to come back? *Calm down, she’ll be fine*, I told myself. We sat down and waited for her boarding time to be called. I took pictures with her and my dad. I wanted to have something to “remember”

her by. But how could I forget my own mom? I was sure she would be on my mind everyday. Wondering if she's okay, wondering what it's like in Korea, wondering how much better it would be if she were here with me and my dad. But since we're all alone. *Snap out of it kid. You'll live. It isn't even that long—it should fly by*, I assured myself. The lady at the gate called people with small children to board first, then first class, then the first part of coach.

"Well guys," said my mom with a sigh, "looks like I'm next."

My dad said with sadness in his voice, "Guess so."

We stood up slowly, dreading the moment she would walk away from us. The moment we knew for sure that she couldn't come back, the moment she couldn't quit. We all knew it had to come and we knew we couldn't stop it, no matter how much we wanted to. We dragged her bags toward the gate's opening through the other people waiting around. I could pick out the military people, the ones saying goodbye to their crying families. One caught my eye in particular, the one with a crying wife and a newborn baby. I couldn't imagine how that would be. Raising a child all on your own. That happened to me the first time my mother left for Korea. I was about two years old and my father was left alone with me, to raise all on his own. At least I was older now. Then, the time came for my mom to board.

The woman announced that it was the second section's time to board. I looked at my mom. My eyes

started to water, a steady flow of tears running down all of our cheeks. My mom, dad, and I all hugged one another. We savored our last few minutes we had in person with her.

I could remember everything. She was wearing comfortable clothes, a Coca-Cola shirt, some sweatpants, flip-flops, and a light jacket. I also knew that I hadn't seen my mom or dad cry in months. Right then, they broke down as much as I had earlier. It was heartbreaking. The woman announced the last call for boarders.

"Well, it's time for me to go," my mom said, "but it'll be over soon. I love you guys, so much."

I managed to choke out, "I love you mom, be safe."

She looked at me with her eyes full of tears, "I love you too, baby," she said. "Be good to your father. I'm going to miss you two so much."

My father looked at my mom, he dropped his head, and wept. I could sense his emotion. He was heartbroken on the inside. He didn't want her to leave and neither did I. My mom could see that. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it fairly hard. My mom looked into my fathers' eyes. She knew what he was going to say, so she finished his words for him.

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Then, she walked away.

That was the last time I would see her for a year. I wanted to run up to her and drag her back home, but I knew deep inside that wasn't the right thing to do. I had to let her go, no matter how much I didn't want to.

Before she went onto the jetbridge, she turned around and blew me and my father a kiss. I held up my hands in the shape of a heart. My father waved.

“Do you want to stay and watch the plane leave?” my dad said through his tears.

“No,” I said as tears fell onto my shirt. “That’ll only make it harder.”

We walked back to our car hand in hand. I hugged my dad before we sat down in our seats. At least he was here, but I couldn’t imagine how my mom felt, she was all alone.

I wish I could have gone with her, I wish she was never in the military, I wish we were a “normal” family. But we aren’t, and we have to deal with it.

My father and I started down the highway, then we got a call. It was my mom. She called to tell us that her flight was delayed for forty-five minutes.

“Damn,” said my father angrily. “I wish we would have stayed, Jade.”

I looked down and mumbled, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’s alright, I didn’t know either.”

He put the cellphone back to his ear. He asked my mom what she was going to do if she missed her connecting flight to Georgia. He looked like he was worried. She had to hang up to go find out what she was going to do to get to her assignment on time. After a few minutes of silence, my father’s cell phone rang again. It was my mom with her plans for getting to Georgia. She said they reserved her a spot on the waiting list and that she’d be in the next airport, in Seattle,

soon. After she got off the phone with us to get onto her flight, we were almost home.

We walked into what seemed to be a lifeless house. Without mom, it wasn't the warm, lively home it used to be. It's like she took our hearts with her. She's who made this house a home. My father and I just sat down. We didn't want to do anything. I could feel the depression settle. I was listening to music, texting my friend Taylor. She was trying to make me feel better. It wasn't working at all. I looked up to find that my father was crying. Not just normal crying. Snot and tears going everywhere and couldn't understand a thing, crying. It had always hurt me when my father would cry, but this time that wasn't the only thing bugging me. I started to sob. I had to take deep breaths in order to keep breathing. It was heartwrenching. I got out of the bean bag I was sitting in. I sat on my dad's lap in the chair, wrapped my arms around him and just sobbed.

"They say it gets easier," my dad stuttered, "Well, they lied."

"Dad," I found my voice to speak "we'll be okay."

He looked at me and pulled me in for another hug.

"Can you imagine how she feels? We're together but she's all alone."

I just sat with the thought of her on the plane, looking out of the window, crying. And I couldn't do anything about it. I felt helpless. I received a message from Taylor. She was asking if I wanted her to come to

my house. I replied “Of course I would, I could use a friend right now.” I told my dad that she was on her way over. He was fine with it. I think he could tell that I wasn’t okay at all. But, by the looks of it, neither was he.

I hugged him again before he got up to go into his room and relax. I laid myself down on the bean bag. I was exhausted from crying all day. I drifted off into a light state of sleep. Then, my phone vibrated. I checked it. Taylor was almost there. I told her to just walk in the front door, I was downstairs and the door was unlocked. I laid there with my eyes open, thinking. Thinking about how my mom was, how she was going to deal with all of this. I knew she was strong, but without her family? I didn’t know the answer to that. Right then, Taylor walked in. *Thank you for saving me from my thoughts, Tay.* She walked over to me, sat on the floor, and hugged me. We stayed together until she had to leave. It was getting late and it was a school night. I went upstairs and drifted off to sleep.

It’s now almost three weeks later, still going strong. My mother and I talk everyday. Whether its for an hour or a few minutes, it’s always good to hear from her. I love my military mom, no matter what.

# TRADING PLACES: THE LIFE OF AN ARMY BRAT

Tara Deck

## *Chapter 1: And So It All Begins . . .*

Out the door he went. With the sky dark enough to think it was night, he left with a kiss to his wife and newborn. Tears were shed, but she stayed strong. With nothing left to do but close the door and weep some more, she put me back in my crib. As the car's engine quieted, her sobbing amplified. My cries in the background distracted her. My mother gained hope that everything would be okay. This was the first time (but surely not the last) that she would be left alone, with a baby, while he went away to be a hero.

My dad has missed a lot of my birthdays, but I don't blame him for that. The military does care, but they can't afford to send every troop home just because it's their little girl's birthday. It makes me proud that my father serves this country, but it also makes me sad every time he misses one of my softball games, birthdays, or can't spend a holiday with my family. I have

gotten used to him being away, and a lot of people don't understand that. It's not as hard for me now when he leaves for a month or two, but when he deploys for a year or a year and a half or more it is a difficult time for our family.

I wonder sometimes if my dad feels bad that my brother and I are used to not seeing him. That he is just a face on a screen. That his voice can only crackle over the telephone. That his kisses and hugs can only be heard and not felt.

### *Chapter 2: Plumerias*

The sweet lei around my neck presented a welcoming "aloha," and the island sang songs of beauty. As my dad comforted me saying this would be the best adventure of my life, the sun-kissed face of the Hawaiian native made my arrival less overwhelming. The rainbow peering at me was foreign, but I liked it.

As we departed the airport (not on a plane this time) we drove through Honolulu, where the beautiful palm trees and exotic flowers presented a warm hello. The breeze through my window glided past my neck and nose and I could smell a certain flower that would become very familiar by the time I left.

With a slight pink, but yellow center and white surroundings, the plumeria is a well-known flower in Hawaii, but is originally from Central America. Most scientists refer to it as the *frangipani*. Not many people know though that this flower can cause serious illness if eaten. The plumeria is about five inches wide and is frequently used in Hawaiian leis. It is also an excellent

accessory for little kids.

As my friends and I climbed the plumeria tree, a skip and a hop away from my house, we gently tugged at the most perfect ones, and put them behind our right ears. We knew only our married mothers kept them behind the left. This became a weekly activity, and by the time I left the island, I knew the scent of the plumeria as if it were a part of me.

The perfume of the flowers takes me back to my house, hula, and friends in Hawaii. All my best friends lived next door, their lives connected to mine. We enjoyed gymnastics together, but I was the only one who did hula. I went to hula two times a week and before my hips or feet moved to a beat, I knew how to speak my alphabet, body parts, numbers and a few phrases in Hawaiian. I learned about Hawaiian traditions and when we dressed for a performance we often wore plumerias behind our ears while we danced. This was important for me because it taught me that hula is more than just a physical activity. It's a lifestyle that reflects a culture, and that's what Hawaii is all about.

My house was a pale green shade, joining about six other houses together. My door had a sign that said, "Please remove shoes, *Mahalo*." In Hawaii, it is common courtesy to take off your shoes, and now it is just habit when I walk in my door. Simple things that affect me like that is what makes Hawaii my *ohana*.

The military moved us around a lot, but Hawaii proved that moving wasn't such a bad thing. Hawaii was, in my opinion, the most pleasant place to live out of all my moves and if I could, I would have moved

back there yesterday. A salty breeze or the sound of waves breaking jolts memories into my head and reminds me how lucky I was to have been there and met the people I did.

Plumerias were missed as I started a new chapter of my life, but never forgotten. If anything, seeing or smelling the flower made me thankful for my opportunity to have lived in Hawaii. I pondered, *If Hawaii was wonderful and gave me things to remember it by, then maybe Germany will, too.*

### *Chapter 3: Shattered Shell*

The loud sound of people muttering German into phones filled the Frankfurt Airport. Unlike Hawaii, the air breathed down my neck at a chilly fifty-seven degrees and I caught a whiff of fall in the air. I regretted not owning a single pair of jeans. I forced myself to stop shivering as I dragged my luggage off the old squeaky conveyer belt and headed toward the door. As soon as I put my foot on the bus, I was uncertain about what lay ahead, but I was hopeful it would prove that flying over eight thousand miles away from my *ohana* would be worth it.

The fresh pasta and garlic bread would surely welcome any new faces and be a good conversation starter. My mom cooked at the chapel as everyone gathered in the main room. The annual military child awareness gathering kicked off with little kids screaming baby talk and parents grabbing young ones by their arms to quiet them, as they listened to the “boss lady” explain the day’s events.

As my friends and I started to discuss what we would help out with first, a professional looking lady in a tan pencil skirt and cardigan holding a notebook, pencil, and tape recorder, roamed over. "Hi, I am an interviewer for the weekly paper and I was wondering if y'all would be interested in talking about being a military child."

"Sure, why not," I casually answered. In the back of my head though, I was not casual about anything. I knew I had opened up a can of personal worms. Sharing my feeling about being a military child had never come up for one simple reason: I didn't want it to.

I began by saying, "My dad is in the Army and I have moved three times so far. I am a really social person and I get along with everyone, bu- . . . bu- . . ."

"What is it?" she said with her deep eyes looking into mine.

It seemed as if this was a life or death situation. How could I share what had been bottled up for what seemed like a century. I forced myself to say, "but I am afraid to get personal and connected with someone because I know I will just have to leave them again in three to four years."

"I know exactly how you feel," my friend Lacey explained making it a little easier for me to go into depth.

"I put a shell over myself when I meet new people, but then their warm and open personalities shatter it and I learn to love them." Everyone who faced the same issues looked at me with a sigh of relief because I

had just put their feelings into words. “ Even though it hurts so much to leave the ones I learn to cherish, staying in touch and starting something new helps.”

Another friend of mine, Sage, said she had moved over six times already and was about to move for her seventh. The way I expressed my feelings helped her express hers.

Her bright blue eyes listened intently and said it all before she spoke. She knew I was only a thirteen year old girl, but I had lots to tell. Very softly she said that if there was anything we ever needed that we could talk to her. Could you imagine that? Barely an acquaintance and she has the heart to realize sometimes teenagers need someone who is not in the military to talk to.

#### *Chapter 4: 360°*

Virginia was nothing like I imagined “home sweet home” to be. When I arrived in Virginia, I felt that I was supposed to be more connected here because I was born here, but what happened was the complete opposite. I was completely culture shocked. The only places to grab a bite at that we recognized were McDonalds, Subway, Popeye’s, and Burger King. These don’t even come close to the variety and options America has to offer.

My dad is still in the military and still continues to leave, but I think because we are back in Virginia and unlikely to move again, at least not before I graduate, that I am starting to feel more settled. Everyone likes

and accepts me and I have made close friends. I can enjoy getting to know my friends and not have that little voice in the back of my head saying "This will all end in a few years, Tara." However, I realize that we could very well move again, whenever the military tells us to.

The truth is, I have never come to terms with moving and the military. I don't think I will ever have closure until I am on my own and decide when I want to move. Even though my family faces many obstacles and doesn't necessarily get to be together all the time, we have a strong bond.

I never thought when I moved back to Virginia that I would feel as comfortable in one place as I do. Friends, family, and the military have made me who I am today and moving to different places has been a huge part in that too, but moving here is the last military moving montage for me, or so I am told.

# CANCER LIFE FLIP

Emily Pace

*July 1, 2012*

It's all over now, my life has been flipped and now all I have to do is get used to my "new normal." The past year of my life has been filled with times I never thought I would have to go through, but I did, and I know that other people have to as well. And yet I just feel so isolated from the world. I wish I could go back to a year ago, when everything started, and undo it all.

*July 7, 2011*

"Emily we found out that Daddy has cancer." That's the sentence Mom said to me earlier. I didn't exactly know what that meant, other than the fact that my Dad has a disease that is almost incurable. I'm sitting in my room now, and I feel as if my world has been turned upside down, like a piece of raw steak being flipped to cook on the grill. I'm home alone and yet

even though I could burst into tears right now, I don't want to. Dad wouldn't want me worrying he would want me to keep living my life as it is, but even I know my life will never be like it was now. I walk downstairs and see Leo, sitting there wondering what's going on and why everyone is acting different, I would give anything to be him right now, to be able to run and play without a care in the world, but I know I can't. The phone is ringing and I see it's Pastor Doug, I don't want to answer it because I know what's coming.

"Hello?" I say, knowing it's him.

"Emily? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me. Do you want to talk to Mom?"

"No, actually I want to talk to you. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Why?"

"Well, I thought you might have some questions that you didn't want to ask your mom, so I thought I would call and see if you wanted to ask me anything. Do you?"

"No, I think I'm okay right now." *Who am I kidding? I'm not okay. But I won't ask him anything. I need to be strong.*

"Okay. Well, I will see you tomorrow. Bye"

"Bye." I hang up and put the phone back on the charger. I go sit down and see that it's almost 9:30 p.m., so I head up to bed.

*July 17, 2011*

Today was the first day I have been to church since Dad's been diagnosed. Last week Pastor Doug called

Mom and told her. He didn't think we should go. He didn't want us to be swarmed by "supporting worriers." That's what Dad calls the people who are supporting us but are doing it in a way that makes them look like they are worrying to the point that we don't want their support. Mom didn't come to church. It was just me out of our family and I was the only one who got "swarmed." Amanda took me even though she was upset about having to get up at 7:30 to get me there by 8:30.

When we got back from lunch, I tallied up the number of people that hugged, talked, prayed, or did something for or to me today and I had a total of about forty-seven people. That seems like a lot of people and it felt like even more. I would walk down the hall to get some water and get stopped by about ten people at least, when normally I would be lucky to be stopped by one person, and normally they just wanted to ask me where my Dad was. I know they just want me to know they care, but some of these people, I swear I have never seen before at the church.

*July 24, 2011*

Today at church you could tell who wasn't there last week and had just found out about Dad. Today was also my Mom's first day back at church. Only the younger people that know me came up to me, and all the little old ladies that don't even know that I exist went up to mom. She said that about every five minutes someone would walk into her kindergarten Sunday school class and interrupt to tell her how

“they were praying” or “they would do anything she needed.” I’m glad they didn’t do that to me last week, because I probably would have just said, “Um, you might want to ask my mom because I don’t know what she needs.”

No one takes me seriously anymore. They just tell me how much they are praying for me and other stuff like that. I feel like I’m being treated like a two year old when you spell things out to other adults so they can’t understand. Earlier I was just walking down the hall, I heard some lady whisper to one of her friends, “That’s Emily, their daughter. She doesn’t understand anything about what’s going on.”

I thought to myself, *Well, neither do you, so back off.* Sometimes I’m glad Mom and Dad raised me to have a good temper because if I had been in a bad mood I probably would have said that to her. Mom just got home from the grocery store; she had to go today because Amanda is staying with me again this week. We are now on our way to MCV to see Dad.

*July 31, 2011*

Today we got good news: Dad might be able to come home in about a week. I was so happy when my Mom told me last night. She called awfully late and I thought something was wrong. I almost didn’t answer the phone for fear that she wanted me to come up to MCV and say goodbye. Instead, she said “Hey so we have some good news . . .”

“Really, what is it?” I said, excited.

“Well, it looks like Daddy might be able to come

home, possibly by next Sunday!"

I was so happy, I didn't know what to say. She thought I had hung up, and when she realized I hadn't, she said she had to go but thought I might want to know. I said goodnight and that was that. I was so ecstatic I could hardly sleep. Apparently, she called Pastor Doug too because when I got to church he announced it during concerns and celebrations time.

I ended up having another day like the 17th, but this time I was okay with people coming up to me because it was for a good reason.

*August 6, 2011*

This week starts Summer Fun for the preschoolers at our church, and I am super excited. I know that I'm just doing some of this stuff to keep myself busy, but I do enjoy it and I know what I need to do. I am helping Mrs. Mazzucchi. She is super nice and I'm glad I get to help her. We have twelve kids in our group and they all are between the ages four and six. I'm happy I didn't get stuck with the little, little kids, like the two-year-olds. I mean they're cute and all, but I don't think I could deal with ten of them for five hours a day. Dad came home Thursday and on Friday one of the ladies that helps told me that my smile had gotten twenty times bigger and I looked so much happier. Honestly, I was happier. I didn't notice the whole smile thing, but I was a lot happier. I mean who wouldn't be if your Dad had been in the hospital for a month and then got released you would be pretty happy, too. I think Leo was even happier. When Dad walked in the door, he

went nuts. I thought he was about to jump over the gate and fly across the room into his arms. Just before Dad got home, Amanda and I were watching TV when Leo started barking like crazy. When I looked out the back door, Emily, Mrs. Megan, Pastor Doug, and Pastor Clara were standing there with balloons and a giant "Welcome home!" sign that they wanted to put out front. We were headed out the front door when the car pulled up so I was sent out to "distract" them. It was a mad dash to get the decorations and balloons up, but it looked great. Dad walked in and started laughing. He couldn't believe his eyes. I had to explain to him, it wasn't my idea, and that I didn't even know about it until five minutes before they pulled into the driveway.

*September 4, 2011*

Today after I woke up Mom took me to Riverside Hospital in Newport News. Dad gets his monthly chemo there because it's too far of a drive to MCV, and Riverside offers the same plan. On our way up, Mom told me that I could get some hot cocoa from Einstein's even though it was eighty degrees outside. I still got some and it was delicious. After Mom stopped at Dunkin Donuts, we walked up to the room. As soon as we walked into the room, Dad says, "Hey, have y'all had breakfast yet?"

We looked at him, at each other, and then both said, "What do you want?" He acted like he didn't know, but he clearly did. We ended up going to Chick-fil-A for breakfast, which just so happened to be almost

thirty minutes from the hospital. We returned and ate breakfast in the room. As we were eating, we heard the nurses in the hallway arguing over something.

I walked out to get some forks and they all looked at me and asked, "Are you visiting James?"

"Yes. Why?" I said. They told me how they loved having him as a patient and not having to do much when they were in charge of him. That, I knew, was true. Even if Dad was in pain or needed something, he wouldn't tell them he'd just say "I'm fine" or "I want to leave" or smart aleck stuff like that. When the nurses heard my laugh, they knew I had to be his daughter because they said our laughs are "the same." I never thought about it, but I guess our laughs are similar. Amanda is here now and we are going home for tonight. Mom is coming home tomorrow after they get the blood test results. Dad hates those. He says he's glad he has the PICC line in his arm because he doesn't want to get poked and prodded at with needles all the time.

*September 11, 2011*

Today, Dad is coming home from his first at home chemo. Basically he gets to come home from MCV and return to his semi-normal life. Mom and I decided to cook a big dinner for his welcome home. We make some of his favorite foods including macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes, and super sweet sweet tea.

I have been in school now for about a week and so far I like eighth grade. The teachers all seem super nice, and I have lots of classes with my friends.

