



BLUE OUTBREAK 2022-2023

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF MAPLEWOOD
RICHMOND HEIGHTS HIGH SCHOOL

Blue Outbreak
The MRH Literary Magazine
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2022-2023

Graphic Photo Publications Class
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I Didn't Notice

Amber Aubuchon

On my walks home I notice everything around me. How in August the air is hot and humid, the leaves in the tree are a deep shade of green. I notice how when the season changed to autumn, the green leaves lost their hue and fell to the ground. I noticed the afternoon walkers and bike riders changed in to leave rakers. And when the winter hit, the air was frigid and dull. How the leaf piles turned to snow, and the trees were now bare and dead. Sidewalks now abandoned, I noticed it all.

I often wonder, do people notice things about me? Did you notice that my hair is three inches shorter than before? Did you notice the two new scratches on my knee, from when I fell on my bedroom floor? Or did you notice the fresh blue nail polish on my fingers, and how it has chipped over the days? Did you notice?

If you didn't, that's fine because I didn't notice either. I didn't notice when in your free time, you worked overtime. I didn't notice when our conversations fell short. I didn't notice when a fun drink turned into a routine. I didn't notice when your eyes were dark and tired. I didn't notice when your laughter became silent. I never noticed when your smiles became fake. I didn't even notice when you stopped coming around. I never got the chance to notice when you needed help.

I didn't notice anything at all.



Ethan Lewis



Autumn Evans

But I definitely notice what it's like without you. I notice how the sound of your name gets people choked up. I notice the table is far more quiet without you. I notice how eating your favorite foods now leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I noticed the crowded house on the holidays now feels empty. I noticed that certain months are harder than others. I notice that things aren't the same without you.

On my walks home I pay attention to everything. From the seasons causing the leaves to change. The people in the street and what they are doing. To the color of nail polish on people's fingers, or the length of their hair. I notice it all, because I never want to regret not noticing something again.

River Carcass

Aster Tovar

I walked along the river, the sunlight was obstructed by the grey clouds. An overwhelming feeling of dread and melancholy came over me. I didn't yet know why, but I felt a pit in my stomach. The soft crunching of the leaves and the quiet sound of running water were all that could be heard.

As I made my way towards the trees, I noticed something that resembled an animal, about the size of a deer at first glance, resting on the shore. The waves created by the current brushed over the figure as if it were supposed to be there. I approached the unidentified form trying to figure out what it could be.

In something as small as a moment I was filled with horror. I let out a scream, but no sound could be heard coming from me. It wasn't an animal at all. It was a body. I had never seen a corpse and never thought I would. Its eyes were blank, and its skin was so pale you could almost see through it. Its lips were dark and blue. I was shaking, and my ears were ringing, but I somehow managed to get my phone from my pocket and dial 911.

"911. What's your emergency?"

I couldn't talk. It was that feeling you get in your throat, almost as if I were being choked. I don't know why but I started crying. I couldn't stop staring at it, the body.

"Hello?..."

I snapped out of what felt like a trance that had lasted for hours.

"Um. Hi, I found a body. I think."

I don't know why I said "I think," maybe because I hadn't ever seen a body before. Maybe because I couldn't tell if this was all real.

"I'm, uh, somewhere along Deschutes river, I'm not sure exactly where."

"Okay, I'm locating you now. Stay where you are."

I couldn't stop myself from glancing back down at the corpse. It was so much worse than I had ever imagined. I mean, not that I had ever sat and imagined a dead body before, but you know what I mean, right? Everyone occasionally thinks about what a body might look like, but not in a weird way. I forgot I was even on the phone. I know its eyes were lifeless, but it felt as if we were making eye contact. The feeling sent a shiver down my spine

"What's your name?"

"What?"

It sounds strange, but I swear it blinked. I swear it's looking at me.

"Your name, what is it?"

"Oh... um-"

What is my name? How could I forget my name? My own name?

"I don't know my name."

"Of course you don't."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, we do this everyday."

"Do I know you?"

"You don't remember, everytime you never do."

"Look, I don't know what kind of sick joke -"

"Look at the body."

I glanced down again.

"Looks familiar, right?"

I couldn't speak. It, the body, its me. I'm dead.

"How -"

I wasn't even holding a phone. I was imagining the whole phone call. I'm dead.



Lack of Evidence

Aster Tovar

"Was there anyone else there who might've seen it?"

No.

"Did anyone see her do it?"

No, no one was there.

I was alone.

It's just my word against hers.

If nobody saw it happen, did it even really happen?

"There isn't much we can do about it."

Am I making it all up?

Misinterpreting what happened?

What she did is stuck to me like gum under a table

She stuck it to me and walked away like it never happened

But I know it did, it's stuck with me

I am stuck with this dried-up wad of gum that is a pain in the ass to remove

And because no one saw her do it

Stick the gum to the underside of the table

No one will look at her and know that she did it

She'll move on

Forget about it

Never think about it again

Because there's nothing I can do

I'm alone

And I will never scrape it off.

Trials and Tribulations

Eric Shaw

"You're Worthless," says his mother. "You just make my life difficult, can't do anything right. Jesus!" This was her daily rant about the house not being clean. Like you have another kid besides me, tell Mystic to do it. I didn't ask to be here, but I'm here. Yeah, I'm here and constantly blamed for it because of my mother's loss of hope. I'm used to it now. I just pop in my headphones or leave, not like she's going to chase me. She gets nervous when she's too far away from her "meds."

This is the life of me, Miles Kannon and I accepted it. At least I got the guys. Deshaun, Jordan, and Kobe, they're the only family I have, they never led me wrong. Sure we'll be engaged in certain "activities," but that's the circle of life for us. Growing up in St. Louis as a black male is hard enough, but growing up in one bad neighborhood is a different ball game. I live up North, in Pine Lawn, The Lawn we call it, where the sun doesn't shine, really, but it loves to rain. Gotta take what they give you, period, and if someone is eaten, you gotta steal their food. It is what it is, though. Me, Jordan, Deshaun, and Kobe got to get it how we get it and pray that we can go back home when it's said and done.

When an opportunity came up, we took it, anything to get by, anything to get money, anything to make it out. Lucky Kobe's brother is well known in the streets not for the same reason as why Kobe was known but for basketball. He was the top player in high school but lost it all due to a false arrest. That's beside the point, though. He had respect and knew things that we didn't. We had to use that to our advantage.... but his brother wasn't dumb and knew what we were doing and didn't support it. At all.

"Why can't you just help?" said Kobe. "You haven't done anything else for the family since your incident."

The room went quiet, as Kobe's brother's head raises slowly. "What?" he said in a broken voice as he was about to cry, as if just replaying the moment in head feels like he's reliving the moment all over again. "I'm trying to protect you, one mistake can mess up your whole life," said Kobe's brother as tears fell like leaves in the fall. "But you have to learn the hard way." He gives the information on when the next "package" will arrive.

We were scared to even discuss it, and since school started the week we got the information. we used it as an excuse... knowing that we weren't focused on anything that school provided.

Weeks went by before I even said something to them about the situation. After school I dabbed up the guys and walked home a couple houses down from Kobe's. Right as me and Kobe hit the corner, we saw it. The lights shined bright red, nearly blinding you if you were to stare too long. We were used to this sighting, but this was different since they were at Kobe's house. We were timid and slowly approached the house and then we saw the stretcher and took off towards it.

"Kayden!" yelled Kobe after his brother. He walks up to the stretcher confused, hurt, haunted. As an officer pulled him off, Kobe asked, "What happened?"

The officer clears his throat and says, "Someone broke in and killed your brother as he tried to fight back. I'm sorry sir."

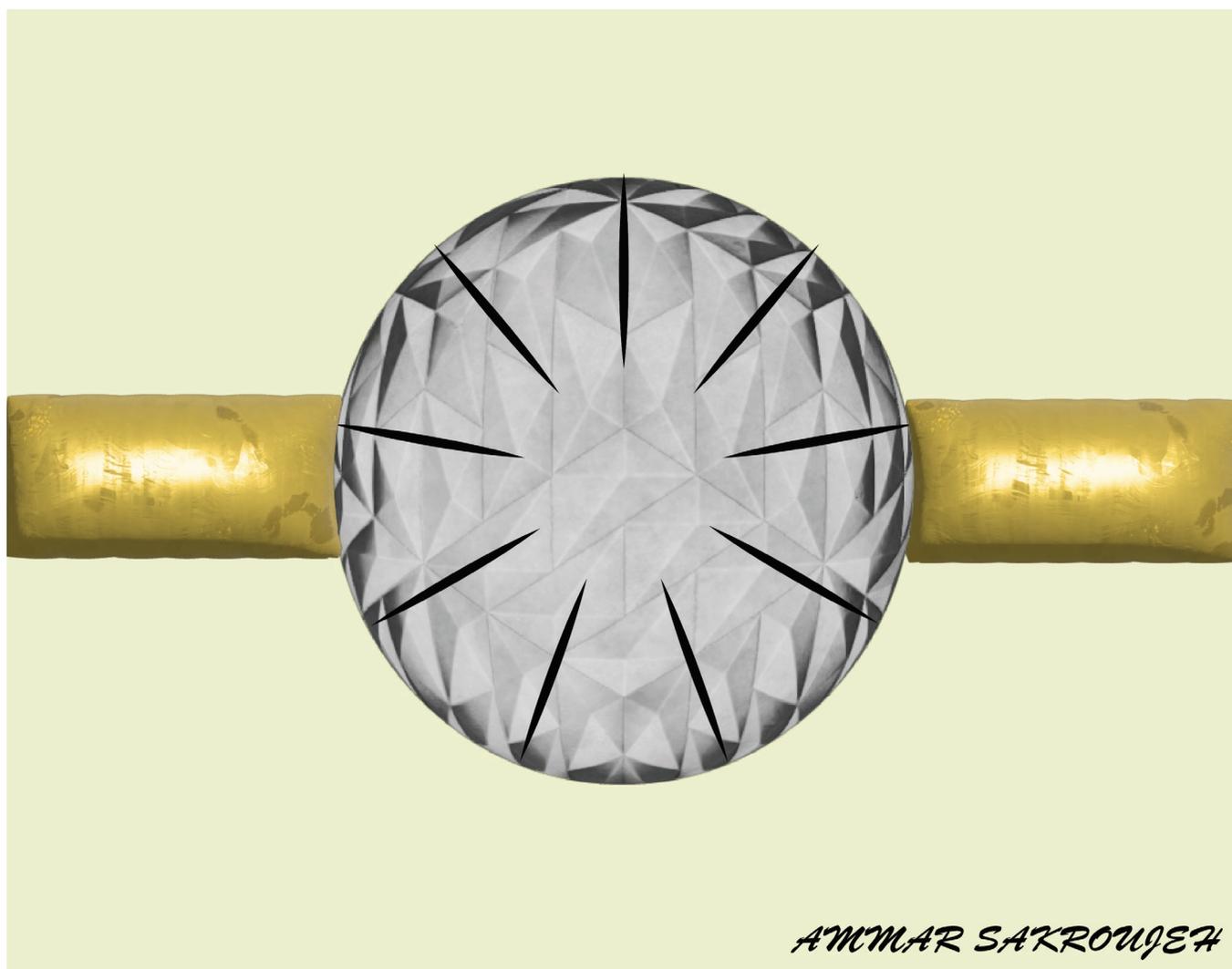
Seeing my brother basically like this changed me. I never wanted to experience this again, and I think Kobe agreed with me as he wiped his face and said, "It's time."



Waiting Game

Pearl Merello

I do nothing but wait.
I wait for the next paycheck,
For the next day off,
For them to text me back,
For the next Pound loss,
For my grades to magically fix themselves,
For the next heartbreak,
When is this going to be over...
When can I live?
I'm waiting for my life to miraculously become "better" but at what cost?
I've wasted so much time waiting, maybe it's time to live in the present.
People say to be present, but the present is unbearable
I mourn the loss of my life while I still live it.



What's to Come

Pearl Merello

I feel sorry for my younger self. I feel
Sorry for the version of me that was
Chasing after the approval of others
in order to feel complete.
Yet she never found exactly what
she was looking for.

It hurts when you can no longer
Remember who you are and your
Identity is a lie created to comfort the
Hole inside your heart. It hurts when
You wake up every single day
And count the minutes until you get to
Go to sleep again. It hurts to
reminisce on the past and what
Could have been.

Her smile is made up of so much
strength. She has lived through hell but
Still has the courage to believe in better
Days. She has seen the darkness that
covers the world, but still adores those
Precious moments that remind her how
Much good exists behind the hurt. She
Wakes up every morning to a "happy"
Family, not knowing the heartache
To come.

I remember these moments, and I
I feel sorry for my younger self. I
Feel sorry that I couldn't save her
From it all. Every moment I look
Back I feel sorry for what she
Is about to go through. She is me.
I am her.
I have lived through the trauma.
I have grown and learned to forget.

She doesn't see how capable she is. She
Doesn't realize how much beauty
Her light can build. I wish i could tell her
How truly wonderful she is. I wish I
Could save her from what's to come.



Jake Was Here

Peyton Bania

The Sun beats down as I walk along the black asphalt highway. But I tried to keep a pep in my step as I listened to my pop music with my earbuds plugged into my cassette player. I could see the Gateway Mountains far off in the distance, the top was barely visible above the horizon. As I gaze at my surroundings, all I can see is the hot orange sand that lay on the ground and the fine dirt dust that blows in the wind. As I truck along, I pass oil rigs that dot the landscape. They clunk and clang, pulling up the liquid gold that made this place rich. The space along the horizon wiggles and flows as the heat boils the air.

I was getting tired and thirsty, but I needed to keep going. I could hear the woooshh of a car in the distance. I stick my left arm out in the road, holding a thumb up, surrendering my safety to the mercy of whoever drives past. I was sure they wouldn't pull over anyway. But I was wrong.

As the car saw me, it slowed down and came to a putt putt stop on the right side of the road about 50 feet ahead of me. I was nervous as to what kind of person would be willing to give me a ride. A pervert? A kidnapper? Who knows. I slowly walked up to the passenger window of the brown Dodge Intrepid and tried to look in. A dark black film over the window blocked the view of the inside. The window slowly slid down, shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. It revealed a small old lady. I noticed that the car was covered in trash and the lady had a few stains on her shirt.

"Hi there, baby!" the lady said to me with excitement.

"Hello, Ma'am," I responded with my dry lips.

"Are you trying to get to the border, love?"

I had to be careful about what I said next. I couldn't tell by her appearance if she would turn me into the police for trying to escape or help me along my trip.

"Yes, Ma'am." I took a risk in the hopes that this would be a nice lady.

"You don't have to call me Ma'am, call me Jolean. Hop in, I'll take you as far as I can," she said with a big smile, unlocking the door.

Even though she was very nice, my guard was still up. I hesitantly opened the door and sat down in the passenger seat. The car had a smell like cheeseburgers and old lady perfume. A blue air freshener dangled along the plastic rearview mirror. I looked at the lady as she watched me get in. Her gray hair was poofy and pressed up against the roof of the car. She wore pink tinted sunglasses and clothed herself with a red blouse and dark tight jeans. Jolean put the car in drive and pulled out onto the highway again. I looked around her car in silence, trying to get a gauge of this person.

"What's your name, dear?" she asked me.

"Jake, Ma'am." I responded bluntly.

"You must be one of those teens feeling the country, ain't you?" she said, glancing at me. I looked down into the corner with a sad expression on my face and said nothing. I didn't answer, I was already ashamed of leaving my family. Once again the fear sat at the bottom of me and weighed me down.

Jolean lost her smile as she saw my expression. "Here, love, have some water," she said as she pointed to a large blue water bottle sitting in the cup holder.

I picked it up and unscrewed the cap. It was cold on my hands. I sipped and gulped the water. The cool refreshing feeling soothed my throat. I let it leave my lips and screwed the cap back on with half of the water now gone in almost an instant.

"I get how you feel, sonny. It feels as though this country has gone to waste as President Jacobs has pretty much turned this country into a dictatorship. I wouldn't be surprised if he rigs the next election. What has made you decide to leave? Is it just the government?" she asked as she kept her eyes on the road.

"That's part of it," I responded. "I'm only 17 and my parents want me to stay here. We lived in an old RV park in the south. But I had to do what's best for myself. The Gateway Mountains are the only way in or out of here. I just have to somehow get through border control." I paused for a moment before.

"Thank you, Ma'am, for the ride and the water."

"Oh, it's no problem, boy!" she said with a big smile. "I would leave this country too if I could, but I have a family here, and I don't want to put them in danger trying to smuggle them out."

My mouth stayed closed, and I didn't say a word. I just looked at her. She acknowledged my silence and didn't say anything for a while.

We listened to the radio for an hour or two, the conversation minimal. The sun was setting, and the stars in the sky were starting to become visible.

"We are almost home. It's an RV community, the last one before the Gateway Mountains. Perhaps it would be a good place to rest."

We pulled off of the highway and into the community, driving under a dilapidated wooden arch spanned over the dirt road entrance. String lights hang on



the arch with "Gateway Mountains Park" written in dripping white paint on it.

As I looked around the little country town, it was lined with dirty RV's and lines of clothes hanging from camper to camper. In the center of the park, an old red headed man sat, stroking his banjo and singing bluegrass tunes on top of a small wooden stage. Members of the community sat and danced around the wooden stage as he performed. Even though this place was poor and dirty, it had a feeling of safety that even the rich communities of Tufren don't have.

Jolean pulled the car in front of a small tin trailer plastered with political campaign ads for Alexander Cadence, the opposing candidate to President Jacobs. She turned the car off and got out. I followed her actions and stepped out. As I stepped out and into the park, the smell of booze and tobacco hit me in the face. I scrunched my face as my lungs tried to process the smoky air. I walked to the other side of the car and stood in front of Jolean. She stepped up to the door of her rundown trailer and put the key in the lock.

"Well, baby, this is as much as I can do for you, I wish you luck on your journey," she said to me.

"Thank you for everything, Jolean," I said as I held my arms in front of me and stood up straight, trying to show the most respect possible.

She put on a big comforting smile and leaned over to pat me on the head. She walked into her RV and closed the door.

As I turned around, the singer on the small stage started to sing a slower, more sad song. In the corner of the park lay a small campfire, forgotten by those who started it. I wandered over to it and sat in front of it. I took a deep breath and watched the fire twirl and dance.

As I felt the soft heat on my face, I could see how fiery my exit from my home was. How sad my mom was. I could still hear the ear piercing voice of my dad for abandoning him, my mom, and my little sister. In some ways, I still believed he was right. My dad had worked on the oil rigs, and my mom worked for a plastics factory. If I had decided to stay, I would have done the same thing when I turned 18. Everyone in this country is just a cog in the machine. They assign their citizens to do their dirty work and operate their meaningless empires while they inbreed in their marble mansions. By leaving I was leaving them to fend for themselves. But I can't be stuck in this system anymore. I have seen the illusion of free will they set on everyone, and I just can't be part of it anymore. I have to leave the box to realize my full potential. I did hope I would see my mom and sister again.

I laid down on the dirt next to the fire, getting my jeans and orange T-shirt even more dirty than they already were. I leaned my head up against a rock and looked into the sky. The universe spoke to me and told me what might lay on the other side of the border. I was hopeful, but nothing could soothe my fear. With glossy eyes I slowly drifted off and fell asleep.

But in almost what felt like the blink of an eye I was awoken by hard sunlight slapping my face. Slowly I stood up and looked at my surroundings. The fire I slept in front of was nothing but a pile of coals. Many members of the community sat in front of their RVs on lawn chairs smoking cigarettes.

As my brain started to become conscious, I walked up to a makeshift deli stand in the corner and bought a sandwich. I sat down and ate the delicious ham and cheese sandwich. This would likely be the last meal I'll ever eat in Tufren. I took my cassette player out of my pocket and plugged my headphones in. It was time to get going.

I left The Gateway Mountains Park and started walking along the road again. As I got closer and closer to the mountains, the biome started to subtly shift from hot desert to a green forest. I had been walking for hours with hundreds of semi-trucks passing me along the way. Eventually I came across a large valley with the highway sitting at the bottom. There had been rumors that police officers patrolled the valley. I decided to go up and around the valley. I had heard directions from a friend at school on how to reach a secret supply point for other teens crossing the border.

As I hiked up the path, out of breath for the whole duration, sweat dripped down my back and the flies thought I was something that died. The warm green forest brought back memories from when I was a kid. My mom would take me and my sister to the forest and I would love to try and catch butterflies. As I remembered those memories, they made me sad, and it made it hard to go faster.

By that afternoon I had reached the supply point. A huge gray boulder sat along the meandering path of a blue stream. The rock had "Leave something, Take Something" in white spray paint, with a spray can placed next to it. Leaned up against the rock was a bottle of water and a granola bar. I took the water and chugged it; my thirst felt unquenchable. In return I took a \$20 bill out of my pocket and placed it under a small pebble to stop the wind from blowing it. I picked up the spray can and walked to the other side. I sprayed the words "Jake was Here," forever cementing my place in history as a teen who would try and cross the border.

I continued on, trying to block out any feelings or emotions that might hold me back. After walking for a while, I came back to the original road I was walking on. I looked in the distance and saw a large cement structure. It spanned the entire valley and looked like a water dam. Semi-trucks lined the road at a dead stop, waiting their turn for inspection to cross through the tunnel to the other side. Suddenly my stomach dropped, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to actually make it across without getting caught. But there was no turning back now.

After hiding in the tall grass for a while, I walked up behind a large dilapidated cargo truck. Just my luck, it didn't have a lock. I quietly opened the hatch

and climbed inside, trying to be as slick as possible. Inside was dark; the only light shone through holes in the wall of the truck. Boxes of god knows what stacked up lined the walls. I tucked myself in the corner of the boxes and slid multiple stacks in front of me in order to block the view from the door. I sat curled up on the cold metal floor in the dark. The truck inched forward every once in a while. After what seemed like hours, the truck had made it to the security checkpoint. I could tell by all the people talking outside of the truck.

"License and employment proof, please," I could hear a man say to the driver. "Anything we should know about in the back of the truck?" asked the officer.

"Nope, just boxes of office supplies," said the driver.

"All right then, we are just going to take a look, if you don't mind."

A cold sweat ran down my neck. My heart was pounding. All I could feel was my gut twisting up in knots. The door clanged open, and a flood of yellow light filled the truck. But I was still hidden behind the wall of boxes. A part of me was convinced that this was it, that they would find me. I wanted to go home, I wanted to go back to my family. I felt like this was a horrible idea.

The truck door closed, and I was then consumed by darkness once more.

"All Clear!" the Officer said as a buzzer went off and the gate was opened to the other side.

Freedom. Freedom at last.

They say freedom is not bestowed but achieved. It was then a new chapter, a chapter of opportunity and freedom from oppression.

Bleeding Dreams

Peyton Bania

Lover of My Dreams

they're a pina colada on a cruise ship.
I'm wondering, how are they real?
they're heaven in a chocolate cake.
How do they feel so swell?

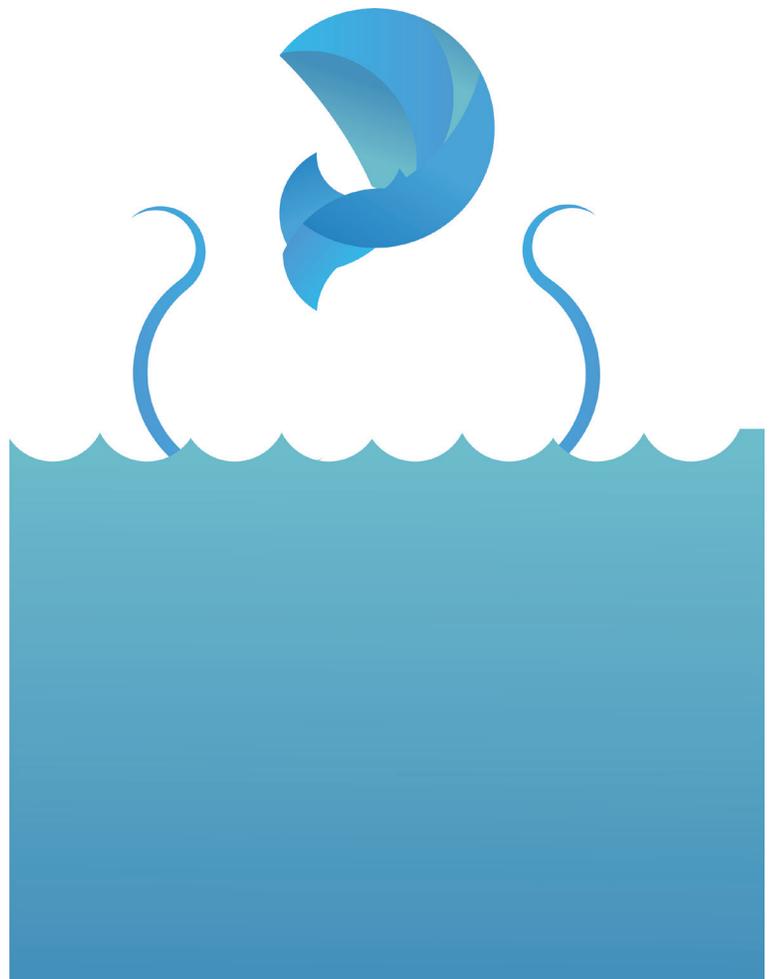
When they smile, Christmas lights dance with the city.
When they walk into the room, the walls of flowers bloom.
When I sleep at night I see the lover of my dreams.

So maybe last time was a plane wreck.
But how will I ever know if I can fly
If I never jump off the cliff?

When they hold my hand, the stars in the sky start to swirl.
When they kiss me, the fireworks light up the night.
When the moon is up, I see the lover of my dreams.

They're just the kind to trick me.
So maybe I stop and think.
Or maybe I just buy the ring.

When they holds me tight, the fish in the sea dance around us.
When they looks into my eyes, the orchestra plays louder.
When I close my eyes, I see the they of my dreams.



Hardcore Sports

Peyton Bania

Heads up, the ball's in your court.
I'm getting tired of selling myself short.
So I'll be out by halftime.

This game you love is an hardcore sport.
Is goes back and forth
Back and forth
And back and forth
Back and forth
And back forth.

Play me in the first
Got me benched in the last.
I don't even know how to play anymore.
Ref called a foul on me

Whenever I hit the ball to your court
You hit it back even harder.
There's only a few minutes left on the clock.
I'm sorry my sweat is getting all over the ball,
You're making me work hard.

This doesn't feel like scrimmage anymore.
You're playing like a pro.
You really haven't played on my team in a while.
This game's complex, rules are slipping my mind.

You love doing your extra victory lap.
Why do I feel like you're putting me on trial?

It goes back and forth
Back and forth
And Back and forth
Back and forth
And back and forth

I don't even really give a crap about sports.
This game you love is an hardcore sport.
I don't even know how to play anymore.



Almost Got Me

Peyton Bania

You were my northern star
Guiding me home.
My gun in a knife fight.

When I was alone
You were a whole galaxy
I could zoom through and explore.
You made me feel like the stars pumped in my veins.

You reached inside my chest
And touched my heart.
I let you hold it.

But did you realize that when your nukes went off
They would rain down on us?

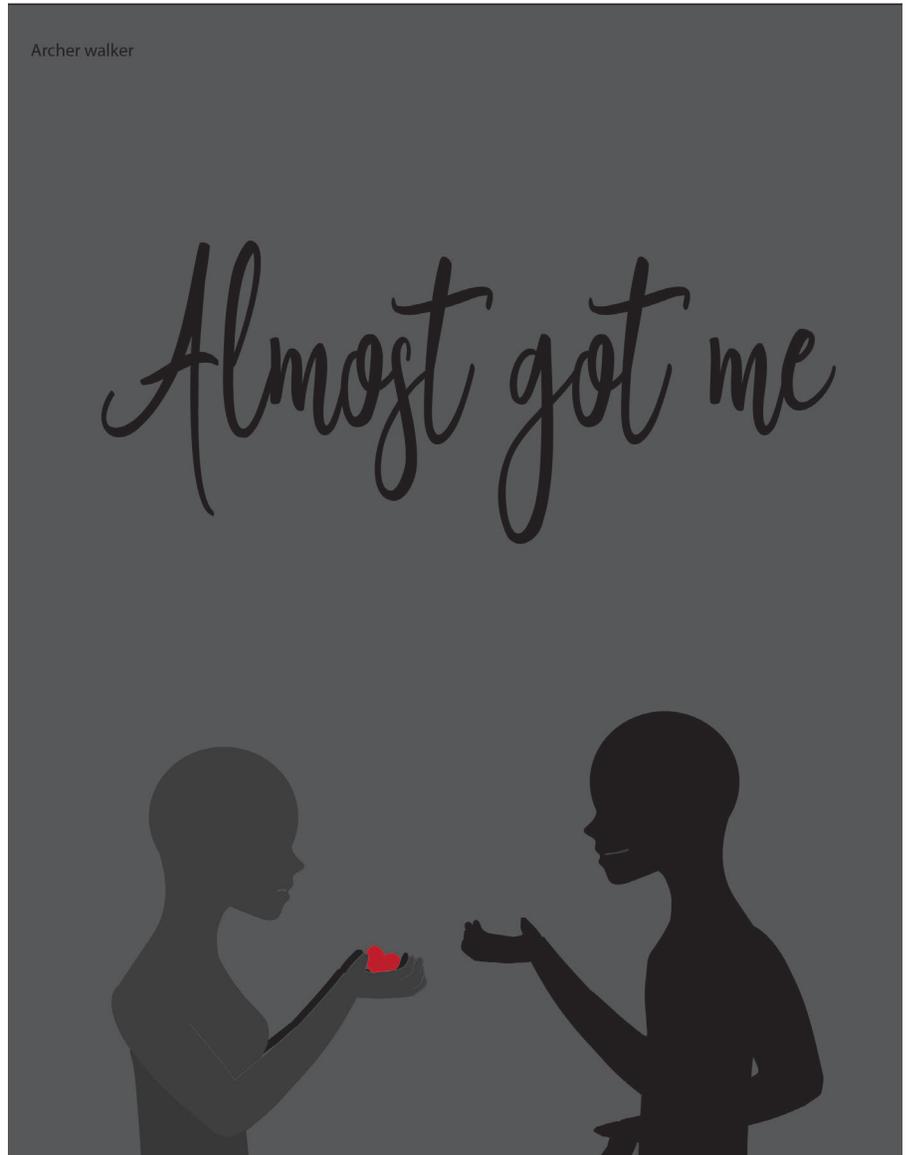
Turns out I was a knife in a gunfight.
And I fought like a maniac.
You were a wolf in sheep's clothing.

