

Peppermint Rooster Review



Volume 2
Spring 2014

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Dear Reader,

This is the second issue of Peppermint Rooster Review, an annual publication that publishes fiction, poetry, and essays by Lewis and Clark Community College students and former students. We hope you enjoy this book. We would like to thank Jill Lane, who wanted to showcase outstanding written work from our students and who secured the financing for this project. In addition, we would like to thank Lori Artis for assisting our staff in the production of this magazine.

This year, for the first time, we held a campus-wide contest for a student to design the cover. A panel of judges decided on the winning cover art, which was submitted by Courtney Samraty.

When we were looking for a name for this magazine, we considered many different suggestions. The name “Peppermint Rooster” was suggested by a former Lewis and Clark student, and the idea resonated with us because of the odd juxtaposition between the two words. (Also, it sounded more interesting that “Lewis and Clark Literary Magazine.”) This book, as you’ll see, contains some interesting juxtapositions, too. We hope you enjoy reading this and that you will stay tuned for next year’s book as well. If you are a LCCC student, please feel free to submit your work to litmaglc@lc.edu. We will be reading submissions year-round and we look forward to reading your work.

Sincerely

The Staff of *Peppermint Rooster Review*

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Joe Moran

Knock on Wood

I could hear a dog sniffing and shuffling around close by, letting out quick whines and barking as if he were excited or anxious about something. I was trying to open my eyes, but something was causing me to see only glimpses at a time. With each blink, I could see a little more. Eventually, I was able to keep my left eye closed, which allowed me to focus with my right. Looking straight ahead, I saw the paws of the dog pacing back and forth, and, every so often, I would see his snout peak down and move along the blades of grass. He quickly jumped away only for me to see a sign, which appeared to be hanging upside down. It took me second, but I was finally able to see that the sign read: *Welcome to Missouri*. But, I was just leaving Missouri; then all at once, it hit me like a freight train. When I realized it was *me*, and not the sign hanging upside down, it was all I could do to remain calm. Apparently, I had just rolled my car, and I'm now hanging--upside down, held up by my seat belt. At this point, I hear sirens and begin to feel sharp pains creeping throughout different parts of my body. It must have been blood that was preventing me to see. I could feel the bridge of my nose was gashed opened; blood was trickling down and filtering through my eye. As I looked down to see the red pool accumulating on the ceiling of my car, all I could think was....

Wait. Let me back up.

I was fifteen when my parents divorced. That summer, I was sent to stay with my mother's oldest brother in a little town of southern Missouri while my parents sorted out their mess. It was an interesting season of my life to say the least. Not only were my parents getting divorced and my life was potentially shattered, but I had to live with a guy who, up to this point, I hadn't really been acquainted with. As it turned out, it proved to be an incredibly beneficial time in my life.

Now my uncle was a very unique individual. He stood no more than five feet tall and happened to believe he was an Indian. He dressed like a native; he danced like a native while tapping his hand over his mouth singing native hymns. He even spoke Cherokee; at least he said it was Cherokee. At the age of 20, his face was mangled due to an explosion while he was making cuts on a tire rim. Little did he know, the air hadn't been let out of the tire, so when he missed his mark and the flame hit the rubber, Ka-boom! The glass from the mask he was wearing blew back into his eyes and face. He lost his two front teeth, it blew off his right ear, leaving him blind in his left eye and left him very little vision in his right. So he wore these big, thick, darkened glasses and would walk with a cane for the rest of his life. Not to mention scars on the right side of his face that helped him resemble Freddy Kruger. It never seemed to be a 'setback' for him, and he never once complained. As if he knew he was destined to be disfigured, he adapted a personality that is unlike anyone I have ever met. He had a thick southern drawl and spoke with a swollen tongue. The combination of his superstitions and unbending religious beliefs created a confidence in his many opinions that he would never apologize for. His inability to sympathize with another's misfortune made for amusing and often, awkward conversation. He had a quick wit, a never ending bag of one liners; he was insulting, disrespectful, funny, comforting and charming all in one. In his own mind, he was always right. Even if you tried to agree with him, he'd find a way to ruffle your feathers and lure you into a senseless quarrel. And, although we spend most of our latter years debating and arguing of subjects that have no real relevance, I can honestly say he is my best friend. Every summer of my youth, I would return to a little house in a little town, and, while most kids my age spent their vacation playing baseball and going swimming, I would spend hours in the company of a brilliant mad man.

Fifteen years later, I no longer spend the summers with him—rather, I drive down on Sunday once a month to help out around the house, and, on occasion, I'll make dinner. On this particular Sunday, he wanted bacon. He was putting on his red ban-

dana when he started in on me.

“Now you better be careful with the stoven top. You turn up too high, it’ll goddamn flame on ya!” he said lighting a cigarette from the dining room table.

“Lucky for us, I’ve cooked bacon before,” I replied with a hint of sarcasm.

“You’ve cooked bacon on one them fancy electronical stoven tops before, but you haven’t not cooked it on the ol’ mans stoven top for now have ya!?”

We begin to argue.

“Uncle, a stove is a stove and...”

He interrupts, “Now fore you go on with that, just let me tell ya, that ain’t not your normal stoven top. That there is gas and you’re cooking with goddamn grease, and if ya ain’t careful with it, grease is gonna FLAME Up and bite cha. And I ain’t callin them goddamn firemen over here’ day. They was just out here yes-terweek when my foot was stuck in the toilet!”

I began to chuckle. “How did you get your foot stuck in the toilet?”

“Well I just got done droppin’ a dumpturd and when I flushed it down, it started to back flow on me, so I reached over to grab the plunger tool, but I had forgot I had used it the other day to shooway the goddamn cats that keep gettin on my shedroof! So, either let the shit water back up on the floor or I can knock it down with my foot. So I tried my foot. Well my ankle got too far down and got stuck, see. So I called up the fireman and they had to come out and bust the toilet bowl in half in order to get my ankle out.”

By this time, he can see that I am laughing in disbelief, and he begins to chuckle right along with me. I then proceed to ask how he made the call to the firehouse from the bathroom.

“Cordless phone!” he hollered, slapping his hand down on the table. “I haven’t been to the bathroom without my phone for bout 2 years now. Learned that lesson the goddamn hard way.”

“This ought to be good,” I muttered under my breath. I then eagerly ask, “What lesson was that?”

“Well Nephew, I had to put a new handle knob on the door

and the son bitch got turned round on me and I ended up putting the lock on backwards! I shut the door to make sure it was working and whatnot, not realizing that the lock knob was on the outside in lock mode! Goddamn 3 days for anyone knew I was in there. Luckily, Miss Hoginpush came over to check on me and let me out, and I'm pretty sure she was lookin for some sorta re-ward, know what I mean? She was given me the horny eye, but I just gave her a can of my homemade salsa and said, 'This as hot as it's gonna get round here'day,'" he said with a cigarette grin. "Besides I hadn't eaten anything for goddamn 3 days. I was worn out just thinking bout given Hoginpush a good ol' fashion whatfer."

And so it went, never ending story after story. You would think I would get used to hearing about his daily adventures, but he had a way of keeping it fresh so that I was always surprised.

I unwrapped the bacon and began putting it in the skillet. He reminded me not to turn it up too high or it would catch fire. He could see that I was being spiteful as I turned it up ever so slightly until it reached its max. With his head cocked down, I could see his one eye gazing at me between his brow and his glasses. As if he was trying to intimidate me, with what he thought was a death stare. All I could think was that he looked like Willy Nelson with that red bandana. While he was still staring in my direction, I looked back at him with a big smile as I thought his new nickname should be "One eyed Willy" like from *The Goonies*.

"Now listen here," he began. "I know you think I'm an old man, and that I don't know right from right, but I know right, and I'm telling ya, you're gonna catch my goddamn house on fire! Now turn it down!"

I can see he was getting aggravated, so I turned it down. I then made the mistake of saying "never" when I said I never started a fire in the kitchen before.

"You better knock on wood," he said blowing smoke from his lungs.

He taught me about 'knocking on wood' the first summer I spent with him. Since then, I've used the word "never" just over twenty two thousand times. While in his presence. And every time

I said it, he would make sure I would knock on wood-- and vice a/ versa.

But I was feeling spiteful on this particular Sunday. So for the first time since the game started, I declined his suggestion and kept on cooking.

Not even thirty seconds had passed when the gas from the stove kicked up and the fire broke out. Before I knew it, the whole skillet of bacon and part of the counter was in flames. In a rush and panic, I grabbed the handle of the skillet and ran it over to the sink to keep it from spreading. I then reached over to grab a bag of flour out of a glass jar on the counter that read "Sugar" and dumped it on the skillet. The fire was out, and luckily I had no real injuries... aside from a bruised ego. While I'm trying to catch my breath and with my heart still pounding, I look over, only to see my uncle sitting on the edge of his chair, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, his hands folded calmly over the arch his cane and with every ounce of humility he had, he grinned and said, "Told you so."

Later that evening, as I was putting on my jacket and getting ready to leave, he had to start in on me one more time. "You know why that fire happened?"

"Cause I didn't knock on wood," I replied calmly.

"Well that's part of it, but it's mainly cause I spoke it into existence, just like God spoke the world into existence."

Not really familiar with what angle he is coming from, with a small chuckle I asked, "How do you mean?"

"What do you mean how do I mean? I spoke it just like God spoke in the goddamn universe."

"I don't think that's how it happened."

"It don't matter what you think of what, cause last Sunday morning the preacher man was preaching about God speaking us all here and whatnot. And he said we have the same power that the good Lord has. So we can do the same type of shit. We just speak like He spoke and shit happens."

I didn't have time to really get him going, but I thought I would take a few jabs at his Christian morals, so I quickly switched the subject to asking him, if he is such a good Christian then why

does he use “goddamn” all the time.

“Well God’s been damning shit long for I said it. So don’t be judging me on what I say or don’t say. At least I’m going to church which is more than you can goddamn say.”

“You got me there,” I said as I was opening the door to leave.

“Besides,” he continued, “It’s like a cold Guinness--it just goes good with everything, and that’s the goddamn truth,” he said with a smile. “Now, you be careful. These roads get slick when it rains.”

“All roads get slick when it rains, Uncle. And it hasn’t even been raining. Besides, I’ve never been in a car accident,” I said

“Goddamn, Nephew, don’t be saying ‘never’ like that if ya ain’t gonna knock on wood! Now knock on the wood piece right there, the door trim.”

I could sense the desperation in his voice.

“Come on now, you saw what happened with the stoven top so stop playing round now. Come on, knock on that wood fore you go.”

He was serious about me knocking on the wood. For some reason, though, I just couldn’t let him win. Even after what happened with the stove. I thought, “Maybe I should do it. After all he is getting old; and when old people worry, they die or something.” Then I thought, “He’s not that old, and fire doesn’t strike twice, (or whatever the saying is).”

So I reached up, cocked my fist, looked at him and knock on the glass door and said, “See you later Uncle. It’s been real. Sorry about the fire.”

As I’m leaving I can hear him yelling from inside the house, “You’re gonna regret it. Hope you live to hear me tell about it!”

So now here I am, hanging upside down being held by the seatbelt. A dog came running over from my right. I must have swerved to the left. I can hear sirens and a man yelling at me from outside, assuring me that I was going to be okay. As I looked down to see a red pool accumulating on the ceiling of my car, all I could

think was: I should have knocked on wood.

Day two in the hospital: I escaped the accident with a broken wrist, three broken ribs and a broken nose. What hurt the worst was the fractured pinky toe. It felt like someone had poked a needle through the top of the nail and was tapping it with a small hammer. They had me on morphine for the pain, which kept me both drowsy and happy. I was staring up at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of a hospital. Still laughing at the irony of the situation, I decided to reach for a drink of water. I could feel a dull type of pressure within my ribs as I was bringing myself to an upright position. Everything was slow moving: my voice, my eyes, my thoughts. I was gazing around the room as I slowly sipped the cold water from the pink hospital cup, when I came to the realization that I had a visitor. He must have been there a while, just waiting for me to wake up. Sitting quietly under the TV mounted on the wall, his hands folded calmly over the arch of his cane, and with every ounce of humility he had, he grinned and said, "Told you so."

Connie Terry

The Summer of 1945

Sometime during the summer of 1945, for the first time since I was born, I met my father. I was four years old. At the hospital, my mother—totally unsympathetic with my father for putting her through so much agony and torment of childbirth—threw a shoe at him and told him never to come back as she would never entertain that experience again. Sometime shortly thereafter, he enlisted into the United States Army and went off to war.

My mother and I made the journey from Louisville, Kentucky to Indiana to a little 45 acre wooded farm nestled at the bottom of a hill on a gravel road named Possum Trot. After recuperating, Mom went back to Louisville, and I remained with my maternal grandmother and step-grandfather.

The terrible war raging across the great sea had little effect on me there—too young to understand it or anything about it. There was no television (not invented yet) or radio in the little house that consisted of three rooms and a lean-to kitchen off the back where grandma cooked three meals a day on a woodstove. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing. The outhouse out back was convenient in summer, but in winter a cold chamber pot was put to good use.

Even though we were only about five miles from town, news did not reach us quickly. No daily newspaper came to the house, and any news was brought home on the weekends by my step-grandfather. He was a boilermaker by trade and worked in Louisville during the week, coming home only on weekends unless he was sent to Lexington or Central City or some other town to troubleshoot a boiler. At those times, Grandma didn't like being left by herself for so long, and she made it known!

Life on the little farm was uneventful for the most part. Once in a while, an unfortunate chicken would wander into the yard only to become the evening meal. Whose chicken? I don't

remember grandma canvassing the few neighbors for any lost chickens because I was so young....but in retrospect, I don't think she did, and any condemning evidence had been consumed by humans and fire.

The days seemed gentle there, playing in the streams, one on each side of the house, or on the swing that grandpa hung from a board nailed between two trees. I learned early on that playing outside was much safer than playing inside in grandma's way. At night, sitting in the rocking chairs on the front porch, it was so dark you couldn't even see the road, but what you could see were the stars—billions of stars, and once in a while, a shooting star. If the moon was full, you could see the outline of the trees and grandma's rosebushes in the yard, and the silvery shadow of Possum Trot as it rose up the hill to the West toward Uncle Earl's place. Even though it may have been dark most nights, it definitely was not quiet! Grandma would rock me (in hopes that I would go quickly to sleep so she could have some peace) to the sounds of the frogs croaking in the little pond across the road, the whippoor-wills and owls somewhere in the rustling trees, and crickets, lots of crickets, and sometimes, locusts—a symphony that lulled me off to dreamland along with grandma's version of what seemed to be her favorite hymn, "Old Rugged Cross" or sometimes "Little Brown Church in the Wildwood."

My grandmother's younger brother, Earl, and his wife, Cordia, lived at the top of the hill in the big, white-pillared house. The smoothness of the concrete porch always enticed me to play jacks in its cool shade in the summer, and, whenever Grandma and I went up to visit or to get milk, I played jacks on its satiny finish for hours as Grandma and "Aunt Cordy" sat drinking coffee and chatting at the picnic table in the enclosed breezeway of the house where the kitchen woodstove stood. A large round chunk of a log—one end in the stove and the other end propped on a chair, waiting to be shoved into the flames—supplied the cooking fuel for eating throughout the seasons, hot or cold.

From the road, Uncle Earl laid a concrete walk to the porch. It was not just a plain old concrete walk—it was a beautiful concrete

walk. It had a flag and designs etched, pressed, or drawn into the concrete, and best of all—a hopscotch! I was always delighted to make the short walk up the road to visit. Life on Possum Trot was good to me, but it would soon come to an end.

Upon the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, many of the soldiers began the journey home to America. Returning to Louisville, eager to get on with his life (my mother had already moved on with hers without me) my father went in search of his daughter. His mother had always kept track of me and knew that I was on Possum Trot. She even visited me a couple of times. I thought she was nice and liked her very much. On one visit (the only one I remember well) she made little boats out of newspapers she had brought with her, and we sailed them in the little pond across the road until they got so saturated that they sank. I thoroughly enjoyed her visit that day and was sad when she left.

Soon after one of these visits, a car pulled off the gravel, and a tall man got out of it. He had a uniform on with shiny buttons and a cap with something shiny glittering in the sunlight. No one had ever visited the house dressed like that before, and I stood on the porch as Grandma and he talked. Grandma was “hard-of-hearing”, a term used then to denote a hearing deficiency, and one always had to talk loudly for her to understand, a condition of which I was well aware. The talking turned into much yelling back and forth, and Grandma grabbed my arm and yanked me into the house. The man followed us into the house and tried to grab me, too. At this point, my grandma grabbed a knife. Her screaming, coupled with the large knife, sent me into a terrified state. To me, it looked like someone was going to die: the man or me. To say that I was “crying” would be putting it rather mildly. Seeing my distress, the man backed out of the room and left. Grandma’s large white-rimmed brown eyes seemed to radiate sparks. Her face, red with fury, was at a level of emotion that sent me flying under the bed as soon as I was released from her death grip.

“Nobody is going to take my baby away from me!” she yelled.

Some hours later, having ventured out from under the bed

to the porch, I saw another car pull off the road followed by the first car that came earlier. Two men dressed alike got out of the first car; the man with the shiny buttons got out of the second. I ran and hid, hoping no one would find me. Some talking and yelling ensued, and I was again pulled out from under the bed, kicking and screaming—I did not want to die (I didn't really know what that was, but I did know what the knife could do after seeing her behead a few chickens, and I wanted none of it). One of the men picked me up, trying to assure me I was okay and that no one was going to hurt me. He put me onto the back seat of his car, and Grandma reluctantly got into the front seat. I could tell she was not at all happy. I noticed her face was red again, and, though I could not see her eyes, I had a hunch they were about the same wide-eyed as before. We proceeded up the road and, after a brief ride, arrived at the county police station. Everyone got out of the vehicles, and we all went inside the building. Still crying, I was put on a chair and told to wait. Everyone else went through a door into a room across from the chair. I could hear loud talking, but understood nothing of the decisions that were being made for me at that moment.

Sometime later, a still angry and distressed grandma emerged from the room with one of the men, grabbed my hand pulling me off the chair. We all walked out the door and got into the car we came in. The man drove us back to the farm in silence and left.

I stood on the porch looking up the road as the gravel dust rose up behind the car in the early evening light. It had been a very traumatic day for me—one I would never forget, and yet puzzling. My life forward had been decided behind that door in the police station. I was to stay with my grandmother and that was that.

Grandma and Grandpa sold the little farm I loved and we moved to Louisville. I saw my father once or twice around the time I was in the third grade. He and his new wife stopped by the house where we lived in an apartment on the second floor. Each time, Grandma stood guard at the fence so he wouldn't take me. I never enjoyed those visits—ever anxious the knife episode would

resurface, I guess. I was not to see him again after that until I was 15. Even then, we just never seemed to be able to connect, to overcome the past. He, too, like mom had already moved on. Eventually, I would, too.

Kristopher Tharp

A Penny for Your Thoughts

Louis Pedone boarded a large cargo vessel in a Sicilian port. He and his parents learned early that life offered no guarantees. In fact, all the small family owned upon departure from Italy was the clothing on their backs and a few meager items, which fit into a small travelling case. Once in the United States, the family made their way to the St. Louis area, where jobs were plentiful. Louis would garner a high school education. He enlisted in the United States military and served his country with distinction during World War II. When the war ended, Louis returned to the United States, started a family, and worked until retirement at a local steel mill. Louis Pedone, through due diligence and hard work, retired at a young age, resting on a small fortune. Louis was my grandfather.

My mother, Louis's daughter, raised my brother and me alone. She divorced her husband the same year I was born. Money was often tight, and, through necessity, my family survived on state aid and the pauper's salary my mother was able to earn. My father was absent and offered no financial assistance. It was during the lean years of my childhood that the complexity of my grandfather's personality came to light.

