

PEPPERMINT ROOSTER REVIEW



Spring 2025

Peppermint Rooster Review

Volume 13
Spring 2025

Editorial Staff

Emily Corby
Francis Corby
Steve Higgins

Editor

Lainee Frizzo

Layout and Design

Laura Inlow

Cover Art

Zachary Miller

Dear Reader,

This is the 13th 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, which is intended to showcase outstanding written work from our students.

For the 12th year, we held a campus-wide contest for a student to design the cover. A panel of judges decided on the winning cover art, titled "Emerald Nails," submitted by Zachary Miller.

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 Lewis and Clark 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.

As a side note, this will be the last year Laine is editing the book, and she will miss it very much.

Sincerely,

The Staff of Peppermint Rooster Review

Table of Contents

Anonymous	A Hard Day's Work	6
Laura Dycus	The Flight	16
Grant Lockhart	The Tetons and Snake River	21
Savannah Moore	The Time I Stole a Toy	22
Mark O'Brien	Narrative Essay	30
Summer Poitra	My First Time Throwing Live Grenades	34
	Life with Adult Kids	40
	Effects of Raising a Transgender Child	46
Destini Riley	The Big Change	50
Burrae Rocha	The Silent Year	55
Maria Vithayathil	Treading Full Circle	61
Poe Wilkins	A Good Dog	67
Steven Wood	My First Lake Day	69

Anonymous

A Hard Day's Work

As a waitress, you experience a lot of different encounters with customers. Some good, some bad, maybe even heart-breaking at times; you never know what to expect when someone walks into your restaurant. Will they be rude? Will they complain about the food? Am I going to have to run back and forth every five seconds to get whatever they may need? Or am I going to laugh at a sweet old veteran's jokes? Maybe it's someone's birthday and I will offer them a free slice of pie? Anything could happen, humanity could surprise you with anything at any given moment.

It was the middle of August; I was working as a waitress at a little diner in Brighton. The restaurant was styled with a farmhouse theme. There were cow pictures on canvases covering the walls of the dining room, along with sky-view pictures of their family's farm and historical articles in picture frames. The boss's office was attached to the dining room, which wasn't much but a wooden cabinet with a few cleaning chemicals and an unorganized desk covered with papers in disarray. On a shelf next to the office, there were evenly placed antique milk bottles with two oil lamps at each end. Under it, a counter topped with baskets of soup and salad crackers.

On the other side of the restaurant was the staff's area. The kitchen was outlined with shiplap and barn tin, completed with two sliding barn doors on each side of where the orders were passed through. The register counter was covered in stereotypical farmhouse trinkets: a cowbell, a cow shaped pencil holder, and a silver 'milking bucket' as the tip jar. Every

dining table was centered with handmade 'tractor wagons' to hold the condiments and spices. It was the perfect theme for a restaurant surrounded by corn fields. On this blazing hot summer day, it was almost as if you could smell the cows that decorated the restaurant.

Every customer that walked in complained about the heat and asked if there was any way to adjust our thermostat or if we could place some fans around the diner for air circulation. I, personally, was used to the heat. I was constantly trailing back and forth between the tables; it was extremely easy for me to get overheated. We weren't allowed to adjust the thermostat unless we were given consent from our boss, Jessica. She was a short, stubby lady with a blonde bob haircut perfectly framing her face. Her eyes were brown, but droopy as the result of her aged skin. She walked with a limp due to a back injury from falling off a ladder. Though, she still walked as if her head were held higher than everyone else's.

That day she had waddled into the cafe and grabbed a seat at 'Table 1', closest to the restaurant's register. 'Table 1' held some type of higher priority than the other tables. Her family would sit there, and the daily regulars would interchange seats throughout the day. Two older men would come in, one would leave, more would come in and then the previous would make room for them. I guess you could call it the 'popular kids table' if you were comparing it to a high school setting. Other than my boss, Jessica, there was one older gentleman sitting at the same table across from her. His name was Donald, and he was a frequent customer.

Donald had worked at the diner doing maintenance and dishes in the past. Now he came in daily, sometimes multiple times a day, as a customer. He seemed like he was lonely and

needed company. He was a couple inches taller than I, about 5'10". He also waddled, more as if he ate too much and was having trouble carrying the weight. Though, he was normal size for a man in his 60s. He wore an old, beat-up shirt with a faded logo that had once said 'Maw Salvage' and a pair of old blue jeans. The type of jeans that had an adjustable band on the inside, they type you would usually see on an older man. He always came in and ordered one thing, our unsweet tea. I watched him drink cup after cup every day. Sitting in the same seat next to the window, staring out at the street and watching life go by.

A man and woman in their late seventies walked in and sat down at the table closest to the door. They were a tiny, cute older couple. The woman had short, curly black hair and pink framed glasses. She wore a white blouse with silver rhinestones lining her collar, accompanied by a long, flashy silver necklace covered in fake diamonds all the way around the chain. The man had a white, Nike cap on and wore a blue golf tee with khakis. They both looked like they had come from a golf tournament, him playing the game and her playing the wealthy, upkept wife. I grabbed two menus and two sets of silverware from below the register and skipped over to their table. My boss did not like complaints, so I had to stay moving at a fast pace my whole shift.

The two were smiling at each other as I walked up, almost caught in a daze staring into each other's eyes. The man was holding the woman's hands in his. I felt bad for ruining such a genuine moment, but I also didn't want to ruin their experience. I smiled and greeted them with my usual 'go-to.'

"Hello, how are you folks doing today? Can I start you off with something to drink?"

The man smiled back and replied, "My wife and I would like two unsweet teas, please!"

"Of course, I'll be right back with those!" I exclaimed.

I rushed back behind the counter to fill their cups with the ice and poured the tea from the jug with the red lid. Red lids on a tea jug meant unsweet, and the beige jugs held sweet tea. I carefully placed a lemon in each tea, swiped some straws from the box and my ticket book, and returned to the table. I placed the drinks slowly on the table, to avoid spilling the almost overfilled teas. I lined the straws next to each of their glasses. Most servers toss them at the customer, but I liked to be as neat and kind as possible. I politely offered the daily special, which they declined and proceeded with telling me their orders. One bacon cheeseburger with fries and a pork tenderloin sandwich with fries. They wanted both meals with lettuce, pickles, tomatoes, onion, and mayonnaise. I wrote out the ticket and returned to the register.

Our register was not a typical cash machine, but an iPad connected to a cash drawer and debit reader. It held a password based on our town's zip code. I typed in the password, clicked 'new ticket,' and entered the customer's drinks and meals into the tablet. The kitchen window, where the food was handed through, was about three feet to the left of the register. I ripped the ticket out of my book and smacked it down in the window. I shouted, "got an order!" It wasn't out of the norm for us to yell in the kitchen. The grill and oven hummed deafeningly, and the sizzling from the burgers was enough to drown out any sound coming from the front. Brad, our cook, grabbed their ticket and started preparing the meals.

Brad was about thirty years old, but he had spent his twenties partying hard which aged his appearance ten years.

He had a black, flat bill Los Angeles Lakers hat and a neon pink tee with our restaurant's logo covering the back. His hat kept his shoulder-length, sandy blonde hair from covering his honey brown eyes. To me, he looked like a knock-off version of the professional skater, Rob Dyrdek.

After about ten minutes, Brad called for a server since the food was finally ready to go out. I returned to the window, carefully grabbing each plate to ensure no food fell off. I glided to 'Table 5' where the couple was sitting and noticed the older woman was gone. I placed the food on the table and continued with "I hope you both enjoy your meal. I'll be back soon to check on you!" As I was walking back to the register, I noticed a strange odor. I did not think much of it at first, maybe an older guy passed some gas as I was walking by. I went to the register and started entering the tickets scattered on the counter from our lunch rush. A few moments later, my coworker Madeline approached me. She was about ten years older than I, though her face didn't show it. Her eyes and hair were dark brown, almost black in color. Her skin was a dark tan, glowing like amber. She always had a smile on her face at work, but today something was different. Her face looked disgusted. I watched as she questionably wandered back towards the register.

I stopped her and asked, "Are you okay? What's going on?"

She scrunched her nose and looked towards the dining room. "I don't know. I thought I smelled something when I was walking back here."

I assured her, "You're not crazy. I smelled that too."

Suddenly I remembered that my customer had not been at her table for a while. I wondered if she was in the bathroom and if that was where it was coming from. "Maybe it's coming from the bathroom?" I asked. Madeline agreed that could be

the case.

Moments later, the woman that was at my table exited the restroom. I continued to the women's restroom to douse the place with air freshener. It was a one-person bathroom, about 5x7 feet in size. It didn't take too long to cover up the smell. Since I was already there, I decided I should go pee while I had the time. We had a steady crowd of people during our lunch hour, and I didn't want to leave Madeline out there by herself. Not thinking much of it, I tossed the toilet paper in and flushed the toilet as I always did. That was a huge mistake. The water in the toilet started to rise, not only containing my urine but now what seemed to be the woman before me's business.

Every inch of my body started to sweat. Was it going to keep rising? What do I do if it does? Do I even know how to use a plunger? My head was spinning like I was on a swing that's chain had been twisted fifty times. What was only a couple minutes felt like hours. Losing myself in fear, I paused and thought of what to do. I grabbed the plunger and placed it onto the hole of the toilet, carefully thrusting it back and forth to avoid splashing. I noticed the water starting to travel down and I decided I was confident enough to set the plunger to the side. It was time to make another attempt at flushing. I grabbed the silver lever and flushed once more. This time, the water came up higher and it was not stopping.

Not knowing what else to do, I sprinted out of the bathroom to Donald, our old maintenance worker. I blurted out what had happened—there was no time to waste. He called our current maintenance worker, Justin, and followed me to the bathroom. Luckily, Justin was just pulling into our parking lot for lunch. He always got a free meal since he worked for my boss at the diner and on their family farm. Justin rushed into the cafe and

bolted towards the bathroom, my boss following behind him.

He was a tall, skinny man with buzzed dirty blonde hair and bright green eyes. There was a golf ball sized cyst next to his left eye that he refused to have checked out. He wore a tan Carhartt coat and overalls that were covered in dirt and hay from the family's farm he was working at. Donald and I were standing in the doorway, trying to figure out what we could possibly do to stop it. Justin stepped in the bathroom, instantly covering his nose.

He started by saying, "My god, what the hell did you eat?"

Embarrassed, I answered, "I swear it was not me! It was just my flush that broke the dam!"

He laughed, picked up the plunger and started pumping.

The smell at this point was awful and my boss could not handle it, so she returned to her table. The inside of my nostrils was burning, and my stomach was turning. I had never smelled something so disgusting in my life.