With the backstab
And it bled so badly.

I knew when your heart stopped beating,
I couldn't let you sink your teeth in.

I was a knife in a gunfight.
And I fought like a maniac.
You were a wolf in sheep's clothing.

You almost got me.



Pillar of Blood

Peyton Bania

Poor wolf

I know you're living with a wild hunger.
You'll do whatever it takes to feed.
Living in the same old sin
I feel it rustling through the night.

Every single drop of sweat
I feel it running down my back,
When you stare at me like that.
Your yellow eyes and blood coated teeth
Make me want to run.

But like the deer I am
I freeze in the headlights of your natted fur.
If I become a pillar of blood
I'll know that it was all my fault.
Every single drop of sweat

You're just a bottomless pit of hunger.
You wear your skull on your face.
Your hot breath is filled with flies.
You howl but hear no call.

Take me to the deepest of forests
So you can leave me in the dust.

You know you'll never be full.
If I become a pillar of blood,
I'll know that it was all my fault.



*"But like the deer I am
I freeze in the headlights of your natted fur.
If I become a pillar of blood
I'll know that it was all my fault."*

Cedric Wielocher

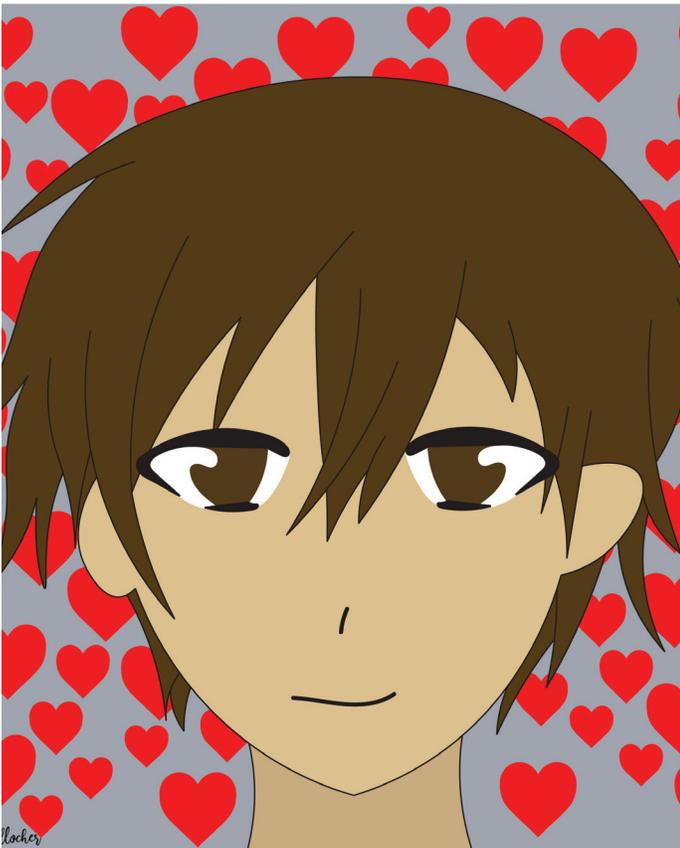
HIM!

Lexi Brooks

His eyes,
Brown like the new fall leaves
His smile that's perfect
His laugh that makes me smile
His attraction that pulls me in
His hugs that make me feel safe
When I'm with him it feels like the whole world is moving in slow motion
The spark I get from being around him
The way he looks at me that makes me fall in love with him all over again
How he calls me all his cute little nicknames for me
The way I miss him every second I'm not with him
The way he's always on my mind
The way he laughs as I'm dancing around blasting Taylor Swift
How he is so warm
His hands a perfect fit in mine
The way I wear his clothes and how they smell like him



How I crave his touch every second
How he holds onto me so tight
How I fell for him so fast
How he makes me laugh every day
How he makes me think about our whole future together
How I'm scared to lose him because I don't know if I could live without him
How he makes me think I met my soulmate
I love him.



The Bass Teacher

Olivia Ceballos

The connection you can have with a music teacher can be very great. They're teaching you about something you're passionate about, they can play with you, and especially if they're not too much older than you, you guys can really hit it off and have good conversations and interactions.

I had a bass teacher at School of Rock, and I believed he would make me the best bassist there. He was my bass teacher from 2019 through March of 2022. I started lessons with him when I was thirteen, and then our lessons ended when I was sixteen. Teachers don't often share their age with students, but he and I shared a joke about him turning twenty-seven. Hopefully he wouldn't join the twenty-seven club in classic rock history! Age doesn't always matter, but in this story, it does.

He was funny, kind, talented, and had connections with his students. It was 2020 over zoom where my connection with him really grew. We were joking constantly, and I was finally feeling comfortable with a music teacher. When we got back to School of Rock in person, everything was different. He wasn't the same person anymore, but neither was I. I had grown up, as teenagers naturally do, but with the pandemic, I was forced to spend a lot of time with myself, and to evolve. I didn't mind his jokes, how he'd gossip with me about other students, and the way he would act around me and his other students.



Henry Krussel

It was really the way he would act around me that I didn't mind. But there was something else too. There was a certain relationship that would change our lives.

The first time I noticed her was at a house band show before the seniors graduated, so I understood why she was there to support her friends that were one year younger than she was. My bass teacher was also at that show, and at the time, I was really excited that he had decided to come to a house band show. It was the first time he saw me play with the house band, and I wanted to impress him. The second time I noticed her was at another house band show during the summer, after the seniors had graduated and left, so I was a little confused as to why she'd show up. I noticed her and my bass teacher talking, but I thought nothing of it. I thought it must be nice for them to reunite after being teacher and student from the previous year. The third time I saw her was the day I knew something was wrong. The house band had a show right outside the School of Rock, and many teachers were attending the show, including my bass teacher. She didn't just show up as herself, she showed up as an attachment to my bass teacher. When I saw her show up with his dog, I knew immediately that something was going on. Why is she doing this? What is going on? We all noticed.

As time went on, more information came out, and I had to contemplate everything that happened in the past. Everything and nothing started to make sense. She only came to those shows because he was there. They had been dating through the spring and summer, and none of us knew until now. This was one of the hardest things I've ever had to go through. I used to have a teacher that I loved, he was the best music teacher I'd ever had. But then he messed up his reputation, he ruined his position at School of Rock, he lost his trust with students and teachers. But most of all, he lost his connections with his students.

I even wrote a letter that was addressed to him so I could express my feelings. Some of the letter stated, "I feel betrayed. I feel like someone I thought I could count on and enjoy seeing is ruined for me. Is this really worth possibly losing your job? Possibly restricting you from important titles at School of Rock? Losing your trust from your students? Causing students to contemplate switching teachers or even leaving? Are you seriously making this decision to date a 19 year old right now? I didn't want you to do something so stupid like that. I didn't want you to be that desperate to date someone who's too young for you, and who you met through your job while she was a student. Do you realize how wrong that is? Do you realize how this is affecting the school? How this is ruining the reputation of the school? You're really willing to risk your name and how people view you to date a young girl who used to go there? You are a man who should have the brain capacity and understanding that it's completely wrong and inappropriate to date a 19 year old young adult. Even though this isn't illegal, it's still completely wrong."

That was some of the angry emotions in the letter. The disappointment and personal side of the letter states, "You have been the best music teacher I've ever had. You've made me feel like I couldn't find someone else, I felt like I couldn't move on from you. Now I feel completely disappointed that you have chosen to do something so morally wrong and not even care about it. I feel so uncomfortable around you now. I feel like I can't even make eye contact with you without wanting to cry. I'm confused, disgusted, angry, disappointed, and really hurt. This is not something to brag about. I will never be the same after this. I will never view you as I did before this happened. You've made me lose my trust in you, my happiness to see you. You've really let me down. I'm really upset by this. I hope that we can figure out a way to repair our student-teacher bond."

Since then, I've had to let go of what I thought was a really great bond. I've had to deal with my range of different emotions. Feeling sad because it felt like he just left me and the school with no problem, feeling upset with myself for letting myself feel so connected with this teacher, and just straight up feeling angry at him for doing this.

This topic is always on my mind and is affecting me to this day. I'm trying to work through what he did to School of Rock and the community within the school. Despite the situation, he still made me one of the best bassists at School of Rock. During our last lesson, these words were shared: "You are smart and very talented. You were one of the best students. I loved being your teacher. Good luck. Goodbye."

Things We Can't Write About In English Class

Olivia Ceballos

Disclaimer: This piece is entirely satirical and ironic

There's some things we can't write about in English class. The papers you turn in shouldn't be your diary. You're not confessing to your therapist. Why are you treating this like you have to dump trauma every writing assignment you get? Don't get too personal, your teacher doesn't care. How will your teacher grade that? Eh, I didn't like how you wrote about feeling worthless and your bad relationship with your dad. Well, that's too bad because this is what I'm dealing with. Sorry that my writing wasn't to your liking. I'll write an essay about something I don't care about next time. Anyways, these are the things we can't write about in English class.

Mental health. If you write about depression, feeling suicidal, anxiety, or any other disorders that you have, you're just setting yourself up to be sent to the counselor. They're gonna call your parents and urge you to see a therapist or go to a mental hospital. It's a bad idea. Just keep it inside. Don't let anyone know or they'll ruin your life trying to help you. Any time you get assigned to write something for English, you always have to dump all your problems on your English teacher. That poor teacher! They definitely don't want to hear about the times you cried yourself to sleep, felt like you couldn't go on any longer, or when you had that horrible panic attack at school. Just take your medications, and you'll be fine. I just took three anxiety pills while writing this.

Drugs. We all know you do them, pothead, but don't write about it! It's illegal to smoke weed and to do any other drugs, so maybe don't write about them and send it to your English teacher. Don't talk about your after dinner walk with your cousins on Thanksgiving, that time you greened out in the Olive Garden bathroom, or when you got absolutely drunk and stoned at the party after homecoming. Look, we all smelled it in the bathroom, we knew what you were doing when there were five sets of legs in one bathroom stall, we all knew what you were doing when you suspiciously gave him money in the middle of class, and we all saw the vape fall out of your pocket in the hallway. You gotta keep that on the low, do you really want your cart to be taken away from your mom because she found out you're smoking weed?

Love. First of all, we're in high school, what love are we experiencing? Second of all, weird. Your teacher does not want to hear about that. What are you thinking? That's personal information that's meant for your diary. And how embarrassing would it be to have your classmates reading what you think about your significant other? What if you break up with them after you publish it? Be smart, don't write about love. Okay, fine, we're all thinking about it, so it's hard to not talk about it. Man, I hope my hallway crush is reading this.

Friendships that no longer exist. Once again, how embarrassing would it be for other classmates to know exactly who you're talking about? Trust me, they know. It's just not a good idea. Just text the group chat about your issues with this person, don't publish it so everyone can read it. You're essentially just saying, "Hey, I want everyone to know that [insert name here] and I aren't friends anymore, and this is how they're horrible.", so maybe reconsider. And you're most likely going to tell the story from the point of view that sets them up to be the bad guy. What if you're a part of the reason why you're not friends anymore? That's going to start the drama all over again, and you don't want that elementary or middle school drama in high school, now do you? By the way, I'm expecting some ex-friends to read this, so hey!

Your bass teacher. In what kind of environment do you think it's okay to write about an adult who was inappropriate, abused his power, and mentally harmed many people? In no situation, really, but certainly not for a writing piece in English class, that'll be read by teachers! Why would you even bring that up in school? Bring it up to a lawyer.

I hope this was helpful for all the oversharers and for the mentally ill who take up any opportunity to trauma dump. Now you know about the things we can't write about in English class. Including a piece like this.



The Darkness

Jadyn Garneau

May 7, 2021, I was in the car with my mother and my step dad. We were on our way home from my friend Nate's house. My mother was driving my step dad next to her as they listened to me in the backseat talking about my day. As we were passing Ryan Hummert Park, I began to hear music that seemed very loud but far away. Almost like someone was blasting music on a big speaker in the park. When doctors ask me what happened, that's all I am able to tell them because that's all I am able to remember before everything went dark.

Talking about my seizure is never difficult for me, but for my mother it is rather hard. People always ask me if it was scary, and I always tell them that it wasn't. Although, now that I am reflecting on it, it was only scary when I woke up. For me it was like when you go to sleep but don't remember falling asleep. And when I came back around, it seemed like everything had happened in a blink of an eye, except it didn't.

Seven minutes. That's how long my seizure was, and because of this it was classified as a grand mal seizure. They are rare, and by some dumb luck, I had one. Grand mal seizures lead to a loss of consciousness, which I experienced, and muscle convulsions, which I also experienced. However, something that doesn't come up when you search "Grand mal seizure" on Google is that the person will stop breathing. I did though, and I don't know if it was the shade of purple that had made its way to my lips, or if it was the death grip before the shaking that scared my mom the most, but if I were to witness what she had that day, I would have felt ten times more scared than I did.

I woke up to a pain in my finger, I'm not exactly sure what it was, I just remember that it hurt. Now imagine waking up, strapped to a gurney, in the back of an ambulance to which you don't remember getting in or for what reason. I was terrified. I started crying and looking all over and calling for my mom.

"Why am I here? I didn't do anything wrong." I'm not sure why my immediate thought was that I did something wrong, but it was. I remember being in an almost loopy state while the paramedics asked me a bunch of questions.

When we got to the hospital, they told us that I had to stay the night. The next day I was scheduled for an MRI, and they found two spots on both sides of my brain. The doctor told me that I would need to come back in order to see if the spots had grown, and thankfully they hadn't. However, when I had an appointment with my neurologist and an epilepsy specialist they asked me to describe what happened before I had my seizure.

"It was like music coming from the park we drove past, but it was really loud." I repeated that multiple times. When I told them about the other times I'd had "episodes," I explained, "It's almost like a white noise or a really big crowd of people all talking at the same time."

After I told them this, they eventually diagnosed me with epilepsy and said that what I was hearing was called auras and were mini seizures. They put me on Zonisamide and said that I needed multiple vitamins and suggested taking prenatal vitamins. The doctors informed me that I would have to take this medication for two years and that the side effects might be weight loss, sleepiness, and even something to do with my kidney.

When my mom and I got into the car, I didn't really know how to react to what I had been told. "So I have epilepsy?" I said to my mom, and she looked at me.

"Yes," she simply responded to me.

I sat for a little while which allowed me to think about all the things I would have to be cautious of now.

"So I can't go to a club and party? Can I still go to Harry's concert? You know what, I'm still going, I don't care." It all came out of my mouth at rapid fire. My mother wasn't very sure of me going to that concert still, but she eventually let up and allowed me to go.

On September 14, 2022 I had my first aura since August of 2021 and since I'd started taking the medicine. I was in Algebra II, and there was some quiet talking going on here and there. I was scared. I texted my mom, and there was an immediate response. She was scared. Scared of the possibility that I would fall into that darkness again, but I wouldn't be with her or my stepdad. Scared that I would stop responding to her texts and she would receive a phone call saying that it had entered the darkness again.

That's always something that's on my mind. That I will wake up in an ambulance again around people I don't know with fear and confusion running through my body. That I will have to spend another night in a hospital bed being monitored. That I will be the cause for another huge hospital bill. That my mother is worried sick because I'm not with her. That my family will forever be scared to let me live life because I have epilepsy. But however worried or scared we were, we've already come so far, and there's nowhere to go but forward.

What's happening?

is it a good

Eitan E-H

Enemies Blood Intertwined

Jadyn Garneau

"Alex!" Kingston yells at me from downstairs. He makes his way to my room as I continue to touch up my hair in the mirror.

"Yeah?" I respond as I stand and start for my bed that has my dress resting on it. I pick my dress up as I listen to Kingston's footsteps getting closer and closer. I quickly slip the dress on and zip it as much as I can.

"Could you help me?" I ask him as I feel his strong presence at the door frame. I look at him through the mirror and watch him make his way to me.

He zips up the little amount of the dress that was left and steps back. Once our gazes connect again, I am surprised to see an almost smile on his face.

"Red really suits you," he says to me.

This might be the first time he is actually complimenting me. And I can't help but smile at it.

"Thanks," I say in return.

"Are you ready to go?" he says after a few seconds.

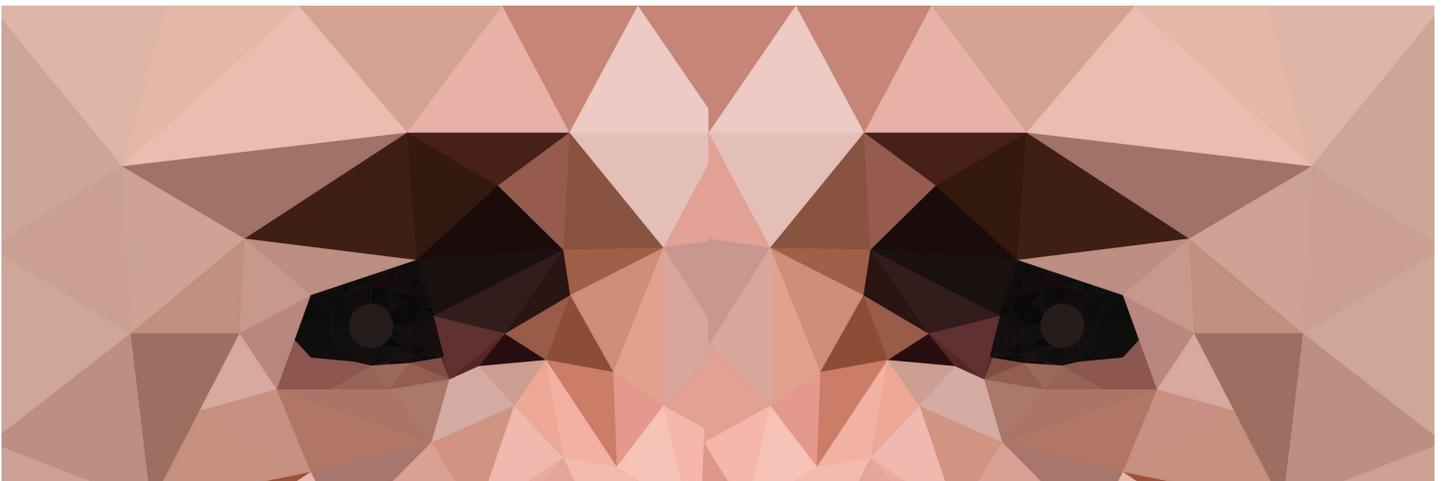
"Yeah. Just let me put my shoes on and grab my purse," I say as I make my way to my closet. I quickly grab my black heels and slip them on. I then grab my black and gold handbag.

"Okay, let's go," I say, looking at Kingston walking towards him. He turns the light off and gestures for me to lead the way. The two of us make our way to the car. With each step I take I become progressively more nervous.

Tonight will for sure be one of the scariest nights in a long time. Tonight will be the first time I am seeing my father since my birthday. What will he think? What will he say? What will he do? And what about Kingston's father? Surely both of them will be enraged by our actions.

"Are you scared at all?" I broke the silence between me and Kingston.

"Possibly a little. But I'm more excited to see the looks on our fathers' faces when they see just how important we've become without them. I'm sure it'll



be hilarious.” He quickly looks at me with a smile on his face. He knows I’m nervous, and I deeply appreciate his attempts to make me feel better.

After spending some time in the car, we finally arrived at our destination. Kingston got out of the car and handed the keys to the valet driver before he came around to open my door.

“Thanks KJ,” I say as I step out of the car and start making my way up the blood red stairs. Kingston and I make our way up the stairs and into this castle looking building.

Once we got in the building, people immediately looked our way. I wanted to look at my feet. Surely my shoes would be nicer to look at than all these scary men and women. However, I held my head high because that’s what my father always taught me. He told me that even if I’m not confident, I need to act like it, so that’s what I’m going to do.

The louder the music gets, the tighter my muscles and throat gets. With each step we take, the talking gets deeper. As we are about to reach the stairs that descend to the main event, Kingston raises his arm for me to take. I wrap my arm around his and take a deep breath before we keep walking to the edge of the top step. When we finally reach the step, the announcer speaks.

“Entering.” He pauses to gather attention, and he does.

While we are standing at the top step, I look around the room and see just about everyone’s eyes on us, including our fathers’. My father is practically shooting lasers into my skull, but just like he taught me, I keep my head up.

“Kingston Hendrex and Alessandra Perez!” He says it loud enough for everyone to hear.

We started making our way down the stairs as people clapped for the ‘new pair’ entering. I continue to hold eye contact with my father, and I start to feel a sudden wave of confidence, and maybe it’s false, but no one will ever know. As I’m watching the rage run through my father, I can’t help but to smirk, which of course makes him even more upset.

We reach the bottom of the stairs and make our way to a table. Everyone went back to their conversations, except our fathers. They made their way to each other to try and figure out what is going on. Kingston was right, seeing them freak out like this is hilarious.

Stranger in the End

Peter Pongruska

This story was heard by most of my closest friends because I always tell them everything. This isn't a 30 year old love story, or a broken marriage. This is just a story about a snobby high school relationship; at least that's what everyone calls it. To me this meant more than a high school relationship. It was my first relationship, and it was my first love.

This story includes me and a girl named... let's just call her Phia. I had girlfriends before I even met Phia, but I'm not gonna lie. I never cared about relationships that much until I met her. Maybe that was because I didn't put any effort into any other, and I was young. Anyway, I met her around seventh grade. This was my second year at MRH, and I started to make a lot more new friends than my first year. I still remember the first time I met her, it was at the local park with a couple of friends. It was back when the park was a popular place for kids to hang out at. I have never talked to her or even known her



before this. I was a quiet kid back then, so I didn't interact with new people that much. It was winter time, and it was very cold outside. My first interaction with Phia was her borrowing my coat. Even though it was just that, I can feel there's something that sparked right away between us, and I know it sounds crazy.

I started texting her, and we started talking ever since. We were really close in middle school, like really really close. That stopped for a while after she left me for my best friend. It didn't matter to me though, because we were just really close friends who I happened to like but the feelings didn't align yet. We didn't even talk that whole eighth grade. I was doing my thing, she was doing hers. Covid Year didn't help either. After we came back from the lockdown and the school started opening up, second semester freshman year is when I started to have lots of friends, and I mean lots. I probably knew most of the MRH people and was close to everyone. I'm not trying to brag, but I really was that "I-have-too-many-friends" guy when high school started.

I got added to this group chat, it was full with the people I started to hang out and talked with. I became tight with that group, and pretty much was actively participating in the hanging out after school and summer. You probably can guess it, Phia was in that group chat. When I first got added, me and her interacted with each other like we didn't have history at all. We just became associates, friends, and then became very close by sophomore year. I'm gonna be honest, it wasn't very easy to become close with her. When you're in a group chat, there will be drama. That drama will cause fights, and

fights will cause separation. Me and Phia had a bunch of drama in the group chat. Just know that we both overcame it and moved on.

We started liking each other again after the halloween party in that same year. We enjoyed each other's company at the party. After that party, we started talking and talking. We're closer than ever to being in the relationship. We were basically talking for about three months, which I feel like we should've waited longer. Of course, we were both too into it. In late February, we finally both made a decision to jump into the relationship. Now is when I get into the details. I'll say we were both happy that we made that decision. We quickly announced it to our close friends, and they were giving 75% support. I said 75%, because someone said this was a bad idea; maybe they were right. After we got into the relationship, I felt like I was the happiest guy in the world. I was hanging out with all my friends with her, and we basically spent most of our time together. We would hang out at each other's houses, we would go with our friends everywhere. I'll say the beginning of 2022 was the happiest phase our relationship ever came to.

It's the third month being in the relationship, we had some fights but it wasn't much. Let me rephrase, it didn't mean much at first because we've been through so much together. Fights and drama weren't going to put our relationship on the line, not yet. We always talked it out, and tried to work through it. I'll be honest, I wasn't the very best person when it comes to communication in the relationship. This is exactly why I said Phia was my first love. I have never communicated openly about my feelings to anybody, she was the first. I'll say our first miscommunication started when we're about four months in. I did something that I shouldn't do. It was basically me betraying her trust. No, I didn't fall in love with other girls, if that's what you were thinking. I'll say we have many conversations about the same situation multiple times. By multiple times, I meant about six different times. I'm gonna be honest, I wish I did more than just conversations. I wish I can actually show that I actually loved her, and never with no one else when we're together. Anyway, skipping to the summer. We had a pretty good summer together. We're always hanging out with our friends, going to the lake, or a sleepover. I'll say I had a very memorable summer because of her. Despite all the good times, this was when arguments and fights started to get worse and worse.

Before the end of our relationship, I always had this feeling in the back of my head. It's a feeling I couldn't get rid of, no matter how many reassurances she gave me. It wasn't that I didn't trust her. I was scared. I was scared of everything. I was so scared that she was going to leave me, talk to someone else, all of those things cramped up in my head. I didn't even try to talk to her about it. It was a mistake I regretted the most. Things started to go bad in the last two weeks of summer. We were arguing repetitively, I was upset at her for the smallest things. We were both busy so we didn't spend time together at all during the end of the summer. I went to Chicago, and she was just doing her thing. Despite being distant and busy, I tried to text her as much as I could.

Right after I got back, we had a huge fight. I was upset because she was texting her "boy bestfriend" repeatedly. To where he was closer to her than me. This fight is a little blurry in my head. I don't remember much. I didn't want to. All I know is that it leads to the thing we called "mutual decision." I lied. It wasn't mutual at all. She said breaking up and us being friends was probably the best way. I was thinking the opposite. I wasn't gonna give up on us, but to make it work you needed effort from both sides. It was one sided. In the end, I didn't blame her at all. I knew she was done. She gave up, and she was tired.

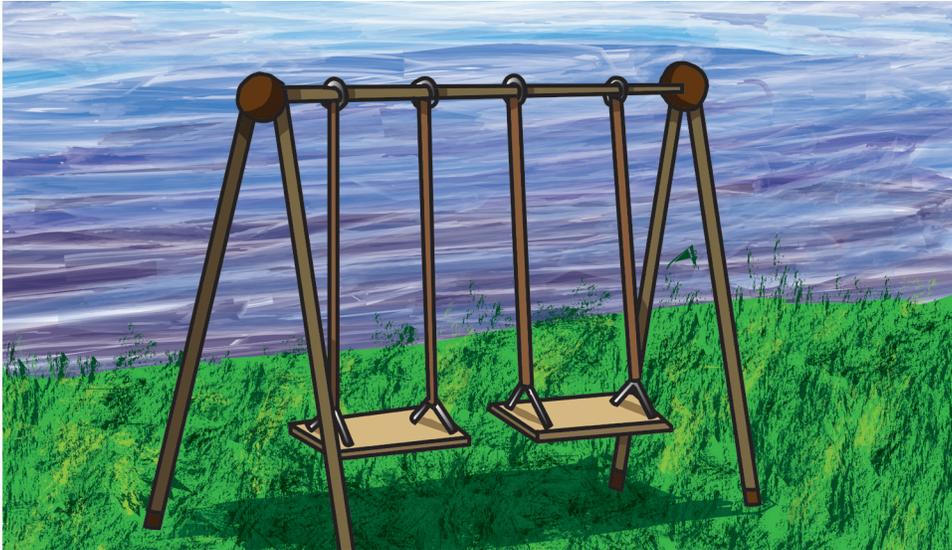
Evaluating the relationship afterward, I took in more lessons than pain from it. The most important lesson I learned was that I took things for granted, I took her for granted. I guess you don't realize how empty things can be until that one person walks away. Now, we don't talk anymore. Not even a text, not even in real life. I made that decision not to interact at all. It's better to walk away than to hold on to what isn't there anymore. We walk past each other like we don't know each other. We became strangers in the end, and maybe it's for the better.



Memories

Jasper Jones

The sun peeked over the horizon, trying, with all its might, to stay above the land about to swallow it up. The heavy heat was only broken occasionally by the breeze that gilded smoothly through our hair. We swung on a swing set that no longer stands; worn by time and torn down by the hands of my father, making way for something new. We loved each other, but sometimes, things as special as that aren't meant to last. Like the summer sun and like the swing set, relationships fade. You'll be sad for a little while, but eventually you move on. The sun will rise again, shining on a day anew; and the backyard won't always be so empty, eventually something else will take its place.



Trinket Dish

Jasper Jones

The sun peeked over the horizon
reaching out to touch every last house
with long, golden rays
before the horizon swallowed it up

The heavy heat
only broken up by the cool breeze
whisking past us

We sat on swings in my backyard

kicking our legs out
then in

Forward
Then back
Forward
Then back

swinging on a play set
that no longer stands
worn by time and
torn down by the hands of my father

I loved her.

She didn't love me back.

But I always had
that shred of hope.

In the end
I guess it didn't really matter

Like the summer sun
and that old swing set
memories fade.

I'm sure
she's long forgotten that day
but I'll always treasure it.

I'll keep the memory
in the little trinket dish on my dresser.



Maia Trueman

Part of Your World

Annalee Rintoul

Kat's aunt had surprised her mother with an incredible anniversary gift. A scuba diving trip with the family on a sunny island, clear waters, and alone time. It was the dream vacation, even though the two have always hated each other and have made it a tradition to see who can get the most drunk at family dinners.