Mom drove Dad home and I am really happy to see him. Through this whole experience we have been cracking jokes about him being bald now. I said jokingly, "Hey is your head cold?" He laughed and we sat down for dinner. While he was at MCV, people from my church volunteered to cook me dinner. Even after he came home, people were still bringing food even though we didn't need it. We had some awesome food made for us like chicken enchiladas, lasagna rolls, and even crab cakes. The last person is bringing us food on Tuesday and then that's it, we have to start cooking for ourselves again. I said this and they both started laughing. I guess it does make me sound kind of spoiled, but it's been nice not having to do anything. I just realized it's 9/11. I guess with everything going on, I've lost track of the days. Well, God Bless America.

*October 23, 2011*

This month has gone by so fast, I can't even believe it's the end of first quarter. Dad has been doing pretty well. In fact, I'm visiting him now. He is back in room 524 at Riverside Hospital in Newport News. The chemo from last time seemed to do exactly what it was supposed to do; it knocked down all of his white blood cells and basically made it to where he can't fight off any sicknesses, but now that his numbers are back up, we are at Riverside to have them knocked down again. He will be knocked down even further this time and further the next time. Hopefully, if everything goes as planned, then he will be done with chemo for a while until he can get a bone marrow transplant.

So far this month has been amazing. I can't wait until Halloween, I made a tutu from an old pair of shorts and some fabric and I can't wait to wear it. I am going to Katie's house to pass out candy with her. Aunt Hannah made Dad a crocheted hat that looks like a pumpkin with a little green stem on the top that he is going to wear on Monday. We even got him some candy to give to the nurses that come to help him. I guess if you're going to be in a hospital you might as well make the best of it.

*November 11, 2011*

Today is Veteran's Day and the day I get my braces off. I am so extremely excited I don't know how to express it. Sarah, Lynne, and Mom and Dad keep teasing me about not being "metal mouth," "railroad tracks," or "brace face" anymore, and you know what? I'm okay with that. I have had these things for almost two years now and I am glad they are coming off. We just left the hospital, Dad is in there for his last round of chemo. I am so happy he doesn't have to go through this anymore. Even if the leukemia isn't gone forever, he won't have to have any more chemo if everything goes well. Dr. S., I call her that because I can't pronounce her real name, said basically the chemo has "knocked him down" so much that if he had another round in a month it would do the same thing, so he doesn't have to get any more chemo. Mom told me that we weren't going to be able to go to Louisiana for Christmas/New Year's this year, which is kind of sad because that means we are going to miss fireworks at

Aunt Debbie's and we won't be able to open presents with the family. I am glad that we won't have to deal with Nanaw though. She has gotten a lot worse than she was before. She calls Dad like 24/7 and blames him for not talking to her in over a year, when he talked to her last week. Mom and Dad are both extremely worried about her but I personally think shes going crazy, being alone in her house all day with no one to talk to.

*December 16, 2011*

Today is my fourteenth birthday. I can't believe another year has already gone by. For part of my birthday/Christmas present Mom bought tickets to see The Cake Boss from TLC. He came to Norfolk to show what he does and tell his story. When I heard he was coming, I practically begged Mom to get the tickets. Getting to see Cake Boss was amazing and I wish I could have met him. Dad is in Riverside today. He had to get blood work last night and they wanted to keep him overnight, so it kind of stinks with him not being here. Right now we are on our way to Great Wolf Lodge for my party. I haven't been there in a long time, and because I didn't know what I wanted to do for my birthday, Mom told me if I wanted we could go back. When I got to school today, Lynne came up to me and handed me a large box that felt too light for it to be almost a foot long and foot wide. She told me to carry it. When I asked what it was, she said, "It's one of your presents." I asked her if I could open it and carry what was in it and she said "No! You have to carry it all day until we get to Great Wolf Lodge."

People kept asking, "What's that? or "What's in there?" I had to tell them I didn't know and I wasn't allowed to open it until later that night. Everyone shook it and nothing rattled. I was beginning to think Lynne had given me an empty box. Well, I guess I will find out tonight.

*January 8, 2012*

The New Year has officially arrived. The joys of Christmas are over, and it's time for midterms and third quarter grades. Great. I hate third quarter. For some reason, my grades always fall. I think it's because of midterms, but Mom thinks it's because I don't care anymore. I guess it could be some of both. Dad is home now and hopefully for good. Dr. S. said that we shouldn't worry. Dad and I have been doing so much together. I personally love doing paint your own pottery at Starving Artist Studio in Port Warwick. Mom has been freaking out over little things, like Dad driving. The doctors told him not to do long drives through the forest and things like that, but she freaks out when he wants to drive to our church which is only about three miles away. Mom even freaks out at me for some pretty stupid things. The other day I was going upstairs and she started yelling my name.

"Emily Alexandra Pace!" she shouted. *Oh no, the full name. What did I do now?* I thought

"Yes," I said in the sweetest way I could

"Why didn't you tell me there were dishes in the sink this morning?" I thought to myself, *Really, that's what you're yelling at me for?*

"Sorry, I forgot. I'll put them in the dishwasher in a little bit," I said.

"Thank you for finally listening. I've only been telling you to move them for three days now," she said sarcastically. I just walked away and forgot about it. I know she is under a lot of pressure nowadays, but it's starting to get kind of ridiculous.

*March 3, 2012*

This week has not been good. Dad had to be rushed up to MCV in Richmond on Tuesday night and has been up there for the whole week. I'm not really sure what's going on, but it can't be good. Mom has been on edge with everything and I haven't seen Dad at all. Aunt Debbie and Aunt Hannah are on their way here, so that can't mean good news either. Mom and I are on our way up to MCV now and she is trying to "prepare" me, as she says. She told me what's been going on. Apparently, Dad was moved to ICU.

*March 10, 2012*

Dad is still at MCV and still in ICU. Things have gotten a lot worse, and I'm starting to get worried. He was put on a ventilator last night, and when we went to see him the nurses told us that he probably couldn't register that we were there. Mom got pretty upset, but I didn't. I'm not sure why. I feel like I should have been more upset, but I guess I just can't imagine anything being different because everyone has told me nothing in my life should have to change. However, now that I think about yesterday, things in my life have had to

change. I honestly hope that dad gets off the ventilator, though right now things aren't exactly looking up.

*April 7, 2012*

Dad finally came home in these past couple of weeks. My schedule has been so crazy I forgot to write in my journal. Dad has been doing super well. The doctors are still seeing him once a week to check blood work and make sure we don't have another March scare. I'm glad Daddy made it out of that. I was about to start preparing myself for the worst, which sounds bad but I would rather be prepared than have it happen and not be ready at all. I think now, if it still happened, I would be ready.

*June 12, 2012*

This year has gone by so fast. Thursday is that last day of middle school for me. I am super excited, I can't wait to get out of middle school and go to high school. I'll probably regret saying this next year, but for now I'm excited. The Antleys came from Louisiana today. Dad is back at MCV, but he's doing well. It turns out that his body didn't respond to any of the seven chemo treatments he's been given over the past year, so now he has to wait in MCV until a bone marrow transplant donor comes along. Which seems like it would be an easy task, but it's not because the donor has to qualify in at least six of the ten categories to be eligible and the patient, in this case Dad, has to have a certain number of white blood cells to get the donation. Even though it's kind of scary with him waiting in the hospital, it

gives me more time to clear things up in my head. Ever since March my brain has been all jumbled up with medical junk and trying to figure out what's going on. The doctors say he should be able to come home in a few days to wait in what they call "remission."

*June 29, 2012*

Today is the worst day in my life so far. Last night dad got rushed back to MCV. Dr. S. came to my house and rode with mom and him there because she was so worried. No one told me what the heck was going on and I was super scared. Aunt Debbie went with mom and Aunt Anna stayed with me. Today Dad came home and that made me even more confused. I kept thinking, *Why did he go all the way to MCV to come home the next day?* Then I figured out why.

Aunt Debbie pulled the car up in front of the house in the cul de sac and Mom told me to go get the rolly chair from the office. I ran upstairs and almost toppled over trying to bring the chair down. Dad had to ride in it to get to the front porch. I could tell he was really struggling to even sit upright and not drag his feet. That worried me. When Dad finally got inside and got seated in his chair, Mom sat on the couch and told me we needed to talk. She spoke slowly with a slight tension in her voice.

"Emily, I don't know how to tell you this, but the doctors came today and told us Daddy only has a little time left in his life."

I didn't know what to say.

She kept asking, "Do you want to talk?" or "Do

you want to hug Daddy?" or "Emily, it's okay to cry and tell us how you feel," but I just sat there like a rock. I was in shock. Then I broke down.

That was the first time I had ever seen my dad cry in my whole life. At that moment, I knew he really loved me and I loved him and had learned so much from him. I cried and cried and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. Just thinking about it now is making me want to cry. I went upstairs and took a hour long shower. I just sat there and thought the water on my body was the only thing telling me this was real. Now as I sit here, I'm realizing what will change and what will never happen.

He's never gonna see me march in marching band. He will never see me ready for prom or homecoming or a date. I will never get to celebrate my fifteenth birthday with him or Christmas. He will never walk me down the aisle or help me pick out my wedding dress.

I just can't imagine my life without him. I am laying in bed now, begging and crying, just praying, asking God to save him, to let a transplant come along, or just save him somehow.

*July 1, 2012*

I have been awake since 3:33 a.m. At 3:30 I heard a sad, helpless scream and I knew something had happened. I didn't want to move or get up or even think I heard anything. I just wanted to forget it and got back to sleep. I knew what had happened, I just didn't want to realize it.

Aunt Debbie came in at 3:33 and said, "Emily, it's over. Your dad gone on to be with Jesus."

Mom follows her in. She's crying and comes and sits on my bed. I know it's real, I just don't want it to be. I burst into tears and lay on Mom's shoulder. We just sit there for about five minutes, crying. I hear the doorbell, but not Leo barking. Aunt Debbie says he's outside, and I nod. Mom says, "That's Dr. S. I should go change. Debbie, will you go let her in? Emily, do you want to stay here or go downstairs?"

I change into something a little better than my PJs and walk down the stairs. I half expect Dad to come around the corner and ask me what's wrong like he always does. But that doesn't happen.

Mom asks if I want to see him. I shake my head and go sit on the couch. Pastor Doug is here, too. He comes and sits next to me and says, "I'm not going to say anything because I know it won't help. But I want you to know I'm here." I start crying even more.

Dr. S comes in and says, "He loved you very much, and he always will."

I know that, but I don't say anything. I just sit there.

Everyone left around 5:00 and I went back upstairs to bed. I feel like I should text Lynne, Katie, and Matthew now, but I just don't have the energy. I look at my phone and see that all of them have already texted me, and so have Michael and Gaelan.

Uncle Don and Aunt Maria were on their way here to surprise Dad for his birthday. They got here at around two. I watched from the front door as Mom

told them that he had already gone on. When Uncle Don heard, he burst into tears. I thought of myself just earlier that morning. I watched Mom tell Aunt Maria, too, and they both just stood in the driveway crying.

*July 5, 2012*

*I won't cry. I won't cry. I will be strong.*

These thoughts keep running through my mind as I walk down the center aisle of the church. All eyes are on me. I see Lynne and Rebekah, but they don't see me. I see people I have never met before in my life and wonder why they are here. I know Dad knew a lot of people before I was born, but I didn't think they would all come. The church is packed. I smile to myself. I can't believe all these people care enough to come to his funeral. Mom starts walking, and I freeze for a second. I don't want to move; I just want to slip in the back of the church and not let anyone see me. Sarah grabs my hand and brings me back to reality. Sarah and her family are sitting with us, since they're close enough to be family.

All I can think is how I'm going to have to sit in front of the entire church and let people watch me cry and watch me hurt when they know they can't do anything about it. The service is very nice, all of the Calling 21 interns speak and read scripture and Pastor Doug gives me an embroidered cloth that he tries to make me read backwards. He says, "Sometimes things seem to be unclear, but when we look at them in a different view they become very clear." He turns over the cloth and it says, "For every garden a flower, for every

life a dream."

I realize I don't want to forget anything that happened. I want to remember what happened, even if it didn't end well.

The service ends and Pastor Doug sections off the youth room for the kids to go in if we want to get away from the adults and the old people. I find Lynne and Beka. They don't say anything, so I say, "Hey," and we have a few awkward words before we just walk in silence. I know exactly what they are thinking: *Why is she acting normal, like nothing happened? Her dad just died and she's fine?* But that's how I deal with things. I don't forget about things, I just distract myself from them. I walk into the fellowship hall and there is a line leading to my mom. I grab some food and head straight to the youth room. Lynne walks in with me and everyone stares: Brandon, Shelby, Sam, some others that I haven't seen in years.

Lynne says, "What at you all staring at?" Of course. I can always count on her to break the ice. It's almost like there's a wall thirty layers thick between me and the rest of the world. I don't like it. We sit on the couch and all I can think about is how much I want to change clothes. I hate wearing dresses. I just want to put on my shorts and relax as much as possible.

Everyone just sits, no one speaks. I know everyone is afraid to say anything, so I ask Lynne how camp is. She came home in the middle of Camp Overlook to come to the funeral with Pastor Clara. I'm so grateful she came. Lynne is like my rock, but even I can tell she is scared to say anything too heavy. We finally leave at

four p.m. and go home.

*Today*

Ever since July 1, 2012 I have an emptiness inside of me. I've had to adjust to the "new normal" everyone talks about. People always say things are going to get better and that I just have to keep moving in life, but sometimes it's hard to listen. There's days where I feel like everything's falling apart and it's not going to get better. Days pass where I just want to hug my dad and talk to him, but I know that can't happen. And then there's days that I've filled with friends, school, and things I love. Those days pass quickly and I don't feel as lonely or lost.

Lynne and I started a team called Jogging for James in memory of him. We run/walk 5Ks and do other races and events for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. They raise money for research and cures to give to other patients. I don't want others to go through losing a father, mother, spouse, brother, sister, friend, or family member so I will do all that I can to help prevent that. When people ask me how I'm doing I always respond with, "As good as can be expected." As good as can be expected is as good as I will be until I adjust to the "new normal" everyone talks about . . . I just hope normal will come soon.

# IT'S OKAY.

Lynne Frecker

## *Hope*

Tiny granules sift through my toes, rubbing the soles of my feet. I move my feet up and down, catching the sand in between my toes and slowly returning it to the ground beneath. I run out of sand to drop, and I scoop up some more, letting it slip through my toes again. I pause, listening to the choppy waves thunder onto the bleached white sand repeatedly; they threaten to put me to sleep. A slight breeze rises off the waves and lowers the temperature just so it isn't uncomfortable. A string of shells and rocks just above the waterline litter the grainy sand posing tiny threats to the soles of people passing by.

Emily and Rebekah, my two best friends, are sprawled out underneath vast, blue-striped umbrellas. Emily's bright green sunglasses hide her storm-cloud grey eyes. Lying next to her, Rebekah's dark brown, almost black hair whips into her eyes and she swipes

at it, annoyed. Emily rolls over onto her side and rifles through her bag. She pulls out a bulky bottle of sunscreen and applies it to her already crimson face.

"You're so white," I joke. "We've only been out here for an hour and you already have a sunburn."

"It's not my fault," she says. "I don't want to be this white."

Rebekah sits up and looks over at us. She looks confused. She never gets our jokes. "Lynne, just because you don't need sunscreen doesn't mean no one else does."

I roll over onto my elbows and break into a smile. We crack up. I lean over Rebekah and reach for the red cooler. I pull out Cokes and toss one to each of them. Three cracks later, we are sipping the chilled soda, feeling it tingle the insides of our mouths. I start pulling on the tab, listening to the twangy clip sound it makes when it hits the top. Emily looks at me, annoyed, and takes the Coke from me to put down beside her. I open and close the cooler lid instead.

"So when are we going back to MCV to see your dad?" I say as I shift the sunglasses from the top of my head to the bridge of my nose. I roll onto my back. The flapping of the umbrellas lessens. Emily's dad has leukemia and is at a hospital in Richmond. Mr. James got diagnosed a year ago, and then went into remission. About a month ago he relapsed and has been at the hospital ever since. Emily and I have been going to visit him about every other week.

"I don't know," she responds. Her face lightens and a smile emerges. "We might not have to go to

MCV anymore."

"Um... What?" I say.

"Yeah, they said that he's almost done with his chemo," she answers. "I really think this time it'll work."

"You think so?" Rebekah says while she absent-mindedly smoothes the wrinkles in her towel. Emily slowly props herself up on her elbows and brushes her hands together thoughtfully, wiping the sand from the creases on her hands.

"Yeah—you don't?" she stares at Rebekah. Rebekah pauses smoothing the blue striped cloth.

"Yeah— That's what I'm hoping—" she answers back. "But you just never know."

An awkward silence.

"Way to be a downer, Rebekah!" I punch her playfully on the arm. Rebekah might be right, but we need to give Emily hope right now. What we're telling her might not even be realistic, but finding out that your dad has leukemia again, after beating it once, is not very realistic either. I reach over Emily and grab my Coke.

"Sorry," Rebekah says. "I didn't really mean it—I'm just worried."

"Me too," I say.

"Me three," Emily adds. Rebekah's dark brown eyes catch mine and then shift down to the Coke sitting in the sand. The sun looms over us.

"You want to go in the water?" I suggest.

"Yeah it just got really hot," Emily says. She stumbles up, and in the process, knocks over her Coke, send-

ing flicks of sticky syrup flying. Seeing this, Rebekah sets her's in the cooler. I get up, leaving the can behind, and walk towards the water sparkling underneath the burning sun. Emily runs straight into the surf and flings herself in. I wade slowly in until the water reaches my hips. The water laps up against my stomach, making me shiver. Rebekah runs into the waves and then promptly screams and decides to return to the depth of her ankles. Emily resurfaces, gasping, with a long strand of dark, almost black algae hanging off her ponytail. I laugh, pulling it out of her dripping hair. I toss it from hand to hand for a while, turning my eyes from Rebekah to Emily. They both catch my eye and start to run. I throw it at Rebekah. It hits her in the face. Her high-pitched scream intrudes on the quiet beach. We crack up.

"You think that's funny?" she says. "Well then this must be *hilarious!*" She leans down and scoops up two overflowing handfuls of algae. She smiles mischievously. It smacks into my face. My eyes and nose burn from the salt. The gooey mass seeps downward and then plops back down into the water. Smiling, I reach up and wipe off the briny residue. I scoop up two more handfuls of algae.

"Now you're going to get it!" I yell. They scream and run from me out of the water. I watch them run up the sand towards the umbrellas. The sand seems to fly from their feet, in all directions. I let the green sludge slip out of my fingers. I really hope that this will be the last time Mr. James goes through chemo. I hope, for him and for Emily.

*Holding On*

I must look like such a moron. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth— my dad says that all the time. My arms are laden with every type of school supplies known to man, and I’m struggling not to drop anything while ascending five small brick steps. This sounds like an easy feat, but currently it feels like climbing Mount Everest while holding four tons of slippery marbles. The sun beats down on my neck. It’s hot. I reach the top of the steps and promptly drop my French binder.

I hear a muffled chuckling noise and snap my head toward the blue-shuttered window, unleashing an avalanche of colored pencils and pens. I smile. A cheerful, round face pokes through the expertly hung window treatments. Footsteps come down the short hallway a moment later and the lock clicks on the door.

“Who’s there?” he demands jokingly.

“The pizza guy!” I yell back through the closed door. He cracks it the tiniest amount. The sliver of sunlight illuminates one part of his eternally smiling face and points out the newly-formed wrinkles and bald head.

“I ordered that pizza five hours ago,” he says with a completely straight face. I laugh at his odd appearance.

“Mr. James, you know that you’re wearing an apron and hot pink slippers, right?” I ask.

“My feet got cold and I couldn’t find my slippers.” He shuffles his fuzzy neon feet and looks at his apron speckled with different colors of cupcakes. He looks back up again and wags his finger at me:

"And just for that sass I'm not letting you in, pizza guy!" He starts to shut the door but I yell:

"Wait! I'm sorry! Just let me in, my arms are about to fall off!" I start to kick the scattered colored pencils into the warm, inviting home, but Mr. James stops me with a raise of his hand.

"A damsel in distress!" he exclaims. He leans down to pick up the pencils and I slip through the doorway into his house which always smells like cookies and potting soil. He straightens back up with a bundle of colored pencils grasped triumphantly in his hand. The color drains from his face and he grasps blindly for the wall. I see him to a large armchair and he plops down. After a minute his rosy cheeks return and he proclaims:

"I must be getting old!" He smiles weakly, but I know why he got so tired from just picking up some stupid pencils. His first chemotherapy treatment didn't work and the last few treatments have been intense. He's getting weaker. He's even stopped taking care of the garden in the backyard because it takes so much energy to go outside. Lately, he's switched to a cluster of potted plants and herbs on the kitchen windowsill.

"Emily's waiting for you in the T.V. room," he says. I pile some of the stuff back into my arms, and then he piles the rest on top. He gets up and shuffles to the couch, bathed partially in the warm sunlight streaming in from the window, and lays down.

"Goodnight, Lynne," he says. "Have a fun time studying."