Growing up, my mother had no vehicle. If there was somewhere we had to go, we walked. Sometimes, walking in and of itself was a reprieve. Hot summer nights in a small home with no air conditioning were sometimes countered by long walks with my mother. There was a large fountain downtown, not far from our home. Sometimes, my mother would allow me to jump into the fountain to cool off before walking back home. I distinctly remember my grandfather driving by in his new Cadillac. He bought a new car about every two years. While walking with my mother, I remember my grandfather pulling over to speak with us. When he rolled the window down to his Cadillac, the cool air-conditioning

would rush out of the window and hit my face like a cool wave of fresh water. He would drive off a few moments later as if we were on gleeful summer's stroll. No offer of a ride was ever extended. The mobile cooling station his vehicle represented is still imprinted upon my mind as opportunity lost to make things a little more tolerable for his daughter and grandson.

My grandfather would come to our house to visit. He would read the paper and talk to my mother. A favorite game of his was to brandish a large cache of money rolled in a bundle, the likes of which would make the monopoly man envious. If I guessed how much money was in the roll of cash, I could have it. I never guessed right. If bedtime came while he was visiting, he would get to experience the nightly ritual of me taking a bath just before bed. This was not to cleanse my body, but instead to cool it. I would lie down in bed while still wet from the bath, usually in front of a box fan. This would enable me to fall asleep before the distraction of the summer heat could set in and keep me awake.

I would grow to accept and even appreciate the adversity in my life. My grandfather was always on the periphery of my life, but never actively involved in my adolescence or young adulthood.

When I turned twenty-one, I found myself on the threshold of beginning my career. I decided on a career in law enforcement. My application to the Eastern Missouri Law Enforcement Training Academy had been accepted; however, there was an issue: the tuition. It would cost \$4,500.00 for me to attend the program. I could not afford the tuition without assistance.

My grandfather was the only person in my life who had the financial stability to provide assistance. I wanted nothing more than to be in a position where I did not have to go to him for help. He was infamous for not lending a hand to family in times of need. In fact, there had been several situations where requests for financial assistance from his children had been denied.

I worried for days and finally decided to talk to my grandfather about my situation. I remember walking to his front door the day I spoke to him. Walking up to his front door was like walking on an escalator in the wrong direction. I knocked on the door and

secretly wished he would not answer to save me the anxiety of asking for help and being denied.

My grandfather invited me into his home and inquired about the nature of my visit. I told my tale just as I had rehearsed. Promises to pay the money back and several examples of why this was an important moment in my life were included in my dissertation. When the presentation was completed, I waited for a response with sick anticipation. My cheeks had flushed and my stomach was queasy. My grandfather reached for his checkbook, wrote a check for the required tuition, and added a sizeable amount extra, to account for unforeseen expenditures. He tore the check out his checkbook and handed it to me. I can still remember the feeling of utter shock and joy I felt when he placed his hand on my shoulder and smiled. He wished me luck and told me not to worry about paying him back.

That moment is directly responsible for the life I now possess and the opportunity and doors which have opened since. A few years later, my grandfather was stricken by Alzheimer's disease. The affliction quickly robbed him of his memory and cognitive ability. It ultimately led to his death. He never had the chance to see the full realization of his investment, although he was able to see me as a young policeman in uniform. I often reflect about my grandfather and the mystery he was as a man. The opportunity in my older years to quiz my grandfather about his life and reasoning for what he did and did not do was forever lost. I choose to believe he was good man and everything he did, he did for a reason, known only to him. For everything, both good and bad, I will be forever grateful he was in my life.

Troy Toedebusch

The Fall

How could the day get any better? It was the first week of summer vacation after my freshman year of high school. The day was gorgeous, picture perfect for late May. It was a mild 75 degrees with a brisk north wind. There was not a cloud in the sky. Our family of five--my mother, father, two brothers and me--had been living on our six acres on the edge of town for around five years. Trees in the back yard surrounded the house with a small pond on the corner of the property. The front yard was wide open with a couple acres of pasture at the top. The framework for a shed was being laid in our side yard butting up against Litton Road.

I had wakened early that morning in anticipation of taking advantage of the summer I had waited for so long during my brutal freshman year. My family and I had a marvelous breakfast of thick slices of hickory smoked bacon, farm fresh eggs, and home made bread toast with real butter. After the hefty breakfast, I dressed and went outside to start my adventure for the day. The air smelled of spring. Grass was being cut; the trees were bursting with crisp green leaves; flowers were exploding in my mother's side gardens with any and every color imaginable. The neighbor's dog was barking at the sirens screaming down the highway in the distance. Birds were chirping, bees were buzzing, and the butterflies were floating around in their own graceful ways. What a beautiful day, I thought to myself, feeling joyful and free.

I spent about an hour walking around and enjoying the beautiful day when my brother Cal walked outside. Cal was thirteen at the time. He has always been small for his age. Standing at only 5'3" and weighing a hefty 100 pounds soaking wet, he looked like a fifth grader instead of an eighth grader. That day, he was wearing black athletic shorts that looked like they had been under a car hood for a month and seemed to be a size too small for him. He had on a white Chillicothe Hornets t-shirt that had a rip and a faded

red bloodstain under his left arm from a previous encounter with a barbed wire fence. His hair was the usual, a shaggy mess of brown. The recent trip to the orthodontist rewarded him with his first set of braces. My brother never did like change, and the new braces had made him moody for days.

I was sitting in a red lawn chair under the shade of the biggest tree we had in our whole backyard, a huge pin oak that had to have been at least 100 years old, (or so I thought when I was only fifteen.) Cal approached me in a surprisingly good mood.

“What do you wanna do today?” he said in a voice that led me to believe that the great weather had an effect on his mood like it had on mine.

“Let’s climb this tree!” I replied in a half unsure, half excited voice.

I could tell by his facial expression that he wasn’t so sure himself. He had never been much of a risk taker, always erring on the side of caution. I’m not really sure what had gotten into him that day, but his uneasiness of the situation was short-lived.

“Beat you to the top, pansy,” he quickly shot back in a manner I had never seen nor heard out of him before.

I had never been one to back down from a challenge from anybody, let alone my little middle school brother. As quick as he spat out his surprisingly competitive dare, he was headed up the tree. I jumped up as quickly as a cat, tipping over the red lawn chair in the process, and grabbed onto the lowest branch.

That day, I was wearing an old, raggedy pair of tan cargo shorts with rips and tears up and down both sides. My old pair of red Nike sneakers, which looked like they were fresh out of the dumpster, were tied up tight with one black and one red shoelace. I had on my favorite black Missouri Tigers cutoff that I had gotten two years prior on our family trip to the university’s season opening baseball game.

By the time I had my feet off the ground, Cal had to have been halfway up the tree. Or at least I thought that’s how high he was. I could barely see him through the maze of limbs and bright green leaves. Being so active in sports since such an early age

made me very competitive in anything I do, so I didn't think very highly of my cocky younger brother being so far ahead of me. I went faster... come to find out, too fast. My hands and feet were working together perfectly. I felt like a monkey. In my mind, I was a monkey. The adrenalin was flowing so rapidly I didn't even notice all the cuts and scrapes I was receiving from the hundreds of branches I was going straight through. I didn't seem to have a care in the world. The enjoyment of climbing that tree was liberating. Cal had slipped my attention in the sudden rush of excitement and competitiveness.

When I thought I was halfway up the huge pin oak, I looked up for Cal. He was only feet away from me. The tear he had in his shirt was hooked on an oblong limb and had slowed him drastically. That's when I kicked it into overdrive. This was my chance to get ahead of my rival brother and beat him to the top. No sooner did I take my first step higher and CRACK! The branch below my right foot broke. My stomach dropped. The fall was so quick that I didn't know what happened. All that I remember of it was how bad the branches hitting my ribs and scratching my legs and face hurt. By the time I got to the ground, I was parallel to the horizon. My assumption is that my natural instinct was to put out an arm to stop my fall. That ended up being my worst decision of the day.

After I hit that rock-hard, cracked ground I felt a horrendous pain. I looked up at where Cal was in the tree, and all I could hear was a blood-curdling scream. Cal was dumbfounded. He could not believe what had just happened. He climbed down quickly, and his face showed worry and fear.

Not ten minutes after I fell, I went to the emergency room. The x-rays revealed that my radius was snapped completely in two. I wore a cast for four weeks and missed my first fifteen baseball games. That was the longest month of my life. I learned a valuable lesson that day. A small brotherly challenge is not worth losing fifteen games of baseball. That is the only bone I have ever broken and is also (knock on wood) my last. My advice to anyone who ever thinks about breaking your arm: don't do it.

Troy Toedebusch

Herniated Disc: An Unknown Horror

It was just a little back pain. It didn't really mean anything at the time. I was just a freshman in high school, and I thought I would get right over it. On Monday, I hurt it lifting weights, and now it was Thursday. We had a soccer game later that night, and I was really excited about it. I went through my day just like normal. I was going to tell my P.E. coach about my sore back and explain how I had a soccer game that night and didn't want to put any extra strain on my injury. When it was time for P.E., I explained to coach my situation. All I got back was, "Just lift through it. You'll be fine." I knew in my gut to just not lift. Against my better judgment, and with my daily grade in jeopardy, I lifted anyway. Later that night, I played my soccer game with an enhanced amount of pain. And when I woke up that next morning, I couldn't walk. As a result of this herniated disc, I went to many different doctors and a lot of money was spent, my family and I were forced to live a totally different lifestyle, and my athletic ability decreased dramatically.

For a fourteen-year-old kid, a herniated disc is extremely uncommon; I had to go to a lot of doctors, and my parents had to spend a lot of money before they finally figured out what was wrong with me. After a week of extreme pain, we finally went to our family doctor to try and figure out the issue. All he had to say was that I was being a pussy and it was just deep muscle pain. He told me to suck it up and go to school. My mother and I both knew it was something a little bit more severe. So after that (wasted) eighty-dollar doctor visit, we tried going to physical therapy. The physical therapist agreed with the doctor in thinking I was just having muscular issues. She prescribed me excruciatingly painful exercises to do such as walking around the house while holding a wooden rod behind my back to straighten my back. I quit doing that after just one week. The bill from the therapist was close to

one thousand dollars before it was all said and done. After another week of hoping and praying my back would get better, my mom received a suggestion from one of her old friends. My mother's friend's husband had herniated disc surgery a few years before at Columbia Neurosurgeon Center. We scheduled an appointment and made the two hour trip the following Monday. I sat down in the examination room. And, after I informed the doctor about my pain, he asked one simple question, "Are your big toes weak?" At the time I didn't think anything of it and replied with a yes, not knowing why they were. Come to find out, that is a sign of high amounts of pressure on the sciatic nerve that runs down each leg. He informed us that the high amount of pressure in each leg is from two injured discs in the lower back. The herniated disc was on the L4 disc, and the bulging disc was on the L5 disc. He immediately prescribed me Vicodin and scheduled an MRI. I was then given a cortisone shot and sent home for a week. After that whole week, I wasn't any better and came back for another check up. The doctor couldn't believe the cortisone shot didn't help at all and was very alarmed. He immediately scheduled surgery for the next day. We went all the way home that night and came down the next morning. The surgery didn't go exactly to plan because the disc in the L4 region was a lot more herniated than he had anticipated. He told my parents that if I could walk when I woke up, the surgery had been a success. When I finally woke up, they made me try to walk immediately, which was very scary because I couldn't walk without extreme pain when I had come in that morning. Thankfully, I was able to walk and went home that night. The surgery, the appointments, and the MRI added up to cost around \$60,000. If I would have been diagnosed correctly from the start of my injury, a lot of time, money, and painful weeks could have spared.

From the very beginning of my incident, I was forced to live a totally different lifestyle. The first three weeks before my surgery, I laid on a cot in our family living room. The only reason I got up was to use the bathroom and shower, which I did but a handful of times. My mother had to cater to me hand and foot. She had to bring me pretty much anything I needed. This was really

hard for her. She was having troubles at work. Plus, it was harvest season and my dad was always working. And, on top of that, she had two other kids who couldn't drive, and she had to tend to them. After surgery was preformed, I all but had to learn to walk again. For two months straight, I went to physical therapy, with minimal progress. Even though it was normal, I was extremely discouraged. I am not a patient person, and I wanted to be better then and there. I worked out for two to three more months after that by swimming three to four times a week. This was very helpful to my recovery, and, as a result, I was able to play baseball that spring. At this time, I still wasn't near 100% recovered, and time was my main medicine from then on. The physical therapy wasn't my only main change in lifestyle. When I was sitting, I had to do so in certain positions or I would be uncomfortable. I also couldn't sit too long, so class was rough for me. I had to get up every so often to be comfortable, and, most of the time, standing produced the least amount of pain. One day, I was having more pain than normal and stood up about nine times during my teacher's lecture. When I went to stand up the tenth time, I proceeded to get my ass chewed by the teacher for interrupting class. She knew about my injury, but when I told her that was my problem she said, "How long are you going to keep pulling that card? Shouldn't you be over that already?" This really angered and discouraged me. How could she not understand even a little what I was going through? That was the biggest change in my life, having no one understand what I was going through. Eventually, I accepted the fact that everyone thought I was a pussy and just stopped caring what everyone else thought. I continued this way of thinking into my athletic life.

The herniated disc decreased my athletic ability tenfold. I was halfway through my freshman year of being the starting goal-keeper for our soccer team. It was one of the most fulfilling periods of my life while starting varsity as a freshman. After my injury, I was out for the rest of the year and into basketball season. The thought of playing basketball made me nervous anyway because it was my freshman year. The coach was a dick, and the thought of having my injury and trying to make a good impression was too

much to bear. After talking with my parents (as well as my doctor) I ended up not playing basketball at all. This was a big disappointment to my family, especially my dad. He was the scoring champion his senior year of high school in his district and really wanted me to play basketball in high school. That was just a sacrifice I had to make, though. My sophomore year, I started at goalkeeper again and continued to get better. My disc surgery didn't affect my soccer skills very much, and I was able to play almost up to my full ability. My baseball skills were affected the most by my injury, though. I wasn't able to hit, pitch, or field nearly as well as I used to. My core was drastically weakened by the injury and it affected every part of my game. I went from hitting around .450 my previous year in summer travel baseball to hitting .200 in freshman baseball, .200 my sophomore year at the varsity level, and .250 my junior year. This was a heartbreaker for me because, when I was younger, I was the best player in the area. Lots of former college players and college coaches expected me to play Division 1 baseball. After my injury and my sophomore year of high school, I all but gave up on my dream of playing college baseball. Finally, during the fall of my senior year, during soccer season, I noticed my back pain decreasing dramatically. Toward the end of the season, I would go from three to four weeks without having any pain. We set the school record that year with the most wins, and I set a school record with the most shutouts and the least amount of goals given up in a season. The next spring I hit .325 and led the team in RBIs and doubles. I also led the team in wins, strikeouts, innings pitched, ERA, and earned a college scholarship. During summer ball, I completely raked, leading the team with a .400 average as well as every other offensive category. On top of that, I led the team in every pitching category with a 1.90 ERA. The road I traveled to succeed in sports after my surgery was a very difficult one. But making it back to the top is what made all the hard work worth it.

My back still bothers me some, even though I fully recovered (which is only 95%). I have had to move positions a few times just while writing this essay. When my family doctor found out

about me needing to have surgery, he was extremely apologetic. I forgave him, and he is still our family doctor to this day. I can do nearly everything anyone else can, but I can only do so much. This injury is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life and something I have had to adjust to. I wouldn't wish such a devastating injury on my worst enemy. Thinking about it today, I am relieved I came out of it as well as I did, and thankful I am not in worse shape. The experience had great effects on my life but has matured me as a person and made me a harder worker as an athlete.

Chrissy Judkins

A Closet Extrovert

It's Tuesday night at Applebee's, and you are there celebrating the big 3-0. The song Happy Birthday starts, and the focus of the table is automatically directed at you; you are suddenly panic stricken and terribly uncomfortable with the knowledge that you are the center of attention. Being in this situation is all too familiar with me. I am an introvert, but am determined to change and become an extrovert. An extrovert would not be uncomfortable in this situation; an extrovert thrives in the public light. Extrovert is how I want to define myself someday. Although it seems an unattainable goal to change fundamental characteristic traits, I hope to defy the odds and someday change mine.

It is easy to stay in the shadows when you are the youngest of five children. Having brothers and sisters who spoke up for me when needed, or keep the conversation going when I had run out of things to talk about, can be both good and bad. It's good in the sense that I had someone who would always stand up for me; also that I was never on the spot and had to come up with something new to talk about. There was always someone else there to claim the spotlight. The downfall is that I did not learn to do these things on my own. I learned to blend in and let the focus be on other people. I vividly remember my fifth birthday. It was the first time I learned what being the center of attention was. My whole family had come to my aunt's house to celebrate. Others gathered around the table as I sat on my uncle's lap; the candles were lit and the lights were turned off. The age-old song Happy Birthday began. For the first time, I realized that the focus of the entire room was on me. Before the second verse was sung, I could feel my face heat up, as it turned red with embarrassment and in one fluid movement I slid off my uncle's lap straight down to hide under the table until it was over.

Since my life-changing fifth birthday, I have done my best

to stay in the shadows. If I am faced with a situation where I must be center of attention, I am forced to temporarily overcome the panic I feel inside and do my best to swiftly avert the attention from myself to anything else possible. This year marked twenty years since that terrifying day in 1992. As an adult with three kids of my own now, I have hopes that in the near future I will learn to control the panic and intense fear I feel when these situations arise. I want to teach my kids to enjoy their birthday and not be afraid of it. I hope to teach them to feel secure in their own skin and to never feel panic when the focus of the room is turned on them. I hope to teach them to thrive in those moments.

Can someone who has basked in the shadows for twenty years change their ways and learn to finally conquer the fear of being the center of attention? Can we change lifelong characteristics that are ingrained in us? Can an introvert become an extrovert? The answers to these questions remain unknown for now, although I hope, in time, I will be able to say yes to every one of them.

A. N. Dalton

White Silence

In the white silence of a winter's eve
I hear him singing for me
I raise my head, to listen
In my dreams I had heard him before
But upon waking he would disappear, as though he had never been
All that would be left is a resounding echo of his melody

I have never seen his face
Though my soul knows his
My heart answers his song
A ballad of loss and of hope
But why is it that he cannot hear me?
Why is my voice silent to him?

Is our time already gone?
Is our time yet to be?
Has his body already vanished from this world?
Have I lost him before, I have found him?
Is he waiting somewhere far away from me?
Why does he sing to me, but never show himself?

My voice echoes through the falling snow
“Who are you? Why can't you hear me?
“How do you know my name, yet I don't know yours?”
Why do you sing to me, though you can't see?
“Where are you?” “Why can't I see you, only hear?”

In the white silence of the winter's eve
His song echoes around me, like a gentle caress
A single snowflake lands on my cheek, like a kiss
I listen more carefully, to his words

The melody has changed
It is no longer sad, but full of love and wonder

In the wind, I hear a whisper
“I hear you and I can see, our time is near,”
“I will find you soon, but until then I will remain inside your
dreams”

Then once more, I am alone, standing in the ever deepening snow
Now the warmth of hope, echoes in my heart and guides me home

Holly Guess

Mirrors

Searching behind garnished mirrors...
Yet all I see is me
Lost in this predetermined motion
Beside handpicked expectational ghosts.
Trying to prove I cannot live alone
Defined by the twisted grape vine
And wrinkled paper trails
When expecting some untarnished linear side
To this nocturnal lie... fed with post-mortem poison
Equilibrating on the pristine edge
Of one double tipped blade
The ever present ulterior motive... forever miscalculated
Morphing into an imposterous, atomic time bomb
When it's merely a cherry in the snow
Discovered on a gallant midnight mission
Then lost and replaced by the stunning sun
And the cadaverousness it awakens
It magnifies all I am
And all I am not.
Alone in a house of mirrors I cannot escape.
Proving what I need to find
Really isn't there.
For everywhere I look, all I see is me
My own idol... yet worst enemy.