As he was plunging, I noticed the seal where the toilet met the floor was secreting a green liquid. I mentioned it to both men, and they explained to me that the force of air from the plunger was pushing the water out. Unfortunately, most of our drains and pipes were connected—meaning if one pipe was getting pumped with air, they all were. Slowly, the stench started to grow stronger and more violent. I heard a gurgle from the floor, so naturally I looked down. It was as if a small volcano of sewage were about to erupt from the drain. I exclaimed, "It's coming up through the drains!" Justin and Donald both looked at each other and exited the bathroom. I wasn't sure why they had looked at each other as if a light bulb popped on in both of their heads. Not until they had opened the men's restroom did they find that not only was the women's

restroom overflowing, but the men's was too.

At this point, all three of us were in a pure panic. The drains and toilets were rising with soiled water, and we were running out of time. The foul smell tainted the air, drifting from the bathroom into the dining room. The customers' faces started to scrunch, looking at each other and then us, judgement radiating across the room from them to us. Worrying about what they may think, I ran to the office to search for anything to potentially cover up the smell. The office was on the other side of the bathroom's walls. I pivoted around the outside wall of the men's bathroom and hopped into the office, only to find that drain was overflowing as well. In the span of five minutes, both toilets, both of the bathroom drains, and the drain in the office were starting to bubble up with green and black chunks of sewage. I instantly grabbed the Febreze out of the office's cabinet and ran to the bathrooms to warn the men.

Customers started requesting their tickets, complaining of the horrid stench. All of them were asking questions as to what was happening and why the whole diner smelled like a sewage plant. Sweat dripped from my neck and trickled down my back, my hands trembling and fumbling everything I touched. I had people in line at the counter with unpleasant faces, fidgeting arms, tapping feet, all waiting to get as far away as they could from the diner, all eyes on me, waiting to pay for their food. My hands were flying back and forth between scrambling through the tickets, ringing them up on the register, printing out receipts, stapling them, on repeat. I could not help it. I was tripping over my words and dropping everything. This had all started from what everyone in the diner knew, my flush broke the dam.

As the line grew shorter, the smell grew stronger. I watched

them leave, one by one. The cute, little farmhouse restaurant had turned into a ghost town. Now only Justin, Donald, Jessica, Rusty, and I were left. By the time I had returned to the restrooms, Justin had already gone out to his work truck and found something to snake the pipes. The toilets were filled to the brim, and the drains were flowing up onto the floor. They were covered in feces and a green liquid, what I could only assume was urine and other fluids. I was appalled. I had never seen something so revolting.

My boss had propped the emergency door by the bathroom open and placed a fan in front of it to help the smell, but NOTHING could make it go away. I waited with my back against the wall and my shirt over my nose. I watched as he used a long, somewhat rusty wire he had pulled from the bed of his truck to snake the sewage pipe. I watched back and forth, bathroom to bathroom, drain to drain, toilet to toilet, and they all started to descend—the drains slowly bubbling as the sewage lowered.

Everything was starting to feel okay again. My heart could finally stop trying to beat its way out of my chest. My body wasn't sweating anymore. The drains and toilets had finally gone back to normal, but there was still a giant mess on the floor in both bathrooms and the office now. It was time to disinfect and mop and, personally, it was too much for me. Donald, being the nice guy he is, offered to clean it all up for us. I was extremely grateful, as was my boss.

After all the damage was cleaned up, my boss asked me to pour baking soda and vinegar down all three drains to help maintain some of the smell coming from them. We sprayed the whole diner with Febreze and opened all the doors to air out the never-ending stench. I had spent the last thirty minutes

of my shift trying to fix what started out as a small bathroom incident. Justin and Jessica decided the situation had been taken care of and told Donald and I that they were leaving. Donald returned to 'Table 1', and I shuffled back behind the register. I watched as he drank the last drop of his watered-down tea. He didn't seem to mind much; I think he was just happy to be sitting down again.

I had never expected a clogged toilet to cause that much damage. Now I take five seconds to pray before I flush the toilet. I know it wasn't entirely my fault, but that day haunts me every time I step foot in that women's restroom. I have never seen that little old lady again, but I will always wonder if she knew what happened after she exited that bathroom. She just dropped a bomb and left.

Laura Dycus

The Flight

Why do so many people have a fear of flying? For some, it is the fear of heights, the suffocating grip of claustrophobia, the lack of control, fear of dying; for me, it is a tangled web of all these fears combined.

I will never forget the moment I knew that I had no choice but to face my fear. It was a chilly Wednesday morning in October when I received the call from my boss. He informed me that our biggest client was pulling out of a once-in-a-lifetime deal that was to close in five days. I poured four years of my life into this deal—every detail thought of every possibility meticulously covered. This was going to be the big one, the grand prize. The one that guaranteed success for life. The one that got our name out there, that put us on the map. I knew I was in over my head from the word go, but I dedicated my life to this deal. Sleepless nights blurred into missed family dinners, skipped school functions, and missed celebrations with friends. Sacrifices, all for this pivotal moment. Now, less than a week before the massive payoff (both metaphorically and literally), it all unraveled. No one else had the knowledge or the connections I had. There was no alternative; the stakes were too high.

I had less than 24 hours to prepare. I prayed a lot. I cherished every moment with my loved ones. I planned who would raise my children and how. I didn't sleep. Every part of my body was telling me not to go. So much so that I couldn't get myself to leave on time, glued to the floor in a crying fit. I arrived at the airport 7 minutes late—and I missed my flight.

Surely this was the sign, don't go, but my boss' words echoed in my mind: if I didn't go, the company would collapse. The thought of myself and others losing their jobs and being unable to support their families propelled me forward. I had to book another flight.

The older woman at the counter was very kind and patient with me. Her silver hair pulled back in a perfect bun showed off her soft brown eyes. It was clear that she had experienced a woman in the midst of a complete and total meltdown before. I don't know if words were even coming from my mouth. My hands were shaking as I handed her my ticket with my tear-streaked face saying all that it needed to. She could have sold me a flight to Timbuktu, and I would have never known. Thankfully, she didn't and I was back on track to California. The plane was already boarding. Most would expect me to run to the plane to make sure I didn't miss another, but I couldn't do it. It was as if someone poured cement, and I stepped right into it. I tried to muster up the courage. I begged my feet to move and used every ounce of my will, only to stay in the exact same spot. The woman at the counter jumped into action and somehow got me on the plane. I still do not recall how. Was I kicking and screaming? Did I say awful things to her? Did I pass out and they carried me? Did I walk on willingly? Did I skip and sing like an insane person? To this day, I still do not know, and that's probably for the best.

When my mind and eyes started working again, I braced myself expecting to be squeezed in the back of the plane between two large, sweaty men, battling for a corner of the armrest. To my surprise, I found myself at the front, with an entire row all to myself. The woman must have pitied me terribly or wanted to save everyone else from my dismay.

There were so many noises. Beeps, dings, whooshing, thumps, thuds, bangs, rattles, muffled static words from what only one would have assumed was the captain. I listened intently and hung on to every word of the safety demonstration, taking mental and physical notes. I was scoping out each exit, counting the steps to each, and determining which would be the fastest to access.

The woman sitting in the row ahead of me must have been a pro. She seemed at such ease, relaxed, and carefree in her face full of makeup, purple velour tracksuit, fingers adorned with gold rings, and her short pixie cut showing off her giant gold hoop earrings. She must have sensed that I was staring at her. She turned around, reached over her seat, and took my hand. She addressed me:

"Sweetheart breathe, it's just a flight."

"How can you think of it so nonchalantly?" I asked.

"Oh honey, my son is a pilot. I fly all the time. Think of it as an adventure. Flying is fun!" Within minutes, I could feel the regret she had telling me this because now I had an inside source to tell me about all the things I was hearing and seeing. The questions poured out of me like lava. How long has he been a pilot? How often do planes crash? Does anyone ever survive a plane crash? What are all the strange noises? Has your son ever made an emergency landing? Does the plane really fly itself? The purple velour lady had enough of me after about 10 minutes and faced forward.

I took notice of a baby two rows ahead of me on my left. She was wearing a white dress, a giant white bow, and little white lace socks. She bounced in her mother's arms, almost struggling to get out, but never a cry, not a peep. We locked eyes. Her eyes were like the clearest ocean, inviting, and

a shade of blue that begged you to dive in. The power of innocence and warmth, her chubby cheeks and toothless smile smoothed my mind, even if it was just for a moment.

I hopped from seat to seat before finally settling by the window. As I stared out, I watched the engine on my side startup. Little sparks, reminiscent of a Fourth of July display, began shooting out, each one larger than the last. *Is this normal? Surely not. Is anyone else seeing this?* My mind raced with a million thoughts, my heart pounding. *We are on fire! Why isn't the fire department here? Where are the hoses? Why isn't anyone screaming, running, or jumping off the plane?* I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself as the sparks disappeared. My sweaty hands and white knuckles loosened their grip from the free, unshared armrest. Wait, there it was again, another spark, and another, faster and larger than before. Something was definitely wrong. The sparks turned into flames shooting from the engine. I leaned over the seat and urged the purple velour woman to look. She dismissed me with a wave, shooing my ignorance away. Now I knew I was no plane expert, but I knew fire when I saw it, and a plane shouldn't have fire. Houston, we have a problem! Unfortunately, those were not thoughts in my head. I had been screaming them while running down the aisle. I was tackled and restrained as chaos erupted around me. It all was happening in slow motion. Thankfully, it did not last long. A flight attendant saw the flames and screamed the plane was on fire. The captain came over the speaker announcing that we would be deboarding the flight immediately.

As the chaos subsided and we deboarded the plane, I was overwhelmed by a mix of relief and disbelief. The flames were extinguished, and everyone was safe. I faced my fear,

and somehow, my instincts had kicked in and saved us all. Passengers and crew surrounded me, praising my quick thinking and bravery. A sea of grateful faces, one after another calling me a hero. It seemed like there were thousands of people. I was surrounded. There were fist bumps, handshakes, hugs, kisses, people even on their knees bowing to me. It felt surreal, like I was in a movie. Amid the crowd, the older woman from the ticket counter: the start of my journey. Her soft brown eyes held a mix of pride and something deeper. She reached for my hand, her touch gentle yet firm. Without speaking, she pulled me away from the mob. Her palm pressed against my back, guiding me toward the exit. The noise faded—the applause, the chaos. It was just us, moving through the terminal. She didn't need to say anything; her actions spoke volumes. She had seen it all: the fear, the flames, the transformation. With a wink and a smile, she turned and walked away. In that moment, I realized that facing my fear had not only saved lives but also transformed me. The experience taught me the power of courage and the importance of trusting my instincts, even in the face of overwhelming fear. In the end, the deal was saved, and the company thrived. More importantly, I emerged stronger, knowing I could confront my deepest fears and come out on the other side. This journey, though terrifying, became a testament to the resilience and the unexpected heroism that lies within us all.

