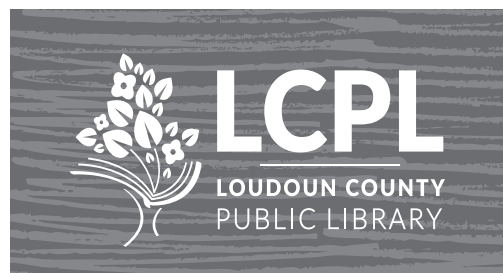
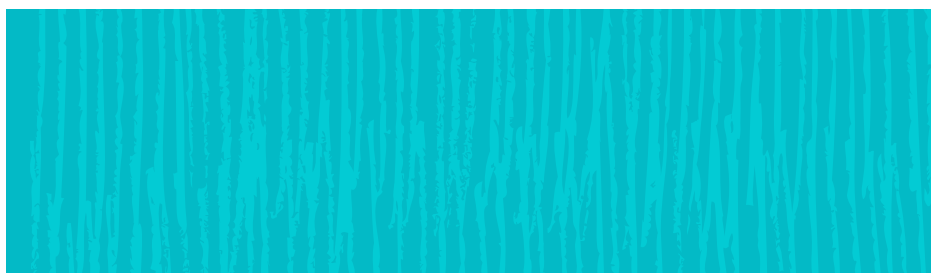




# LCPL **Short Story Contest**

2025  
**Contest  
Winners**  
*Adults*



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## **Dedication/Thank You**

We extend our sincere appreciation to the Loudoun Library Foundation which helps fund this and so many other library programs.

Finally, a special thank you to Trailside Middle School for graciously hosting our award ceremony this year.

And to all our writers: thank you for sharing your stories with us. We enjoyed reading every one.

## About Our Guest Author



**Monica Saigal**

Monica Saigal is an award-winning author, literary coach, and educator whose storytelling bridges cultures and genres. Born in New Delhi, raised in the Middle East, and currently residing near Washington, D.C., she has authored over a dozen books, including acclaimed cookbooks like *Modern Spice* and *A Life of Spice*, as well as fiction titles such as *A Kiss in Kashmir* and *Karma* and the *Art of Butter Chicken* which inspired a featured menu in NPR's Sound Bites Café.

Her work has been featured in esteemed publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Food & Wine*, and she has been recognized by the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the seven food writers to watch. Monica is also a sought-after speaker, having presented at institutions such as the Smithsonian and Georgetown University.

## About Our Guest Judge



### Nathan Leslie

Nathan Leslie won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. He is also the series editor for *Best Small Fictions*. *Invisible Hand* (2022) and *A Fly in the Ointment* (2023) are his latest books. Nathan's previous books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. Nathan is the founder and organizer of the Reston Reading Series in Reston, Virginia, and the publisher and editor of the online journal *Maryland Literary Review*. Previously he was series editor for *Best of the Web* and fiction editor for *Pedestal Magazine*. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. Nathan currently lives in Northern Virginia.

## **First Place: My Soul To Take**

By: Polly Jones

Found it. My hairbrush. In the freezer. It provoked a chuckle when I reached for the gelato and saw curly white frozen hair creating a delicate ethereal sculpture among the freezer burned veggie packages. It was so pretty I almost forgot to take it out. But after the amusement it made me pause, take things more seriously. Yes, I had forgotten how to get home from the bank but the phone map thing worked. There were the odd items in my grocery order: collagen powder (I must have read some beauty tip), tikka masala (was it inspired by that Bollywood movie I watched?), family pack paper plates (I don't even use paper napkins!), value pack of crispy battered fish portions (what was I thinking?). I began to carefully monitor how I ordered, like Santa's list. Checking it twice. Everything began to have a trip wire to alert me of a "hair brush incident." I began to feel like a fugitive dodging this invisible pursuer who played annoying tricks on me. Gaslighting? Since Chuck died Charlene (we called her Charlie) has been solicitous and sweet but she has her own life out on the left coast. Oakland. I'm not sure what she does with tech but she is successful and very busy. How are you doing? Busy. Super Busy. I'm not sure that it's code for "too busy to come back east to visit" or "too busy to have you come out here." She has lots of money but no time. No family of her own either. She calls on Sunday like clockwork. I have the time blocked boldly on a calendar I use ritually x-ing out each day to keep up to speed. I've jotted notes in case she asks a question about what I did on such and such a day. Does she suspect? When that question in my mind arises it makes me wonder about paranoia. Is this a symptom? What would I be doing that is suspicious? I'm good at covering up. But I'm afraid that my lifelong skills at obfuscation are no longer useful to me. Did I like my job? Was I happily married? Was I comfortable being a mother? Did I ever want to be a mother? What is the point of asking these questions anyway? Now they bubble up in the early morning hours of awakeness. It's ironic that for the first time I'm pondering these existential questions but the mind, my mind, no longer tracks. You know how a musician "lays down tracks" in a studio - I

used to work in a radio station so I heard things like that - my “tracks” no longer produce sound, or in this case, memory. When the question is posed the track is silent. Charlie and I have always gotten along. Neither of us are drama queens. As a result I have no idea who she is nor she me. Now I need to try to explain that the person who has inhabited me, perhaps not the one she even knows, is failing. For a moment I feel deep regret but then I guess I forget. And in the end, do we really know ourselves? And if we do, we still die. At my annual physical I casually mentioned the hairbrush incident, offhandedly with a laugh. I noticed the young doctor didn’t join in the mirth of the moment. I sat there, my bare legs dangling on the edge of the examining table (it has been decades since I’ve had to use the stirrups for that exam) looking down at my thin skin stretched more like a membrane on my bony tibias, noticing my cracked toenails. She asked lots of questions which she typed into a laptop. She replaced the old-timer who I had seen for decades. He carried a clipboard and knew me inside and out. Literally. But people retire and move on. “I’d like to set up a diagnostic cognitive exam so we can explore these, umm, glitches. Does that sound good?” Of course I agreed. It only made sense. I was fully aware of what might be happening and the one thing Chuck and I agreed on, and we didn’t agree on much, was that we didn’t want to be a burden to the family. We had made all the arrangements given Charlie the various powers to pay our bills and the authority to respect our wishes and not to be kept in a vegetative state. The thought of it makes me cringe. Vegetative state. We don’t need to discuss the test. I forgot the first appointment. Then I got angry at the insulting questions as if they were deliberately trying to trip me up with instructions to remember things without allowing me to write them down. Talking about “biomarkers” was very upsetting. There were mornings when I thought I would be going to work at the radio station where disc jockeys put together sound mosaics during their shifts to create moods with their voices, some soothing (those who enjoyed working in the depths of night when the station was all but empty), their booth filled with records and albums categorized in a library around them. They knew how to segue those moods of a downbeat into another entirely different sound with the same idea. Like canonical hours in a monastery. Imagine the miracle of a box on the table bringing the world into your house, connecting us to a

larger place while displacing our small localized world with that of something more important. Here was something empowering our lives by confiding in us about events beyond our insignificant existence, including us in “the latest” and opening the door not only to the restless few who were born chaffing at the bit to see distant shores, but also to the rest of us who had a vague notion of dissatisfaction with the daily toil. And then my job came in. The advertising. I didn’t have anything to do with the art of radio but like everything, money is necessary to make it happen. My desk functioned as command central for the airwaves of the call letters. It wasn’t me that said “we sold air.” A nice sales lady said that. I can’t remember her name but I can remember her “look.” Olive oil. Sun. Water. Warmth. Jewish. I don’t know what this means anymore but that word pops into my head. It must be a hair color? Is it a language? A place? And I know that I took this invisible time that she sold in advertising and I put it on a schedule that interrupted carefully constructed music flow with suggestions for getting a car wash at thus and such a place, purchasing gifts at this mall, putting money in that bank. I determined minute by minute what went out over the air and it was called traffic. When I was younger I kept a dream journal. You know those trends in life you take up for a year or two? You don’t think that a life can be broken down into “periods” like a timeline in a history book, but if you live long enough you can. Teen, newly wed, class mom, aerobics, marathon training, ceramics, bowling, bridge. Recording my dreams made me wonder, where do dreams go? What I’m trying to explain is that in the middle of the night you wake up from a vivid dream. You have been in a jungle with large leathery leaves brushing your shoulders and suddenly you are face to face with a huge snake and *pow!* you are awake with a vivid recollection of each scale on the creature’s slithering body, of the forked tongue that flickers in and out of its mouth and the unblinking eyes of deep black staring at you. It is so real. Your heart is pounding. You fall back asleep and in the morning you wake up knowing you had a vivid dream but you can’t for the life of you remember what it was. So where did it go? This is how I feel. Except that the dream I can’t remember is my life. Who I am. I’m functioning normally but the blank spaces are getting larger. The place where the dream goes that I can’t access is growing. After a morning spent looking for shoes that I already had on my feet I got the idea to kill



myself. There was no morbidity involved. Just a simple acceptance of the fact that I had the dreaded “thing” we all fear. I knew it before the doctor called and asked me to bring someone with me to the follow-up appointment as if I needed a witness to hear what was so evident. How insulting. After a lifetime of control (I dictated the radio traffic! I set the dinner time! I organized vacations! I logged my periods!) hearing a diagnosis and query about family since I had gone alone, the future devastated me. The fact is, I am dying. Such a ridiculous statement! We all are but this is different. The person Charlie knows as her mother will die but live on as a duplicate who will not know her own daughter. What kind of person will emerge? Vanity makes me shudder at the visual of me sitting, slumping staring blankly into space instead of whirring around busy, busy, busy. Ego makes me outraged. I had a dream last night. There was a long trestle table with a nautilus shell carved with the likeness of my childhood dog, a mutt named Ruff. Next to that was a tortoise shell bowl filled with pomegranate seeds. I reached out to try one and they dissolved into crimson juice pooling on the table. I lay in bed happy I remembered the dream and then wondered why that one and not the others? My family has a history of being addled in old age. Senility. A common thing and tolerated as they became fixtures in the house sitting on plastic. Drooling a bit. Mumbling, smiling for no reason. We weren’t so in tune with hydration so perhaps they died of dehydration as much as anything. Who knows? But they didn’t linger so long. I will no doubt fester in the place where I’ve purchased my slot. My bin I call it. They call it memory care but there are no memories. During a Sunday call I casually dropped in the results of my tests to Charlie. I had carefully scripted it so there was no confusion of the cognitive and physical declines. I had recorded with bullet points the “incidents.” I told her about the young doctor letting me know that rather than plateau which I had asked her about, the condition would accelerate. “But Mom you are in such great shape!” Charlie protested, vocalizing the same argument I had been making with myself. “Are you sure?” “Yes. I can’t deny that the gas was turned off last month because I forgot to pay the bill. I can’t deny that I’ve lost weight because I literally forget to eat. I have to set three alarms to make sure I get out of bed. I could go on.” “Why haven’t you told me? I’m coming out.” So just like that she was able to fly to see me. Work from my home. I was still lucid

enough to register the irony. Don't worry about me I told her when she arrived. I won't know anything. But then I wondered what if I do? In the gradual drift away from coherency, friends probably wonder why I haven't called. Why my cards didn't arrive per usual at the holiday time. Why I haven't been to the sewing group. The first time I wet my pants in public the gals quietly wiped the chair and walked me to the car. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" "Text when you get home." And when I didn't and they called, I asked why they were calling and where we had been. Then I'm back. But it gets less and less. The large lists and the calendar on the kitchen counter don't help me so much as confuse me and remind me that something has changed. Charlie is taking care of the details I've neglected or forgotten about. We agree. It's time. We packed the suitcase of clothes I wanted. I chose not to take any keepsakes. "Let's keep this simple," Charlie would be going through all the detritus of my life, her Dad's, our life together. The junk drawer, the cards I couldn't bear to throw away. Pretty stamps. Dried up rubber bands. Old photographs meant to be labeled but now simply smiling faces staring out from the Rocky Mountain National Park welcome sign, snow capped peaks in the background, me with an unidentified man obviously dressed for summer weather. Snow capped peaks in summer. That hasn't happened for awhile. Who is that man she'll wonder but the story of it will be lost forever. The thought kept occurring to me, "in the nick of time, in the nick of time" as I cut a piece of butter to make a cup of tea. What nick of time? Like the wake of a ship begins strong with frothy foam and a wide path, it eventually fades and is absorbed into the wide sea. That's how it felt. Engulfed. I told Charlie about my plan and she agreed to execute it. So the letter was sent out right after entered my bin.