Holly Guess

Untitled

One more crow soars with shooting stars
As volcanic magma cracks and flows,
Smearing purple sky
With the poisoned blood of fallen hopes.
But I shall stand up
And keep counting my steps though as nothing happened.
Move on... for the part of me who didn't.
Leaving me here like a piece of glass
Neither here nor there
Unable to decide
If I'm halfway gone or halfway here.
With scattered shards, I piece together
The puzzle of my fated life.
Though every time I try, I found myself lost
Inevitably disabled at living a normal human life.
For I cannot move on
While holding onto the past.
But what I wouldn't give
To pull all the hair from my scalp
And fill my veins with tears
In commemorating the blood stained pages
Of my then and now
And how I ever got from here to there.
Lost, Misplaced
Forgotten in an eternal charade
We should never have been apart of
Trapped in the cathedral of lonely misconception
As the pieces of my sanctuary
Suffocatingly fit together
Shedding light onto my faded features
Then break once more

As she smiles for the last dance
Before the walls implode...
Caving in tragic finality
As iridescent calamity falls in suit
Ripping another star from this particular stage of life
Sending her back to oblivion
From whence we all came
Leaving behind an echo of one last, silent laugh
What we grow to accept as sacrificial goodbye
Shadows I'd die to hear over and again
From this glass window pane we all left behind
Separating me from her, what I know
And what is left, everything I know not
I need to know...is the view better from over there?
Or did all the pain leak through the walls
With your soul... following you into eternity.

Sarah J Dhue

The Girl Everyone Loved

Carrying her books down the hallway
The same as every single day
Alone
But she's used to this; being on her own
She walks into class, sits down, sweetly smiles at her neighbor
Then the teacher gives the assignment and she begins her labor
She's sitting there
Her face hidden by her long beautiful hair
She doesn't see them cheating
She doesn't realize that their grades, she's feeding
The bell rings
All the students grab their things
And once again
Things are as they are when the day begins
She's carrying her books
No one's sparing her any looks
She's alone
But she's fine being on her own
She is happy with who she is
And she loves the way everything else is
But one day
Things did not go this way
Because she didn't come
And she had never stayed home
And as silent and unnoticed as she had been
Everyone felt her absence within
Then came the announcement over the staticky intercom
The girl never again would come
She had been driving home from school
Last night, a night so wet and cool
When she was killed

The driver didn't even remember how many times he'd had his
glass refilled
An odd silence came over every room
The cheaters all felt their impending doom
The boy who had watched her every day
Wanting to walk with her, yet not knowing what to say
Sat staring off into space
And wishing that once he'd met her gaze
Maybe even said 'hey'
And asked her 'how was your day?'
The girl with the neighboring locker
Missed the presence beside her
Silent and sweet
Smiling and neat
Her lab partner
Knew she'd never pass without her
She'd always made it make sense
And she sat in awe of the girl's intelligence
The teachers pass the empty desk
Giving assignments to all the rest
She walked out of school that day
The same as any other; the exact same way
And as she drove away from school
She never realized that
She was the girl everyone loved

Peppermint Rooster Grand Prize Winner

Kevin Strange

Gods Act

Edwin spotted them the moment he stepped off the train. The Men In Black. The agents.

“That lying fuck!” he said, under his breath.

Edwin turned to hop back on the train but the shorter, stockier of the two agents grabbed his backpack, easily overpowering Edwin’s smallish, fourteen year old frame and halting any forward progress Edwin had hoped to make.

“Edwin Marshalls, by order of Department of Homeland Security, you’re coming with us.”

“How original,” Edwin quipped, brushing his shaggy brown hair back into his eyes, as they marched him toward their black Escalade.

The taller, fatter of the two agents forcefully took Edwin’s pack off his back.

“Are they in the bag?” Fatty asked. His accent was decidedly southern.

“Are what in the bag?” Edwin asked, playing dumb.

As they rounded the corner away from the crowded train station, away from prying eyes, the short one punched Edwin in the side of the face, sending Edwin sprawling onto the sharp gravel below his feet.

“Ow.” Edwin looked around at the empty parking lot hoping to spot some means of escape.

“There’s nothing in the bag,” the tall one said into the communication piece attached to his ear.

Edwin felt a molar come loose when he nudged it with his tongue. He spat out blood and said, “Where’s Brad? Brad told me he’d be here. I explicitly said no agents.”

“Bradley Charney’s dead,” Shorty said. His accent was

unidentifiable, due mostly to his pronounced and ridiculous lisp. “Give us the stones. They’re highly unstable. This is a very serious situation, Edwin.”

Edwin cursed under his breath. He pulled a small Tupperware container out of his pocket. Time for plan B, he thought.

Deftly and without catching the attention of his captors, Edwin popped the three marble sized pulsing blue stones into his mouth and swallowed hard.

Then, standing on shaky legs he said, “Five million in cash. That’s what I asked for, that’s what I’m getting if you want your little alien rocks.”

Shorty whipped the rear passenger side door open. He forced Edwin inside, then crawled in after him as Fatty got into the driver’s seat, started the truck, and pulled away.

Shorty took off his generic black sunglasses. Edwin was half surprised to see brown eyes behind them. He sort of expected them to be black like everything else these goons carried.

“Look. I know you think you hit the jackpot when that meteor landed inside your kitchen, kid. But you don’t understand just how many innocent lives are in danger by having those stones out here in public like this.” He un-holstered his pistol and placed it threateningly in his lap. Black. Of course.

Edwin looked the agent in his brown eyes and said, “I’d love to give you the rocks, pal. Unfortunately, I ate ‘em.”

The truck screeched to a stop in the middle of the road. Fatty, who Edwin now noticed was sporting a pretty bad comb over, made worse by his bristly ginger-red hair, spun around frantically.

“You ate the stones?”

“Yep. Figured Brad would fuck me. Figured you wouldn’t pay me. Thought, what the hell, I’ll down em with some Frosted Flakes and see if what happened to my Mom would happen to me, too.”

The agents looked at each other nervously. Fatty spoke into his ear piece. “Situation has upgraded to a level 7. I repeat, level 7. Full threat level. The subject has come into immediate proximity

with the stones. Send all available backup to our location. GPS coordinates sent.”

The agents sat still as statues. Finally, Fatty added: “And please hurry.”

Edwin began to glow. A bright blue luminescence filled the large cab of the Escalade. It pulsed rhythmically in time with Edwin’s breathing. His shaggy brown hair stood on end, creating a series of jagged spikes, which waved threateningly. Finally, Shorty spoke. “That was suicide, Edwin. Suicide.”

Edwin grew noticeably larger in that moment. He now had to duck his head to avoid touching the high ceiling of the truck. His voice took on a curious harmonic quality, as though his words were being naturally auto-tuned. “Was it suicide when your friends gunned down my mother in cold blood? Was it suicide when you dissected her still living body? While she screamed in pain, hmm, was that suicide?”

Fatty spoke this time, slowly. Cautiously. “It was a matter of national security, Edwin. What burst out of your house was no longer your mother. It was a monster. It had to be put down. We had no way of knowing whether or not her condition was contagious until the proper tests had been run.”

Shorty moved his trembling hand toward the door.

Edwin began to drip raw energy into the seat cushions. Spots where it touched instantly melted away.

“Command is two minutes out. They’ve authorized engagement,” Fatty said, reaching for his gun.

Edwin heard the helicopters and assault vehicles before the agents did. He could hear everything now. Literally everything. He heard the elderly fat lady at Kroger half a mile away haggling with the disinterested young clerk about the price of her eggs after the coupon. He heard the happy family in the car on I-95 one hundred fifty miles away singing songs and laughing with one another. And he heard the fighter jets screaming through the air at 700 miles per hour with his name in their head-sets.

Edwin grew again, ripping the roof off the Escalade like a can opener works a container of sardines, forcing the agents out

into the street. They were babbling into their ear pieces, aiming their black guns at what used to be his head.

He no longer cared what the agents said or what they did. He tried to open his eyes and was amused to find that he no longer had eyes and that he could see everything without them. Everything. Clearly.

The agents opened fire. Their bullets simply flashed blue as they harmlessly entered into his new body. They caused him no worry.

With his thoughts, Edwin turned the agents into blue flames, which flickered then went out almost instantly. Surprisingly though, the two men were not dead. Not in the sense that Edwin understood life and death now. Time, space, matter, energy--all of these terms were relative, human terms. Terms he could no longer relate to. The agents were not really dead. Their personalities had left a mark on the particles around them. A sort of emotional fingerprint before absorbing back into the whole of reality.

Edwin was in awe. Seeing it all. Hearing it all. Understanding everything perfectly for the first time in his life.

The irony was not lost on him that it took an organism launched through vigintillions of years and unfathomable miles from a long dead planet to awaken in him a true understanding of the human race and its full potential and purpose in the universe.

He saw and understood connections and pathways between light and love, between death and time that no mortal being had any right to conceive. He reveled in his new found enlightenment.

Edwin grew one final time. He gushed now. Blue plasma cascaded down from his titanic form as a radioactive avalanche of death and destruction. It swept through city streets like a nightmarish tsunami of protoplasmic sludge. Tens of thousands perished where they stood like little blue pulses on an electronic switch board. Hundreds of thousands more would die in the coming days and weeks as new and terrible forms of cancerous disease overtook their fragile forms. Mile after mile of once fertile Terra would be left uninhabitable for millions of years.

Does an organism weep for thousands of dead bacteria

when it is infested with billions more?

The black choppers and military tanks had arrived. They were no more a concern to him than the tick is to the elephant. His mind raced. He knew he only had moments to live before his gelatinous body collapsed entirely.

This final growth brought with it the realization that he was no longer Edwin Marshalls. He was God now. He saw into the souls of every person walking the earth, saw their thoughts, their dreams.

He knew he had the power to destroy them all like he did the agents. Like a child drowning an anthill. He wanted to, for what they did to his mother. For what they'd done to each other since the first hominid picked up a rock and smashed in his brother's skull.

But Edwin could not hate these people. Gods do not hate. Human beings simply did not know, did not understand, as a whole, what he understood now. He dwelt on that notion, that they may never know their true place in the cosmos. In the Grand Design. The Intergalactic tapestry of existence. And it made him sad.

Edwin began to dissolve, to come apart. In his final moment, he did not doom human civilization. Instead, he sent out, without knowing if he even possessed that kind of power, one thought. One thought he hoped to plant into the mind of every person on the planet. As the last of him pulled away from itself, he did not care that he would not live long enough to see if his thought had the intended impact. Gods don't care. Gods act.

In the instant of his demise, the Edwin Marshalls that was no longer an Edwin Marshalls but instead something entirely new, Something that has never existed in all of the fathomless depths of the universe before and may never exist again, sent out his one thought to seven billion minds simultaneously. His dying thought.

We are all one.

Mark Ax

Ramblings Of An Addict

My name is Mark and I have an addiction. I need help. I am not at some twelve-step program because there is no rehabilitation facility that accommodates the disease I have. There is nobody to help me but myself and I can't seem to counteract this sick, obsessive personality trait genetically ingrained into my D.N.A. So here I sit, a thirty-year old "man" at his adolescent desk in his mother's basement, waiting seventeen minutes and four seconds until his next fix. Sure, I've asked friends for help in this matter: I've texted and Facebook-messaged them multiple times, asking, begging, pleading, DEMANDING for their help. Just do this for me once and I'll leave you alone the rest of the night, I swear. Plllease? I'm so bored! The texts go unanswered, the messages ignored. And yet, I don't blame them; the addiction has changed me, and they don't like the person I've become.

I guess it all started about a year ago--give or take a couple months (who can keep track of long stretches of time: the obsession swallows it like a vacuum)--when my so-called friend got me hooked onto the sweetness. "Just try it," she said. "It's really fun, and a great way to kill time."

And, like stupid sheep in a herd, I followed.

At first, I didn't even really enjoy it (frankly, it looked like something pre-teen girls got involved with), but kept with it because of its social acceptance and eventually developed a passion for it. "Again?" Jackie, my now ex-girlfriend, asked with worried blue eyes. I assured her it wasn't a problem, just something I liked doing after work to take the edge off. Over time, however, I was doing it in the afternoon and night--before and after work, mostly--and had developed a nickname for my fixation, trying to make it a pal. "Need to get me some CC up in here," I'd yell like a gangster before laughing manically. Before long, I'm feeding the need every half-hour I am conscious, like clockwork. And it worsened.

Oh Lord, had it ever worsened.

I found myself lying to loved ones and good friends for no good reason, as if trying to hone my manipulative craft. I would sneak out to my truck because “I forgot something” and do it there real quick, other times sneaking into the bathroom and turning on the exhaust fan, claiming to be pooping but secretly masking the sounds my addiction possesses. The final straw for Jackie and our relationship happened about an hour ago when she wondered why I was taking my fourth shower of the day and decided to barge in, catching me red-handed. I never wanted her to see me like that: helpless, sitting with my back against the tub—naked--determined to move onto the next level of my addiction. Jackie screamed and dropped the glass in her hand before racing down the stairs, crying and screaming, “I can’t believe this is more important to you than me! It’s over, Mark; you need help! I’m going to my sister’s for a few hours: you better be the fuck outta here when I get back!” I wanted to yell for her to come back, that I won’t do it again, that I can change, that I LOVE her, but to no avail. The black cloud hovered overhead and the monkey on my back kept me silent until she left. I waited the allotted timeframe needed to feed my perversion once more (while crying) before ultimately driving to my mom’s to write this stupid thing. Only eight minutes have passed; still another nine to go.

And *why* am I writing this? Is it for myself? Am I going to print this out to read aloud and discover how pathetic this sounds and straighten my life out? Or is this merely for the paramedics, policemen, and/or Coroner to discover along with my rotting corpse? A sort of documentation of loserness, so to speak. Jackie’s absolutely right: I do need help. I have to free myself of this enslavement before it completely destroys me. But it’s so goddamn humiliating WHAT I’m addicted to because most grown-ups have normal, adult problems like alcoholism or cocaine-dependence, while others have more disturbed ones of banging dogs or staring at children. Mine isn’t a drug at all: just virally-constructed jelly beans, lollipop heads, and weird-looking chocolate balls with sprinkles.

My name is Mark and I'm addicted to Candy Crush Saga. It is not something I am proud of and like most lowlife addicts, I'm ashamed and hide it from most people (except when I'm desperate, then I troll Facebook pages like drug addicts roam back alleys, accepting anyone into my life if I suspect they play an inordinate amount of CC and be willing to give me the lives and extra moves I desire. I mean Candy Crush. Damn it!). I dream about Candy Crush. When I'm not playing it, I'm thinking about it. Always. I imagine scenarios in my brain and how I would overcome them, or try and think three to five moves ahead as if I'm playing chess against a Grandmaster. I glamorize it and OH MY GOD when I get a striped candy to mesh with a chocolate ball I almost get an eighteen-wheeler in my pants by the illuminating orgy that displays on the screen. This isn't healthy. No, this isn't healthy at all.

But how can I recover? As stated previously, there is no Candy Crush Rehabilitation Center and if there was, I'd be too repulsed by the cretins (which, sadly enough, would be my constituents) inside. Sullen patients in hard wooden chairs, constantly staring down at their laps expecting their iPhone or Android phones to be there and whimpering when they're not; others would be sitting on the cold linoleum floor facing the wall, touching it in short, side-to-side and up-and-down swipes with their index fingers. What can I do?

I could write; I've always enjoyed that. But how can I focus on my novel or short stories when I take a break every half-hour to bust up candies? I'm thirty freakin' years old, for Christ's sake: how can this be the most important conquest in my life? How can I surmise in my head that when I reach (and surpass) my friends on their Candy Crush levels that that somehow makes me a "winner?" I have under four minutes before I can play again and as I stare at the crying heart on the Candy Crush app, I think of the irony: a loser with no life begging others to give him one. The realization hits me hard and I join the heart and begin tear up.

As I wail with the heart and count down the clock (two minutes and twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one seconds), my phone makes a chirping noise, indicating I have a notification.

Giddy with excitement, I think one of my friends has finally shown pity for me and decided to help me out. I wipe my nose with my shirt and swipe my phone with my thumb to discover it's an e-mail from Crystal, the bitch who got me hooked in the first place (I shouldn't call her that: she was a good enabler for many months until she grew tired of my persistent pestering. Quick sidebar: I don't know how Tommy Strudrick did it, but he was the only one able to conjure up the three extra moves consistently; thanks buddy, you got me through some tough times). While it isn't the free life I've been pining for, I'm excited the line of communication has been minutely opened until my eyes scroll across the subject line: **READ THIS...AND LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!** What a bitch. I blink my eyeballs to the body of the letter and read the copy-and-pasted following:

Can't get enough of Candy Crush Saga? Don't want to wait for lives? Here's what you do:

- 1. Go to your phone's 'time & date' settings**
- 2. Unlock the 'automatic' feature and set your phone three hours ahead [don't forget to change it back, though ☺!!]**
- 3. Presto! You now have a full set of lives. Enjoy the newest, sweetest, most addicting game by Zynga!!!!**

“Oh Dear Lord, help me,” I whisper before sitting on my hands so my thumbs can't scramble for the 'settings' icon.

Kayla R. Howland

Psychologistics

I closed my fingers into my palm, running my nails over the skin to feel the sticky, red liquid covering it. Blood is such a strange element. I find it neither like syrup or water but a warping combination of the two. Who designed blood after all? Was it an all-powerful God like the Christians believe it to be? I think not. Yes, he sat atop his golden throne and stated, “They will have innards like thick goop, suicidal thoughts, murder their own kin, trouble coping with boredom, and a constant longing for friends they shall never acquire.” In fact, based on the Christian God, it might as well be told that way. He did, after all, part the waters and turn water into goddamn wine. I would think to pardon my French, but I also don’t believe that, if there is a God, he’d have half a mind to be French. That bartender was French, but she talked too much. I felt as if I kept nodding and nodding to the point my head would roll off my shoulders and she’d feel like *she* was the killer in the conversation.

But that cannot be so. Why? Because: I am the killer in the conversation. I’m always the killer. I’m on TV now, don’t you know it? All I had to do was bash a waitress’ head in with a bottle. They get a little stingy with their waitresses nowadays. I mean, her life was a dead end anyhow. I listened to her life story for hours. It nearly brought a tear to my eye, nearly. Long-gone parents, no friends, a college fund spent on twitchy drugs, boozed up nights with a certified domestic-violence specialist. I ended something that ended long ago. I sped up time actually. That’s what I do. I should be making a bigger salary and charge by the hour, but I’m not Oprah. I listen to people’s problems, yes, but Oprah doesn’t end her shows by slitting the throats of everyone in the crowd. Believe me, if she did, she’d have a lot more viewers; for one night at least. Then, they’d haul her away.

I wonder if the cops would ask her for her autograph. Prob-

ably would, the bastards. They try to do their job. But see, they're failures. They blamed what happened to the waitress on some guy who looks like me but isn't. If you ask me, his fatal flaw was being born. Some restaurant screams murder and the jury screams, "Death penalty!" I scream, "Let's plan another trip!" That guy got off easy if you ask me. Life in prison is a doucher for sure. I'd rather off myself than go back. I saw the guy's eyes when some bitch reporter asked what he wanted for his last meal. His eyes got real big and he just stared a moment. I wonder if I look like that when I stare. I wonder what I'd want for my last meal. That's easy actually: Turkey. I love turkey. I love turkey more than turkey would love not to be turkey. That's how much I love turkey. But I can't think of turkey now.