Grant Lockhart

The Tetons and Snake River

Grandiose depiction of the natural world in black and white. Gone is the aesthetically rich form of photographs taken in negative. A form that feels comforting and right.

The mountain reaches towards the sky, towards the light. A picture that was taken by Ansel Adams at his most creative. Grandiose depiction of the natural world in black and white.

A real photograph that fills me with delight. Modern photography is regarded as a rather net positive, but classical photography is a form that feels comforting and right.

The mountain and the river seem to collide. In reality, they're further apart, but it's all about perspective. It's such a grandiose depiction of the natural world in black and white.

The contrast that the form highlights is present in sight. A depiction of a form that is now retrospective. A form that feels comforting and right.

The mountains, the heavens, and the Earth run together, and it feels quite right. The depiction of the world's magnificent grandeur is effective. Grandiose depiction of the natural world in black and white. A form that feels comforting and right.

Savannah Moore

The Time I Stole a Toy

As a kid, I was only allowed one toy when I went into the dollar store. The options always lined the walls and filled the shelves with colors, textures, and activities. The possibilities were endless. I paced, grabbing one toy just to pick up another and then another. Just for my mom to tell me to put all but one back. It was unfair that I was only allowed one. How could I decide? This ongoing childhood battle would lead up to a day that will stick with me forever.

The day in question was bright, windy, and just cool enough for a jacket. As my mom drove me to the dollar store in her blinding white Blazer with the windows down, the breeze running through my brown hair, I knew it was going to be a great day. The dollar store of choice was a Family Dollar to be exact. It wasn't a standalone store but sandwiched in between an A1 Beauty and an insurance company with a Subway on the left end and a Little Caesar's Pizza on the right. I couldn't wait to look at my options because today I was getting two toys! But how?

As we pulled into the parking lot, I contemplated how to get my mom to say yes. I would just have to ask, use my puppy dog eyes, and hope for the best. My mom's Blazer squeaked as she hit the brakes, clicking the gearshift into park before gathering her loud cluttered keys and wallet. I unclicked my seatbelt and followed my mom into the store. She was wearing her all-pink velvet jumpsuit, almost as blinding as her Blazer. Bleh. I always felt a little embarrassed when my mom wore this outfit. Combined with her loud, cluttered keys, all eyes were on her.

It was a stark contrast to what I was wearing: a dark blue Hollister jacket, blue jeans, and a black pair of tennis shoes. I was blending in, and she was standing out. I made sure to get ahead of her so I wouldn't be stuck looking at her pink jumpsuit. It wasn't difficult to stay in front as my mom always had to take the last drag of her cigarette before going into any store. Waiting for her always felt like agony and she made sure to take her time. I could feel the eyeroll coming on, but I knew I had to be on my best behavior.

I wanted more than one toy today.

Ding!

The bell to the door let the incoming cashier know we were coming. She greets us with a nod and a half smile. Nobody working in the dollar store ever looked too happy and I couldn't blame them. The dollar store always has a weird musty smell, drab lighting, and rude customers. A lady was already starting to argue that her coupon was valid.

"No ma'am, this coupon expired last year," the cashier said, annoyed. The older woman scoots her glasses up her face as she leans in, looking at the date, then frowning. *Who's correct?* Is it the older woman or the cashier? You can see the younger woman behind her, growing impatient as the discussion continues.

"Savannah, let's go." My mom's voice makes me jolt and I look away from the woman, hurriedly catching up to my mom. With the woman clear from my mind, I can focus on my main mission. Two toys. We walked down the first aisle, the old cart squeaking along, my mom stopping every now and then to check out a household item. Boring.

"Hey mom, can I look at the toys?" I asked, wanting to get away from this drab part of the store.

"Sure, go ahead, but don't take too long." As I turn away, she doesn't forget to add, "and only one toy." I stopped and turned towards her.

"Can I please get two toys this time?" I beg, putting on the best puppy dog eyes I could muster. There is no way she says no.

"No." she says sternly, her tone flat and even, not even looking up from the various hand towels she's looking at and I know that it was final. I wasn't getting two toys today.

I walked grudgingly to the toy aisle, tucking my hands in my jacket pockets and zipping it all the way up to the top. Trying to duck inside as if that would make me smaller, less visible. I couldn't believe it was a no. *I always have good grades and never get in trouble!* I thought to myself as the heat rushed to my cheeks and my throat started to tighten. *Don't cry Savannah, it's okay.* I took a deep breath and continued to the toy aisle. As always, there were many options to choose from and most of them were thrown askew, the hooks broken and unable to be hung. I stacked the toys neatly, then looked through the squishy lizards with this almost wet feeling to them. Bleh. I put it back with the others like it and continued looking for my one toy.

I frowned.

It wasn't fair, and I didn't see why I couldn't have more than one toy sometimes. Then a strange thought occurred to me. *Why can't I just take the toy? Because that would be stealing, and you would go to jail forever.* The little voice in my head made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I could feel my palms starting to sweat. Stealing was not an option.

After that little discussion with my inner voice, I decided one toy was just enough for me. At least until I found this small

clear plastic tube with little animal figurines inside. There were multiple different lids for each animal type. Blue for the sea critters, green for the farm animals, and orange for the safari animals. I held them in my hands, debating on which would be better. One had a shark that I really wanted, but then there was a cheetah in the other that was also one of my favorites. I just couldn't decide.

Just take it.

There was that thought again. I chewed on my lip as I held the two toys in my hand. The plastic started to become slick as my palms began sweating again. Then my heart started to race as my mind thought of the perfect plan. *Tuck it in your jacket.* I looked around to see if there was anyone else in the aisle. *What if I get caught?* That was enough to make me re-think my plan. I put both toys back and went to look for my mom. I scoped out the small Dollar General for my mom who was now looking at toiletries for the bathroom. It wasn't hard to find her, I just had to listen for the squeaks as she moved along. I peeked around the corner to see that her cart was getting full—I didn't have much time.

I quickly turned before she could see me and darted back to the toy aisle. There was a moment of indecisiveness, but now that the thought was in my head I had to put my plan into action. Looking around once more just to make sure the cost was clear, I crouched down in front of the toys. My heart began to race even quicker than before as the toys found their way into my hands. Everything went into slow motion as the Safari tube was tucked into my jacket. Then at full speed I zipped up the jacket and put the other tube back on the shelf. Someone was going to see, but when my head turned to see if someone was there, the aisle was empty.

I grabbed a different sea critters tube off the shelf as if that would make a difference and forced myself to walk calmly back to my mom so we could get out of here. When adjusting my jacket, the toy made a crinkle noise. This almost made me turn around and put it back, but my mom was in view. What was I going to do? Don't panic, just breathe and think! Quickly, I put the second tube in my left hand and tucked it under my arm to make it sound like it was this tube instead of the hidden one. Taking one last deep breath, I forced one foot in front of the other, towards my mom.

"There you are. Isn't this shirt cute?" My mom's voice startled me, although I came from in front of her. She's going to know. I thought, trying to calm down.

Focusing on the shirt in front of me helped me catch my breath. It was a deep purple shirt with butterflies littering the front. They weren't just butterflies but bright pink and blue ones with rhinestones covering every inch. Rhinestones. Matching my mom's bright pink sweatpants, they were definitely my mom's style, but to me, it looked like something my grandma would wear. I'm pretty sure she has that exact one. I thought.

"Yeah, it's okay," I said, causing my mom's face to scrunch.

"It's not that ugly," she argued, her green eyes looking from my disapproving look back to the purple shirt.

"It's something Gaga would wear." I stifled a laugh, and she scoffed.

A smile then filled her face, "I think she has this exact one."

"I told you."

We shared a laugh and then she put the shirt back on the rack. This put me more at ease as we continued walking towards the front of the store. My mom pushed the cart,

talking about all the things she got. She showed me some hand towels with grapes on them, matching her grape-themed kitchen, and some wooden decorative spoons that had hair and of course, fake grapes cascading around them.

"Can you help me hang these when we get home and are you ready to go, did you pick a toy?"

"Yep and yep," I said shortly, only slightly lifting the toy in my hand. The slight ease I felt quickly left as my anxiety crept back in. *Just stay calm.* I lagged behind my mom so she could position the yellow cart in front of the small checkout counter.

Two workers were chatting as we walked up, and everything went quiet. I couldn't hear anything over the load pounding of my own heartbeat. I focused on the candies in front of me, waiting for my moment to hand over the toy and leave this store. My mind was so focused on the Reese's in front of me, I missed my cue.

"Savannah put your toy up there." My mom's stern voice snapped me out of the trance I was in, and I quickly handed it to her. Almost forgetting about the other one.

"Sorry," I mumbled as she grabbed the toy. Quickly, I made my escape to the other side of the cart and waited for the cashier. The cashier saw me staring and thankfully handed it over as soon as she scanned it. Sticking the toy under my arm made it awkward to load the cart with our bags, but I managed as quickly as I could.

Once the cart was packed, I bolted out the door, holding it open from the outside. I could almost taste the freedom, but there was one more obstacle. The car ride. How would I hide the noise while in the quiet car? This was getting trickier. As I waited for my mom to exit the store, I thought about how I would be able to get this toy out of my jacket pocket and

maybe into one of the bags.

I contemplated this, but my mom made that difficult for me as she pushed the cart to her side of the car. She would be watching me the whole time or just do it herself, and I would be unable to go unnoticed. I was just going to get in the car before she did and sit very still.

And that's exactly what I did. I sat as still as a statue, using my right hand to fix the air vents, or mess with the radio. I remember at one point, my mom asked me if I was okay, and I mumbled a response good enough for her to leave it alone.

When we arrived at home, my anxiety started to settle. I wasn't fully out of the gate yet, but as we pulled into the driveway, my confidence rose. I grabbed a few bags before my mom was even out of the car and got them inside of our house. It was a duplex apartment, dark green in color. The porch was concrete with iron rod fences lacing the edges and was shared by our neighbors on the right. The door was also green and had a large glass window. I could see my older brother in the living room, playing his video game. I knocked and waited, but our mom was getting closer. The slam of the car door was an indication that she was gaining on me and my brother was taking way too long. I banged again, causing him to make an annoyed sound before quickly opening the door. I scowled at my brother, and he scowled in return.

"You took long enough," I said annoyed, "and since I went to the store with mom, you have to help her unload." I stated as I passed him. He gives me an Uh Huh and an eyeroll before continuing his game. I dropped the bags on the kitchen table and quickly made a beeline for my bedroom.