Nonetheless, Kat's mother was very happy. Although the gift was from her sister, she loved seeing new things, going to new places, and being adventurous in general. This scuba trip was a perfect balance of relaxation and adventure.

They're all sitting next to each other on the boat in their scuba gear. Next to Kat is her brother, Ray. He's always been the nervous type. He sat there running his hands up and down his thighs, and if you squint hard enough you could see a bead of sweat running down his face.

She scooted closer to him. "You'll be fine, you love the ocean. You do this every single time we go on a trip, and every single time you turn out all right. You could always be my partner if you'd like." She smiled at him for reassurance, but his face only turned a darker shade of green. She frowned and scooted away. From then on, it was only awkward silence between the two. It wasn't exactly unexpected considering the circumstance, but it was less than favorable. Kat turned her attention back to the rest of her family who were engrossed in their own conversations.

After a little while, the instructor clapped for their attention. "Starting off with the rules." The instructor raised his voice and squared his shoulders. "Always stick with your partner. If you're gonna separate, always stay within sight, we don't want you guys gettin' lost—even if it's just a small area. Always make sure to keep breathing; never hold your breath while scuba diving. This requires a lot more attention than you'd think. You constantly need to be monitoring where you are, where your partner is, how you feel..."

As the instructor went on, Kat's eyes flicked back and forth between her brother and the instructor. Ray was obviously sick, but this happens every time and she wasn't sure if she should tell the instructor. But at the same time, she wasn't so keen on risking her brother's health.

"Please make sure all of your scuba gear is ready and in working condition. We cannot let you go on this trip if your scuba gear is broken in any way." She lugged the scuba gear on and pulled the diving mask down onto her face. Kat felt excitement rush through her. She was ready to go.

"Grab your partners and get ready to dive. Don't forget to equalize as you descend, and most importantly, have fun!" With that, everyone dove off the boat and into the water.

The water was a bit cloudy, but the sights were shocking nonetheless. The siblings took their time exploring. While Ray didn't dare nudge one thing out of place, Kat was thorough, looking under rocks, in between crevices, or into caves. It was remarkable, swimming near schools of fish and crabs. Kat loved to dive as deep as she could go and look up, just so she could observe the beauty above her. Ray rambled about the different types of fish and plants he had seen while swimming along with her.

Eventually, they happened upon a large cave. It was magnificent; an expansive cave undoubtedly filled with fossils, various species of fish, and so much more. Kat wished her mother was here. She would have loved to explore such a lovely cave with her.

She swam deeper. Stalactites hung from the ceiling of the cave, and there were several tunnels leading further into the cave. Ray trailed close behind. Even his initial uneasiness couldn't stop him from being blown away by the beauty of the cave. Kat approached one of the tunnels. What intrigued her about this one was that it was curved downwards instead of straight ahead. She turned on her flashlight and peered down. While most of it was dark, she spotted what looked like inhumanely large metal railings. Kat squinted and leaned further down, not believing her eyes.

"Maybe we should tell the instructor...?" Ray looked queasy as he glanced down. "I can't see the bottom, even with your flashlight."

Kat nodded absentmindedly, still focused on the railings. "Before we go, I'm gonna take a closer peek at those railings. It'll only take a second. Stay here and keep an eye on things, all right?"

Ray was stunned. "Are you sure you wanna go down there? We can't even see the bottom... The instructor told us to always stick together. You can't just leave me here like this." He looked at his sister with desperate hope in his eyes. Hope that she wouldn't leave him behind, hope that she'd stop being so stupidly impulsive, hope that she'd just listen to him.

"Ray, you also need to consider that they've probably been here before. This cave is huge and practically impossible to miss. Someone's likely checked if this place was dangerous or not. I doubt they'd let us anywhere near here if it was." Kat shot him a condescending glare.

"Don't look at me like that. You're always treating me like that, like I'm somehow—" He steeled himself. "Like I'm somehow inferior to you or

something! And I'm sick of it! You never listen to me!"

"Cut the crap, I always listen to you. I go out of my way to listen to you when others won't and you know that!" Her voice edged on near hysteria.

Ray snorted in disbelief. "You're doing nothing except proving me right. Go on then, have a nice long look at those railings of yours and see if it was worth it."

Kat, for the first time in years, drew into herself. She seemed small, so different compared to the brave, impulsive sister he once knew. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but the lump in his throat and pure cowardice stopped him in his tracks.

Kat didn't say anything to him. She just stood there, breathing in and out before she finally turned her back on him and left.

Ray stared at the place she left him behind.

Kat knew she shouldn't have left him there, but the last thing she needed was to hear him double back and ramble. She knew that leaving was a bad decision, but she wasn't ready to face Ray or the rest of her prodding family or god, even the instructor.

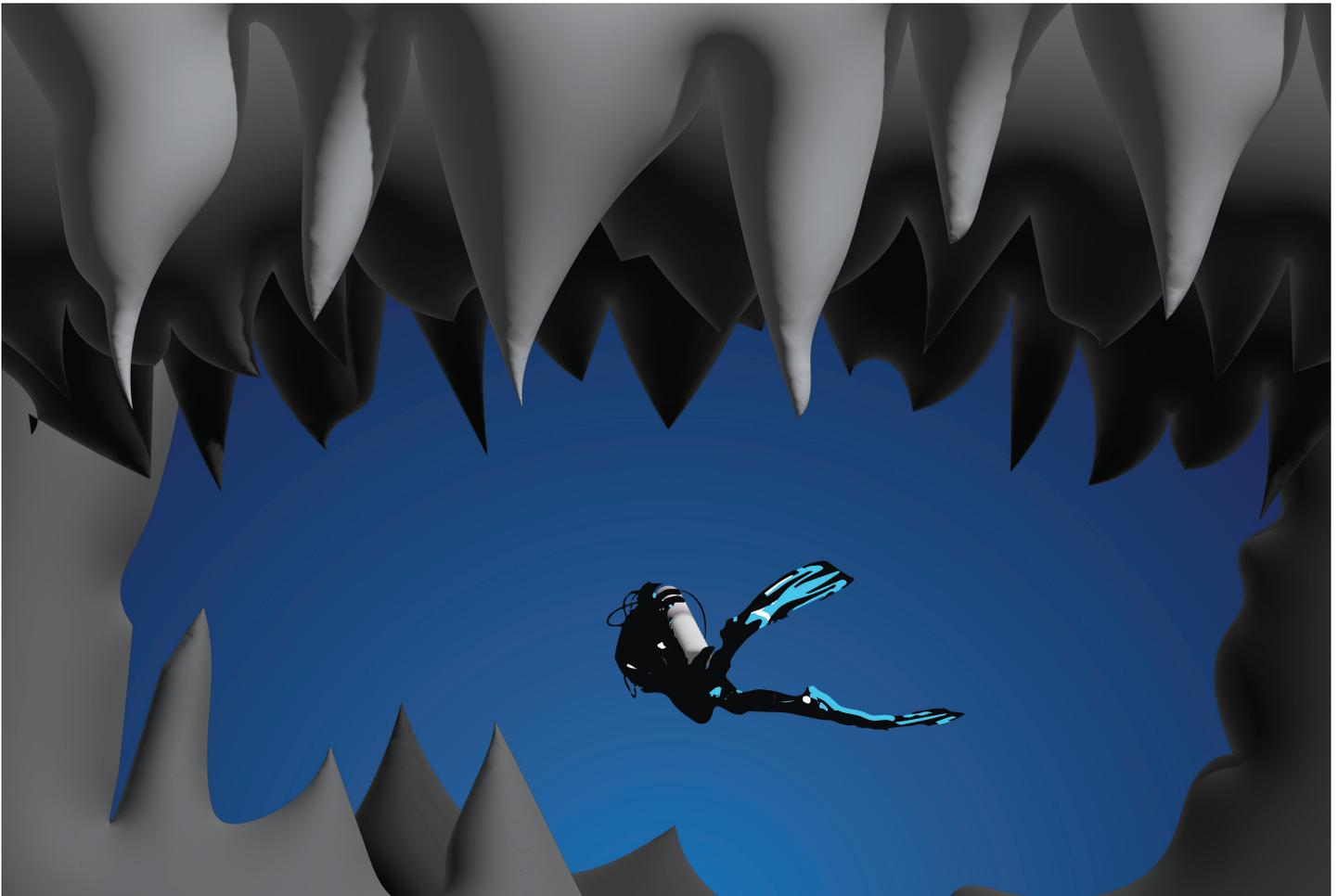
And she really did want to get a glimpse of those railings.

The railings already seemed huge from afar, but as she swam closer, she realized that they practically dwarfed her in size. It terrified her. These railings looked just about as big, if not bigger, than a building. She turned on the flashlight as she swam further along. Instead of a railing she was met with a metal pipe which was also rusty and practically inhuman in size. The bolts on it were probably the size of an average tire.

Kat takes a chance and reaches for it. She admires the difference between the rust and old metal. It's very old. Despite its imposing size, it's fragile. Kat tests the strength of the screws holding the pipe in place by giving it a good shove.

It's dislodged out of place and misses her by a hair.

She was just as fascinated as she was terrified. No human had use of pipes or railings this large. While a typical metal pipe floating in the water wouldn't pose much harm to a regular human being, one with such monumental size (like the one in front of her in the water right now-) would probably cause life changing damage if it were to ever collide with-



Bang!

She swore. Her mouthpiece fell off, and she inhaled a mouthful of the murky water. Her knee radiated in pain, and she scrambled for something to cling onto. Her hands reached for support and were met with the same murky water she inhaled. Inwardly, she cursed herself for being so foolish.

Kat begins to tear up behind her mask and she feels so utterly hopeless as it begins to fog her vision. "No, no, no, God no, not now..." Despite her protests, she lets out a broken sob. She should have listened to Ray. She should have ignored her stupid curiosity and gone back to tell the instructor. She should have gone for help.

Kat feels exhaustion weighing her down as she tries to swim to the top. Her injured knee protests as she works it past its limits. It's desperate hope and a will to live that gets her so far before she starts to sink.

She knows she lost the battle against her exhaustion when she can feel her muscles growing weak and numb. Her eyelids begin to droop and instead of exhaustion, it's water that weighs her down.

Her lungs are clogged, she's sinking, she's injured, and she has no clue where Ray is. Kat only prays she makes it out of this alive.

They say hearing is the last sense to go before you die, and she thinks they might be right. In the distance, she thinks she hears Ray's voice.

Kat is heaved onto the boat by the instructor and a member of his team. She hears someone barking orders and barely has time to prepare herself before a fist is placed on her stomach and pushes in—

She vomits, all the water she inhaled is forcibly pushed right out of her. Kat is light headed and heaving into the side of the boat. Someone presses a cold rag to her forehead, and she feels eternally grateful.

"Kat? Kat, are you alright? Can you speak?" A nice woman speaks up. Kat realizes she's the one who's pressing the rag to her forehead.

Kat pushes through the nausea and dizziness to respond with a slurred, "Yes." The woman's shoulders sag in relief, and she turns to speak to another member of the instructor's team.

Suddenly, Ray is in front of her. His eyes are puffy and red, and his mouth is pulled into a wobbly frown. He's been crying. He's concerned for her, she realizes. She tries to say something to him, an apology or greeting, but he pulls her into a tight hug before she gets the chance.

"You disappeared. I tried looking for you, and you were gone. Do you realize how much that scared me? Don't ever leave me like that again," he sobbed into her shoulder and gripped her tighter. Kat broke down crying and hugged him back. They were safe.

Fully Alive

Annalee Rintoul

The internet was a strange place. Most of my life has been taken up by the internet, and I feel as if I've experienced quite a bit of it. The amount of times I've been sent a horrifying Twitter link, argued with someone, or been jumpscared on the internet is practically immeasurable.

Gore videos aren't exactly an unknown thing on the internet. It's insane how easily accessible they are, and you can even stumble upon one without even looking it up. Once you see one, there's nothing you can really do to reverse the damage after you've watched it.

There was one such video that popped up for me. I was only a preteen when I was scrolling through Reddit, of all things, looking through interesting stories, when I stumbled across quite the popular video with a blurry thumbnail. It wasn't exactly popular in the good way, and I was a nosy child, so I decided to click on it.

I saw a plain field. The ground was covered in a sort of sandy dust, and nearly every plant surrounding the area was dead or dehydrated.

In the middle of it, I saw a woman.

It seemed like she had been kneeling on the ground for hours. Dirt and bruises covered every inch on her body. Her hair whipped back and forth in the wind, covering her face from view. She seemed worn down, and by the rope tied in a knot around her wrists, she obviously wasn't brought to this location under her own volition. Despite the sick feeling in my gut, I leaned in to get a closer look and took in more of her. She had pale skin and wavy brown hair. In a normal circumstance, I wouldn't have even spared a glance at her.

To the right of her, two men were having a conversation. I couldn't exactly see their faces, but they were very immersed in themselves. It wasn't exactly easy to hear them either, but that didn't affect anything. In fact, my interest piqued when one of the men stepped towards her. Until then, they hadn't moved.



HORRIFIED

Autumn Evans

As he moved towards the woman, my wariness grew along with my curiosity. The two men weren't speaking English, so I couldn't understand a single thing that was going on. Still, I looked the man over. He was wearing a golf shirt with dark pants, and I couldn't exactly see his shoes that well. My attention was drawn away as the distance between him and the woman grew shorter. He was cautious, as if he was approaching a fearful animal.

She cowered as he shortened the distance between them. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as the world closed in around her. When the breeze picked up, she tensed. It felt like he was breathing down her neck. The distance between them was practically nonexistent, yet he took another mocking step at her, as if he was daring her to flinch, to move away, to scream.

She didn't move a muscle. He panted behind her like a dog as his hand twitched around the chainsaw. The whole world stopped. Now, no one breathed, no one moved, no one spoke. Not even once. The air was still around them. My eyes darted around the screen, waiting anxiously.

I still remember it. He was so fast. In a split second, he cut through her, and all I saw was red. She thrashed around violently as her guts spilled out of her, escaping from her body's confines. What was once a woman is now a puppet, twitching and toppling over like a half dead bug.

I was frozen. I hated every second of this, of looking at her. It was so quiet now. She stopped wriggling and now lay still on the ground. The only part of her that moved were the guts that were slathered onto the ground. I felt like I was going to puke. I closed the tab before the man even got halfway through.

I didn't realize I was shaking until now, and my eyes were darting around the family room, checking if anyone had somehow seen. Their eyes were still glued onto the TV, immersed in some sort of cheesy crime show. Still, that persistent feeling of paranoia was latched onto the back of my mind like a leach and just wouldn't let go.

I shifted uneasily in my stool and tried to force myself to relax. Flashes of her guts, her hair, the blood everything ran through my mind. I tried thinking of something else, looking up things I enjoyed, yet nothing worked. It was stuck replaying in my mind for forever and forever, and I was left feeling more and more disgusted with myself after each replay.

Dry Smoke

Salvador Miano

Although the rocking chair I plop myself down in is hard to the touch, this seat is well-needed and more comfortable than any chair I could want right now. I'm the co-owner of a 100-acre Pistachio farm, and on this heat-filled late August day, we started our first day of the harvest portion of the season. While my dry, wooden chair rocks back and forth like a tennis crowd's gaze, the shade from the porch hides me from the heavy California sun. This porch is in the front of the house that me and my best friend, Charles, own, with our wives and kids. With our kids at their fifteen mile bus ride away school and our wives in town, we had the farm to ourselves for the first day of harvest.

Around a football field length away under one of the thousands of trees, I see Charles powering our brand-spanking-new honeybee-yellow pistachio harvester, one of the bigger investments we've made to the farm. He and I are proud of it; we've been putting money aside for around two years, knowing all the way along it would bring more money in than our farm has ever seen before. This machine allows us to harvest the whole farm by ourselves, without any help from anyone else. Connecting the communication between him and me is a strawberry-sized walkie-talkie, clipped above each of our ears on our hats, and I press the button on the side to talk.

"Everything going all right out there, soldier?" I ask him, knowing damn well he's roasting his own pistachios off in this heat.

"Doing all right, Cap'n," he replies over the radio, "Temperature gauge is showing she's running a little warm, 'have to keep my eye on that one."

"Alrighty, let me know if 'ya need anything," I say, noting it's a little odd for a brand new piece of equipment to be running hot in the first several hours that it's been running. Surely we are just breaking it in, I assure myself. After all, it's hot and dry out here anyway.

Disregarding the odd overheating issue, I continue rocking in my chair, enjoying my break with a glass of water so cold it'd sting your finger if you touched it. My eyes wander to the northern side of all of our fields, past the barn and the last of the trees. Our house has a good fifty feet of elevation over the farm, helping us spot anything that could possibly go wrong, along with helping us with a great view. The quarter-mile-long strip of dirt in the distance houses our airfield, where I pilot a '50s vintage crop duster, both for fertilizing and for my enjoyment. Charles' and my kids love a good afternoon soaring through the California hills and valleys. On the west side of the farm houses our lake, where we grow cattails and good drinking water for the animals that visit.

On the thought of water, I observe my own drinking water has run out. With a breath, I rock my weight forward to lift myself up, and pass through the front screen door for the kitchen. I seek the faucet and, proceeding to fill the cup with ice (a necessity for a refreshing cup of water in my opinion), I allow the water to flow out of the head.

I, sometimes, as I think anyone should, find myself slipping and staying in a zone in my mind, especially when I'm exhausted as I am. While in one of these spacing-out sessions, I am interrupted by a large, ground-shaking drum of an explosion. Not believing what I just heard and felt, I immediately look to the cup of water for any ripples. There were ripples.

I can feel under my breast pocket my heart profusely beating while I whip my body around, bolting for the door. While on the way to the door, I swiftly go through a list in my head of what this booming sound could have possibly come from. It can't be the natural gas tank, I just had maintenance on it, I think. When I catch a view of the farm, a large black cloud crowds the eastern part of the sky.

"No. No. No..." I murmur to myself in distress as I see the base of the fire, flames coming from a yellow piece of machinery. I squeeze the button on our walkie talkie and let out an urgent yell.

"Charles, do you copy?"

No answer. The fire is clearly collecting other trees quickly.

"Charles, I repeat, can you hear me?" I catch myself holding my breath after saying this.

"Ma-Mar," his voice is being broken up by static. "Mark, I can hear you, my mic got disconnected."

I let out my breath.

"Jesus, Charles, thank god. Tell me what is going on?"

"The damn harvester caught on fire," he says with panic and disappointment. "I don't know what we're supposed to do, the fire is getting pretty big and these trees are still as dry as can be."

This reminds me of the drought this side of California is getting this year. No rain in the past five months, which has starved the trees of a lot of moisture, and they just might as well be firewood. An idea pops into my head.

"I'll just get the crop duster."

"Great idea, just hurry," he commands.



छात्र ।

As a crop duster pilot in the training school that I attended, they also taught an aerial firefighting course, which I found some interest in, and ended up taking that class. It is times like these where I am sure glad I did. Even though the ground is dry and at a loss of water, our lake still had a large amount of water, just at a lower tide.

Knowing what has to be done, I leap down the porch stairs and dart past the driveway to the hangar. I rush to press the button to open the garage door, and while the door hums, I leap onto my crop duster's wing and slide myself into the cockpit. Having started this airplane many times, the routine of powering on the single propeller engine is muscle memory. The engine sputters to life in a few cranks, and I wiggle the joystick to make a final check of the operation of all the ailerons and increase the throttle to get moving.

The heat is catching up to me now that I can sit, and a large drop of sweat travels its way into my left eye, forcing me to blink. Once I regain that vision, I give a routine glance to the gauges to find them all in a healthy range. I release the parking brake, and the engine's tone rises as the plane bounces out of the hangar. I bounce with it and strategize a way to put out this fire in my head. I'll take off westbound, I decide, and head the opposite way to go over the lake to the fire, in a straight shot. My plan will be just that, to use the scoop to pick up the water in the lake and hopefully extinguish a good amount of the fire before it can spread too far. I communicate this plan swiftly with Charles and make it to the beginning of the runway.

I position the airplane, and with the view of the strip directly in front of me, my plan takes more form in my head. Here we go, I think, and I start down the runway. My speed increases and my plane slowly separates its wheels from the ground. While I climb, I achieve a better view of the path I'll take, and I shift the joystick to the side and begin my turn. Rotating around the lake, I watch the massive smoke cloud move directly behind the lake, aiming my airplane to take the route over both. My descent to the low-sitting lake starts, and I feel the g-forces lift me in my seat. This maneuver is common in crop dusting, and my training in the firefighting class taught me what to do once I get to the surface of the lake, and the exact altitude it takes for my scoop to pick up the water. My heart is bouncing around in my chest like a gnat in a box, and I pitch up gliding over the water, opening the chute for my plane to ingest the lake's water. The water level gauge slowly creeps up to the "Full" level, indicating for me to pull back on the joystick, gaining altitude.

With half of my plan done, only one thing remains that I have to do: finally put out this fire. I press the button on my radio and say to Charles on the other end, "Here we go, now or never."

This has to work, or else with this dry terrain a fire could spread extremely quickly. As I get closer to the towering wall of smoke, all thoughts of doubt leave my mind, and all I hear is the engine turning into a background drone, with all of my focus centered on hitting my target. The burning piece of equipment comes into my sight, along with its raging fire, and I jab my thumb into the "DUMP" button, letting all my water out. My view is temporarily blocked by the cloud of smoke, and my airplane and I burst out on the other side.

Now it's just a game of waiting, hoping that my efforts have achieved my goal of putting out the fire. I keep a straight flight away from the fire, which is now in my rearview mirror, and anticipate a positive radio transmission from Charles. A few long moments later, the radio silence is broken.

"You did it! Fire's out," Charles screams triumphantly through the radio.

I let out the breath I realize I've been holding and watch as the source of the smoke ceases. If I were to be asked if I would be someone doing something this heroic, I would have not believed it. Things like this are not something I usually step to the plate and do, but the possibility of losing everything we have worked for this past growing season caused me to go outside my comfort zone, doing what had to be done. I fly away in celebration, grateful for the crisis I avoided.

Down by Seven

Callan Sukanek

As I line up for a goal kick at my position of left defense, I glance at the scoreboard. 0-7, 13:29. I sigh. It feels like the last time I looked at the clock was ages ago, but somehow only three minutes have passed. I kept hoping that something had happened behind my back, that somehow a goal had been scored when I wasn't paying attention, but I had no luck.

I shiver. It had started raining an hour or two before the game started, and it was around 50°F and windy. This isn't that cold in the grand scheme of things, but when you were in a short-sleeved soccer jersey because you forgot an undershirt, and you are sitting on a cold metal bench, it was the coldest feeling imaginable. I was sure that if it had started raining a few hours earlier, they might have canceled the game; a few hours later and the rain would have missed us entirely. As it were, the rain hit the "sweet spot" and started almost right as the game began, which means that we were playing on a muddy field in wet, cold soccer jerseys.

For anyone who doesn't know, 8 goals is the mercy rule in varsity soccer. That means that after one team is winning by 8 goals, the referee stops the game and declares that team the winner. I'm sure some coaches who want to give their players a workout or players who are more competitive than me would argue against this rule. However, I like it because, when you are losing by so many goals, playing soccer quickly becomes more of a chore than anything else.

Being mercy-ruled sucks a lot, especially because it is so humiliating. Usually, it starts at kickoff, when, for whatever reason, we aren't playing at our best. This could be caused by many things, like a bad warmup or a game that we hadn't fully woken up for. We would usually get scored on in the first fifteen minutes or so, and then every few minutes after that. Tempers flare, people start yelling at each other, and morale is low. After 6 or 7 goals it gets to this weird point where you're almost hoping the other team scores because, at that point, I would much rather get scored on a few more times and get on with my life. I would never purposefully get scored on, but when you're in this situation, it is really hard to stay focused on defending the net, when really all you want to do is go home.

Overall, I have enjoyed my three years (so far) of varsity soccer. I enjoy the easy wins, I enjoy the close wins, and I can also have fun when we play a hard, close game, but we lose it in the end.

Our team has had our fair share of all of these. However, there are a few games that we've played where we just couldn't keep up with the other team. Those teams were faster, more skilled, and stronger than us. I'm sure that some of the teams could have scored 10, 12, maybe even more goals against us if the rule didn't exist.

While I'm thinking about all of this, our goalie takes the kick. The ball soars beautifully across the field, right to open space. A player on their team beats us to the ball and starts heading toward our net. I step up to play defense, and he fakes a shot and dribbles around me. I sprint back to help defend, but I already know there's not much I can do. He takes a shot, and I see the ball hit the back of the net. I glance at the scoreboard and breathe an involuntary sigh of relief. 0-8, game over. After all, there's always the next game.



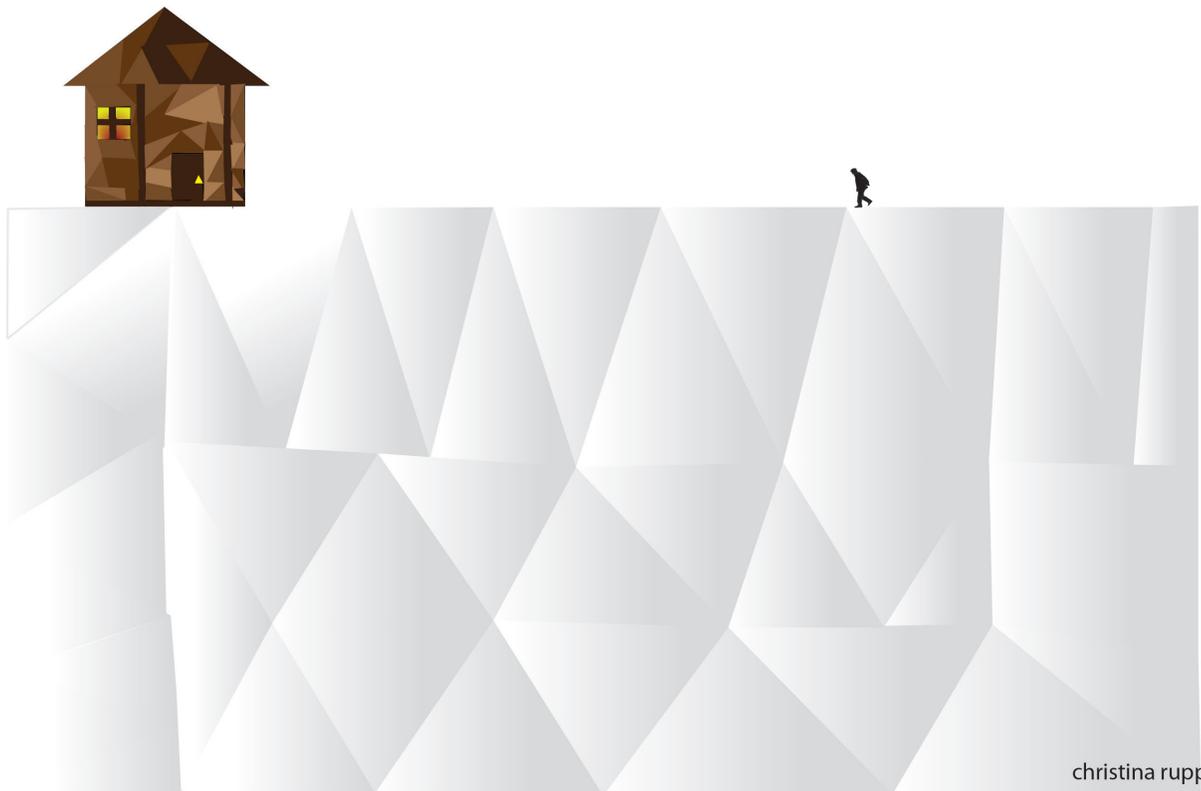
Comfort in a Snow Storm

Jeremiah Ayres

Once upon a time, the man might have considered himself alive. Perhaps when he was younger, before the weight of the world had set in and he could do whatever he wanted with no repercussions. Before he didn't even have enough to understand what losing something meant. Before he died. But he doesn't remember that. All the man knew right now was that he had to walk. He was walking through a dense snowy fog and trudging through six inches of snow across flat land that he could only imagine stretched along the length of infinity. He was in pain both physically and mentally, though right now he didn't have time to think about his mental anguish. His feet were nearly numb in pain. He imagined if he were to take his socks off, he'd be met with a color gradient of anywhere between light blue and dark purple, almost black. He was scrunched into the pockets of his puffy coat, even though it did nothing to negate the heat. It was more of a way to keep his body upright to fight the harsh wind that was trying to push him down on the ground. It was trying to make him give up.

The man didn't exactly know what he was doing, still walking, still struggling to survive. It's not like life had been particularly friendly to him, or even worth living at times. Traveling back from his wife's funeral, at the same cemetery she had buried her brother. Driving all alone in his car, not wanting to stay with anyone, and insisting he was fine. He stopped to help the two strangers on the road not because he thought it was safe but because something deep in his heart told him it was the right thing to do because what kind of a person would leave a stranger in the cold to freeze alone?

He couldn't tell where he was mentally now. He thought maybe he was in shock at the robbery the two men had committed. Maybe he was trying to block out the thought of burying his wife. Or maybe the wires in his brain had frozen over and were malfunctioning. It was a strange sensation of feeling incapable of being able to concentrate while at the same time hanging on to a strong sense of clarity. He understood everything about nothing. He noticed how he was still walking. Where was he going? Why did he want to keep going? It didn't matter that his conscience didn't know, he figured something



deep down kept him going.

Time no longer passed for the man. All there was was more walking and cold. If it wasn't for the dim light in the distance, the man wouldn't have even realized he was walking. Wait. There was a light in the distance. There was a destination. The man grunted as he used his little remaining energy to pivot his body towards the flicker in the void and marched. He couldn't believe somebody was out here, had a house here. Somebody had to live in the lighthouse he supposed. The man sifted, grunted, and fought his way through the snow which no longer affected his steps. His spirits rose as he got closer. "Will they have a phone? Will they have warm food and a bed?"