I walk through the baby-gate and step into the

small TV room and smile at the pencil sticking out at an odd angle from her ponytail. The cluttered mess of textbooks and worksheets spread around her cover the whole couch and the floor space around it. I make my way through the mess and sit down in the plush recliner. We start to pore over countless pages of French, Algebra, and Physical Science textbooks. The math problems and vocabulary words consume a whole two and a half hours. By the end of the vocabulary list my brain feels like a bowl of mush. So I suggest going out to her trampoline.

We hop around the stretchy, black surface on the fallen leaves and twigs for a while, crunching and snapping them underneath our toes, laughing and pushing each other over. It's nice to get out of the silent house. The tension inside seems almost palpable. I flop on my back and watch her jump and flip for a while.

We met during Sunday school in third grade, after she moved here from Texas, but we never really got close until we started going to the same middle school. We became friends at the exact right time. We decided that we would be friends forever. It sounds tacky, but we did, and I'm glad we did. Since, we've decided to take French together in seventh grade and we have had repeated study afternoons. For a while when her dad first began treatment for his cancer, I couldn't come to her house because of the germs I carried, so Emily came to my house. But now I have noticed that she doesn't like to leave her dad at home if she goes anywhere.

Emily collapses beside me. Her dark brown hair

fans out over the surface of the trampoline. She's wearing blue plaid shorts and a white t-shirt, her signature look. We look upwards at the clear blue sky and lay there silently. I roll onto my side away from her and see the tired garden, once flourishing, that now holds wilting tomato plants framed by a strong wooden box. Tiny sprouts poke through the earth and reach for the sky, but eventually every one of them dies, stamped out by the tomato plants over it.

"Do you think that the garden will ever look the same again?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. I roll over onto my back and resume looking upwards at the slowly darkening sky. Some geese honk noisily by. She looks at me again.

"I don't know."

### *Nightmare*

I lay sprawled across the sheets of my bed, high above the cluttered mess on the floor of my room. I lift my sticky hand and wipe the moisture off my upper lip. The tangy scent of window cleaner and the comforting smell of my sheets surround me. My thoughts transfer from my swim team to the remainder of my summer to the nightmare that I've just woken up from. I don't remember the last time I had a good dream. I only remember the bad ones. The only way I can shake off bad dreams is to take a shower. It seems bizarre, but the water seems to wash the terror and worry away like new white paint obliterating all dirt and grime.

I roll onto my side, watching the little, red smoke

detector light blink. Time for new batteries. The broken shades on my window reveal nothing. It's too dark to see anything outside. My eyes slowly fall to my old, crinkled elephant laying beside me, whose trunk is bent at an odd angle from all of the years of love.

"Fix the air conditioning," I demand. He stares back at me blankly. I throw him at my empty laundry basket and then turn and stare at the other wall. I soon feel absurdly remorseful. I sit up and climb down the steps of my bunk bed. The piles of clutter tangle around my legs like vines. As I stumble toward my laundry basket, something reflective catches my eye. It's the iPod that I have been missing. Relief flashes in my mind. I would've been screwed if I had lost it. I click the tiny black lock button on the top-right corner. Squares of green light up the display; someone's been texting me. I pick my way towards my desk chair and plop down. It was Emily:

*Hey!*

*Are you there?* I scroll down and two more messages pop up.

*Can we talk? I know it's Friday night but I want to talk!*

*Lynne, I need to talk to you!* My heart skips a beat. Something's wrong. God, I hope it's not Mr. James. I text back hoping that nothing's wrong, that it's just my imagination.

*Hey is something wrong?* I say. *I'm still going to the beach with you tomorrow, if that's what you're worried about.* I hope the humor will dissipate the anxiety that she's texting me with. I wait a few minutes.

*I can't go to the beach tomorrow,* she replies. *I'm spending time with my dad.* My heart beats faster.

*Ok, I see how it is!* I joke. The silence presses on my ears. Nothing in the house moves. I am the only one awake,

*Oh, u haven't heard?* she asks. Now I'm really worried. I shift in my chair.

*No,* I reply.

*He only has a few weeks left.*

My world stops. The few seconds it takes me to process what she said seems to take hours. I run my tongue over my cracked lips and look up at the blinking red light on the ceiling, trying to form a thought.

*Emily, I want you to know that I'm here for you if you need me.* Even in my mind it sounds fake and prescribed. I don't have any words for her. What are you supposed to say to someone who is going to lose their dad?

*K,* she says.

It's the same response she had for me when I told her I'd be there when I first learned that her dad had cancer. It happened about a year ago and my family and I were out west in some obscure town in South Dakota. I hated this trip, and I hated my parents for making me go. I protested for weeks, and I made sure they knew I wasn't happy, even during the trip. We had just found a campsite off of the interstate and set up the RV when the screen of my iPod suddenly lit up with green. I thought, *They actually have Wi-Fi here?* I slid the lock button across the bottom of the screen and tapped on the tiny green texting app.

*Hey, the text said. It was from Emily. My insides leaped; I had missed her so much over those two weeks apart. It seemed like I hadn't seen her in forever.*

*Hi, I raced to respond to her. I felt like she would disappear off the face of the earth if I didn't text her back immediately. What are u doing up this late? :)*

*I got some pretty tough news today, she replied. My heart clenched.*

*O my God! I texted. What happened, r u ok?*

*Yeah I'm fine, but u know how today was my dad's birthday? she asked. Well he went in for a checkup, and we found that he has leukemia.*

*Emily, that's awful. This was the first time that I have had no words for her. I don't know what to say, I just really wanted you to know that I'm going to be there for you whatever happens. What a lame answer, I'm supposed to know what to say. I am her friend.*

She didn't reply for a few minutes.

K.

The conversations ended similarly, but when he first got diagnosed there was always the hope that he would live, but now that I know he's going to die my hope flies out of the window.

My heart shatters for her. She isn't going to have a dad. There's going to be no one to walk her down the aisle when she gets married. Only her mom to watch her graduate and have kids. The tears run down my cheeks.

I run out of my room and into the bathroom, dropping the iPod onto the hardwood floor. Even with the unbearable heat, my room seems icy and dark. I

have to leave. I turn the knob to intensely cold. I get in without taking my clothes off. The water slowly seeps down my shirt. My pajamas stick to my body; it feels like they are suffocating me. The desperation to get rid of this nightmare claws at my insides. The icy water doesn't help. It just seems to collect more and more, piling the feelings on top of me.

The tears stop flowing.

I don't want to think about it.

I don't want to feel anything.

I just want to sleep.

### *It's Okay*

I stare blankly at the multiple bouquets of bright yellow sunflowers dispersed between gorgeous red-orange hibiscuses strategically placed around the room. They attempt to brighten the gloomy atmosphere; the room is filled with crying people dressed in dark, monotonous clothes. Non-family members stand in clusters behind the seats draped in black felt where Emily and her mom are sitting. Pastor Doug sits a distance from the grey casket, both in front of the array of mourners. He wears the same expression he wore early last Sunday morning.

It had seemed like an ordinary Sunday morning, with the congregation socializing before the service and the same families sitting in the same pews they sit in every Sunday morning. The organ music sounded, and everyone stopped their conversations and sat down. I sat in the same pew as always next to Amy, my sister, and Laura, Pastor Doug's only daughter.

Amy leaned over to me and whispered, "Something's wrong!" She pointed to Pastor Doug. The lines on his face were creased with worry. His hands shook like they do when he's nervous. His eyebrows were pulled together in thought, but I shrugged it off. After the crappy news I got Friday night, I wanted nothing to do with anything serious or depressing. I didn't want to have to think about it ever again. There's not a day when I don't think of them now.

The acolytes came parading down the deep crimson carpet wearing bright red and pure white. They lit the candles at the altar and then went to their seats. After the acolytes bring the Light in, the congregation gives concerns and celebrations, but Pastor Doug paused the service by raising his hand. Pastor Doug has worked with Mr. James at our church for about seven years. Sometimes Pastor Doug disappears into the woods with his three boys to go hunting, but he is always back by Sunday. He visits everyone who happens to be sick or hurt, and brought me doughnuts when I broke my arm in second grade.

"As most of you know, Mr. James Pace and his family got some pretty tough news Friday. The doctors said that he only had a couple weeks to live." He cleared his throat and looked down at the floor. The congregation became completely silent. Some people began to cry. When he looked back up again he had tears glistening in his eyes.

"This morning at 4:00 a.m., James left to be with his Savior."

I didn't cry.

I couldn't form tears.

I was numb.

I was senseless.

I was alone.

Amy gripped my hand. I didn't squeeze back. I didn't even look at her. I could tell she was sobbing. I felt like I was unattached to my body. My whole body felt like it was made of lead. My breath was the only thing that moved through me. Even my thoughts stopped. Pastor Doug was crying. Everyone was crying. I wasn't. Why not?

That numbness that I felt on Sunday has slowly declined, but it hasn't gone away. It just feels a little more real. More painful. Pastor Doug is reading scripture, but I'm not listening. He closes his Bible and walks in front of the large silver casket that's draped in a lavender prayer shawl. The prayer shawl was given to Mr. James when he was going through chemo. The people of the church wanted him to know that we were praying for him. Pastor Doug's deep, comforting voice suddenly resounds in the open room.

"I just wanted to let you know that whatever you're feeling is okay. If you feel angry—depressed—grieved—if you feel nothing, it's okay." He looks around at us.

"You can feel whatever you need to. It's okay," he says. The sun streams through the translucent windows, reflecting off of the polished metal cross on the altar. A singular crimson drapery hangs alone on the granite wall.

He goes on to tell stories about Mr. James and his

life, but I don't pay attention. I'm still thinking about what he said.

"Whatever you're feeling is okay." I haven't ever really thought about that. I was raised in a family where crying wasn't okay and anger was discouraged and stifled at the first sign of temper or tears. I shuffle my feet and look down at an ant struggling to carry a crumb across the cold, hard floor. I move my black, shiny church shoes out from the ant's way and hear the quiet clack of the heels hitting the granite floor. *"Whatever you're feeling is okay."*

My stomach hurts. I feel sick, clammy. I wish I was back at the beach with Emily and Rebekah, when everything was okay, and there was hope. Nothing is left now. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to act around her? Her dad is dead. Gone. And I still have a dad. Am I allowed to talk about him when I'm around her? What if she starts crying, what do I do then? What if the Emily I know disappears? What if she gets depressed, or goes goth, or starts cutting? What happens then? If we were just at the beach again, everything would be fine. We wouldn't have to worry about anything like this.

The funeral service ends and everyone shuffles out, wiping their eyes with damp tissues and handkerchiefs. I find Emily in the crowd and we walk down to the reception together. It's in the Fellowship Hall at the other side of the church. I don't say anything, and Emily laughs nervously when she sees our other friends waiting for outside a small room that Pastor Doug has closed off for just the youth. In the corner

there's a fold out table piled with snacks, but none of the youth are eating. The couches are piled with kids that used to be our friends, are our friends, or never will be our friends. They all stare at us as we come through the small doorway.

"What are you looking at?" I ask to the room. Everyone looks away. Emily walks over to the snack table.

"Darn, no Chick-Fil-A," she announces. "I'm going to have to walk through all the old people to get some."

No one says anything. She's acting like nothing happened. It's really weird; she didn't even cry during the service. I expected her to be a total wreck, I mean, it's her dad, right? People cry during the sad movies and in every book I've read about someone dying. So why isn't Emily crying?

Then I start to think about what Pastor Doug said: "*Whatever you're feeling is okay.*"

Maybe she doesn't need to cry. Maybe it might seem to her like the only hope is to keep holding on to the old memories and blocking out the newest ones. Maybe it seems like there is no hope, and the easiest thing to do is just ignore her feelings. Maybe it just feels like a gigantic nightmare that she's just waiting to wake up from. Not every moment of our lives can be like a day at the beach or a jump on the trampoline. Some moments suck. Her feelings might be completely different than my feelings might be, but it's what she's feeling, so whatever they are, it's okay.

# INTO THE BLUE

Arielle Spalla

It is only a matter of time. 6:42 a.m. We should have left three minutes ago.

Guess that means I won't be able to text Dad for a while.

I feel a humming deep beneath my seat. It is the sort of deep rumbling you'd hear before a volcano exploded, or the thundering of an earthquake before it lay waste to a once bustling city.

Or the rumbling of a five-hundred ton jet getting ready for takeoff.

I close my eyes and let the roaring sink into me. I am ready for this. Flying alone is no big deal. I mean, it isn't even my first time, so why am I so anxious? It might have something to do with the fact that I'm still pretty frazzled from this morning when I almost didn't make it here.

Mom let me spend the night at my dad's yesterday because he was the one taking me to the airport.

So he set his alarm for what he thought was 3:00 a.m. Only it wasn't. He had set it for 3 p.m. Luckily, I just happened to wake up at 4:00. I remembered that my plane was scheduled to leave at 6:39, only because it was such a ridiculously specific time, and it takes over an hour to get to the Richmond Airport. So we managed to get out the door by 4:30 and then actually arrived by 5:45. Getting my suitcase checked in and going through TSA took another half hour. Although it wouldn't have taken so long if somebody didn't have to tell TSA that his belt couldn't be detached from his pants even though it actually could, and then proceeded to be patted down and questioned extensively. Years from now, I'm sure we'll look back on everything that happened and laugh, but it sure wasn't funny at the time.

I had just enough time for a bathroom break and then I was whisked onto my flight by several 'helpful' flight attendants. I hoped my dad was doing okay. He'd probably get lost in the airport without me. I am, after all, the expert on air travel.

The plane is picking up speed now. The air above my cabin has turned off, and everyone is quiet. Before I know it, we are racing down the runway, faster and faster, until I feel like I will melt into my seat. My stomach does a backflip, the plane lurches, and the world is falling farther and farther behind me. I peer through the little window to my left to see the outline of Virginia's coast. The sea is a breathtaking azure that darkens into a steel blue. Trees dot the land and I can just make out the moving specks that must be cars. I

smile to myself. Just like old times. My smile fades a little as I look around and see that I have no one to share this moment with.

“Oh sweetie, you’ll be fine, it’s only an hour long flight,” an overly enthusiastic flight attendant coos at me. Her shiny gold name tag reads “Nancy.” She is roughly in her late sixties and has short, fire engine red hair and purple spectacles, not to mention she has a little face on her makeup.

“Oh, I’m not nervous at all . . .” I reply confidently. For some reason, I just attract these overly attentive, fussy types. They’re drawn to me like a moth to a flame.

“Well aren’t you a big girl! All grown up and flying by yourself!” she condescends.

I scowl. “I’m fourteen.” I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, lady. She pretends she doesn’t hear me and turns to another flight attendant. They whisper something and steal a glance at me.

I have a feeling this flight is going to be a lot longer than an hour.

I notice that this jet is slightly smaller than what I’m used to, with only one aisle to move up and down. Which is fine by me—it makes it feel cozier, more like home, I guess. My seat is toward the center of the plane before the wing, so I have a fantastic view. I can see everything behind me and before me. My dad would always tell me, “You’ve gotta be able to see where you’ve been to see where you’re going.”

The reason I’m here is because I am going to Maine to visit my grandparents for a few weeks over summer

break. It's a tradition that I go to celebrate my birthday with them. I look out the window again.

I'm eleven years old, and life is good. I'm visiting my grandparents for a couple of weeks since school is out for the summer. Right now, I'm sitting on my favorite swing: third from the left. I kick off my flip-flops and let my toes wiggle freely in the breeze. It is a nice day for Maine: low seventies and not a cloud on the horizon. Before long, a girl of eight or nine comes and sits in the swing to my right. She has her dark brown hair in pigtails and is wearing shorts and a pink t-shirt.

"Hi," I say cheerfully.

"Hello," she returns with a smile.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"It's Kaitlyn, but you can call me Kaity. What's yours?"

"I'm Arielle."

"Wow! I love your name!" she exclaims. "Just like the Little Mermaid!"

I giggle. "Well, not exactly like the Little Mermaid. Mine is spelled with an extra 'le' at the end. But almost." This Kaity girl seems really nice.

"So do you live around here?" she asks.

"No, actually I'm just visiting my grandparents with my other family members. Well, except for my dad. He's in Baghdad."

Kaity's eyes widen. "Why is he a bad dad? What did he do?"

I smile. "No he isn't a *bad dad*, he's in *Ba*ghdad. That's in Iraq. He got deployed there for the military."

He's been gone for over five months." Though it feels like it's been a lifetime. I sigh. I really miss him. There are a few minutes of silence between us.

"Well, at least you get to see your dad. I hardly ever get to see mine ever since my parents got divorced."

"Your parents are . . . divorced?" The word tastes bitter. "I'm *so* sorry." Poor thing. I feel so bad for her. I mean, sure I don't get everything I want, and my life isn't perfect, but at least my parents are together and happy.

"Eh, it's okay. I'm used to it. They've been divorced since I was five," she says.

"Oh," I whisper. I don't see how anyone could get used to something as traumatic as that. I look up to see that the sky is getting darker and a few clouds have gathered in the distance.

My head jerks forward. I glance to my right and see that Nancy has plopped herself down in the seat next to me. She is staring at me very curiously.

"Hun, are you alright? You kinda glazed over there."

I blink and reply quickly, "Oh yes, um, just fine, thank you."

Nancy purses her lips and looks like she wants to say something else, but changes her mind. She stands up and says, "Well, I'll be bringing the drink cart 'round in a bit, just as soon as we reach thirty-thousand feet." She heads toward the back of the plane. "Let me know if you need anything."

I nod and thank her. If only she knew the half of it.

I don't know where that memory came from. I mean, I didn't even know that was what happened, exactly, but I guess my subconscious knows best. What are the chances that I would happen to run into a girl whose parents were divorced on the same day that I found out mine were separating? Was that just a cruel joke God was playing on me? Had I done something horrible to wrong him in some way, without knowing it? Because I sure as hell didn't think I deserved to have my entire world yanked out from underneath me and turned upside down in a single day.

I hear wheels squeaking and turn to see Nancy coming down the aisle with her drink cart loaded. She stops by me and offers me a clear, plastic cup with ice.

"What'll it be?" she asks.

"Thanks, Nancy, but I'm not really thirsty right now." This is a lie, of course, but I really just don't want to be bothered at the moment.

"Oh come now, you've got to drink something." She clutches a half-empty, navy blue can of Pepsi and pours the hissing drink into my cup. "There you are." She turns to another passenger.

I hold the glass firmly in my hand. It's such a familiar drink, like an old friend. I remember when I used to live in Necedah, Wisconsin, in a cozy, one-floor home that my parents had specially built. It was one of those houses that gets shipped in two halves on the back of a truck. When it was nearly finished, after my dad had laid down the cement for the basement, it still had no front steps or back porch. I would sit on the sidewalk on my cherry red tricycle and watch my dad

go out and work on them every day for hours. It never really got above 80 degrees, even in the summer, but the humidity made up for it.

He used to fill one of those giant Taco Bell cups to the brim with Pepsi and ice. It would sit out in the sun until a veil of condensation had formed on the cup's exterior, so when you picked it up, your fingers dripped with dew. The soda's fizziness had mellowed enough so that it didn't burn your tongue with its sharp carbonation, but not enough so that it was flat. The ice had melted down until it was perfectly lemon-drop shaped and could slide easily down your throat.

My daddy would often let me have a sip, if my momma wasn't looking, and I just remember how it would be worth sitting out in the simmering heat all day long, just to see his dimpled smile as we shared a Pepsi.

But that was a long time ago.

Well, I think it's okay to turn my phone on now. I pull my backpack out from under my feet and grab my phone out of the front pocket. I turn it on and see that Dad had texted me less than fifteen minutes ago.

*Have a safe flight. Take lots of pictures. I love you. :)*

I can't help but grin. I reply with a simple, *I will. Love you too. :)*

It's the little things about my dad that make me love him so much. Like how he always puts a space in his smiley face even though I tell him that he's supposed to leave it mashed together. Like how he always wears Old Spice deodorant because his father does. Like how he was a diver in high school, so he can

show us different dives when go to the pool. But the one thing that I love the most about my dad is that he seems to be the only thing in my life that has stayed the same. I mean, he is still living on Langley, even though we all have long since moved out, and he hasn't remarried, even though my mother remarried last May. He still has that dimpled grin that makes me feel like nothing has changed. The past three years have been nothing but change, and what I really need is for some things to stay the same.

I glance out my window and see a blanket of cotton below and above me. That's what I love about flying. I can escape from my worries. Although, today it seems they manage to catch up with me pretty quickly.

Nancy brushes past me as she comes down the aisle, but turns quickly when she sees me. I can only imagine what I must look like right now, swirling emotions all crammed into my expression.

"Darlin', are you sure you're okay?"