*Dear Friends, This is to announce that Nancy, the girl, woman, old lady you have all known is dead. You may have noticed I've "not been myself" lately. The past few years actually. If I have offended you with rudeness I apologize. The dreaded condition we all fear, wondering if forgetfulness is the beginning of something worse, has arrived. In my case anyway. Thankfully Chuck is not here to witness my demise. Charlie is my stalwart and will need some loving kindness from you all. I am counting on that. By the time you receive this I will be in my final living space, a personal "bin for dementia demise." I can hear the groans and*

“don’t give up” “atta girl” pep talks. But just because I’m physically ticking doesn’t mean my spirit is still there. It’s a strange strange place to be my friends, knowing that the world I used to inhabit is no longer accessible. You will be happy to know that Nancy died peacefully with Charlie at her side. I will admit to you that Charlie has composed this letter at my request. I bought a notebook after it became apparent to me something was happening. She is cobbling together these words from thoughts I’ve been jotting down as the world has been slipping away. But you know I always have a plan and here it is. I am inviting you to my wake. Trust me, I’m excited to host a party I don’t have to attend. I’ve set aside some money and Charlie will be sending invitations and a date. It’s my funeral you see because I’ve died and it’s important for you to have a celebration of life on my behalf. Charlie has organized the appropriate “fun photos” of my life’s highlights. Drink and be merry! There will be lots of booze. Dress casual. Laugh about the good times we’ve shared, the trips, the walks, the books, the cries, the food, the drink, the non-drink, the diets, the bad hair, the love. I have invited a new person who looks just like me. You might mistake her for Nancy. For the record, I have never liked that name which may have contributed to the pricklier side of her nature. This is Nancy’s celebration of a life that has passed on. You can grieve or be relieved but just know that when you see a stranger who looks like Nancy introduce yourself because she doesn’t know anyone. Good news. You can be anyone you want with her. Here’s another fun fact, she will be all new to you too. There will be no guilt if you don’t visit her. She doesn’t care. But if you do, bring chocolate. Read her poetry. Take her out on the grounds to watch squirrels. I think this new person will be easy to amuse unlike her doppelganger. This stranger in our midst has arrived at my funeral in the first phase of an adventure. She might be confused and Charlie has promised to take her back to her safe place if the prospect of embarrassment emerges. Charlie has agreed to reinvent herself with this new relationship which might be quite fun for her! No longer a daughter per se, she can tell me any crazy thing. Imagine being able to reinvent yourself! Maybe this is the greatest gift of all. I have agreed to listen to whatever she wants to tell me, fact or fiction. I hope I can respond but, again, no guilt, no expectations. What a wonderful life I’ve lived! Such a privilege to know you all. Of course I apologize for this ignominious exit without the proper good-bye but truth be told, I’ve been grasping each moment of clarity. I can feel the sigh of relief some of you are feeling knowing

*that you've known and watched and remained silent, hoping it's just a phase. But for me my friends it's real. So I am writing to say good-bye. And this stranger who looks like me? She is on a journey of discovery that she may or may not be able to share. In any case she's available to hear your stories and promises not to tell any secrets. Please gossip. So when you see the person who looks like Nancy, remind yourself she has died and introduce yourself to Chloe.*

## Second Place: Grape

By: Val Muller

The detour was a whim—a final stop in Connecticut before the long drive to South Carolina. Mom had told me the name of the new owners, years ago, but how could I remember something like that? As I turned onto Strasbourg Road, none of these streets looked familiar, streets I'd ridden countless times on my bike, streets I'd walked Ash on. But that was a lifetime ago, the time before college or career. I was hardly that same person—I barely had a right to be here. But my hands maneuvered the steering wheel without me, as if my childhood soul were navigating home.

The street signs were new—blue now instead of green—but the names were the same. Chardonnay Court, Nice Avenue, Mont-St-Michel Road, all named after places in France none of us had ever been. The blue newspaper box had long ago disintegrated, and someone had put in its place a small toddler playground for the neighborhood. A mom with two kids eyed my car, then moved a step closer to her child behind the protective fence. And why not? An out of state car. A slow-moving stranger. I was a stranger, after all. Everyone I had grown up with had moved away or died. Even I questioned what I was doing here.

But still—why not? What did I have to lose?

I would likely never set foot in the state again. I'd had enough of cold New England winters and cold New England hospitality. And if my mother's parents hadn't prepaid for her burial plot, I wouldn't have subjected her body to eternal rest here, either.

I pulled up to the house and almost turned instinctively into the driveway, the shadow of my past flexing her muscle memory, but I thought better of it and parked along the street. The trees were all the same, taller of course, except the two pines were gone. The house, though, was blue. It used to be a lime green, something that probably

looked good in the Seventies, but had long gone out of favor. Still, that green would always be home to me. The blue was foreign. Something shivered down my spine.

The low roof over the garage was gone, too. How many times I'd climbed out onto that roof for stargazing! My bedroom window had opened right out to it, and I loved the freedom of going in and out. Now, another room had been added above the garage, a tall roof, and a big picture window suggested that my childhood room had been expanded, maybe a new master suite? Those features hadn't been a thing during my childhood, not unless you were really rich. But something inside me smiled. No one else would ever be able to stretch out on that roof under a dark sky. That memory was mine, now. Only mine.

How long could I sit in the car before someone called the police or came to the car? Across the street, the house on the hill looked down at me neutrally. How was that possible? It always looked so sinister when I was a kid, like it was alive. Now it looked harmless. Next door, the neighbor's house I'd easily entered a hundred times looked unfamiliar, like some background of a movie set that someone barely gave a second thought to. Had it been renovated too? I couldn't remember. All the personification, the trees looking like faces, the flowers that would sing to the clouds—all those weird things you think of as a kid—gone.

It was a sinking feeling, like when you stop believing in Santa. Like watching the last bit of snow melt on a spring driveway, wondering what will happen if it never snows ever again.

Before I could convince myself otherwise, my feet were moving me down the driveway to the walkway where I'd taken all those first day of school pictures so many years ago. I chilled as I saw the ghostly image of my dad in his business suit, my mom still in her robe, and me standing on that walkway to the porch, posing for the camera.

A woman walked through the memory to greet me from the porch before I could even make it to the doorway.

"I saw your car." She crossed her arms. "Can I help you?" But she said it in a way that meant something else. She meant, get out, you have the wrong house, you are not

wanted here. Something about it—I didn’t know the tears were flowing before they raced down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” I managed, breathing in that awkward, clumsy way you breathe when you’re crying. “I used to live here,” I blurted.

She rushed inside and came out with a tissue box and a husband. The husband handed me the whole box, then took a full step back, like he didn’t want to get too close.

“Sit down,” they said, motioning to a wicker chair on the porch. I remembered a wrought iron bench that should be there instead, but then I realized Mom had taken that with her when she moved. It was still at her house. It would be mine now. Something about that lessened the tears, and I stopped crying as I sat.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I was in town for Mom’s burial, and I thought, before I drove home, I might stop here. I used to live here. It was stupid. I—”

“Oh—” The woman’s face softened, and she ran inside. Her husband looked helplessly between me and the front door. Before long, the woman was back. She held up a faded envelope. “A Christmas card,” she said. Then she handed it to me.

A shiver ran down my spine as I recognized Mom’s long, neat cursive handwriting. So neat it could be its own font. The envelope was addressed to the Millers, there at our old address. It was postmarked several years ago. I looked up at her and she nodded, prompting me to open it.

“You’re Vanessa,” she told me, as if I needed to know.

Printed on the card was a photo of Mom and Dad. It was the year Dad died, but Mom had already had the photo cards printed, and she sent them out anyway. Inside the card was a photo and a note from Mom: *Found this while cleaning. Thought you might want to know who used to live there.* It was a picture of me in kindergarten. Mom had done my hair in these two braided pigtails, and she wrapped them around on the side of my head like Princess Leia. I was standing in front of the school’s kindergarten entrance, between the two bushes. It must have been right before Thanksgiving, because I was holding a pilgrim hat in one hand and a feather headband in the other. Probably some pageant I couldn’t remember.

The picture transported me down the street to the elementary school. I remembered finding a scrap of paper stuck to my shoe, I picked it off and threw it in a bush. Mom immediately snapped. I remember it being out of character for her. When we got home, we had a discussion about littering. I guess she thought she needed to do a better job parenting because after that, just about every night we had a discussion about some aspect of morality. I don't remember all of them, but I remember the one about stealing. We talked about paying for things in stores and not just taking what we wanted. We talked about ownership and all that, but still—

There I was, in the kindergarten classroom. We were playing in the house section, the one with the toy food and pots and pans and things. It was time to clean up, and we were all hurrying. Jeffrey threw the fruit in the fruit basket, and the squishy rubber grapes bounced out and onto the floor. Several of them came off the bunch, and Mrs. Warner instructed me to throw them in the trash. There were three of them, and I picked up each grape individually before walking it to the trash. The first one I put in reluctantly. The second one—I squished it over and over again, knowing I never had, nor never would, squish anything so satisfying. If only I could possess that grape for myself! Adam saw me and tattle-tailed, and Mrs. Warner told me to hurry up. I hurried with the third grape, Adam watching me like a hawk. But I was slick, and I pretended to miss the trash can. I bent down, and cleverly I put the grape in my shoe.

The rest of the day I felt like a criminal, like someone waiting to be convicted. All eyes sought my grape. It had its own gravity there in my shoe, bending all the world toward it. In the car, when Mom asked how my day had been, all I could think of was her lecture about stealing. And what had I done?

By the time I got home, I was too upset to enjoy the grape. I hurried upstairs, telling my mom I needed to rest. It was such a suspicious thing to say, something uncharacteristic, but I didn't have time to think of another excuse. I took the grape out of my shoe. It looked bluer in the light of my room compared to the classroom's fluorescence. I gave it a quick squish to confirm that its magic was lost to the guilt of my crime. Then I had to hide the evidence. I didn't dare put it in the trash can. Dad emptied



the trash, and he was likely to ask me about it, or worse yet—show Mom. Then I'd have some explaining to do.

I opened my closet and felt around. There were too many boxes, too many things that would eventually be opened or moved. My fingers slid around crevices and cracks until I found it. Around the doorframe inside the closet was the tiniest space, not even fit for a paintbrush, where the molding of the door frame met the corner of the wall. I shoved the grape there, squished permanently in place. Phew—the deed was done. I would not enjoy the fruit of my crime, but at least I wouldn't get caught, either—

“I mean, if you want to,” the woman said.

I shook my head. The woman, Mrs. Miller, had been talking to me. I had no idea what she had said.

“I'm sorry, I—”

“She's had a rough day,” the husband said. He turned to me. “Do you want a drink? And I do mean a drink.” He made a drinking motion with his hand.

I shook my head and pointed to the car. “I'm driving.”

Mrs. Miller looked doubtfully at my car. “Well at least if you want to, I'd be happy to let you look around.”