After an unknown amount of time, he reached the cabin. It wasn't a large cabin, but the man didn't care. This was his chance to get back. He burst through the door outlined with a fiery red hue and held his breath. He looked around for a second and let his breath out in a heave. He was confused. There was a fireplace at the other end of the house with a modest fire burning bright enough to light up the house. If the man was thinking more clearly he would have questioned how he had seen it so clearly through the cloud of snow he had just been wandering through, but the man was focused on finding some form of human communication.

He surveyed the cabin. Opening cabinets but finding no food, scanning the walls finding no phones, looking around, and seeing nothing but fire. He figures he's better off in the cabin than back outside. He'd wait for the owner to come back so he could be rescued. He also didn't feel like going back outside to walk. So he found a spot on the couch in front of the fire and took a seat. Immediately he felt the faint heat of the fire turn into a wave of relief and comfort. The couch consumed him, and he immediately felt how hungry and tired he was. He didn't want to move, he only wanted to sit and appreciate the fire that had gifted him so much grace.

The man felt his mind begin to wander and reflect on recent events though soon for whatever reason he began to think much further back. He thought about having to work from a young age so he could provide for his family. How he was constantly having to move. His dead friends and family he missed very dearly. People he had fallen in and out of love with. The struggle of taking care of his wife with lung cancer. Getting beat up left on the side of the road by those two men. Before the man could remember his death, a big gray and white wolf hobbled next to him. It had great blue eyes and beautiful fur that radiated in the light. The man didn't know where it had come from, he didn't know how he could've missed it in the small cabin, but he didn't care. The wolf managed to make its way next to the man and laid down next to him, its fur adding extra warmth to the man, just the perfect amount.

He began stroking the soft fur of the wolf and noticed something strange. The wolf's hind leg was bleeding. He figured it might have been from a fall it endured, or maybe some rival wolves got in a scrap and it suffered a battle wound. Regardless, the man figured it could use as much comfort as he needed if not more. He felt responsible for helping the wolf now that it had offered him warmth. The two of them were both hurt, but that made the man feel better.

He wrapped his arms around the wolf and the wolf laid its head on the man's lap. This felt right to the man. For the first time in a while, maybe in his whole life, the man felt that all of the pain he'd endured had been worth it, he could finally sleep easy.

The man drifted away from his body until he was no longer there, and the wolf stayed with him the whole way. The man truly passed away this time and with ease. He wasn't left on the road, limping on his one unbloodied leg towards his car speeding away from him by two strangers. Without the unending force of the wind and the snow hitting his skin feeling like tiny spikes. He had forgotten his life of torment and comforted the wounded creature next to him as it kept him warm.

Before leaving, the man smiled. He forgot the weight of the world and decided to give himself up to the wolf. He hoped the wolf felt better. The man passed into the ever-after happy.

INTERMISSION

Each year, the Graphic and Photo Publications class competes to have their artwork selected for the cover to Blue Outbreak, submitting original photo compositions as their final in the class.

The following pages are the runners-up. Enjoy!



BLUE OUTBREAK

2022 – 2023

**THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF
MAPLEWOOD
RICHMOND HEIGHTS
HIGH SCHOOL**

2nd Place

Helena Roberts '23



Blue 2022-2023
Outbreak

The Literary Magazine
of Maplewood
Richmond Heights
High School

3rd Place

Molly Hargrove '25

BLUE OUTBREAK

2022-2023

**THE LITERARY
MAGAZINE**
Of Maplewood Richmond
Heights High School

**BY STUDENTS,
FOR STUDENTS**
Literature written
by your peers at
MRH



*LEANNI'S
WORLD*

WERE JUST LIVING IN IT

4th Place
Ian Mathews '24

BLUE OUTBREAK

2022 - 2023



**THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF
MAPLEWOOD RICHMOND HEIGHTS HIGH SCHOOL**

BLUE OUTBREAK

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF MAPLEWOOD RICHMOND HEIGHTS



**Runner Up
Kathryn Chaves '23**

Nice Guy

Jeremiah Ayres

He was just opening the car door when there was a loud scream coming from the distance. Stuart had little reaction to this sudden noise as he was tired from just getting off of work, and frankly, he wasn't paying too much attention to the world around him. To be honest, Stuart really didn't have much care in the world and spent most of his days slumped in his cubicle. He reckons he lost his ability to process surprise through constant stress and general depression. The scream was loud enough however to break through Stuart's wall of attention, just enough that it bought a glance from him. He sees a woman running very clumsily toward him with a worried expression. She's in a work dress and heels and he wonders why she decided to wear heels if she was trying to run. It's near forty degrees at night, and he's in the middle of the street, why was this woman running towards him?

After Stuart harnessed his focus for a few more seconds following the girl. Moving much faster than her, actually. He's going to get hit, he thinks.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Stuart gives something to do with this girl and this mystery car that Stuart turns the car on and starts the heater and his jazz CD.

A loud thud on the car window is heard right next to his head. "HELP ME! PLEASE YOU'VE GOTTA HELP ME!" The lady mouths "I can't hear you" to the lady and turns up her head. Can't she see he just got off of work? He's tired and wants to belt. Stuart sighs and begins to recline his seating, trying to do something his wife had told him in a fit of hysterics.

"You only think of yourself, Stuart! What would you have the slightest amount of sympathy when you truly asked?" His wife and there were no responsibilities between the two of them and his duties began to come around, he began hating life. He hated the world from him. He then began to consider, maybe he's missing a fulfilling life. That's it, Stuart concludes. From now on he's going to tell his mom and tell her he loves her. He'll teach his kid to be a good right. Stuart smiles knowing that from now forth, he will live.

A roaring car zooms by him in a large screech. He looks out the window. There's no more nagging girl at the window, just the ambulance. Sometimes she sees roadkill on the road, driving to his cabin in the road except she's still breathing. At least a little. She seems to be it's terribly mangled. Maybe she was trying to point at something seeing what the girl was referring to. She was flipping him off half an inch from her knuckle.

The girl's arm goes limp, and her gaze turns toward the street to react. He turns his head and looks at the car parked ahead, not having the decency to make his way around the body.

Listening to jazz, Stuart makes his trek back home, not really thinking about much. He's forgotten his daydream, and his eyelids have put on a few pounds. What a day it's been.

Suddenly, Stuart hears sirens coming from behind him. He's startled and doesn't know what an officer could want with him. He pulls over and puts both of his hands on the wheel, beginning to panic a little bit. He'd never been pulled over before. Was he speeding? Was he driving like he was drunk? Was he drunk? He rapidly begins to try to recall his day at the office. Had his coworkers offered him alcohol? Maybe they spiked his lemonade they had offered him

at lunch. Stuart was terrified. He didn't want to go to jail. He didn't want to have to pay for a ticket. He was worried about his record. Would his office fire him for finding out about this? He's beginning to panic now. His chest rises and falls faster than the last cycle. He feels sweat forming on his forehead. He thinks he might faint in a second.

The officer slowly walks over to his window, a way to really juice the suspense, he thinks. He rolls his window down.

"Do you know why I've pulled you over sir?" the officer asks.

Too scared to speak, Stuart just shakes his head.

"Your mirror is gone."

Stuart looks and sees that his side mirror's gone. In fact he notices that the entire left side of his car has a horrid scratch along the exterior, clearly visible when contrasted with his red paint job. That black car must have scraped against his, taking his mirror with it. What a jerk.

Stuart takes a few seconds to process this and to catch his breath. "Schucks."



Art by Hunter Smith

Me and the Mirror

Gabbie Miller

Me and the mirror
We don't get along

When I look at it I hate what I see
I think it hates what it sees too

Me and the mirror
We don't get along

It tells me every flaw there is
Even the ones that are hard to see
The stretch marks along the
Waste
Thighs
Arms
The acne and the scars left behind

Me and the mirror
We don't get along

Every look taken there is another thing added
Another thing added to the list of things needing to be fixed

Thighs are to big
They need to be thinner
Stomach not flat
Need to lose weight

Me and the mirror
We don't get along

When I walk by it I never look
Not even a glance
But it is always looking
Looking at me
Taunting me
Its stare burning into my skin
Trying to get me to look
Just one glance
No I can't
Please don't make me
Just one glance
I don't like what I see
Why did you make me?

Me and the mirror
We don't get along



The Insiders: Battle of the Martinez and Morris Gang

Isaac Martinez

I woke back up, blood was rushing from my face. The Schnucks logo was blurry. I could barely feel anything anymore. Punches just rained down one after another. I couldn't do anything, I felt so weak.

"GET UP, HIT HIM BACK!" everyone shouted. Or so it seemed. I was getting absolutely wrecked. I had a backup plan. I hesitated, should I use it, should I not. I was scared of the consequences, but anything is better than this. I just wanted to put an end to our rivalry and become the best gang in Maplewood. I was starting to black out again, I couldn't take anymore of it. I either do it, or I die. I would never gain respect again, but was it worth it? "I spat blood in his face and got him off me, as soon as he ran at me again that's when I did it." The sound of the switchblade still echoes in my ears.

Last week in school was a living hell for me and the gang. I can't even leave the "wood" without getting an ass-whooping. I remember when we first started calling it the wood. We thought it sounded better than hood and we just kinda went with it. The Morris Gang made sure we could never stoop to their level. This was going on for about a few months, but they made sure this week to really stop us. They kept claiming they were gonna "Stomp" us out. Every time they fought, we retaliated back. It got so bad this week, me and Parker destroyed Ethan's car entirely. That was when they got super mad.

"I hope you die," Ethan would say after beating the living hell out of one of us. My gang was small compared to his. All we had was Joey, Jayden, and Parker. No one wanted to get in all this drama but it kinda just so happens, when you're tryna be the best gang in the wood.

The other day we actually ended up holding our own against Jackson.

"Next time I see you dead," I said. "We're gonna settle this once and for all one day." Little did I know that one day was coming up in three nights. The first day after I made this threat was fine. The Morris gang actually backed off for a little bit. I knew they were planning something. I just didn't know it was going to be an ambush. Me and Parker always stood together. We always had secrets in case we were gonna get killed. The next day the beating was the worst. They hit Joe over the head with a metal tray knocking him out. No one does that to my friends. I knew they were getting more violent and that I had to put them in their place. Everytime we fought I would lose or just barely make it out.

"This fight was gonna be different." That's what me and Parker would always say at least. The night of the day came. We were at Schnucks in the middle of the night, the parking lot was empty. The lights were on just enough to see, but it was still dark. A car pulled up quickly, and as soon as I saw it, my stomach dropped. The Morris gang all pulled out. They were dressed in their matching leather jackets and blue jeans. They were ready to fight. It was just me and Parker on this match.

"What are you doing here?" we ask politely as we try to avoid conflict. Jackson tried to hit me, but Parker pushed him back.

"Get out of here. Go back to your pitiful house." That must have been the final straw for them because they all rushed Parker. The fight was actually in our favor even though we had less manpower. We beat up a few until it was just Ethan and Jackson left. I remember Parker and Ethan taking each other on. That means it was just me and Jackson.

I don't remember much of the fight other than how I blacked out. I woke back up, blood was rushing from my face. I could barely feel anything anymore. I mostly remember seeing the red from blood and the Schnucks logo. Punches just rained down one after another. I couldn't do anything, I felt so weak.

"GET UP, HIT HIM BACK!" everyone shouted. Or so it seemed. I was getting absolutely wrecked. I had a backup plan. I hesitated, should I use it, should I not. I was scared of the consequences but anything is better than this. I was blacking out again, I couldn't take anymore of it. I either do it, or I die. I would never gain respect again but was it worth it?

"I spat blood in his face and got him off me, as soon as he ran at me again that's when I did it." The sound of the switchblade still echoes in my ears. The cocking back of the slicing motion is still vivid. Even the image of when I slashed his neck was ringing in my mind.

"EVERYONE RUN," Ethan said. They all got in their cars and drove off. He laid there lifeless. The sparkle in his eyes disappeared. I couldn't believe what I had done, but before I could even think about it, we ran off. The adrenaline was pumping through my veins as I ran all the way to Parker's house.

"DUDE, WHY THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT!" Parker shouted.

I couldn't say anything. I was still in shock. "I-"

"You can't go to school tomorrow," Parker explained. "You gotta get out of here. You're gonna have a target on your back, you need to leave now." What he said barely registered. I knew I had to leave to keep him safe, but I didn't want to lose him.

"I'm gonna miss you," I said as I ran out the door. I knew he hated gangs, especially the Morris gang. I wasn't sure what would happen to him, but I hoped it was something good.

The next morning I was still on the run just getting as far from there as possible. After three nights in the cold, I was long gone. I was the only one able to get away from the gangs. We went our separate ways after that, and the gangs disbanded. I heard from around the neighborhood that the gangs were still active but just more "underground," but they were actually getting worse. Everyone in the gangs ended up dead or in jail. That's how it usually goes. At least I thought. I assumed the gang era was over, that was until the Sieberg gang hit the streets. You'd never guess who the members were. I guess gangs never die.



The Warm Winter

Luke Goodman-DeLeonardis

It must have been -5 degrees Fahrenheit outside, and the chilling cold was relentlessly biting at Johan as he tried to walk to his cabin in the depths of the forest. Snow kept falling onto his dark blue coat and onto his face. He wasn't too bothered though as he had grown to like the cold, and of course because he found something special while he was out. This special thing he found was of course food, but not just any food, he managed to hunt down a few rabbits, which he could easily carry, and which were always rare, especially at this time. Though he didn't like killing the rabbits, because he had respect for all wildlife, it was something he had to do, and finding food, especially plants, was always trouble in the winter for him. He didn't mind too much because he felt satisfied living this way, even if he had to do things he didn't want to do from time to time. Before too long, he would see the glowing light emanating through the window of his cabin.

"Finally made it back... I didn't want to have to kill that poor thing, but there was a chance I might have starved to death if I didn't," he said to himself as he opened the door to his cabin.

At his cabin he immediately prepared the rabbits for cooking, even before he took off his coat, because there were little things that excited him more than having something good to eat. "If I hadn't found something to eat today, I would have gone crazy," Johan said to himself. He was getting pretty hungry, especially after running through the cold forest.

He then took off his boots and put his knife inside a case, so it would be safe and he would know where it was. Johan then peered outside his window to see a plane streaking through the sky, and it would remind him of childhood and the journey and decisions that brought him to this point.

Thirty years ago, Johan grew up in a city with cars, skyscrapers, and trains everywhere. It seemed as if each building was twice as tall as the last one, and there wasn't a spot on the road where there wasn't a car whenever he would look out onto the streets of the city from the balcony of his apartment. This stuff didn't really fascinate him though, as he often found himself gazing off into the mountains far beyond the city, which dwarfed even the tallest skyscraper he could see.

Johan's relationship with his family was important to him, but whenever he looked into the distance past the city, he wished he could visit those places instead of being at home. He asked his mother with an excited tone, "Hey, do you think we can go outside of the city sometimes and go and see the mountains?"

He got his hopes up too soon, because she replied with, "I'm sorry Johan, but wouldn't that be too dangerous? Who knows what could be out there and what would happen if you were hurt?"

Johan replied with, "All right then, I can see where you are coming from..." and he went to his room and lied down on his bed. He didn't feel too great about what happened, but he didn't necessarily feel defeated.

Even though his family didn't show much interest in his desire to check out the forest and nature, they still cared about him a lot and wanted him to be happy. They would buy him books and survival guides and movies about nature and stories that are portrayed in the deep forests and the tall mountains. He enjoyed looking for stories himself on his own time or drawing paintings of nature landscapes that he imagined. Nature wasn't all that was on his mind, as he had other interests, but it was his main obsession.

10 years later, Johan would be in his early twenties. This would be a very decisive time in his life. He wasn't too interested in the idea of college, or getting the money needed for that matter, and working in an office or fast food place was the last thing he wanted to do. He thought back to his childhood and his obsessions and decided to make a decision. He would try to get out and live in the forest and experience nature like he always wanted too.

This was tough, but he had to say goodbye to his family and life before. He didn't want to have to make such a difficult decision like this one, but he

realized he would have to go out or else he wouldn't be able to realize his dream, and he may live a life that he finds too boring. With his knowledge of survival from his childhood, and further research, he said goodbye to his family and his city to live out his dreams.

He said to his parents, "I feel like I need to go out and experience what I always wanted to when I was younger. Do you guys understand what I'm talking about?"

His father said, "If this is what you feel like you need to do, then I have no objections, but please stay as safe as possible and try to contact us every once in a while, please."

Johan replied with, "Don't worry, I'll come visit sometimes and I'll be sure to call you guys."

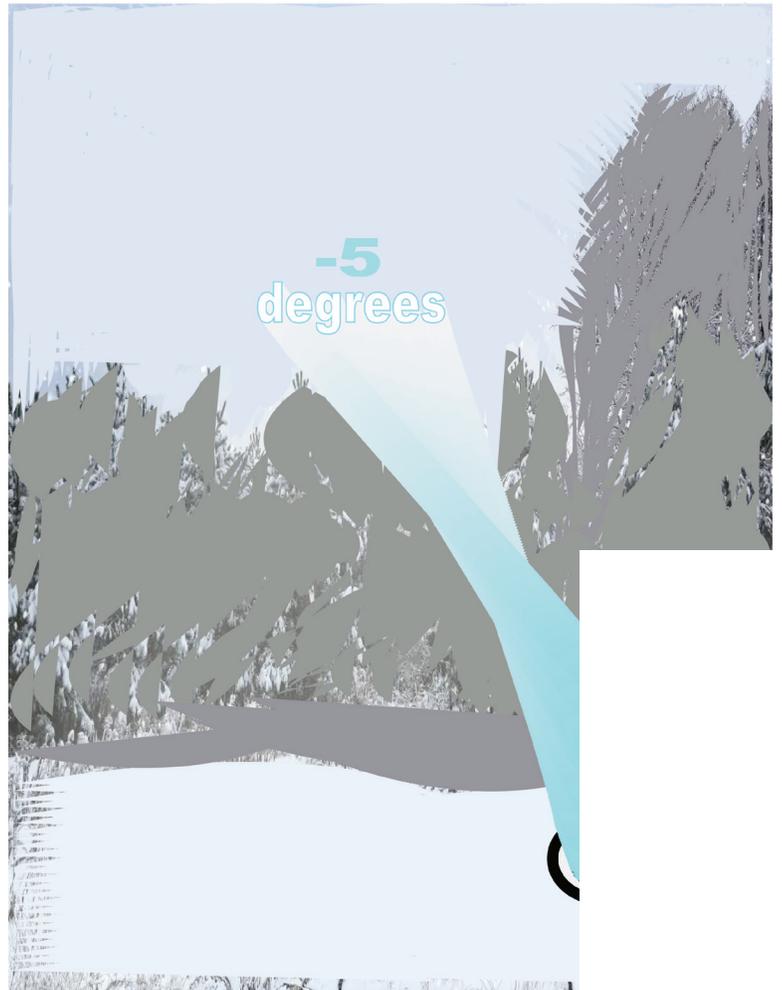
His mother said, "I'm so sorry I didn't take you out to the mountains when you were younger. I didn't realize you were that passionate about living in and seeing nature."

Johan said to her, "Don't worry, I was too young to go out there anyways, you were just trying to keep me safe." He then said to both of them, "I love you guys, and please stay safe. I'll be sure to call you as soon as I can."

Both his parents replied with, "Goodbye!" and they waved to him as he went off on his journey to go where he wanted to go ever since he was a young boy.

Twenty years later, inside his cabin in the woods as he was cooking the rabbits he worked hard to hunt, he would still be thinking about that decision that changed his life forever. "I left there so long ago." He said that to himself as he was thinking about his past.

From living deep in the city to living deep in the forest, things changed quite a bit for him. While thinking, he felt emotional about his family and journey, but eventually he couldn't help but smile and feel warm inside as he was right where he wanted to be.



Life

Mariona Jones

I was a 119-year-old Elf, and I had just graduated from high school. My aunt would pester me about what I wanted to become in the future and to be honest, I didn't know. I was always thinking about what I could do; I just didn't know what I wanted to do. When people asked me what I was thinking about doing, all I could reply was that I didn't know.

"Well, what do you like to do?" or "Why don't you know? Aren't you almost 120?" they would always reply, and I was getting kind of sick of people asking all of those questions or trying to talk down to me like I was dumb or incompetent. If I knew what I liked then I would be trying to pursue that thing, but sadly I didn't have anything that interested me at that time. I had things that I could do, but I didn't have anything that pulled me in, and I knew I'd be able to stay and keep doing without slowly dying inside.

When I was in high school and still not knowing what I wanted to do didn't help. Teachers and counselors would always ask, and I still wouldn't know. They would give me ideas and try to pursue me, and not to toot my own horn, but I did have really good grades and participated in a few after-school activities; I was a really good student. I wouldn't have any problems getting into any type of college, except for the racism against black elves, but that's a whole other dilemma. The thing is I just have no type of drive whatsoever, everyone would say it's because of my parent's death and all, but I don't think that's it. I've always kind of been like this but I guess the older I got the more apparent it became. But that all turned around when one day my friend Vivian needed a dress for some type of function.

I was alone in my home at one point doing something that I don't remember when I heard the door burst open. I jumped up and grabbed the object that was closest to me; I remember it being a hanger. I tried to inch my way to my door slowly, but it burst open, and I just threw the hanger.

"OUCH" I looked up and saw that it was my friend Vivian, and all I could do was sigh. She slowly started to recover from being hit with the hanger.

"Why did you throw that at me?" Vivian all but yelled.

"Well, you did just barge into my house like some type of maniac, but I'm sorry." I sighed. Vivian wasn't impressed but went on to start talking and





complaining about her day. I remember Vivian ranting about how she needed a dress for some function that day, but the dress didn't come in yet and most likely wouldn't be there until it was too late. I was just listening to her until a light bulb went off in my head. I used to sew dresses and stuff at my grandmother's old shop. She was a seamstress, so I learned how to make outfits from her.

"Hey, if you don't mind it, I could make the dress for you," I said while Vivian paused and thought about my offer. "Sure, why not? It's not like I have any other ideas." I went and measured Vivian up and wrote everything down. She told me everything she wanted for the dress; a long mermaid-style dress that would be detailed with jewels and lace. She told me I could make it whatever color I wanted. Vivian left, and for the rest of the day, I gathered the old tools from my grandmother's closet. Almost everything was kind of rusty, but it still was usable.

I went and got some light yellow fabric from a shop; I thought it would've looked so good on Vivian's deep dark skin. When I went home, I went straight to work cutting, measuring, and sewing. I remember doing the little things like sewing and how I wanted to do everything my grandmother did at the shop when I was really little, but she wouldn't let me since it was too "dangerous". But when I got a lil' older, she started teaching me slowly but surely. I remember how her nimble fingers would glide over the fabric and how quickly she could put an outfit together. I let my mind drift to the good times with my grandmother while I put the dress together. We used to sing and dance to these old songs while we made costumer's dresses. I remember my grandmother's voice as she sang like a princess while putting different outfits together. I loved the way her mind would work. And how she put complicated sheets of fabric together, being able to take two different fabrics that wouldn't normally go together and end up making it look so well put together.

I stayed up all night working on the dress. Early in the morning the next day Vivian walked through the door, and her eyes landed on the dress; her eyes started to sparkle and shine. I felt so accomplished. I loved the way she squealed and jumped around the dress.

"You can try it on in the bathroom right over there. You should know my house by now since you are always up in here," I said, and Vivian didn't hesitate to grab the dress and run towards the bathroom. A few moments later Vivian came out of the bathroom, I tailored the dress perfectly to her figure. The shimmering yellow looked so good on her. Vivian twirled and danced around the living room, and I couldn't help but smile. I put this huge smile on my friend's face because of my hard work; I just couldn't stop smiling either. Vivian got dressed up and styled her hair and put a lil' makeup on; she looked drop-dead gorgeous. And as she walked out of the house with heads turning towards her in awe, I couldn't help but say, "I think I've found something I wanna do with my life."

A Zombie's Memoir

Ian Mathews

It was Sunday when they found me. Early in the morning when two young boys screamed at the sight of me
Two sweat drenched, sunburned boys
the blood curdling in their throats, their eyes bulging, irises dropping to what was lying in front of them
like watching a mother's vase fall
Down
Down
Down
Until those eyes crash and shut
They squish their eyes closed and turn their heads
But not before stealing a few more glances
A few more repulsed expressions at me
I hear them whisper
About the blotches on my skin
About my mangled body
These words that spill out of their downturned lips
Start to stab me where I am already bleeding.

So I snap back.
And my bones, they snap back.
And I feel my body rise
Every inch of it filled with this displeasure
This jealousy
Building up, and up
And as I reach out to these boys
I tear them apart by each hateful phrase and ugly glance they gave me.
And I am finally content when everything goes silent.
I am content with knowing that when they wake up,
They will know what it feels like to be me.
To feel the bugs consuming them, to feel your own skin being eaten away.
What it feels like to rot and keep living, hearing, and seeing
Just how I do



Late Walk

Ian Mathews

My eyes felt swelled as I pushed my hair out of my face to look at the other end of the tent.

I couldn't tell if you were still crying.

Music from your phone was still playing, I don't quite remember what song it was
but we were silent.

We'd previously cried for
30 minutes.

10 minutes?

5 minutes.

I was unsure, but that didn't matter.

In the long silence that seemed to drown out the music, we began to laugh.

I don't remember what we were laughing about,

Or where the sudden urge came from

but it was something that shuffled our moods like a deck of cards

Confusing and surprisingly sudden

Maybe it was the awkwardness of it all.

We slid closer and began to laugh, and talk.

Joking was really the only way we knew how to get feelings across

Without that lingering feeling of stupidity or over-thought words.

Through sniffles and coughs and dry laughs

One of us decided to take a walk.

We had all this energy and nothing else to do
especially after crying our eyes out.

It was around 3AM when we slowly unzipped the tent and crawled into the night.

you begged your dog to stay put as we climbed out onto the wet grass

closing the tent back up with a slow zip

Sad puppy eyes looking up at us from the mesh inside

Giggling and shushing swarmed the cool air as we made our way to the back gate.



“Friends”

Aidan McGinn

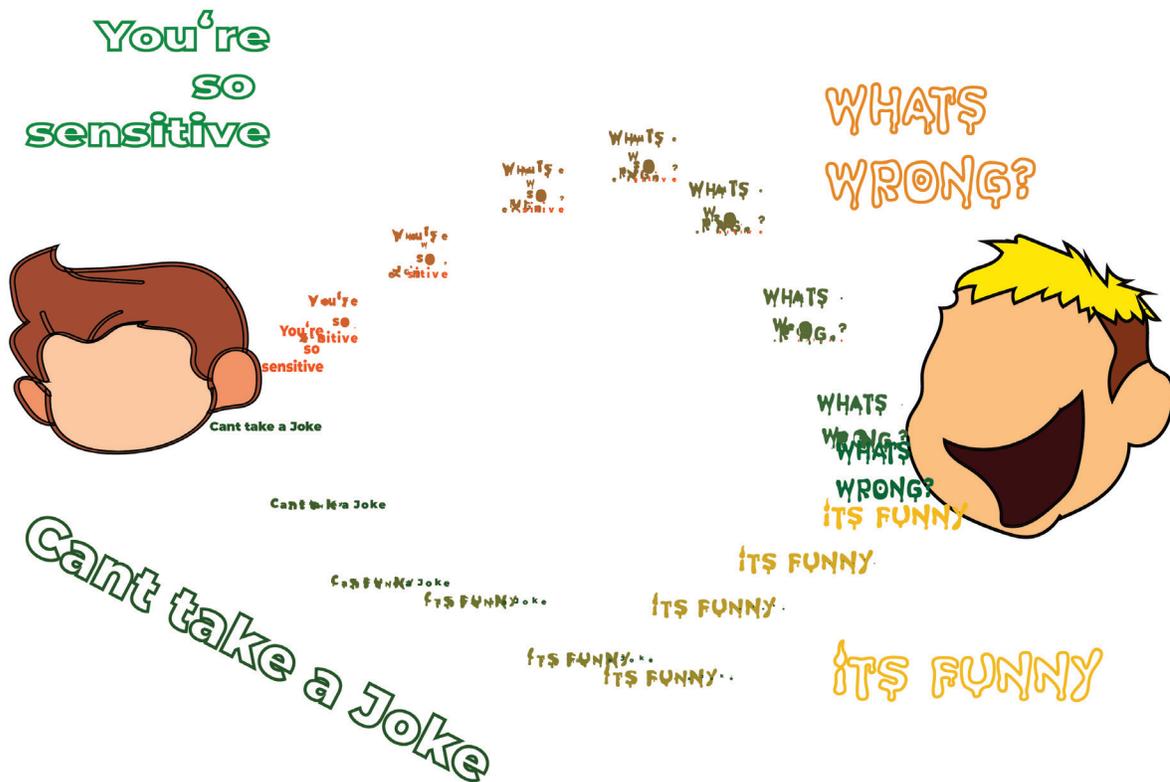
If I am being honest, I thought I was pretty popular my whole life until high school. I always had a lot of friends and people I liked to hangout with; I believed we were really close. In middle school there was a big group that seemed to be my best friends. We were always together, trying to make plans, and staying busy. The more time that goes along with these people the more connected you feel and the more you feel like they will be your friends forever. You build special bonds that feel like they can never be unbroken; you tell them things you'd never want another soul to hear.

But one thing I heard around that time was “You'll find your REAL friends in high school.” Hearing that at the time sounded crazy, it was already common sense to me that these would be my friends forever. It hadn't occurred to me that maybe at some point these would not be my people anymore.

As more and more time goes by that gets spent with friends, you can either grow up with them or grow apart from them. I unintentionally grew away from these friends going into high school. Little petty arguments over time resulted in a somewhat growing resentment towards them. Growing away from them felt almost as if I kept maturing and they were stuck. I felt there was always so much unwanted and unprecedented drama. You tell yourself it's nothing because these are your friends, and they share the same interests as you. When in reality you are being manipulated.