You see, turkey is simple. It's a bird, it's no longer a bird, it's a slice, it's a sandwich, it's a meal. Murder is easy too. You're alive, you get caught, you panic, you die, you go to... wherever the hell you think you go to. I personally think there is no heaven or hell, or God, for that matter. If there were, he'd stop sick bastards like me. But I too personally believe I'm not sick. I'm just different, and aren't those one groups trying to encourage being different? They're reaching out for a better purpose. Really, they're reaching out to make a profit and encourage whatever the fuck people want them to encourage. The public want football stars, they encourage sports. That's all. The people don't want to look at fat, sad people, they encourage organic vegetables and speed jogging, which is just a way to say, "Jogging like you give a fuck." But I don't, so they should stop that shit and encourage *different*, more impossible shit, like world peace. Ma'am, I'm sorry but it's not going to happen. Don't cry; want me to make it all better? Sorry, I'm a murderer and I don't make pussy deals like that. Go ask God. He'll grant it. Yup.

So I've got this dead bitch lying on the floor right now. I don't quite remember what went down, but it went down. *It hella* went down. And across the walls. And on the kitchen counter. And on the windows. After six years of doing this, you'd think I'd learn to be *cleaner* with my episodes, but I'm always surprised.

Windows are the easy things to clean up. Floors are shit. Floors are like black holes that suck up blood and wait to let it seep when the authorities arrive. Fuck floors. Fuck cleaning. I don't do it anymore. It's a waste of valuable killing time. But I, unfortunately, have to clean myself up. It's hard to make a good impression on a mark when you have sketchy stains on your t-shirt. Women don't exactly go for Mr. Unexplained Stains.

I am surprised sometimes, though. Sometimes I think I get *that look*, you know, like I have some sinister secret locked up in my head, which I do, *but* I don't want my marks to know it. I stare at myself in mirrors a lot. I look for that look. But all I find is myself looking for a look that I can't look at, because I would never face it down. Inner demons are also shit. You'll find it out soon enough if you decide to be a serial *coincidence-creator*. I am the defector of Hannibal Lecter; the know-how-to-kill Buffalo Bill. I do not, however, make suits made of people-skin or eat other human beings. I can appreciate art from a distance but come on; a mind can only handle so much. I just like the blood. And the satisfaction. I don't kill people who don't deserve it or want it. Sometimes they don't see that they deserve it or want it but, being the professional that I am, I know that look. I know that passing glance. Many people are just looking for a way out. I understand. I want out too. But I don't know another professional like myself to ask. That's why I have to be careful. Killer is a rare breed nowadays. There are just too many insane people making laws for the sane people to live by. It makes it hard on us. It really does.

When did I kill this bitch? Her blood is cold already. It's coagulated in lovely little black spots like the ones on the Dalmatians in that Disney movie. Wasn't one of those little assholes named Patch? Yup, that big spot beneath her head is just like Patch's patch; Big, irregular, and looming. My head is aching. I don't drink or do drugs anymore. Sobriety is also shit. It can't be that. Did she hit me? It's happened before. Some people just aren't too keen on receiving their final judgment. Some of them like to fight back. Then some of them just stand there with their eyes wide open like the man who took my wrap. They just look at you like

some dumb animal. *Are you going to seriously kill me? Yes dude, I am seriously going to kill you. Right now? The fuck do you think I'm doing with this shovel? I don't dig holes. I leave that up to the gas journeyman. By the way, they'll probably find your body in the morning by that one store. You know, the one that sells used underwear. I like to put them in places like that. Then, whenever the reporter is at the scene, she has to say something like Man found brutally slaughtered outside of Louie's Luxury Lingerie.* I have to have something to live for, after all.

I'm washing my hands and am looking in the mirror again. I hear something though and it's giving me a complex. It's a little voice. Most people have it. Usually it tells them they're fat, or that they have ugly ankles. Sometimes it tells guys their life is a waste of time and their toilet paper needs restocked. It's that little thing a lot of weirdoes call a *conscience*. I just call it the *annoying fucking little voice*. Same thing really. But mine is a nagging little bitch. It whines mostly. It tells me I'm in the wrong mostly, or that I'm going to get caught soon. It tells me I forgot that one little fingerprint that's going to lead the police to my dojo. If I had a dojo. I don't. I just sleep in the house of whoever I killed most recently without a spouse. This one guy's wife was so fucked up she thought I was her husband coming home and I had a hell of a time getting her to leave me alone. I slept on the couch and she kept baking cookies and shit, bringing them to me, baking herself, bringing that to me, talking. I didn't kill her, if you're wondering, but I have to admit it crossed my mind.

I don't like women. I don't like men. I don't like pets. Actually, I rather resent all living things. I would probably be a fashionable grim reaper. Hopefully, he's retiring and handing over his position soon. I'd take his job in a heartbeat. The only things I cannot kill are children. Not because I believe in the whole *all children are innocent* bullshit, but I just can't do it. They seem like they should have the allocated time to make things *right* before I judge them. Who knows? I might not kill them, if I like them. But I'm usually one to revert to my habits.

I'm sitting in the soiled apartment on the toilet. My stom-

ach is cramping terribly. The little voice is saying: *The neighbors heard her scream. They know your face. They know your game.* I keep scratching at my temples like that will drive the voice away, but the itch always goes deeper, always digs its way down further until my very brain feels like it's burning. It sometimes bothers me when I get overzealous for a kill. It makes me feel like I might really be seriously crazy, which is ridiculous because I know I'm not. Still, it haunts me. They say you never forget a kill, but that's not necessarily true. I forget Janes and Johns all the time. Some stories just aren't that memorable and I've killed what? Forty? Fifty? Maybe fifty-five? Enough. But the truly messy ones--those stick with you for a long time. I would say forever but I haven't lived that long.

My clothes are dirty and caked with red slag, shiny and dull at the same time where wet meets slime. There is blood on my face, my gray eyes blinking like my reflection is a stranger. Dark circles ring the gray where stress has divided and conquered. The viscous, unintelligible garments on me are difficult to remove and, when I do, my pallid skin is draped in rivulets of textured gore. I shower and the tiles jump with watered down red droplets. I shower so hot my skin turns colors and my back stings. As I shave, the final traces of red stains disappear. Many call me handsome. I have a medium build and am quite tall. It always fascinates me how, no matter how strange I am, women are still drawn to me. I believe my description on a dating website would go something like: *6'4", blonde, gray eyes, likes to hunt, heart of gold. Well, everything but the heart of gold.* I've seen my heart and it is black, black, black.

I tiptoe carefully through the apartment until I reach my briefcase. I bring it everywhere with me. It contains a change of clothes, bar of soap, a straight razor, and a bottle of peroxide. On occasion, I add or subtract contents from it, but it mostly never changes. After dressing nicely and doing a once-through on my hair, I go straight to the fire escape. Something as obvious as a fire escape is something I rarely take as an exit but this one faces a windowless alleyway and seems safer than taking the main stair-

well down.

I climb down and in seconds I'm just another average Joe, drifting in and out of the busy sidewalk wafts as group upon group of possible involuntary volunteers pass me by. The smells of the city make me hungry. An heiress' perfume seems delectable and poetic to my senses; a man's musk stark and vibrant against the shades around it. Every human creates their own inimitable redolence that makes my thoughts skip and my imagination flip through the many pages of possibilities conceivable. If I remember anything about my marks, it's their fragrance.

It might be a perfume or conditioner, laundry or sweat. They say that smell is the most primal of senses, that your brain can pinpoint exact information from only a few particles. This has to be true. Every Lola or Leroy I encounter seems to emit or stifle the smells of their lives. The fearful whore masks the smell of fear behind a floral bouquet; the greedy pimp shows off his affluence in the form of lavish cologne. A cheating husband is a complicated smell indeed; a triangle of scents: his wife's, his mistress's, and his own. But, of every intriguing scent, the one that captures me most is the smell of pure blood. The smell has become a modern rarity. Cigarettes, medications, pollution: all adding to the impurities of the human body. It is nearly inconceivable, the amount of things I can distinguish about someone by their smell.

I wander Third and Ninth for about an hour. The voice is back. It must've snuck up on me when I wasn't looking. This time it's excited. It's saying: *Turn back the way you came. Don't walk too fast, they'll notice you. They know. They know. They know.* I duck into a restaurant. Boy, murder sure does give one an appetite. It's a common habit of mine: mass slaughter, then dinner. I order a mass of food and feel obligated to leave a hefty tip. I've killed many waitresses, enough to know that most don't receive dick for tips. Before I leave, before I tip my hat and slide in my chair, I can feel something telling me there's something wrong. I feel strange. I feel sick. An Asian couple walks by me and raises their brow. Do I look strange to them? I am tired suddenly. My body feels weak. Is it the food? No. It's in my head. There's something digging inside

it. It's like a headache that's burrowing into my spine and squeezing my brain. I feel like I'm going to have an aneurism.

In a haze, I stumble forward, the patrons of the restaurant gawking at my stagger. I open my mouth and eyes wide. It must look like I'm gasping but I swear I'm not. There's a ringing in my ears that is shaking the drums nearly out of the hole. A waitress jumps to catch my fall, my knees sliding out from beneath me before I know it. Then it is black, black, black. Blacker than my heart.

I begin to breathe and automatically I am filled with a strange feeling. I don't know what has happened. I don't know where I am. I just know it's never happened before. I guess the feeling I'm trying to describe would match closest to fear, but it's hard to tell considering I've never been afraid. Suspicious, yes, paranoid, yes, but never afraid. My eyes flicker open and the fluorescent of a white kitchen blinds me. A hand is on my chest, another under my head. About six faces stare down at me from my sides. I hear British voices bickering.

"Is he dead?"

"Calm down Evie. Can't you see the bastard is still breathing?" A man's voice.

The woman shrills again, "Are you sure he's not dead? Look at him. He looks terrible."

"Goddammit, Evie! Will you shut up? What if he hears you?"

"Well *what if* he hears me? He should know he's sick, Errol."

"I'm pretty sure he knows he's sick, Evie! Look at him!"

I look at the man named Errol and knit my brow.

He looks back at me and then to his wife, "Do you have a name, sir? Can you hear me?"

His tone makes me feel ignorant and afflicted. I don't like it. I don't answer. My mind can hear his words but they seem to come out funny. I can't seem to answer him.

Errol snaps his fingers in my face. "Ello? Sir? Can you hear me?"

I suppose I give out a nod because he quits asking.

Evie seems preoccupied with my pulse, her prodding fingers cold on my hot neck. “He’s giving off a cold sweat, Errol. What do you suppose is wrong with him?”

“I don’t know, woman! Do I look like a goddamn doctor? He probably had a heart attack or, I don’t know, something like that, maybe a stroke.”

The fear grips me suddenly.

I kick out of the group and into a cabinet, my back cold with sweat and my head swimming, “Where am I?”

I hear a gasp from Evie, “Oh dear. Poor man. Doesn’t know where he even is.”

I feel myself shaking, my muscles contracting, “What’s wrong with me?”

Errol is coaxing me to lie back down but my body doesn’t want to move. I’m so weak and tired.

“You’re in the kitchen of the restaurant dear. You seem to have fainted. We’ve called the hospital and they’re on their way. Do you need water?”

Evie’s words sink deep into me. An ambulance. If they cut off my clothing they’d surely see the stains on my body. They’d surely see the scratch marks and bruises. Questions would be raised, pictures compared, suspects narrowed. They’d catch me for sure or at least put me on watch.

“I have to go,” my voice sounds raw and hoarse.

Errol is shaking his head, “Where? But you can’t even walk right. Who knows what’s wrong with you even internally. You need to stay here, sir.”

I shake my head, “No, I have to go. I have to.”

In my confusion, I cannot think of a reason I must go that I can explain, only that I must.

A dozen hands descend upon me suddenly. I try to stand but the hands hold me.

“Let me go! I have to go! Let me go!” I kick my feet out and fight with the max of my strength.

There are eight hands on me suddenly, and then six, and

then two, then I break free of them and narrowly stumble out of the back of the restaurant. My heart is beating frantically. I clutch at my chest as it pounds hatefully inside me. I round the corner into an alley. Voices grow louder behind me but I cannot run any faster. I turn on another block, faces gasping and alarmed by my outbursts. I lose myself in the crowd. I feel like one of them, the poor bastards I usually feel predatory to. I feel like a mark. Vulnerable. I wander to third and twelfth, my legs barely dragging my sagging body forward. I see an ambulance go by and feel the need to hunker away from it. I am sweating furiously, my clothing soaked through.

I stoop down on a step. The cool stone feels like needles on my skin. Before I know it I am laying on the steps for all to see, absorbing the affirming cold. I lie here a moment. I close my eyes. I ignore the busy sidewalk and focus on my pain. The little voice is whispering now: *I found you! I found you! I found you!*

“Hello? What are you doing on my doorstep?”

I can barely bring my eyes to open, “Resting. I am very sick.”

The voice comes back. It is dainty and feminine. I feel a longing for it. It reminds me of what home is.

“Resting? On the steps? If you don’t mind me saying, you look terrible.”

I roll my eyes. “I know.”

“Well, do you need help?”

I manage a nod but the small effort makes my head throb.

“I’ll call the hospital.”

“No. No.”

Her voice quivers, “Well you can’t just stay out here.”

My chest is rising and falling heavily. My breathing is slowed to shit. “Ok.”

There is a stiff silence a moment. Has she gone? Did she leave?

I feel worried. “Hello?”

“I’m still here.”

I feel her sit next to me. Her gentle smell is calming.

“Well, what on Earth do you think I should do with you then? Do you need anything?”

My mind wrangles up only one word: “Help.”

I hear her sigh, “Then why can’t I call the hospital?”

I shake my head. “Trouble.”

“You’re in trouble? Do you mean they’ll arrest you? You’re not a mental case are you?”

I can’t help but smile. “Sure.”

I hear her sigh again. “Can you walk?”

“Maybe.” Even the small answers are dragging on me.

“I’ll help.”

I feel arms beneath my own. I push upwards and teeter against her. She is small but strong.

“My apartment is on the first floor. Bet you’re glad to hear that.”

I feel my feet dragging slightly behind me. I am losing ground.

She fumbles with her keys and jangles open the doorknob. I open my eyes vaguely long enough to see that her expression is fierce and serious. She worries that I will not make it inside. I make it barely to the couch and crash into the cushions as if dropped by plague.

She runs off a moment and returns with a cool rag and three beautiful white pills.

She presses a glass to my lips, “Drink. Take this. You need it.”

I generally don’t take medicine, but, being as my head felt kicked by a mule, I didn’t argue.

“Please. Let me call someone. A doctor. A nurse. Someone.” She sits on her coffee table and frets.

“You can’t. I can’t say why. Please.” I feel like these words might assure her but they do not.

“Fine. We’ll see if the medicine helps. If it doesn’t we’ll be having this conversation next time you wake up.” She takes the glass from me. “If you wake up. Ask me if you need anything. I’ll feel terrible if you die here. You don’t seem like such a bad guy.”

I nod. I am very tired. She folds the rag on my forehead. I have never been treated this way. Even as a child, I cared for myself when I was sick. I feel a strange warmth inside me and I'm not sure if it's nausea or if it's joy. Someone cares about me. Someone cares if I die. In some way, I feel different. It's not just because I'm sick. There is something else. I am tired. I don't know what.

I awaken to a strange sight. As I stare two eyes stare back at me. A massive, spotted Great Dane is looking me square in the face. It has one blue eye, one brown. The blue eye has an annoying black spot in it that makes my obsessive compulsive disorder tick. But I kind-of like the dog. I never like anything or anyone. What is wrong with me?

I look around the room. In my vertigo I hadn't been able to see the room before, or at least had not noticed it. It is small, comely. The walls are a light gray with well-placed pictures dotted about it. Most homes look like shit. This one does not. The dog whines a bit and places a robust paw on my arm.

"I don't shake hands."

The dog tilts its head. I feel guilty for this strange dismissal of friendship. I read his nametag. It reads: *Beauford*, in large, black letters.

"Go away, Beauford."

He rests his head on my side and stares. This brings on a stronger guilt. What did Beauford ever do to me? I know. He is a dog. I don't like animals. He is an animal. It makes total sense.

"Where's your owner?"

Beauford woofs. He seems to think he has understood something I have said. He nudges me and attempts to climb onto my stomach.

"Get off! You're smashing me, Beauford!"

Just then, I hear a lock click. The door across the room opens and my rescuer walks in, carrying a grocery sack.

I sit up and manage to push the colossal beast off of me, "Is this yours?"

She sets the groceries down, "Oh, I'm sorry. Beau! Beau! Get off the dude! He's not feeling well."

The dog looks at me as if in a desperate plea for me to allow him to stay.

“You heard her.

Beauford walks away and disappears into a bedroom. His large nails click on the wooden floors as he leaves.

“Sorry. I’m not much of a dog person.” I feel bad. I never feel bad for anything. Serial killers shouldn’t feel guilt. Artists shouldn’t feel guilt. I am both. Have I somehow metamorphosed into neither? Has my illness rendered me boring and normal?

“It’s okay. Beauford likes everybody. I’m Piney, Piney Rushford. It’s a terrible name, I know. Don’t hold it against me. Let’s just say high school wasn’t a time of great joy for me.”

I chuckle a bit. I try to hold it behind my teeth, but the voice is telling me to. It tells me that it’s ok to laugh, which it never has said before. I must listen to it, must release its wishes. I can imagine the voice’s eyes watering. His face wrinkles in places, a wide smile played across his face. He must love seeing me hold back. He settles.

I take the reins again, “Sorry. It’s not that bad, really.”

The voice hypothetically nudges my side. It repeats to me: *Dude. Get out of here. She doesn’t want anything to do with a weirdo like you. Look at you.* I stand. My eyes seem to glaze over. I must look like I’m going to pass out or go apeshit or something but Piney doesn’t say a word.

“I need to go.”

Piney’s face turns sad and confused. “Are you sure? You still look very weak.”

“I’ll be fine. Where’s my jacket?”

A sweep of panic overcomes me. I realize my jacket has been removed. My white shirt has been taken off of me. Has she realized what stains them? Has she noticed? My hands tug at my clothing nervously. In replacement of my white shirt, a white tee covers me.

“My shirt, where is my shirt?”

Piney shrugs, “I helped you remove it last night. You woke me up mumbling. You had a fever. You were sweating pretty bad

so I guess you wanted it off.”

Her expression is blank, if not totally ignorant. She has not found me out.

“Can you get it for me? I have to go. Now.”

Her eyes narrow. She looks at me like someone who has just discovered their apartment has a dead rat in it. As she walks off, I can’t help but look away. Beauford eyes me as I stand in the doorway. Piney has collected my things which appear to be newly washed. Much of the blood has faded away.

“I am sorry to leave you with so many questions. I just need to go.” I look at Beauford’s saggy eyes, “See ya, Beauford.”

Piney stands in the way of me leaving, “What’s your name even? You never said.”

“It’s better you never know. Remember what I said about me being in trouble? I am trouble. Thank you but you shouldn’t have to know people like me. Just forget you ever saw me, ok?”

She crosses her arms, “Ok. Fine. You can go. Just know that a police officer came by our building a few minutes ago looking for you. I guess I don’t want to know why they were looking for you exactly. Goodbye then.”

Her voice was dour, obstinate.

I thanked her to my best ability and left the building. I walked all the way to Seventh and Ninth before realizing I had no place to go. My last kill’s home had been thickly evidence-strewn. I could not go there. The authorities could’ve already found my last prospect.

Finally, back in my comfort zone, I began to go back to my normal habits. I smelled the air. I searched for new prey. The smell of a wealthy socialite makes my senses tingle. I follow my nose to the source. A finely dressed, attractive businessman stands in attempt to hail a cab. A young woman stands next to him. I can tell by her tailoring that she must be his wife. Her coat smells like apricot and vanilla. I do several incognito passes and inhale the couple’s scent deeply.

My second pass reveals that the woman’s name is Wendy. My third reveals that the man’s name is Michael. My fourth pass,

as the man hails a taxi, reveals that they live in an apartment complex on Caldwell and Adrian, a place I know well for its high-society aristo-brats; young, dumb money on a spending spree. I hail a cab myself, flipping through my wad of cash Piney forgot to wash down the drain. I pay the driver twice his rate. I do this and tell them to not ask any questions. The drivers are always more than willing to do exactly as I say. After all: twice the rate? Opportunity is a bitch.