Once I got up the stairs and down the hallway to my room my anxiety subsided. I unpacked the hidden tube from my

jacket and spread my new animals out on the floor. The disappointment came soon after, and a frown met my lips. I succeeded in my mission, but at what cost? Even here at home, I kept my eye on the door, waiting for my mom to burst in and say I was going to jail. I didn't want anyone to see what I'd done. I felt so guilty.

The feeling of my heart racing and the fear of getting caught was enough to prevent me from stealing again. It was only two dollars and brought me so much dread and anxiety of being caught. Come to find out that years later my mom thought she bought me the second tube of toys. She never even considered that I would steal something from the store. Now, at 25, with a four-year-old of my own, I always let her get more than one toy.

Mark O'Brien

Narrative Essay

"It's okay. It's good. You'll walk into the coffee shop, you'll do the thing, you'll do it good, it'll be done. You like coffee shops. They have good stuff there."

A cool wind blew through from deep inside the sweeping pile of green frowns that made up the Appalachian mountain range and reordered the garbage littering the West Asheville downtown area into something no less hideous than it had been, like an elderly person toying with their warts.

I walked briskly past a gauntlet of pubs, dispensaries, and psychedelic gift shops, hoping to soon relieve the aching in the right side of my body coming from the wretched bag that held my computer. It wasn't a computer bag anymore, except for the fact that at that moment, it happened to contain a computer. It was filled well beyond capacity, distorted to an incomprehensible shape by various books, wires, chargers for devices that didn't work, yet still were taking up room for no reason but for that it would be marginally more difficult to remove them at an appropriate time than to allow them to continue squatting. I could feel it tearing down on my shoulder; some unknown angle stabbing at my rib with every step through the synthetic membrane.

"Maybe you shouldn't wait until the day before an essay is due to start working on it. You know that you need to work more on school. You need to work more on school, so that you get a good grade, so that you get the credits, and so that you can get a good GPA so that you can maybe transfer..." The chime of the front door's little bell charitably distracted me before the line of thought bottomed out.

The cafe walls were entirely made of drywall, except for a single strip of molding running along some of the interior corners. Someone, presumably in an attempt to compensate for the elemental simplicity decided to attach miscellaneous pieces of unfinished wood onto random places on the walls and laminate counter, but instead of alleviating the oppressive vibe, it only added an air of desperation. There was no one there but the barista, me, and an old couple who sat with slumped postures and ate muffins silently from opposite sides of a particleboard table. The single speaker was playing 2000's indie hits and it smelled like burnt coffee and I didn't feel any better.

The barista watched as I lumbered up to the counter. He, she, or they wore their hair in a bun with a floral clip and glared at me from behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses while standing stoically and stiff like a metal statue. There was no humanity in the way they looked at me. We were merely the visages of people to each-other and there was something in their eyes that seemed to tell me that there was nothing I could possibly say or do that would have a the faintest chance of making the faintest impression in their life.

"Don't even try," I read. "...you are one and I am another and good or bad you cannot change it any more than you can change the orbits of the stars."

I asked for a small black coffee. They said that they stopped serving coffee at three. I asked for an Americano. They asked what I wanted in it. Nothing.

I sat on the uncomfortable-looking couch because I felt like sitting in one of the plastic chairs would make me feel like less of a human but when I sat on the couch I still didn't feel like a human and I also felt uncomfortable. After taking a moment to accept the situation, I set the coffee on the coffee table

and began the labor-intensive task of digging the laptop and charger out of my ambiguous bag.

I had the computer open. The off-brand word processor was loaded. The coffee was gone. There was nothing there. The text cursor blinking silent and alone on a blank page. It was blinking not in time with the music, or with my heart, or with any decipherable vibration of the universe. It's rules all of it's own. A recursive observer, whose final judgment would forever be hidden. A message spoken in a forgotten language to an empty dark.

"Come on man. You've got to think of something. It's already September 23rd and the final draft is due tomorrow. You can't phone this in like you did the rough draft. You really need to get a good grade on this so that you get the credits so that you can transfer so that you can get that major, so that you can leverage it for better wages so that you can..." I couldn't finish the thought. I never can.

I looked up at the barista. They were still standing there—probably glancing at me intermittently, wondering why I came in, spent ten minutes digging through my bag for the accouterments to my busted-up laptop only to sit here for an hour-and-a-half staring at the screen. The old couple had moved on long ago, as had the two teenagers who came in for a date and the woman who spent twenty minutes on the phone with her accountant.

"Maybe I'll write a narrative paper about accounting," I thought. "I'm sure there's a lot of wild stuff that goes into the profession. All I'd need to do load it up with unnecessary details and plot cul-de-sacs; I'll have three pages in no time."

I continued to stare at the text cursor, waiting for the 'accountant essay' to appear.

It did not.

Dejected, I packed up my wires, chargers, phone, laptop, books, and wallet, and one-by-one, jammed them back into the polyester bag from whence they came; forming it back into the unwieldy plastic cudgel that I had grown accustomed to. The bell rang with a taunting air as I left and I didn't look back at the barista, just at the spent Bojangles' Chicken wrapper that flew past the entrance.

The seasons are changing, and there is a chill in the air, and it's already getting dark and I have a hard time believing that it will ever get light again. One day the seasons will stop changing. It will get cold, and colder, and not stop. The trees will lose their leaves and there will be no more leaves. The sun will flicker and leave and we will be alone with our thoughts and nothing. My laptop text-cursor will still be there however. Stuck somewhere deep inside my old, broke Lenovo, blinking eternally, witnessing in horror as one by one, the last little spots of light in the sky slowly burn out forever.

Summer Poitra

My First Time Throwing Live Grenades

In 2008, I joined the U.S. Army as a Military Police Officer (MP). Upon joining, I was shipped off to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri for One Station Unit Training (OSUT). OSUT combines the Army's nine-week basic training course with the ten-week Advanced Individual Training (AIT) or Military Police, which is the training course every Soldier goes through for their assigned job. Basic training was broken down into phases. The first phase was Red Phase which consisted of three weeks of "total control." At no time during the first three weeks were we without a Drill Sergeant. The second phase was White Phase which consisted of three weeks on constant ruck marches to various ranges for our Basic Rifleman Training (BRM), where we were taught to fire our M16 rifle and qualify to graduate. The final phase was Blue Phase which taught us team building, procedures, and had an additional focus on physical fitness, and of course, final qualifications which included throwing two live grenades as required for graduation.

As I awoke on the morning of November 8, 2008, I opened my eyes and took a moment to orient myself, listening to the hum of the lights. The bay was bustling quickly. Two rows of metal bunkbeds lined each side of the massive dormitory. Two by two, all 24 women emerged from their bunks and began gathering their personal care items and made way to the restroom just down the hall. Walking into the restroom, we all had a great routine. There were two rows of sinks, four on one side along with eight shower stalls and four on the other side along with eight toilet stalls. Drill Sergeant Robinson

appeared. She stood 5'9" tall, slender build, dark brown skin, hair in a perfect small bun at the nape of her neck. While her physique was not intimidating, her facial expressions and voice was enough to make even her peers stand at parade rest. When she spoke, her tone was sincere, but serious. No one dared to question anything she ever said. We did not fear her; we respected her, and would have done anything for her. Drill Sergeant Robinson spoke with an elevated voice, but was not yelling, as she typically would.

"Wrap it up! Be outside in ten minutes!" Drill Sergeant Robinson bellowed.

My Battle Buddy, Palmer and I, were a pair. She stood at 5'7" tall, long blonde hair, which she kept in a neat bun at the nape of her neck, her hair parted slightly more to the right side and combed down perfectly. She was from Southern Missouri and spoke with a slight small town, southern accent. She smiled often, showing her beautiful teeth, bright white and perfectly aligned. She had a solid, athletic frame, and was incredibly strong. Palmer and I made our way back into the bay to collect our weapons and then made our way down the two flights of stairs, making a right out of the double doors, then another 100 feet to the CTA where over 200 of us gathered for the march to breakfast.

Today is the day, I thought, as we arrived at the grenade range. We were going to not only be handling live grenades, but detonating not one, but two of them. I was a nervous wreck. My confidence was shot over that little squiggle line on my ACH I received after unsuccessfully throwing the practice grenades and I no longer wanted to throw a live one. I was terrified. Stepping off the bus and into heavy shade, I felt a thick, foggy smell hit my nose. It was the smell of burnt

gunpowder. Palmer and I were ushered along with the first half of our platoon to the staging area. I walked through an opening in the walkway, under an old wooden awning. Bulletproof glass provided our view of dirt and trees, blurry from the elements and lack of upkeep. Everything moved in slow motion, taking steps forward until I was next in line.

"Are you ok, Private?" asked Drill Sergeant Robinson, her voice sincere.

I was fighting the tears hard. Choking on the quiet word that barely escaped my mouth.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant." I practically coughed out the words, barely a whisper.

When they called me to the pit, I choked. I stood and dry heaved a moment, sure that this was it. I went through every worse case scenario in my head and concluded that I was somehow going to die in the next five minutes. The intrusive thought that played the loudest was the scenario where I pull the pin, release the spoon, and then throw the grenade against the concrete separation wall instead of over it, killing myself and the poor Sergeant stupid enough to get into the pit with me. I composed myself and stood tall. My 5'8" self met the Safety Sergeant at eye level. He was about my height, skin as black as night, dark brown eyes bright with excitement, and an equally excited smile. He turned his body to stand side by side with me, placing his hand on my back towards the top of my IOTV, nudging me towards the pit. The pit was nothing more than a shallow trench, a mix of new dark green sandbags and old, ratted sandbags, whose color was now gone, matching the light gray dirt around it. Standing face to face with the Sergeant, he removed the first grenade from a pouch attached to his IOTV and gave it two little taps on his ACH.

"For luck, Private," he stated quietly and confidently. We crouched down into the pit, facing each other.

"Do you have any children?" he asked frankly.

"Yes, two little boys, Sergeant." I barely whispered it, while choking back more tears.

"You are going to be just fine, Private, nothing is going to happen that isn't supposed to happen."

He was so confident, I almost believed him. In horror, while crouching and facing this man, he pulled the pin on the first grenade, holding the spoon firmly in his grasp. He then grabbed my right hand with his left hand and firmly placed the grenade in my visibly shaking hand.

"You are just fine, Private. The spoon will release when you throw it and there will be a short delay before it detonates," he explained.

I sat there crouched, for just a moment longer, I pictured my kids and the life they were going to have without their mother. I mustered up every single bit of strength I had, stood up into the ready position with the live grenade a mere two inches from the right side of my face.

"FRAG OUT!" I screamed.