Just one example of this during my middle school years was when they would always call me “so sensitive.” While this is somewhat true with my moderately short temper and passion about certain things, it was always used in such a negative tone that genuinely made me upset. This would always cause some sort of conflict with them, but it also caused internal conflict with myself. Often from time to time I would find myself believing them and trying to fix myself, but the problem was never me, it was them.

I took some time to reflect on instances where I found myself being called sensitive and tried to find out what the source was. If I found what was making me so upset and told them, they could stop. But one day when I decided to talk to one of them about it casually, she said, “I say stuff to make you mad all the time,” and just sorta brushed it off. I know writing about it now doesn't seem like such a big deal, but let me explain my thought process in the best way



I can... The route of the problem for them was that I was always too sensitive or angry about certain things, but my problem with that was they would be making me mad on purpose just to call me sensitive. It just felt like I was being manipulated into something that they thought I was, and not who I actually am.

At first it was easy to be civil and hold conversations, but after time it became exhausting and easier to just act like they aren't there. Now starting high school, I was under the assumption that it was the right time to find my REAL friends. You always hear the story of the two best pals who are sixty but became friends in high school; I wanted someone who I could rely on for the rest of my life. None of what I expected going into high school was my reality. I even ended up back in a big group dynamic not learning my lesson from the first time.

You connect with all different people, some connections growing stronger than others, but they all lead to the same thing in the end... disappointment. You grow artificial relationships that will eventually lead to your disappointment. The disappointment comes from expectations and feeling like you will be able to rely on people. When the truth is that people will always be looking out for themselves and what they think is in their best interest. Some examples would be trying to look out for your friends after seeing them get hurt and being disappointed when they make the same mistakes over and over. Or feeling like you can trust someone and being disappointed by lies that seem meaningless and unnecessary.

There are so many different levels and types of disappointments we all have to face, and they never seem to get any easier. Just the simple disappointment of a friend agreeing to plans when they know they never could in the first place, and the disappointment you feel when they inevitably have to tell you the truth. Or when you genuinely believe you have made a pact with the people you trust the most, and your friendship starts to fade away like it was never there in the first place.

I know this all sounds really bad and like high school is the worst thing that can happen to a person (which it can be for some). But in all honesty high school has made me who I am today with everything I had to go through and endured. Half of the time believing that I wasn't strong enough alone and I needed people to get me through it. But in all honesty the past few months of my life without friends and just the one person I love the most I have felt so happy. Another thing that I always hear a lot of people say is, "Everyone needs friends." I remember specifically a conversation with my mom driving home from my girlfriend's house,

"Hey, where are *\$%\$3 and !@?\$\$ I haven't seen you hang out with them in a while?"

"Oh, I don't really talk to them much anymore," I said, trying to stop the conversation before it started.

"What! They are your best friends! What happened?" my mom said, almost a little too concerned for her own good.

"Yeah I don't really talk to anyone anymore, besides Jada." I sighed and she paused.

"So you just have no friends Aidan? You need friends, everyone needs friends."

I felt my stomach drop and my heart go to my throat. I tried to tell her that I didn't and not everyone does, with probably too much attitude, causing the rest of the short drive home to be silent. If she would have said that to me two years ago, I would've jumped up and said, "Yes! Everyone needs friends all the time!" But now growing up and learning about myself made me realize I don't need a bunch of people to make me feel like myself.

But that conversation with my mother always stuck with me. Having your mom tell you you have no friends to your face kinda sucks because it makes you realize you have no friends. I know I just said I don't need people, but that's not how it always felt. Around that time of the conversation with my mom I was really struggling in particular with such conflicting thoughts. Feeling like having one person is all I need, but then also feeling lonely and like I needed those friends in my life. It took me a long time to come to peace with my situation and feel comfortable and happy. It makes it way easier when you do have someone you know you can rely on. Just one person is all that is truly needed to make someone feel complete. Without my person, I don't think I could've handled any of this.

Political Polarization in Modern America

Luke Woodrum

One day, I was with my godmother and her family and as usual, we were discussing politics. After a debate on various things, that included whether the government should give money to teens who become pregnant. I asked my godmother's husband if he thought Democrats, Socialists and Communists were the same. To my surprise, he said yes. This demonstrates the issues caused by political polarization. This is not a problem just among the uneducated and fools of both parties, but the educated as my godmother's family is educated. The idea that Democrats and Communists are comparable in beliefs and policies is far-fetched. As much as the fragmented media would have you believe it, just like the idea Republicans are Fascists is also wrong. It is concerning however that educated members on both sides of American democracy would think of each other as radicals. In general, this is just one example of political polarization I have seen first-hand. It has only demonstrated to me the need to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. This is further demonstrated by the fact they bought me a book for Christmas that was meant to dissuade me of communist notions. They saw my albeit left-leaning views as me seeing Communism as the better system while in fact it is well established as a failure of a way to organize society and the economy.

Now, this is not just one occurrence over a family dinner but is a national issue. According to the PEW research center, "The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%. And ideological thinking is now much more closely aligned with partisanship than in the past. As a result, ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished: Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican." (Political Polarization in the American Public). This further demonstrates my story from before. Wherein views have gotten farther from each other and now people see any disagreement as a wholesale attack against their beliefs. It is a repeating theme in the book *Demagoguery and Democracy* by Patricia Roberts-Miller that people have been drawn to make their political party part of their identity. Due to this, the discussion becomes much harder between people over matters of policy, as any disagreement was a personal attack on the other. This is added in a study by Harvard University professor Jesse Shapiro and two Stanford economists Matthew Gentzkow, and Levi Boxell who discuss the idea of demagoguery without saying it. In their study, they wrote, "The linear trend in elite polarization has a positive and statistically significant rank correlation with the linear trend in affective polarization". This may require a definition of a demagogue which is according to Merriam-Webster "a leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims and promises in order to gain power". Most of the time these people will be found among the elite and if not will quickly join it upon accession. These demagogues have a damaging effect on democracy due to their desire to prevent proper public discourse from occurring.

In *Demagoguery and Democracy*, the author wrote that it is hard to tell when you are following a demagogue while easily finding the other group in opposition to be following one. This leads to a feedback loop in which the people think of the others like sheep and the demagogue can use this to further their agenda, this leads to continuous separation in highly diverged groups. This means that an even small divide in the elite of a country can cause huge divides in the general populace. This can be for a large number of reasons but mostly can be seen in the news industry where the channels say what their owners tell them. The question is then whether this problem is just a result of democracy and yes it is but, the USA is a particularly bad example. This was found in the previously referenced study and the PEW article. In comparison with 12 other countries, the study found that "According to our baseline estimates, the US experienced the most rapid growth in affective polarization over this period among the twelve OECD countries we consider, with five other countries experiencing smaller increases in polarization, and six experiencing declines in polarization". (Cross-Country Trends in Affective polarization, Jesse Shapiro). Not only this but the PEW article clearly states the same with the very title being "America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide".

So since polarization in this extreme is not a normal byproduct of democracy why is it so prevalent in our democracy? There are numerous reasons to be pointed at some clear and others not, an easy one to point out would be the division of politics into two parties. Two clear camps to divide into and considering how different the ideologies each disagree on the purpose of religion and how the economy functions and many more items of debate brought up often, they have become identities and beliefs on their own. It is easy to find hatred between people just because one is a Democrat or Republican. Both sides also have their demagogues interested in keeping it this way for power or money. But a deeper dive allows one to see the main driver. In a study by John V. Duca and Jason L. Saving (both bankers at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas), The causes of political polarization were examined wherein they attempted to explain it in two main ways: income inequality and media fragmentation. Ultimately they found media fragmentation was the greater cause as shown here: "Our findings strongly suggest that greater media fragmentation has contributed to increased political polarization. This may occur as individuals seek out self-reinforcing viewpoints rather than be exposed to a common "nightly news" broadcast (Gul and Pesendorfer 2012), or alternatively, may occur as individuals opt out of news entirely in favour of entertainment, thereby reducing incidental or by-product learning about politics" (Income inequality, media fragmentation, and increased political polarization). The study concluded by saying that income inequality was not to be completely ignored but media fragmentation surely was of greater cause for division. They wrote that in the past Americans had a common frame of reference for news

due to the few channels available. Now there are hundreds filling every niche and humans will tend to seek things that will reinforce their own viewpoints. Due to this, news companies went to those niches for money, reporting in the way they know their audience wants and often those in the audience will stop watching other news channels. This could be for many reasons, one being the effort involved in watching many news sources, and the fact they weren't going to agree as well with the other views being presented as they did with their first choice. This prevents people from getting an unbiased source of news leading to different tellings of the same story, which means people can no longer even agree on what happened, much less what to take away from it.

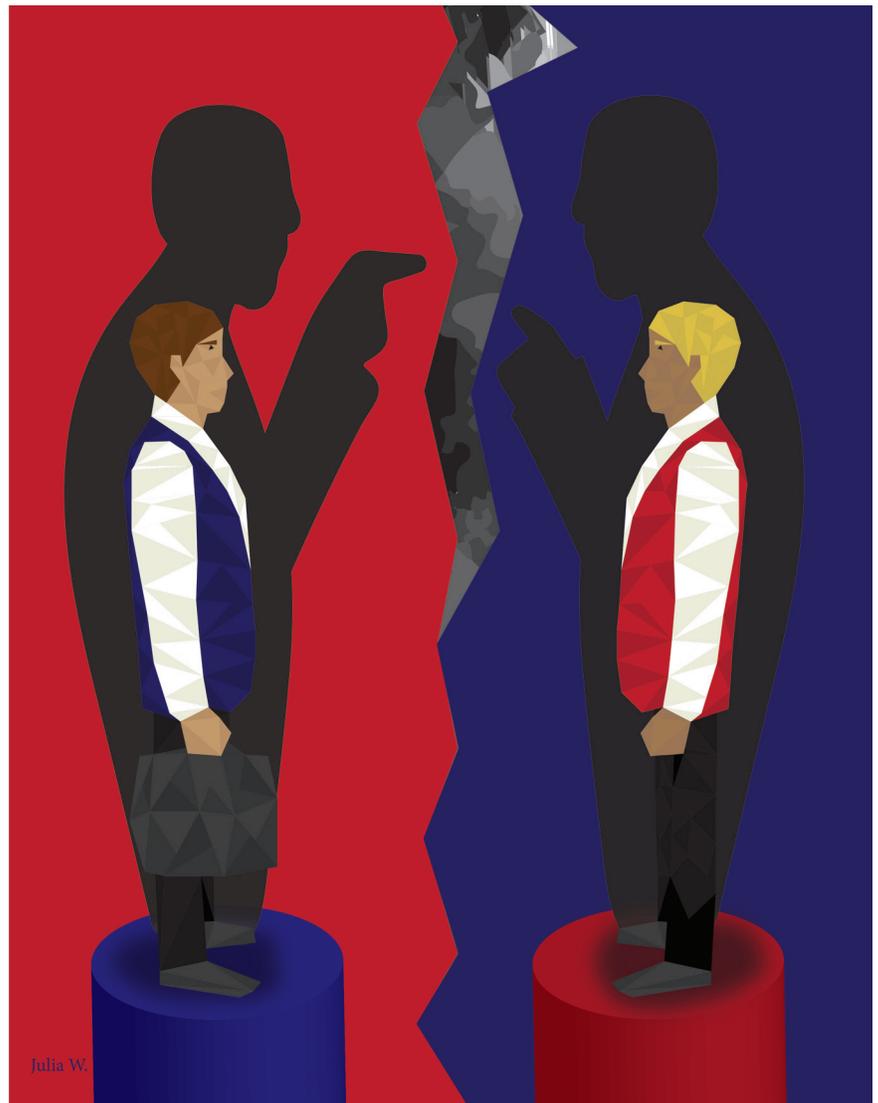
In conclusion, political polarization is not something that will just go away. As we are often told we must seek other viewpoints no matter how foolish they seem. We need to be able to talk to others and hold public discourse with a common frame of reference for events. Yet how do we do it? After all, we seek our views and the algorithms that suggest such sites to us know this, all this makes it hard to break out of our echo chamber. It is also important to watch the news because if you only consume media of an entertainment sort you will be opinionated but without facts and just assume that people are just the caricature of whomever you saw. So, returning to my story at the beginning, it is important to discuss not just online or read online but also have conversations with people who hold different viewpoints. When debating such subjects you will undoubtedly have a much more fulfilling conversation in person than online, where people can say what they wish with the mask of anonymity. This is not something that can be forced upon everyone- there will always be radicals, but fixing political polarization is a grassroots movement at heart. Wherein little by little we can bring the divide closer and closer to mending. We will never close it for democracy is working when such a divide exists. It is why political parties exist. But when we can not even talk to one another without insults, and say that the other side will lead to the destruction of America as we know it. It is a sign that not all is well with the machine of American democracy. Democracy after all means the rule of the people, so as the people we must maintain and fix it where necessary.

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Heard

Annabelle Rayburn

A worker at a small restaurant walks back into the kitchen to grab their food to take to the customers. They open the door to the kitchen and the chatter of customers is finally muted but replaced by the ding of the bell, the bubbling of the fryer, and the sharp taps of the plates as they hit the window. As they walk through the familiar calls from the line cooks are heard. Corner! Hot behind! Yes, Chef! They keep walking to the expedited window where they find a small girl, nine years old standing on a milk crate to reach the shelf, shouting orders to the chefs. Her mom is there too watching from behind to make sure everything goes smoothly, but the girl knows she's the one in charge. They walk up, the girl hands them the food, and they're on the way back to the dining room.

I am the girl standing on the milk crate, peering over the countertop. When I was in kindergarten my parents bought our family restaurant, The Blue Duck. Back then it was a small business, with only three employees total including my parents. Throughout the years I have spent hours upon hours in this business and watched the company grow. I was only five years old when my parents first bought the restaurant, so I wasn't much help. My sister and I would sit in the corner of the kitchen playing with our Zoobles, attaching them to the metal shelves so they would pop out and hang there. This was the kitchen where I learned how to play UNO, type on a keyboard, and make friendship bracelets. As I got older, my parents let me help out more with the smaller things. I was able to stir the pot of soup, fill the salt and pepper shakers, and organize the spice shelves.

As the business grew, so did our staff, and eventually we moved to a larger location. Here I was able to truly start learning the ins and outs of owning a business. I would sit in the back office and help my dad organize the order sheets into a fun file folder, learn how to use Excel spreadsheets (I thought the calculation functions were magic at first), and organize payroll. Whenever I didn't have anything to do, I would sit at the end of the bar with my coloring book and pencils and just observe. I would fall into the rhythm of watching the bartender scoop the ice, join the shakers, shake each drink for fifteen seconds, then drain into the proper glass. All of the employees were very kind to me and would try and teach me things if they had downtime. My favorite was when the bartender would help me use the cocktail spoon and jigger to make my very own Shirley Temple.

The years passed and through observations and training, I learned almost all of the positions in the restaurant. I was a host, busser, food runner, prep cook, and line cook, and landed in my favorite role of expediter. I am the one who runs service most nights, making sure the food goes out correctly, on time, and to the right tables. I have to communicate with all of the chefs, keep all of the tickets organized, and manage the food runners to make sure food is going to the proper tables. I have worked with a wide variety of people from college students to veteran chefs who have worked with the best of the best. From these people, I earned the nickname "corporate" because even though I am young, I have been working in the industry just as long, if not longer than many people. I have learned more about life through the restaurant than I ever have at school. Although this isn't my goal in life, I wouldn't trade it for anything.



A Fixed French Door

Amara Akridge

My sister Hannah and I found ourselves kneeling over a mound of glass in front of my previous house's French-styled room door, laughing till we couldn't breathe. We were cleaning out my room, singing and dancing to some tunes, when she accidentally knocked out the bottom panel of my door while attempting a ballerina-like high kick. I could feel tears running from my eyes; my heavy laughter was nearly completely silent. In May, while we were packing to leave my childhood home, I realized how much sentimental value I placed on having these clumsy times with my sister.

The only other time I had to move was when I was a newborn, first to Columbia, in Illinois, and then to Arkansas. My following years were spent in the St. Louis suburbs. (I was astonished to even hear that I once didn't live in St. Louis.) Stranger still, this house looks very similar to my old one, although in a cottage stone style with no more hideous popcorn ceilings and a complete basement. Similar design of the fireplace room and dining room, a little corridor with a bathroom in between, and, most notably, identically fashioned French doors leading to the bedrooms above.

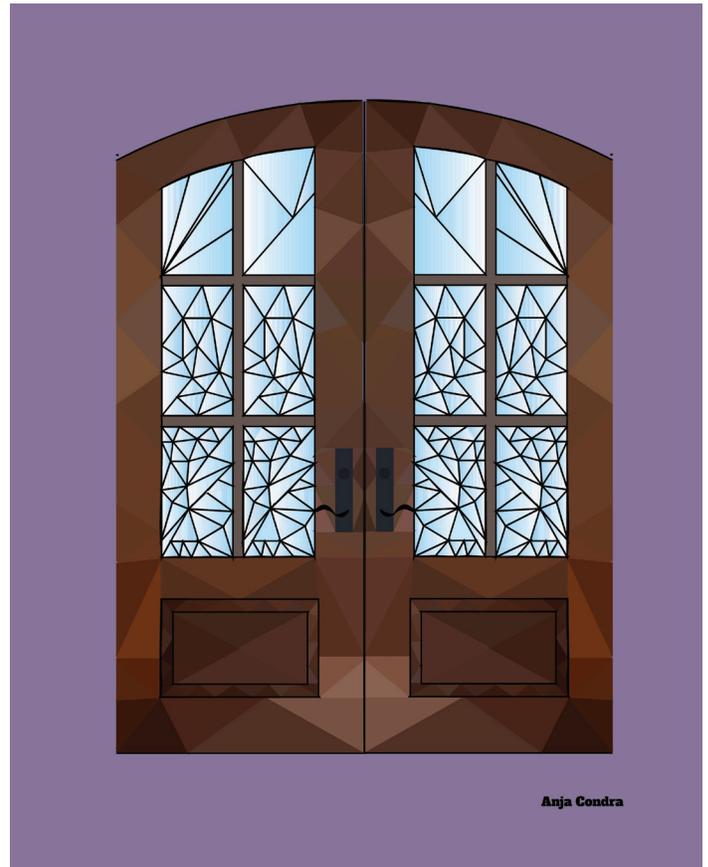
Remarkably, every one of those doors in the old house had also been shattered at least once. Now, my sister and I just broke the remaining intact one. This was nothing new. At this point, it had become something of a family tradition for us. My first scar actually came from the time my sister and I shattered the first door. Hannah was twelve years old, and I was nine. It was right after my father had taken my twin and I to Dollar Tree the week before and purchased a brand new disturbingly chlorine-smelling rubber violet bouncing ball.

Like most older siblings do; they steal. So one thing led to another, and my sister and I fought over who was going to play with it until we chased each other down, and I CRASHED out the panel to our living room's French door. I remember it was specifically the left panel on the third row down. I was utterly terrified and as I looked down at my blood-stained hands, the liquid wouldn't stop spurting like my hand was draining every drop inside it. Hannah held my palm under the bathroom faucet while I screamed, "I'M GONNA DIE. I'M GONNA DIE." (I wasn't. It was a scratch.)

I was grounded as soon as my parents arrived home from work, and I was left with a mushy white scar beneath my left pinky that took almost four years to heal. To this day I have a bumpy mark there.

I refused to forgive her for a long time afterwards. Until the end of my junior year in high school, five out of six French styled doors had a broken panel on it. They weren't all from me, but the common denominator was it had something to do with sibling rivalry and ended with everyone irritated and in trouble. With a house of four kids, who would be surprised? Looking back at them, as the house clears out, I feel overwhelmed with a feeling of guilt and nostalgia. Now that we stay in a new house, every single French door is intact. No more broken panels at all.

I'll miss being in a home without a broken French door, but it feels good to be able to laugh with her about it now.



A Recipe for Tortilla de Patatas

Ana Munn Carstensen

I want to share my abuela's recipe (the right recipe) for my favorite food: Tortilla Española, a dish that tastes like heaven and has gotten me through my hardest study nights and many long dinner conversations. My family is mostly teachers; conversing is our favorite activity. I hold this dish dear because it connects me with my Spanish culture. I eat this on the town with my family as we talk about politics and art. I ate this when Spain won the World Cup. I ate this before I went on stage for my first play, and I have eaten this at every funeral, birthday, family gathering, or potluck.

You need:

4-5 potatoes or however many your abuela hands you, she knows best

1 yellow onion, chopped coarsely

4-5 eggs

Salt

A lot of Olive Oil



Peel and slice the potatoes. This is my job; it is long and hard. Cut each potato into thin slices, as thin as you can. This takes a while, so sit down and talk with your family and friends. Make it an occasion. Teach your friends to slice the potatoes. Make it fun, a competition between cousins; the thinnest slice gets out of doing the dishes.

In a skillet, heat up olive oil. My abuela always told me Spaniards only use olive oil in all their cooking. She convinced me butter did not exist in Spain. I spent hours wondering how the bakeries made such delicious pastries using olive oil. My dad says my abuela passed her love of hyperbole and stubbornness to me. My brother says I'm gullible. I think I meet them in the middle.

Once the oil is hot, caramelize the onions, then add potatoes. This is when patience is key. Patience isn't my strong suit, but I'm getting better at waiting for the potatoes to cook. While waiting, you could read about Aristotle. I'll probably just lie on the kitchen floor or talk to my family and check in on the potatoes every 5 minutes. But Aristotle is mentioned; Aristotle is always mentioned in a house full of philosophers.

Salt and beat the eggs while you wait for the potatoes. Don't forget to salt the tortilla or else it will be *sosa*, or bland, my great uncle's nickname for me. Which is ironic, as the youngest in a Spanish family, I have learned to be loud. My father constantly tells me to, "Modulate, Ana." My loudness does come in handy when I need people's attention. Being the smallest forces you to command a room.

Mix the eggs, potatoes, and onion together. This is called *la masa*. It should have lots of brown caramelized bits. Let it rest. Once again patience is key, once again I struggle.

Cook *la masa* in a clean skillet, and once it feels right, flip. When is it right? You just have to know. Abuela taught Dad, and Dad taught me how to flip the tortilla. Wait until the bottom is golden and firm enough to flip but still a little gooey. Be careful - you must be confident in yourself and your ability to execute the flip, or you will end up with hot oil down your forearms or a half-cooked tortilla on the stove.

After a successful flip, serve: on a plate, at a party, on a picnic, with family, with friends, or alone. Let the flavor of childhood melt across your tongue and think of your loved ones.

How You Die

Alex Siemer

This is how you die.

The air rushes past me, my hair flies into my face. A wall of lights rises up before me, higher and higher, vanishing in the dark hazy clouds above. I feel every heartbeat, magnified, against the whoosh of the air. BUMP-whoosh-BUMP-whoosh-BUMP. Every sensation of air against my skin, I feel it. I am still, suspended, the wall of light next to me rising, and the planet far below speeding towards me at 66 meters per second.

Through the hazy clouds I see the stars. Then I feel warm heat as I pass the columns of fire that keep the wall of light next to me afloat. Their light is blinding and I no longer see the stars, but I know they're out there.

Atop the wall stands my executioner, waiting, watching, long gone from my view.

But what was I executed for?

I need to go back.

Come back with me.

Please.

I was ten when my parents died. My sister and I had both been in school when an enemy bomb landed on my family's house.

Normally I would have been left to fend for myself, but I was so promising even at that age that the Legion of Undying Light took notice of me. They sent me and my sister to live with a Legion instructor who ensured I got the best possible education and the safest possible home.

Now I want to kick myself for having been so stupid. But the loss of my home that I'd thought was a safe haven and the parents who'd kept me happy was a grief so monumental that it was completely beyond me to feel it. The Legion promised me safety when the only safety I'd known had been blown apart.

I wish I'd known that the Legion would never be as safe as my old childhood home. My parents protected me because they loved me; the Legion protected me because they wanted me.

There's a world of difference between being loved and being wanted.

I wish I'd known it sooner.

How different things would be.

Beep Beep Beep!

Some things never change, and my hatred of wakeup alarms is one of them.

Technically I was allowed to keep my own hours. Unlike the other soldiers and engineers, I could sleep until noon if I wanted. But Command wouldn't change the meal schedule to accommodate my sleep schedule. It was either get up early or skip breakfast.

I groaned and rolled off my bed (blankets on the floor). I was the only engineer who slept in their lab, and having a mattress was too much of a hassle. Once upon a time I couldn't sleep in the place I worked in, but I don't mind anymore. It beat the dormitories.

My lab had two rooms. The front room, where I slept, was lined wall-to-wall-to-wall with computer screens and two doors. The front door led to the hallway beyond. The back door led to the danger room.

I had just changed my clothes and powered up all of the computers when the bell on my front door rang.

Well, somebody'd better be dying, I thought, glancing at the small screen that was linked to a security camera in the hallway pointed at my door. The image on the screen was of Ramona, my closest maybe-no-definitely-not-friend-maybe-ally in the whole Sky Palace.

I opened the audio connection to the speaker outside my door, that allowed me to communicate with people without opening the door. "What is it this time?" I snapped.

On my camera feed, Ramona rocked back and forth on her feet. "Meeting request," she answered. She'd gradually become the unofficial liaison between grumpy, irritating me and the rest of humanity. I'm not sure how she felt about that.

My disciplinary supervisor kept sending me disciplinary meeting requests for random regulation infractions I'd committed: taking two extra minutes to shower; grabbing vault materials without an official requisition; ignoring disciplinary meeting requests.

I thought for all of two seconds. "Nah," I replied, moving to close the audio.

"Direct from Command," Ramona added.

I groaned. Not even I could ignore a direct-from-Command meeting request.

I slid my hand along my door's palm lock, and the triple-latches clicked. I pushed open the thick, heavy steel door and walked out into the hallway with Ramona. My door slid back closed, and the triple latches reengaged, protected by a palm scanner, retinal scanner, alphanumeric passcode lock, and key card lock.

I'm not paranoid, but... Hmmm. Maybe I was paranoid.
Or maybe I knew all along that something wasn't right.

The war never really interested me until it killed my parents. Long before I was born the world had splintered into a thousand factions, each one fighting all the others for some reason I never knew. When the Legion of Undying Light took me in, they told me everything they knew about the enemy that killed my parents. I was angry; I wanted revenge.

So I worked, and I learned. I became the Legion's most promising engineer.

Have you heard about the revolutionary wind-phase canceling stabilizer on the Legion's floating Sky Palaces that reduced their embarrassingly high crash rate to zero? That was me.

Or the light-bending camouflage panels on the Legion's aircraft? Also me.

Or the micro-sized plasma generators that allowed plasma blasters to become small handheld guns instead of large cannons? Still me.

And now I have promised the Legion the ultimate weapon, the weapon that will finally enable them to dominate the world.

I know they'll enjoy it.

It's strange. In the space of just a few hours I've forgotten everything the Legion told me about the faction they said killed my parents.

I'm eighteen now. Very soon I will be nothing.

Ramona walked me down the massive halls of our Sky Palace. It was the largest Sky Palace in the Legion, housing the most senior pilots and the top leaders of the Legion's military. It floated miles above the Earth, safe and stable, and massive.

"Beautiful day, huh?" Ramona said, smiling brightly.

I didn't answer. I hated small talk.

Ramona watched me for a second, then she lowered her gaze and leaned close to me.

"Command has been investigating the cause of that power outage last week," she said, low-voiced.

My eyes narrowed. "I thought I already did that?"

Ramona dropped her voice further. "Well... they suspect you."

I actually stopped walking. "What?"

Ramona laughed like I'd said something funny, just as a junior pilot rounded the corner in front of us. He gave her an odd look as he passed, and she resumed her secretive talk, beckoning me to keep walking.

"Apparently they found something. And, well, you never cared much about the war; you're just trying to survive. They think another faction could buy you with the promise of safety."

"I am safe," I snapped. "And I do care about the war. I want to end it."

"If you say so," Ramona replied, shrugging. "I'm just telling you what Command sees. They think you have a motive." She turned to me earnestly. "You didn't hear this from me, got it?" she said. I nodded slowly.

Finally Ramona stopped at the giant doors that led to Command. She showed the guards her communicator screen, verifying that she'd collected me for a meeting request. The guards opened the door, and Ramona beckoned me to enter Command's giant meeting space.

It was a giant arena, theoretically able to hold every inhabitant of the Sky Palace. At the moment, though, it was just me, standing at the center of the hall, and Command glaring down at me from their seats at the end.

The entire gang had shown up: the five Illuminated Advisory Council members Sylvia Wakor, Melvin Piscauni, Oona Zhang, Brock Frelm, and Aarlo Zuun; Director of Sky Forces Janina Wright; and the top leader of the Legion's military, Illuminated Grand General Richard Dodson.

Most unsettling of all was the face of the Legion's ruler, Undying Empress Luz Lumina Solaris IV, watching the proceeding from a larger-than-life video screen. (Her actual location was the most closely guarded secret in the Legion). Empress Luz didn't watch just anything.

"Alexandra," General Dodson said, "this committee is called to address the cause of the power outage that occurred at 1400 hours last week."

(Alexandra. That's my name. Never Alex. To anyone who really can't say two syllables, I'm Sandra).

My face remained guarded. I couldn't let them know what Ramona had told me.

Oona Zhang spoke. "Our investigations have confirmed that the outage was brought about by a mechanical device planted in the generator room. It could only have been planted by someone inside."

Command paused, giving me a chance to speak.

"That's news to me," I said. "I thought I'd determined that the outage was caused by a computer virus?"

"That was in your report, yes," Brock Frelm replied.

I tried to look decently surprised. "You believe I caused the outage."

Sylvia Wakor smiled. "The generator room was sealed and guarded after your investigation, so the device was planted before. And no one is better with mechanical devices than you, Alexandra."