We follow the young couple inconspicuously until they stop. I pay off the driver another hundred to keep his mouth shut, a not-so-uncommon act, and follow the couple into their building. I slide on my jacket, one I found on the body of a blue-blooder only blocks away, and stride proudly across the marble floor. My humble heeltap brings the building's front desk attendant to attention. I feel inclined to grin at her and she melts. She probably thinks I'm one of the residents, which would entail being filthy rich. That, or I am better looking than I thought. But I don't want to get a big head. I have to fit on the elevator.

I hop on the same elevator as my prey. Another woman hurries in before the doors close. She is skin and bone and oddly dressed. She holds a magazine in her hands filled with colored paper markers, probably some hyper little editor for a no-name tabloid. Halfway up the building, the editor drops her magazine in the floor. The paper markers spill out onto Michael's shoes and he irritably moans like they'll leave a stain. I use this moment to absorb the character of my target. As the editor picks up the last of the mess and leaves the elevator, I notice Michael's eyes wander to the editor's ass. It's nothing untypical but this small, masculine character flaw reveals something about Wendy: she's jealous.

Her eyes catch his. He refuses to look away until the doors finally close. He doesn't care. I look at Michael in short bursts as to not draw attention. I twiddle with my fingers and stare quietly at the ceiling. Michael's face is clean-shaven. His physique is that of someone who cares much about outer appearances. I catch another smell. It is faint but feminine and it's not Wendy's. I realize abruptly that the smell is emanating from Michael. He must be taking

nightly detours to his secretary's house.

Meanwhile, I am paying so much attention to Michael that I do not realize Wendy is staring right at me. My eyes meet hers a moment. She reminds me of Piney, and I suddenly feel sorry for her. But I mustn't. I cannot deviate once the plan is set. It is against my idiom. It isn't me. Wendy's hair is auburn and set to one side in loose curls. Her eyes are hazel, almost yellow. I glance away, but I can still feel my skin crawling under her microscope stare. She picks at me, analyzes me visually as I did her. I can feel it.

The elevator door dings and Michael steps off. He doesn't even look at Wendy but grips her wrist tightly and leads her off. I follow but take a left when they take a right. I act like I've dropped my wallet, looking behind me as I bend to pick it up. They open the door to apartment number four-twenty-six. I am walking down the hall when suddenly the door opens again. Wendy mumbles something to Michael and comes back outside. She seems surprised to see me again but I can tell she has returned to the hall on purpose.

She seems ready to walk past me but stops. "Do I know you?"

I run my hand through my blonde hair and give my most applicable grin, "I'm new to this floor. I'm in apartment four-thirty-four."

I improvise, reading the fire escape plan coincidentally located behind her.

"Oh, so just down the hall, I take it? In what line of business are you?"

I make a quick groan as if I hate talking about my work. "Started a small computer security company. It's pretty technical."

She chuckles and sways back and forth as if holding a glass of champagne in a ballroom. Her posture indicates she is attracted to me. This makes me oddly uncomfortable.

"Oh! I am being rude! Let me introduce myself. I am Mrs. Wendy Schwartzman."

She adds a long curl to her last name, probably the only pride she has taken from her husband.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ryan Wilbur.”

My fake name intrigues her. She blushes.

She giggles, “The pleasure is mine.”

I nearly mentally vomit at her soap-opera vocabulary.

Michael opens the door suddenly.

He walks up to us, a fake smile slathered on his face. I imagine he keeps this repugnant look upon him for all situations.

Wendy takes a cautious step away from me and grabs on to her husband’s arm. “His ears must’ve been burning! We were just talking about you dear.”

I nod approvingly to him and offer my hand. His grip is strong but complacent. His body is strong, but his soul seems weak. I can break this man easily. I can kill this man with no remorse. His soul is as black as mine.

Michael shakes off Wendy’s arm, “My wife. She is quite sociable. I never know what shenanigans she is off too, do I dear?”

Wendy nods and her smile turns all too fake, sadness beneath it, Michael’s words all too true.

Michael kisses her, “I will be back dear. I have a meeting with Mr. Blaikley on floor twenty-seven. I’ll be back before you miss me.”

In a rush, Michael disappears.

There is an awkward silence between us.

Suddenly, she grabs my shoulder, “Hey, do you want to join me for a drink?”

I sigh. She is making this easy enough to be boring.

She is playing right into my trap. “I guess I could visit a moment.”

Their suite is beautiful. The modern contemporary furniture and white walls will be a handsome backdrop with a little more red.

Wendy leads me to the lounge in the middle of the room, “What would you like to drink?”

“Do you have coffee? I’m not much of a drinker,” I lean licentiously across the lounge.

Wendy gives me a cup of coffee and sits beside me.

“Hold on. I like it sweet.” I walk to the bar and sift through the cabinets.

“The sugar is on the counter.”

I nearly think I’ll have to stop when I finally find what I’m looking for. I curl my fingers around a silver blade and slide it up my sleeve before grabbing a packet of sugar on the counter.

“I found it,” I sit down beside her and give out a suave smile.

We talk a bit. She tells me about Michael’s company and lots of other uninteresting bullshit. I wade through the conversation, bring out components that I find useful, lead the conversation where I know it’ll work to my advantage.

She leans onto me suddenly and kisses me as I have been expecting from the direction of the banter. We stay this way a moment. She tells me about how lonely she is. This is no lie. I can see it in her eyes. She is much like me but only if I gave a damn. Her hazel eyes stare at me as they did in the elevator. I feel again that I am looking into the eyes of Piney but do not know why my mind keeps going back to her.

She falls asleep on me after crying a bit. I have very mixed feelings about her. Maybe I shouldn’t kill her. Maybe I should wander off now and say that I have to leave as I did to Piney, before I’m in too deep, before Michael returns and...

I hear the lock tumble in the door. It is already too late. Wendy awakens as Michael steps in the room. He is as enraged as I had presumed him to be. Wendy primps herself hastily as Michael’s small mind tries to understand what he is seeing. He has closed the door behind him. This apartment is by itself on this corner. It is reasonable to assume it is mostly soundproof. It is my time to move, to get to work.

I leap across the couch as Michael leaps for me, Wendy crumpling to the floor and getting out of the way. A glass sculpture shatters to the floor as Michael hurtles towards me. He doesn’t notice me take out the knife. When he stands again, I quickly dodge his lunges. I play as only I can.

“Come on, Big Mike! Hit me!”

Michael picks up a table leg and swings at me. I dodge. He swings. I dodge again, feeling the weight of his steps as he bumbles about the apartment. Wendy is up now. She digs through the bar cabinets and comes up with a knife like the one up my sleeve. She rushes me as well, but I toss her and she falls onto the flat of her back, the air leaving her lungs all at once.

I've finally prepared myself for the final blow. Michael jumps for me. He strikes my leg as I sink the blade into his shoulder. Unlike most horror movies, where the killer leaves his blade in the flesh, I yank the silver vane out violently. Blood explodes from his back. The white carpet hungrily feasts upon the crimson liquid. Michael is stunned and falls to the floor. My shin is throbbing as I stand above him.

He begs. He pleads. *Please don't kill me. What did I do to you? Who are you? What do you want?* He says it all. I've heard every word many times. Everyone always assumes I want something from them when the truth is that all I want is the kill. It's never for money or property or petty desire. It is my job. I take it seriously. Besides, even if my kills knew the answer to these questions, even if I answered every one, they would still die the same way.

Michael grabs my feet. I must've pierced a lung because he spits blood onto the floor and wheezes. He grips my ankles and climbs up me like a ladder, gripping my clothes until he stands again. Wendy is crying in the corner. She screams at me. She calls me a monster. I'm not done yet. I take the blade firmly in my hands, my thumb over the bolster and my index finger over the spine. Michael's eyes are wide, and he manages a gasp as I thrust forward. The blade sinks into his stomach. He spits out blood onto my face, my chest. My hand is now coated in red. I love the familiarity. My hand slips a bit, and I have to readjust as I plunge the knife into him again. I lift up and shred away at his abdomen and feel the table knife conduct his insides to his outsides.

His entrails are being held in by only a thin layer of skin now. He is finished. I cup his head in my hand as he sinks, gently coaxing him to the floor. His legs buckle. He convulses a moment.

He becomes quiet. As soon as his movements end, I notice Wendy. Her face is fixed on mine. She sits idiotically against the wall with a knife in her hand. It takes her a moment to realize she is next.

“No!” She screams, “Please don’t kill me! Please! No! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

She stands and tries to take off running, but I grab her auburn curls and throw her to the ground. Unexpectedly, she lashes out. She swings wildly with the knife and catches me by surprise. My right arm catches the brunt of it and I feel the sinew of my arm snap as the sharp edge buries its way through the limb. She swings again. It catches my jaw and glides, skipping a moment, before re-digging into my brow. We struggle. She is losing ground. Her final swing is aimed at my face again, but I manage to catch it with my right hand. I can barely grip the blade as I throw it into the corner.

I take the knife and struggle her head to the floor. Her eyes are wild things, distant and knowing. A thought suddenly enters my mind. What if this were Piney? Would I stop? What would I do? But Wendy is digging into my arms with her nails and biting at my hands. I quickly lose the thought and go back into kill mode. With a quick slash to her throat the light begins to fade from her eyes and it’s over, blood gushing onto her hair.

It takes me a moment to lean back, to feel the pain Wendy Schwartzman has inflicted. I sit in her and Michael’s blood as it drains from its host and begins to coagulate in a mixing pool. I am covered in it. Michael’s blood adorns my face, Wendy’s my body, and my own has covered what was left of me. My arm has lost so much blood I’m becoming dizzy. Quickly, I rip off my shirt and wrap my wound tightly, forming a tourniquet. Something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong. I feel something. I feel strange. I feel sadness. And, for the first time, I feel doubt. I am evil. I am terrible. I am filled with regret.

“The metal has cut to the bone. The wound still bleeds. The lion’s eyes content as it feeds. The mark across my face, a scar. My lungs heavy, filled with tar. They see me but not what I am.

I see myself, I am the damned.”

I wake up and cannot feel my right hand. I am so covered in the thick paste of dried blood that it takes more effort than usual to peel myself from the floor. The room is dark. It is not quite daybreak, but I know the sun should be rising soon. I strip off my clothing and look in the apartment’s bathroom mirror. My skin is covered in crisscrossed lines where the blood has literally pasted my clothes to my body. The blood spatter on my face is almost artistically placed. My hair is stained with a coppery, brown stain. My gray-blue eyes are staring anxiously back at me. I look at my hands; their color is still bright but fading to brown. The color of my skin is not visible on them. My nails have blood lodged beneath them, dried, disturbingly enough, to feel when I press into my palm.

The voice comes back to me. But, strangely, I cannot understand it. It yells quietly, desperately, trying to reach me.

“What?!” I scream at it, “What do you want from me?!” But its clarity stays firmly incomprehensible.

My hands are shaking. I can feel the buildup of anger inside my throat, the turning of my stomach as I think of all the things I have done. Has the voice been trying to save me? To stave off my macabre actions? My, socially revolting tirades?

I turn around and can partially see the body of Wendy. The sudden urge to vomit hits me in the stomach. I kneel to the floor and hold my abdomen, thinking of the way in which I had just eviscerated Michael’s. Only when I close my eyes do I force the feeling away. Wobbling, I manage to climb into the shower. The water is hot. Its boiling makes me feel cleaner, as if this sacrifice of flesh will somehow equalize what flesh I have taken. I let it scald me and scream as the water pelts my aching arm. It refreshes me, but not as much as I had hoped.

I wrap a pink towel around me and gaze at myself once again. Wendy’s cut has scarred me terribly. Her mark will surely make me a pariah to those that see me. Thankfully, she has missed my eye with the blade. I quickly find a bottle of peroxide. I cannot

let it become infected. A hospital would question its origin, and my mind is not fit for alibis right now. I let the clear liquid pour onto my face, and it feels like my flesh is melting. I blink my eyes as the orange foam burbles from the gash and down my face. The counter makes a thud as I slam my fist into its marbled surface. I whimper like a dog, tears welling up in my eyes.

The pain in my slashed arm is horrible. I have not seen the wound yet, and, as I carefully unravel it, my stomach turns again. The metal has cut straight through the muscle and I can see white bone. Blood still runs heavily from the open wound. Cleaning it is a chore in itself as the agonizing burn of the peroxide runs without end. I know I must bandage it quickly, but first I must sew it shut. I find a needle in the bathroom's linen closet and a spool of black thread. The thread is thick and I know it will be excruciating to bear but I must hurry. I take several swigs of Everclear and position the needle by my arm. My hand shakes already.

I take a deep breath. My heart races as I pop the needle into my skin. I suppress the need to vomit with another burning gulp of alcohol. The thread pulls at my skin as I prepare to pierce the other side of the wound, the pop of it as close to torture as I can imagine. I manage to dizzily close the wound, my hands bloody again before I finish. I cut the thread and watch my blood swirl down the drain like one of those charitable coin contraptions.

As I am looking in the mirror, I realize that my face will also require stitching. I dread this as I am already fearful of needles and the cut is disturbingly close to my eye. Regardless, I prepare myself for yet another sewing session. The cut isn't as extreme as my arm, but it lies open, a jagged, nasty slew of meat. I watch the needle tensely as it passes near my eye and folds the skin together in a shoe-lace fashion. I am grateful to hide my handiwork behind thick cotton dressing.

After I clean myself again, I dig through Michael's clothes. His pants are big on me and his polos are a little small but they fit, more or less. I tiptoe between the puddles of blood and busted furniture, sitting on the couch to pull on a pair of Michael's tennis-shoes. They also fit snugly but fit nonetheless. I lack my suit-

case which I have realized must still be at Piney's. Has she looked inside it? Do I need to kill another bitch to save my own damned hide?

No. I won't. I don't care what she knows. I won't do it. I don't want a life like this anymore. I want to be absolved of this evil. I want to be clean of it. I hold out my clean hands and stare at them in the darkness. If people only knew what my hands have done. I look at the lines in my palms. This normal hand is petrified, empty, stained. I see what only I can, smell the stench of four-dozen bodies as their blood leaches out of my pores. I hear their screams as my fingers latch around their corpses growing cold; their pulses ticking as the clock runs dry beneath my thumbs.

Even though I am pouring sweat, I put on a hoodie and pull the hood up. It says "Dapper Dave's Haberdashery" and it shows a man with a handlebar mustache holding handfuls of ties. I search the apartment, trying to decide whether my mess is salvageable. My DNA is certainly everywhere. My bloody fingerprints dot the bathroom. The DNA doesn't bother me. It's a new process that rarely produces leads, but my prints make me nervous. Before I leave I scrutinize the bathroom and living room walls with Lysol, boiling the knife in peroxide before closing the door to Michael and Wendy's apartment for the last time. The sun is up and I bide my time, listening to doors open and close until I find a gap and slip down the hall, unnoticed.

The Unders

He stood in front of her, his mouth slightly open, his lips a pale red. Streaks of crimson marred his clothing.

A metallic scent bit at her.

Her brother, her sweet and innocent little brother...the blood on his hands was a dark, inflamed pain.

“I’m so hungry.” His voice was barely audible, the words crumpled against the ringing in her ears. The rattle of his breath was the only noise after that.

She glanced around their kitchen, her throat caught in a terrified scream. Their parents, they were dead.

The bodies, ripped apart, were strewn across the wooden floor. A pool of blood lay between them, the scent of death beginning to overwhelm.

She couldn’t contain the scream any longer. Shredding out of her throat, it shattered the quiet. He was fast, so fast. His bloody little hands grabbed her wrist; his violent strength pulled her down to the floor.

“Quiet...Perri, you...have...to...be. Quiet.” His words were short, diluted by gasps of air. His mouth rested just over her throat, his tiny tongue came out to taste the sweat on her skin.

She was so frightened.

Wrenching her arm out of his grasp, she stumbled to her feet. Tripping over herself, she scrambled to the other side of the room. She panted, suddenly out of breath. He stared at her, unmoving, almost confused by her easy escape.

Alec glanced at his hand, his small fingers clenching and unclenching. His body was hunched, almost trying to protect himself from the kitchen light; whimpers fell from his mouth, the sound a painful howl. When he finally looked at her, she lost her breath to the fear. His eyes were coated pools of murder.

He was going to kill her.

Moving quickly, Perri ran her hand along the countertops, the kitchen too dimly lit for her to remain focused. Her messy, rust-colored hair had fallen over her eyes, her vision blurring. She

stayed focused on him through the strands as she moved, her hand searching for something, anything. Some form of defense against a villain she was not prepared to face.

Her father's strict training returned to her. "*You are not weak. If it happens...If Alec turns, you must destroy him.*" They had been waiting; the disease that consumed her brother had come so swiftly.

She hadn't expected it to be so soon. The epidemic swept the nation in mere months, the world in one year; she had prayed for it to never hit home, her false beliefs of hope and salvation a lie she told herself daily.

Luck had not been on her family's side.

Relief filled her when her hands landed upon a broad cutting knife; she brandished it in front of her, a lame piece of protection against an unwanted enemy.

The room was empty; the innocent sounds of laughter filled the shadowed living room just feet away.

Harsh breaths, in and out, Perri allowed her eyes to move around the room. Could she really kill Alec? All she could see was his shrunken form, his emaciated smile.

The walls—painted a lush blue—were splashed with her parents' blood and gore.

Fear overwhelmed her.

Tightening her grip on the knife, she tried to calm herself.

Stop, stop...breathe, take deep breaths.

"Winkle, Winkle, little Perri..." Her brother's childlike voice filtered in and out.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, the mantra repeated in her head. Slowly she stepped across the floor, the kitchen seeming far too long. Her eyes strategically avoided her parents' bodies.

She was such a coward.

The darkness engulfed her. Only for a second, she let herself fall, let the quiet surround her.

She sprinted, her body sliding against the wall. She had to make it to the other side, had to make it to the light switch. She had no real goal besides that, no true aim. She only wanted to make it

out alive.

“If you encounter Alec after his transformation, and we are not with you, always stay in the brightest of areas. He will not be fully taken, so any weakness those beasts possess will be multiplied in intensity for him.”

A lick of white, just out of the corner of her eye, alerted Perri to the oncoming attack. Roughly, Alec grabbed her, his nails scored her skin, tossing her to the floor. She crashed into the table, her body splitting the wood to pieces.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

She was worthless.

She had to stop. Gasping for breaths, she tried to focus, but the pain from the first attack was overwhelming, her body crumpled.

Perri fumbled for the knife. She realized she must have dropped it. Her hand only found gritty floor.

He was on her then, her sweet and innocent Alec. Ferocious snarls ripped out of his throat, saliva dripped from his mouth. His bloody fingers grasped her upper arms, his mouth open on an eerie wail.

She could barely see him in the dark, his skin, a milky white, the only thing visible. That, and his shining eyes, filled with hunger and desire for her flesh.

The fear overwhelmed her once again.

“Don’t let him win,” her father’s rough voice commanded. “You may be in a bind, but do not lose yourself. Do not give in.”

She pushed him off, her feet coming out to land a double-footed kick to his chest. He flew across the room, crashed against the wall. His body slid down. He didn’t get up.

“If he attacks you, do not think of him as Alec. Only see him as he is, an Under. Do not think of him as living. He is not.”

As Alec developed the sickness, her father hadn’t faltered for a second as his son became more and more aggressive, as he lashed out. When the sores began to form—the final stage—her father hadn’t stepped back once, constantly tending to his son, even though Alec’s death was imminent.

“Winkle, Perri, winkle, winkle, little, merry...” Alec’s mind was fading fast; soon he would be fully taken. The horde would come to claim him, then. She couldn’t allow that. If they took Alec with them, he would be trained in the feasting rights, in the art of destroying mankind. He would feed and kill, tear apart what was left of the humans.