I nodded and allowed my body to follow her into the house. The entryway was completely different, tile and wood paneling replaced with more modern clean lines. There was so much light, I could barely imagine the shadowed memories of childhood. The kitchen had been completely gutted. The wallpaper gone, stainless steel replacing those old-fashioned appliances of my childhood. It looked like a kitchen out of a magazine. Everything repainted, floors redone, no worn marks where the vinyl flooring was walked on one too many times. The stairs were redone too—the slippery wood where Dad had fallen and broken a rib now covered in some rubbery synthetic. How could the house that defined my childhood look so completely unfamiliar?

When I was a kid, I woke up most mornings wondering if I had grown wings. And I mean this in a literal sense. I would lift my nightgown and stare at my back in the mirror. I swear I could feel the place where the wings were going to emerge there at the edge of

my shoulder blades. In the night, I had countless dreams of flying. Mostly I flew around the living room, the one with the ceiling—

I stepped out of the upgraded kitchen and looked up. There was one thing that stayed the same: the high-vaulted living room ceiling. I winked up at my childhood self flying there, swooping down to place the star on the Christmas tree, circling around while my parents had boring visits with friends where they just sat on the living room couch and talked for hours.

“There’s a smile,” the husband said, raising a glass of amber liquid with ice cubes. He took a drink. “To your happiness,” he said, “and to your Mom.”

“Can I see my room?”

The woman’s eyes lowered. “Your mom must have told you—”

“I know it’s been renovated,” I said. “I just want to see it. If you don’t mind.”

They led me upstairs. My parents’ old bedroom there on the left was still the same, only it was an ordinary room now. It looked so small by modern standards. How could I have remembered it as so much larger? I saw the black and white TV there on the rolling cart, rabbit ears and all. I heard it being wheeled down the hallway when I was sick so that I could watch *The Price is Right* while the rest of the kids were suffering in school without me. I watched the ghost of myself sneaking into Mom’s closet to see what Christmas toys were still unwrapped in the Toys R Us bag, and then I watched her sneak off to her room crying, knowing she had ruined what would probably have been her most epic Christmas surprise and wondering how she could fool her mom by acting surprised a few days later.

I followed her down the hall, where she disappeared into the new carpeting of my room. Not my room, the new master bedroom, entirely unrecognizable except for the warmth of the sunlight shining on the carpet. That had been a favorite for me, the way the late afternoon sun patterned the carpet. It felt cozy in the fall and comforting in the winter. In summer and spring, I barely knew it—I practically lived outside in those days, but at bedtime I could tell it had been there by the warmth in the room.

Above the garage, where the roofline used to be, was a bathroom bigger than any bathroom I’d ever been in, soaking tub, double shower, double vanity, water closet. This

was not my room. I should not have come here. I turned to leave, and that's when I saw it.

There at the back of the bedroom, next to what appeared to be a ginormous walk-in closet, was a familiar sight. My old closet. "Oh," I said.

The husband took another sip of his drink. "It was structural," he said. "The beams and things. It was easier to keep it as a closet. We made it into the linen closet for the master bathroom. Nothing but towels and soap."

He opened the door and let me look inside. My wooden shelves were gone, replaced with wire ones, but the bones of the closet looked the same. On a whim, I dropped to my knees to reach my kindergarten height, and I stuck my fingers behind the doorframe. There, wedged beneath the doorframe and the wall, was the most satisfyingly squishy thing I've ever felt. I pulled my hand away, and there it was, more blue in the afternoon light than I remembered it—the purloined grape of my childhood.

The tears could not be stopped, and the woman was nowhere to be found. Her husband stood watching me and nursing his drink. He looked from the grape in my hand to my face. Then he took another swallow. He nodded solemnly, then motioned with his head to the envelope in my other hand. "Keep that too," he said.

I stayed only a moment more before venturing into the world again, the grape seeming once again to pull everything toward me—the ghosts of my past and the memories of my parents and my future in South Carolina. I walked across the lawn like I used to do as a child when I played freeze tag with the neighbors or piled the heavy New England snow into mounds to sled down, or the one time I trekked across the yard to the mailbox, knowing that the envelope containing my college future waited to be opened. The lawn I imagined Mom standing on as she watched the ambulance pull away, carrying Dad one last time.

I turned back to the house just once. It was lime green, and it smiled at me, promising that the mean house across the street would do me no harm. A late blooming daylily sang to my car that she hoped I would have a safe trip. And there on the porch, waving from near the wrought iron bench of my youth, my parents stood, arms around

each other, the bittersweet melancholy of seeing their daughter entering the world mixing with the pride of knowing they'd raised her right.

I stuck the grape into my shoe and got in the car, my muscle memory turning around at the cul-de-sac the way I always used to do, before starting the drive toward home.

## Third Place: Rumpelstiltskin Meets His Match

By: Grace Johnson

A friendly piece of advice: if you promise away your firstborn child in exchange for a wagon of gold, you should mention that to your spouse.

Because it's really awkward for all of us if you don't.

Especially if your spouse also forgot to mention that they did the same thing.

Let me tell you how I know.

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It's rather lonely, being a Hairie. There aren't many of us out there—half fairies, half humans, or Hairies. I'm not a particularly good-looking Hairie, anyway. I got all my looks from my fairy father, and he was a three feet tall mass of wrinkle and hair. Every female Hairie I've met turned her nose up at me.

So, at the age of thirty-four, I knew my prospects of marriage were decidedly hopeless. If I wanted a family, I would need to put on my thinking cap.

That's when Merida showed up. You know the story—her father bragged about her ability to spin straw into gold, and before she knew which way was north she was in the king's dungeon with a pile of straw. Of course, I got her out of that pickle, and she promised me her firstborn child in return.

When I came back for the child, though, she had second thoughts. (These fickle humans. Can't they just keep their word?) She somehow solved my impossible riddle, and what do you know, all my hard work was for nothing. Nine months of waiting all wasted.

Well, not entirely wasted, because I had learned a valuable business lesson. I wrote it on a sticky note and stuck it on my fridge: *when dealing with humans, always write a contract.*

So I did. I wrote up a contract and put it in my waistcoat pocket so no human could contest the terms and conditions at the last minute.

The next step was to find another maiden in distress. That wasn't very hard in my country, Faitlithimean. Two days later, I came across a poor ugly farm girl who was in love. Problem was, she claimed the boy would never love her because she was so ugly.

If she was poor in the looks department, she was flush in the straw department. Seriously. This girl took care of cows for a living. She harvested straw. She bundled straw. She fed straw to cows. She slept on straw. I swear she even ate straw, chopped and boiled in her stew.

Thanks to Queen Merida the fickle-minded, this young girl (I'll call her Beth for anonymity's sake) knew of my skills.

So, one day, Beth comes knocking on my door with a wagon full of straw, asking me to change it into gold. "If I'm rich," she said, "Ralphy won't care about my looks."

This was my chance. I whipped the contract out of my pocket and slapped that bad boy down on the table. "Just sign here," I told her, "and I'll have that straw transformed in no time. You don't even need to put down a deposit. I'll come collect the payment in full. Let's wait, I don't know, nine or ten months."

Beth was beyond elated. She signed that paper faster than a fried egg dipped in grease set to spinning on a sheet of ice.

Well, I thought I had everything figured out nice and legal this time. Boy, was I wrong.

The couple got married, and pretty soon their first wee thing arrived. I showed up to collect my payment, and the minute I appeared, Beth shouted, "Rumpelstiltskin!"

I grinned and whipped out the contract. "Lookie here," I said, pointing to the fine print, which read, *This contract cannot be voided or altered by the discovery of aforementioned Hairie's name, nor the utterance of it, nor anything else. Like literally.*

"Not my baby Rillyilly!" Beth wailed, her face turning as white as an egg white. (Which are very white.) I'd seen the look before and was prepared for it.

Then I looked at her husband's face, and I was *not* prepared for that.

First off, that man was every bit as ugly as his wife, and ten times more. Where in the world did Beth get the idea that she needed wealth to convince *that* man to marry her?

That man's ugly face, all twisted and gnarled, became even more ugly. Because it turned whiter than an egg white, whiter than a ghost. It was as white as a Mother of Pearl on a string of Mother of Pearls.

Beth turned to her husband. "Oh Ralphy, I should have told you," she babbled, "but this Hairie said he would spin my straw to gold if I promised him our firstborn child, and I—"

"You too?!" her husband said, jumping to his feet.

At that moment, the window above the cradle opened and a Hairie hopped through it. A *female* Hairie. And she was every bit as short and ugly as me.

The Hairie landed on the edge of the cradle. "I am Wrinklestiltskin!" she announced, pointing to the baby, "and that baby belongs to me!"

(Have I mentioned that all Hairies have names that end in "stiltskin"? It's required by law. Some Faitlithimean king a couple hundred years ago thought it would be a funny joke. I'm not laughing.)

Now Beth turned as pale as a Mother of Pearl on a string of Mother of Pearls. Actually, she might have been even more pale than that. Blugh. I shiver just remembering.

I turned to the Hairie and said very politely, very calmly, "You idiotic thief, this baby is mine by contract, and I'll fight you before I let you take her from me."

The new Hairie glared daggers at me—literally. She pulled a knife out of her pocket, screeching, "Take a look at my contract!" She slammed the knife into the table—and, there, on the end of it, was a piece of folded paper. I opened it and read. It was hard, given how messy her handwriting was. Still, I deduced that it was indeed her own contract!

Well, this was a pretty pickle. The husband and wife began unleashing some sort of unintelligible human gibberish at each other while Wrinklestiltskin and I calmly looked over our contracts together.

I tried to explain to her that there had been some mistake. "Look here, Robberstiltskin, this wife promised me her firstborn child, and I'll take you to Hairie court before I let you take the child from me."

Wrinklestiltskin answered just as politely, "You're so ugly, you'd just make the baby cry." She shoved a second knife into the table, for emphasis.

I put my contract on top of hers and pointed. "The wife signed on the twelfth of January, in the year three million four thousand and twenty-one, at 12:31 in the afternoon."

Wrinkle pulled her contract out from under mine, giving me about a million paper cuts in the process. "The husband signed mine on the twelfth of January, in the year three million four thousand and twenty-one, at 12:30 in the afternoon."

I stared at the contract in dismay. It couldn't be. But there it was! As plain as day! The husband's undistinguishable X was slashed over the *sign here, please* section at the bottom of the page.

I wasn't giving up so easily. No siree. Not when I'd been foiled once. Not when I'd taken the time to think up all that legalese.

I folded my arms. "A mother's word is more binding than a father's."

"Is not." Wrinklestiltskin threw another knife at me.

"Is too." I threw it back at her.

"Is not." Another knife.

"Is too." I caught the knife and threw it back.

"Is not."

"Is too."

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"THE DEFENDANT AND PLAINTIFF WILL STOP THROWING KNIVES OR THEY WILL BE REMOVED FROM THE COURTROOM."

I froze mid-catch, and Wrinklestiltskin's knife clattered onto the courthouse floor. That was the moment Wrinkle and I stopped throwing knives at each other. It had become such a habit, I don't think either one of us noticed that we were still throwing knives nonstop while we hired lawyers, found a nanny to watch the baby, and showed up for the first day of hearings.



I guess the judge didn't appreciate the game of catch. He was a Hairie too, but he was good-looking. (Most Hairies were handsome enough. Except me. And Wrinklestiltskin.)

Wrinkle threw one last knife at me. I caught it and politely shoved it into the mahogany table before us. Wrinkle slammed one in next to mine. "Our apologies, your honor," we said in unison.

The judge frowned at us. "Will the nanny please bring forth the child?"

The nanny brought in the baby, who was quite a pretty little thing. Everyone awwwwed when the nanny held her up.

"What is the child's name?" asked the judge.

"Troublestiltskin," I said, at the same time that Wrinkle said, "Jugglestiltskin." We shared a sympathetic look of mutual hatred.

"Bring forth the contracts," said the judge.

I may have accidentally tripped Wrinklestiltskin as we raced towards the judge's bench, but she smashed my face against his chair, so we're even.

The judge looked carefully at both our contracts.