Flattering.

"The tribunal is held to determine your innocence or guilt of betrayal. You may speak in your defense," General Dodson commanded.

I forced my face to remain neutral. I needed to tread very lightly here. "If I had planted a mechanical device in the generator room to cause a power outage across the whole Sky Palace, why would I leave said device in the generator room for your investigations to find? I had the opportunity to enter the generator room immediately after the outage. I would have taken the incriminating machine and destroyed it."

(As I spoke I watched the Council members exchange nervous glances. I remembered what Ramona had said, and somewhere in the depths of my subconscious an alarm bell started to ring.)

Dodson's eyes narrowed. I went on. (Threads of insinuation connected together in my head). "Furthermore, I have no motive." (Yet the Council assumed I did. The circumstantial case was weak and they knew it. There was something else. What?) "The Legion has done me a great service, and given me everything I could possibly need." (They'd invested a lot in me, because they wanted my skills.) "The Legion granted me a home and a job where my talents can shine." (There was a way the Legion could lose me. That was the only reason they could fear it so.) "I have always been loyal to Undying Light and you have given me much in return." (Yes, I cared about the war.) "I have no reason to turn to the darkness." (But maybe I did.)

"I plead that someone else planted your device in the generator room to frame me for the outage." (The why was obvious, but who?) "If I were found guilty and sentenced to death, then any other faction could claim me – and in turn, my ultimate weapon." (Someone else wanted me to turn against the Legion.)

There was a long silence.

(Command knew something I didn't. Something that could turn me against the Legion.)

The voice of Empress Luz Lumina Solaris (IV) suddenly rang through the room, causing even Command to startle. "Two days."

I cocked my head.

(Someone else knew it too.)

"You have two days to prove the identity of the true traitor," General Dodson clarified. "Should you fail, then you will be arrested and tried under the full power of our laws."

"And any attempt to leave this Sky Palace before that deadline," Janina Wright continued, "will be taken as an admission of your guilt."

"I understand, and I accept your conditions," I replied.

"Dismissed," General Dodson finally ordered.

And as I left Command, the threads of insinuation finally wove into a snarling web of truth.

(I didn't care about the war until I was ten).

Ramona was hanging out outside of my room when I got back.

"How bad?" she asked.

I glanced at her as I opened all of my locks. "Fine."

Without waiting for a response, I closed my door, sealing myself in my lab. The blankets on the floor sneered at me now, no longer a clever tool for my safe shell but a cruel mockery. My eyes drifted up from the mattress to the thick, sealed danger door.

I gave myself two hours.

In my younger days my name was Alex. Alex died with my parents when I was ten, but I still used her name out of habit. It wasn't until I was fourteen when I finally buried her corpse.

I "borrowed" an airship from my palace and "visited" the medical tent near one of the many Legion army front lines. Inside, I hurried to the bed that held my sister.

The bomb that had hit her bunker destroyed her. She was still alive, but barely. Ropy burn scars perforated her face and body. Her stomach was connected to a bag and intravenous tubes snaked in her arms. Her spinal cord had been crushed.

Her eyes opened when I drew near. "Hey... Alex..." she whispered, wincing.

"Hey," I replied.

She was smart, tenacious, and driven. I'd pressed the Legion to relocate her to my engineering division, but that was something they couldn't do. When I heard of the bomb that destroyed her bunker Command tried to forbid my seeing her.

"I should've—" I started to say, tears filling my eyes.

She shook her head – or tried to, anyway. "Legion... wanted...", she said weakly. "...you."

"I can't – you can't—" I tried to say. The tears in my eyes started to slide down my cheeks.

You can't live like this. No one can. This isn't a life. Even if she survived, she would never walk again, she would never eat solid food again, and her injuries would give her constant pain. My sister had always been athletic, strong, moving, talking. She couldn't live like this.

"It's okay...Alex..." she whispered, looking up at me. I met her eyes. "So this... is how... you die," she said.

I smiled. Coco Chanel's last words. The last words she'd always wished were hers.

"It's okay," I whispered, drawing out my gun as she relaxed back and closed her eyes, the faintest smile playing on her face. True to form, she said nothing more as I positioned the barrel of my gun under her chin. Straight through her brain stem. As quick and painless as I could make it.

One of the nurses noticed. "Hey, what're you—" he started to yell.

I squeezed the trigger.

None of the doctors, nurses, or security guards made any move to stop me. I think they were too stunned to.

Wordlessly I dropped my gun on the floor and strode out of the tent.

There are two things I never did again after that moment.

I never fired a gun.

And I never went by Alex.

The three largest airstrips in the Sky Palace were always crawling with pilots and crews. The other six were all on lockdown, which I found out when I arrived at the entrance to a small, disused storage runway near the top of the palace.

Well, lockdowns can be overridden.

In the airlock, I slipped into a thin, lightweight gray pressure suit. This runway wasn't enclosed, so the temperature was freezing and the air was too thin to breathe. The runway stuck out from the Sky Palace, rather like walking on a fictional pirate plank. There was no wind, thanks to my super-stabilizers, but I still needed the pressure suit to survive. Over the suit, I put on a holster belt with various weaponry I'd invented.

Finally I put on my helmet, adjusted the oxygen tank on my back, grabbed a spare oxygen tank, and opened the door to the cold upper atmosphere, counting in my head.

Three... two... one...

As soon as I stepped out to the platform, I swung my arm and hurled the spare oxygen tank.

The oxygen tank met a giant net. The net wrapped itself around the tank and the whole thing slammed against me, knocking me to the ground.

Ahead of me, a figure in a pressure suit dropped from the top of one of the aircraft on the runway. I tapped my helmet to send a communication request to the figure in front. There was a ping when my signal was accepted and the comlink was opened.

I spoke first, my voice cold steel, as I stood up and shoved the netted oxygen tank off me. "Hi, Ramona."

Isn't it funny how so much that is mysterious becomes clear once you understand one thing?

Ramona's laughter blasted through my comlink, loud enough to make me wince. Ahead of me, her pressure-suited figure doubled over and clutched its sides.

Eventually her laughter drifted into silence and her figure straightened up. "How'd you figure me out?" she asked.

I shrugged. "The incriminating device was planted during my investigation, before I locked the generator room. And there's only one person in this place who was close enough to me that her presence in the generator room wouldn't arouse my suspicion."

Ramona nodded approvingly. "You really are a smart one, Alexandra."

"Also," I added, "I never told you that I didn't always care about the war."

The still air seemed to grow heavy, cold, and twisted.

Tension twists tightly. It's a gleaming net, a wound-up braid, wrapped around us all.

"How'd you know I'd be here?" I said, my voice showing no emotion.

Ramona laughed again. "Oh, I had people at every runway. But this one?" She gestured to the aircraft she'd jumped off from. "Wasn't this the craft that you stole to see your sister?"

(It was. Had I missed that? No, I hadn't. How could I?)

I had nothing to say, so I said nothing.

Ramona's figure sobered, and she dropped her net launcher, holding out her hands in a gesture of invitation.

"We can do this the easy way," she said. "I know you want to escape the Legion. You can join me." She stepped forward. "With your weapon designs you'll be welcomed. And when my faction controls the world, you'll be a hero."

My hand slid to one of the canisters on my belt.

"We can't bring back your parents or sister," she went on, "but we can get you whatever else you want. You can have safety. Security. Happiness."

I admit, I seriously considered it. All I ever wanted was to be free, with a home and a family that would never be taken away. The Legion wouldn't let me have that. But there was no reason why Ramona's faction would let me have that either. My skills were too useful to waste. Even if I found a home, I would have to fight tooth and nail to protect it from everyone who would use me, all day, every day, for the rest of my life.

In a world at war, I would never be valued beyond my ability to win.

So I looked up at Ramona and said "No."

Sometimes knowledge feels like a curse. Sometimes it feels better to live in illusion. And that's all good, until you try to touch it.

I whipped the canister out of my belt, pressed its button, and dropped it. It exploded in clouds of smoke that billowed out quickly – low air pressure – and I dashed away from Ramona, toward the aircraft I'd taken to see my sister, and the crash of another net hitting a wall echoed behind me.

Something thin snaked around my legs and tied them together. I fell awkwardly, and Ramona stalked over me, her figure fading in and out of the smoke. She must have been wearing some heat-seeking tech under her helmet.

One hand grabbed the hose of my oxygen tank. The other hand held a small syringe.

My hand was still free, and I unholstered one of my inventions. The small bladed circle flashed as I sliced it toward Ramona. Ramona jumped back, and in the same motion I brought the blade down and sliced the cord that bound my legs.

I scrambled to my feet and dashed toward the aircraft again, only for the ground between me and the craft to explode and erupt in flames. I yelped and skidded to a stop. The flames went out quickly – not much oxygen, see – and I spun around to see Ramona holding a plasma gun. She shifted it to point at me.

"Stop," she snapped. "We don't have to fight. We can still do this the easy way."

I snorted. "You won't kill me. You need me alive."

Ramona gave a brief sideways nod. "That would be preferable, yes. But we can always take your designs from your lab. Our best engineers could be able to finish them."

I laughed, just as Ramona had done when she'd fired her net at me. "You failed, Ramona. You turned me against the Legion. But in doing so you turned me against the war. I'll never help your faction."

Ramona's finger tensed on the trigger.

Pull one tiny thread on the braid of deceit and the whole thing collapses.

"Just kill me, and take me out of the running, before I do something crazy."

Still Ramona hesitated. Doubtless until her superiors decided I was as useless as she claimed I was, her punishment for killing me would be severe.

And everything... falls.

Before Ramona could make her decision, I threw my circled blade and broke away into a run. Behind me, Ramona shrieked, and her gun discharged. There was a rush of heat and a violent explosion. I tumbled dizzily, crashing against the hard surface of the runway, pain ripping through my sides, aircraft wreckage crashing around me, and as I came to my senses my body slid off the edge. On instinct, I reached out my hand and grabbed the edge of the platform, hanging above the abyss below.

I could feel holes in my pressure suit and my body, blood and oxygen leaking from them. I wasn't going to stay conscious for much longer.

With my free arm I tapped the comlink to make sure it was still open. With my fading strength I pulled up, my head breaking the surface of the ruined runway to briefly see Ramona. She staggered, on the verge of collapsing, a hand clamped over a rip in her pressure suit on her other arm, the aim of her plasma gun wavering. She caught sight of me and inhaled in surprise.

"You'll never... get... my weapon," I gasped. "It... will... destroy... you."

"Wh—" Ramona started, but I muted the comlink before I heard what she said.

I drop down again, hanging on by one arm. I feel everything – the cool air, the pain in my side, my warm leaking blood, every sensation from my fingers to toes.

And I let go.

And so I lay suspended, the Legion and Ramona rising away from me, and as the Earth pulls me toward her so I pull on her gravity, ever so slightly, and so we rush towards our final embrace.

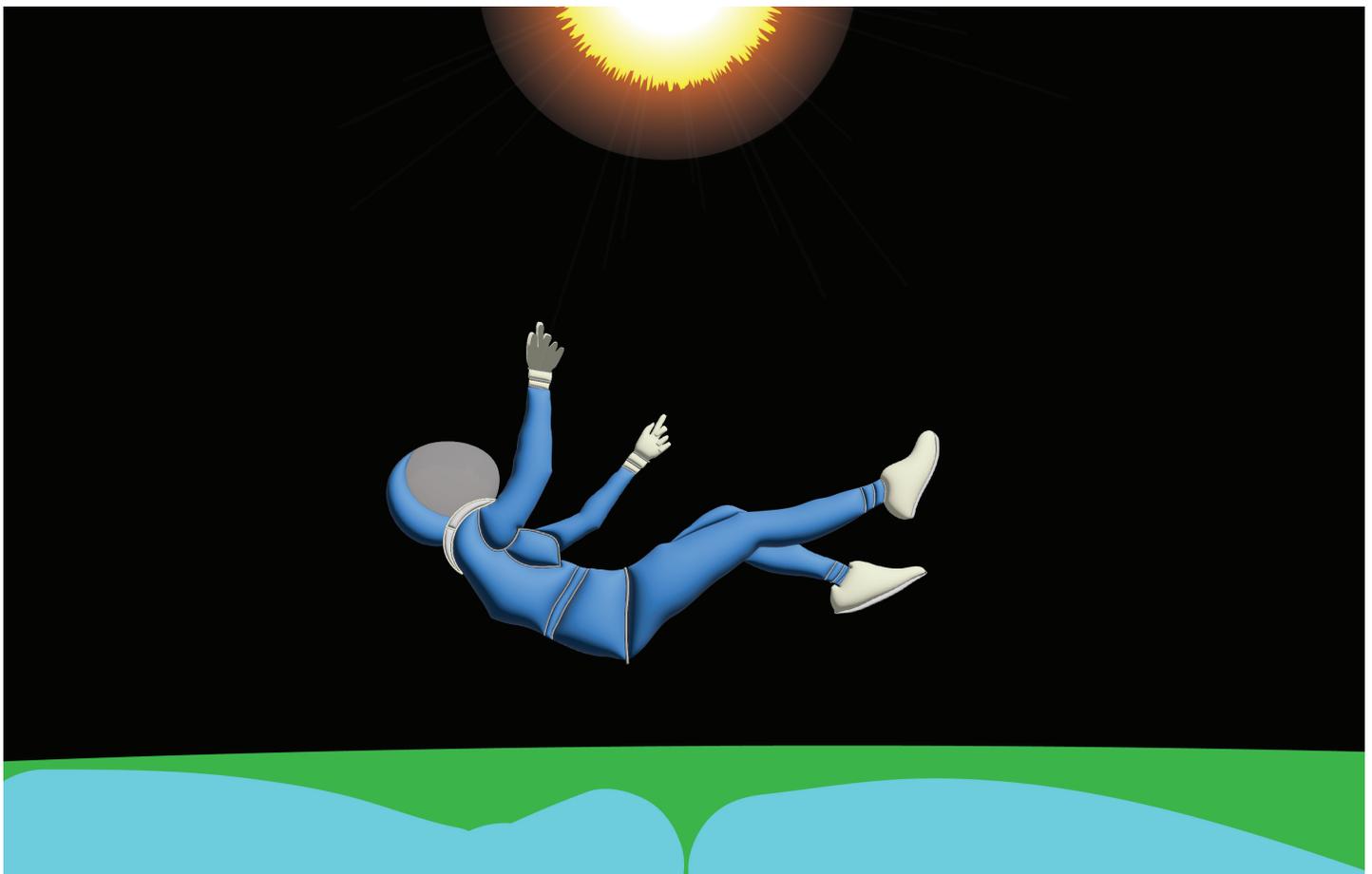
But what those who would use me will never realize is that I finished my ultimate weapon.

Far above me, there will be a flash of light, consuming the entire sky. The light will rush toward me, and so will the heat, and as it reaches me it will reach into my molecules and break them apart, scattering the atoms away.

If the stars deign to notice, they will sneer at the knockoff beneath them, that dares to mimic their light. But it will only flash a second, and then the undying light will fade away like the cheap mockery it is.

Only the quiet of the stars will remain.

This is how you die.



The Tale of Jacob B. Asteria

David Maloney

Lord Jacob B. Asteria. What a funny name. He had all the rights of a lord, head of the Asteria family, and yet he only used his title once, during his letter to the people of the walls. Sitting at his office at Stohess, he stared out the windows at the fifty-five meter tall walls, the gray color he had stared at for twenty-eight years. These walls stood to protect Eldia from the titans, but they recently had their meaning changed.

The title of Commander in Chief was one of the most respected in the walls, next to the royal family. Recently, Jacob had been promoted to the role after the previous CIC had committed suicide, or so the military believed until only a few days ago. Mr. Wide, the new Vice CIC was an excellent CIC who ran into a deep fog after a hard battle, and was assumed dead. It was Jacob's fault for not searching, but after losing so many good men at that battle, he didn't want to risk any more lives.

A letter sat on his desk, written to Julia Fritz, the queen of Eldia. Jacob hated writing letters, especially to the royal family. His father seemed to have a knack for it, but Jacob struggled, sighing as he tried to write an opening.

Jacob decided to go for a walk outside the district. As he stood up and exited, his officer, the MP stationed outside, saluted him. His tan trench coat was on a rack just outside the door, with the logo of the CIC on boat sleeves. As he put it on, he remembered his father's old coat from when he was the CIC. Jacob quickly took off his new coat and went back inside his office. Opening a cabinet, he spotted the red trench coat and decided to don it on this winter night. As he walked out, the MP soldier once more saluted, to which Jacob saluted back. Walking down the stairs, he started to remember more and more. He could tell this would be a night of remembering, which he didn't like to do much of. His life was forever changed in this very building, almost seven years ago now. The night before he was given the power of the nine.

His mask made it hard to breathe, but he didn't dare take it off, same with his sunglasses. The district was darkened from the night, the moon hardly showing through the cloud cover. He knew that if he removed his glasses, there was a chance that the civilians would see it. Ever since that day, the fateful day outside of Stohess, he couldn't remove his glasses for fear of being found out. Jacob was not one to take risks, even in the most secure city in the walls, so he went to the armory to strap up. The Stationary Guard quartermaster opened the door when he saw the CIC coming.

Inside the armory lies one of the most advanced weapons to ever be made. The Omni Directional Mobility Gear. Jacob had used it since he was sixteen in the training corp. Every trainee had to show they could balance it to pass through basic training. The system used gas to push out a hook, which would be wound back up to the user, pushing the user forward at high speeds. The weapon was made out of necessity, to fight the titan menace. He had lost many good friends to the titans, almost losing his own life many times, saved by the same friends who lie in the ground, many miles from Stohess.

As he filled his ODM with gas, he grabbed his blades and his flintlock. This flintlock was almost seven years old, saving him countless times throughout the years. He quickly left the armory and went out the front door of the HQ. As he exited, he stared at the walls. The first of many memories hit him.

Seven Years Ago, in the District of Trost, 839 WC.

A young and proud Stationary Guard member stood on top of the gate at the city of Trost, side by side with his comrades from the scouting legion. As he stared out into the titan territory, he felt anxious. This was a standard clearance operation, but something was different. His brown hair flowed from the large amounts of wind atop the walls, but thanks to the sun he was warm. On his black and orange jacket, the nametag of Asteria sat, next to his rank of private. The stomping continued to slowly get louder and louder, as the first scout called out the first titan.

The lumbering beast was not alone. Not even a minute later, hundreds could be seen. The titan was what he trained to fight for years. The same things that killed so many of his people so many years ago at Shiganishna. The strange creatures were human-like, except they ranged from three to twenty meters in height. They also had an appetite for humans, ignoring all other animals like deer and horses. There were many theories of where they came from, or what they even were, but Jacob didn't believe any of them. As long as Jacob could remember, the titans had always been a threat. The walls were erected hundreds of years ago to protect humanity from the menace, and today Jacob stood atop them to protect them.

As he looked, he noticed the variety in sizes of the beasts, ranging from five meters to fifteen. The ugly faces and humanoid body was enough to make any new recruit tremble. This was his third ever clearance, more than many could boast. As the titans approached the gate, a scouting legion officer raised his hand, holding a flare gun. He covered his opposite ear and pulled the trigger. A green flare had been launched, the signal to begin the operation. All at once, the branch members on top of the wall drew their blades, and ran forward, into the thin air.

Jacob never got over the thrill of jumping off the walls toward the titans. As he jumped, he found his first target and hooked into the tender skin

of the titan. Using his gas, he boosted himself at breakneck speeds toward the mouth of the enemy. As he approached, the titan stared at him, deep into his soul. Jacob began to wind up his spin, and as he drew near, he released his hooks and began his signature move. He slashed the titan's vulnerable eyes, one of the few weak spots the titans had. It would be a minute before they regenerated. He quickly made his escape down the body of the titan, who now had placed its hand in front of its eyes in pain. He slid down the ribcage and looked toward the nape of the neck. The nape was the only place he could kill this monster, and as he approached, he began to prepare his spin. He quickly boosted himself one more time as he began spinning, slicing through the nape in a clean fashion. The beast let out one final cry as steam began coming out the wound. Jacob grappled back to the walls, panting from his first kill.

As soon as he looked back onto the operation, he noticed something was wrong. He only saw one other gas trail, a sign that only one other person was alive. He couldn't believe that the scouting legion had been killed just like that. Using his ODM to boost up the walls, he ran over to his cannon, which was near the front of the gate to confirm the situation. A lone scout could be seen fighting a titan alone from the coming pack. The horde which was only now arriving looked to be in the 50's. Jacob tried to reach for his flare gun, but he was shaking too badly to reach it. As he stood there, watching the sole scout fight, he was in disbelief. This sole scout knew he was alone but kept fighting. The scout claimed another kill and quickly retreated on top of the wall for only a moment. He approached Jacob, who was now on his knees from the shaking. He placed his hand on his shoulder and stared out toward the mass of titans.

"You're a cannoneer, right? This isn't a very winnable fight, I'm afraid, but we must try."

Jacob couldn't believe the scout. His comrades had all just died, and he was still going to fight. The scout looked at Jacob with a smile. Jacob stopped shaking and slowly stood up.

"Bait them into groups. I'll try my best" Jacob stated. He wasn't the best with ODM, but he was the best with cannons around. The scout once more smirked at Jacob before slamming his fist over his heart in the famous salute.

"Shinzou Wo Sasageyo!" the scout yelled as he ran and jumped off the wall. The wings of freedom flashed Jacob for one second, but it was enough for him to remember it years later. Jacob raced to his cannon and quickly sat down. He grabbed the aiming devices and began to watch as the scout began to bait the titans into a group. He slowly began to turn the horde toward the walls, coming right at Jacob. As he approached, Jacob had finally got his firing solution in. Jacob squeezed the trigger, and the wall shook. The muzzle of the cannon flashed as a cannon tore through the air, quicker than any ODM user could dream of going.

The cannon tore through the crowd of titans, killing most of them, if not crippling them. Jacob had no time to watch as he jumped out of the seat to begin reloading the cannon. This normally was a team effort, but thanks to the adrenaline, Jacob was able to slam another round into the cannon and quickly sat back down for another shot. The scout had another part of the horde, about a third of the horde remained. As the horde approached, Jacob once again made a firing solution and pulled the trigger. The horde instantly fell, almost every titan being killed thanks to a well placed shot. The horde was destroyed minus a few stragglers. Jacob once more jumped up and loaded another round, not even feeling the weight of the seventy-five pound round.

The lone scout was doing well clearing up the remaining few titans alive, an easy job for him. As Jacob watched, he heard stomping coming from over the river to his left. As he stood up to spot, he noticed a lone titan sprinting towards the scout. An abnormal had shown up. Jacob had no time to fire a flare as the titan sprinted at insane speed toward the scout. The scout was busy with the remaining titans, not paying enough attention to spot the titan.

There was no way for Jacob to aim the cannon quick enough to kill the abnormal, leaving one thing for Jacob to do. Jacob launched off the wall toward the ground below, preparing to hook onto the abnormal titan approaching the scout. As he neared the ground, Jacob fired the grapples, and began boosting toward the titan, nearly scraping the ground. Jacob held down the gas booster trying to speed up toward the nape of the sprinter. Jacob went zooming by the scout, locking eyes with the scout standing on the fresh corpse of a titan. The scout's blue eyes lingered in his mind as Jacob went flying toward the titan.

As he approached the titan, it turned its focus on Jacob. The grapples had been set into the back of the neck, but now with the titan turned to face head on, Jacob was heading right for its massive hand. Jacob released his left hook, which allowed him to spin himself toward the right of the titan, narrowly avoiding the arm. As he swung wide, for a moment time paused. He was floating in the air. Jacob launched his left hook, and boosted into a spin, sinking his blades into the nape, killing it instantly.

The memory stopped there. Jacob stood in the cold night at Stohess once more. That day, Jacob learned what it meant to fight for his life. Seven years had passed since that day atop the walls, an innocent recruit forced into a horrible position. For his actions, he was awarded the Scouting legion's "Wings of freedom" pin, making him an honorary scout. In his own branch, he was promoted to an officer role and quickly rose the ranks to assistant commander of the guard. He recalled the pride he felt when he was able to tell his father about the promotion.

Jacob noticed a large hole in the park in front of the HQ. It looked almost like a footprint. Jacob shuttered at another memory that he managed to repress. He turned right from the HQ toward the main road, sparsely populated due to the time of night. As he walked down the road, he pulled out a canteen from his coat pocket. The canteen was as old as his flintlock, and another memory sparked in his mind.

7 years ago, Trost District.

After yet another clearance operation outside the Trost District, Jacob headed back toward the Trost HQ to relax. The operation was a major success, with no branch members dying. He was walking along the wall when he spotted a man on the roof of HQ. The other branch members seemed to not see the man, so Jacob decided to check it out alone. He grabbed onto the roof of the HQ to find a man, sitting down. He had brown hair with distinctive bangs. As Jacob approached the man, the man looked up at Jacob. The man had yellow eyes, like Jacob, a rarity inside the walls. As the two men stared at each other, Jacob felt the urge to speak.

"Would you like a drink of water?" Jacob reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his canteen, extending his hand toward the man. The man stared at the canteen, grabbed it and thanked Jacob. The man downed the water in one swig, then handed the canteen back to Jacob.

"The name's Rhaez. Nice to meet you." Rhaez looked at Jacob once more. Jacob stared back, and felt as if his eyes never ended. They seemed incredibly...deep. Jacob struggled to reply as he stared.

"My name is Jacob Asteria, it's nice to meet you as well." Rhaez's face began to change after hearing Jacob's last name.

"Your father is a good friend of mine. I didn't know he had a son, let alone a son in the military." Jacob had never heard his father mention Rhaez either, which was shocking as his father often told Jacob about everything.

"Are you all right up here? There's better places to sit." Jacob felt the urge to help the man, an urge which would carry on for the rest of his life.

"Yeah, I'm fin-" As if Rhaez was a titan, a strange steam began to arise from him. Rhaez seemed to not react to this, but Jacob prepared to draw his flintlock. As he reached for it, Rhaez noticed and quickly stood up. "Relax, Jacob. I know this isn't very normal, but it's okay. Your father knows what I am."

Jacob kept his hand on his flintlock. He had heard rumors of people called shifters. When you sliced the nape of a regular titan, they simply began to decay, but if you did the same with a shifter, the human who controlled it would appear. He also heard that they could steam like a titan to heal. Was this man a shifter?

"You could have ordered me to get off this roof, you know. I'm not a branch member. Yet, the first thing you do is offer me water. I like you, Jacob. You're a good person." Rhaez seemed very relaxed about all this, but Jacob wasn't sure. "Why don't you sit down and I'll tell you? If you have time, of course." A branch member below called that the cart was leaving for the interior. Jacob had a choice to leave and act like this never happened, or to hear Rhaez out.

Jacob sat down in front of Rhaez, like a kid listening to a parent tell a story. Rhaez quickly sat down after him.

"I'm sure you've heard about the shifters and the powers they hold. I'm the holder of a titan called the Attack titan. It's a very powerful form, one of the most powerful of the many. That steam was me regenerating from a small wound I received earlier." Jacob was extremely confused but was trying to listen. "I'm sorry if I scared you, I can't control it well recently. It just happens as shifters grow older."

Rhaez hardly looked over twenty. He almost looked like a child compared to Jacob. His face had no wrinkles or other signs of aging, along with the rest of his body.

"How old are you? You look pretty young to me." Jacob was puzzled by Rhaez. He seemed to make little sense. Here was a perfectly healthy man saying he was old.

"It's called the Curse of Ymir, my friend. Ymir, the founding titan, only lived for thirteen years, so us shifters only have thirteen years once we inherit the power." His eyes seemed to drift toward the horizon, which was beginning to turn a shade of pink. The tone of the conversation seemed to become grim.

"That's a shame. You gain that incredible power only to lose almost all your life."

"Depends on how you see it. Most people are lucky to live to be thirteen. I can heal wounds, so to have a cap on how long I can live really isn't that bad." Jacob looked at Rhaez's eyes once more. His eyes, while still deep, seemed to give off a happy feeling, as if Rhaez was content with dying.

"Do you want to die?" Jacob blurted out, immediately regretting it. Rhaez turned away from looking at the horizon to stare at Jacob.

"We all die eventually, friend. I've simply accepted that." Rhaez smiled a reassuring smile. "However, until that day, we have to keep moving forward, for all of those who can't anymore. You should understand that better than most."

It was as if hundreds of eyes were staring at Jacob at once. He felt stares from all around, colder than the winter breeze. Jacob turned his head quickly but didn't see anything. The feeling continued on, Rhaez taking notice that Jacob was feeling off.

"Your comrades have to believe that you'll continue to save the people until you die. They die believing they meant something. Being upset with the notion we all die eventually is undermining that trust." Jacob froze up, his muscles tense. His eyes widened as he tried to process what Rhaez meant. A

hand was placed on his shoulder. As he looked up, he saw Rhaez standing up, once more facing the horizon. At once, the stares stopped. The horizon was now an orange color. "That color is what your heart must be. Blazing, always, as a light. You must not let others see that you don't believe. You should always believe that you can carry on, no matter what happens."

Jacob stood up and faced the horizon. As the two stared at the orange, Jacob made a pledge. No matter how rough the going got, no matter how bad things were, he would carry on, not for himself, but for those who couldn't anymore.

The next day would test Jacob's resolve.

The next day, at Trost, 839 WC.

The wind atop the wall was calm today. Much more so than usual. As Jacob stood watching for titans, he thought about last night. About his promise to his comrades. He doubted he could manage it, but he figured he would try. As he finished cleaning his cannon, he began to inspect the breach when thunderstruck. However, this was no normal thunder. Jacob turned around to see the brightest light he had ever seen coming from inside the district. A fierce wind began to blow, almost pushing him off his feet. Thunder appeared to come from nowhere.