I then dropped the grenade just on the other side of the bunker into the live fire pit. Less than half a second later, I felt the Safety Sergeant grab the front plate of my IOTV and with a strength I did not know he possessed, threw me face first out of the pit and threw himself onto my back. A couple of seconds later, I heard the grenade detonate and it began raining dirt and concrete pieces on us. The Safety Sergeant got up, dusting himself off with both hands, looked at me, and smiled.

"Excellent job Private! You threw your first grenade!" he exclaimed proudly.

Huh? Was my only thought. I'm certain my face said the same.

"Now let's get back in there and throw another one! Only this time, please throw it just *a little bit* further." He stated and the emphasis in his voice was practically begging.

"Yes, Sergeant!" I stated confidently.

We didn't die! was the joyous thought in the front of my mind. I looked back and caught a glimpse of Drill Sergeant Robinson's face. She looked amused. I expected her to be angry with me, but she just mouthed the words "good job" and gave me a thumbs up. I did not need coaxing back into the pit. I was happy to see that the concrete wall was enough protection, and I was not stupid enough to drop it on my side of that wall. Crouching down, eye-to-eye with the Safety Sergeant again, he handed me the second grenade, pin still in place. I smiled and gave it two little taps on my ACH and handed it back to him. Going through the same motions, he pulled the pin, held the spoon tight, and firmly placed the second grenade in my right hand.

"FRAG OUT!" I screamed, far more confident than the first time.

I immediately dropped the grenade just over the wall again. The Safety Sergeant muttered a curse word under his breath and again grabbed the chest plate of my IOTV and threw me from the pit face down and jumped on my back. A moment later, I heard the detonation and felt the debris rain down. A hot piece of shrapnel landed on the top of my right wrist this time. I kept quiet, feeling the burn, much like a hot cigarette ash that just stays smoldering. When the Safety Sergeant stood up for the second time, I immediately wiped off my wrist, but the burning lingered.

"You made me work for my paycheck today, Private!" he exclaimed, still smiling, still happy.

I stood there a moment, proud, accomplished, happy that it was finally over. I made my way back towards Drill Sergeant Robinson, who met me with a smile.

"You did it and no one died. Are you okay?" Her eyes were soft and kind, her voice sincere.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant!"

After the excitement of the day, we marched back to the barracks, tired and happy. That day was only one of many once-in-a-lifetime experiences I had during my six years of active duty. I have fired weapon systems no longer in commission. I pushed my body to its near breaking point. I was in top physical shape. While I only barely qualified in the category of grenades, I managed to fire expert in most weapons systems, and sharpshooter in others. Throwing two live grenades has still been one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.

Summer Poitra

Life With Adult Kids

I just want my house back. This is my first thought while I stand at the sink, washing the dishes that “no one” used all day while my husband is at work, and I am at school. I'm staring out the small kitchen window, watching my Husky, Leia, throw something and fetch it. *Someday I am going to miss these days.* This is my next thought as I watch Leia pounce on her prize. I finish the dishes and start dinner. Next, I prepared the chicken to sauté for the jambalaya I decided to cook for supper. *Why do I even bother?* This is the thought I have most nights while preparing dinner. Most of the time, the three older kids do not eat what I cook, even though I announce dinner plans around noon, and they confirm their plans to attend dinner. My youngest has her own dinner items, as she rarely eats what I cook anyway. Typically, it is only my husband and I who eat what I cook; leaving the leftovers to rot until the next fridge clean out. *I miss them little.* This is my next thought as I reminisce on the days when I couldn't chop a vegetable, take a sip of water, or walk from the sink to the stove without a baby on my hip or underfoot. All four children were perfect babies. The babies grew to adolescence, and they sat at the table, excited to tell me all about their day at school. Seemingly overnight, they became teenagers with their busy schedules, oversized hoodies, earbuds in both ears, and only referred to me as “Bruh.” All three older children, somewhere around the age of 17, decided they knew everything about life and us parents knew nothing. At 18, they discovered true independence, and my perfect little babies suddenly lost all

manners, motivation, and all sense of responsibility. Oh God the hormones. Graduation came and went. Now they are freeloading adults who want all the perks of being a legal adult without any responsibility. It is obnoxious having adult children live at home because they are lazy, irresponsible, and destructive.

The laziness is most prevalent, leaving my otherwise clean home cluttered and in chaos. My husband, Aaron, and I work tirelessly to put things away where they belong. Every time we turn around, something is out of place. Not just misplaced, but *why is there a hair dryer and a coat hanger on the couch* type of out of place. It is a struggle every single day to get the kids to just stop walking around with random items, which they put down, and walk away from. The items most left out include shoes in the middle of the entry way, hats left in the fruit basket, clothing stripped and strewn on the back of the sofa, and bottles of half drank water set down on nearly every shelf in the house, including the fireplace mantle. When they are asked to collect their belongings from various parts of the house, we are met with excuses, lies, and gaslighting. They hold themselves in their rooms like hostages, only emerging after we have gone to bed. You would think with as much time as they spend in their rooms, there would be some sort of order. At the least, an appropriate amount of cleanliness. You would be wrong. Instead, their rooms smell like a middle school football locker room and resemble what I imagine would be the aftermath of a police raid, searching for a single diamond stud earring. On Sundays, we rouse the kids at around 10:00 am for chores. Chores consists of every member of the household participating in basic tasks. Vacuuming, kitchen cleaning, organizing, and laundry, just to name a few. This

is often met with resistance and even hostility. They behave as if they are being sentenced to 100 years of hard labor. My youngest, Ezra, who is 12 years old, is beginning to mimic the lazy tendencies of the older three. What they finally manage to do typically results in more work for Aaron and me. We end up having to go back over whatever they lazily “cleaned” and make it presentable.

The three adult children are incredibly irresponsible, despite the example given by their father and I their entire lives. The lessons never stopped; they only changed and evolved. As young children, they were charged with age-appropriate tasks. As toddlers they picked up their toys and put them away. As they got older, they loved helping to clean. Armed with a spray bottle and a cloth, they would happily wipe away marks on cabinets and wipe down the table and chairs. We all work together to have a nice, clean home. They all had routines and all displayed incredible responsibility and pride in completing each step of their routines. I remember the days they would get ready for school. After emerging from the restroom, we would go through the checklist.

“Did you brush your teeth?” I would ask in an accusatory tone.

“*Check!*” they would proudly proclaim.

“Did you brush your hair?”

“*Check!*”

“Did you wipe up any mess on the counters?”

“*Check!*”

“Dirty clothes?” I would playfully narrow my eyes.

“Mom, we know what to do! *CHECK!*”

Their favorite part of announcing their little checklist was punctuating each task with check! All four children have

watched their father and I wake up every day and go to work on time, pay bills on time, prepare meals, clean up after ourselves (and them). As young adults, the household rules are simple yet profound. They are to have a full-time job. They are to build a savings account. They are to respect the home and the other people living in it. Sounds simple enough, right? Oh, how wrong I am. The full-time job rule is a fight. Two out of three adult children work less than part time and blame it on everyone and everything else but themselves. They are constantly late for work. We have told them time and time again that punctuality keeps jobs. They do not care to listen. While employers do not seem to notice or care, I warn that employers are always watching. A short amount of time goes by and suddenly the kids get their hours cut until eventually, they quit. Then a new job comes along, and the cycle continues. We have warned the kids against automatic withdrawals from their bank accounts at length and yet every month they are asking for money to cover overdrafts from surprise expenses.

The destruction caused at the hands of the three adult children left me wanting to pull my hair out. While many things can serve as a lesson, other things require drastic intervention. There are two major rules in place for their rooms. Both rules started as a lesson and ended in dramatics. The first one is “no plugging in anything except a charger or lamp.” I stumbled upon this drastic lesson by chance. My 20-year-old, Arlo, left her hair straightener plugged in, on, and open on her bed, lying next to a can of aerosol hair spray. That day she had received a delivery, so I went into her room and left it on her bed. I noticed the light on the straightener right away and moved to assess. My discovery caused me to just see red. I wanted

to be reasonable and levelheaded, but I could not manage a level tone. Later, I had to adopt the rule “no burning anything in your room.” This rule was handed down as a lesson at first. The same child, Arlo, had left the house while leaving incense burning. While it does not necessarily pose a dramatic risk to safety, it is still technically burning and after the second time telling her to not leave incense burning, I took away the privilege. The dramatics came later, when Arlo left two candles burning in the middle of the third shelf of her four-shelf bookcase. The scent was strong enough to tell me it was not body spray, so one quick glance in her room revealed the burning candles. Just then, she walked back into the house, while I was yelling.

“What happened?” Her wide eyes and blank expression were telling.

“*ARE YOU TRYING TO ACTUALLY BURN MY FUCKING HOUSE DOWN?*” I screamed.

“Oh...I'm sorry.”

“I do not want to hear *I am sorry*,” I mocked, “I want you to do one single fucking thing I ask.”

Then there is my 18-year-old, Trent. He insisted on having cats. He begged and pleaded, and I caved. After about a month, we all started noticing the smell coming from his room. Aaron and I did everything we could to get him to clean up after them. We even went into his room and did it ourselves. Fast forward a couple of months and he moved out, taking the cats with him. We have spent countless hours in his old room, scrubbing walls, shampooing the carpet, laying down carpet fresh, and airing the room out. It only has the slight aroma of a meth lab at this point. My eldest, Hunter, who is 21, has not lived at home since he was 18, but his destruction of our

belongings before moving is still evident. There is the dresser, which he broke and then tried to lie his way out of it, not to mention the \$1,000 security deposit lost in our previous rental home because the entire floor in his room was not able to be fixed, only replaced.

While I will miss laughter, love, togetherness, and even the fighting, I am ready to have peace. I want the kids to be not only independent of us parents, but independent of our house as well. I want to be able to wake up on a Saturday morning, sip my coffee, and not feel the weight of lazy, irresponsible, destructive adult children. I would instead like for my weekends to consist of the kids coming over for dinner. Laughter, reminiscing, and of course, the theft of toilet paper, paper towels, pantry items, and the occasional request for money. What I want most is for them to take all the lessons learned at home and apply them to their own lives, where the effort will come with a sense of pride in their own accomplishments. For the time being, we just close our eyes, cross our fingers, and pray we do not ever need to drain our savings to fix something or file a homeowners insurance claim.