"My was signed first," Wrinkle said.

"Mine was signed by the mother," I said.

Then, to our utter horror, the judge took Wrinkle's contract in his left hand, and mine in his right hand, and crumbled them up. "I grant joint custody of the child," he said, "and declare its name to be Trugglestiltskin."

Well, I had thought this whole situation was as bad as getting stuck in a tornado with a horde of bumblebees, but this new development was as bad as getting stuck in a tornado with two hordes of bumblebees. Flaming bumblebees. Who spew fire.

Wrinklestiltskin threw a knife at me. I kindly tossed it back at her.

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The court didn't tell us how joint custody was supposed to work, so we decided to put our two houses side by side and little Trugglestiltskin could grow up in both of them. I would never enter Wrinkle's house, and she would never enter my house.

Sounds great, right?

Well, there was one complication. I lived in the very northern tip of Faitlithimean in a cozy cottage, with a garden and a river and a huge oak tree by my front door. I love it there. There are so few people.

Wrinkle lived in the very southern tip of Faitlithimean in a massive grey city house, looming over an ugly street with wagons and horses and human people *everywhere*.

I told her she should build a new house by mine. There's space here and there's none in her city, where the buildings suffocate each other. But Wrinklestiltskin wouldn't move, and of course I wasn't going to give up my cozy home, either. We almost ended back up in court because of our disagreement, but the legal fees were getting very expensive—even for a couple Hairies who could spin straw into gold.

So, we split the difference. I built a wagon and put my cottage on it and moved to the middle of Faitlithimean, and Wrinkle put her townhouse on a wagon and put it next to mine in our new suburban neighborhood.

The very first day, I took a stick and drew a dividing line in the yard between our two houses. Neither of us could cross it. Or else. (Or else, what? you ask. Neither of us was brave enough to find out.)

Then I went back and got my oak tree. I pulled that thing out of the ground and put it on a wagon and brought it to the new house and dug a hole nearly straight through the whole earth so that I could replant that oak tree by my front door.

When I turned around, Wrinkle had just pulled up with a *barn* on the back of her wagon. She unloaded it and set it right next to her house and put her wagon and horse inside, and what could I do? I couldn't cross to her side. I yelled something, but she threw a knife at me.

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Truggle loved her new home. She loved the nursery's acoustics so much she screamed at me every time I put her down for a nap, just to show off how great the sound bounced off the walls. She loved her new toys so much she threw them at me so I could see how awesome they felt when they bounced off your head. She loved her food

so much she smashed it into the carpet and plastered it on the walls, so that she could come back to it whenever she wanted

She must have loved Wrinkle's nursery and toys and food just as much, because I could hear similar sounds coming from Wrinkle's house.

Of course, I never went to Wrinkle's side of the house, and she never came to mind. We each cut tiny holes in the side of our house, like dog doors. Then we built a tiny tunnel that joined them, just big enough for Truggle to crawl through. When it was time for Truggle to go to the other person's house, her parent would put her in front of the door and she would crawl to her parent on the other side.

Everything was going wonderfully.

See, I had gone to a few Hairie parenting classes, and I had this whole thing figured out. Still, some things were a *little* harder than I expected.

Like, say, feeding Truggle. The only things she would eat were cake and ice cream. Everything else, she smashed in the carpet or painted on the walls. (Beautiful paintings, I might add.) She tried to eat any book I ever read to her, and bathtime always resulted in more water on me than on her.

Wrinkle was having trouble, too. One day, when Wrinkle tried to put her down for a nap, Truggle ran away, crawled through the tunnel, and popped out in my house. Of course, I wasn't going to make her go back to Wrinkle's house when she clearly wanted to be with me.

I was tickled pink about it—until I tried putting Truggle down for a nap, and she wriggled away and made a beeline for the tunnel. Before I knew which way was up and which way was Antarctica, she was in Wrinkle's house. Wrinkle, very rudely, refused to give her back, and I had to spend the rest of the day alone.

When I gave Truggle her evening meal, I explained the concept of joint custody to her very thoroughly, but I'm not sure she quite got the idea. She did create a smiley face on the wall with her sweet potatoes. (I swear that girl will be an artist when she grows up.)

Well, this running away went on for a few weeks, until it all finally came to a point. I was trying to put her down for a nap, and she ran into that tunnel. Except, she

wouldn't go out on Wrinkle's side, either. Wrinkle came to her side and tried to coax her out, and I knelt down on my end and tried to coax her out, and Truggle just pouted and waved her fists.

Wrinkle and I looked at each other in absolute bewildered confusion. What were we supposed to do?

"Truggle," I said in a coaxing voice, "you can have some ice cream!"

"Truggle," Wrinkle said, "you can munch on the book!"

"Not Truggle!" the little girl shouted. "Rillyilly!"

That was the minute Wrinkle and I looked into each other's eyes and knew we didn't have what it took to be parents. We both scrambled to our feet. "I'll get the father," Wrinkle said.

"I'll get the mother," I said.

Faster than a child on a buttered slide in the hot summer, we found the parents and brought them to our houses. They knelt down by the tunnel and didn't have to say a thing, because that baby just about ripped the tunnel in two in her frenzy to get to her parents.

Wrinkle and I didn't even try to follow when the parents jumped up and ran with baby Rillyilly. We just stood on the road in front of our houses, watching.

"Well," Wrinkle said, "Truggle really was an awful name."

"Well," I said, "being a parent really is harder than they said it would be."

"Yeah," Wrinkle said.

We both stared for a minute longer. "Well," Wrinkle said, "Guess we can take our homes home now."

"Guess you're right," I said.

We went inside. I went to my study and found the box of knives I had kept, every one of them hurled at me by Wrinkle. I chose the one she had thrown at me that first day. I wrote a message on it. *Marry me?* I went back outside. I walked to her house, and I slammed that knife into her front door.

That night, I heard a knife slam into my door. I waited a few minutes before I went to see it. No, I wasn't nervous. Of course not. Just...a bit...cautious.

I didn't need to be. The knife had printed on it in Wrinkle's familiar scrawl, *yes*.

So we got hitched. Two of the ugliest Hairies you'd ever seen, in the ugliest Hairie wedding there'd ever been, and now we live in the ugliest Hairie house you've ever seen, raising a dozen of the ugliest Hairie children ever born.

But we do have the finest collection of knives in Faitlithimean.

## **Honorable Mention: Adventure in the Bazar**

By: Kaylan Baban

“Rozh bash, boys! Good morning, Tahir, Osman, Salah, it’s time to get up.”

Their mother was gentle, and touched their faces to wake them.

Osman opened his eyes. A new day! What adventures would he have today? Only he and his two brothers – one older one, Tahir, and one younger, Salah – were still in the family bed in the courtyard. The sun was up, and robins pecked for bugs in the grass. Osman saw them and suddenly realized, he was hungry, too!

“Daiya, when is breakfast?” he asked his mother.

“That depends: How fast can you go get it?” she smiled at him. “Tahir has to get ready for school. Salah is still too young to go. But you are big enough for your first trip to the bazaar today, all by yourself! Do you want to go?”

Wow, how exciting! Osman had gone to the market with his big sister Sobhei many times before. Never on his own, though. He was a little nervous, but he thought he knew what to do. And he was so hungry, he didn’t want to wait! That decided it.

“Yes, Daiya,” he smiled back proudly. “I will go to the bazaar to get our breakfast.”

Tahir rolled his eyes. “It’s no big deal, Osman. I’ve gone loads of times.” But Osman ignored him. Tahir was just jealous because Osman was the one having an adventure today.

“Good!” said his mother. “Sobhei can help you get cleaned up and dressed. Here are a few fils to pay Haji Hasan. Ask him to fill up our bowl, and then bring it straight back here. No other stops, understand?”

Ooo, his mouth watered and his stomach rumbled. He could not wait for delicious tangy yogurt on his breakfast plate, next his mother’s soft, pillowy bread.

He jumped out of bed and ran to find Sobhei so he could get going -- "Yes, Daiya!" he shouted over his shoulder.

A little while later, Osman was clean and ready. He had money in his pocket, and a big empty bowl in his hands. He walked onto the street and pulled the gate shut tightly behind him, like Sobhei had taught him. He had never been outside the house by himself before!

The street was so busy with people walking by, and donkeys pulling carts to market. He almost forgot that he had a job, too. But his stomach growled and reminded him. Osman's family was counting on him to get their breakfast! He stood up taller, and hurried down the street, like all the other important people.

At the end of the block, he got to the top of the steps. People carrying packages to and from the bazaar were hurrying up and down. The huge bazaar sprawled out from the bottom of the steps, tents and stalls as far as he could see! But Osman only had to get to the fourth stall from the bottom of the steps. He took a deep breath and jumped into the crowd that was bumping and bustling to the bazaar.

The steps were long and steep. He almost fell, and when he got to the bottom he couldn't see the stalls anymore, just people's legs! So he had to count.

First was the dressmaker: "Hello, Mr. Jamal!" "Hello, Osman, greet your father for me!" "Yes, sir!"

Second was the stall that sold spices: "Good morning, Mrs. Saadia!" "Good morning, Osman! How's your mother?" "She is doing well, thank you, ma'am!"

Third was the toy stall, that one was hard to pass by! But he remembered his mission and kept going.

Fourth, he had finally arrived! Now he was nervous.

"Hello, Haji Hasan! Excuse me, would you please fill up our bowl with yogurt?" "Well, Osman, good morning! Are you all on your own today? No big sister with you?" "No, sir,

my mother said I am big enough to do it myself!" Osman told him proudly. Haji Hasan smiled at him, "Well, then I guess you must be! Here you are, enjoy your breakfast and tell your family I said hello."

The bowl had been so easy to carry before, but now that it was full it was so heavy! Osman wanted to ask Haji Hasan for help, but the yogurt maker already had another customer. That was okay, Osman remembered that his mother said he was big enough to do this job, so he must be. It might be hard, but he knew he could!

He started to walk back to the steps, past the third stall. His arms were so full that he barely noticed the toys this time. Past the second and the first stall. Osman tried to say goodbye to Mrs. Saadia and Mr. Jamal, but the bowl was getting heavier and heavier. Osman held the bowl tighter and concentrated. When he started climbing the steps, he counted each one to himself so he could focus, "...seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven..." Finally, there was no next step. He looked up. He had made it to the top, he was almost home!

Osman started to walk a little faster through the crowd – he could see his family's gate! But the street was a little quieter than the bazaar, and now he could hear a jangling sound coming from his pocket. Osman slowed down to hear it better, but the sound slowed down, too. Osman shook his leg, and the jangling sound started again. And suddenly he realized: Oh no! He had forgotten to pay Haji Hasan! Osman was a thief, on his very first outing to the bazaar!

He had to fix this right away! Osman turned around and started back down the stairs. The yogurt sloshed because he was going as fast as he could. He did not want Haji Hasan to think Osman stole! Down the steps, past Mr. Jamal the dressmaker in the first stall. Past Mrs. Saadia the spice lady in the second stall. Even past the toys in the third stall.

"Haji Hasan! Haji Hasan!" Osman called to the fourth stall.



Haji Hasan turned around. He looked surprised. "Osman, you're back so soon? Is something wrong?"

"Haji Hasan, I forgot to pay you! I am so sorry, I didn't mean to steal!" Osman reached out to give him the money that had been jangling in his pocket.

Haji Hasan laughed, "You are right, and I forgot to ask! Thank you for coming back, Osman, you are such a good boy! It looks like you lost a little yogurt on your trip, let me top that off for you." He smiled and poured another big ladle of yogurt into the bowl. Osman could feel it get even heavier!

"Okay, I better get home now. Thank you, Haji Hasan!" Osman called out while he turned around slowly. He had to be careful so that he didn't drop the very heavy bowl. His whole family was waiting for him so they could eat breakfast, and they must be wondering what was taking him so long. He didn't want to let them down!