Then, the unmistakable roar of a titan filled the air. A 15 meter titan appeared near the river boat dock, roaring. Jacob froze as he tried to take in the info. This titan just appeared inside the district. He could see civilians coming out of their homes in a panic. The titan stood there for a moment more, roaring as loud as possible.

The lives of Trost depended on how he reacted in the next few moments. Jacob reached into his bag and pulled out a blue flare. He fired one shot in the air, signaling to the military members to begin evacuating. As soon as the flare rang out, the titan stomped, destroying a home. The civilians below began to run toward the interior gate, all in a mass crowd. The titan began to stomp more and more, almost as if it was fighting something. Debris flew through the air, as dust began to obscure the area. Jacob quickly jumped off the wall, grappling to a building.

"Civilians! Begin to evacuate to the interior! The military will deal with the threat!" Jacob yelled as loud as he could to the scared crowd. The crowd stared at him, eyes wide open. A young child stood in front of Jacob. The two locked eyes, the eyes of the child filled with despair. Jacob reached for his ODM blades, and pointed one at the titan, who was destroying house after house. "That titan can be killed like any other." Jacob grappled onto a building and flung himself at the titan. The titan had finally begun moving around, crushing whatever stood in its path. Jacob grappled onto a water tower nearby so he could wing wide of the beast.

For whatever reason, this titan started steaming almost immediately. Normally titans didn't steam until they were damaged, but as far as Jacob could see, no branch member had tried to attack it. Jacob landed on the side of the water tower, hanging as he continued to watch. Should he attack this beast with it acting so strange? This seemed to be a mixture of an abnormal and a regular titan, which Jacob had never seen before. The dirty blood color of hair reminded him of something, but he wasn't entirely sure what.

The muscles on the titan seemed to be slowly growing smaller as it continued to steam. The overall size also seemed to be decreasing, once more another oddity of this specific beast. The titan continued stomping, but it seemed as if they were growing slower and slower, weaker with each one. Was it wise to go in for a kill? The steam arising would create an issue, and assuming you could even get close, the debris would cause more problems. Flares began to be shot off along the main road, blue in color, showing the branch members had finally opened the interior gate for the civilians to move through.

The titan let out one final roar before crouching down, almost as if it was dying. The steam arising from the beast was enormous, much more than before, and would likely burn the skin off of a person if they were unlucky enough to be near it. Jacob had to wait until just the right moment to attack it, whenever this steam wore off. Thoughts began to race in Jacob's mind.

What if this was a trap and the titan was just baiting him in? What if this was a smokescreen? What if this one was just a distraction? What if, what if, what if. Jacob couldn't stop thinking about the what ifs. This was incredibly bizarre, but then again, most days weren't very normal. The smoke finally began to clear, the titan still there, but seemingly slouched over.

Now was the time to attack. Jacob released his grapples and quickly attached them to the titan. As he boosted, he once again prepared his signature spin, aiming through the steam where the nape would be. Jacob was right in front of the nape when the steam cleared all of a sudden. A man seemed to be sticking out of the nape, leaning back as if he was dead. Jacob only had a second to stop his spin, forcing him to lose his control, and release his grapples, sending him over the beast and onto a roof in front of it.

Landing rough on the roof's tiles, Jacob quickly stood up and faced the beast. The steam had almost entirely dissipated, showing the full beast off. The man had yet to move, but he looked almost attached to the beast, some sort of weird red flesh coming from where his arms should be. The titan's eyes had rolled back, and the jaws had been opened wide as if he was going to eat something. It looked as if it had been frozen in time, but the muscles continued to grow smaller and smaller, almost to the bone at this point.

Jacob shot his grapples toward the nape and boosted toward the man. As he landed on the back of the titan, he noticed that the man's hair was

the exact same as the titans. It could have been coincidence, but this man still reminded him of someone he knew. The man's eyes were rolled back and his mouth wide open. The area around his eyes had some sort of red markings, almost like a birthmark. It would have to be checked out later, as this titan could wake up any moment. Jacob reached out for the man's arms, but they didn't seem to be there. The red flesh went into the titan's body, attaching him to it, same with his legs. Jacob drew his blades from their sheath and quickly sliced the man's strange limbs off, one by one, catching him as he dropped. Once the man was freed, Jacob quickly grappled toward HQ.

Flying over the rooftops was one thing, but with a second person's weight, Jacob had to use all his skill to not crash. As Jacob flew over the destroyed houses in the district, he looked down to see the civilians continuing to run toward the inner gate. The headquarters grew near, and as Jacob arrived outside, he spotted three MPs standing guard. The MPs noticed him grappling toward them and raised their rifles. Jacob quickly slowed down to a safe landing in front of them.

"Assistant Commander Asteria. I need two of you inside with me now. The titan seems dead, for now, at least." The MPs looked at each other, then back at Jacob. One of the MPs held the door open as Jacob and the other two went inside. Jacob approached a pile of crates where he placed the man down. Jacob turned around to face the MPs to explain the situation when he noticed their faces. Anyone would act strange if they saw someone missing limbs, but this was a different sort of shock. Jacob turned around to face the man once more. The man who had been missing four limbs all of a sudden had two arms.

The MPs raised their muskets at the man. Jacob reached for his back pocket, which he kept a pair of handcuffs in for an emergency. Whatever this man was, he wasn't a normal person. Jacob opened the handcuffs up and stepped forward, just in time to watch as the man's legs grew back, almost in an instant. Jacob wrapped the handcuffs around his wrists and stepped back from the man, who now began steaming slowly.



Whatever this man was, Jacob would be the first to talk with him. He was the highest rank in the district, and by the time word spread to the other districts, this man would most likely be awake. Jacob hoped Rhaez was nearby, but he didn't want to count on it.

Jacob studied the man's strange markings on the eye once more. They were unlike anything he had ever seen before. Reaching out to touch it, Jacob placed his thumb on one of the marks. The heat immediately made its way through the gloves Jacob had on, slightly burning his thumb. The mark felt like flesh, but to be that hot would mean it would almost be burning the man himself.

Jacob turned to the MPs behind him. He reached out his hand.

"Would one of you hand me your handcuffs? We need to restrain him as much as possible." Both the MPs look scared senseless. Jacob couldn't blame them, but he wasn't going to panic now, not after the hopefully hardest part was done. The MPs hesitated for a second before the one on the right handed Jacob a pair. "Also, can one of you run outside and get me a situation report? Make sure the civilians are evacuated safely." The MP on the left nodded his head and turned to leave.

Jacob quickly slipped the handcuffs around the newly formed legs, noticing that they felt very warm, more so than usual. As Jacob looked up, the man stared at him with bright blue eyes. The two looked at each other, not saying anything as they stared. The man's eyes had a deepness like that of Rhaez, something you could easily get lost in. Jacob snapped out of the slight daze to speak.

"Would you like some water, Sir?" The man continued to look at Jacob, as if he had almost no energy to spare to talk. He slowly nodded his head, to which Jacob pulled out his canteen. "Can you open your mouth please?" The man slowly opened his mouth, and Jacob poured in a small amount of water, as to not overwhelm the man. Instantly, the man seemed to gain energy.

"Who are you, Sir?" The man asked, his voice slightly raspy. Jacob set the canteen down on the floor, and sat down in front of the man.

"Jacob B. Asteria, Assistant Commander of the Garrison. Would you like some more water? I'm sure you're tired." The man once more nodded and opened his mouth. Jacob poured more water in, this time more. The man swallowed and once again seemed to gain energy.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Jacob. Can I ask why I'm tied up?" The man looked down at his limbs, not struggling but confused. The man clearly had no memory of whatever just happened.

"I'm not sure myself, but, a titan appeared in the district, and when it... died, I suppose, you were hanging out of its nape. I had to manually cut you out, and then I took you here." The man looked at Jacob, but instead of being shocked, he seemed to understand, at least more so than Jacob.

"That means my brother has perished. What a shame..." The man continued to look down, as if he was going to cry, but he didn't shed a tear. Jacob watched the man as he sat. This was a strange man for sure, but his hair seemed very familiar, something to do with his father. Someone his father knew well, but as if it was a different person. "I'm very sorry for all this trouble Mr. Jacob. I hope I didn't cause too much trouble." The man continued to look down.

Too much trouble? Did he know about what just happened? Yet another day where more questions than answers were raised. This man seemed as if he knew what happened, but he wasn't expecting it. Jacob had to keep asking questions, anything to learn more about what happened.

"May I ask you for your name, Sir?" Jacob asked, staring at the man. The man continued his strange slump facing the ground.

"My name... ah yes, I never told you it..." The man slowly sat back up, his red marks making him look very tired. The man looked at Jacob, one more his deep eyes seemed to cut into Jacob's soul. "My name is William Fritz."

The two MP behind Jacob gasped. Jacob himself was stunned to hear this. Quickly sitting up, Jacob uncuffed the man's legs and arms. The hair was the exact same as his brother and sisters, a light brown. As William stretched, Jacob bowed down, as did the MPs. This man, William Fritz, was the new king of Eldia. As Jacob bowed, he heard William stand up. A single hand was placed on Jacob's shoulder.

"Excellent work today, Mr. Jacob. I'm not upset about you restraining me. I'm sure you were scared of me until just now. You've done very well given the situation." Jacob had only ever spoken to the queen Julia, but that was at a family function with his father. He was unsure how to respond to such a powerful force. "Now, I suppose we must head to Stohess, should we not?" Jacob faced upward, looking William in the eyes once more.

"I'll prepare a cart, your highness. We'll depart in a few moments." William nodded then walked away toward the gas tubes. Jacob and the MPs stood up quickly and began to hustle outside. As they exited the side door, Jacob opened his side bag and pulled out his flare gun. Jacob pointed his hand to the sky once more, covering his right ear, and pulled the trigger. The purple flare shot high into the sky, a clear signal to branch members to rally at HQ. Jacob quickly walked to the rally grounds, as trails of gas could be seen coming toward the HQ.

Only a minute later, around ten branch members had rallied. Jacob looked at them, all looking scared or confused, a few still recruits in the training corp. To witness what they did must have traumatized them. Should Jacob even tell them the truth, or should he lie to them a story?

As if Jacob was on the roof with Rhaez again, he felt hundreds of eyes on him. His next actions would alter the course of Eldia for good. What would his comrades do in this situation? Jacob made up his mind and saluted, a sign for the members to silence themselves.

"My name is Jacob Asteria, I am the assistant commander of the Stationary guard. We are beginning an operation which will impact humanity for years to come!" The branch members below the stage looked at each other in confusion, or rather fear. "The titan that appeared in the district is none other than the new King, William Fritz." The eyes of the branch members opened, not one resting. The night was loud with evacuating civilians, but the HQ was dead quiet. "We must take him to the interior, to his rightful throne safely! I need you all to assist me in escorting him there!"

The silence of the courtyard was unbearable. The branch members looked at Jacob, eyes still open, some shaking and rocking their body. A stationary guard recruit, a young girl, on the left side of the group stepped forward, and saluted. The other branch members looked at her, her stance strong, as if she was willing to give everything for the cause. One by one, the other members stepped forward and saluted. The training corp members looked the most scared, most likely their first time seeing any sort of titan.

"We'll take two carts to Stohess then stop at the HQ. The civilians will be upset about losing their homes, so don't be upset if we're not given a warm welcome." Jacob was positive they would be harassed as they rode through the district, but they would have to if they wanted to make it to HQ. "However, you all must hold your head high!" The branch members looked once more at Jacob, eyes opened. "You all saved lives today, even in the face of such a monster! You must be proud that you all helped those who couldn't help themselves. These civilians can't understand what it takes to face a titan, but don't hold that against them! We must help anyone we can to prevent fights from breaking out." The branch members looked at each other once more, this time, without fear in their eyes. "Now, load into the carts! Let the operation to protect the king commence!" Jacob performed one final salute to the branch members before they all headed toward the cart.

The carts were ready and loaded by the time Jacob exited HQ with the King. The stationary guard recruit who stepped forward first was driving one, while an MP was driving the second. Jacob walked the king to the first cart, and sat opposite of him. The girl looked back at Jacob, who nodded. The cart began rolling toward the gate, which was now almost totally clear of civilians. As they drove by the stationary guard posted at the entrance, Jacob almost felt bad for them.

The night was upon the members as they rode the bumpy cart toward the city. It wouldn't take long to reach it, but by the time they would, the civilians who evacuated earlier in the day would be there. If a riot didn't break out already, one would for sure happen somewhere in the district. The difference in wealth between the two districts would spark feuds that the MPs would have to carefully handle. If handled incorrectly, a revolution could start tonight.

No one on the carts spoke the entire ride to Stohess. The only sound was the horses and the carts. The moon was out fully, allowing them to see where they were heading, but it gave off an eerie feeling. This night was far from over. As Wall Sina appeared on the horizon, Jacob reached for his flintlock and pulled it out. Slowly inspecting it, this weapon would be all he had to protect himself with tonight. He was never a good shot, but if it came down to a fight, Jacob was sure he could land a shot. Jacob looked up to see William staring at the flintlock. Jacob froze as William looked up at him, his eyes still deep. The red markings around his face seemed to be slowly disappearing. William looked away before Jacob could say a word, and Jacob took the chance to put his flintlock away once more.

The gate to the Stohess region was one of the finest ever made, made with the finest stone the rich elite could find. As they approached the gate, Jacob stood on the cart, trying to remain upright and waved with both arms to the Stationary guard member on post. The man quickly disappeared inside, and in a few seconds, Jacob could see the gate rising, its massive spikes hanging below it. The carts rode into the main street of Stohess, which was packed full of displaced civilians.

Thankfully, no one tried to block the carts, but the civilians glared at the branches, a few yelling insults loudly. Jacob could only imagine the pain they were going through currently. The branch members all were looking down, avoiding the stares. Jacob couldn't blame them. It looked as if the military had done nothing in that battle, but there was nothing that could have been done. A new enemy must be analyzed before you attack it, or at least, that's how Jacob thought.

As the military members arrived at the HQ, a large crowd had begun to gather in the park just in front. The carts pulled inside the fence, the gate being closed behind them. The branch members quickly hopped out of the carts, Jacob helping William out.

"Head inside to the second floor, your highness. I'll be inside in a moment." William nodded and entered the building.

Walking up to the front of the HQ, Jacob looked at the crowd once more, which was growing at an intense rate. Jacob could only hope they wouldn't turn their anger toward the military. The two MPs at the gate were visibly shaking, both most likely poor recruits. Jacob walked up to them and stood at attention facing the crowd.

"Both of you, head inside now. This will not be an easy night, but we must protect this HQ." The two MPs looked at Jacob, staring. Jacob held his head high as he looked at the civilian mass. "Do as I say, and we will have a chance to live." The MPs quickly ran off inside as Jacob stood alone. Jacob was once more unsure how he would handle this situation, but as far as he could tell, he was still the highest rank here. Jacob turned around as a rock came flying at the HQ, hitting the side wood.

80 Jacob opened the doors and quickly closed them. The two MPs who had been standing at the gate were now in the entrance, still shaking. Jacob

looked at both of them before pulling his flintlock out. "Barricade this door. If any civilian breaks in, you all are the first line of defense." The MPs shook even worse now, their eyes filled with fear.

"You...you want us to stay here?" The MP on the left blurted out, and quickly covered his mouth with his left hand. His eyes opened even wider, probably in fear of being punished for talking back to an officer. Jacob walked up to the recruit and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Tonight will mark a new chapter in our history. You must hold this door at all costs." The recruit continued to tremble as he looked forward avoiding Jacob's gaze. "It's unfair to ask you two this, but I have to. If I can arm the rest of the branch members, you won't be alone, but until then, you must hold this door." The recruit looked Jacob in the eye, and finally stopped trembling.

"Understood, Sir!" The recruit yelled. The two MPs quickly grabbed some chairs and started to barricade the door. Jacob continued on into the building. As he entered the first floor, the branch members all were standing, nervously. Once the branch members noticed he walked in, they all quickly saluted the assistant commander. Jacob stood in front of the members once more.

"Report to the armory and arm yourselves with a musket. The civilians are amassing a crowd outside, which will most likely become a riot. We will have to fight to survive tonight." The branch members in front of him saluted once more before running toward the armory. Jacob quickly stepped up to the second floor, where his father's office was located. The door was open, a sign William went in the right room. As Jacob approached the room, he noticed William looking out the windows at the crowd, who had now moved in front of the HQ.

"Is this because of me?" William asked, seemingly knowing Jacob was behind him.

"Respectfully, your highness, I..." Jacob wasn't sure what had brought this on. "Did you mean to...you know..." William turned to face Jacob, his red marks almost entirely gone.

"No. When the founding dies, it gets transferred to the next in line, as if it knows." William took a seat in the CIC's chair. "It's a strange power." Jacob was once more confused. "The...founding?" William sat up in the chair.

"Sorry, I forgot most don't know about it. Do you know how many shifters there are in this world?"

"No...I only know about the attack titan..." Jacob stated.

"I see. There are nine shifters in this world, each with a unique power. The founding is the strongest shifter, not in offense or defense, but in power." William picked up a pen on the desk. "It has the power to change people's minds, or so I've been told. It'd be a useful power right now, but I don't think I could use it."

Jacob took a second to think. Nine shifters in the world, and he only knew about two. What if some shifter decided to shift inside a district like William, but was trained? Jacob shuttered from the thought.

"So, you just...woke up in the HQ? You don't remember what happened before that?"

"No. I don't recall anything." William inspected the pen. Jacob thought once more.

"Then I don't think it is your fault, your highness. You couldn't have known." William put the pen down and looked at Jacob. The two stared at each other for a moment.

"Thank you Jacob. You're a kind soul, I can tell. I know this situation isn't ideal, but I have faith you can protect me." William continued to look Jacob in the eyes. "Now, you must go and command those branch members. They'll need you tonight." Jacob saluted William, and William stood back up.

"Stay away from the windows, your highness. They've already started throwing rocks."

William nodded, and Jacob turned to leave the room. The crowd outside had become louder. As Jacob walked down the stairs, the branch members were already in positions around the main door. One MP had a black armband on, with the letters F.I.S. on it. Jacob quickly walked over toward the MP.

"First Interior Squad, correct?" Jacob said to the MP, who turned and quickly went to at ease.

"Yes, Sir." The FIS member was sharp, armed with a martini henry, an advanced musket.

"You're to head upstairs to protect a V.I.P. Ask him for a briefing." The FIS saluted before heading upstairs quickly. Jacob was glad there was at least one elite squad member here, and especially glad it was a FIS member. They had a reputation for being brutal killers, the best in the walls. If worse came to worse, that FIS could probably get William out safely.

The rest of the branch members had all grabbed muskets from the armories, beside the female stationary guard member. She was standing down the hall, outside the medical bay, her hands full of medical supplies. She looked up and made eye contact with Jacob. Jacob looked at her blue eyes, and nodded. The girl carried the supplies toward the entrance, handing out small amounts to various branch members. She quickly scurried away toward the medical bay once more.

A shout could be heard from the front door as the crowd continued to grow louder and louder. The sound of rocks hitting the wooden exterior of the building was slowly becoming more frequent. Jacob walked toward the entrance when a branch member, a scouting legion member stopped him.

"There's too many of them out there, Sir. You should stay back here for your own safety." The scout made a fair point. At any point, the civilians could try and break through the glass and enter. The risk of a rock to the head was also very high, however someone needed to try and calm down the civilians.

"I'm going to try and talk them away from the HQ. No one needs to die tonight." The scout looked at Jacob with a grim expression. He lowered his hand, and Jacob quickly walked down the hall to the front door. The two MPs he stationed there had used a table to hold the door, which seemed to be working for the time being. One of them looked over their shoulder toward Jacob, and quickly turned.

"They're armed, Sir! A few of them have axes just outside the door! They said they want the military to come out and talk. It's madness!" The other MP was shaking so badly he was just about to fall down. "We've gotta scare them off somehow or else they'll break through the door!"

Jacob stopped between the two MPs. "We don't need to scare them. We need to address the situation at Trost." Both MPs turned their heads to face Jacob, their faces with a confused look. "If we try to scare them off with bullets, they'll come back later armed. We must try everything we can to de-escalate this delicate situation. Both of you can stay inside. I'll go out and talk with them." The MPs now looked at each other in confusion. Jacob approached the door, looking out the glass. He could see the man with an axe in front of the crowd, his eyes full of anger. Jacob began to push the table out of the way, just enough so that he could open the door. Grabbing the handle, Jacob slowly opened the front door.

The crowd was massive. Taking up almost the entire block, it looked composed of both citizens of Trost and Stohess. As he walked out, the crowd began to become quicker, as the members began to whisper to themselves while staring at Jacob. Jacob wasn't sure if this was stupid or smart of him, but he was going to try.

"My name is Jacob B. Asteria, son of Siegfried. I know that emotions run high in you all, but please hear me out!" The crowd grew eerily quiet compared to just a few moments ago. The man with the axe stepped forward slightly.

"Why did the military not stop the titan at Trost? I lost my house because you all failed to do your job! Because of you idiots, Trost is breached!" The man was shaking just slightly, his eyes wide opened as he questioned Jacob.

"Trost is not breached. I confirmed it myself. I'm not sure what the current state of Trost is, but the titan was slain shortly after the evacuation was complete."

"Why wasn't it slain immediately! Were you all scared?" The crowd began whispering once more.

"When you walk into a new room, do you not immediately look around to learn your environment? It was the same with that titan. That was the first time something like that has happened. Do you expect us to just charge to our deaths with no regard to personal wellbeing?"

The man stood up and lowered his axe slightly. The crowd was once more quiet. The man looked as if he was thinking.

"Our job is to protect the citizens of the walls, but we must also find ways to counter threats! I'm sorry that your house had to be destroyed, but you should be happy you walked away with your life!"

The man with the axe looked down as he dropped his axe to one hand. The crowd stared at him instead of Jacob. He raised his head, his eyes watery.

"Tell that to my family! This is for them!" The man began to charge Jacob, his axe wielding in two hands. Jacob took a step back and drew his flintlock. The man closed the gap between the two quickly, and Jacob found himself out of time to shoot. The man swung the axe, narrowly missing Jacob's head, but pushing him to the ground. The axe sunk into the ground next to Jacob, as the man tried to pull it out. Jacob threw a fist at the man's face, knocking him back and forcing him to let go of the axe. The man stumbled back as he tried to recover from the blow, clearly unexpected. Jacob hurried to stand up as the man regained his bearings. This time, Jacob drew his flintlock and aimed at the man.

"I'm sorry about your family. I truly am. But that titan appeared out of nowhere. You can't blame us for it." The man finally regained his bearing and looked at Jacob's pistol. "I can tell you one thing, and that's that your family wouldn't want you dead for them. They would rather you live to remember them than to die to avenge them. I'd also rather you be alive."

The man just stared at Jacob, his face full of fear. His eyes had widened to the point they looked as if they were going to fall out. The crowd around him was dead silent. Now was the time for Jacob to address the crowd.

"I'm sorry to you all for this disaster, but you mustn't blame us! There was no way we could have known about the titan appearing. We tried what we could, but the risk of death was too high. I'm sorry to those of you who have lost loved ones, houses, and even your livelihood, but if you attack the military now, how will we protect you in the future? Who will stand atop the walls, facing almost certain death, and lunge at the enemy, ready to die?"

Jacob grabbed the axe which was now resting beside him and grabbed it. He began walking towards the man, who tried to walk backwards but tripped and fell over. As Jacob approached, the man tried to back away, but to no avail. Jacob stood over the man, axe in one hand and flintlock ready in the other. Jacob spun the axe around, holding the head of the axe. He moved the handle towards the man.

"Take this axe. Take it and start a new life. I forgive you." The man was shaking as he reached to grab it. He slowly took it, still on the ground.

82 sorry. I really am. Now, please, forgive me to the best of your ability." Jacob turned to walk back inside, but stopped halfway to the door.

"Please, go home and rest, or find somewhere to. This tragedy will not be repeated. You have my word." Jacob performed a quick salute before walking back inside. The crowd remained quiet as Jacob walked past the two MPs, standing in awe at what they had just seen unfold. Maybe, just maybe they could hold the HQ for th-

The sound of glass breaking came from upstairs. Jacob began to run towards the stairs flying up them. Did someone manage to climb the building and break into the attic? Climbing the stairs to the third floor, Jacob drew his flintlock, quickly jumping over the last steps and spinning around to see a man.

The man had blood coming from his right hand, most likely from the glass. His hair was black, and his eyes were slightly green. The two stared at each other. Jacob clutched his flintlock in his right hand. This man looked unarmed, but Jacob didn't want to take any risks.

"Hello." The man said, as if this was a perfectly normal situation. Jacob was a bit shocked, so much so he found it hard to speak. His adrenaline was making his guts feel like mush, his chest heavy.

"Hello. Is your... arm all right, Sir?" The man looked down at his still bleeding arm calmly. He looked back at Jacob.

"I don't feel anything." The man seemed almost as if he was disoriented, like he had no clue where or what he was.

"Well, I suppose if you feel okay, then would you mind telling me why you broke into our HQ?"

The man shuffled his feet slightly. "I was told to."

He was told to? Jacob almost didn't believe this day was happening.

"Who...who told you to?" The man shuffled his feet once more. His left arm had reached behind his back, around his waist.

"Do you believe in God, Mister...?" Jacob had never been into religion, especially the church of the walls.

"I can't say I do, Sir." Jacob's hand was still on the flintlock. The trigger was cold.

"I see. I suppose you can go and meet him." The two stood for a moment, their eyes meeting as the man began to bring forward whatever he had behind his back. Time slowed as the man began to wind up, almost as if he was throwing a rock. The man released the object, throwing something at Jacob. As the object drew near, Jacob had finally realized that this is where he would fall.

A bomb was flying toward his face. Jacob wouldn't die to a titan like he thought he would, but rather a bomb. From some religious zealot too.

"Shoot your grapple left."

The bomb froze. The man froze. Even Jacob was frozen. All Jacob could do was think.

"Shoot your grapple left. As in, right now." Who was talking? Jacob couldn't look around, but the voice was coming from behind him. It definitely wasn't the man in front talking either.

"Damnit, Jacob. Shoot your grapple left. I'm trying to help you here." Jacob couldn't check where his left grapple was facing meaning if he was to trust this voice, he wasn't sure what would happen next. "Shoot it already. I can't keep time paused forever."

Currently, there was no escaping the bomb, which was rolling toward him. Jacob had to try. Somehow, Jacob was able to move his finger, and time launched back to normal. Jacob's grapple sunk into position over the stairwell, and flung him away from the bomb, crashing into the wall with his left shoulder. As Jacob was flung down the stairs, time stopped once more.

"Good, good. This time, shoot your right grapple." This voice, whatever it was, hadn't lead him astray yet, so Jacob pulled his right trigger, once more sending time back to normal, and Jacob on a collision course with the 2nd floor. An explosion from the bomb upstairs could be heard from behind, but Jacob's adrenaline had him laser focused.

As Jacob tried to recover from what just happened, a clink was heard from upstairs.

"Sorry Jacob, but this is the only way." A second bomb, the same type as the one from upstairs rolled between his legs. Jacob fired his right grapple once more, but this time, it was too late.

Eyes. Blue eyes. Brown hair. A face. A young girl was staring at Jacob, her expression rather grim, or even unexpected. She glanced off to Jacob's right, then quickly back to staring.

"How are you feeling, Sir?" The girl asked, still looking at Jacob. Jacob wasn't really quite sure. He felt alive, but as if something was missing. "You're in shock, Sir. Remain calm for now, don't try and talk. Don't look to your right either." The girl once more glanced off to his right side, this time lingering. Jacob laid, looking at the ceiling. Where was he right now? This ceiling wasn't familiar to him.

"How's the assistant commander doing?" A voice asked from what sounded far away. Jacob didn't feel like moving his head to check either.

"He's alive, somehow. He's going to be in shock for a while..." The girl looked at Jacob once more, seeming to inspect his face. Jacob reached out his right hand to rest it on the girl. The girl looked back toward Jacob's side and seemed to be watching something. She put a hand on his right shoulder,

which felt different. "Don't try and move just yet, Sir. Just relax for a bit longer. I'll be right here, but I still have to clean this up a bit more..."

Clean what up? What was happening? All Jacob recalled was the voice. What was the voice sorry for? Who was the voice?

"The crowd's finally leaving. I suppose a bombing isn't as interesting as food..." Another yell from somewhere far off. Who was this girl? What was she even doing? Jacob tried to lean forward, but his eyes closed, and once more he slipped off.

The same eyes stared at him once more. The ceiling was different than before.

"Welcome back, Sir." The same girl was once more leaning over Jacob, this time with a smile instead of the previous grim look. "It's a miracle you survived."

Jacob tried leaning forward, but failed once more. The girl seemed to notice and helped Jacob to sit up. He was sitting inside the hospital wing, in a bed with a white sheet. The girl was the girl handing out medical supplies earlier, and the one who had stepped forward at Trost. Memories of the night slowly drifted back to Jacob, from the signal flare at Trost to the bomb between his legs. What had happened after that?

Jacob slowly scanned the room. Off to his right sat a canteen atop a small bedside table. Jacob reached for it with his right hand. The girl looked at Jacob, and her smile turned once more into a grim expression. Nothing happened. Jacob tried once more. Nothing moved.

"I did all that I could...but it wasn't..." Jacob looked off to his right arm. All that was there was a small stump, wrapped in bandage. Jacob tried to move his right arm again. The stump moved only slightly. Jacob moved his left arm, this arm actually responding. He reached over to the stump and slowly began to feel it.

He still felt like his right arm was there, as if it should be moving it toward the canteen. The girl stepped toward the canteen and picked it up. She placed it in Jacob's left arm, not making eye contact. Jacob looked at the canteen carefully. He tried to unscrew it, yet again, his arm didn't appear. Jacob just sat, looking at the canteen. If he couldn't open a canteen, how would he help lead the guard? Jacob looked up at the girl.