I stare at her for an eternity and then finally say, "No. I'm not." Now that I've started I am powerless to stop. "I just want things to be the way they were. I want my mom and dad to be together again. I know it's selfish and unreasonable, but I do. I want the days of waking up before six a.m. and coming downstairs to watch *Spongebob* with my sisters and baby brother, while my parents snuggle on the couch. I want the Sundays when we would all get dressed up and go to church, then eat lunch at Jason's Deli, or even the days when we would do nothing but sit around the house and play board games. I want to be able to have the

feeling of going to bed at night and hearing my parents talking downstairs, knowing where they are, and that they are safe, even if the fighting gets so loud that I have to come down and ask if everything is okay. When I would get scared and ask my mom if they were getting a divorce, she would always tell me that of course they weren't! And I believed her!"

I look up to see Nancy, listening with sad eyes.

"I believed her," I whisper. I'm out of breath and shaken up, but I needed to get that out of my system.

"I get it, kid. I know how you feel." Nancy hugs me tightly. She smells like tea rose perfume. "Life's like that. One minute you're holding your first child with the love of your life, and the next, you're holding him, begging him not to let the cancer take him away." Her eyes are brimming with tears, but she chokes them back.

I am at a loss for words. So, instead of saying anything, I just hold Nancy's frail hand in mine, and gaze through my little window.

The sky is a clear blue, almost as blue as my daddy's eyes on a sunny day long ago.

# I CAN ONLY FORGIVE

Alexa Kondek

My dad had just come home from work, and he walked through the door with a Walmart bag. In the bag was something he'd bought for me out of love. When he gave it to me, my mom was in the doorway of the kitchen watching us. When she noticed there was another pack of beer in the bag too she started an argument with him right there. They had to take it upstairs because it was getting out of hand. She was angry because she said he was "drinking away our money." I could feel the tense irritation in her voice as she yelled at him, and I could imagine how my dad was dealing with it by drinking his beer.

During the argument which I could hear from the living room, my dad admitted that he had just lost his job.

"I was fired, okay?"

"You were fired?!"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?"

"Okay, so now we really have no money at all, and you're still finding ways to waste it!" she screamed at him. I could tell she was furious. He was sitting there gulping down the beer right in front of her, I knew he was. It was like he was drinking away all of his problems and stress. I'm surprised she didn't slap him.

I kept that toy he bought me that day. I've played with it, and taken it everywhere. It's gone through a lot, just like my dad has, but it still stands strong, and my dad does, too. It was a Transformer, like the one my dad played with when he was younger. He wanted me to have one too.

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I woke up to the sound of a loud, manly voice, almost making my bed vibrate. My room was in the front of the house, so I heard everything. I looked up, and saw my mom at the door sobbing, and my dad standing outside next to a police officer. The cop was saying things I didn't really understand, but I felt a chill run down my spine as the cop locked the cuffs around his wrists. All the fuss woke up my sisters, and they came running downstairs wondering what was happening. I was in shock. It was like my body had frozen; I didn't know how I felt.

My dad was an alcoholic. You could see it in his eyes. They were red, and the skin under them had dark circles, and it sagged. You could smell it in his breath, the alcohol, and his teeth were yellow when he smiled. His whole face was rosy red, and his hair was falling out. He even had a little beer belly.

The night before he was arrested and taken to jail,

he had gone out on a joy ride. He was drunk, and he was happy. It wasn't the first time he had gone out driving when he was drunk, but I guess this was the first time he had been caught. My dad had lost his job about a year ago, and hadn't been able to find another one since then. Since no money was coming in, my parents couldn't pay the rent. The landlord tried to work with us, but my parents were almost a year behind in paying rent. About a month later, we ended up getting kicked out of our tiny townhouse with nowhere to go, they gave us 25 days to pack up and get out. My mom didn't want to believe we were actually moving, so she kept trying to find ways we could pay back the money we owed and she put off packing as long as she could. I knew we had to move, so I started on it right away. My dad was released from jail just in time to help us pack.

I sat in my bed, still frozen, listening as the voice drifted away, the officer led my dad to the car, and drove away.

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I watched my dad go into the house and grab some boxes, and then bring them out to the truck. I admired his strength, and help. I didn't know where I was gonna sleep that night, but my dad knew where he was. My dad, it seemed, didn't care about where we would go, as long as he had a place to stay, which was with his parents.

My mom started calling around, asking for places to stay, but got rejected. At the last minute my grandma (Mom's mom) decided we could stay with her for a

while. My nonna (Dad's mom) pulled up, ready for my dad to hop in the car. He said his goodbyes, grabbed his stuff, and got in the car. I felt my heart drop from my chest as I watched them drive away.

*Why do I miss him already? What do I need him for? He is just going to get drunk again anyway.* But deep inside I knew that, even though that was probably true, I still loved my dad, and I really did miss him. That night we dropped off all of our stuff from the U-Haul truck into our storage units. We moved in with my grandma, but we didn't stay there long. My grandma and my mom were always fighting.

One night my grandma just lost it, and she kicked us all out. Everything was too crazy for her I guess, and we, once again, had nowhere to go, again. We scrounged up all the money we had to pay for a night in a motel.

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We had stayed in the motel, just my sisters, my mom and I, for about a month before my dad moved in. I wasn't expecting it. I also didn't expect to be living in a motel for a whole month. My dad was living the dream at his parent's huge house: all the food he could eat and all the technological devices they provided him. Why would he want to come here?

I walked in the door to the motel one day after school, and I noticed a familiar smell. Cigarettes and alcohol . . . My dad was home! I looked on the beds, and his bags and jacket were spread out on them. I ran to the back room, where I found my mom and dad. I felt relief that he was back, but also hatred. *He decided*

*to come back now? Why now? I knew my dad loved us, but I was just hurt because he let his own family go homeless, while he had a place to stay.*

We stayed in the motel from March of that year to August. That was way too long for me. My dad found a job, finally, and was getting paid good money. He saved up enough to pay for first month's rent to a mobile home. He moved into our trailer with us, and we got all of our stuff out of the storage units. The trailer wasn't big at all, but it was a roof over my head, so I was happy.

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The room was dark, and I was warm and comfy. I was wrapped up in blankets and tucked in tight. I heard crickets chirping outside the window. Other than that, it was dead silent. It's been six months since I've been in my own bed. In those six months, I had slept on my grandma's back-breaking floor, a cheap bunk bed in a homeless shelter, and an old motel bed. It was nice to finally be back in mine.

As I started to drift asleep, I remembered moving day. It was raining, and dark heavy clouds hovered above. I watched my dad take apart my bed, fold up the sheets, and place them in a box. I watched him unscrew bolts and take off the bed frame. He packed it away and carried all of it to the U-Haul truck. I didn't realize how grateful I was to have my own bed until that day. In the back of my mind I thought, *Why are we moving again? Oh yeah, because my dad's an alcoholic who can't keep a job, therefore who can't make enough money to afford a house.* I was happy to be snuggled up

tight under the warm covers in my own bed, but it was sad remembering why I had to go without my bed for so long.

I thought back to how this all began. My dad drinking beer. If he hadn't drank alcohol all the time, and been stupid enough to go out driving when he was drunk, maybe I could still be in my bed, but at my old town house. Maybe he wouldn't have lost his job. Maybe he wouldn't have gone to jail. But I can't change the past, I can only forgive.

# THE TRUE JOY OF FAMILY: A TRIP TO DISNEY WORLD

Josh Blackburn

## *Like a Speeding Bullet*

My heart is beating like a bull shark's as my adrenaline pumps through my bloodstream. I stand tall, hoping my anxiousness will go unnoticed. My mother tries to comfort me, but all I can picture in my mind is coming to the stop at the end, crushed like gum on the bottom of my shoe. Or, I imagine the bar malfunctioning, and when my stomach gets left behind on the drop, I fly out of my seat, crashing into the rocks and concrete below. I step into the car and pull the bar over my chest.

*There's no going back, the little voice inside my head taunts.*

*Three ...* I look over to see my dad sitting next to me like a guardian angel, smiling away at the world ... *Two ...* My heart literally stops beating in my chest, as if it were a drum roll that had been silenced ... *One ...* My head and body are squished against my seat as the

car explodes like a maglev train out of the tunnel, accelerating to sixty miles per hour in 2.8 seconds flat.

The car shifts directions like a bouncy ball in a glass jar. I am upside down in half a second and back up again in another. I can't stop laughing as the wind rushes past my face. When the ride comes to a halt, I look at my body and move my limbs to make sure everything still works like it is supposed to. When I step out, I stumble around on Jell-O legs just to get to the bench outside, but all the blood rushing into them is making them numb, and the trash can looks pretty tempting.

As we stop to rest on the bench, my mother asks mischievously, "Well, what did you think?"

"Let's do it again!" I reply.

### *The Chase*

Indiana Jones is running away from a horde of natives. Fire explodes out of the ground as he dodges each one just in time.

He escapes from his pursuers by audaciously leaping up the rock face. He is starting to relax when a massive boulder detaches from the wall and comes rolling toward him on a path of destruction. He gets a foothold and leaps out of the way just as the rock tumbles past. He emerges on top, holding the crystal skull triumphantly above his head. The curtain falls, and the crew starts to move and transform the set.

I look over to my father with the wide-eyed expression of an infant that was just given a new toy. "That was actually pretty good."

“Yeah, they did a good job.”

I saw this scene in one of the Indiana Jones movies a few months after the trip ended, after I had told my dad that I’d never seen even one of the movies.

His response to this seemingly apocalyptic discovery was, “Well, that’s gotta change.”

So we got into the car, drove down to the House of Video and rented all four movies. When we returned home, we laid down in our living room, blinds drawn so not one ounce of light could put a glare on our dinosaur TV, and started watching the marathon of adventures. When a scene was about to come up, my dad would point his finger at the TV until it happened, at which point he exploded into laughter as if he had never seen it before— even though we all knew he had seen it at least ten times.

“So, who’s that lady?” I’d ask.

“Oh, that’s the evil mistress from the second movie, you know, when Henry went and got coffee and. . .” I just stared at him, one of my eyes half open and my mouth gaping.

The curtain ascends slowly, unveiling a vast desert stretching out to the horizon. A massive armored steel airplane and a few guards are center stage. Just a few feet away from danger, Indiana Jones appears with somebody I can’t quite make out. As he sprints with his partner toward the airplane, one of the guards grabs his partner. But, as quick as lightning, Indiana Jones slaps his hand on the assailant’s shoulder, twirls

him around, and hits him hard in the jaw, knocking him to the ground.

Indiana pushes his partner towards the plane like a father guiding his son to safety. His partner jumps into the plane, but just as he gets out of the way, another guard barrels into Indiana and throws him to the ground. Indiana rolls out of the way, then kicks the attacker into a jeep, knocking him out. More guards come around the corner with automatic machine guns. Indiana dives into the open hatch, just as the guards open fire. The plane's engine is revved up as it turns toward the horizon. Bullets ping and bounce off of the metal hull of the airplane like plastic pellets. They are finally out of danger, Indiana has saved the crystal skull, himself, and his partner.

### *The Magic Kingdom*

The next day, we head over to the Magic Kingdom where my sister gets all she ever dreamed of - fairy tales and princesses. The only thing that was good about it was that I got pictures with Cinderella and Snow White, and boy, do I wish I was Prince Charming kneeling down on one knee to give them a ring, so we could live happily ever after—all three of us. Maybe I could even end up in the next movie. When I made Cinderella get her hands off of me, I walked on over to Snow White and gave her some sugar.

Now, as the nearly grueling day nears dusk, we head over towards Magic Kingdom's grand castle. When we get about a quarter of a mile away from it, we stop and stare in awe at the giant structure. Earlier, the

castle glowed shimmering red, but now, it has turned into a constantly changing blend of blue and purple. Each color transforms into the others and the dome-shaped roofs of each tower now seem to waver like the flames of massive candles in a slight breeze.

My father leads us through the crowd and stops us when we are in a good spot facing the front of the castle. Suddenly, an unknown figure from the top glides down towards the crowd, and as it approaches we discover that it is Tinkerbell. When she gets to the bottom, the near-black sky behind the castle erupts into color. The flaming missiles soar into the sky, and just as they slope downward, they burst into a million sparks and designs. Some are circles, some are faces, and some are designs I've never even seen. When each one explodes, we can feel the concussions in our chests as if we were drums.

I look over toward my dad, who is in my mom's arms, and roll my eyes as I witness them exchange a quick kiss.

#### *Mount Everest*

"What would you like sir," the food stand attendant asks in a bored voice.

"Uhm," I respond while looking at the overhead menu, "which is better, the pretzel or the ice cream bar?"

"I get paid to like either one," the droning voice says, "but a lot of people pick the ice cream bar."

"Well, I haven't ever had a pretzel before, but the ice cream bar looks really good."

"You should try the ice cream bar, because you know that you like those," my father says patiently.

"You know what, I'll take the ice cream bar, please."

The attendant hands me a Mickey Mouse-shaped ice cream sandwich, nice and cold. The sweat trickles off my face as my family and I walk around various places, exploring the attractions of Disney World. We follow a walkway into a massive tree. The faux bark and tree limbs look inexplicably real.

We discuss what we want to do, and then move on to another part of the park to ride a rollercoaster. The entrance to this ride was designed to look like the entrance to a coal mining shaft. As we walk up the hallways, we look at the pictures displayed on the wall of people that who had attempted to climb Everest . . . and failed. We walk past a room that looks like it had belonged to one of the climbers: a thin layer of snow on the ground, a dirty cot pushed against the corner, a simple desk with a letter to home, ready to be sent, and a picture with a man draping his arms around his wife and kids nailed to the wall.

After the long wait, we finally climb aboard and I pull the securing bar over my head. My father sits down next to me, and as this is one of my first rollercoasters, I want him there. The ride sets off nice and easy, with only a slight drop at the beginning. The walls are lined with old, wooden support beams wedged into rock and dirt. The ride keeps moving forward until it stops, leaving us suspended on a forty-five degree angle, our backs facing the ground.

Out of nowhere, a big silhouetted object in the shape of a Yeti appears in front of us, grasping the support beam above. We hear a booming roar, and a trembling rumble shakes the ground beneath us. We start to slide backwards. I shut my eyes and put my hand on my dad's shoulder, knowing that if I die, I'll be with him. The speed picks up, and just when I think that I will fall off the edge of the Earth, something catches us, turns us, and pushes us to the left the split second before the Yeti would have crashed upon us.

The rollercoaster speeds off down a slope and into dark tunnels, back up some more hills, and I yell, but not because I am afraid. No, not that.

### *Home*

On the drive back to Virginia from Disney World, I am pushed against bags, blankets, and pillows that fill the car. I get my Nintendo DS out and start to play it as my father, the driver, pulls onto the highway. My father drives us home. When I get into the door of my house, all I want to do is hug my dog and climb into my own bed.

# MY TWO FAMILIES

Morgan Kimmel

## *Garage Sales and the Tooth Fairy*

About the time I was five, I had my first loose tooth. When I could wiggle it with only my tongue, my mom told me it would come out soon. She also said that if I put it under my pillow that night, the tooth fairy would come to my house and trade my baby tooth for a shiny new quarter. After she told me that, I began to wiggle my tooth every second I had the chance.

It was Saturday. But it wasn't just any Saturday—it was the day the whole neighborhood had a garage sale. It was pretty early in the morning, and I was across the street at my best friend Nick's house, but everyone always called him Nicky. We were also with his little sister, Weezy, but her real name was Mary Elisse. I always thought it sounded weird when people called Weezy by her real name. To me, she had always been Weezy, and always will be.

The three of us were sitting in their front lawn

watching cars go by and helping Nicky's family run the garage sale. The thought of my loose tooth, previously absent, returned at the thought of the tooth fairy. Unfortunately, I was dismayed to realize that my tooth was missing. A moment of panic struck me—I desperately wanted to find my tooth so I could get a quarter from the tooth fairy. I frantically asked Nick and Weezy if they could help me find it. Nicky and I started looking around the yard while Weezy got Miss Jackie. We looked around the yard for what felt like forever before finally deciding to give up the search. I always felt that when Miss Jackie talked she sounded wise beyond her years. Instead of coddling me, she would help me solve my own problems. "You probably just swallowed it," she told me. "It happened to me when I was a kid."

I was really disappointed when I finally accepted the fact I had swallowed my first tooth. When I returned home that afternoon, I told my mom everything. I started bawling when I told her the tooth fairy wouldn't visit me now. My mom was a kind and selfless person, which I never realized until I became older. She told me that there was a chance the tooth fairy might still be able to visit, but I would have to write a note to tell her what happened to my tooth. She smiled and gave me a little wink. I quickly scribbled down my explanation to the tooth fairy and went to bed extra early so the tooth fairy could get my letter more quickly that night.

That morning, I woke up in a groggy haze, but in an instant reminded myself to check underneath my

pillow. I quickly snatched my pillow from the bed, and beamed when I saw not only a shiny quarter, but a note from the actual tooth fairy herself! I grabbed the note and ran downstairs to my mom, who was half-asleep while drinking her morning coffee. I read the note to her: "Dear Morgan, I'm sorry to hear about you swallowing your tooth, but here's a shiny quarter to make up for your troubles. Best wishes, Tooth Fairy."

When my mom saw the note she ruffled my hair and told me, "See I told you the tooth fairy would still visit you. You didn't even have to worry." She smiled and winked at me again.

#### *Hamsters and Dinner Parties*

"Sean get that filthy animal off the table! Get that disgusting rodent and bring it back upstairs right now!" It's safe to say when Miss Jackie was yelling that at Sean, I was a little bit nervous for my own sake. When Miss Jackie got angry, anyone that got in her line of sight ran the risk of getting yelled at, even for the slightest error.

This all started one day when I was over at Nicky's house. I really didn't want to go home to eat dinner that night, so Nicky and I went downstairs to ask Miss Jackie if I could stay for dinner. She seemed pretty skeptical at first, but she agreed. After that, Nicky and I went upstairs and saw Sean in his room with Weezy. Weezy was holding her cat, Roxy, and Sean was holding his hamster, Zippo. Sean knew that Roxy always wanted to eat Zippo, so he was very cautious and took Zippo with him everywhere.

That night, when we were about to eat dinner, Sean brought Zippo to the table. Miss Jackie always talked to her kids with a very stern voice, and her Long Island accent only made her sound sharper, so sometimes it became hard to tell if she was angry or not. The food wasn't served quite yet because Miss Jackie hadn't brought it over, so Sean thought it'd be a good idea to let Zippo out on the table. Watching the little hamster scurry around on the table seemed to draw all of the giggles out of me. But even though Nicky, Weezy, and I thought it was funny, Miss Jackie was disgusted. She yelled at Sean to take Zippo upstairs, so he grabbed the hamster and ran up the steps like his life depended on it. She gave us a stern look and told us not to laugh. We immediately shut our mouths and tried to stifle our giggles.

Once she laid out the meal, she gave us a lesson on table manners. She taught us to not put our elbows on the table, always ask to be excused from the table, and, most importantly, not to bring your hamster to the table. Sometimes when Miss Jackie talked to us, she forgot that I wasn't her kid. I didn't mind though. I secretly appreciated the fact that she treated me like her child. I enjoyed feeling as if we were one family instead of two.

#### *Corn Mazes and Monsters*

All the Beatons love Halloween, zombies, scary movies, haunted mazes, and ghost stories. All of those things terrify me. My coping mechanism for scary things was just to separate the imaginary, such as ghosts, from

reality, like my family. But on Halloween, my ideas of fantasy creatures became concrete entities.

Fortunately, the day before Halloween, my mom said that we were going to go to the Belmont Pumpkin Farm. This place was the exact opposite of what I considered Halloween to be. It felt warm and pleasant, like a security blanket that protected me from the monsters and ghouls. A red barn that was starting to fade into a brownish-red, blending in with the orange, red, and yellow leaf-tops of the trees. At the barn they were selling pumpkins, pumpkin pies, candy corn, and other baked goods that gave off a wonderful aroma. I also noticed a huge cornfield, and my mom told me about a big corn maze that ran throughout the whole field. The thought of a corn maze excited me, because I always loved to solve mazes on paper. Little did I know, this would be very different.

When I first approached the corn maze with my mommy, I thought that the corn stalks seemed tall. They loomed over me, casting shadows on my face. The farther I ventured into the maze, the narrower the rows became. I started to feel panicked and distressed, like the corn itself would swallow me up. After awhile, I started to notice that I had already seen this broken stick or that rock, and I appeared to be wandering aimlessly through this abyss of a maze. I soon realized my mom had disappeared. For all I knew, she could have been swallowed up by the corn maze, never to be seen again. So I did what most four-year-olds would do: I sat down and started wailing for my mommy. While I was crying and screaming, I imagined zombies start-

ing to chase after me, or a ghost trying to haunt me. Just when I thought I was never going to leave the maze, I heard my mom run over to me.