Osman huffed past the toys in the third stall. He puffed past Mrs. Saadia and her spices in the second stall. His arms started to shake past Mr. Jamal and the ladies lined up for dresses in the first stall. He was nearly there now!

But then Osman looked up and saw the steps. So many! And so steep! Why oh why hadn't he brought the yogurt home first?

Then Osman had an idea. He and his brothers had done it once when they were pulling a big log up the mountain to build their fort. Now, Osman put the very heavy bowl of yogurt down on the first step. He climbed onto the first step next to it, then he heaved the very heavy bowl up to the second step. He climbed up onto the second step, and he heaved the very heavy bowl up to the third step.

He huffed and he puffed. His arms shook and his legs trembled. Still he was only halfway up the steps!

Osman had to take a break. He knew his big sister Sobhei never let him stop in the middle of the steps because she said it wasn't safe. But he was a big boy now, everyone

would see him. And he was so tired! He just needed a little break, then he could finish his job and everyone at home could eat their breakfast!

Just then, Osman saw a group of mullahs coming up the steps behind him. They were wearing dark glasses and waving walking sticks in front of them. He waved to them to go around, but they just kept coming. Didn't they see him?

At the last minute, Osman realized they didn't see him – they were blind! He started shouting, "Sirs, please be careful!" and he grabbed to pull the very heavy bowl out of the way. But it was, after all, very heavy and, like most very heavy things, it was very hard to move. And he was too late! The mullah in front of the group stepped right into the yogurt!

The mullah started yelling and flailing. Osman started yelling and flailing, too – all that good yogurt, lost! And the mullah about to fall! And all the other mullahs trying to grab Osman for what they thought was a trick on their friend! In all the confusion, he grabbed the empty, not-very-heavy yogurt bowl, and ran! Up the rest of the steep steps, down the block, through the gate, and he pushed it closed tight, panting on the other side.

Everyone looked up from the table in surprise. Osman had returned from his first trip to the bazaar by himself being chased by mullahs and covered in yogurt!

"Osman, what happened to you? And what happened to the yogurt?" his mother came running to him. "Are you okay?"

He gulped. How could he tell her? Everyone would be so disappointed, and they would think he wasn't old enough to do the job after all! But he had to tell the truth.

"Daiya, I closed the gate tightly, like Sobhei always says. I went down the steps, and counted four stalls into the bazaar. I asked Haji Hasan to fill the bowl and I almost got home before I remembered that I didn't pay him! I didn't want him to think I was stealing, so I went back to give Haji Hasan the money. But the bowl was so heavy by then! I couldn't carry it back up the stairs..." and he told her what had happened. The poor blind

mullah, and the yelling, and the yogurt everywhere, and Osman running all of the rest of the way home!

Osman was too embarrassed to look up. His mother had trusted him, and he had let her and his whole family down! She would be so angry, she would never trust him again. She wasn't even speaking!

Finally, he couldn't wait and he looked up, ready to see his mother's face disappointed and angry. But instead – he couldn't believe it – it looked like she was trying hard not to laugh!

She bent down. "Come here, Osman." A little bit confused, he went to her. "Did you lock the gate and find your way safely to the yogurt stall, like your big sister showed you?" "Yes, I did..." he answered slowly. "And did you make a second trip to make sure Haji Hasan had his money, even though it would have been easier not to?" "Yes, Daiya, of course! I didn't want to steal!" he said. Now she seemed to be about to start laughing again. "And when you were having a problem, did you keep trying, and look for a different way to solve it?" she asked him. He looked at her, "yes, I guess so... I wanted to make sure everyone got their breakfast."

"Then, Osman," his mother smiled to him, "you have shown me that you are responsible, honest, and don't give up, and I am very proud of you." Now she started to laugh, "you just had a little bit of bad luck! Come, we'll have dates with our bread for breakfast this morning, and tomorrow will go better!"

Now Osman finally relaxed, and felt proud of himself, too. He had had an adventure, after all! He hadn't given up, and he had learned a few things. And he smiled as he took a big bite of his dates and bread. He would try again tomorrow.

## **Honorable Mention: Bob Seger Dinner Party**

By: Anne Weshinskey

“Was Bob Seger ever popular in Europe?” I asked my Icelandic husband.

Ivar and I were driving from our home near Washington, D.C. to vacation in northern Michigan. The world had gotten too hot and crowded, and I longed for the cool, mild summers of my youth around the Great Lakes. Our friends and family were also tired of hurricanes and heat stroke. They bought in to my nostalgic sales pitch. We planned a trip ‘Up North’.

“Who is Bob Seger?” he responded.

It had been 3 ½ months since I was diagnosed with cancer and had to have all my reproductive organs removed—every last bit. Before the diagnosis, I was a still-fertile, vital 55-year-old woman. People commented often on my youthful appearance and demeanor, which I worried was just a polite way of calling me “immature”. Having opted out of breeding, I had never really paid much attention to the hormonal milestones in a woman’s life cycle. But here I was: Slammed into menopause without warning. For the past few weeks, I had begun feeling like a dried up empty leather handbag on the outside and a rage-filled irritable lunatic on the inside. Oh, and a lunatic who is also set on fire several times a day and all through the sleepless night. I felt sorry for myself and Ivar. I wanted to get us back to a cooler and more youthful state of mind.

I steered north from Saginaw Bay on M-65 while cueing up Bob Seger’s greatest hits. We cruised for a while until Ivar broke the silence near placid Vaughn Lake, whose view was partially blocked by billboards for the Glennie Sportsman’s Club.

“I wonder if women are allowed?” he murmured.

I was busy clicking “Play” while driving and didn’t know what he was talking about. When the track started up, I alternated between wheezing a horrible impression of Seger’s

raspy voice and bombarding Ivar with accounts of the occasions in which Seger had popped up in my former life as a young person. My sudden need to take a deep dive into the discography of an old dude I hadn't thought about in years bothered me. I couldn't control myself. Maybe if I could take my brain back to those days, it would magically undo the aging process. My teen years were the least enjoyable of my life, and it annoyed me that I was suddenly taking possession of those memories as if they were cherished treasures.

"I used to hang out at the carnival two blocks from my house in Chicago and 'goose' people. You know, pinch their butts. The carnival workers loooved to play this song on their rides. Once my friends and I were goosing people in the crowd, my dad walked by and I accidentally goosed my own father!" I babbled.

No response from Ivar as he gazed out the passenger side window into the sprawling green. The terrain was transitioning from flat plains dotted with deciduous trees to a more hilly landscape dominated by the sight and scent of piney evergreens. The 'Up North' of my youth entered my nasal passages.

"When we moved to Michigan his music was always part of the soundtrack, even though I was more into punk and new wave . . ." I trailed off, distracted by the melody currently playing.

*"Still the same . . . everything is still the same . . ."*

Ivar peeled open a bag of Jamaican Jerk-flavored chips. We had already eaten a full bag of the Prime Rib flavor an hour before, but why stop at one bag when the world was full of so many flavors? I continued blathering on with my mouth full of chips. He turned to look out the window again.

When "Like a Rock" erupted over the speakers, Ivar exclaimed, "Oh! I know this one!" He hummed alongside my explanation that he probably knew it from the Chevy commercials. I fell quiet when I realized that he wouldn't have heard these commercials

growing up in Iceland. We relaxed back into our own thoughts, letting that song play into the next, and on and on until the end of the playlist.

I kept my nostalgia to myself as I steered the car past an exit for a road that would have taken us west to Houghton Lake. I missed the turnoff, but that was fine. It was there, as a teenager, that I went cross-country skiing with a group of friends who disappointed me by drinking too much and hooking up with each other in the cabin, while I remained sober and alone.

Ivar slept the entire length of M-32 heading through the middle of 'the Mitten' near Gaylord. "Against the Wind" played as I edged by a sign announcing "Charlevoix 45mi". My mind steered back to the memory of my childhood friend, Beth, being swept off the Charlevoix pier by a rogue wave. The surge of water had knocked her down and dragged her a hundred feet down the dock towards the jagged rocks near the shoreline. In this terrifying moment, the wave had pulled her t-shirt and bikini over her head, revealing high, round boobs with hard brown nipples. The rest of our gang clutched the railing of the pier to avoid being washed away. When the wave subsided we rushed to her aid. Beth seemed unharmed, so we pointed out the boys standing on the shore who had witnessed her topless. We thought she would be horrified. Instead, she surprised us with an earnest "Did they look big?"

I am still not entirely sure what I had hoped to feel by reminiscing about this. Perhaps I wanted to take ownership of my roots in this gorgeous place, or maybe I was just thinking of the few happy moments I experienced during my teenage years. Neither of those explanations satisfied me. These memories didn't jibe with the image I presently held of myself, or that I held then. I suppose I never anticipated making it to menopause, much less having to consider my self-image after it.

At the junction to M-131 North, I turned right to head toward Petoskey, where my father's business partner once owned a summer home. My parents often took me and my siblings up there, even though they were embarrassed by my green mohawk and

weird clothes. Still, I always felt the discomfort of receiving negative attention beat being overlooked. A feeling that has resurfaced in middle age.

\* \* \*

After skirting around Little Traverse Bay and pushing even further north, we were almost to Cross Village. I turned off Bob Seger and pulled onto a gravel road to text my sister and friends. My sister found a cute, red Swedish-style three-bedroom cottage a five-minute walk from the beach. Our friends had never experienced a freshwater body masquerading as an ocean, and I was looking forward to being the one to introduce them to it. And, maybe, I was seeking affirmation that my memories were valid. As if, somehow, the fact that I was raised around such natural wonders made me a better person. I felt ashamed that I needed this flimsy reinforcement, but my post-cancer mental state demanded it.

Ivar and I finally pulled up to the cottage as the last arrivals. We were greeted by my sister and her husband, my 18-year-old nephew, Abe, his best friend, Eva, and her parents Courtney and Mike. As we entered the sun porch, already strewn with drying beach towels and bathing suits, we overheard our travel companions having their own conversation about Bob Seger.

“Who are musicians from Michigan?” Mike asked.

“Stevie Wonder?” Courtney guessed aloud.

Eva—in true Gen Z form—suggested we check the internet. The first musician to pop up was none other than Bob Seger, followed by Eminem, Kid Rock, Madonna, Stevie Wonder, Iggy Pop, and the entire pantheon of Motown. Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin, anyone? George Clinton, MC5, Grand Funk Railroad, and about a million other names. While we were perusing the list, my sister asked what we should make for dinner.

“What would Bob Seger Do?” Abe suggested.

“Yeah! Let’s have a Bob Seger Dinner Party, I said. “Look up all his favorite foods and make them!”

We all tried searching for Bob Seger's favorite foods but to no avail. It seems that the internet is uninterested in the likes and dislikes of forgotten relics. We switched focus to Stevie Wonder's favorite foods and found that his tastes were apparently important enough to be noted. So vegan soul food it was. And with that, I thought we had laid to rest our conversations about Bob Seger.

After dinner, we took in a vibrant sunset over the lake, then ambled back to watch the Christopher Reeve piece of cheese, "Somewhere in Time". The film takes place on Mackinaw Island. One of Michigan's iconic tourist attractions. I had never seen this nonsensical ode to time travel romance. As we draped ourselves over uncomfortable vacation rental furniture, we heckled the TV and passed around a bag of Michigan Cherry BBQ chips.

When this movie came out in 1980, I was an unromantic tomboyish 11-year-old. I would not have liked it, or liked the way Christopher Reeve's character stalks the object of his fevered obsession. His lopsided smile, as he stares for hours at the photo of Jane Seymour, is one of the most disturbing attempts at acting I've ever seen. But despite— or maybe because of—this kitsch factor, we watched through to the end. I pointed out onscreen memories: The inn where my cousin had worked during summers, the spot on the path where I survived a bike accident a couple of years back, and the Lake Huron beach where I skinny-dipped during Spring Break.