She appeared to be crying. She wasn't making any noise, but she was rubbing her eyes. She looked up and made eye contact with Jacob. Her eyes were filled with tears, slightly bloodshot. The two sat and stared at each other for a moment.

"Did you do the surgery?" Jacob finally found the energy to speak. The girl brushed her eyes one more time before standing at attention.

"Yes, Sir." The girl held her head high while talking, like every branch member was taught to do.

"Thank you." The girl looked at Jacob, as if she didn't understand what he was saying. "It looks very good. You have my thanks."

"But, your arm...I didn't save it..." The girl stared at the lump of bandages.

"Was it possible to save it?"

"No, Sir. The damage was too severe."

"Then don't feel as if it was your fault. You saved my life, the least I can do is not blame you." The girl nodded gently. Her eyes had stopped watering, but her face was still grim.

Jacob had only now realized what he had forgotten.

"How's the King? Is he safe? Did the bombman get him?" The girl walked toward where Jacob sat. She grabbed the chair beside the bed and sat down.

"The King is fine thanks to that FIS member, Sir. As soon as the second bomb went off, the FIS member ran out the door of the office and found the bomber dead. He most likely was killed by his own bombs." The girl reached inside her jacket and pulled out a flask. "Would you like some, Sir?"

Jacob was glad to hear the king was safe. At least his operation hadn't failed yet.

"I'm fine, Miss. I don't drink." The girl opened the top of the flask and took a sip. The smell was that of whiskey. Jacob should be yelling at the girl for drinking while being on duty, but he figured he could let it slide for now. Jacob then realized he didn't even know this girl's name. "May I ask what your name is, Miss? I realize how rude I've been."

The girl put the flask's lid back on and put it once more into her jacket. "My name is Eunie. I'm a private."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Eunie. My name is Jacob Asteria."

"You're the son of the CIC?" Jacob nodded.

"Where did the King go, Eunie?" The girl adjusted her seat.

"He went to the capital with the MPs. He asked me to tell you thanks. He visited you while you were still out. He also gave me something to give you." Eunie reached into her jacket once more and pulled out a medal. "I bestow upon you, Sir Jacob, the medal of sacrifice." Eunie reached over and pinned the medal on the left side of Jacob's shirt.

Jacob grabbed the medal with his left hand to inspect it. It was purple and red, an image of the roses of the stationary guard's emblem in the middle.

84 "I also was given a letter for you, from a 'Mister Rhaez?' Strange name if you ask me." Eunie reached her arm out and handed it to Jacob. Jacob

grabbed the letter and tried to open it, to no avail.

"Would you mind reading this out to me? It appears I can't really open it..." Eunie grabbed the letter back and opened it.

"Dear Jacob,

I hope this letter finds you well." Jacob couldn't help but chuckle at the ill-fated timing. "I would like to talk with you soon, outside of Trost. Please meet me outside the FOB tomorrow morning. Just bring yourself, no one else." Eunie closed the letter and looked at Jacob. "This Rhaez character is interesting if you ask me."

"He's something strange, that's for sure." To meet outside the safety of the FOB was a new idea for Jacob. It was also a strange one. "Miss Eunie, would I be able to request you drive us to Trost right now?"

"Another operation?"

"Something like that, this time hopefully with less bombs." The two laughed at the remark. Eunie stood up and excused herself to prepare a cart.

The memory ended there, as Jacob sat alone in the hospital wing. The cold of the evening was biting at him, even through his father's thick coat. Tonight, the town was quiet, unlike seven years ago. Many of the residents probably haven't thought about that night for some time, especially after the recent tragedy.

Walking down the main road, Jacob found it hard to believe not long ago, he was fighting here with his comrades. The Nadians had taken the district and held its people hostage. The road below was rebuilt only recently, the dirt below stained with blood of comrades and enemies alike. Jacob was the key player in the attack, and as he thought back to the moment before he attacked, another memory came back.

Seven Years Ago, Outside the Trost District, New Year's Eve 839 WC.

Using ODM one handed was possible but incredibly difficult. Only having one grapple also limited the possible movement overall. Since it was night, Jacob was safe from any titans. The moon was very bright tonight, which made him extra confident in his trip. The FOB was just ahead. Jacob recalled no one was stationed there recently, meaning the FOB was most likely damaged.

The wind today was slightly high, but it made the temperature perfect. The distance between Trost and the FOB wasn't too far, but it took some time with gear alone. Small trees dotted the distance, Jacob using them to hook onto and boost over the plains.

The forest next to the FOB had a small light shining, as if it was a lantern. Jacob hooked toward the forest, barreling through the air as quick as he could without two arms. As Jacob approached, he could make out the figure holding the lantern to be Rhaez.

Jacob slowed himself, stumbling as he tried to recover a bad landing. Rhaez stood, facing toward Shiganshina. A lantern sat at his feet, illuminating a bottle in his right hand. Jacob stood beside Rhaez facing toward Shiganshina. Of course, you couldn't see it from this far away, but Jacob knew it was there, just like he knew the titans would come every day. The wind made the silent of the night bearable, but Jacob felt slightly nervous.

Rhaez raised his bottle and took a swig of whatever he was drinking. He lowered it, and held it out toward Jacob.

"I don't drink, thanks though." Rhaez dropped the bottle once more to his right hand, hanging by the lip.

"You'll probably start drinking soon. It happens to all of us." Jacob wasn't sure who "us" was, but he didn't feel like asking. "What happened to your arm?"

"A bomber. Did you hear what happened yesterday at Trost?"

"Yeah, I was watching from atop the walls. Is he safe?"

"We took him to the interior. The people almost breached the HQ at Stohess, but I was able to talk them out of it. Though, the bomber..."

"Sorry to hear about it, but..." Rhaez dropped the bottle, and it hit the ground. Liquid poured out.

"A little buzzed already, huh? Do you need me to help you home?" Jacob laughed as he placed his left arm on Rhaez's shoulder. Jacob could feel Rhaez trembling. "Everything okay Rhaez?"

"Thirteen years ago, I stood before the previous attack titan. He had brown hair like us, but his eyes were blue, a light blue. His time as the attack was up, and I was the next in line." Rhaez began shaking even more. "My thirteen years have finally come."

Jacob watched as Rhaez reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a box. He slowly opened it to reveal a beautiful interior, almost ceremonial. Inside the box lay a syringe, and a strange blue liquid. It was glowing as if it was on fire, or a candle was inside it.

"Jacob...I've chosen you to inherit this power from me." Rhaez pulled out both the strange and the container of the liquid. He stabbed the syringe through the cork on the container and drew out some of the liquid. "I...Rhaez V. Vonfor, pass unto you, Jacob B. Asteria, the Curse of Ymir." Jacob was frozen. Rhaez pushed up Jacob's jacket, and injected into his arm the liquid.

Everything went dark. Suddenly, Jacob was standing atop a hill, what looked to be the eastern plains. Up ahead stood two figures, one a small

boy with brown hair, the other an old man standing under a tree. Jacob walked up to the two, but they didn't seem to take any notice.

"Are you ready, Rhaez?" The older man looked down at the young Rhaez. Rhaez looked up at the man and nodded. He couldn't have been older than thirteen. Rhaez turned around and faced the open field in front of the pair. A lone figure, a man in some sort of gray outfit stood, a red armband on one arm.

As if it was the day at Trost, lightning appeared seemingly out of nowhere, almost as if it was coming from the man himself. The lighting made the sky look as if it was night time. All of a sudden, a titan emerged, unlike any Jacob had ever seen. The body of this titan was... almost a crystal. A large hammer, presumably made from the same material, appeared to grow out of its right hand. Two bright red eyes opened from the beast, and a terrible roar came. No hair came from the beast, which was an almost crucial feature for titans.

Rhaez ran at the titan, biting his thumb. More lightning appeared, this time, coming from Rhaez. Another titan appeared, this time looking much more like a standard titan. This titan had abs as if it worked out, and a massive jaw, times bigger than any titan Jacob had ever seen. The titan let out the loudest roar Jacob had ever seen before lunging at the crystal titan.

Jacob's eyes hurt, as if they had something in them. He rubbed his eyes, and when he lowered them, he was sitting atop of the gate at Trost. The sun was rising. Jacob stood up, placing pressure on his right arm. As he stood up, he felt confused. What had just happened? Was he dreaming? Jacob scratched his head with his right hand.

His right hand? Panic shot through Jacob as he flexed his right hand. The hand was totally intact, working perfectly fine. He moved all his fingers, all able to move in full motion as they had before. He touched it with his left hand, but quickly retracted it. It was warm to the touch. It was as if he had touched a candle, but he couldn't feel anything strange. The arm looked identical to his old one, a perfect recreation. Jacob had to be dreaming.

Just then, Jacob heard the sound of ODM hooks grappling into the walls behind him. He turned around to see a man in a red trench coat, with a brown beard and hair. Siegfried V. Astiera, the CIC was standing behind him. As his father looked at him, Jacob couldn't help feeling scared.

"I'm glad you made it back safe. Congratulations on being chosen." Siegfried walked up and patted Jacob on the shoulder.

"How...how did my arm..." Jacob stared at his arm, partly out of curiosity, partly out of fear.

"You're a shifter, my son. There are many mysteries attached with becoming one." Siegfried looked out toward the horizon, his head held high.

"Wait, how did you know I was chosen? Only me and Rhaez were there..." Jacob wasn't even sure what happened to Rhaez. He hoped Rhaez was safe, wherever he was.

"He sent me a letter. We both were good friends. I'm not sure why he chose you of all people, but at least it's someone I can trust." Siegfried looked back at Jacob, who was finally finished looking at his arm. "Now, we begin your training."

Siegfried jumped off the wall, grappling toward the FOB. Not a titan was in sight today, which was slightly odd. Jacob checked his ODM on his waist before jumping off. Once more able to use both hands, Jacob was able to quickly catch up with his father, who was a good distance ahead. The two continued until they reached the FOB.

As the two landed, a figure approached, wearing all black, with black hair and a black cap. On his arms sat strange metal rods, and on his chest sat the black and white wings of freedom. This man, whoever he was, was a member of the special operation squad of the scouts, one of the finest killing machines around. Siegfried reached out and shook the man's hand, as if they were old friends.

"Jacob, meet Stewy. He's the current captain of the SOS, and someone I trust. He'll be helping us with this training." Stewy nodded at Jacob, Jacob doing the same in reply. Jacob still wasn't sure what type of training this was going to be, but the fact the SOS captain was here worried him.

"Take off all your gear, Jacob," Siegfried calmly ordered, even though they were in titan territory. Jacob began to drop all his equipment, the metal hitting the uneven ground below him. As he stripped his equipment, Siegfried and Stewy were talking. They seemed a bit nervous, which only continued to make Jacob worry. Stewy seemed to inspect the metal rods on his arm, looking at some strings coming from them. This was a really strange type of training, even for his father.

The two finally stopped talking as Siegfried made his way to Jacob. Siegfried held up his hand, showing Jacob his thumb.

"Whenever Rhaez used to shift, he would bite his thumb, right here." Siegfried gently bit below the thumb, just enough so that when he showed Jacob after he could see the teeth marks. "It will probably be the same for you. Are you ready to go?"

"What do you mean ready to go?" Jacob was per normal puzzled.

"You're going to shift. We have to train you." Jacob looked at his father like he was crazy.

"Are you sure? This is all titan territory, and I don't even know anything about this power! You just want me to bite my thumb and... do something?" Siegfried nodded.

"That's exactly what I want you to do. You'll have to figure this out, but at least me and Stewy are here to help you." Siegfried pointed toward a small opening next to the FOB. "Go out there and try it."

Jacob didn't know what to think, so he listened to his father. He walked until he stood in the middle of the planes. Siegfried and Stewy stood back behind the spikes surrounding the FOB, watching. His father nodded at Jacob, who nodded back.

Jacob bit his hand. Hard. Blood began pouring out from the bite, which steam appeared from almost instantly. Jacob winced from the pain before looking up at his father, who nodded once more. Jacob brought his hand back up to his face once more.

Another bite. More blood, more pain, more steam. Tears came to his eyes as Jacob tried to fight the pain. It hurt worse than anything he had ever felt before. Not even losing his arm hurt like this. He looked up once more to the sight of his father running toward him.

"Behind you!" Jacob began to turn, but all of a sudden, a massive weight was put on Jacob, wrapped like a rope. It was the hand of a titan. The titan turned Jacob toward his face. This titan had brown hair and an ugly smile, as if he was taunting Jacob.

Jacob struggled and struggled, only his right hand free as the titan began to raise him toward his mouth. The titan opened his mouth as Jacob's head got horribly close to the beast. Time froze like at Trost.

"Bite your hand once more." The same mysterious voice from before, sounding like he was close but far. "You have nothing else to do. Bite it again."

As Jacob sat there, frozen in time by something strange, he looked at the Titan's mouth. Is this how he wanted to die? Is this where his comrades would see his end? What would they say about this? Jacob felt like he was being watched again, by hundreds of eyes, all around, except this time Jacob couldn't look around. A hand was placed on his right shoulder.

"Bite your hand."

Jacob had no other choice. He wasn't ready to die, at least not here. Jacob bit his hand as hard as he could. The sound was ear splitting as a yellow light appeared around Jacob, and lightning began to fly from his body. The titan dropped him and started to walk away, as if it was trying to run but couldn't.

Once more, everything went black. This time, though, Jacob was unconscious. He was totally aware of what just happened, but it was like he couldn't see. His body felt...strange, as if he had grown.

Suddenly the world came back, except the large titan that was in front of him was replaced with a small one, about half his height. The titan was still trying to flee from Jacob, but it wasn't able to run, so it looked rather bizarre.

A strange feeling came over Jacob. It felt like intense hatred, as if he had thousands of years of anger built up while looking at this titan.

"Kill it. How many people have these beasts killed? Kill them all. Every last one of them." The voice came back, but this time, time didn't pause. "Let it know who you are."

Jacob opened his mouth as if to speak, but instead of words, the loudest roar he had heard, even louder than Trost came out. Jacob raised his fist, his hands seemingly massive compared to just a few seconds ago. The intense feeling came back, and Jacob launched toward the titan with incredible speed, much faster than Jacob had ever ran before.

The titan turned around and looked at Jacob. Jacob raised his right hand, and punched the titan in his face. The titan almost took off flying from the punch. The titan's face lost a chunk of its cheek, which began to steam and regrow. It was as if Jacob wasn't in control.

Jacob jumped toward the titan and this time punched it with his left hand. Then his right. Then his left, and once more with his right. All he could think of was killing this titan. The titan, which was laying from the attacks, stared at Jacob as he seemingly ripped it to parts. Jacob threw one more right punch at the titan, this time crushing the titan's face completely. The titan had stopped steaming, a sign that it had finally died. Jacob roared once more, still not feeling like he was in control.

A warm feeling came from his body. It was as if it was on fire. He raised his hands to inspect them. Steam began to arise from them, but they didn't appear to be healing anything. Then, everything went black once more. His body felt as if it was disappearing, his flesh slowly withering away all the way to his bones.

Just like before, the world came back before he knew it. This time, he was staring at his father, who was carrying him as he was grappling. The wind was blowing as the two continued grappling. Steam seemingly was coming from his body, but Jacob couldn't move. His father seemed concentrated on grappling, so it was probably for the best.

The ride didn't last long, the two landing on the outer gate at Trost just a few minutes later. His father gently laid him down on the brick before walking away. All that Jacob could see was the sky, which was blue. It must have been early afternoon by the way the sun fell. Steam was still arising from his body, seeming to slow down slightly. His father stood over Jacob, talking to someone out of his view. Jacob felt as if he had run to the FOB and back.

Jacob sat himself up and looked at his hands. He clenched his fist, like he had done beating the titan. What had happened? He went from being in the titan's hand to being twice as tall as it. Where was Rhaez? Why did he leave Jacob with this unexplained power? Always more questions than answers. It actually seemed as if the answers to his questions were yet again more questions.

Siegfried walked over and sat down next to Jacob atop the walls.

"What happened, father?" Jacob figured he would start with what he hoped was the easiest question to answer. Siegfried stared toward the wilderness like earlier.

"You shifted. You shifted and killed the titan." Jacob was beginning to feel as if there really was no answer to any of his questions.

"What do you mean I shifted? How did I kill the titan?"

"You shifted into the attack titan. You became one of them, and used that power to kill the titan." Jacob had become a titan? But he was here, atop the wall. Yet another question.

"I was a titan? I was actually a titan?" Siegfried seemed as if he wasn't really listening, only thinking of the wilderness.

"That's what it means to be a shifter."

"But, does that mean I'm..." Jacob began to shake as he thought of the words to use. "I'm one of them? I'm like a titan?" Siegfried finally looked at Jacob.

"In some ways yes, but, you have one they don't. You have a purpose beyond killing." Beyond killing? But wasn't that all Jacob had done? Kill titans, kill terrorists, kill kill kill. Siegfried looked back toward Trost. "You have people to fight for. You have people you want to protect. You want to reclaim your lost land. All those titans want is to kill. You're not like them, at least mentally, you aren't."

"But, I didn't feel in control when I shifted...like I was being dragged along..."

"That comes with training. It takes a lot of mental power to control your titan. As you train, you'll eventually be in total control." Siegfried pointed toward the Trost. "Never forget what you fight for. Even if they try to kill you for what you are. They'll never understand what we have seen, and they'll never understand what you'll go through. No matter what, just hold your head high, and be proud. So long you try as hard as you can, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

Try. Try. Try. The memory ended there. Jacob chuckled at the thought of having nothing to be ashamed of. The gate guarding Stohess was one of the finest ever made in the walls, a sign of the wealth the city had. Two SG members stood around a small campfire near the gate. As Jacob approached, the two stood up and saluted. Jacob returned the salute before standing near the fire with them. The three stood in silence as the fire provided the only warmth around. Jacob reached inside his coat and pulled out a small flask, handing it to one of the branch members. The first took a small swig before handing it to the second. The second took a gulp, but Jacob didn't mind. Jacob kept the alcohol for others, never once drinking it.

Jacob walked inside the gatehouse, heading toward the exterior of the city. One lone lantern on a table sat lit, providing a light in the dim room. The brick construction helped the room stay warmer than the outside, but just slightly. Emerging on the other side, Jacob was cast into the snowy night once more.

In front of Jacob, miles away, sat Trost. Miles in front of that, Shiganshina, but there was something here that tied Jacob to Stohess. Turning to his right, Jacob began walking toward a set of stones emerging from the ground. Sixteen stones sat next to each other, with an extra one off to the side, marked with the emblem of wall Sina. Jacob stood in front of the stones, eight in two rows, evenly spaced.

Just like the footprint, and the newly built roads, here sat another reminder of the battle of Stohess. Sixteen brave military members who never got to see the city rebuilt from its war like state. Jacob performed a salute, which he felt was returned from those buried in front of him. One gravestone, the one on the first row closest to the gate was special to him. Jacob approached the grave and wiped the snow off the front.

Jacob had never been a ladies' man. He never found the time for a wife, being busy in the military. After his father's suicide, Jacob had noticed a boy in SG, by the name of Juan. Jacob quickly took a liking to the boy, and seeing his potential, adopted him into the bloodline of Asteria. Juan was in line for becoming the SG commander when he was killed at the battle. His corpse, along with all the other branch members who had been killed, was mutilated. Juan's face had been cut off, his limbs severed, and the rest of his body cut or sliced.

Juan C. Asteria laid in the cold soil of Stohess, alongside his comrades. Jacob liked to visit the small graveyard when he felt lost. For some reason here, he felt as if he could find the answers he needed. Alongside Juan, Jacob buried Stewy, who became the Scouting Legion Commander just before the battle. Alongside them, more comrades Jacob had known for a few years, all mutilated by the Nadians who defended the city.

Jacob wasn't sure what he felt standing here, in front of them. Maybe he felt ashamed that he had let them die, but that wasn't true. Jacob had the most important part of the battle. Was he feeling regret? Was he feeling upset? Was he feeling angry? Was he feeling... the urge to carry on?

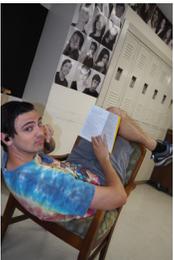
A hand landed on Jacob's right shoulder, and a second one on his left. On both sides of him stood two stationary guard members, both in black and gold uniforms.

"Your brother would have loved to have met you both." Jacob looked at the two beside him. On Jacob's right, Rose Asteria, and on his left, Patrick Asteria. Jacob had in fact, carried on, no matter what he felt. He wished that his fallen comrades could still be alive, but Jacob felt content knowing that he was still carrying on their spirit, years after they had disappeared from the cruel world.

Author Bios



While **Amber Aubuchon** is a junior at Maplewood Richmond Heights, she enjoys spending her free time showing her creative side. Loving to read and write, she is currently on the path to an education degree and enjoys incorporating writing into her life. She likes short stories and Young Adult novels, and she hopes in her career to bring her love for reading and writing to younger generations.



Jeremiah Ayres is an up and coming superstar writer rivaled by no one in previous history. He is not thrilled to share his writing to the public just yet, so he would advise you NOT TO READ HIS WORK. He still needs his mom to read his work so he knows it's okay (his Mom usually likes his work). He is so thrilled to get his first gig in the Blue Outbreak and hopes his work will take off soon. Love you mom :)



Peyton Bania is a high school junior whose writing style doesn't always make sense. Peyton tries his best to think outside the box and leave a lot of the interpretation up to the reader. He enjoys relaxing, playing survivor video games, and spending time in nature.



Alexia Brooks's interests are soccer and volleyball, running, and hanging out with her boyfriend. She says, "I love playing with my dog and taking her for walks and playing with her at the park," and she also claims, "I am not a great writer!"



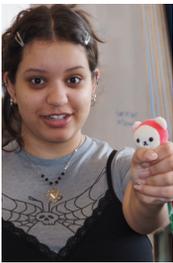
Olivia Ceballos is a junior in high school, and she's always enjoyed writing. Olivia has always used writing as a way of expressing her emotions, and she feels that writing her thoughts out is one of the best ways to express herself. Olivia's latest piece of writing, "The Bass Teacher," was featured in last semesters' edition of The Writer's Block and on the Wall of Fame, and she is very proud of that piece. Olivia also enjoys music; she plays bass, guitar, piano, and sings. She feels that music and writing are her two favorite things to do. Be on the lookout for Olivia's future projects and concerts!



Jady Garneau enjoys spending time reading and occasionally writing. Her favorite reading weather is when it's raining outside. Nature is something else that she loves, and because of this, she enjoys going camping. Every summer she goes camping with her sister and her mom. When she isn't camping, she is playing basketball and softball.



Luke Goodman-DeLeonardis is a junior at MRH High School. He is currently taking English III. He has never considered himself much of a writer, but he does value the importance of writing and strives to get better at it. He enjoys math, history, and Spanish in school as well. Outside of school, he enjoys playing instruments and video games. He plays the bass guitar and enjoys rock music.



Jasper Jones is a junior at MRH High School. They love anything creative and can often be found drawing, listening to music, or singing. Fantasy is one of their favorite genres in media due to the creativity in creating the characters and world. As a writer, Jasper gravitates to storytelling in the form of descriptive language and metaphors. They always have a thesaurus at the ready to find new and interesting words to include in their writing. They hope that you will enjoy reading their work!



Mariona Jones is a seventeen-year-old junior attending Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. Mariona likes to be to herself and to be able to eat lots and lots of food. She also likes to take tons of naps if given the time. She has only had a little bit of experience with writing and she doesn't particularly hate or love it. She used to write a lot in elementary and middle school, but it slowly started to dwindle.



David Maloney is a Junior in the class of 2023 who enjoys writing fiction. David enjoys playing video games with his good friends, like War Thunder, or Terraria, as well as hunting, fishing, and playing airsoft. His writings are normally works of fiction with characters based on people he knows well, leading to authentic characters.



Isaac Martinez was always really cool and funny. He was really creative making new guitar riffs. He was also super strong hitting PRS like they were nothing. Everything to him was light weight. As a writer he was very creative. Isaac will always be cool, funny, and awesome. He can always turn something small into multiple pages, and he can just write forever.



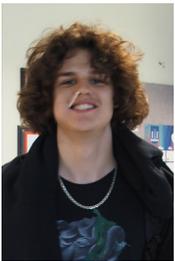
Ian Mathews is a junior at Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. Ian is very interested in all forms of art, such as fashion, theater, and painting. When it comes to writing, he feels that it is an important part of not only learning about the world around you, but learning about yourself. He loves to explore his imagination and memories through short stories, poetry, and memoirs. He is thrilled that his English III class has given him more opportunities to get his writing out into the world as well as the work of his peers.



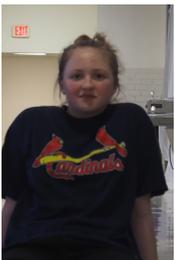
Aidan Michael McGinn is a hardworking student devoted to trying to help people anyway he can, with an interest in social work and growing his social tree. He has a passion for writing to release his feelings and using words to convey how he is truly feeling. Aidan believes his best pieces are when they come straight from the heart and from the want to write. While his passion for writing goes deep, it is easy for him to become involved with other things and subconsciously ignore the writing aspect of his life.



Pearl Merello is a Junior at Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. She has never particularly enjoyed school, but she enjoys writing, and she loves her friends and pets. She enjoys writing about her feelings and things other people could relate to. Pearl hopes she can better her writing and execution skills.



Salvador Miano is a junior at MRH High School. He has a passion for music, as he plays piano, organ, trombone, drums, and a bunch of other instruments; as well as a passion for cars, airplanes, and motorcycles, and working on them. He currently owns a 1990 Porsche 944 that he is restoring, and he enjoys playing piano every time he can. Being a creative person, he finds joy in putting story ideas into writing, or putting his soul into the piano. He hopes you enjoy reading his writing.



Gabbie Miller never really enjoyed writing because in school she mostly wrote essays she was assigned, about things that were not very interesting. But she has found interest in stories she has read this year, in how writers create new worlds, new realities, and she wants to create them too – from the stories where the characters are fighting some kind of evil power to a story of a girl who is struggling with the reality that her dad is dead and her seeing him isn't real. She has found love in how writers create stories that make the impossible seem real, and provide a space in which a reader can relate to the characters.



Ana Munn Carstensen loves to cook with her family and tell stories with friends and family. As she prepares to head off to college, she has been collecting recipes for meals that are simple and cheap to make but still remind her of home. This essay, which she submitted on her common app application, is an ode to her family, childhood and favorite simple recipes. Writing down this recipe has proven to be quite difficult because her family never uses strict measurements, just “about this much,” “cook until it looks right,” etc. She has tried to create that feeling of cooking and eating with family while also providing some general measurements so that someone who does not understand what the measurement “Cuando se sienta bien” means. She has always cherished the time she gets sitting at the bar and cutting potatoes or watching her uncles yell about which spices we needed and how their idea for the recipe was better. These sayings and experiences have become a part of who she is today, and she views this recipe as a way to introduce herself through one of her favorite things: food.



Peter Pongruksa is a junior at Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. He in fact does not like writing at all. Although writing is not his thing and never will never be, he loves telling stories about his personal life. Not that he thinks that his story will impact anyone, or accomplish anything important, but he does hope that it will give a perspective about what he has learned in situations that he has encountered in the past.



Annabelle Rayburn is a senior at Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. The last couple of years she has started to work on her creative writing more, publishing pieces in the past year such as “Painting Your Dreams” and “Launching Into My Future”. Now the future has arrived and she has been tasked with writing the essay for her college essay. After many failed attempts and tossed out ideas, she looked to her past and found the perfect topic. She was able to produce one of her favorite pieces so far and is excited to see where her writing takes her next.



Everyone has seen a movie where a character is trying to escape from an enclosed space where the water was slowly rising, filling up the room until it was neck level with the character. Your eyes would be glued on the TV, holding your breath until the character finally manages to escape the locked space. This experience inspired **Annalee Rintoul’s** “Part of Your World,” about two siblings and their dangerous adventure underwater.



Eric Shaw is a tall 6’4 African American who loves basketball. Eric was also passionate about art, but writing in particular never came easy to him despite the work he’ll put in. He never liked reading or anything of that nature. It felt like a chore to him. He couldn’t get pleasure out of reading. Just recently he fell in love with writing and learning new words to incorporate with the love of hip hop he has, and he wants to be able to translate those abilities into his music.



Alexandra Siemer has loved writing stories ever since she won a short story contest in fifth grade. Currently, most of Alex’s writing is fan fiction, allegories about modern life, and cinematic stories filled with emotion, action, and plot twists. When not writing, Alex enjoys video games, movies, LEGO sets, and TV shows. On May 22, 2023, she’ll finally, hopefully, be watching the premiere for the newest Wild Kratts season.



Callan Sukanek is a junior at MRHHS. He enjoys reading books more than he enjoys writing about them, but one time he was forced to write about a book because if he didn’t, he would probably have failed his English III class. He enjoys playing sports like hockey, soccer, and chess (if you consider chess to be a sport), and he also enjoys playing piano.



Aster Tovar is a junior in high school who plans to pursue lighting design in technical theater after HS. Although lighting has nothing to do with writing, Aster really enjoys writing. Writing allows them to express certain emotions that can be hard for them to get out easily. Poems for example, can be vague or specific and still have power. Words have a lot of power. Their favorite words are: melancholy, mundane, and hysterical.



Luke Woodrum grew up with a love of reading, and more than anything else, tales of intrigue caught his attention. As he grew up, it was refined into an interest in modern politics. From then on, he was interested in the issues facing modern American democracy. He found it important to raise more awareness about the issues facing democracy. The story told at the beginning was the real push to write it. Seeing that it affected people even he knew made him want to understand it evermore, and through his research, he found being aware of it was one of the best ways of combating it.

The Blue Outbreak is a yearly publication of Maplewood Richmond Heights High School. Submissions are given by high school English students, and illustrated by Computer Art Studio students. It is printed and assembled by the High School Print Shop during 4th Quarter.