“Aw my baby Morgie! It’s okay, I’m here! I’m here!” she said as she ran over to me and gave me a warm hug. “I didn’t think you would’ve gotten lost. I’m so sorry I didn’t stay with you, but I’m here now.”

After a couple moments, I started to settle down, and my mom walked me out of the maze. This time I held her arm tight, thinking that the more I squeezed it the more the monsters I imagined would disappear.

# MY FAMILY AND I

Hyeon-U Kang

## *My First Memory*

My first memory of my father is hearing my dad shout from the bathroom, “강현우 이 사고뭉치!”<sup>1</sup> I was around four years old, and my mother had commanded me to take a bath. Because I hated to take baths, I enjoyed fooling around in the bathroom to waste time. My parents always got mad at me because they were afraid I might break something when I fell.

I was having a fun time sliding from one bathroom corner to another; although I am not sure why in the world I thought it was safe for me to slide across the bathroom floor with soap on my feet. When I was at the peak of my game, I lost control of my body and fell straight to the ground. Panicked, I grabbed whatever was closest to my body. Despite the fact that I had grabbed something, I broke something like my parents had warned me. In fact, I would have not broken

<sup>1</sup> “Hyeon-U, you little troublemaker!”

anything if I did not cling onto the first thing that was within my grasp. It was luckily not part of my body; it was one of those brand new toilet paper hangers that my mother had bought a couple of nights before. The stick that held the paper together was split in half.

Afraid that I may get in trouble, I had to think and act fast. I do not know why I thought gluing the parts back together was a better idea than apologizing to my parents. Avoiding my mother, who was cooking, I quietly tiptoed to my room. Inside, I got my pencil pouch which contained a glue stick and a roll of tape. Then I snuck back into the bathroom quietly. Then, the scientist side of me came through, and I started to conduct experiments. The goal of the experiment was to reassemble the hanger without getting noticed. When I applied the tape, it held together pretty nicely, but it was easily visible. That experiment failed. Then, I tried to glue it back together. Since it was very cheap glue that you would find in the kid section of the supermarket, it was not strong enough to hold the two broken pieces together.

Filled with anxiety, I looked around the bathroom for any tool that I could possibly use to solve the problem. It was then when I came across a chunk of toothpaste waste, stuck to the bathroom mirror, that I had forgotten to remove a day before. Doubtful, I attempted to attach the two broken pieces with toothpaste. To my surprise, it worked! I put the stick back where it belonged and put the toilet paper on top of it. Right after I was done with my tiring but successful experiment, I returned to my room, satisfied and proud.

I woke up to my father screaming at me from the bathroom. It turns out even though my repair was perfect from a visual standpoint, it was not really good at functioning as a toilet paper holder. As soon as my father pulled on the toilet paper, the entire hanger collapsed to the floor. When my father came out of the bathroom, I was worried. He first came out with the broken holder and told me to look at it. It was then when I asked him, “잘 고쳐놨줘?”<sup>2</sup> Then he cracked up and forgave me for what I did.

He told me, “나는 너한테 니 자신의 행동에 채김을 지는것을 가르켜주고 싶었는데 넌 벌써 알고있나부다.”<sup>3</sup> Then he asked me, “근데 치약을 어떻게 생각해냈느냐?”<sup>4</sup> I just simply laughed.

### *My Sister*

All siblings hate each other. I hated my older sister. When I was a child, but now I could not hate her even if I wanted to. My first memory of my sister is being smacked in the face by her diary. Yes, there were plenty of good reasons for me to hate my sister. She was dominant and was able to boss me around just because she was stronger and a better fighter than I was. I also got in trouble with my parents if I ever attempted to fight back because they always told me, “누나한테 대드는 사람은 세상에서 제일 치사한놈이다. 대들다 걸리면 맞

2 “Did I do a good job fixing it?”

3 “I’ve been trying to teach you to be responsible for your own actions, but it looks like you already know, judging by the way you tried to fix your mess.”

4 “But how in the world did you think of toothpaste?”

을 주알아].”<sup>5</sup>

My sister had complete control over me. Therefore, I always had to do what she wanted to do, such as playing Barbie and having a tea parties. She always told me what to do, pointed out things that I was doing wrong, and picked on things she didn't like about me. I hated her.

What I thought was most unfair about my childhood was that she was allowed to hit me while I was not allowed to hit her. This really bothered me because my father always scolded me when I got hurt and started to cry because he told me, “남자는 여자한테 맞고 우는거 아니야.”<sup>6</sup> I was not beaten up by a girl. At least, not fairly, because if you ask anyone in the world if it is a fair fight if only one person gets to hit the other, every single person will answer “no.”

Despite all these mistreatments, I loved my sister. It was the kind of love-hate relationship most siblings have. She brought me food from convenience stores if I asked. She also played with me whenever I asked her, even though it was usually tea parties and other girly games. She was always there for me. She was the one who made me happy, mad, sad, upset, and proud.

### *Waiting*

After the incident with my father, my father decided that I was ready to start preschool. The preschool sounded great; I would have been able to make new

<sup>5</sup> “A brother who hits or fights with his sister is the biggest jerk in the world, and will have to face his father as well.”

<sup>6</sup> “A boy does not have the right to cry after getting beat up by a girl.”

friends, ride on the preschool bus without my parents, and I had this really cool backpack that I was finally going to be able to use.

After a great day in preschool, I returned home on the preschool bus. I ran to my house because I wanted to watch a new *Beyblade* episode that was supposed to be airing in next couple of minutes. Because I ran as fast as I could, I fell down on the concrete. My knee and my elbows were scraped which caused them to bleed and hurt, so I quickly scurried to my house where my mom would be waiting for me. I rang the doorbell, but no one was answering the door. I was scared, but I was raised to be calm in such situations and to wait for someone I knew to come and get me. At first, I thought my mother had left to take out the trash or to pick up something in the grocery store. Since I was aware that she knew the exact time when I returned from preschool, I figured she had gone to the grocery store to buy the supplies to make me lunch.

I waited and waited for my mother to return and open the door for me. I was already furious because I had missed *Beyblade*, and my legs were getting sore from squatting down. Without the patience to wait any longer, I went to the store of my fellow church member, located across the street. I asked him if I could stay, and he told me I was always welcome. I must have looked upset because he offered me a carton of milk while I was waiting.

I stayed in the store for thirty minutes before I heard from her. As soon as the store owner got off the phone, he went to go grab his jacket. He told me that I

needed to go somewhere. I asked him, “왜요? 무슨일 있어요?”<sup>7</sup> He had a hard time trying to find the right words to tell me. I asked him again.

“니 누나 얘기다.”<sup>8</sup>

“뭔데요? 누나 괜찮은 거죠?”<sup>9</sup>

“사고났는데. 하지만 하나님이 지켜주실거다.”<sup>10</sup>

It turns out my sister was hit by a speeding truck while she was crossing the street to buy me the snack that I had begged for. My mind was blank when I was in the car to the hospital. I wanted to cry and scream, but I was unable to. Deteriorated by the shock, all I was able to do was stare blankly in front of me without saying a word. When I arrived at the hospital, I hugged my crying mother. My mother and father walked into the emergency room and instructed me to stay in the waiting room. For the next hour or so, all I heard was my sister screaming in pain.

### *Aftermath*

I was not myself for the next couple of days after my sister’s accident. It was not just because I spent most of my time joking around with my sister, but I just did not feel like doing anything. I even stopped coming up with clever ways to avoid punishments. For the first time in my life, I was depressed. I tried not to show it, and acted like there was nothing wrong, but I secretly knew that I was not myself and something was bothering me. I came straight home after school, even

7 “Why? Is something wrong?”

8 “It’s about your sister.”

9 “What about her? Is she okay?”

10 “She had an accident, but God will protect her.”

on my friends' birthdays. I didn't want to do anything. All I wanted to do was lie down on my bed and stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars my parents got for my sister and me when we first got our separate rooms.

I became a terrible student who stopped caring about grades, sports, and even friends. I eventually even stopped doing my homework. Not doing homework as an elementary school student does not sound like it is a big deal; however, it was to me. Not only have my parents raised me to do my homework every day, but back in Korea, teachers hit their students for missing their homework. Pain was not the only punishment; it was humiliating as well, especially if I was the only one receiving the punishment.

When I first saw my sister after the accident, I was not able to believe my eyes. She looked completely normal; in fact, she was smiling and waving at me as if nothing had happened. It turns out she did not even break a single bone in her body. The only parts of her body that were damaged were her three front teeth. The doctor told my family, “기적입니다. 걱정하실 필요가 없어요. 아무이상없이 살수있을겁니다.”<sup>11</sup> He even told my family, “나는 교회를 안다니는데, 이것은 하나님이 지켜주신것이 틀림없읍니다.”<sup>12</sup> At first, I blamed the Lord for *not* protecting my sister. I was raised to believe the Lord's angels were always there to protect me. I had no idea why they did not protect my sister during the accident, but after hearing the doctor's tes-

11 “She is a miracle. You don't have to worry about a thing. She is going to be able to live without any major defects.”

12 “I don't go to church, but without a doubt, she was protected by God.”

timony and witnessing my sister's health, I was able to smile for the first time since the accident.

### *Emigration*

In February of 2004, I was having a normal day in school. It had been a couple of months since my sister's accident, and everything came back to normal. I had no idea that within a day, my life would change. In fact, the only thing on my mind was getting home to watch the *Beyblade* episode.

The day went by slowly. It was one of those days that made my least favorite class, Korean, seem as if it lasted a century. After waiting an hour for Korean class to end, I was extremely excited to go to my favorite class, computer class, where all we did was sit down in front of a computer and play games until it was time for us to go home. Right when I was about to play my favorite game with my friend, I was called to the hallway by a teacher.

By this time, for the first time in my life, I was very nervous because I was a good student. It felt like I was in a serious trouble. I kept asking myself, “이번엔 뭘 했니? 뭘 했니? 뭘 했니? 숙제 또 안해왔니?”<sup>13</sup> With the mixed feeling of guilt and disappointment, because I was missing my favorite class, I walked out to the hallway. When I walked outside, I saw my father. I just stared at him without knowing what to say. I thought to myself, “아빠도 오셨어? 이번엔 뭘 했느냐?”<sup>14</sup>

13 “What did you do wrong? What did you do wrong? Did you forget to do your homework again?”

14 “Even Dad is here? You really messed up with something this time didn't you?”

Instead of a scolding, however, my father just came and gave me a hug, and he whispered to my ears, “현우야 이사가자.”<sup>15</sup>

I asked him, “어디요? 서울이요?”<sup>16</sup>

He replied, “아니, 거기보다 좀 멀리. 우리 미국으로 이사갈거다. 친구들한테 작별인사를 해라. 친구들한테, ‘애들아 난 미국으로 가, 어른이 돼서 다시 만나자.’라고 하고 와.”<sup>17</sup>

I went back to the classroom and told my friends that I was leaving. I personally went to my best friend that was sitting next to me in the class. He just ignored me and kept playing his game. It bugs me now, but back then I did not blame him because that was an awesome game. It was truly the best game during that time.

For the next couple minutes, I had a serious talk with my teacher. She asked me, “앞프로 닥칠일이 무섭니 않니?”<sup>18</sup>

I answered back, “아니요.”<sup>19</sup>

She asked me with a surprise, “진짜? 거긴 한국말도 안써.”<sup>20</sup>

I told her, “네 알아요, 하지만 우리 가족은 많은 일들을 겪었어요. 이번 일들로 나는 중요한 것을 깨달았어요. 가족이랑 함께라면, 못할게없어요.”<sup>21</sup>

15 “Hyeon-U, we are going to move.”

16 “Where? To Seoul?”

17 “No, somewhere further than that. We are going to go to America. Go say bye-bye to your friends. Tell them, ‘I will miss you, but I am going to return, so let’s meet again when we are successful adults.’”

18 “Aren’t you scared of what you are about to face?”

19 “No.”

20 “Really? Why not? They don’t speak Korean over there.”

21 “I know, but my family has been through a lot recently. From the past events, I learned as long as we are together, our family can overcome any problems.”

# A FAMILY WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Justice Pinter

## *A Dinner to Remember*

I like to eat; sometimes I eat a little bit too much. On one such instance we were at my aunt and uncle's house for dinner. They had everything from ham to homemade buns to chocolate peanut butter pie. I ate my fill, and maybe a little of everyone else's fill, too. I was stuffed to the maximum potential. I was sitting at the little kids table in the kitchen, because I was four, and my parents were sitting at the adult table in the dining room. I tried to stand up only to find that I was too stuffed to move, so I just sat right back down.

My face slowly turned green and I was breathing really heavy, huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf. I kept reassuring everyone I was fine, not wanting to seem like a pansy, but all the while feeling terrible. Our aunt came into the kitchen to clear plates and ask if we were ready for dessert. All of the kids screamed, excited for sweets, and I screamed right along with

them, not wanting to feel left out. As I choked down the first bite of pie I felt my tummy lurch, trying to make room.

My sisters were trying to get me to stop eating, saying I would blow up or something, while my brother was chanting, "Eat it, eat it!" over and over. I took one more bite, and that is when things took a turn for the worst, I felt terrible.

My sister, Cherish, stood up, ran into the dining room, and screamed, "He's gonna blow!" as I came waddling into the room. My mom stood up to help try and stop what she knew was about to occur, but it was too late. I threw up everywhere. My mom says I always was a "projectile vomiter," and this was definitely the case here. My vomit covered the floor, part of the table, and most of me. The aftermath was surely a sight, with my embarrassed parents rushing around trying to clean up, my sisters scrambling around the house informing anyone who hadn't seen or heard that I had indeed barfed, my brother laughing and patting me on the back, and finally, poor me lying in a daze on the floor still too full to talk or move.

After everything was cleaned up, I rested and recuperated on a couch until we loaded up our car and headed home. Everyone laughed about what had occurred and retold the story from their own perspective, which was even more hilarious. They proudly proclaimed that we would surely tell and retell this story for years to come.

### *An Oncoming Storm*

“You can’t get me.” I squealed as I rushed around my mother’s leg with my brother following closely behind, frantically trying to tag me. I felt icy water crash against my legs as I splashed into the crystal blue waves. The sun was setting on the horizon, and a storm was coming. The sight of the broad, ominous clouds was an awe inspiring, beautiful sight that made me feel truly insignificant.

We walked along the beach as a family for an hour or so, enjoying the breezes, soaking in the sun, frolicking in the water, and collecting seashells of all varieties (as long as they passed my sisters’ ‘prettiness’ standard). We turned around, casually making our way back. As I trudged along the beach feeling the pure, white sand press down between my toes with each step, I was completely oblivious to the chaos about to break loose; I suddenly felt a huge drop of water hit my nose. We turned around and saw a curtain of rain steadily approaching about fifty feet behind us.

We were still a half mile from our resort, and it was about to rain cats and dogs. My siblings and I, thinking we were super-fast, tried to outrun the rain, only getting about forty steps in before we were completely drenched. My parents just kept walking, chuckling at our attempts to flee.

By time we got back to our room, we were soaked, chilled, and giggling uncontrollably.

### *Soaring like Eagles*

“It’s looking awesome.” my dad proclaimed as he

surveyed the work area. I was in the process of trying to complete my Eagle Project, and it was going great. We cleared off the weeds and branches hindering the flow of the water below the bridge, and were now working on tearing out the old bridge and putting in a new one. My Eagle Scout project consisted of tearing out a footbridge at the Noland Trail, replacing it, and clearing the stream embankments on either side of the bridge.

“Does anyone need a water refill?” my sisters belledowed in unison. I had put them in charge of making sure everyone stayed hydrated. They were rushing up and down the hill helping out when needed and fulfilling their waterbottle filling job. They were a huge asset to completing my project.

“Watch overhead for falling branches, and don’t forget to drink plenty of water.” my dad yelled over the noise of the machinery being used. My dad always told me that the project was mine and he was not going to take it over like some parents, so I gave him the job of Safety Manager where he explained the different dangers associated with our job, and watched and helped when needed to assure the safety of everyone there. He was a huge help, as he didn’t exasperate me by trying to take over my project, which he was vehement about not doing. He also did a great job ensuring the safety of the workers, as nobody got hurt or became dehydrated.

As completion of the project neared, my father was the first to congratulate me. As we were laying rip rap stone down he turned and patted me on the shoul-

der, trying to explain how great everything looked and how proud of me he was. Next, my mother came over practically overcome with tears as I am now her second son to achieve Eagle Scout. She knew how much time and effort I had put into scouting since I was young, and she's been there every step of the way. She pumped her fists and jumped up and down while telling me how marvelous the footbridge looked, embarrassing me a little, but still allowing her excitement to sink in and invigorate me.

"Sweet," my sisters exclaimed as they rushed across the newly completed bridge. The bridge was complete, and seeing them dash across it and walking across it myself filled me with pride as I knew I put my heart and soul into this project. The finished product didn't buckle under twenty-eight people's weight, as we took pictures to remember this day. The best part was not that the footbridge was done or that my Eagle Scout Project was finally completed. I knew that the project was mine; I had done it, and no one was able to take away the feeling of accomplishment I received.

#### *The Mountain of Terror*

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as I slipped and landed face down in the pure white, powdery snow.

"It's because you didn't do the pizza correctly," my brother mocked me with a sly grin.

I stood up, gingerly rubbing my cheeks as the snow melted on them, turning them numb. I was trying to learn how to ski, and honestly it was just hard; it didn't help that my siblings were practically professionals,

leaving me feeling young and dumb. I quickly heaved myself to my feet, launching myself farther than anticipated and landing on my bottom, which pulled a gasp from my lips.

I glanced down the mountain, spying my parents anxiously awaiting our safe arrival down the crag. I looked at my siblings expectantly and they each smiled in return, understanding my slightly scared expression and realizing how nervous I truly was. Panicky anticipation coursed through my body as I turned my head to face the beast, the seemingly biggest ski slope in the whole world.

“Go ahead students,” our teacher bellowed over the screaming wind. “I’ll meet you at the bottom.” With this, students left and right hurriedly zoomed down the slope toward their proudly waiting parents. My siblings were some of the first to get down to the bottom; meanwhile, I was still at the top of the slope, legs shaking, petrified at the fact that I had to go alone down a huge slope. My siblings high-fived each other and glanced around for me. I was the last person on the top of the slope besides my teacher who was trying to persuade me to go down the hill. I peered over the drop-off, gauging whether I could accomplish this feat or not. As I leaned over for the inspection, I felt a quick, light push on my back, and off I went.

I sped down the hill, forgetting all my training, just going straight down. Trees, rocks, and people were a blur as I zipped by, unable to control my speed. I went over a bump and almost lost balance. As I neared the bottom of the mountain, my training began to cross my

mind. I tried to swerve back and forth, but I was going too fast. I remembered what my brother said and tried my hardest to “pizza” my way down, but it was too late. I rushed by my bellowing family and kept going towards the ski shack. As I came within one hundred feet, seriously thinking I would die, I veered right, directly into a plastic orange protection fence.

“You should have seen your face.” my siblings cried as my family rushed over to untangle me. I was embarrassed until I realized that no one was mad. In fact, everyone was smiling and laughing, so I couldn’t help but laugh, too. As my parents and the ski teacher finally go me loose, I laughed and laughed until I cried.

# PARTY

Tevin Lambert

Years ago, I'm sitting at home, bored, playing NBA 2k10 on Xbox 360. My headphones are on, playing Lil' Wayne. I'm nodding my head back and forth to the beat. I'm playing with the Boston Celtics killing with my boi Rondo versus the LA Lakers.

My phone started ringing, vibrating on the TV stand. I picked up my phone. It was my mom. "What did you take down for dinner?" she asked.

"Yeah, I took down some chicken," I said, pressing start to unpause the game.

She said "Ooh, okay. I'll cook when I get home, okay?"

"Okay, I'll see you when you get home." I hung up the phone. I picked up the controller and started playing again. My phone rang again. This time my cousin was calling. "What up, bro?" I said, pausing the game again.

"Chillin', what you doin'?" he asked. "Playing

2k, bored. Nun' else to do," I said, looking at the TV screen.

"True, true. You try'na go to dis li'l house party wit' me?" He asked.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Aight, Im'a be there in a li'l, aight?" He said.

"Aight bro, I'll be ready."

"Lata." I put my phone back on the charger and went to the back to shower and got ready. Swag, right? I thought to myself. "Yeah," I said out loud. My cousin pulled up in the driveway, like an hour later. He parked the car and got out and came to the door. I opened the door and said, "You ready, bro?"

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "Nawl, it's only six. Da party start at eight, bro."

"Aight, you tryna play 2k den, bro," I said as I shut the door. I went and turned on the 360.

"Yeah, but you ain't ready fo' dat work," he said, laughing and putting his keys on the arm of the sofa.

"You funny, bro. Get the controller, lets go. Pick yo sorry Knicks and get whooped," I said. I laughed and picked at my hair as the game loaded.