*"And the sweet summertime, summertime. . ."*

\* \* \*

On our last day Up North, Courtney nipped into the general store to buy a breakfast sandwich. She returned to the cabin, breathless and laughing. "You aren't going to believe this!"

As she entered the store she heard a gravelly voice blaring over the speaker system, "Ooooo! They looove to watch her strut! Oh! They do respect her, but . . ." Bob Seger singing



“Strut”. By now feeling almost local, she remarked to the weathered clerk, “You’re playing Bob Seger!”

“Yeah, everyone plays Bob Seger. He has a house around here, ya know?”

We couldn’t believe we hadn’t known this tidbit sooner when we could have scoured the area for a sighting. Hell, we could have invited him to his own dinner party! But it was too late for that. *Next time*. We reluctantly packed up and began the 12-hour drive back home.

*“We are older now, but still runnin’ . . . against the wind . . .”*

\* \* \*

At work a couple of days later, one of my coworkers asked how my trip had been. While I was telling her how splendid it was and how much I wished I could spend more time up there, another colleague interjected that she was going to Michigan in a couple of weeks for her nephew’s wedding. I asked where the wedding would be and she answered, “I’m not sure, but Bob Seger is going.” *What the?* I hadn’t mentioned Bob to her, but here he was, looping back around and blowing my mind.

“Yeah. The father of the bride was a roadie for him. Her mother talks about how the first time she met the guy he asked her if her boobs were real.”

“Are they?” I asked

“No. They’re fake. But that’s a scummy thing to ask.”

I agreed. One thing that instant menopause has provoked in me is a blinding irritation for almost everything anyone says. I was enraged by this intrusion into the fond reminiscence of my past. I wanted to believe Bob Seger was the romantic philosophizer his lyrics portrayed him to be. But nope. He’s exactly what you would expect from a man of that place and time. Another symptom of menopause is an intense need to organize my surroundings and control the things I can. My body wants to do its own thing. My car, air conditioner, career, and country all reserve the right to break down around me at

their convenience. Clearly, I don't have control over anything in my life. But I can get rid of clutter. I can throw away crap that is not serving me. After I returned home from Michigan, I began going through shelves and drawers in my house, violently expunging everything that had been holding me back. Broken jewelry and clothes that hadn't seen the light of day in years, coins from countries I knew I would never visit again, unfinished art projects. I have nostalgia for places, but definitely not for things. Everything flew from my hands into a rapidly filling garbage bag.

"Wait. What's this?" Two stacks of CDs were hidden on a low shelf in my studio. Atop them sat a glittering blue sticker of the outline of the Great Lakes. Moving the sticker aside, I pulled out the CDs. They all appeared to be unused, and I didn't recall where they came from or when I acquired them. I flicked through until some writing in black Sharpie caught my eye. "Bob Seger: Stranger in Town". I separated this disk from the stack and held it, with the sticker, between my thumb and forefinger. I stared, astonished. Gradually it dawned on me, clear as the waters of Lake Michigan, that Nostalgia is an aching lonely place. Bygone selves float on the waters of the past, and no amount of reminiscence can coax its waves to present shores.

*.... woke last night to the sound of thunder*

*How far off? I sat and wondered*

*Started humming a song from nineteen sixty-two*

*Ain't it funny how the night moves?*

*When you just don't seem to have as much to lose?*

*Strange how the night moves*

*With autumn closing in . . .*

—"Night Moves" by Bob Seger

## Honorable Mention: The Color of Hope

By: Jennifer Christiansen, Ed.S.

“Nevermore, daughter. Nevermore. He is nameless here forevermore.”

And with that the closing of my chamber door, a dull thud followed by the clanking of familiar keys.

One, a dagger, pierced the hole and twisted. Snap. Like a horned beetle flickering its wings and lurching into mechanical flight.

Then darkness, nothing more.

And in the silence, in defiance, the forbidden utterance spoken as my parched lips trembled out the trochee. “Eddie.”

§

Was chance or circumstance cause for his entry into my chalky world, a brand that splashed everything into a blaze of orange and red?

I never knew. How many events slipped into place, like the pieces of a dissected puzzle that a child plays with, to guide him into my delirious embrace? What strange continents slid and rumbled over what painted Ocean to unite us two in Charleston above the graves of the city's founders?

He told me once during one of our clandestine meetings in the churchyard, amongst the ivy-tangled tombs, about his parent’s death and the difficulties he had with his foster father. Was he seeking love, a hummingbird pursuing nectar, as he dwelt alone in a realm of pastels, haunted by misfortune and poverty, gambling and drink?

Did the inauspicious beginnings of his writing career – overlooked lines of an uncut stone - propel him to me by way of the Artillery? O, the love of beauty and terror of its loss. Who were the lost flowers and what were the sunshine hours that vanished before me?

Or was it the simple allure of seashells, discovered during his year of service on Sullivan's Island, beyond the Charleston barrier? Salty hours rapt in Atlantic echoes that

murmur on in chambers of mother-of-pearl. This, perchance, steered him to my father. The old man a conchologist, the soldier a seeker on the shore.

In my father's library, I sat cross-legged on the floor, my back to the door. The room was large and high-ceilinged with wide windows overlooking the covered piazza. A fire was blazing in the hearth. A rare and welcome luxury. The distant sound of raindrops drummed the wood shake roof, a background lullaby that I had known since my earliest recollections.

Perhaps I may have heard his entrance, soft and gentle though his customary steps were, if I had not been engrossed in the tome of poems lying open in my lap. I read the words aloud as verse is best enjoyed. Indeed, my own voice seemed one with the poet's printed thoughts.

*"As from the darkening gloom a silver dove, Upsoars, and darts into the eastern light..."*

I saw her fly, the spirit gliding towards the eternal morning, over Biblical clouds and olive groves, interspersed with the tulip trees of the Southern interior. The poem put words to a state of mind I had long recognized, a longing for the eternal.

Alas, my reverie was shattered by a sudden response. A stranger's voice wafting through the air like mist, drowning the channels of my ears. Pulsating, vibrating my eardrums with its melodic waves. The known words reverberated within me, to the score of a music never heard before.

*"On pinions that nought moves but pure delight, So fled thy soul into the realms above."*

He understood. Had always understood and will understand forevermore.

The face that greeted me when I turned was not noble but fine and well gifted with intellectual beauty. Keen-visaged with dark complexion and wandering locks of hair. The eyes like sunken wells seemed to reflect uncharted constellations circling in the depths of Heaven. His appearance was by no means ordinary but fit to rivet attention in any crowd.

"Keats, a favorite of mine," he said, a small smile with a ghost of apology on his mustached lip.

A silent nod was all I mustered, my tongue mimicking those of the ceramic figurines crowding the surrounding shelves.

"I hope I did not frighten you. I am Eddie Perry, a friend of Mr. Ravenel. He suggested that I wait for him here."

His form, albeit slight, was enhanced by his bearing and the proud manner in which he held his head. His uniform was always the last detail I noticed, a patina of navy blue and gold gilt over something much darker and more possessing. It was his eyes that held me captive.

"Do you..." I said, nodding down to the pages in my lap. "Do you think it's like that? Death...I mean?"

"Are you inquiring if I believe in Heaven?" he said, laughing and turning to rub his hands above the fire.

"Yes, and beautiful, haloed angels greeting us there? Do we retain our identities when life is lost?"

"I could not imagine a higher pleasure than living in eternity," he said, "but to be frank, Miss...."

"Ravenel. Anna."

"My daughter," Mr. Ravenel said, his booming voice breaking the spell as he burst into the room with a tray of sweet tea and sliced lemons.

With no further ado, my father hastily dismissed me so the men could talk about gastropods, bivalves, and scarabaei.

Before I closed the door behind me, I met his gaze once more. I observed the admiration I inspired in his assailing eyes – and O! I absorbed it and coddled it until I was again in their focus.

Little did my father know at the time, Eddie and I were fated for *a love that was more than love*.

## §

Weeks later, I lay in bed waiting for all house sounds to cease, eagerness pulsing through my veins like tiny, biting ants, feeding on the sugary sap of hope that my skin and soul exuded. My cue that life would begin again, how I hungered for his embrace.

Cloaked in a warm outer garment over my nightclothes, I stole through the house and outside as silent as the overgrown graves that marked our usual meeting place. My newest poem folded and tucked away in a pocket.

His intelligence was tremendous, and his talent with words far-reaching. I surrendered myself to his tutelage, became his pupil, with full abandon, his prophetess, his stirring muse.

I remember the hiding spot for the beeswax candle I stowed for our mid-night rendezvous, although it was not necessary on this occasion.

The stars, in their orbits, glowed pale through the light of a full winter's moon. There was still a hint of lingering smoke in the air from extinguished fireplaces of the houses I passed. I went slow, savoring the warmth of the night, the sweet scent of magnolia. I drew out the moment of our meeting, expectant, like a worshipper approaching an altar with trepidation.

After reaching our secret garden, I hurried along the narrow path, navigating the shadowed thicket of palm trees, magnolias, and Spanish moss enriched by centuries of death. The lantern beside him was no competition, as he was the radiant heat I sought. He stood, and I poured into his arms, flushed and giddy.

Enveloping me close to his body, he crushed his lips into my hair, breathing me in. "My darling...my life..."

Pulling away a bit, his gaze dropped to my face where he peered right through my pale skin and to the substance underneath. He presented me with a camellia flower, rosy and radiant, the color of hope. I plucked it from his fingers.

We sank to the ground and began to speak at the same time, each of us wanting to fill in the days that had passed since the last time we had held one another and catch up on every trivial detail that had occurred since we had parted.

We longed to inhabit the same soul, the same patch of ground. I envied the couples whose names we read on the gray stones beside faded angels, buried on top of one another.

He was proud to announce that, as an artificer, he had already passed through the practical part of the highest section of the Artillery arm. He was rising through the ranks.

I looked down in the moonlight and stared at our clasped palms in the grass, my fragile bones embedded in his like a fossil in a rock, and a portent of grief came upon me.

“What will I do when you have gone?”

“Let us not speak of that day until it comes.”

Hating to witness my worry, Eddie began to spin a witty yarn about an out of favor officer who was well known to report cadets for minor offenses. If only we had known that an amusing tale would herald the beginning of the end.

It was my laugh, a brazen, golden bell ringing its delight, which my father followed through the wrought-iron graveyard gates that fateful night.

We scrambled to our feet at his voice, between a whisper and a shout, deep and rumbling. An earthquake cracking the ground, capable of toppling headstones and bringing the dead up from underneath us.

“This is unacceptable. Anna, come with me. Now.”

“Sir, I beg of you. I love your daughter,” Eddie began. “It’s my intention to...”

“This shall not be entertained. By God, a soldier,” my father said, his face twisted into an ugly sneer. “We have other plans for our Anna, here in Charleston.”

Panic and guilt rose in my body, suffocating the birth of any of words. Father’s fingers prodded into the delicate flesh of my upper arm, as he dragged me away from my Eddie. He turned around once more with a final warning. “Stay away from my family.”

With my free fingers, I reached into my pocket and withdrew my words. I touched my lips to the letter once before allowing it to flutter to the ground like a fading spirit.

*He must know  
His breath on my neck,  
Sets my dear soul ablaze  
And when his lips crash into mine,  
I hear the ocean’s waves.  
He must know  
His fingers were made,  
To graze against my skin  
And when he smiled against my mouth,*

*I knew I'd let him in.*

§

Without delay, my father, possessing substantial influence in town, arranged for my Eddie to be transferred out of Fort Moultrie to Baltimore. I hatched a plan to run away from my stifling childhood home to begin life anew with my love, but somehow my father found out about my scheme. He met me at the dock where I stood gazing out at the water, the pathway to my life, the artery that fueled my heart. The laughter of gulls above mocked my miasma of hope.