She had to kill him now: otherwise, he would grow, become something even she could not stop.

She bent down and grasped a piece of the broken table. Her body straight, her mind clear. She would destroy him.

She stepped toward Alec, her hand tightening around the wooden shard. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness; her brother’s sunken form, hunched against the wall, was enough to make her teeth clash in anger.

Why had her father not stopped this long ago? Why had he not protected her from having to face this moment?

Raising her arm up, she angled the stake--the only way to kill him was by taking out the heart. Nothing else would work. The rumors... they had all been falsehoods. Her father had taught her that.

In the blink of an eye, he was gone, the sound of the front door crashing open the only alert she got before her house filled with the stench of Unders. Completely uncontained, their death scent raided her nose, causing her to lose focus. It was putrid and overwhelming, and she gagged roughly, a harsh cough bubbling up.

She had lost herself, lost her determination for killing. She couldn’t see them fully, no one could see them fully, but their human-like form was frightening enough. The magic that coated them was old and powerful.

“Do not stare; do not try to see their true self. It will not be possible. If you encounter an Under...try to stay sane and alive.” Her father, his words...he had known, understood everything even before the nation had.

These Unders, their coming, her family had foretold of it. Her crazy she-bitch of a grandmother had predicted the fall long

before the scientists had created the disease. The mutations that infested the body, took over the mind. For some, it was rapid, the Undertaking; for others, it took years.

Regaining focus, she pushed out any pull the creatures had gained. Her mind was fully on the task at hand.

“You are the descendent of a family far more powerful than anything this Earth has seen.” Her father’s deep eyes stared into Perri’s soul. “But, you are not ready, will not be ready for some time. You must understand the truths before you can claim your real self.”

Even now, four years later, she was still trying to understand the truths. Whatever they were.

Unders filled her home, destroyed her innocence, their growls flowed to her core.

She was so frightened. So very frightened.

Her only hope was the kitchen, an old wooden door her last chance of survival.

Sprinting, she raced; entering the room she shut the door, locking it behind her. The thin barrier would do nothing but buy her a fleeting second of time. Heading to the sink, she pulled open the silverware drawer. Dumping it to the floor, she crouched down, shoved her hand into the depths of the back, where she groped for the latch.

“Come here for me, Perri.” Her father’s voice was soft and gentle; a slight touch on the back of her neck told her this was not a request.

A thump to the door was the first sign that she wasn’t going to make it; the door was hardly stable, unable to withstand the ferocious beating from the Unders, and the barrier...every hit to the wood was a cut to the strength, to the safety.

He pulled her to the kitchen, the blue walls sifted yellow by the morning sun. Stopping by the sink, her father crouched down, pulling the silverware drawer out with him. “Come here,” he commanded.

A cracking sound littered the kitchen. Glancing behind, she caught sight of the ferocious beings, their milk-yellow eyes glit-

tered with hunger. She shoved her hand around more, her father's guidance walking through her mind.

"There's a trick to this," he was saying, his arm deep into the back of the cabinet. "Lift your arm straight up, and then stretch! Stretch all the way forward, until your fingers touch the back."

Perri nodded, her gaze riveted on her father.

"Then, move your hand down quickly, the latch needs a lot of force for it to open."

Mechanical clicking filled the kitchen as he stood up, tall and proud. He glanced down at her, his blue eyes flashing fire. "Come." He pulled her towards the hole that now occupied the kitchen floor.

Finally the clicking sound reverberated, and a sharp whoosh filled the kitchen. The shelter was open. Her eyes filled with tears as the floor shifted apart to a set of steep stairs below. She didn't wait. Standing up, she struggled toward the opening. Her feet, clumsy on the stairs, tripped her as she went. Her eyes caught on her father's dead body, just inches away from her face.

Oh God... She looked away, ashamed at her cowardice.

Her father stood at the bottom of the steps. "It's fine," he murmured, holding his rough, work hardened hand out to her.

Perriwinkle glowered at him. "Are you going to tell me what this is?" Quirking a tight smile, she asked, "Does this lead to Narnia?"

Her father laughed his deep voracious laugh. As his eyes turned serious once again, the laughter stopped. "You need to understand how important this is, Perri. This is no time for jokes. Now, get down here." He held his hand out once more, only this time she took it. Following him down into the dark, she tried not to think of what was to come, because she knew exactly what the shelter was for.

When she reached the bottom, her hand searched the wall for the second latch, flipping it just as the kitchen door crashed open. The entrance slid shut, surrounding her with darkness once again.

The roars of Unders filtered in from above, filling the room around her.

She was numb; everything that had once been her life was completely destroyed. The only thing left was to wait. Come morning, the Unders wouldn't be able to stay in the light, and she would make her way along the safe route her father had shown her.

Her parents, everyone she loved was dead.

Perri wasn't the least surprised as she stared at the walls. Weapons upon weapons covered the walls, and scattered around the floor were survival kits, along with boxes of MRE's.

"A soldier's home," she whispered.

Her father shook his head, "No, Perri, this is no home." He grabbed her arm, whirling her around to face him. "You need to understand, if you were to stay here, after the Undertaking, you would not survive. They are skilled creatures, those coming; they will find a way to consume you. Take your soul." He released her, stepping further into the room. "This is if all protection fails. A last resort." His face was sad, something was holding him back.

"Now, let's go over the basics," he ordered, grabbing a double barreled shotgun from the wall. "There are five steps that you will always rely on. Never forget them."

Perri glanced around, remembering the basic steps of survival her father had taught her. Step-one, she reminded herself, was always the most important. Do not wait; do not hope the danger will pass. Prepare yourself to face the devil.

"I don't understand," Perri grumbled. "Why are you showing this to me? You'll be there guiding me through it anyway." She crossed her arms, her square chin jutting out in irritation.

Her father huffed; turning to face her, he crouched down, his eyes a somber gold. "Do not take me for granted." His voice was sad; a small frown covered his brow. "You need to understand, if something were to happen to your mother and me, you would be all alone."

"As if," she huffed.

"You need to be able to survive without my help, without me watching over you every moment. You need to be able to defend

yourself in a crisis.” He stood then, turning away from her, his body tense.

“At some point, Perriwinkle, you will be alone.”

She was glad he was not looking at her, the fear that filled her, covered her features... was embarrassing. “Yes.” She didn’t want to picture that life, did not want to even contemplate that fate. She would not survive alone.

Grabbing the same shotgun her father had that day he had first brought her here, she began to prepare.

Come morning, the Unders would not be able to survive the sun; she would leave then, make her way to the first checkpoint.

Her only regret was that she had been unable to destroy Alec before his taking. She did not want to think of what her failure meant, what he would become.

Closing her eyes and inhaling a deep breath she nodded in acceptance.

She would survive.

Kelly Jo Andrews

Is He Real?

Lynn was a single mom working at her grandmother's thrift shop that her mother, Jane inherited after the car accident that took the lives of Lynn's Grandma and Grandpa. For as long as she could remember, Lynn never really had family around besides her mother. That was until she found herself in a relationship with a man she thought was a good guy for her. The relationship ended with him skipping town at the first news of Lynn's pregnancy. This was okay because she knew she would be a good mom, like the one she had.

Jane absolutely loved having her grandson Sam around the shop. She would often tell Lynn, "He just always brightens the room by giving me another reason to smile." Every morning, it was routine for Jane and Sam to create a stack of records to be tested throughout the day. Lynn often caught Jane teaching Sam how to dance to Marvin Gaye's "Heard It Through The Grape Vine." It brought back many memories for Lynn; she loved that song as a child. Sam's favorite song to listen and dance to was "One Eyed, One Horned, Flying Purple, People Eater" by Sheb Wooley. All the customers found it adorable when they saw Sam dancing through the entire shop screaming all of the words.

The three of them grew into a close family as Sam grew from newborn into his young childhood. Every holiday and birthday was celebrated with some sort of fancy large meal and just the three of them. Picnics at the local zoo and camping trips were also common for the trio.

Sam was only five years old when his grandmother became very ill and needed to stay in a nursing facility. With Jane no longer able to run her late mother's shop, Lynn took on the responsibilities. Sam helped the best that he could even though he was so young.

After a few months of Jane being in the nursing facility, reality had set in that she was not going to return home. Lynn and Sam had started going through and packing Jane's belongings at her house to get a head start on the inevitable fact that Jane was going to die soon. With Thanksgiving just a week away, the situation was even harder to handle. Their trio was breaking apart.

In the master bedroom that Jane had slept in for many years was an antique cedar hope chest. Lynn had always seen the hope chest as she grew up, but never was allowed to see inside it. When she lifted the heavy cedar lid, an aroma of fresh wood blasted her in the face. She was so surprised by its contents that she instantly dropped to her knees onto a bright orange rug and began searching through the chest. Lynn's whole life memories were being stored in that chest. It contained everything from her first pair of shoes to her favorite toys such as the homemade sock-monkey and her favorite Holiday Barbie that the neighbor gave her when she was around Sam's age. Inside the wood chest, Lynn found a cardboard box filled with snapshot photographs. They were all of Lynn as she grew up. Naturally, she took a short trip down memory lane while browsing through the snapshot photographs. There was everything from holidays and birthdays to Girl Scout and school events, like prom and graduation. That was about the time Sam walked in from the living room, where he had been playing. With the distraction of Sam in the room, Lynn put the few pictures back in the box with the rest and decided to look through them later. The two of them spent a couple more hours packing Jane's belongings until dusk.

After Lynn gave Sam his bath, the two of them sat on his bed and began going through the pictures in the box. Sam was able to see what his mother had looked like when she was a child his age. She had always been skinny, unlike him. Instead of the brown hair that he had always seen her with, she had the same blond he had. Somehow, this made Sam feel a closer connection with her. Sam thought his grandma must have always looked the same as she did then: a big woman with long black hair.

Close to the bottom of the box, Sam noticed a small stack

of envelopes bound together by a brown piece of twine tied in a perfect bow. “What are these?” he asked curiously

“They are letters of some sort.” Lynn helped the little boy retrieve them without bending or damaging any of the pictures still in the box.

“They’re to Santa!” Sam exclaimed. He was proud of himself for learning how to read the word Santa by looking at all the book and movie covers at the thrift shop.

“Wow, they’re the ones that I wrote as a child,” she commented, untying twine. The letters had never been opened, and each one still had the sticker they were sealed with.

“Why does Grandma have these?”

“I don’t know, maybe she forgot to mail them off,” Lynn answered, trying not to tell him that it is really because there is no real Santa Claus. She knew that her mother had kept the letters as mementos of the childhood she had. Lynn had then remembered the Christmas that she quit believing in Santa. It was when she realized that every toy she ever asked Santa for, never was found under the tree. She only asked Santa for the toys that she knew her mother was unable to afford.

“Can I write a letter to Santa, too?” Sam asked with enthusiasm.

“I don’t see why not. We can write it tomorrow,” she said trying to be just as enthusiastic as Sam.

“And then can we walk to the post office to mail all of them?” he added with a gleam in his eyes.

As the warmth of holiday cheer started to overwhelm her, she smiled and told him, “We’ll see, but right now it’s bed time.”

The next morning after breakfast, Sam didn’t waste any time and started gathering paper and his often-used crayons. “Can we write the letter to Santa now?” he asked while stacking all of his supplies on the kitchen table, “And then mail it with all of yours?”

Lynn smiled and told him, “Okay, but I also want to go see your grandma today since the shop is closed and we don’t have to

go there. Maybe after that, we can go pick a Christmas tree to put in our home and decorate.”

“Okay, deal.” Sam held his hand out ready to shake and seal their verbal contract.

Sam opened his little plastic container of crayons and dug out his favorite one: dark green with both ends used to the point that he only had about an inch left of it. He was ready to start on his first letter to Santa Claus.

Lynn grabbed the envelope and a chart of the ABC’s. She sat down at the kitchen table next to her son. Together they wrote a letter to Santa with Lynn coaching him on spelling and the letters he didn’t know yet. She helped him write down exactly what he wanted to say.

Dear Santa,

My name is Sam. For Christmas I would like to have some new crayons, a dump-truck, a nerff-gun, and a puppy. I think I have been a good boy this year. It would make me very happy to get any of these things.

Your friend, Sam

Lynn was content with his requests considering that black Friday was two weeks before and she was able to get the Nerf gun and dump truck on sale. Crayons were cheap and easy to get. A puppy was the only thing she couldn’t provide.

“You know it’s hard for Santa to bring animals to kids,” she told him. “The long and cold ride on the sleigh ain’t good for them.” She tried to explain this as nicely as possible.

“It’s okay if I don’t get one,” he said with a disappointed look on his face. Trying to be enthusiastic again, he asked, “Can we put a sticker on the outside like you did to yours?”

“Of course we can.”

That morning was extremely cold, and a layer of ice had

formed on the plastic patio chair on the front porch. Lynn decided that it would be best to drive to the post office instead of walking the two blocks like they had discussed. She also figured that it would make it easier to accomplish everything they planned on doing before dark.

Pulling away from the post office, Sam asked, “Can we go pick out our tree before going to see Grandma at that one place that smells funny?”

“Sounds Like a good idea. We can get there before the crowd and have that many more trees to choose from.”

Within five minutes of being at the Christmas tree farm, Sam had found what he thought was the perfect tree. It was about as tall as his mom, and it was the skinniest Christmas tree he had ever seen. “This one, Mom. I want this one!” Sam jumped up and down, pointing to the tree.

“That looks like a perfect tree. The pine needles are still dark green and won’t fall off anytime soon. It wouldn’t take up too much space either. Good job, Sam.”

They purchased the tree and the men strapped it on the top of her Jeep. The fat one commented, “It’s easier to get the tree off the car than getting it up there. And send my blessings to your mother for me, Lynn.”

“Sure will, Fred and thanks again for everything,” Lynn replied and started the engine.

On the way to the nursing facility with the tree still strapped to the car, Jane was obligated to explain to Sam how she had been going to that very same tree farm her whole life to get their Christmas trees. Fred was the owner and happened to be a close friend to Jane.

When arriving at the nursing facility, they were greeted by a nurse with a sympathetic expression on her face. “Oh Lynn, I was just about to call you.”

“Why, what’s going on?”

“Your mother passed about ten minutes ago.”

“Oh no!” Lynn cried hysterically.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Sam asked with extreme worry in his voice.

He had no experience dealing with death, so Lynn wanted to be as sensitive as possible. “Grandma moved to heaven today and we are no longer able to see her.” She then realized just how much her son needed her to be strong. She was his only family around, just like her mom was for her through most of her childhood.

About two weeks after Jane’s funeral was Christmas Eve. Lynn was busy making gingerbread men cookies so that Sam could leave some for Santa, and doing other last minute Christmas tasks. She had to wrap the box of 54 crayons she had purchased from the local drug store the day before, and they had put popcorn on a string and used it to decorate the tree just like she used to do with her mother as a child. They hung the stockings, which Lynn had planned on filling with candy later that night, by the front window. Since the death of his grandmother, Sam seemed to have lost his Christmas spirit and didn’t smile very often like he did before. He didn’t even seem to enjoy the popcorn stringing or decorating the gingerbread men for Santa.

As Sam was being tucked into bed, under his favorite Toy Story blanket, he looked out the window and noticed that the snow that had just began to fall from the crisp dark sky. That’s when he asked his mom a question that made her heart ache for him. “Is it okay to talk to Grandma even though she is dead? Will she hear me?”

“Oh, course it is. I think she can hear you, just like she can see you. Just don’t get upset if you don’t hear her talking back to you.” Lynn’s voice crackled as she fought back the tears.

On Christmas morning, Lynn was woken by Sam running into her bedroom yelling, “Mom, Santa came! Santa came and left a funny looking bike!”

Knowing that she did not put a bike under the tree, and no one else had a key to her home, Lynn got up out of bed a little

confused. When arriving in the living room, she was astonished to see that there was indeed a bike standing next to the tree. Instantly, she recognized the bike as a 1985 series Schwinn Fair Lady Girls Muscle Bike. It was the one that she wanted when she was seven years old. It had the blue frame with curved bars, a white banana seat, and small flowers decorating it in various places including the side of the seat and on the white chain guard. There was even a white basket with bulky fake flowers attached to the top mounted on the handle bars that had plastic blue and white strings hanging out of the hand grips. A large tag was hanging by the bow on the seat that read:

To: Lynn
From: Santa

There were a few more presents that she did not wrap nor recognize under the tree. She couldn't help but to stare at the beautiful ribbon and bows on the gifts (that were not from her) with wonder.

“Can we open them yet?” Sam pleaded.

“Of course. It is Christmas morning, after all.”

As Sam ransacked through the presents, Lynn noticed that there were ribbon and bows added to the gifts for Sam that she had wrapped. There was also six more gifts for her. Both Sam and Lynn quickly opened all of their gifts to see what they had received. The more gifts that Lynn opened, the more startled she had become. She had received every toy she asked Santa for. There was what she wanted at the age of four; the original first edition of *My Little Pony*, a set of six little ponies it included:

1. Blue Belle-
 - a light blue body
 - Purple mane and tail
 - Blue eyes
 - Symbols of darker blue stars
2. Cotton candy
 - Light pink body
 - Pink mane and tail
 - Dark purple eyes
 - Symbol of several white dots

3. Butterscotch
 - Gold body
 - Darker gold hair
 - Tan eyes
 - Symbol of gold butterflies
4. Blossom
 - Purple body
 - Purple hair
 - Grayish purple eyes
 - Symbol of white flowers
5. Minty
 - Mint green body
 - White hair
 - Blue eyes
 - Symbols of green shamrocks
6. Snuzzle
 - Gray body
 - Pink hair
 - Blue eyes
 - Symbol of Pink hearts

They were all there in mint condition still in original box.

Lynn had also received A Cabbage Patch Kid with its perfect soft face and body, blond yarn hair in pigtails, wearing a pink and white dress that the pink shoes matched. Lynn smiled a lot when unwrapping A Rainbow Brite doll with orange hair and the shiny blue dress with a shooting star on the chest. The doll was with her loyal companion horse, Starlite, white with a star between its eyes. She even received the Hott Looks Doll Stacey, which said, “I just wanna have fun!” There was a Barbie Dream House. The one she wanted at the age of nine. It was the one with an elevator that worked by pulling a string. It even had the three levels to it.

Being totally dumbfounded, Lynn sat back and read each nametag that stated From Santa. Sam opened all of his presents and was excited to get the items he asked for and then some. When all the presents were unwrapped Sam looked up at his mom with an almost disappointed face and asked her, “Did you get everything you asked Santa for?”

“Yes I did actually. It’s all things I wanted when I was a

child and didn't receive.”

“It's because Grandma forgot to mail the letters to let Santa know what you wanted and when he learned what you wanted, he brought it to you. Duh!”

Just then the doorbell rang. The two of them went to the door to answer it together. There was no one there except for a little white puppy with a big red bow tied to its neck and a tag with Sam's name on it. As they picked up the very soft puppy Lynn noticed that there weren't even any footprints of any kind in the snow. She then looked over and saw Sam smiling a true smile of happiness for the first time in weeks.

Sarah J Dhue

A Girl Named Carrie and a Boy Named Theodore

This is a story about a girl named Carrie and a boy named Theodore. They may or may not have fallen in love; they may or may not have become best friends. When you narrow it down to the bare facts, it is a story about a girl who needed help with her advanced math class and the tutor's son who played the piano and read long novels by the window. Our story begins one early summer day when Ms. Bellows drove her beat-up old Chevy up the long driveway to Matthew McKraxter's mansion, where he tutored students, predominately in math and writing structure. Carrie Bellows looked up at the huge house out her window, overwhelmed. McKraxter had come highly recommended, and, though his rates were not too high, the whole setting intimidated her.