"I don't know why you keep growing yo' hair out. G'on head and let me cut it." he said, looking at me, shaking his head.

"Naw, I'm good fo' now, bro. Maybe in a couple weeks."

"Aight bro," he said as he picked the Knicks.

We played, and Boston Celtics beat them Knicks 299 to 101.

"You got lucky, bro. You ready to go to dis party?"

he asked, putting the controller down and walking to the door.

“Yeah, I’m ready, and it’s aight, I’m jus’ a beast at 2k,” I said, grabbing my bag and turning off the TV and 360.

We were riding in the car listening to Lil’ Wayne off his iPod. “Where dis party at?” I asked, texting my home boy Q.

“In North Little Rock. Why?” he stopped at a red light.

“My home boy Q said can we pick him up. He wanna go,” I said looking at my phone.

“Yeah, where he at?” he asked, shaking his head.

“He chillin’ in Chapel Ridge,” I said and turned up the music.

We went and picked up my home boi Q. “Yo, what’s up?” Q said as he got in the car.

“What’s up, bro? What was poppin’ out here?” I asked looking in the back seat.

“Some fights, bro,” Q said, putting on his seat belt.

“Who was fighting, bro?” I asked as my cousin pulled out of Chapel Ridge.

“I don’t know who they were. I was there to watch,” he said as he laughed and shook his head.

I was laughing and said, “Who was out there with you?”

“Greg. We was chillin’, den he left. Turn up the music.” We pulled up to the party.

“Y’all ready?” my cousin asked.

“Yeah, but Q you tryn’a see who can get da most

girls' numbas," I asked Q as I got out the car shutting the door.

He laughed and said, "Yeah, bro. How much you tryn'a put up, bro?"

"Twenty, bro. I'm 'bout to be twenty dollars richer," I said, putting on my hat.

"Aight bro, lets go," Q said, wiping his face with his hands.

"Yo, Kiel, you tryn'a lose some money, too?" I asked my cousin looking at him.

"Tevin, I'm a grown man. Y'all ain't on my level," he said looking at me and Q, shaking his head.

"What! I can get grown women too, bro. It's easy," I said to my cousin, raising my eyebrow looking at him. He started laughing and walked to the front door.

"Y'all can do what y'all do. I'ma be in the back wit da grown folk," he said, walking in the party. We walked in the house. The music was loud, all the girls were dancing. It was looking nice in the living room. It was dark, and in the other rooms, there were black lights. My shirt was red and had white written on it, so the words were glowing. My shoes were black, red, and white. The black light made them look pink. *Swag.* "You should go on ahead and give me dat twenty, bro," I said to Q looking at this girl.

"Naw, bro. I'm bout to talk to all the shawties in here," Q said as he started to walk to one girl. I just laughed and started looking for some girls to talk to. I saw Q talking to a couple girls, and I didn't start talking to one yet. I walked pass this one girl.

"What's good," I said to her.

"Hi, what's your name?" she asked looking at me, smiling.

"Tevin, and what's your name and number? I asked, handing her my phone.

"Jasmine," she said, taking the phone and putting her number in it.

"Aight I'ma text you lata on," I said saving her number and walking away. After that first girl I talked to, it was easy to talk to the other girls.

"Yo, Q, how many you got now?" I asked him, laughing and pointing at my phone.

"Thirteen, bro. Some girls tripping," he said shaking his head.

I was laughing and said, "Bro, I got seventeen. This is too easy. G'on head and pay up."

He gave me the twenty dollars and we started walking to the back where my cousin was. "Shut up 'fo you get knocked out!" someone yelled. Me and Q ran back to the front to see what was going on. It was a big circle, and two dudes in the middle 'bout to fight. The music was not playing. All you heard was everyone yelling. Me and Q were trying to get in the front of the circle so we could see. As soon as we got in the front of the circle, the fight started. It was a quick fight. All we saw and heard was right, left, right, right and pat! One of them got knocked out. I was like, "Dang," and laughing, I said, "Yo did you see dat dude just drop?"

Me and Q started walking back to the back as everyone started back dancing again. We were halfway to the back, when someone pulled out a gun and shot three times. Me and Q ran to the back fast and looked

for my cousin. Everyone was yelling and screaming, running outside. My cousin Kiel was in the backyard. "Y'all good? Let's go," my cousin said as we all started running to the car. We jumped in the car and my cousin just drove off fast. "Yo, dat was crazy," I said, trying to catch my breath, smiling.

"I know. Aye, Q, where you 'bout to go?" my cousin asked putting on his seat belt.

"To the crib," Q said putting his head back on the seat. My cousin took Q home, then he drove me home.

"Aight bro. Hit me up tomorrow," my cousin said as I got out the car.

"Aight bro," I said as I shut the door and got my key out of my pocket.

My cousin drove off, and I unlocked the door. My mom was watching TV on the sofa. "How was the party?" my mom asked, looking at the TV screen.

"It was aight," I said low, walking to my room. I went in my room, took off my hat and put my phone on the charger. I lay down and fell asleep.

That's one of my best memories of me and my cousin. I haven't seen him since I moved from Arkansas in 2010. All I can do is write him, he's locked up now and gets out in 2020.

# THE IDEAS OF YOUTH

Borden Hayes

## *Scar*

It was summertime, and I was bored. There was nothing to do but entertain myself by watching “Ask a Ninja,” one of my favorite series on YouTube. I finished watching the episode about throwing Ninja stars, and immediately headed outside.

While I was outside looking for something to do, my ADD kicked in and as a result of that, I had a string of thoughts. One of those thoughts happened to be smashing glass bottles on trees.

I grabbed three bottles from the bottle bin and found a big wide pine tree where my parents couldn’t see what I was up to. When I threw the first one, it made a satisfying smash and I threw the next one I found, just like the first one, but this bottle made a louder smash.

After finishing throwing the bottles, I decided to clean up my mess around the tree. While I was picking

up the broken pieces, I thought, I can throw these like ninja stars, and it will look amazingly cool.

I picked up a good size piece and threw it into the water. It cut through the air just like a ninja star, minus the shape. I was hooked, so I kept throwing piece after piece. As I was looking for another piece to throw, I found a big piece shaped like a pentagon but sharper. I threw it and right as it left my hand, I felt a sharp pain in my thumb.

Filled with fear I ran into the house to show my parents my cut. They took me to the bathroom to clean out the wound and see just how bad it was. My parents were talking and next thing I knew we were going to the doctor's office to get stitches. Before the doctor stitched my thumb up he gave me a shot to numb me, so painful, I thought I was going to die. While the numbing agent was starting to work, the doctor asked me how this happened. "I was picking up broken glass and a piece of glass cut me," I lied. After my thumb was stitched up, we went out to eat dinner.

In the car my dad asked, "How did you really cut your thumb?" I told him the same story I told the doctor. "I am giving you one chance to tell me the truth. I promise you won't be in any trouble," he said. I caved in and told him the truth. The look on his face showed how upset he was with me. I knew he was upset over my glass throwing and even more upset over my lying to him.

### *The Great Fire of '07*

I was a little pyromaniac as a kid. I was at a party

at my grandmother's house with my whole family on that spring day. The party was going well inside, and my cousins and I were playing a round robin tournament of our favorite card game, Speed. It was the finals, me versus my sister, and it was a close match; I was down to only two cards left while she had four. In a quick flip of the cards, she laid down one, now two, now three, and her last card was going down in slow motion and *wham!* She beat me.

Furiously, I stomped outside. To my surprise it was bright and sunny. What better way to work out my frustration than setting stuff on fire? I went inside the house and grabbed the magnifying glass. While all the other cousins were on the dock fishing, I was gathering up some dry pine straw and other flammable materials. I placed the pile on a brick walkway near the summer kitchen, a small shingled building which was used as an outside kitchen many years ago. I got the magnifying glass out of my pocket and got the most concentrated dot of sunlight focused on the pile. All of a sudden, I saw smoke coming from the pile and the pine straw turning a bright orangish red. I started blowing on the ember to give it air, and I was filled with excitement when the pile became engulfed in flames.

"Borden Saunders Hayes!" Those were the last three words I wanted to hear. Immediately after the pile caught on fire a big gust of wind came through, and it lifted up some of the lit pile and blew it directly towards the summer kitchen. My grandmother, mom, dad and granddad came to see where I was and they

were horrified to see me setting the summer kitchen alight. My grandmother hollered,

“Borden what are you, a pyromaniac?” She grabbed me and put me in time out for the rest of the party.

### *Break*

In elementary school, I was hard-headed. It was the end of fifth grade, and I had recently had a cast removed from my arm. The doctor told me to wear a soft brace for two months. I was good about wearing my brace most of the time but when I didn’t wear it, I would act like a rambunctious idiot: jumping over chairs in instead of walking around them or rough-housing with my friends.

One school day, I was on the bus when I realized that I had left my brace at home and instead of being cautious and being smart, I did something that I would never forget. All daylong I was messing around with friends and jumping over chairs and all thoughts of a broken arm were gone. Then, *ringggggg*. The recess bell rang and I shoved my chair in and ran out the classroom door then I jumped over a chair in the hallway. My teacher was watching and she yelled, “Borden, be careful and stop being so hard-headed.”

Once I made it through the door, I headed to the tennis court to play kickball. I ran out to the field and I jumped over the tennis net and cleared it. Then one of my friends said, “I bet you can’t do that again.”

Lo and behold I hollered back, “Oh yeah, Watch this.” I took off running toward the net and prepared

to jump. Next thing I knew I was lying mostly over the net and I looked down and saw my arm bent in a completely unnatural way. My arm was straight from the shoulder to the elbow but the middle of my forearm it looked like a speed bump. Mr. Borak, my math teacher, picked me up and told me to walk to the door and sit on the stairs. Oddly enough I didn't feel any pain in my arm, nor was I crying. The nurse came pushing a wheelchair to get me; I stood up calmly and took my seat in the chair.

As she wheeled me into her office, I started to cry. There was no pain in my arm; however, I knew my parents would be stressed. After all, it was the fourth time I had broken my arm.

### *You'll Shoot Your Eye Out, Kid*

One afternoon Dillon and I were chilling in the living room watching *A Christmas Story*. It was the part after his mom warned, "Be careful, Ralphie. You'll shoot your eye out." As we watched Ralphie shoot the targets outside, I said:

"Let's go shoot stuff with my BB gun."

"Sure why not, I bet I can hit more targets than you," he said

"Psh, naw. I am very accurate," I replied. But I knew that he was, indeed, a better shot than I. We proceeded outside; I grabbed my gun and went to the back in the woods. I grabbed five empty glass bottles from the beer and wine bin, lining them up twenty feet away from us. Then we each had one turn. The rules were: if you hit a bottle you get to go again but if you

miss then it is the next person's turn. I went first; I saw the bottle in the iron sights. I took a deep breath "Don't miss!" Dillon interrupted. My concentration was shattered, making me miss the bottle. Angrily, I handed him the gun. He shot and no matter what I said or did he never stopped hitting the bottles. Finally, he missed a bottle. There were only two bottles left in the line. I managed to hit both of them without distractions.

My genius and I decided it would be cool to put the barrel of the BB gun into the bottle and shoot. Dillon went first and it blew a hole clear through the bottom. It was my turn, I pulled the trigger and, unlike Dillon's, mine went through the bottom and shattered the side of the bottle. "Dude, that was awesome. Let's do it again."

"No. Knowing you, you're going to get hurt."

I convincingly said, "Come on, one more time. Then we can we can go back inside and play video games."

"Fine," he huffed.

So, I grabbed a wine bottle and placed it over the bottle bin, stuck the barrel in and Bang! All of the sudden, I felt a sharp pain in my right eye. I asked frantically, "Is there anything in my eye?!"

"No. Wait, dude. Your eye is bleeding!" he shouted. We ran inside into the bathroom and he told me to flush my eye out. Seconds later, my mom pulled up in her minivan. I sprinted to her car and pounded on her window.

On the way to the E.R, she asked me how it happened. "Dad told me to empty the bottles into the trash

can." That part was the truth. "So we threw them into the trash trying to break them. Then after I threw one I felt a sharp pain in my eye." That part wasn't.

"Okay, well let's hope you won't go blind," she said. With that I started crying and freaking out, imagining all the possible damage I might have done to my eye. I survived with no permanent injuries.

### *The Lying Shot*

*Bang!*

*"Ouch!"*

It was our annual family trip to McDowell, Virginia. My sister, Maggie, and my cousin, Madeline, were speeding on the ATV down the driveway and around the cabin, while I was shooting targets with my new BB gun. It was then that I came up with a brilliant idea to scare my sister.

I heard them coming back down the driveway towards the cabin. I got into position facing the back woods where I knew they would have to turn. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them speeding around the turn. I lined up my shot and bang! I shot in front of the ATV.

Seconds later, I heard my sister scream in pain and I realized what I had just done. I had unintentionally shot my sister. I saw them stop the ATV and Maggie came hobbling as fast as she could to the cabin, bawling her eyes out. My granddad heard the screams, met her at the door and asked what was wrong. She told them about the pain in her leg.

Knowing that I had been target-shooting outside,

he asked me, "Borden, did you shoot her?"

"No, I was just watching them come around the turn to see if they were being safe." I could just imagine how much trouble I would be in if I confessed. Confession was not an option.

"Are you one hundred percent sure you didn't shoot at her to scare her?" he questioned.

"Positive," I said. Then he left to tend to Maggie. Her thigh was purple, black, and blue, with a red dot the size of a BB in the center. Till this day, everyone thinks that a wasp stung her. I am the only one in my family who knows what really happened on that day.

# A LESSON, BUT AT WHAT COST?

Ahmed Khalil

## *Ramp*

They say that curiosity killed the cat, but pain trains it. I played a variety of games during recess: tag, hide and seek, and handball. During hide and seek, I stumbled upon a car without wheels. It was a red 'mini' car, with orange stripes and outline around the wheels. It fascinated me. I had never seen anything like it in my four years of life. I grew fixated on it, and decided that I must find some way to use that car. Knowing that I couldn't ride a car without wheels, I had to come up with some sort of solution to the problem.

I glanced around the recess yard. Kids, toys, and gravel met the eye. Another sweep of the recess area, and I paused, noticing something that I hadn't noticed before. A ramp, its gravel freshly turned over. I ran to the top of the ramp, and decided to let gravity drive the car. I sat down in it and simply kicked off, believing that I would be fine. I crashed down on my chin

and flipped a few times; I had to go to a hospital for stitches. It was painful, but I had learned.

### *Zoo*

Picking at the scab of the past serves to ward against the future. When I went to the zoo to celebrate my 8th birthday, my parents were excited.

“Are you ready to go Ahmed?” my dad exclaimed.

“Sure.” I replied.

No, I wasn’t enthusiastic about going. Then, we reached the lion’s cage. Something about the captive golden beast drew me in. The beast mesmerized me. It had a certain regal quality about it, like it was distant from everything. It exhibited a level of self-control I had never seen before.

### *Sleep*

Sleep arrives as a friend to the weary. A saying passed down through my family, or so my dad said. He explained to me that I needed to sleep often because it was what kept me healthy and helped me grow. Being my young, impressionable self, I took his words to heart and began sleeping whenever I could. Naps in the middle of the day, long stretches of constant snoring and yawning; you name it, I was sleeping. After a few weeks of this, my dad confronted me and explained that sleep would stop having meaning if I did it so often. He said that too much of a good thing can be a bad thing, and that I need to limit myself, or I wouldn’t be able to sleep. I didn’t listen to him much,

only nodding and shaking my head, but I wish I had. I continued my irregular sleep cycle, at the expense of my normal life. The result was that the friend never came.

*Bite*

Pain. Throbbing, aching, it erases all other thoughts except fear and escape. I was living in Saudi Arabia at the time. My parents were by no means wealthy, but they worked hard; enough to get me a driver to and from the private school I attended. My parents were both doctors. They often worked long hours into the night, so more often than not, I found myself raised by my sister, Sarah. She was two years older than me, and much more mature. Responsibility was thrust upon her as the elder child, and she diligently, if not happily, accepted it.

I had just turned five the day before. My driver, Farid, walked up to the door of our apartment and rang the bell. Accidentally sleeping in, I had thrown on my uniform in a hurry. He waited for me and then smiled when I opened the door. As he drove me to school, I tripped as I left the car, flinging my books in every direction. Hastily picking them up, I ran inside, dreading the cane I would receive if I was late. When I finally arrived, out of breath, my teacher, Akbar glared at me. "What took you so long? Everyone else is here but you," he said with a sneer. I glared back and said nothing. God, I hated him. After a difficult lesson, I went outside to play with my friends. As I passed the last desk, I felt someone's grip on my arm.

“Nice arrival, stupid,” Shafat teased. He was the son of Akbar, and an idiot to me. He routinely tried to pick fights with me, even when I ignored him.

“Shut up. Go back to your mom, she’s the only one who cares about you,” I said hotly, as I wrenched my arm out of his grip. Speechless, Shafat glared at me. As I found out later, his mom was extremely ill. My insensitive comment fueled his anger. He got up and pushed me. I grabbed a pencil and hurled it at his face. He jumped on me, and sank his sharp, dog-like teeth into my arm. Pain. He hung on, blood dripping out of my arm as I screamed. I grabbed the nearest thing I could find. I began smashing a broom against his head. It soon broke, with a shower of splinters raining onto Shafat’s face. He screamed and finally let go. Shafat was rolling on the ground, holding his face in his hands. Cradling my arm, I looked down at Shafat with disdain. That was my first fight ever, and I think I won, but I wondered at the cost.

### *Drowning*

The stunningly turquoise water rushed to meet me as I leapt off the fiery ship. As I surfaced, I saw another RPG shot scream past, smashing into the yacht, blasting it into pieces. The resulting explosion left my ears ringing. Off the Horn of Africa, Somali pirates were ambushing me. Gasping for air, I treaded water, keeping my body and head low to avoid the barrage of bullets that assailed the waters around the boat. They weren’t stopping. A Rooivalk attack helicopter whirled by, the rotor blades whipping up fierce waves to batter

me down. The searchlight glared past me in the water, thankfully missing me by a few feet. I was lucky that it was night, and even luckier that I had moments of warning before the first RPG shattered my world.

I swam over to the remains of the yacht, looking for the bright yellow safe with survival gear that I had brought. I froze, staring with disbelief. Part of the yacht was still afloat, a testament to the engineering skills of my butler. He built it himself, using reinforced steel plates and lightweight metals to prevent most attempts on my life. I climbed on, crawling to the safe, which was in the corner of what remained of my bedroom. As bullets sang by in the darkness, I opened the safe, taking out my custom AK-47, a crossbow, and a wilderness survival kit. Equipped, I dove into the water, dreading the two mile swim back to shore.

A few hours later, I crawled onto land, my muscles burning with exertion. I lay in the sand like a crab, wishing I could just lie on the beach, but I got up. Keeping my gun close at hand, I inched forward onto the Somali plain, watching for any signs of life. Hungry, I spotted a herd of hartebeests, and I raised my gun. One shot later, the herd exploded into a frenzy, fleeing with terror. I had found my dinner. Building a fire with what little tender I had, I roasted strips of meat, enjoying the new luxury. I knew this meal wouldn't last. I had hundreds of miles to travel, and parts of the harshest desert known to man, the Sahara, to cross. Suddenly, my keen ears picked up yells, and I quickly doused the fire, crouching in the darkness. I saw headlights break the darkness around my enclave, advancing toward

where my fire had been. I flung my equipment into my sack and hurried off, trying my best to cover my tracks. I began my arduous journey to reunite with my mansion and butler back in Egypt, wishing I had invested just a little more money for a personal helicopter.

Suddenly, without warning, an explosion shattered the silence. I stared with as a Jeep soared in the air, landing close to where I was crouched. I faced the darkness, anticipating my inevitable end. A helicopter's motors began whirring, and it started to descend in front of me. I began to aim my gun, but stopped as it landed. Alfred, my butler, stepped out of the helicopter. I smiled, and heaved myself into the helicopter.

Just as I stepped into it, I fell out of my bed. It had all been a dream. I was in shock and awe. I never knew a dream could be so vivid and so real.

I often look back on this time, when I could remember dreams, and remember it fondly. At times, it felt as if I was drowning in them, but now, I'm constantly up for air, unable to sink back down.

# KOSTROMA 1

A. P.

I grew up in a small house around a neighborhood you wouldn't want to live in. The house I lived in was torn down and rusty. It had a bathroom, one room, a kitchen, and a basement. My parents made very stupid decisions and didn't turn out to become good parents to me and my sister. My sister was the only person I could rely on to help me, but she was sent to an orphanage. So I eventually went to the orphanage, too.