Before I could board the ship, he snatched my arm – firmly but gentler this time to avoid a scene in the waterfront hive of activity- and ordered his driver to take my travel bag to his carriage.

“You are coming with me, little girl,” he said.

“But I’m not a little girl anymore,” I said, unsuccessful in my attempt to regain ownership of my arm.

“You are fourteen years old, and I am your father. Your guardian. And that’s what I intend to do...guard you. Protect you from that *twenty-two-year-old* soldier.”

“O, I know all about how you *guard* me...I know it was you who sent those ruffians to hurt my Eddie. Will you make us Abelard and Heloise?”

“Anna dear,” he said, ignoring my insinuations. “You are already spoken for by someone suitable. As you very well know.”

“I will NEVER marry anyone but my Eddie.”

And that evening, my father locked me in my room.

§

I was drawn to the thought of Eddie as birds are drawn to the sky. But, no! No sky for me. No sunshine. Even though my father’s sentence was only to last a few months, each second marked by the ticking clock drove me insane. I screeched myself hoarse and hammered on the door until my hands bled. Unheeded.

“He said to cease with your tantrums. They will do no good,” my nanny, Rebecca, said to me, bringing in a tray of food.



Famished, my stomach roiled at the smell of the gumbo and crusty bread she placed in front of me. But I refused all sustenance in my effort to make my father release me. My hunger strike gave me a small morsel of satisfaction. At least I could control something, even if this extended only to what I did and did not accept into my body. Surely the idea of his little girl gradually killing herself would trouble him with feelings of shame and guilt. But he did not believe me capable, even when dizziness drove me to bed.

He did not give me credit for my strength, and the strength of the unbreakable bonds of love. My anger consumed me, and I wrapped myself in humid sheets when I shivered, imagining they were Eddie's arms encompassing my withering body.

Even though my father did not take my stunt seriously, when I raged with fever and my mind slumped with fatigue and confusion the mood became more somber.

Was it the abuse I inflicted on myself, the collateral of a shattered heart, or the bite of an imported winged fiend now suffering the same sequester as me?

Regardless of the cause, I only knew that, whether Heaven is true, there is indeed a Hell. I dwelt there, condemned, imprisoned without parole, pining away, as I feverishly uttered those two pathetic and glorious syllables, "Eddie."

About the time when I could stand no more, Rebecca, in a moment of kindness, spoke to me in a whisper as she wiped my brow with a damp cloth. The draperies were closed tightly over the windows since my eyes were tortured now by even a dim light.

"You should know, sweet Anna. He came back for you. He heard about your suffering, and he came for you."

Whether it was the hallucination of a diseased mind or not, the words sparked inside me, catching flame in the dry tinder beneath the ugliness of the hovering pall. "Eddie."

"Yes, darling girl, but shhhh..." The coolness of her hand briefly touched the yellowed inferno of my cheek. "But it's no matter now."

"Eddie? Is my Eddie here for me?" My eyes popped wide open, drinking in the darkness that might somehow contain his shadow.

"He is here no longer. Your father...he blamed Mr. Perry for this entire affair."

During the time my fragile spirit clung to the world, I did not know he revealed his lies to my father. He, my very own heart, was not twenty-two but only eighteen. It did not make difference to my father – no! any more than when he claimed not to be Edward Perry but Edgar Allan Poe.

I no longer fear death, dearest love, and I know I cannot escape it. I only long for it to release my soul from this torment, these confines, so I can soar towards you. Do not be afraid, darling. We will soon be together. I will again be your beautiful Anna, and we will breathe freely the air of Heaven. They came for my blood, a last resort, but I knew that very night would be my last.

§

All that was left of me was the ghost of a memory and rotting flesh in an unmarked grave. Even after the last breath left my body and dissipated, my father's hatred of my Eddie endured. He had six plots dug up, so Eddie could not be sure which held the remains of his beloved's bones. But our love was stronger still, as he continues his visits and remembers our special place where he sits alone weeping. Deep in the earth his love is lying, and he will not say farewell.

My love still wanders through the garden of graves, and while he may not see, there's an ethereal lady in white, wearing a blossom the color of hope, searching for the poet of her heart.

And in his anguished soul, he can feel me. It is I, dearest Eddie, your beloved Annabel Lee, who whispers in your poems of strange recollections. The salt on the cracking skin. The voices of never-settling gulls.

***Annabel Lee***

*It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.*

*I was a child and she was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love—  
I and my Annabel Lee—  
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven  
Coveted her and me.*

*And this was the reason that, long ago,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling  
My beautiful Annabel Lee;  
So that her highborn kinsmen came  
And bore her away from me,  
To shut her up in a sepulchre  
In this kingdom by the sea.*

*The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,  
Went envying her and me—  
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,  
In this kingdom by the sea)  
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.*

*But our love it was stronger by far than the love  
Of those who were older than we—  
Of many far wiser than we—  
And neither the angels in Heaven above  
Nor the demons down under the sea  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul*

*Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;*

*For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams*

*Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;*

*And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes*

*Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;*

*And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side*

*Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,*

*In her sepulchre there by the sea—*

*In her tomb by the sounding sea.*

- Edgar Allan Poe

## **Honorable Mention: Exposure**

By: Carla Cale

After the assault of background checks and the battery of blood tests, after the required legal consultation where I had to outline a living will (signed and notarized) I still don't feel connected to my life.

I showed up half an hour early to my appointment, because I've honestly got nothing else to look forward to.

I've only just finished the remaining paperwork (mostly waivers and consent forms) when an attendant calls my name to take me back to the examination room. They are mercifully silent. They leave me in the room, looking at my paperwork, shouting, "Virge!"

The door *ka-chunks* closed. The sound of finality.

After a few minutes, there is a light knock. I never know what to do in these situations. My whole life, I've felt absent. An observer. But if there's any time to be a participant, it's now.

I call out, "Come in!"

And he does. Late forties, I would say, white lab coat, fashionable spectacles, extremely animated hands. He uses one of them to shake one of mine.

"I'm Doctor Virgil! It's so nice to meet you. How are we doing today?" He doesn't wait for my response, continues in a facetious tone. "Willing to sign our lives away for one hour of godliness, so, we're doing great, huh?"

With another wave of his hand, he reverts to clinical sincerity. "Paperwork is all in order, though, so we're getting what we want, at least."

He's doing the usual doctor-schlock routine as he continues speaking: temperature, ears, nose, eyes. "I am legally required to tell you that the procedure you're about to undergo is risky. There is an 82% chance that after your hour-long upgrade is over, you'll experience total organ failure, coma, brain death, you get the picture. And even if none of those things happen within the first three days, which is usually when they do, we won't really know what the effects are long-term. We're talking cancer, mood disorders, diabetes, issues with the immune system. We might not know until ten years from now, or twenty or thirty, how this will shake out, you understand?"

"I do."

"Your vitals are looking great. Did you read the whole rundown of the procedure, everything? Do you understand that once you've had this procedure, there's still at least an 82% chance you won't make it past three days, even if you choose not to activate your upgrade?"

"Yes."

"Excellent," he says, washing his hands in the little sink and flicking them dry instead of using a towel. "I'll pass you off to Seon and Pluto, then. I hope you enjoy your hour of being a superhero. Best of luck."

He gives a little salute and leaves.

Seon and Pluto are calibrating the machine, a sort of torture chair with a dome that fits over my head, supposedly to target a specific part of my brain with a type of radiation that will grant me a superpower of my choice for one hour.

Seon is chatty, with an easy smile, dimple on one side—the kind of guy you’d love for fifteen minutes before he dies violently in a horror movie, the kind of scene the writers didn’t realize would gain a cult following. ‘*Justice for Seon!*’

Pluto has a habit of pursing their lips, they are incredibly serious. As they adjust the hardware around me, I find that even though Pluto isn’t very likable, I trust them more to do their job correctly than I do Seon.

“It’s wild what you’re about to do!” Seon exclaims softly, maneuvering his body around mine to adjust a screw in the helmet. “Superhero for an hour, even if it means you die? That’s so crazy, it’s so cool. And I saw you chose a passive one! Most of the people who sign up for this want to like, fly or be super strong. Are you gonna use your power to do some kinda sneaky spy shit?”

“Seon!” Pluto barks at him, “You know we aren’t allowed to ask questions like that; the patients all sign the agreement—”

“Yeah, yeah, no vigilante justice or crimes against the state.” Seon, unbelievably, starts sing-songing and rotating his hips from side to side, literally twerking. “No crimes that can be prosecuted in your jurisdiction, no talking about it, even if you say it’s FICTION!”

“I hate your Chappell Roan impression,” Pluto says.

Seon reaches for them, exclamatory. “DANCE with me, Plutes!” Pluto shakes their head at him, failing to hide a little smile.

This is why I signed the waivers. I’ve observed this all my life; love, happiness, friendship. I never really felt like I was a part of it. I even felt that simply watching tainted it somehow, as if my silent appreciation diluted the joy of people around me. Perceiving of me was burdensome to others, being perceived was burdensome to me. I would like to love in silence, unobserved.

“Don’t listen to him,” Pluto says through their grin. “He’s a nonsense-man.”

"I'm the nonsense man!" Seon holds one ear and sings this like he's Mariah Carey, and then adds in a monotone, "Pluto is racist, though."

"India is also in Asia, Seon. We are both ASIAN. I'm not being racist when I'm mean to you, I'm mean to you because you're bad at your job."

"And also geography, apparently!"

The way he tosses one arm up over his head dismissively, I can't help myself, I laugh.

It goes on in this way for a time, the lights in the room are oppressive, the dome around my head is cold and claustrophobic, but they continue their banter as they calibrate the hardware, and I feel somehow warm, somehow safe.

I think about how there are all different kinds of people, I think about how there are all different kinds of love. I think about how love is all that really matters.

"Alright, we've got you all set up," Pluto tells me. "We just have to fine-tune your objective."

"Your wish is our command!" Seon adds, cheeky, and Pluto elbows him in the shoulder. I think, the chances I will die could be one hundred and ten percent, and I would still take this risk. Being a set dressing in the two-person play that is Seon and Pluto only serves to remind me of the vitality there is in the world, and how I've never been able to do more than be aware and appreciative of its existence.

Pluto and Seon retreat behind a set of computer screens a few feet away. Pluto begins entering data, Seon reviews a different monitor.

"So, you want to be invisible, yeah?" he asks me, his eyes narrowed, focused on whatever he's reading. In a low voice, he adds, "That's so fucking cool."

"No," I tell him, "I want to be more than invisible. I want to be incorporeal. I want to be able to walk through walls."

"But you still want to be able to interact, right? You want to be perceived, in some way, I would assume, I mean?" He's squinting up into the monitor and typing so quickly; work mode. Pluto was definitely kidding when they said he was bad at his job.

"No. I don't want to be perceived."

The cadence of his typing intensifies. “So you want Ghost! We’ve never had a Ghost! That’s so cool. I personally think Ghost is the most slept-on superpower. You can be anywhere and listen in, you can influence–”

“Seon!” Pluto grasps him by his upper arm, “We can’t do Ghost, remember? There’s no way to pick and choose; if you want to phase through matter at will, you can ONLY phase through matter at will. You can’t also influence matter at will.”

Seon gives Pluto a blank, uncomprehending stare.

Pluto rolls their eyes and synopsis. “Unlike you, superpowers don’t go both ways.” Seon half-smiles, works his jaw over this, pats Pluto on the thigh, and addresses me. “If you’re just invisible, you can’t walk through walls buuut you can still open doors, you can still move shit around and be like, perceived, temperature and weight-wise, that’s probably, uh, better, right?”

“I don’t need to be perceived or to interact. It’s ‘uh, better’ if I don’t. It’s actually probably even more ‘uh, better’ if I can’t.”

Seon sticks his tongue out at me a little and we share a tiny smile. Love in the time of superhero cholera.