"I'll see you in a couple hours." Her mother parked, unlocking the doors. Carrie continued to gawk at the house, "Well get out of the car. I know we are a little early, but being punctual never hurt anybody."

Carrie reluctantly opened the car door and stepped out of the car, then leaned back into the car, staring pleadingly at her mother, "Do I really have to go?"

"If you want that advanced math credit to get into that fancy college you want to go to, then yes. You are seventeen, Carrie; you can handle this without me holding your hand."

Carrie sighed and closed the door, turning back to face the monstrous house. She heard her mother pull away and wrapped her arms around herself as she slowly began up the steps to the front door. As she neared the top, she could hear piano music coming from the inside. She raised her hand to knock when she noticed a golden plaque on the door. It read: 'Students Enter and Wait at the Bottom of the Stairs. Thank You.' She gripped the door handle and turned it. The piano music grew louder as she entered the foyer, and she was once again overwhelmed by the luxurious

house. Why would a man with this kind of money tutor students for such a low rate?

A mahogany door stood slightly ajar a little to her left, and the piano music wafted out through the crack. She looked around, seeing no other movement in the large house and curiosity began to get the better of her. She wanted to know who was playing the beautiful music. She began to edge toward the door and peeked inside. The walls were lined with massive shelves of books, and sunlight poured into the room from a large window that took up the whole far wall. In the center of the room stood a majestic grand piano, its player with his back to the door. He was slender, his elbows and shoulders stiff, hunched over the instrument, his fingers gliding over the keys. He wore a thin white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, his wild brown hair sticking out in every which direction. She wanted to watch more, but heard the footsteps of someone above her and quickly retreated back to the stairs.

A balding man in a suit appeared at the top of the stairs, looking down at her. “Ah, you must be here to see Mr. McKraxter. Miss Bellows, yes?”

“Y-yes,” she answered, all of her former nervousness returning to her.

“I’ll take you up in a moment, Mr. McKraxter asked me to do something for him first. It’ll only take a moment.” The man descended the stairs and entered the room with the piano, and, after a few moments, the piano music ceased and the man reappeared. “Mr. McKraxter will see you now.”

He led Carrie up the stairs and into an office with a large desk and a slightly smaller desk facing it. Another massive window leaked natural light into the room. A middle-aged man sat behind the larger desk, scribbling on a piece of paper. He looked up as they entered the room, a large smile spreading across his face.

“Why hello! You must be Carrie Bellows,” he extended his hand and she took it, shaking his hand, “So you are here for Advanced Calculus help, right?”

“Yes sir,” she replied quietly, avoiding his eyes.

“Fine, fine. So where are you currently? Here, let me take

a look in your book..."

Mr. McKraxter had seemed nice enough the first time, but Carrie still felt that knot in her stomach again as they neared the mansion. She climbed out of the car and walked up the stairs to the porch, a little faster this time. Piano music could be heard again, and she headed to the slightly opened door to peer through the crack at the mystery musician again. The young man sat there, same as before, stiff arms and smooth fingers, sleeves rolled up the elbow. She slowly slid through the crack to get a better view of the pianist. Her eyes never left the piano as she made her way around the room. As his face came into view, she could see he was very young, quite possibly not much older than herself. Her foot caught on the leg of an armchair near the window and she cried out, nearly falling face first to the floor. The music stopped abruptly and he turned stiffly toward her.

"I'm so sorry, I can leave if- it was just- the music and I-" she stuttered over her words as he stared at her, his expression nearly impossible to read.

"You must be one of the students?" he finally asked.

"Yes... I'm so sorry for disturbing you I know I shouldn't have barged in but the music-"

"That's alright," he turned back to the piano and began to play a slow piece.

"I... I'll leave you to your music." He didn't look up and she practically ran to the door, almost running into the butler, whose name she had found out was Truman. "Sorry!" She blushed bright red.

"Why Miss Bellows, what are you doing in here?" Truman seemed surprised.

"It was the music; I wanted to see who was playing... I'm sorry; I know it wasn't my place to wander."

"Why it is quite alright, Miss Bellows. Young Mr. McKraxter doesn't seem to have been disturbed by your presence." She felt a lump in her throat as she realized she had disrupted Mr. McKraxter's son's piano playing. "I suppose I should be getting up

to Mr. McKraxter's office." She slid past Truman and headed up the stairs.

"The third time's a charm," Carrie thought to herself as she entered the McKraxter mansion. The piano music was quieter today and there were some long times of pause. Carrie wanted to know what was distracting the young man, but dared not peek into the door again after the disaster last week. Truman appeared at the top of the stairs and she walked up to McKraxter's office.

"So I hear you met Theodore last week," Mr. McKraxter said as she entered. At her bewildered expression, he elaborated, "My son."

"Oh... yes." Her face turned beat red.

"No need to feel embarrassed, he does draw attention to himself with that piano. I do hope he wasn't too rude to you. He isn't the friendliest fellow there is."

"Oh, no, not at all."

"That's good."

She saw a sad glimmer flash and disappear in his eyes, then he sat at his desk and began in on the equations.

Carrie's mother had arrived a whole half an hour early to drop her off today; she had some things to do and told Carrie it would be fine to arrive early. She entered, hearing the piano music and starting toward the door. Perhaps she had started off on the wrong foot with Theodore and she wanted to fix things, if for no other reason just so she could watch him play the piano instead of just hearing him from the foyer. She entered the room and Theodore either ignored or did not notice her. She watched where she was going this time, placing herself in the leather chair she had tripped over the last time. He continued to play, and she sat and listened, losing track of time until he stopped, grabbing his elbow and wincing in pain.

"You play beautifully," she said in the silence and he looked up, apparently noticing her for the first time.

"You think so?" he rubbed his elbow, looking down at the

keys, "I wrote it for my mother."

"You wrote that?" Carrie was overcome with awe and walked over to the piano, peering over his shoulder at the sheet of music.

"Yes... a long time ago," he stared out the window then looked back at her, "And why, may I ask, have you arrived so early today? You aren't scheduled to be here for another twenty minutes."

"Mom dropped me off early... I don't mind really, especially if I can hear you play."

"I think I'm done for today," he rubbed his elbow, standing stiffly and walking with a slight hobble over to the bookshelf, "But there are many good books here to read. I have read nearly half of them." He took a book from the shelf and shuffled over to a chair by the window, peering out at the garden it overlooked.

"I'll leave you to your reading then." She stood.

"Will you be back to listen next week as well?"

"Yes, I would like to," she said shyly.

"Then I shall play the piece again... from the beginning." She smiled and headed up the stairs to her tutoring.

The white car in the driveway was the first thing Carrie noticed, for it was the only thing there that did not belong. The second thing she noticed was the lack of piano music. The house was completely still and quiet and she sat down on the stairs, waiting to see Truman appear and tell her it was time. Fifteen minutes after her sessions would typically start, he appeared at the top of the stairs and she could tell he was frazzled.

"Mr. McKraxter will not be seeing anyone today, Miss Bellows. I do apologize, but it is somewhat of a family emergency."

"Well I hope everything is alright."

"No, ma'am, I am sorry to say that it isn't. Young Mr. McKraxter's illness has progressed and Mr. McKraxter--"

"His illness?" she asked, shocked.

"I really must get back, please call your mother and we will refund your money for this session, I am sure you can resume

lessons next week. Apologies, again.”

Carrie was relieved as the sound of piano music filled her ears. She tried not to appear too eager to enter the piano room, and, as she did, she saw Theodore was wearing a thick sweater. Otherwise, he appeared the same. He stopped when he noticed her in his peripheral vision and looked up. “Wasn’t feeling so well last week... but I will play you that song now.” He turned back to the piano and closed his eyes. As he began, she realized he was playing from memory. The music was warm, but sad and she had to keep herself from crying. When he finished, he sat upright and his neck popped, causing him to wince.

She sat for a long while before finally exclaiming, “That was... extraordinary.”

“I am glad you think so.” He still had a slight frown on his face and grunted as he reached up to rub his neck.

Carrie checked her phone and stood, “Well it is about time for my lesson... thank you for sharing your music with me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said quietly as she left and went up the stairs.

Mr. McKraxter was not in his regular humor as she entered the office. He appeared to be nervous, and he stood when she entered.

“Carrie, I am so sorry about last week, I can explain, it was so sudden.”

She sat, watching him pace, thinking about what to say.

“My son Theodore is a very sick boy... though it ails me, there is nothing I can do to cure him. You see, Theodore has a form of muscular dystrophy... Emery-Dreifuss is the proper term. It not only affects his joints, but also his heart. Last week I think he suffered a small heart attack and it gave us all a scare... now his legs have grown even worse...” He stared distantly out the window, as if he had forgotten she was there. “It’s so hard knowing he won’t live that much longer... and I can’t pay any amount of money to fix him.” He stiffened, as if remembering Carrie and turned to her, “But enough about that... I would like to once again extend

my apologies to you and your mother.”

It was a brisk October afternoon and the trees were all beautiful shades of orange, yellow, and red. Carrie saw Theodore in the garden as they drove up the drive and had her mother let her out at its edge. She walked out to meet him and noticed he was using a cane.

“Hello.”

“Hi,” he smiled slightly, the first time she could remember seeing him smile at all. And in the stark light of the sun she realized how pale he was and just how slender his face was. He wore the same sweater as the other day and thick pants accompanied by army boots.

“Nice cane,” she complimented.

“Yes, yes it is.” He looked down at it. “A waste of money, however. I won’t be around much longer to use it.”

Carrie tried to ignore that last bit and looked around the garden. “Isn’t this the garden the piano room overlooks?”

“Yes.”

“It’s lovely. Who tends it?”

“The gardener... it was my mother’s.”

“I see...” She looked down at her feet. “I have never seen Mrs. McKaxter around the mansion... does she travel often?”

“No,” Theodore looked across the garden sadly, “She died... heart failure. Looks like I’ll likely go the same way, seeing as this disease is genetic.”

“I’m sorry...”

“No, I’m sorry,” she looked up at him to see him staring at her, tears shimmering in his eyes, “I didn’t want to get close to anyone, since I knew I was going to die... I didn’t want to cause them the heartache my mother’s death did. I tried to stay distant and bury my nose in books and my piano. But somehow... you found a way in. And I am sorry that I allowed you to get to know me.”

“Theodore...”

“Soon, I won’t even be able to walk. I’ll have to use a

wheelchair.” He shook his head, staring out over the garden and gripping his cane.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad I got to know you. You are a beautiful pianist... and person.”

He smiled distantly. “I hope I never lose the use of my hands... I want to be able to play the piano right up to the very end.” He looked over at Carrie. “Father wants me bedridden, but I won’t hear of it. I want to go out doing what I love.” He checked his watch. “It’s about time for your lesson. Shall I walk you to the door? I can’t handle the cold for very much longer anyway.”

Mr. McKraxter and Truman watched the two make their way up the garden, Carrie slowing her pace so that the limping Theodore could keep up.

“She is a nice girl, sir,” Truman said to his superior.

“I know... that’s what makes it so unbearable,” Mr. McKraxter retreated from the window to his desk.

Winter had fallen and Christmas was fast approaching. Due to his lack of muscle tissue to protect him from the cold and the stiffening and deterioration of his joints, Theodore had been confined to the indoors and could no longer take his afternoon walks in the garden. As Carrie entered what she had affectionately began to refer to as ‘Theodore’s Study,’ she noticed his wheelchair next to the piano bench and he sat bent over the keys, his fingers frozen, resting his tired arms and shoulders, wrapped in multiple layers to keep him warm. She sat next to him on the bench.

“I have something for you,” he said quietly, reaching up stiffly to the music stand and retrieving a few sheets of music. As he handed them to her, she read the top: ‘Mother McKraxter: by Theodore McKraxter.’

“Theodore... I can’t take this.”

“Take it,” he insisted, “I don’t need it... it’s all up here,” he pointed to his temple.

She looked at him a moment longer, then hugged his arm, and he did his best to hide that it hurt him for her to touch him, “Thank you... I don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you’ is enough,” he held back tears, feeling her beginning to cry. “Don’t cry, you don’t want to be tear streaked for your lesson.”

She sat up, wiping her eyes, “Thank you again.” She gripped the sheets of paper in her hands, “This is the most beautiful song in the world.” He smiled and turned back to the keys, and, as she left the room, she heard him playing the song again, starting from the beginning. It could barely be heard up in Mr. McKraxter’s office.

“So we left off on the fundamental theorem. Let’s try example five-”

Suddenly the piano made a loud sound, as if several keys had been hit all at once, then the music stopped altogether. Mr. McKraxter froze, his mouth hanging open in midsentence. Carrie felt an uneasy tension forming between them. A knot began to form in her chest as she heard Truman pounding down the stairs. Mr. McKraxter recovered from his daze and stood, following Truman down the stairs. Carrie sat staring down at the equations, scared of what she knew was awaiting her downstairs. She finally stood when Mr. McKraxter did not return. The door to ‘Theodore’s Study’ was wide open and she could see him slumped over the piano, one arm dangling limply by his side. Mr. McKraxter stood by the window, staring out over the garden, and Truman stood at the front door as if waiting for someone, most likely the doctor. But the doctor was not truly needed. They all knew that what had been expected for months, since before Carrie Bellows had ever set foot in the McKraxter Mansion, had finally happened. And Theodore had been right. He would no longer be needing his sheet music.

Sarah J Dhue

Ghosts

After I was dead, a lot of things changed. Things tend to do that when you die: people you knew age a few more years within a few days, others sit and cry incessantly, while still others pretend that you will walk into the room again like “ha-ha, I fooled you!” Or even better, some pretend they never even knew you. Funerals, I never liked them when I was alive, and I like them even less now. People all gathered around, dressed in black... so much black... staring down at your body—well, I guess it really is not yours anymore—all made-up; fake. The skin looks plastic, the cheeks far too rosy compared to the bluish-white tint your skin seems to take on when there is no more blood in it anymore, which might explain why the cheeks look too rosy. You are wearing your Sunday best that you probably wore only once while you were alive and then hung it in your closet where it collected dust and you had to throw in a few mothballs so that it would not get moth-eaten and ruined; not that it mattered since you never wore the thing. Your hands are folded neatly, the fingers so rigid that they look like Barbie hands and you are wearing some random ring your aunt says belonged to Great Grandma What’s-her-name that you never met. Your eyes are closed, the lids void of wrinkles like there would be if you had actually closed your eyes and you wonder if it’s actually your eyes in there or some marbles to help maintain a natural shape. Yep, everything about it is fake and wrong.

And all the people that are there: relatives you have never met, people who hated you when you were alive, possibly even some hobo who wants to feel included in something so he wandered into the group. They will dress in their finest black clothes and sit and cry over that fake body and then go home, cry some more, eat some comfort food, then feel guilty and decide to jog it off, and before you know it, they will have forgotten about you, and all of the photos of you are in some box in the attic.

And then there is the service itself. It goes something like: “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to remember some great friend and family member who brightened our lives and the community, and was an inspiration to us all. Let me read a section from Job, ‘and the Lord said blah blah blah...’ and now let us bow our heads in prayer... you will be missed, citizen.” Chances are most of the people there are falling asleep, waiting to get home to watch the show they are missing by being there; thank God for TiVo. When their heads are bowed in prayer, they are thinking about what to cook for dinner. Because that’s what happens when you are dead; life goes on. And you don’t.

But the worst has yet to come... once most of the people have gone, they lower what was your body into the ground, and, as they begin to throw the dirt over it, that is when you realize you saw yourself for the last time... that you will never celebrate another birthday... that you will never enjoy another home-cooked meal, your mother hovering to make sure everything is to your liking. And you realize how truly alone you are when you try to say hi to someone and they walk past – or through – you, without so much as glancing at you. You try to pet a stray cat that has wandered your way and you feel nothing; the cat on the other hand, senses your presence, hisses, and runs away. The worst has hit home, because sometimes when you die, you do not, to be cliché, rest in peace.

“Life is short.” Death, is not... death, is forever. Forever alone, forever wandering, forever forgotten. Eventually people will stop leaving flowers on your grave. Eventually erosion will get the better of the granite, and your name will become indecipherable and then the whole stone will be gone. And no one will remember who you were... or that you were.

Darick T. Earney

The Infinite Sleep

It was a long day. My boss made me clock out early from work because of how slow the day had been. Figures, right? Fall college classes are starting up next week and I'm losing gas money. It is what it is, I guess. I approached the digital clock-in machine; pressed my right index finger on the finger-print scanner on the little gizmo and let it clock me out. "Free at last", I thought, and I'm more than certain that there was a bit of truth shown in my face as I hustled out of the automatic doors of the *Stop-N-Shop* grocery store, smiling from ear-to-ear at my boss as he stood near the entrance training some rookie who was learning how to collect carts for the evening/night shifts.

The *Stop-N-Shop* was about as good as it could get for a small town like mine. It had canned goods, crackers, a deli, and we sold ice-cream. What more could one want? I don't know. Consider me narrow minded, but I'm a snack man myself. And it didn't bother me watching the many different genres of people that had ransacked the place on the first of every month with their food stamps, and the folks who'd stop by just for something as little as a jar of *Stop-N-Shop* brand peanut butter. It was intriguing to me; seeing all of these proletarians flummox the deli-clerks, not making up their mind of how many pounds of cottage cheese they wanted, against how much they could actually afford, while capitalists wrangled with the cashiers; berating their status in society as register jockeys at this so-called "grocery store" which was, basically, a mere step-up from a gas station. *Stop-N-Shop*—it even sounded like a gas station! And my job couldn't be any more agonizing than death itself.

I was a stock-boy. I worked in the Dairy/Frozen section, which meant that I was never seen without a jacket and gloves on. I would spend my "smoke" breaks in the employee break-room, standing above the heating vent that was built into the floor next to

one of those crappy microwaves from the early 90's. You know, the ones that have the little wind-up timers on them?

Anyways, I clocked out for the afternoon, then drove home as it was beginning to drizzle outside. I was a little delirious. I had trouble getting to sleep the night before, and I'm one of those people that by the time I get to sleep, it's already almost time to wake up. So, I took some cough medicine to calm my nerves down, and send me into a nice, quiet slumber. At least it helped me keep my thoughts balanced long enough to want to keep my eyes closed before that moment came, that always did, where I would open them to find some kind of small errand to run as an excuse to stay awake.

By the way, if I haven't mentioned it already, I do have Anxiety issues, and a small case of "On-Set" Insomnia, which, to those of you who have no clue what that is, it means that I have trouble getting to sleep, and staying asleep. For years, I had a really hard time understanding the difference, and the fact that there was a difference between the two. But, surely enough, there was, and I had to deal with it during every waking moment of my life. But after I discovered the potency of three table spoons of cough syrup and Percocet, I was locked in. My problems getting to sleep were over.

When I arrived to my apartment I did my daily routine: Come home from work. Kick off my shoes. Go to sleep. Man, living simple was so good. Although my afternoon naps probably did have something to do with my irritability towards others at times, especially my parents whenever they called me, and my inability to sleep at night. But, hey, why should I care? I'm young. The way I see it, if daytime naps were so bad, then why was I told to do it in Kindergarten? Naps were about the most useful thing I had ever learned in school. From Kindergarten through College, nothing I had ever learned seemed near as useful and beneficial as learning how to sleep. Well, except for going to the bathroom.

I spent my afternoon as planned: I entered my apartment. Flicked on the television set and watched the latest episode of *Maury* and cackled at the men who would gloat on stage and deny

their children until the fraternity test had proven them to be the biological father of the kids they had preached were “Too ugly to be their child”. Shows like this had made me sick to my stomach; made me feel empty inside, as if these types of shows glorified men that did these things because it gave the network higher ratings. I don’t know. I sat up straight, on the edge of my bed, for a while with this thought, then changed the channel to some daytime cartoons as I gave myself a Percocet and a little bit of cough syrup.