When I was about seven years old, I stopped being so shy and started talking to people there. These people were nice or at least nicer than all the other kids I knew. Valera, Mesha, and Nina were the three main people I stayed around the most, but I was around my sister more. Wherever she went, she wanted me to go with her. I shared a room with Mesha and Valera, and my sister's room was next to ours. The house that I lived in was small, full of bugs, insects, and other nasty things. The yard was only about twenty square feet.

There were power outages, very small amounts of water, no food, and so on. Parts of the house would rust and fall into pieces.

Mesho and Valera were my best friends. Sometimes they would ditch me and pick on me, but most of the time they were there for me. We were the daily trouble makers. The three of us would sneak out of the orphanage and go play outside. One time we snuck out of the orphanage in the morning, I think it was around three am and we went on top of the roof and ran around and laid down.

We would also go around setting things on fire and throwing them in the lake. We would just pile up a bunch of sticks and grass and set them on fire with lighters. One time the three of us started three big fires and we accidentally lit the top of a tree on fire. The tree was on the ground already, and it wasn't big, so the tree caught on fire and there was no way to stop it. Then the three of us went to the side of tree that wasn't on fire and rolled it into the lake. Some of the other kids saw us. They were selfish, mean, and had no care for other people. Every time I would do something bad they would go tell on me or make it worse by telling on me and saying that I did all of it by myself. Every time I did something good, they would take the credit and say they did it themselves.

Mesho was big, strong, and stocky. He had a mean personality with an ugly demeanor. Mesho had long strong arms and a big chest and he just didn't know where to stop when he would pick on people my size. Mesho was one of the biggest bullies you have ever

seen. He would pick on the tiniest kid in the orphanage, and that happened to be me. I was seven years old and less than seventy pounds. One time, an older Mesha walked in on Mesho putting a pillow over my head while I was laying face- first on the bed, moving around, trying to find some air. It felt like torture, and the fact that I couldn't do anything to stop it made it worse. How more mean and cruel can you get? I could hear him laughing and then Mesha grabbed his arm and pulled the bully away. I was ready to kill him. My sister ran to an adult and showed the adult what was going on. The bully got in big trouble and didn't mess with me anymore. He actually started to be one of the nicest people in the orphanage to me.

After this event Mesha came up to me and said, "If something like this happens again, just let me know."

"Okay thank you!" I replied.

I didn't sleep that whole night.

As my sister walked in my room, she said, "Breakfast!" She went back in her room. I started walking down the stairs. I didn't know where to go, so I sat on the stairs. Fifteen minutes passed by. Where is everybody? Then I hear the sound of feet and flip-flops hitting the stairs. I jump out of the way and watch all the kids line up by the cafeteria. By the time I got in line for breakfast, it was a thirty- minute wait. I got my food and sat down at a table in the cafeteria. Nobody was in there because they were either eating in their rooms or playing outside.

The apple looked good so I went for it. But when I bit into it, my jaw started hurting. It wasn't just a little

hurting feeling, it was painful. I looked out the window and I saw my sister walking inside. She walked in the cafeteria and sat next to me. She was wondering why I wasn't eating. I was moving my jaw and touching it to see if anything was wrong or out of place. I got up and threw my food away.

"Come outside," my sister said.

"I'm too tired," I replied. But I wasn't tired at all- my jaw just hurt. Later that day, the counselors asked me if something was wrong with my jaw and I said no because I didn't want them to do anything to me. I couldn't chew anything, so if I had lived in Russia longer than I did, I would've died of starvation.

It was hard living in the orphanage. Nobody but my sister was there to take care of you, talk to you or just love you. Back then we used to have shows, parties, plays, and movie nights. I played in a show once and I had to sing. Except, I didn't sing, I just lip synced because I didn't know half the words. I was ignored by the other kids. If something was going on at the orphanage, I was never invited to play or be there. Sometimes my friends would back me up and let me join in on the activities. When I got older, new kids came to the orphanage that were younger than me. I knew how it felt to be picked on everyday, so I would stand up for the kids and do everything to my ability to keep them from being bullied on. There was bigger kids than me but I had bigger friends that would take care of them.

It had been a while and the orphanage started to be like a home to me. That was a big change. It felt

like I could walk around the orphanage and just know where everything is, so that just made me feel better. I had to drink smoothies that had chopped food in it, and I started to get used to the hurting feeling of my jaw. But I was still in a risky situation. I started to go outside and play with people, and got to know more people. Me and Valera would run around on haily days and get pounded on by hail. Yes it did hurt, but that's how you make memories. The winter time was the best. The snow would get so high, when we piled it up it would get higher than four feet. We had to lift one another to get on top of the snow. It made me feel like I was in a movie because snow doesn't get that high regularly, so it was like a once in a lifetime kind of thing, especially because it's hard to find fun in an orphanage.

My Aunt and Uncle would come and visit my sister and I, just to check on how we were doing. Later on, a group of people would come every year and bring us toys and play with us for about a week. They started to sponsor kids and then eventually they would adopt them. The only thing I wanted while I was at the orphanage was a family. A family to take care of me and have my back through bad and hard times. I heard rumors going around the orphanage that my sister was getting adopted without me. When I heard that, I went straight to my room and started crying. I didn't go out of my room that whole day. The next day, the counselors went to tell the people who were adopting my sister that she had a brother and that was me. They never knew she had a brother, and they said

they would never separate me from my sister because my sister was the only thing I had. I was just turning eight and getting ready to have a good life with my new family.

I picked up English fast. My parents named me after my great grandfather except for my middle name is my russian name. I liked my name. I went straight to third grade when I got to the U.S. I made a lot of friends, fast. Years passed and I ended up here at Grafton High School, with caring and loving parents that are there for me.

# LA CORDA

Guilia Bratosin

## *Flying*

I never played with girls my age when I was younger. Not because I didn't like them, but because they didn't like me.

For the first years of my life, I lived in a small neighborhood on Mihai Bravu Street, in a big city called Ploiesti, in Romania. My house was one of about five or six clustered around one general area, and, although there were girls around, they were too busy dressing up in pink, frilly skirts, stealing their mothers' high heels and learning how to be princesses. I never stooped low enough to be a girly-girl. In my opinion, they were just sissies.

I liked playing cards and fighting with metal spinning tops—Beyblades—in the dusty street with the boys in my neighborhood. I loved having my friends Andrei and Robert come over and teach me karate kicks. We had our own Pokémon Olympics every

once in a while, pulling up a plastic table and playing for hours, while my mom catered our games with fresh slices of homemade apple pie and orange juice. Sometimes, we had fistfights and arm wrestling contests, and sometimes we pulled big bed sheets behind us while we ran down the sidewalk, ready to save the next imaginary friend from a meteor shower or demons. I was a regular tomboy.

Safety was never an issue in our neighborhood, so my parents let me stay outside and play until the streetlights came on. Once in a blue moon, a drunk gypsy man dressed in rags would come and tell us that he'd give us candy if we went and played with him. We'd run away screaming and hide behind the big almond tree in my yard. Secretly, I wondered if he had no friends and really just wanted to play.

One spring day in mid-April, when the chill of winter had long died down and parents let their kids run around in t-shirts for the first time, I went on a bike ride with Robert. He told me I'd be safe with him. He sat me on his handlebars as we rode around a small playground in front of my house. I had never been on someone's handlebars, and I wasn't sure my mom was okay with it, but I went ahead and rode with Robert anyway. We gradually got faster, and I dared Robert to ride us as fast as a train, since that was the fastest thing I knew existed. I told him, "I betcha you can't do it!"

"Can too! I bet I can outride any train!" he argued.

"Prove it then," I demanded.

Robert did prove it. The younger kids on the

swing set laughed and pointed as we rode around and around the playground, our wind-blown hair getting messier by the second. I felt the dust flying in my face, rocks hitting my bare feet and a sense of freedom like never before. Just then, a rowdy kid much older than us, also on his bike, decided he was going to play a nasty trick. He rode up right behind us and yelled out that he was going to give us a little lift. Robert sensed the danger.

“Back off,” he ordered the older boy.

The kid just laughed. Sure enough, he bumped his front wheel into our back wheel, hard. I heard the bike screech and felt the shock of the impact. Next thing I knew, I was flying.

It must have been a fraction of a second, but I felt like I was airborne for a long time. Robert’s bike skidded out of control. The kids on the swing set gaped their mouths into tiny ‘o’s, and the gravel underfoot reached its grubby arms to catch me; it all went by in slow motion. A shock of pain seared through my body, and I lay limp, feeling the rocks against my bare arms and legs. I felt dizzy, so I just lay there until the world gradually returned to normal.

Robert kneeled down beside me, panting and asking if I was okay. I said I felt fine, which I mostly did, but when I reached to touch my chin, my hand came away wet with blood. My stomach churned. Sitting on a curb a few steps away from the scene was Rob’s bike, wheel up in the air, still turning. The other boy had sped away. There was no chance we’d ever catch him.

I pulled myself up, feeling fine but slightly disgusted. I sat on the curb, wondering what I should tell my mother.

### *Waves*

My dad always said I was a fish out of water. I didn't learn to swim until I was nine, but I forced my father to take me into ocean and let me cling to them. I loved the feeling of the water swell up and down around me, the current tugging at me.

Most of the time, Dad would take me out in calm water, where I could feel the currents without any fear of waves. Dad loved waves. He would wait until a big one came and then just as it was about to break, he jumped underneath it and popped back out on the other side. When the waves were out, my mom and I sat on the wet sand, letting the water lap at our toes. My mother and I hated the waves just as much as dad loved them. They were too high, too strong, and I thought the foam looked gross.

About a year before, we had moved to the United States in hopes of a more successful life. At first I was scared, knowing that I would leave a lot of things behind. However, as time passed, I grew more familiar with the way things were done in the US. I missed my family and friend, but the experience was so exciting that, at times, I would just forget how much I yearned for them. Going on trips was a way for me to explore the country we'd moved to and spend some time with my parents. One particular day in the summer, we went to the Outer Banks in North Carolina to get some

beach time.

When we got to the beach at Nags Head, the water was rough and menacing. Mom took her seat under the umbrella, but my dad took me by the hand and led me out to the water. "You know, you gotta get over this fear of yours sometime!"

I pursed my lips and violently shook my head. I knew that I had to familiarize myself with the waves one time or another. *But really, there's got to be a better time and place to do this. This is supposed to be a relaxing family trip. The waves are just going to scare me.* I'd already made up my mind. There was no way I would go out into the choppy water.

"Looks like we're gonna have to drag you in, then," he declared.

My dad picked me up and ran into the water. I screamed and squirmed as hard as I could. "Momma help me," I called out. Mom just sat there, eyes wide open.

Dad took me out farther until we got to the point where the waves broke. The dreaded sea foam lapped around me, and a couple of loose strands of seaweed tickled my feet. I shivered. I knew the bottom was far below my reach. There was no escape.

"Look I'm going to hold ya up when the big ones come and you're gonna be right on top of that mean old thing," said Dad. I squirmed harder, shouting in protest. Dad held on with an iron grip and stopped me from squirming. "You don't trust your daddy?" he asked me.

I stopped, wondering if I should tell him that I

trusted him or that I was so terrified I would rather trust a shark. But there wasn't any time for that. "Look, here comes the first booger!" Dad lifted me up. "Ride 'em baby!"

A dark wave heaved closer and became high and I thought we'd both drown when the wave finally broke under my legs. When I looked down, my dad has disappeared under the mass of water.

One second later, he was there again. I realized he'd been hold me the whole time, even as the wave rolled over his head. He's stayed there knowing the wave would break on top of him just to keep me safe. He grinned. "See I told ya you can trust me. Daddy's gonna protect you with his life."

The next wave was just in front of us. I smiled and threw back my head and laughed.

#### *An Unpredictable River Ride*

Suddenly, it didn't feel like mid-June anymore. A large gust of wind pulled my canoe farther downstream as the darkening clouds hid the face of the sun. In the gloom, the surface of the river looked choppy, and tiny waterfalls tumbled over the rocks. A storm was on its way.

In the summer before my sophomore year in high school, I went to a camp in the hills that rolled their way up into the Appalachian Mountains. Parents would drop their children off on a Sunday afternoon, leaving them to enjoy a week of seclusion and adventure. It was a health-based camp: the food was vegan, and we had morning exercise routines bright and early,

even on the weekend. There were many activities and classes to choose from, each focusing on a special skill or theme. One of the classes I chose to take for the week was canoeing, and it was promised that, at the end of the week, we would take a canoe trip down one of the rivers that ran through the woods. I had been looking forward to the day all week, praying that it wouldn't rain.

I had woken up to lemon-colored light and the clear cerulean sky; I'd never seen a more perfect day. About two hours before lunchtime, our coach, Nathan, stuffed a cardboard box with pita bread, fake chicken salad, and juice boxes. He and a couple of guys in our canoe class hoisted a dozen canoes into the back of a truck, and we all piled into a beat-up white van. A camp assistant, Claire, took the driver's seat.

"Watch it," Nathan said as he turned around with a grave expression. "Claire's driving. She has a nasty knack for speeding. You might want to hang on to the backs of your seats."

With that, the car wheels screeched against the hot pavement, and we shot down a twenty mile per hour road with the speedometer topping seventy.

It hadn't taken long after that. After rocketing to our pick-up site, we slid the canoes into the river. It was a quiet, lazy ride. The sun beat down on our tanned backs while the river carried us. That lasted about an hour. I didn't notice the darkening sky for a long time.

A chill wind blew hard, and as it passed, I felt the cold spread out over my skin. I shivered. Looking up,

I noticed black clouds tumbling together like heaps of wool.

“I think it might rain,” I turned to tell my friend Bianca.

I looked around. In the fading light, my friends had stopped canoeing and gazed at the dark sky. One of them shouted at Nathan, who was a little farther ahead of us in his canoe. Nathan simply turned around and shrugged. He wasn’t going to stop, which meant we wouldn’t either. We had no choice but to keep going.

All around, the light grew dimmer. Gusts of wind blew leaves off the trees, which danced down to the surface of the water. It felt like a fairytale, being under that shimmering curtain of falling leaves.

The rain started after a powerful blast of thunder struck right above us. It was so loud that I felt the vibration shoot through my body like a bullet. Large drops rained down, starting off slowly, and quickly building up to a torrent. Lightning struck nearby, a majestic flash of light, followed by the drum roll of thunder. Still, we heard nothing from Nathan. There was a chatter between us kids.

“Wow, this is so cool,” said one younger boy, clearly excited.

“I wouldn’t say this is exactly cool,” Alex, a friend of mine, stated. “The chances of us being struck by lightning are really high.”

“I’m really scared,” I heard one girl peep from not far behind us.

It was hard to hear over the sound of the pouring rain. Another young girl shouted over the noise of the

torrent. "Guys, I can't see Nathan anymore," she said. That was bad news. She was in the canoe at the very front of our group. If she couldn't see our coach, then it was obvious that we couldn't either.

Lightning struck again, this time closer and brighter. I prayed that Nathan would say something about stopping until the river got struck.

Finally, we heard a shout from up ahead. It was Nathan. "There's a little sand island up ahead where it'll be safe to stop. When you get there, jump out of the canoe as fast as you can and find shelter."

We did as we were told. The sand island was probably the size of an average living room, with exactly one tree growing on it where there was a bit of soil. There wasn't much shelter to find, so we all huddled together and tried to find a solution for our predicament.

Alex spoke up first. "We need to stay on the island. It's too dangerous to get back out in the water and find another place."

"But, there's nothing here except that tree," someone pointed out.

For a second we all stood silent, wondering what we could do. Suddenly, an older boy jumped, startling everyone.

"I've got it!" he said. "We'll use the canoes! They're made of plastic, so they won't attract the electricity. We'll roll them on their sides."

It was a brilliant idea. Little groups branched off, grabbing the first canoe they saw, dragging it onto the sand and ducking under it. Two brothers, Joshua and Caleb, let me and Bianca stay under their canoe.

I didn't like it there one bit. Sitting inside of a side-ways-turned canoe meant you had to bend your back so much it hurt, and since there were four of us inside there, we all had to let our legs rest outside in the cold rain. Nathan announced that we were all to have lunch right there where we were. He took the cardboard box out of his container, and passed around the soggy pita bread and washed out chicken salad. The sand mixed in with the food, so whenever we chewed, we could feel the gritty sand. It was the best lunch I ever had. The lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, but I didn't mind anymore. I smiled at Bianca, and she smiled back with chicken salad stuck in her front teeth.

Later that night, after the rain had long stopped, I walked with Bianca down to the girls' tent area.

"You know what would happen if our moms ever found out about the trip?" I asked.

She replied, "They'd kill us and never send us back to camp again?"

"Precisely," I said.

"It was awesome," Bianca declared. "It was a crazy idea, but it was awesome. And the best part is that we helped each other. We're all friends now."

I looked up at the stars, admiring their beauty for a second. "Yeah, we are," I murmured.

Then grinning, I turned to her. "But that doesn't change the fact that you had chicken salad in your teeth."

"Oh, shut up!"

*Ghost Field*

I like to consider myself a country girl. Even though I was born in a city about the size of Detroit, I have the heart and soul of a hillbilly. My mom comes from a rural town called Urleta in the hills of Romania. It's a place where old women herd goats down the unpaved streets and the snow piles up four feet high during the winter. The country fascinated me when I was a kid. Everything seemed so wild.

Every spring and summer, my parents would drive me up to Urleta, dump me and some clothes packed the night before, and leave me there for at least two weeks to take a break from city life. Mom said the country air was good for the lungs. I agreed. Once we got off the main road and drove down into the town, everything would start smelling like hay and just-washed laundry.

Urleta was the home of my grandparents, two sets of aunts and uncles, three older cousins, and one great grandma, who usually forgot who I was by the end of the first week, at which point she started chasing me with a branch, screaming at me to get my sorry butt home. We would arrive with a honk of the car horn, the cue for my whole family to throw open the doors and make a dash for us. My grandpa always lagged behind to open the front gate while the rest of the family gathered around to give us hugs, kisses, and some much anticipated food.

After having lunch as a family, my parents would get back in the car, tell me to be a good girl about a million times, and then drive away. I would triumphantly

march back into the yard, high-fiving my cousins and grandparents and doing a little dance as we walked toward the house. I was free for weeks. I could do whatever I wanted.

My grandma, Veronica, was my favorite person in Urleta. She was the one who made me breakfast, played with me, and let me help her as she scrubbed huge rugs with soap and water. We fed the chickens together, walked together to my great-aunt's house, and let me pet her cow. She kept me busy all week, and when Saturday came around, the whole family would get dressed up and we'd all walk to the Adventist church just half a mile down the road, loose rocks scuffing our polished shoes.

Grandma owned a field a few miles from the house where she grew corn and wheat and all sorts of vegetables. Rumor had it that many years before, one of the family members had been out in the field, tending to the crops, when he felt sleepy and decided to take a nap right there on the ground. He slept flat on his back against the cold earth, and it was said that when he got up, he went home and died two days later. My cousins deemed the plot haunted. Grandma said it was the cold rising up from the earth that did him no good. Whatever it was, I thought the place was mysterious and exciting, and I always looked forward to when Grandma would pick up her gardening tools and call me out to the field.

"Now, remember, the plot we own is very big," warned Grandma one day as we made our way to the land. "It's easy to get lost in the tall corn. If you go ex-

ploring, don't go far, you hear?"

When we arrived, Grandma got straight to work on her vegetables, and I began poking around, looking for ears of corn on every plant. Time passed as I ran through the maze of plants, pretending I was a spy and a queen and all kinds of fictional characters. After a while, I looked around. The sun glared above me, but all around was corn and corn and corn for as far as I could see. I cried out, "Grandma!" and perked my ears up to listen.

Silence. The wind rustling the plants. The buzz of bees. I walked in the general direction I'd come from. The more I walked, the more discouraged I became. I wondered if the field went on forever in all directions.

Hope came to me in the form of a tree. I saw it standing tall in between the corn plants, branches stretched way out as if reaching toward the sky. I could climb into the tree and easily see past the corn and figure out where Grandma was.

It was a short climb. I planted my feet firmly on the branch I was standing on and gazed over the field. Then, ever so subtly, I heard a scratching sound on the ground. Looking down, I spotted him.

It was a man dressed in ragged overalls. His shoes were knocked off his feet, and he was sleeping on the dark earth, flat on his back. I hadn't seen him lying there before.

A long, cold shiver inched down my spine. All of a sudden, I remembered the story about the ghost man from our family's past. I started to shake uncontrollably and I held onto the tree, knuckles clenching

tightly.

The very next second, I swore he woke up and looked me dead in the eyes. I jumped down and took off into the corn, not knowing exactly which direction I was going.

Instinct, or maybe just a stroke of luck, brought me back to my grandma. I saw her on the side of the road looking critically at her rows of vegetables, her head cocked to one side as if she was deep in thought.

“Grammy!” I hollered at the top of my lungs. Tripping over my own two feet, I fell a short distance in front of her.