Summer Poitra

Effects of Raising a Transgender Child

"It's a boy!" I proudly exclaimed in my Facebook post around 4:00 in the afternoon on December 29, 2011. The baby was born two weeks earlier than expected due to some complications. Despite a hidden pregnancy, no prenatal care, and suspected drug and alcohol use, he was healthy and perfect. He was born to a young mother who was unable to care for him, my husband and I were chosen to adopt him just two weeks before he was born. It became obvious within just a couple of years that there was something very different about this little guy. He was the youngest of three boys but his behavior in his toddler years marked more differences than similarities we were accustomed to after already raising two little boys. For starters, he preferred traditional "girl" toys. He would bypass his own trucks and trains and play with his sister's barbies and ponies. Later, he was adamant on feminine wear and growing his beautiful blonde hair out. On his eighth birthday, he came out as transgender, insisting on a name change and living as his authentic self. We introduced the world to our beautiful daughter, even though those closest to us were not surprised. What I never expected was all the hate from people who were essentially strangers to my daughter. Having a transgender daughter has meant cutting off toxic people, losing family members, and trying to shield my daughter from the hate in the world.

Cutting off toxic people was difficult at first but has become much easier over the years. The term "let's agree to disagree" is reserved for those who prefer milk over creamer, patterned

ties over solid ties, or college rivalries. It does not refer to opinions on other people's lives that do not affect the one saying it. More times than I care to admit, people have come and gone from our lives. People I have invited into my home have said things such as "That is who she is, there's nothing wrong with that!" Then later they post anti-trans rhetoric on social media. I call them out on their public opinion, and I am met with phrases such as "Your kid is awesome, but I don't believe children are capable of making that decision." It absolutely breaks my heart. My daughter did not decide to change genders. We as parents did not change her gender; we just loved her. Navigating this new territory was difficult from the start, but the worst part is the opinions of people who have not seen her blossom and grow into her own person over the years. I have explained countless times that her transition was organic. I was raising a boy who loved long hair, pretty things, hair accessories, Claire's merchandise, rainbows, and unicorns. Who was I to deny her things she loved? She was not able to understand that things are traditionally marketed towards a certain gender. All my daughter knew is that she loved those things. She did not even know other transgender people existed until she had lived as a girl for over a year. We even tried to sway her decisions away from feminine things through time, but she stood firm on her preferences. Now, those people want to walk into her life after being absent and spout off hateful comments and rhetoric. They are cut off immediately and my daughter does not even know why people do not come around anymore. We are all home bodies and prefer to spend our time together. At least that is what she believes for now.

Having no contact with family members has proven to

be the most difficult of all. Maybe because family members believe in their heart of hearts that their opinions are somehow more valid than my daughter's happiness and wellbeing. People who had, at one time, kept consistent contact with us, who received updates on our kids, and who have shared in our sadness and joy suddenly and out of nowhere became people we no longer knew or wanted to know. The most painful was my brother. Out of the seven of us, he and I had always been the closest. He would randomly send gifts to my daughter, like plushies of her newest favorite Pokémon. Then one day everything changed. My brother found out his wife was having a girl and his entire mindset changed towards my daughter. He said hateful things to me, accused us of abusing her and feeding into a delusion. I was sobbing when I told him that he was not a safe person and that we would no longer have contact with him. To this day, it hurts so badly. I hold on to hope that he will open his eyes and see his niece for the beautiful soul she is and accept and love her as she is. Cutting off contact with my brother has also meant I only get to watch my niece grow up through Facebook. She is almost two and I have never met her.

Shielding my daughter from the hate in this world has been a challenge all its own. The very first time she found out that people will hate her simply for existing broke her heart. She was at a sleepover with her cousins, and they were watching YouTube videos. The girls came across content that was filled with hateful, transphobic content. My daughter did not fully understand what she watched, and her cousins tried very hard to explain it to her as gently as they could. My baby was only nine years old. She called me that night and asked some very hard questions. I fought tears while listening to the

awful things she was repeating. I explained to her as matter of fact as I could while still trying to protect her heart. Often, we have short conversations about the world and what to expect. I have the same conversations with my little girl as other mothers do with their daughters, but our talks come with extra warnings and precautions because she is transgender. I have explained to her that people can be cruel and awful for no reason other than they can... that not only does she have to be careful as a young lady growing up, but extra careful with being transgender. I have cautioned her from being alone in private spaces, to walking on the street, to talking to strangers. The danger is already inherited as a girl but amplified for being transgender. She thinks critically and asks thoughtful questions. Above all, there are no secrets kept from us. She has come to us a few times in the last couple of years with issues such as her bus driver "dead naming" her as well as her not being willing to use the boy's restroom at school. Thankfully, our school district is extremely supportive of our daughter and our state has laws protecting transgender youth.

My husband and I are raising a strong, proud, confident, smart, witty, and funny young lady. She is secure in who she is and who she wants to become. My daughter is very open about being transgender as well. There are no secrets--this is who she is. My hope is that she does not find out why we do not have family or friends around until she is old enough to not shoulder the blame for it. While I cannot protect her from everything in this world, I can only hope that we arm her with the knowledge of what to do and how to act in situations. I truly believe that great changes can happen when everyone can be their authentic self without being harshly criticized for simply existing.

Destini Riley

The Big Change

Around the time I was eight, my mom had a stroke. It all started when my mom, Laura, got her degree in cosmetology school. My mom loved doing hair, makeup, and nails. She was actually good at it, too. She had long black hair, always had her eye makeup done with a little wing, and bright red lipstick. She was in school for two years and decided to start her own little business. If someone wanted their hair or makeup done she'd go to their homes and do it right in their kitchen. This was her passion. The way people's faces lit up after she was done and how confident they felt--that was all she needed to brighten her day. But it all got ruined by drugs when she had a stroke.

While I was eight at the time, my brothers Dylan and Bubba were eleven and four. They both looked exactly alike except Bubba was half Dylan's height. Both had dirty-blond hair, blue eyes, and loved video games. My older sister Alexis was fifteen at the time with big ol dimples (which I wish I had.) She had brown hair, green eyes, and a big gorgeous smile. My dad, Josh, looked just like my brothers except he had a scar right on his jawline where a mole used to be. He worked with a tree business called Nelson and would be the one to climb in the tree and cut the limbs. We lived in our childhood house right across the alley from my grandma's. So, anytime we wanted snacks or to just hang with Grams we just walked across the street.

My mom was always in and out of the hospital since the stroke and had to go through a lot of physical therapy. She now has seizures that would cause her to shake, lose

consciousness, and her body would tighten up. She soon got a service dog named Dober. He was big, black, and brown, with long pointy ears. He would help her get through seizures by nudging her till she recollected. I also would hold her through every seizure making sure she didn't hit her head or hurt herself.

One dark rainy night, my dad and sister went out to the dollar store for our basic needs for the household like toiletries, soap, milk, bread, etc. The only people home were Bubba, my mom, and me. My little brother was in the other room playing his game and I was told to watch over her since she had recently just gotten out of the hospital. She was still weak. She looked very skinny, pale, and seemed uneasy. I was sitting with my mom at the kitchen table talking with her about her experiences at the hospital.

She explained, "The hospital kept me heavily sedated and sent me home with a lot of medicine."

I asked, "Is that why you're so drowsy?"

She just nodded her head from being so out of it. She then asked, "Babe, I'm tired. Can you get me a pillow?"

"Yes, where would you like to lie down?"

Weirdly, she said, "Just put it on the kitchen floor."

I thought it was strange to want to sleep on the kitchen floor, considering her room was a few feet away. Automatically, I knew there was something wrong. Then I laid the pillow down on the floor and she laid down like she was going to bed or something. She also was blinking really slowly, like she was passing out. So I kept watching her. After like the fifth blink, her eyes stayed open like she was staring at the ceiling. I began to ponder what happened, how this happened and what my next move was going to be. I started calling her name but there

was no response or movement. Then I nudged her to see if she would awaken, but nothing happened. My little brother Bubba heard my frightened voice and came into the room. I quickly told him to leave. I didn't want him to see her and freak out or potentially freak me out.

I didn't know what to do. I then flashed back to my health class when they showed all of us CPR. I wasn't too good at it, but I thought it was better to try than do nothing at all. All of a sudden, I had an adrenaline rush. I got on top of her and then tried cpr. I wasn't doing it hard enough I believe so it didn't work out. I didn't know what else to do besides get help. That's what I did. I ran over to our neighbors. I had no shoes, it was raining, and my neighbors were reversing out of their driveway. Banging on their window, I blurted out, "My mom is dead!"

My neighbor was a heavier set, blonde, older woman. Although I don't remember her name, I do remember that she worked as an EMT. She ran over to my house, into the kitchen, and saw my mom on the floor. She looked freaked out because my mom was also her friend. I watched her perform CPR. She was way better than me at it which is expected, but, I was sort of amazed at how formal she was doing it. Even though she was good at doing it, it wasn't enough to awaken her. By the time she got into the kitchen her husband, a skinny, white man, had called 911.

By the time the neighbors stop trying, my dad and sister got home. I heard their car, ran outside, and broke the news. I said, "Dad! Mom stopped breathing! Hurry!"

Dad replied with, "No! She was just fine."

My dad ran inside so fast I felt the air from his body passing me. I followed and was told not to go in the kitchen and exempt from seeing my mom. Soon, the ambulance arrived

and did everything they could until they ran out of options. They had to shock her back to life. It was almost too late but thankfully she came back. She was taken to the hospital again for the 50th time. The family was devastated. Everytime we think she's home for good and healthy, it always takes a nasty turn. We all thought it was going to be never ending. That she wouldn't be "normal" again.

People outside were watching her rolling out on the stretcher just wondering what was happening with her. My little brother and I were crying worrying about her too. We felt she was never coming back, stuck at the hospital forever. We just wanted our normal, healthy, mom back. For the rest of that night, the image of her face with her dilated eyes wide open and no expression was stuck in my mind. It just kept eating at me. It even continued to bother me when I slept that night. From then on I felt a sense of worry and anxiousness. Not too long after, I got diagnosed with anxiety.

In the end, she turned out to be alright and is essentially normal for the most part. She gained strength and weight. She began to move her arms more freely and her speech improved. She began a good diet and does not experience many seizures. But she still has issues. Her demeanor has changed and her memory is hazy, since she can only recall events from the past few months. Now, she is feeling better and everyone is pleased.

This frightening day shows how life is full of twists and turns. Full of challenges that test you and make you stronger in the end. You just have to be strong enough to push forward and look beyond your troubles. If you think about it, bad things will happen to test you, and in the next month or so, you won't even be thinking of the situation. But in some cases that's just

for the time being. Once in a while, you might still ponder over the experience again. Even though it's over with, it will still be classified as your most frightening experience.

Burrae Rocha

The Silent Year

The Corona Virus shattered many lives. My story is no different. My family still calls 2020 "the silent year." This was the year the entire world watched in fear as a deadly virus wreaked havoc across the globe. Our elderly were the most vulnerable in this time of uncertainty. Our government assured us they were doing everything they could to ensure the safety and wellbeing of everyone. As Covid's chain of events unfolded, it would bring chaos, tears, and heartbreak to my family. The promise of safety long as you wore a mask, used hand sanitizer, and did not make unnecessary trips outdoors just would not be enough.