I waited for a few moments for the drugs to take hold of me, but I felt nothing. So I popped another pill. Then another. Then another. I eventually started to feel a sharp pain in my upper chest and started to feel kind of queasy. I wanted to throw up, but I couldn’t lift my head up high enough to barf. I was definitely “trippin’”, as they say, on the Percocet, but I’ve never even smoked marijuana that had gotten me this high before. This was like nothing I had ever felt. It kind of hurt, and all I wanted to do was just lay down. So I did. I grabbed my pillow and TV remote, with all of my strength, and closed my eyes and started gasping and breathing heavily. A lot of things crossed my mind at once; images and memories were skimming through my mind like a scrap book or a slide show.

The heavy breathing continued as I struggled to open my eye lids and it just got harder and harder. I felt saliva, or some kind of mucus cascading from my mouth and sluicing down my neck and down to my collar bones as I had begun to realize that I was experiencing an over-dose. The thought of overdosing itself made me so scared that I was actually able to hear my own heart pounding inside my chest and then it happened... it all stopped. I was finally able to just relax and get to sleep. And, in a way, I felt like I had been asleep already. Only, I saw nothing; heard nothing. I made an attempt to speak up when, out of the nowhere, the pain in my upper chest came back. I tried to feel around and understand where the pain in my upper chest may have been coming from but, I was helpless.

The ache had begun to grow from what felt like *Angina Pectoris*, to what felt like a full-fledged heart attack. Only—I felt

nothing. It's hard to explain. There was a twinge of grief, agony, and hopelessness one moment, and the next—the feelings were a figure of some sort of distant imagination; as if my ability to retain knowledge had escaped.

I hadn't the slightest idea of where I was, or where I had been. All I could do was feel. But it didn't take long for a slight chill to come over me. I felt like a quadriplegic on tranquilizers. In other words, I wasn't going anywhere. And I wasn't planning on it either. I just wanted to wait, and wait, and wait—hoping that something would happen, eventually.

There weren't any clocks wherever I was, so, for all I knew, I probably spent weeks, or months, hell—maybe even years in this deep dark place. That is until, at one moment, I heard a sound. Some kind of noise that resembled a high pitched voice, whispering: "Follow me", or at least that's what it sounded like I was hearing. I don't know. It was ghastly, yet to my surprise, exciting—in a good way, I mean.

I felt like I was levitating; Suspended into the air as if by some kind of rope being pulled by someone, or something, further and further into an unknown destination. If curiosity killed the cat, I had taken all nine lives at this point. I felt as if I was traveling through some kind of worm-hole in time and space, like something out of *Doctor Who* or *Quantum Leap*, and was going to land into some ancient or pre-historic time zone and have to slay raptors for food and trade rocks with Neanderthals in exchange for a warm place to urinate. But before I could think too much about my life becoming a groundbreaking scene out of *Quest for Fire*, featuring a young Ron Pearlman in a passé outfit that consisted of a half inch layer of cloth that merely covered his man tools, I felt that my inquiry with where I was, along with my increasing thirst for stable knowledge, had been coming to a resolution as time dissipated with the noises I heard as I felt the gravity of my being become next to nothing. By the way, I say "Time Dissipated" because "Squander" is a little too disconcerting. For me, at least. I mean, come on—squander sounds like a fish!

Anyways, I'm over-thinking a bit, at this point. I haven't

felt so relaxed, yet so clamorous in my life. The feelings are as disproportionate as my thoughts entirely. I felt like somebody or something had been playing a cruel joke on me. Allowing me to think and feel, but not see, hear, touch, or taste. I didn't understand. Where was I? Who Was I? What was I?

This question had been shortly answered as I found myself waking up during an autopsy. Now, autopsies are, generally, not all that gut-retching to me, but when it's YOUR autopsy... it's quite terrifying. Think about it, someone using tools to clean out your insides—YUCK! It's like someone reading your own personal diary, or going through your clothes drawer. Even if there is nothing you're ashamed of, you always have that teeny tiny paranoid feeling, in the back of your mind, that somebody may plant something on you, or write some kind of rude gambit or wisecrack in your journal to make you second guess whatever it was you had written, and make you ask yourself: "Okay, did I really mean to write that? Why was I so emotional?"

If it were possible to die from embarrassment, I think America would have a higher crime rate. But the problem in this situation was nothing like that, the problem was, that I was, somehow, alive and able to watch myself be cut open like some futile UPS box with my heart and lungs being the desired items inside the packaging. In other words, it was weird. Gosh, I always thought Therapists and Lawyers were the nosiest people in the world, but I stand corrected. Autopsy performers are, by far, the nosiest. How would you feel having somebody digging into your lower intestine and discovering what kind of diet you had? Imagine how the conversation between the Autopsy Guy and his buddies would go:

Autopsy Guy:
Hello, Good sir.

Friend:
Hey, how goes it?

Autopsy Guy:

Oh, not too bad. I just had to dissect a deceased Ice Cream man.

Friend:

Oh yeah, how'd that go?

Autopsy Guy:

I screamed.

Friend:

(Sarcastic)

Was it for Ice Cream?

[AUTOPSY GUY AND FRIEND POINT AND LAUGH
HYSTERICALLY]

Yeah, I wouldn't appreciate that either. I waved my hands, constantly, trying to seek the man's attention, but he seemed to be too focused on his work. What can I say? My body is irresistible. It was kind of strange to me that I'd have such a dour and repulsive dream after the experience I had just had with the Percocets and cough medicine, but, hey, GOD can have a sense of humor, right?

Anyways, I exited the funeral parlor and made my way towards a small town. A town called Carborundum. It wasn't a very big town. As a matter of fact, it was quite small and unkempt, but it was better than the *Stop-N-Shop*. Not to mention, something kept telling me to go there; some kind of gut feeling or voice.

It was a little later in the evening and the Moon had already punched in his time card and the Sun darted behind a forest as the night time mist had become prevalent; casting itself all across this side of the earth and turning the souls of every street sign and fire hydrant into a living shadow. Wow—that was poetic.

Anyhow, I headed down a flight of stairs and into a subway station, hoping to catch a ride across town to explore the world, when I had realized that, for some reason or another... no matter how loud I yelled, how many noises or distractions I would make,

there wasn't a single being in the entire subway who could notice me. It was chilling; frightening, and all the while I never felt so... invisible.

I felt a frown come upon my face as I looked up to see a group of passengers aboard a train. I followed them, not to be a stalker or anything, just kind of wanted to feel less, I don't know— isolated. I sat with them for a little while when I suddenly remembered the scene from the movie “Ghost” where Patrick Swayze is confronted by the Subway Ghoul and is forcefully thrown off of the train and into what the cheesy effects in the movie display as “another dimension”, before luckily being spotted by Whoopi Goldberg. But there was a problem here—THERE WAS NO WHOOP! GOLDBERG!

I began to tear up as I felt a massive feeling penetrate my—well my spirit. I say “Spirit” because my heart was, as of this moment, being examined by some dude with a ‘internal organs’ fetish. I made myself laugh, as I fascinated myself with the idea that the guy back at the autopsy place had impregnated his wife shortly after seeing the gall bladder of a dead dental floss salesman, or maybe some girl who overdosed on Flintstone vitamins and cinnamon rolls during a post afternoon workout splurge. I don't know, call me random, but these are the types of thoughts that kept me entertained.

Although this experience was quite arbitrary and somewhat delightful, I felt that it was time to go home. So, I kept tapping myself on the arm; Pinching and tugging away at my limbs to finally wake up from this seemingly real, but awkward lucid dream I was having, but nothing worked. I figured, if I waited a few moments, maybe somebody would come and wake me up. So, I played the “Patience” game for a few minutes, waited for the subway train to come to a full stop and watched every one of the folks step off the train and onto the pavement and go about the rest of their evenings. I waited and waited and still nothing. So, I advanced to the next level of this “Patience” game and soon, I was fighting the biggest boss in the entire game, his name was “Agitation”, and boy was he giving me a damn good beating.

I made an executive decision to step off the subway later that night around 9 o' clock in the same place I started off in: Carborundum. The city of hesitation marks. Man, this place was a dump. But, hey, it could be worse. It could be *Stop-N-Shop*.

Moments passed as I started to hear that noise once again; something saying: "Follow me." I asked aloud: "Who are you?" and heard no response. I just ignored it a little longer until I finally reached a library not far from an old bar. I figured I could drop by and maybe snag a few beers, and sense it's a dream, I thought that I may have been able to get hammered free of charge sense I'm the one operating this lucid brainchild.

I paced towards the pub at a moderate walking speed, and kept my mind at a maximum thinking speed as I tried to block out the array of noises that danced around in my head like a juke-box that only played records where every song skipped. Gosh, I'm not even quite sure if that analogy makes sense, but I suppose it'll have to do for now.

Anyways, I was drawing closer and closer towards the pub door when a voice plead, once more: "FOLLOW ME!!!", and I spouted back, spitefully: "LEAVE ME ALONE!". The voice began to tone down a bit, crying the same phrase: "Follow me" over and over in a never ending sequence of patterns and on again-off again vocal dynamics, generating from GOD knows where, and becoming louder and softer, and even louder than the first time. I did what I could to ignore it, and just kept walking towards the bar.

I got to the bar at around 9:20 P.M., trying to find an open bar stool, but couldn't find one, so I sat up against a door way and watched a couple of hicks play some billiards.

Meanwhile, there were a couple of hoosiers to my right at the bar table playing some "Liar's Poker". It looked interesting. The purpose of the game was simple: Two or more players had to place a one dollar bill onto the table. Then, they each had to make a guess of how many of the same single digit numbers, between each of their dollar bills, appeared the most on each of the dollar bill's serial numbers, and who ever had the correct guess, or whoever's guess added up to the highest number, would be the winner.

I watched a couple of drunkards play this game for about 10 minutes when, all of the sudden, a huge chest ache, similar to the one I had felt all that time earlier, had started to mess with me again. I collapsed and began to bleed heavily out of my nose and the ache was so excruciatingly painful that I started to cry. It was like an anxiety attack, a heart attack, and a stomach ulcer rolled into one. I tried calling for help, as I garnered the strength to stand on my own two feet, after grunting and panting for a good 8 minutes (according to the clock at the bar) and I approached one of the men playing “Liar’s Poker”, hunched over, and tapped his shoulder to receive his attention and then it happened... the man fell over, right then and there, after pouring his last shot of whisky and died.

I didn’t mean to do it. I swear. I didn’t mean to—to.. take his life. The pain in my upper chest then felt so bad that it was just down right intolerable. I ran outside of the bar, without anyone noticing what I had done, and vomited all over the ground; Crying and sobbing. I looked around and screamed for an ambulance, but no one was coming. I felt myself going into shock, when I had begun to hear the noises again, this time getting closer and closer: “Follow Me.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and nodded, saying: “Okay, whatever you want. I’ll do it. Just, please, leave me alone.”

I wandered through the empty streets of Carborundum, trying to avoid any police officers from finding me, praying that an ambulance would arrive to that local bar soon and take care of that poor man and his family and friends during their grieving period the next few months of their lives, or maybe years.

“Gosh, what have I done?” I kept thinking. I had obsessed over the thought after a while as I continued to follow the voice that had demanded my strict attention and full allowance. Again and again I kept hearing “Follow Me”, as I felt how Alice did while chasing the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole and into the deep, dark, and illogical realm of Wonderland. Only there was no Mad Hatter offering me tea any time soon, and this place was far from the beloved Wonderland. This was Hell. Or something like it.

At this point, my life had begun to feel like a living portrait of a madman. And every breath I had taken was the beginning of

some twisted overture of Armageddon. A little drastic? I'll agree that my words are more than a 'Little' drastic, but, try as I might to justify what I had felt through words, language made me feel teased, as I did before in my deep dark world of oblivion, because nothing could describe how I truly felt at that time. "Hurt" was a joke, and to say I was "In Hell" was a punch line; an understatement; a mockery. The more I spoke the more idiotic and naive I sounded, but biting my tongue and letting the words cross my mind hurt even worse. Feelings were torturous, and freedom from them felt impossible. Even when I felt numb, everything seemed so-off-balance.

The voice got louder and louder and the words "Follow Me" were blaring in my ears as I attempted to block out the noise by covering my ears, which only made it louder. I kept walking and walking until I finally came to a small, white house and I noticed the noise had finally went away. "FREEDOM!" I shouted, not wasting a moment on worrying about who or what would hear me. I had never felt so good to hear the sound of silence in my life. Despite the fact that I could hear my own voice while yelling for joy, that is.

I waited a few moments; feeling liberated from my internal agony, when I heard a similar voice come back, saying: "Enter the house." I shook my head "No" and tried to avoid the command, but the voice repeated itself, only this time it was begging me to enter the home.

I shook my head "No" a second time, and the voice had begun to shriek like a child or small animal, begging for mercy. "Okay!" I agreed disdainfully, "I'll go inside the house!"

I approached the front porch steps and looked inside of the home; lying before me was a woman in her 40's struggling to breathe. Her husband was trying to hold her in his arms, telling her how much he loved her and how he will never forget her as a telephone sat by his side with a 911 dispatcher on the other end of the phone call that had been made prior to my arrival.

I took a deep breath and walked into the front door of the home without being noticed. The husband of the woman kissed her

on the lips, while tears rolled down his cheeks, saying: “I’ll always love you, Baby.”

The woman looked up, struggling to take her last breath, and saw me. She looked straight at me. For the first time since I had been in this nightmare, somebody noticed me. I ran, quickly, towards her side, next to her husband, grasped her hand and whispered: “It’s okay. I promise.” I don’t know exactly who or what told me to say that, or if what I was saying was the truth... but it just seemed right at that time to say it. I spoke the words and she looked at me, and looked at her husband, one last time, and closed her eyes and joined the rest of us in the Infinite Sleep.

Since that experience, I’ve learned to accept that what I am is something that I’ll never have the privilege of being alive to confirm, but there was no longer any question about it that I wasn’t dreaming that night. I never dreamed again. I just waited and waited for the moment to come that I’d get a phone call to return to my stocking job at *Stop-N-Shop* that never came. I had a new job. I had to stock Heaven with new angels.

You probably have no idea of what I’m talking about, nor believe a single word I’m saying, but—I will say this: There is much more to life than living.

Contributors

KELLY JO ANDREWS has one daughter named Lillian Mae Andrews. She is currently working on an Associates Degree, majoring in literature. She plans on getting a Bachelor's degree next to become an elementary teacher.

MARK AX is a former student of Lewis and Clark Community College as well as being the first Grand Prize Winner of the Peppermint Rooster Review. He is hungry to keep that title and will step over anyone in order to achieve it. His dream is to be discovered and write his own T.V. show while living in Los Angeles and hobnobbing with important celebrities and models.

AIMEE DALTON is 30 years old, born in San Diego, CA, and raised in Jerseyville, IL. She entered the Navy in 2007 and left in 2011. This spring is her last semester at Lewis and Clark, and she's going on to University of IL, Springfield come fall of this year. She intends to become a psychologist, once she's done with college.

SARAH J. DHUE is an author born and raised in the Alton/Godfrey area. Some of her writing was featured in Volume 15 of the Alton High School Calliope. Although her first love is writing, Sarah J Dhue is also a photographer and graphic designer trying to start her own small business, Sarah J Dhue Photos, and hopes to someday travel the world taking photos. She is a true animal lover and believes in supporting all types of artists from all over the world. Her creative role models include Stephen King, Anne Lamott, Adam Horowitz, and Eddie Kitsis.

DARICK T. EARNEY was born on July 15th, 1993 and is the son of Dennis and Suzanna Marie Earney. After many years of drawing his own comics in his mother's notebooks, Darick had decided, as young as 10 years old, that he wanted to be a writer. Darick had taken the stage at age 16, and worked as an actor for almost 4 years when his mother, Sue, had passed away on November 1st, 2013.

Darick then wrote two original short stories, “Danny’s Diary” and “The Infinite Sleep”, as his own way to cope with the tragedy he had faced. Darick would like to dedicate all of his works to his father Dennis, his late mother, Suzanna, and his best friends Christopher Jones and Blake Barnes for their many years of support. And, in addition to those, he would like to thank his nieces, Laila Suann Earney and Hannah Marie Fliegel, and his close friends Caitlyn Bridgeman, Mary Jo Brunhaver, and Alexandria McGuiggan for their love, respect, and support as well.

MEGAN FRYE is an inner Otaku that currently lives on top of a Mountain. She has a love of historical literature and an addiction to gory (zombie) science fiction. She is perusing a degree in English and hopes to one day meet George R. R. Martin (Game of Thrones) in real life.

HOLLY GUESS is an avid poetry writer and a student at Lewis and Clark Community College.

KAYLA HOWLAND is a writer and artist currently residing in Alton, IL. “Psychologistics” is currently a work in progress. The story is condensed by more than half. Kayla stated, “I enjoy writing immensely and hope to attain the ability to publish more works in the future. Usually, I write at night. The words always come to me more easily at three or four in the morning (imagine good ideas on school nights!). I also enjoy poetry, photography, and graphic design. I can’t thank the Peppermint Rooster team enough for giving me a chance! Also, a special thanks to Laine Frizzo! She has helped me develop my creative writing and has been an awesome friend. A shout out to my old creative writing class: I love you all! Keep writing! You all made the class amazing! Thank you!”

CHRISSEY JUDKINS is a first year student at Lewis and Clark Community College and currently living in Brighton, IL with her husband and 3 young children. She is pursuing a degree in Pediatric Occupational Therapy. Since writing this essay, she still does

not have all the answers to the questions but is starting to come out of her shell and is hopeful that the introvert chains are beginning to fall off.

JOE MORAN had this to say: “Well for starters, I’m the only vegan I know who loves meat. I’m related to Bill Gates, but we don’t talk cause he’s not the real one. I work hard to be lazy, and I take pride in only one thing; my humility. I am happily married to a beautiful woman. We have four, incredibly diverse children. I work full time and go to school part time. My passions include my wife, our children and baseball (not necessarily in that order). Leisure activities include guitar, grilling, and writing. I’m naturally interested in people, life and discussing purpose while gaining new perspective.”

COURTNEY SOMRATY, of Edwardsville, enjoys technology and is enrolled in Photoshop and InDesign courses at Lewis and Clark Community College because she thought it would be fun to learn graphic design. While she is honored to have her design featured on the cover of the Peppermint Rooster Review, she actually plans on becoming an occupational therapist. In her free time, Courtney loves spending time with her family, which includes her 17-month-old son, Maddux.

KEVIN STRANGE is a prolific filmmaker and author with seven feature films and over a dozen shorts to his credit. He has published two novels, a short story collection and numerous novellas. He loves schlocky B-movies, Mixed Martial Arts, Bizarro fiction and Queen records. He is the co-owner of StrangeHouse Books and author of Robamapocalypse, Vampire Guts in Nuke Town, The Last Gig on Planet Earth, and McHumans, as well as many short stories available in SHB anthologies and beyond. His short fiction has been published in Rhonny Reaper’s Roadkill Cafe, Tall Tales with Short Cocks 3, 50 Secret Tales of the Whispering Gash, the 2013 edition of the Peppermint Rooster Review, and the upcoming Vertigo Schisms anthology from The Surreal Grotesque Magazine.

CONNIE TERRY is a student at Lewis and Clark Community College.

KRISTOPHER THARP was born and raised in Wood River, and he currently resides in Bethalto, Illinois. He is married to his wife Jaime, and they have two children, Tyler and Kameron. He has been a police officer for 17 years, and he is currently a Lieutenant in the Investigative Division at the Madison County Sheriff's Office (Edwardsville, Illinois). He will be graduating from Lewis and Clark Community College in the Summer of 2014 and will continue his education in the fall of 2014.

TROY TOEDEBUSCH is a student at Lewis and Clark Community College. Troy is 19 years old and is a pitcher on the baseball team. He is from Chillicothe, Missouri where his mom, dad, and two younger brothers live. When Troy graduates from college he plans on farming with his dad and brothers.