She knelt down and picked my up gently. “What’s wrong, baby? You look like you just saw a demon.”

I tried to explain. “He, the man, on the ground, sleeping, tree!” It was no use. My grandma didn’t understand a word I said.

“Oh, you poor darling!” she exclaimed. “Come on, maybe a refreshing walk through the field will help ya.”

I got up. Grandma gave me a loving hug. She whispered, “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m right here.”

We began to walk through the field. The warm breeze, the sunshine, and Grandma’s hand in mine helped to calm me down. My racing heart grew steady again as we walked on.

“We’ve got to pay a visit to old man John,” Grandma said. “He said he’d help me out in the corn-field today.”

She turned to me. “Did you happen to see him as

you were wandering around?"

### *Zacusca*

Colorful leaves, Thanksgiving, and newly sharpened pencils; all of these mean fall in the United States. But for the country folk of Romania, autumn means making juice and canning vegetables. In rural areas, not everyone had a fridge, so they have to find ways to preserve food as best as they can for the cold winter months.

One particular preserve made in Romania is called zacusca. It's made with different kinds of vegetables, usually homegrown. Depending on the family, it can range anywhere from sweet and tangy to sour. Sometimes it can even be spicy. It's eaten with virtually everything, which makes it a staple for the winter diet.

My grandparents always had a fridge and a freezer, but they also had a food pantry underground to keep up the tradition. We didn't make juice and preserves because we had to. We made them because we wanted to.

As a toddler, I knew it was time to make zacusca when we left for Urleta on Thursdays. We'd never leave during the week except for when we made preserves, and in the car, I would always feel and excitement building up inside of me. When we got there, we got straight to work.

Making zacusca was a family bonding experience. Everybody pitched in to help. Except for me, that is.

For me, zacusca time was a time to run around and

see what everyone was doing. In the kitchen, I would stumble upon my aunts chopping vegetables. They'd give me a carrot and send me back outside. Some of my uncles would go out to the field to bring vegetables, but I never went with them. My cousins would help out with whatever they could, when they weren't playing or quibbling with each other.

My favorite thing, however, was to sit by my grandpa. His job was simple: to sit in a chair next to a big black cauldron filled with boiling zacusca and stir it every now and then with a huge wooden stick. I'd pull up a chair by him and watch him stir the bubbling food.

Grandpa was gentle and kind. Unlike my grandma, who was a "girls just wanna have fun" kind of person, he was steady and placid. I never heard him raise his voice at me or my cousins. I admired him because he was truthful no matter what happened.

Grandpa would let me sit on his lap when he wasn't stirring. He'd stroke my hair and tell me stories about his childhood. He'd tell me about wars and hay bales and milking cows, and I'd sit, mesmerized by his tales until the zacusca bubbled over and we would both jump off the chairs and try to get it back in the cauldron. Sometimes, Grandpa would let me stand on his chair and stir the zacusca myself. His wrinkled hands help my shoulders, to secure me just in case I stumbled and fell.

After gathering, chopping, and stirring were all done and the dish was fully cooked, the adults would all carefully pour into glass jars. I felt left out and

begged to be allowed to help, but my mom always declined.

“Sweetie, the stuff is boiling. If you get some on your skin, it would be a one way ticket to the hospital for you,” she would proclaim.

“But Mom, please?” I’d ask.

“No buts,” my mom would cluck and shake her head.

When the sun shed its last rays, the zacusca would be done. Dozens of jars neatly lined the shelves of the underground pantry, and we’d all sigh and high five and collapse on the ground exhausted. Then, we would all stand in a circle, hold hands, and pray.

“Father in heaven,” my grandpa would murmur, “we ask for Your blessing upon this family. May we always love each other and support each other. We pray that our love and friendship will never cease to exist, and that our bond and a family will stay strong forever.”

Yes, that’s right. *Corda*. A bond. We will always be together.

# HOW TO GROW A FAMILY TREE

Avery Lee

## *I. Roots*

Family trees are long, complicated things. If you look at the little trees hung in the hallways by first graders on Back to School night, you might not think so. Brothers, sisters, cousins, parents, uncles, and grandparents are simple; they form the trunk and main branches that are impossible to miss. It's once you get started on second cousins, or aunt's brother-in-law's cousin twice removed, that things get more complex. Branches fork and twist in unexpected ways, arching higher and higher until you can't see the top, no matter how far you crane your neck. Leaves cover some branches, make you guess at the elusive details hidden behind them.

And people can never stop guessing, stop wondering. It's just human nature, the desire to know where you came from. I can't say that I'm any different. However, the people I was concerned about were

not my mother's aunt's fourth cousins. For me, shadows formed at the closest branches, obscuring sight of relatives who most people could name with the utmost ease-- my grandparents.

## *II. Sprout*

"My grandma died yesterday."

My smile falters at Sara's words. I stare at her blankly, trying to process those seven syllables. *Grandma . . . died?*

"I-I'm sorry," I stammer. I don't know what else to say--the drawn sadness in her face is so foreign and unfamiliar. It's as if a part of her has died, too.

"Thanks," she says and starts to turn away, but I stop her with a hug.

Soon, we're sitting on the stone wall next to the playground, our feet dangling about a foot off the ground. We sit in silence, listening to the sound of the rest of our classmates playing on the jungle gym.

I try to put myself in Sara's place: the death of one of my grandparents, theoretically someone I had actually known or cared about. Would I even notice the absence of my grandparents, whom I only saw every two years? My chest feels strange, as if it's temporarily forgotten how to beat. *Grandma . . . died . . .*

"Were you two close?" I ask suddenly. "How often did you see her?"

Sara twists a blade of grass between her fingers before replying, "We went to visit her every Christmas in Louisiana. We'd drive down in my dad's big truck the day after school closed for winter vacation. She had

the best chocolate cake recipe in the world; secret ingredients, you know? She said she'd teach me..." she trails off, but then chuckles. "Oh, we always froze our noses off gathering sticks and twigs outside to burn in her fireplace! I remember I caught a cold once because of that, and she sat next to me on the bed and told me stories about what my dad was like when he was my age. Funny, how I miss her already." She sighs, but I notice that she has a small smile on her face and distant eyes.

I don't feel the need to break the silence that falls between us once again. I have my own thoughts to speculate on.

### *III. Seed*

My mom and I drive into the parking lot in front of my grandparent's apartment at the crack of dawn. As my mother lifts me out of my carseat and reaches into the car to grab my diaper bag, I tilt my head back as far as it will go to look up at the towering apartment building that I come to every day of the week. I try to guess which one of the many windows looks into my grandparents' home. I lean back even further, and my frilly pink hat slips off of my head and flutters to the ground. Sighing, my mother picks it up and places it back on my head as we walk into the building. Her heels click loudly on the tiles of the floor, while the sound of my own soft, stumbling footsteps follow unevenly behind her.

We take the elevator up to the seventeenth floor and walk down the hallway to a dark green door la-

beled 402. My grandmother answers the instant we knock. She greets her eldest daughter warmly, and then leans down to smile at her only granddaughter. My mom gives me two quick kisses on my cheeks and leaves, calling over her shoulder that she and my dad will come to pick me up at six. My grandmother takes my tiny hand in hers and ushers me into her small, simple home.

I walk into a room with shiny hardwood floors, like most Korean houses. The walls are a soft shade of white and are decorated with paintings and family photographs. Traditional Korean furniture inlaid with designs of flowers and peacocks in mother-of-pearl are arranged against the walls. Light is just starting to peek through the windows, filling the room with a slight glow.

My grandmother leads me to the dining room, where my grandfather is waiting with breakfast on the table. She feeds me rice and warm soup, making the universal facial expressions that all parents make when trying to get little children to eat their food. My grandfather talks to me, distracting me while my grandmother tries to stuff as much rice as possible into my mouth. They've perfected the technique and manage to finish feeding me within an hour. While my grandmother goes into the kitchen to wash the dishes, my grandfather takes me out for a walk in the park next to the apartments.

He holds my hand carefully and walks slowly to keep pace with me as we wander around the playground where the older kids play. The distant sounds

of car engines and the chatter of people can be heard from where we stand near the flower bushes. The vibrant colors of the flowers attract not only butterflies, but people too. One of my grandmother's friends comes over to pinch my cheeks and give me a piece of bread. I eat it quickly, savoring the soft, sweet taste.

When I get tired of walking, my grandfather lifts me into his arms and carries me inside. My grandmother tutts when she sees the state of my hair and the dirt on my stockings from tripping outside. Her fussing convinces my grandfather to give me a bath. He fills the bathtub with warm water and places me inside after pulling off my dirty clothes. The water inside the tub laps against my tummy and trickles through my toes. Once my fingers are all crinkly from soaking in the water too long, he gently lifts me out of the tub and wraps me in a soft towel.

It's easy for my grandma to lull me to sleep once I'm dried off and wearing clean clothes. I curl up next to her on the couch, snoring noisily while she watches Korean dramas on TV. I'm still lost in dreamland when my mom and dad come to pick me up at six. My grandma gently lifts me off of her lap and winces, her legs having fallen asleep. She passes me gingerly to my dad and kisses my forehead as I snuggle into my dad's chest, feeling safe and content in the cradle of his arms.

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How happy they must have been to be able to bring up their first grandchild. What hardships they must have faced while caring for me and wiping my

tears. It couldn't have been easy to babysit me while my mother and father were at work, but my grandparents never complained. I often wonder how different my life would have been if my family had never moved to America when I was three. What would I be like if I hadn't been separated from my grandparents and isolated in a strange new world where kids with pale hair spoke gibberish?

As new immigrants to America, we were swept into a culture that was entirely different from our own. My parents made every effort to raise me and my siblings in an environment where our heritage hung in the air, influencing everything we did. We spoke Korean at home and were enrolled in Korean school where we learned how to read and write in our native language. Whole bookshelves were filled with Korean story books and CDs. We ate rice and kimchi at nearly every meal-- with chopsticks. Korean holidays, such as Chuseok and Sullnal were always celebrated. We were taught the legacy of Korea and her people, the greatness and beauty of our homeland we should have pride in being a part of.

Yet it was difficult to uphold these lessons at school. In a classroom full of children wearing clothes from Old Navy or Aeropostale, eating PB & J sandwiches, and talking about Nickelodeon, my different background stuck out like a weed in a flower garden. I felt the need to hide it. As I slowly shed my Korean skin and stepped into my new American one, my connection with Korea started fading as well-- starting with my grandparents. Their visits became less and less

frequent; their presence in my life diminished. Time differences limited our phone calls, and letters took weeks to send. It wasn't hard to gradually drift away from them until, eventually, our relationship became next to nothing. They were now strangers living on the other side of the world.

#### *IV. Leaves*

The walk to the dimly lit terminal of the airport is silent. I make an attempt to draw it out as long as possible by trying to step over every piece of dried up gum stuck on the sidewalk. It's not as easy as I thought it'd be. A security guard fixes my family with a suspicious glare as we walk up to the automatic sliding doors. Damp, stale air washes over us as the doors slide open.

Gloomy looking people walk past us, hauling enormous suitcases up the escalators. We mingle with a wave of businessmen dressed in shabby suits and make our way towards the arriving flights. The screen displaying arrivals and departures of planes gleefully informs us in glaring highlighter green that flight #27769 has arrived on time. It shouldn't be long before we see my grandparents.

We wait for what seems like hour in front of the translucent door my grandparents should come trotting through at any second. I pace from the door to the water fountain, trying to calm my growing restlessness. Most of the airport appears barren. I almost expect a tumbleweed to roll out from behind baggage claim.

Still no sign of aforementioned grandparents. Where are they? It's been ten minutes already! I feel like pawing the ground and stomping around. I have got to move.

"Mom, can I go to the vending machines?" I plead with my mother.

"Please?" my brother and sister chime in.

"Alright," my mom says after exchanging a look with my dad. "But be back soon. Your grandparents will be here any minute now." She has to jump out of the way to avoid being trampled by my brother and sister.

Choosing something from a vending machine takes a lot of thought. We have to narrow down your choices to the five you want the most, and then weigh the benefits of each one before you make your final decision. By the time we finish making our choices, our parents are walking toward us, with our grandmother and grandfather following close behind.

My grandmother is a rail thin woman with short, permed hair and a passion for fashionable clothes. Her bony arms wrap around me in a hug, pressing my face into her expensive silk scarf scented with the cloying odor of her perfume. My grandfather, on the other hand, is a balding man with a pot-belly, laugh lines around his eyes, and the biggest ears I've ever seen in my life. His hug crushes my ribs, nearly making my eyeballs pop out.

"Oh Avery, you're getting so tall!" he says creakily in Korean.

*Yeah, maybe because your hug just pushed all of my*

*fat up to my head*, I think to myself. I look down at my waist. It does look a bit thinner.

Once greetings and hugs have gone around, we walk outside toward where my dad parked the car. We barely manage to cram all of the suitcases and boxes into our trunk, and then scooch into the car. I stare out the window as my dad backs out of the parking lot. *Just twelve more days. Get through twelve more days.*

My brother, sister, and I have always dreaded my grandparents' visits. Their usual twelve day stays during the summer always feel more like a month. Over a week of tolerating their questions and kisses, constantly speaking in Korean, and catering to their every wish and whim make the prospects even grimmer.

We always moan and groan about it. My brother and I fight over who will give up their room, my sister and brother bicker over who will sort my grandfather's medicine each morning, and we all argue about who will be the first one to give my grandmother a hug at the airport. Despite my complaints, a part of me always feels guilty for not being more considerate. These were the people who brought me up for two years of my life. My brother and sister may not have such qualms, but I feel that I have to somehow repay them for their sacrifice. It's just so hard when it feels like their sole purpose in life is to see me fail. Piano recitals, soccer games, school plays. If they were there, I was bound to miss a note, fumble a pass, or forget a line. My grandparents were my personal bad luck charms. I wished they would stay in Korea, out of my

life, out of my world. Just far enough to be saved from witnessing what a failure their granddaughter was.

### *V. Shoots*

The telephone rings downstairs. I hear the thumping of rapid footsteps as my mom hurries to answer the phone.

“Oh hi, Mom,” she says in Korean. My heart sinks. I know what’s coming next. “Kids, come down and talk to your grandmother,” my mom calls up the stairs.

My siblings and I make our way slowly toward the phone, all the while conducting a silent conversation using just our eyebrows.

“You go first.”

“No, you go.”

“That’s not fair! I went first last time!”

“Oh, stop being such a baby.”

“Why don’t you two ever go first?”

“Fine. Byunghyun, you go.”

“Me? No way!”

“Well, there’s no way I’m going fir--”

“Avery? It’s your grandmother,” my mom says as she thrusts the phone into my hands. My brother and sister snicker.

“Um, hello?” I say, bringing the receiver up to my ear. I shoot a dirty look at the traitors.

“Oh, Avery, it’s you,” my grandmother says in Korean. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I reply stiffly, also in Korean.

The rustling sound of static is deafening in the

awkward silence that follows. I twist the phone cord around my finger.

“So, school is fun, yes?” my grandmother asks.

“Yes,” I answer, and the conversation resumes. My grandmother fires questions at me, and I answer them as well as I can with my rough Korean.

Finally, after three minutes, my grandmother says, “Alright Avery, put your brother on the phone.”

“Okay,” I say with relief, turning toward my brother, ready to put the phone in his hand faster than relay runners pass on their batons in the Olympics.

“Oh Avery, just one more thing,” my grandmother says. “Remember that I’m always proud of you.”

“Oh, um, thank you, Grandma,” I mumble, blushing. “Good bye.”

I hand the phone to Byunghyun and retreat to my bedroom. A wave of remorse washes over me. I remember Sara’s grandmother, who is now dead. Your grandmother won’t live forever either, you know, I think to myself. My grandma tries her best and deserves at least a decent conversation, rather than the monosyllables and half phrases I gave her in the past. My cheeks burned to think about it. I was going to fix my relationship with my grandparents, if it was the last thing I did.

I shift my weight, trying to find a comfortable way to sit in the hopelessly uncomfortable airplane seats. *Now I see why my grandparents didn’t like to visit us that often.* We’d been on the plane for six hours now-- about halfway to Korea. It was June 23, and for the first time

in four years, we were going to Korea for a visit.

“Are you okay, Avery?” My mom glances over at me.

“Fine, fine,” I reply, and then scooch in my chair once again.

“Try to get some sleep. It’s help pass the time and make you less sleepy once we get to Korea,” my mom advises.

“Alright, I’ll try,” I say.

Seven hours later, the plane finally lands. My mom and I stand with my brother and sister while my dad goes to find our luggage. My mom keeps scanning the crowd.

“They should be here. We told them the flight comes at around eight,” she mutters.

“Who are we supposed to be meeting?” my brother asks.

“Your grandfather and your uncle,” she answers.

Suddenly, I spot a familiar figure walking in through the front entrance. “There he is!” It seems as if my grandfather has spotted us too, because his face breaks into an enormous smile and he starts walking toward us.

“Youngbum, Avery, Byunghyun, Bohyun! Byunghyun, how much you’ve grown! And Avery, getting so pretty. Hi there Bohyun. Where are our bags? The car’s parked outside. Your mother’s waiting for you at home, Youngbum,” he gushes.

We split up the luggage and the people between my grandfather’s small black car and my uncle’s mini-

van and head toward Seoul. We arrive at an familiar towering apartment building.

"Your uncle lives here now, ever since your grandmother and I moved to the new apartment complex on the other side of the city," my grandfather explains as we're going up the elevator. My uncle unlocks the door, and we step into apartment 402, where my grandmother, aunt, and two cousins are waiting to greet us. Chaos reigns for the first ten minutes as the women hug and exclaim over how good the other looks while the men try to bring all of the suitcases inside. I'm standing to the side, trying not to get in anybody's way, when I freeze.

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High pitched giggles fill the air as I zoom across the living room floor on the little toy horse. The plastic orange wheels make a most pleasing sound against the hardwood floor. My tiny little feet propel me forward, and I grip the handles sticking out of the horse's ears tightly.

"Good howsy," I croon, and pat the horse's blue plastic flank.

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The little toy horse was something I had long forgotten. I had played with it every time I stayed at my grandparent's house. It had been such a disappointment when we had unpacked the boxes in our new home in America and realized that my horse had been left in Korea. But here it was in front of me, a reminder that I had, in fact, lived here once upon a time. I walk up to it and run a finger over the saddle. It looks so

tiny now. I bet if I tried to ride it once more, it would collapse.

A little figure jumps forward and sits on the horse. I reel back in shock. My younger cousin, Jaeyoung, is sitting on the horse with a look of defiance on his face. We stare at each other for a few seconds before it dawns on me: this is his horse now. My actions were clearly those of a horse thief, and he was making sure I didn't get any ideas. Hand me a pistol and a cowboy hat, and I would have believed we were about to start a showdown too.

I smile and hold out my hands to show that I mean no harm. He relaxes, and smiles back. The horse is his. I'd had my turn, and I had no claim to it now.

I pat the horse one last time and whisper, "Take good care of him, horse. He really likes you."

"Here, let me dry your hair. It's not good to go to bed with your hair wet."

I reluctantly allow my grandmother to lead me into her bathroom, where she pulls out a hair dryer and a towel from a cabinet. I stand stiffly in front of the mirror as she turns the hair dryer on and starts to dry my hair. I'm at that point where I'm just slightly taller than her, so she has to stand on tiptoe to reach the top of my hair. The warm air from the hair dryer blows on my neck, and I start to relax.

"Wet hair. The perfect recipe for colds," my grandma mutters to herself. Her hands skillfully toss my hair this way and that until it feels soft and dry. At last, she turns off the hairdryer and puts it back in the cabinet

it came from.

“All set. Run along to bed now,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say, and hesitate. Then, I give her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Good night.”

#### *VI. Trunk*

The drive to the airport doesn’t feel that long. The walk to the terminal seems even shorter. The airport was filled with other sleepy-looking people staring bleary-eyed at the small lettering on their tickets. Flight attendants in powder blue skirts and immaculate make-up click past in their heels. A large LCD television displays the arrivals and departures of various planes.

It’s hard to believe that a month has already gone by. I’ll be going to school in three weeks. A feeling of sadness creeps into me. America seems so foreign after living a month in the Korea. It’s so strange, to be homesick for Korea already. How will I bear to be so far away from my family and friends here for who knows how long?

The wheels of our suitcases rattle against the tiles of the floor. It’s the only sound that passes between us as we tow them to the gate. Words are insufficient for describing how we feel. We hold off until the last moment before saying good bye.

“Come back again soon!”

“Thanks so much for having us here.”

“Remember to call when you get back!”

“But I don’t want to leave.”

“I’ll miss you!”

My grandma pulls me aside and envelops me in a hug. My grandpa joins us, and we stand there for a while, just holding on tight. Then my grandmother whispers in my ear:

“I love you, Granddaughter.”

And I whisper back, “I love you too, Grandma.”