My mom had just gotten out of the hospital in November from having fluid drained from around her liver, a complication from stage 4 NASH. She was in good spirits and gaining her strength back every day. I remember sitting on her bed with her watching the events unfold on CNN. "Burrae what is this?" I remember her asking me.

"It's nothing mom, don't worry. I'm sure they have it all under control."

My mom never questioned me after that; she knew I would protect her with my life as I had many times before. My mom had lots of people coming in and out of the house to get her back on her feet after her November hospital stay. Four to five times a week we had home health care, physical therapy, and visiting nurses. Some wore masks, some did not. We got close to a couple nurses; my mom always looked forward to seeing them come in. In the early weeks of Covid, I don't think anyone

thought much about wearing masks. As the months passed, my mom got a little stronger, but weeks went by without any visits from physical therapy, or nurses. They became so short-staffed I was doing all her medical care at home myself. My kids also hated wearing masks. I scolded them every time I saw or heard of them in public without one. "Mom!" they would shrug "it's really not that bad!" You know how the news is, they are just trying to scare people. I half-heartedly believed it was some kind of scare tactic considering I self-entertain as a conspiracy theorist but couldn't be too careful. My mom was 78 years young. She had COPD, NASH, and Congestive heart failure. Now, after hearing this you may think she was a frail little lady but let me tell you this woman has been on deaths doorstep more times you can shake a fist at. I always joked with her that evil never dies—she always shared a laugh in my dark humor.

Our chaos started on January 4th, 2021. I was asleep when my son rushed into my room. "Mom!" he yelled, startling me. "Grandma's talking really weird. You need to come check on her now!" This was not exactly abnormal for my mom as her stage 4 NASH progressed. She would go into what I called liver attacks. The fluid in her liver would back up and would need to be drained at the hospital.

As I got to my mom's room, I could see her scrolling through her phone, but nothing was on the screen. "Mom? Are you ok?" I asked in a concerned voice.

"Well," she said softly, "I have my bat, but I seemed to have lost the ball."

At that point, my son and I both knew something was wrong and it was time to get her to the ER. I cannot remember the ride to the hospital, I just remember sitting outside in the

hospital parking lot waiting for the nurse to call my phone with an update. Because of Covid no one was allowed into the hospital but the patient being seen. My mom was alone for the first time since she was diagnosed with stage 4 NASH 7 years prior. I had been to every doctor's appointment, and every hospitalization but this one. In the middle of my thoughts my phone rang. I could see it was the hospital; I took a deep breath and answered the phone. "Hello this is Tina, Dorothy Kelley's nurse. Is this her daughter?"

"Yes," I said nervously. "Is she ok? Do you know what is going on?"

"Yes," the nurse hesitated. "I am sorry, but your mom has tested positive for Covid."

I could feel myself stop breathing. It felt like the world stopped in that moment. "Covid?" I asked in disbelief. "Are you sure? We followed all the rules, we wore masks, we never left the house."

"Yes, we are sure," the nurse replied. "We are taking your mom up to ICU—her stats are unstable at the moment. I will call you with any updates I receive."

"Call me?" I asked in shock. "I need to be with her. I cannot leave her here alone." "Unfortunately, hospital policy states we can't let anyone but patients into the hospital at this time. I'm so sorry," she explained.

I sat in the hospital parking lot for 27 hours. I prayed my mom knew I was close, and knew I would not leave her alone. The next few weeks were a whirlwind of tears. Once the hospital was able to stabilize my mom's condition, they set us up on video chats where I could talk to her. She was on a high flow nasal canula, so it was hard for her to talk, but I felt better knowing I was there. I called the hospital 4 times a day to get

updates and even made friends with some of the nurses. I remember the day they said my mom could have visitors--my family was ecstatic. We had not seen my mom for 12 long days. Once we got to the hospital it was not the sight we expected: she was weak and frail, her nose covered in sores from the high flow oxygen. Her hair was matted, and she had dry blood around her mouth. "Mom, I whispered softly, "Were here."

She opened her eyes with a smile. She looked so relieved to see us. "How is she?" I asked the nurse. "When can she go home?"

"Well," the nurse said, "We wanted to talk to you about the next arrangements. Your mom is still requiring high flow oxygen and will need some extra support to get her strength back. We would like to see her in a long-term care facility just for a couple of weeks."

"Ok," I agreed. "I think that may be a good idea; we can all help her get strong again." My mom was transferred to the long-term care facility that day.

Nothing could have prepared my family for the tears that would come in those following weeks. My mom was never left alone, a family member was always there with her night and day. We fed her, bathed her, sang to her, helped her walk, and took her to the bathroom. She was slowly starting to get her strength back. The nurses loved her; she was always very sweet to them. "Ohhhh, if you all only really knew her," I would laugh. I do not think they ever believed me when I told them she was the boss of the house and that we all knew it. The long-term care facility allowed us all to come in on Valentine's Day to have dinner with my mom. She was being discharged the next day, and we were so excited to have her back again despite her still being very weak and having some cognitive

issues from Covid. The doctor told us she may be foggy for the next few months so we'd need to take things slow. I kissed my mom on the cheek and told her to pack her bags. I would see her in the morning.

Around 9am I got the phone call. My mom had aspirated at 4AM that morning and she was not doing well at all. I needed to get there right away. I had no thoughts as I drove to my mom. Not a single thought crossed my mind, it was like I was blank. When I walked into the room she was surrounded by nurses and doctors. She had a nasal canula back on and she was breathing heavily.

"What happened?!" I screamed. "What is happening?"

"Your mom isn't going to make it, Burrae," said the doctor. "She aspirated early this morning, and we just got her CT scans back. She has fluid in her lungs and getting the fluid out is impossible. The only option we have is to give her medication for her to pass peacefully or intubate her, but she may not survive the intubation.

"Intubate," I demanded. This is not happening. I was supposed to take her home today!

The doctor intubated my mom that day, and she was transferred to Barnes Jewish hospital where yet again family was not allowed. She fought alone for 3 long days, and I paced the floor for any update I could get. When the doctor called me in the middle of the night of February 18th my heart just knew what he was going to say. My mom's heart became erratic, and she was not going to make it. The doctor held the phone to my mom's ear, and I sang to her as the monitor in the background flatlined. I told her I loved her so much and I was so sorry I could not be there to hold her. I told her I would miss her more than anything in the whole world, and to this day I still do.

The chaos, tears, and heartbreak Covid had on my family will never be forgotten. My mom was denied a funeral because her remains were considered hazardous to the public. She would have to be cremated, and a ceremony of life put together. Over the years, we have gotten to hear many stories like ours. Although it hurts deeply to hear others share their traumatic experiences, we all find peace coming together to remember our loved ones and share who they were when they were alive and well.

Maria Vithayathil

Treading Full Circle

In my earliest memories of learning how to swim, I was fascinated by the prospect. I would almost describe this fascination as a triad of curiosity, excitement, and fear. At age 5, going into “the deep end” was as enthralling as Alan Shepard entering space, or so I would imagine. My primal nature, however, knew that I was a breath away from filling my lungs with water. My mind became deafeningly silent as I gazed into the daunting 12-foot-deep blue abyss. But eventually, the voices of caution dissipated. I learned how to swim, dive, hold my breath, and float lifelessly on my back. Water became a companion with whom I was thrilled to reunite.

I was fourteen when our family took a vacation in Puerto Rico. We usually have a tiresome and rigid schedule, courtesy of my mother. She likes to visit the historical sites and anything with a giant crucifix displayed. Her pious and over-protective nature can be smothering, especially for a teenager. My father adamantly wants to fish when and wherever he has the chance. He was more strict, but emotionally unequipped. As typical with Indian culture, he played a traditional role, disciplinary and bread winning. So long as he wasn't needed, he pretty much did whatever he wanted. My two older brothers, who were always immune to consequence, had a “go with the flow” energy. Being the male offspring, it didn't surprise me. My parents extended little concern so long as they got good grades. But I didn't resent them for being treated less stringently than their little sister; my brothers were not naive to this sibling hierarchy. They did their best to include me in their

fun ploys, especially when I was distraught.

I was young and obsessed with all things aquatic. My favorite experience had been snorkeling in a patch of coral reef. I caught a glimpse of a strikingly yellow sea urchin peacefully feeding in its tiny lair. The trip would have been as enjoyable as any other if not for a particularly transformative day. The day I learned the meaning of the word “panic.”

One day, after breakfast, we decided to keep it simple, finding a nearby beach at which to swim. My parents found a spot where the water looked calm and to the left of the shore was a peninsula of large rocks that Dad could fish from. Mom noticed the rougher channels of water between the rocks.

“Joe please be careful! I don’t know how to swim so if you slip, that’s it! I’m not going to be jumping in after you.”

He nodded his head obligatorily and cast his line while we all waded into the cool Atlantic waters. My brothers brought a Styrofoam football that I thievishly gravitated towards. We were playing “monkey in the middle,” a game where I am, without a doubt, always the monkey. They casually passed the football between one another while I jumped back and forth with flailing arms trying to intercept the ball. Even Mom was having a good laugh at my tom foolery. My brothers suddenly gave up the ball and started swimming.

“Hey! Where are you going?” I knew. And I knew I wouldn’t be able to go.

“We’re gonna catch some rad waves, dude!” Paul said like a west coast surfer prototype.

I proceeded to try and follow them. Til I heard the beckoning alarm of water slapping.

“Maria! Hey, no, no, no. You can stay here,” my mother chimed, smiling partly.

“Why? They get to go!”

“Maria, please, the ocean current is too strong, and you’re a lot smaller than Joe and Paul. You can stay here and have fun,” she said as if she was throwing me a bone.

My face was heating up. What started out as fun became degrading in seconds. I understood her fear, but I didn’t care. I stood there and watched my brothers having a blast without—

“Maria! You need to stay close by! Don’t go too far!” she shouted.

I looked back at her piercing eyes, looked around, and didn’t understand.

“I literally haven’t moved.”

She is always on about something; that unnerving scolding tone loses any sense of urgency when you hear it all the damn time. Regardless, I need to make the most of my own experience. How could I not? The blue horizon was gorgeous. Spinning in the bright sun rays while cool breezes wisped about me, existing felt so —

“Maria! I want you to be within twenty feet of me! Stop swimming further away!”

“I’m not doing anything! I’m just standing here!”

It did seem like I accidentally moved over a couple of feet. I suppose, even in three feet of water, there will be some strength in the current; nothing I can’t handle. Joe and Paul were having such a ball. Rushing into the waves and diving into them backwards at the last minute, riding on the tide for a good thirty seconds towards the—

“Maria! Maria! Maria! Swim to me!”

I looked at Mom, and then looked down and left, frozen in time; my body was being guided towards the large rocks. I tried to walk against the flow towards my mother, but by then it

was too late. I had no control. My feet lost grip of the sea floor. Seconds later, I went under. There was no way of me knowing where I was. I was underwater and being thrown through various channels between the rocks. I did know that eventually I would come out, ocean side and be pulled out further into the Atlantic.

While the nightmarish experience lasted only a minute, my entire life was flashing before my eyes. At fourteen, I was thinking, "Wow, I guess this is death..." Despite such thoughts, my body was still in survival mode, grabbing at anything within reach but the rocks were large and smooth, and covered in moss. There was nothing to hold on to. All I saw was green and gray between streams of bubbles flooding from my mouth. I could not even scream; all I heard were my own helpless muffled whimpers. I started to feel absolute emptiness in my lungs.

In that moment, I was lifted out of the water by my arm. The pain was so searing from a single limb bearing the weight of the rest of my body. My father carried me inland and dropped me on the ground. He was yelling.

"What is wrong with you? Why didn't you listen to Mom and stay nearby? You need to listen! Now look what happened!"

I do not know if I was crying because he was reprimanding me harshly or because I never experienced such a degree of shock and distress. My mother was holding me in a deathly clutch that I never felt so appreciative of. My brothers were standing around my mom, patting me on the back and asking if I was okay with a similar shakiness in their voice. And I was grateful for my father rescuing me despite being upbraided for such an innocent mistake. I knew he was not angry. He was scared and did not know how to express it. Meanwhile, I was

internalizing the long-lasting effects of a traumatic near-death experience.

To this day, I still have a fear of going into natural bodies of water. I have tried to counter the discomfort and panic that consumes me with confidence and rationality. I have tried wading in the Yuba River out in California and froze solid with my foot locked in a secure place. I want to get out, but I fear if I released my foot the current would overpower my attempt to escape and carry me further along to rougher areas. Fortunately, my friend walked over to me and kindly escorted me out without concern. I have even tried swimming in the ocean with some friends, but when I swam further out with them, I could feel my heart rate increase; my breathing was irregular, even spouting out those same whimpers. If waves were too rough for my liking, and I could not feel the bottom, I shifted into hyperventilation. At this point I had to swim back to shore, and cry like I just barely escaped death all over again.

Ultimately, I am not discouraged. Last summer, my boyfriend and I swam in Lake Michigan. It felt like an ocean, considering the notable size of the Great Lakes. The waves were even more powerful than I expected. But with a little support, trust, and a pair of strong shoulders to hang on to, I felt less afraid and more accepting of being adrift. My feet were no closer to the ground; there was only my strength versus the whim of the waves. Over the next few days, we swam more, venturing further out and back. By the fourth day, I felt liberated. I swam out further than before and swam back. He even joined me to make sure I was safe. But I knew I was fine, because my body and my mind were confidently working together.

I still have more healing to allow and efforts to make.

Imagining being adrift in the actual ocean fills me with an unshakeable feeling of fear. The lake was a solid start, though. It felt wonderful to make a companion out of the water again. But the rivers, lakes and oceans have always been there and the same. It was I who was different. So, perhaps it made a companion out of me.

Poe Wilkens

A Good Dog

The neighbors' beloved pet goes missing
A hole dug under the gate to their backyard
Black and white fuzz found in the trees beyond it
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

When the phone rings
Trucks speeding down main roads
Body limp flung through the air
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

Heavy front door left open
A gaping wound in the screen
Our dog unaccounted for again
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

When our dog showed up back home
Bathed and smelling of citrus
Full on hotdogs and popcorn
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

Bones barely hiding under skin
Puppy food in the bowl
In hopes of putting on weight
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

When my mom says the two of us can't go to the vet
Worried our dog won't come home
That it will only be the collar
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

Bright pink tongue out
Chasing birds
Watching our dog roam the field across the street
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

When you can still see the shine in our dog's eyes
The rest is frail
On the verge of collapse
My dad says a good dog wanders off to die

Steven Wood

My First Lake Day

Throughout my life, I never gave much thought to the lake in my hometown. However, through the guidance of my most trusted friend and his family, I have realized that there is a completely new world of recreation that I never explored as a child or teen. It was sometime in July 2024 when my friend Jacob called and invited me to kneeboard with him and his family on his grandfather's boat. Immediately, I accepted his offer as it was an excuse to get out of my house and then proceeded to drive to Gillespie Lake in my \$900 2002 Toyota Sienna, anxiously tapping the steering wheel all the while.

Jacob is a stocky fellow with a body that forms a near-perfect rectangle despite his decently high body fat. He is an incredibly handsome man with bright blue eyes and possesses an affable personality that seems to have survived despite his wife and child. We knew each other all throughout k-12 and started hanging out every week since my junior year of high school after we bonded through our shared love of guitar and music. Completing the drive through the narrow and somewhat precarious road to the lake, I saw the silhouette of the Remer family on the dock, the harsh sun highlighting their forms. As I trekked towards them, I realized just how incessantly hot it was.

It was 2 P.M. and the UV index was peaking; just by glancing around I could see multiple people with marks on their bodies that looked bright, red, and angry. Upon reaching the dock I was first greeted by Jacob's son, a beast of a 3-year-old that is much larger and stronger than any other I have seen firsthand. He made his way towards me clumsily, stumbling not unlike a newborn deer gurgling happy nonsense all the while.

"What's up bud," Jacob welcomed. I had heard him say that

phrase hundreds of times before and immediately felt a slight rush of nostalgia.

"Not much," I responded as Jacob's wife Celsey caught up to the pair. Celsey is a woman of average build with long brown hair that curtains over her brown eyes and tanned skin. I briefed them on what I did since I last rendezvoused with him. The rest of his family had already been out on the boat for about an hour before I arrived, and we awaited their return to the dock expectantly.

Not much time passed until Jacob's grandmother, grandfather, father, and brother slinked up on medium-sized boat. Not wasting any time, they moored the unwieldy vessel, and we piled in. I quickly gave my salutations to everyone on the ship and quietly rejoiced when they had a surplus of sunscreen and water as I had not brought either. The air was thick with the earthy smell of the murky water as the craft sliced through it, leaving misting droplets throughout its wake. The crowd in the boat was giving me a rundown of what to do to successfully kneeboard. Admittedly, their wisdom was more useful than it was not; however, it was mostly wasted on me as my eyes glazed over for a few seconds during the explanation. We soon came upon a nice open expanse of water that was currently unmolested by the several other boats engaging in similar activities, and I began setting up for my go on the kneeboard. Putting on my life jacket, I made my way outside the boat and submerged myself into the extremely reflective water that was almost hard to look at.

Warm water coated my skin and the pleasurable sensation all but nullified the sun's unceasing assault. I then slid onto the rubber board and the boat lurched forward lessening the slack

on the rope. Once I gave them a signal in the form of a hand wave, the boat sped forward and I was immediately dragged along with it in turn. It was my job to lift my knees onto the board and grab the rope. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done as the water resisted my slow advance. My leg slipped off the board and my body skidded along the water briefly like a flat stone, and I waved my hands in the air waiting for their return.

I could hear my rescuers' hearty laughter ring out as their boat drifted near me. Exhaling in annoyance at the outcome of the situation, I took my place on the kneeboard and prepared for round 2. While the slack was being removed, I took a moment to mentally prepare myself for the upcoming trial. In a flash, I was thrust forward yet again but this time I was more prepared. I clenched my abdominal muscles and tore my legs out of the depths while trying to obtain any sort of balance as the displaced water zipped across my body. Placing my knees into the indentation, I grabbed the rope and removed it from the board. I was now fully in position, and I was enjoying the ride to its fullest.

The water streamed around me while the rubber board slid across the water's surface and the speed was exhilarating. I could not shake the feeling that I was doing something wrong though and after a few minutes of enjoyment, I resigned and bailed off the board, content with my experience. When the boat returned and I clambered my way back in, I was quickly notified by Jacob that I was supposed to lean back while holding the rope. I rubbed my eyes at my incompetence, but I laughed it off and told them that I'd rather not go through the strenuous action for a third time and passed my life jacket to Jacob so that the rest of the family could have their go at the

kneeboard.

Not much time has passed since that day, and Jacob still hangs out with me every week. We have also had a couple of lake days since then and I have used that time to hone my kneeboarding ability to the point of doing it correctly. Growing up, my family never went to the lake; I never thought it would appeal to me as I thought of it as nothing more than a pointless dingy body of water. I now see that there are many fulfilling and exciting experiences that one can have while going on a lake day.

Contributors

Anonymous is a very mysterious student at LC.



Laura Dycus lives in Edwardsville, Illinois, with her husband, and had the following to say, "I am fortunate to be the mother of four children, ages ranging from 1 to 25 (yes, I know...). I am currently studying Health Information Management with a focus on medical billing and coding and was recently honored to make the President's List at school. I have always loved the idea of writing, especially poetry, and I am thrilled to have my first short story published in the school magazine. In my free time, if there is a beach nearby, you can bet I will be on it with a book in hand. I enjoy spending time with my family, listening to music, dancing around the house, doing puzzles, and watching Dateline."



Grant Lockhart is an Alton native that graduated from Lewis and Clark in the spring of 2024 with an Associate of Arts Degree. He now attends SIUE and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in integrative studies with a focus on creative writing and religious studies. He loves reading and writing while drinking an iced coffee.



Savannah Moore is a mom to a four-year old daughter and wrote the following, "I am thankful for the opportunity to have

some of my work published. I really enjoyed writing when I was younger and have unfortunately gotten out of the habit. I am excited to see that others are interested in my writing, and it inspires me to continue! I live a pretty simple life, working at a doggie daycare and living in my apartment with my boyfriend, cat, and dog. I can't wait to grow and see where this takes me, and hopefully when I submit in the future you can see more writings from me!"



For his bio, Mark O'Brien wrote, "I'm Mark. My credit score is over 800, and my Elo on chess.com currently stands at 1604. One time I found a mushroom that bore an uncanny resemblance to Mikhail Gorbachev. The end."



Summer Poitra is a student at LC.



Destini Riley is a student at LC.

Burrae Rocha's essay is dedicated to her mom, Dotty Kelley, 2-2-1942 to 2-18-2021.



Maria Vithayathil is a student at LC.



Poe Wilkens has lived in the rural Midwest his whole life. Both his visual art and poetry are heavily influenced by growing up around farms. This is their first publication. In memory of Dash, a great first pet.



Steven Wood is an IT Major at Lewis and Clark Community College with very little experience in anything besides pizza delivery. Steven wrote, "In my spare time, I like to play my classical guitar, 3d print, and read Science Fiction novels."