“Are you sure?” Pluto asks, their seriousness a sledgehammer to our silliness. “You won’t be able to communicate with anyone at all, in any way, and if you ... well if the risks are fully realized, you won’t be corporeal again before you experience the side effects. Fuck. We haven’t ever done a passive power like this before, so...” They strike a few keys, “We can’t even be sure if it will wear off after an hour. You’re removing yourself with this, not augmenting yourself.”

“Don’t listen to Pluto, they’re allergic to creativity.”

“No, I’m serious. All previous tests involve the subject ‘relaxing’ into their pre-upgraded state. We have no data on a subject ‘regenerating’ into it,” They look directly at me. “This might be permanent, do you understand? There’s every chance you’ll be completely alone at the end.”

“You’ll be a memory;” Seon says, in awe. “You’ll be an echo.”

“I understand,” I say, and the way that they look at each other, I add in order to ease them, “It’s not unethical. I signed all the paperwork, it’s what I want.”



“Okay, so now I really have to know what you’re planning to do with this!” Seon groans.

“Gotta be some superhero saving the world type shit, right? To be completely incorporeal and then just die—comic book kinda plot twist, it’s gotta be. Tell me!”

Pluto digs their elbow into Seon’s ribs this time.

“You can’t ask them these kinds of questions.”

“Well, Pluto darling, what CAN I ask them?”

Pluto regards me.

“You can ask them if they’re ready.”

There’s a bead of silence that grows like water, and in it I feel such appreciation for them. For love.

“Are you ready?” Seon asks, and seriousness looks deadly coming from him.

“Yes.”

They count down from three together, and there’s such a bright light. Meteors hit my head. I can hear species going extinct. I believe that I could have saved them, if I had tried a little harder.

“Hey,”

“Seon?”

“Yeah. I wanted to see you before I leave.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Babe, this place is fucked. You know you’re going to die if you do this, right? Virge is going to let you die.”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay, but for real, are you Batman or something?”

I can’t help it, I laugh a little, “No, Seon.”

When I tell Seon what I’m planning to do, he doesn’t react the way I assumed he would. He looks at me for a long time. Then, he kisses me very gently on my mouth. He is warm. He plants his cheek against mine, leaning over me in the recovery bed, and he murmurs into my ear, “Good luck. It was so nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure was all mine.”

“So, this is how the bracelet works,” Pluto tells me, lifting my wrist to my face so I can see what they mean. “See, it’s like a calculator watch. When you’re ready, hold this button on the side down until the screen flashes, and then you put the last four numbers of your social security number in. There’ll be a thirty second delay, that’s the device irradiating you the last little bit, and it will reset the face to the one hour countdown.”

“Where’s Seon?”

“Fuck Seon. You’ve got 24 hours to use this bracelet, probably less, honestly. You remember that the risks are essentially the same whether or not you use your augmentation, right? You don’t have to use it. Do you remember that?”

“Yes.”

Pluto seems relieved at this, but when I continue, that relief curdles into sadness.

“When I do ... will I really be incorporeal?”

“You will, but...” Pluto shifts, their body language becoming much more personal. They are breaching protocol. “You’re not coming back from this, if you activate that watch. You’ll be incorporeal indefinitely, and based on how you’re doing now, I can say with confidence that after an hour you’ll...” They swallow the word ‘die’ and continue. “You’ll be completely alone, there will be no possibility of a medical intervention.”

I can tell they feel they have done something unforgivable to me, that they wish they could undo it. I reach for their forearm and give it a little squeeze.

“I won’t be alone. It’s okay.”

“Well,” Pluto says, pursing their lips. They seem to have made the decision to remain as detached as they can, “Good luck, then. It was so nice meeting you.”

“Thank you, Pluto. It was nice to meet you, too.”

As soon as I get back to my hotel room, I have a shower, holding my one arm out of the water because I never asked if this watch is waterproof and I don’t want to risk it. I wash my hair, scrub and exfoliate and shave, floss and brush my teeth. If I die tonight, I want to die feeling my best. I change into my fluffiest pajama pants and comfiest t-shirt, and I summon an uber. On the ride across town, Chappell Roan is playing on the radio.

This is what I’ve signed my life away for.

The apartment building is tall and nondescript. Some beige monstrosity, affordable enough to live here that there's tires missing from cars in the lot, affordable enough that someone could easily hide in their unit if they paid their rent in cash. I thank my uber driver, a very kind man who offers to wait until I'm safely inside, but I tell him I'm going to have a cigarette and I send him off. I've left my wallet in the backseat of his car; there'll be nobody to return those twenties to, and I hope he has a nice life.

I do smoke my cigarette though, and while I do, I hold the button on the side of my watch down. The screen flashes, I punch in the last four digits of my social security number, fully realizing how stupid this is. As I'm stubbing my smoke out on the side of this building, the display lights up: 60:00

Up I go; through the open atrium, idiot breezeway of this shitty apartment building, up four flights of stairs, down the hall to an apartment labeled 4C. And, as promised, I phase through the door, incorporeal, unperceived.

I move through the galley kitchen into the living room.

The Love is on the sofa looking at his phone. I say his name. He doesn't seem to hear me.

I settle on the L-shaped sofa across from him. He stops scrolling and looks up, placing his phone on the coffee table. For one horrifying second, I think that I actually did go Ghost, but then I watch his hands take up the Xbox controller.

"Baby? Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

I reach for those pretty hands, but it's as if through an infinite tunnel, our atoms repelling each other, never to meet again.

I knew it would be this way for the rest of my life, with or without the procedure. I am incorporeal now, but haven't I always been?

This is what I wanted.

"If there's anything I'd want to do for one more hour," I murmur, "it would be watching television with you."

I check my watch. I've got 58 minutes left.

He has chosen a show and he extends himself across the cushions as if to prepare for sleep. I ponder the shape of his body, the glimmer of bare skin revealed where his shirt rides up above the waistband of his pajama pants. I think of touching him.

I think of Doctor Virgil shaking my hand and of Pluto elbowing Seon. Seon giving me one last kiss. Pluto allowing me to comfort them with one final act of physical reassurance.

All the ways we touch each other in this life. All of the love there is to experience.

I am incorporeal and I cannot touch The Love.

But I've felt this way for my entire life.

He reaches for his phone again, drowsing now, swiping it off of the coffee table, making a phone call.

From the bedroom—

Our bedroom—

My phone is ringing. Chappell Roan. Our song; the ringtone I'd assigned to him.

The Love is concerned, gets up off of our sofa and moves toward the sound. Our cat weaves between his legs, but he seems not to notice.

I don't have to phase through a wall; I watch him from the doorway.

He yanks open the drawer in the bedside table on my side of our bed, puts his hand in, withdraws my phone.

Whatever he is feeling now—anger, panic, confusion—it is a bargain. I bought it for a song.

I've lived my whole life unable to feel the warmth of love or touch, that's how depression works. You watch The Love. You appreciate The Love. But you cannot feel it, yourself. You live in a cocoon, you live covered by a cuticle so thick that you go untouched, forever.

There is no hand, not even the hand of The Love, that can clear the murky cataract covering your heart.

I thought it would be less cruel to disappear than it would be to expire in our bed, have him find me buried under a sadness he could not conquer for me. I was always a burden, and always aware of it.

In this way, I am finally weightless.

I go to The Love and I tell him, "I love you."

The way he lifts his eyes to mine, I imagine he might have heard me.

## **Honorable Mention: Hello Friends**

By: Oliya Zamaray

Olya loved her little life. She loved her family, her teacher, and her friends. Her whole world was contained in a peaceful Ukrainian village. Around her brick cottage, the birches swayed in the breeze and their leaves danced in the sunlight. Outside her village, groves of fir trees stood like gentle guardians. Beyond the firs, open land stretched as far as she could see. On summer afternoons, Olya walked along wide fields of sunflowers. She watched as thousands of bright yellow crowns reached for the sun. A clear, blue sky stretched generously overhead. "Hello, friends," she said, as she greeted the birches, the fir trees, the sunflowers, and the sky.

Sweet, wild raspberries grew abundant in her village and in the groves beyond. They tasted best when warmed by the sun. "Thank you, friends," she said, as she ate handfuls of fruit from the raspberry bushes and rested in the shade of the birch trees. Sometimes, she made flower wreaths and released them in the clear, cool river that flowed past her village. Olya was happy and safe among her beloved friends.

One day, everything changed. Her family had to move far, far away in search of a better life. "How could anything be better than this life? What will happen to my friends?" Olya wondered. Olya's mother tried to comfort her.

"Do you remember what your sunflowers do as the sun travels across the sky?"

"Yes," Olya replied. "They turn toward it, tracing the sun's path in the sky."

“Well, do you know what they do on a cloudy day?”

Olya thought, “I’m not sure.”

“Some people say, the sunflowers stand tall and wait for the sun to return.

Others say they turn toward each other,” her mother smiled. “Good advice either way, don’t you think?” Olya lifted her gaze and looked into her mother’s thoughtful eyes. She tried to stand a little taller. But, inside, she felt uncertain and afraid.

In her new life far, far away, a teacher with a kind face welcomed Olya to her classroom and introduced her to rows of children with curious eyes. They tried to speak to her. But Olya did not speak their language yet and had few words for them. She felt alone, except when she drew pictures of her old friends.

With a sharp, black pencil Olya drew the long lines of a birch tree, shading its bark here and there. She took a green pencil and drew many, many delicate leaves. She found she could not get them to dance on the page. But when she closed her eyes, the birch trees in her mind swayed and their leaves danced in the sunlight. Beyond the birches, Olya added a cluster of fir trees. Using quick, sharp movements of her pencil, she drew pointed needles on each branch. Olya added wild raspberry bushes at the bottom of her page. She tried to remember their scent and sweetness.

The teacher with the kind face continued the lesson on the blackboard. Olya pulled a clean sheet of paper out of her folder and drew a dozen sturdy stems, broad green leaves, and bright yellow petals. The sunflowers reached toward the white space at the top of the page. She filled that white space with a blue wash of color, the clear blue sky of her childhood.

A boy seated next to Olya watched her draw. He looked closely at each drawing, thinking quietly to himself. During recess, he found Olya on a bench and introduced himself.

“I’m David. I like your drawings. Especially the sunflowers.”

“Thank you,” Olya replied quietly. “My home. My old friends.”

The boy looked puzzled, trying to understand. He could see she was trying to share something important.

“I know a place like that.” He said. “It’s a few hours away. My family goes every summer. I hope you get to see it some time.”

Olya also tried to understand. She liked his kind voice and smiled.

Over the coming months, she learned more words and grasped more of the things David said. She shared her drawings and he shared his language. When Olya shared her memories of Ukraine, her heart felt both full and broken. David listened and tried to understand.

On the last day of school, Olya’s parents packed their little car. They drove on a long and winding road over hills covered in thick pine forest. The map promised David’s destination was a few hours away. Soon, a blue and white sign greeted them, “Welcome to Maine.” In smaller letters, the sign seemed to whisper, “The way life should be.” Curious, thought Olya.

The landscape danced outside the window. Olya saw a grove of fir trees standing like gentle guardians and there, the little family car finally came to a stop. Olya stepped out, and her mother followed quietly behind. Birches swayed their greeting, stretching out their slender arms in a familiar welcome. Olya followed a narrow path between the birches. Wild raspberry bushes, heavy with fruit, grew along the curving path. She collected a handful of sun-ripened berries and continued walking.

Beyond the birches, the fir trees, and the raspberries, a clearing opened to a great body of water, as cool as her beloved river. The sun warmed her face and hands. The sky was the same, clear blue sky that stretched generously above her village.

Olya stood in that peaceful, unspoiled bit of Earth. She instantly loved this place, and the Ukrainian countryside it resembled.

“Hello, friends,” she said. “I’ve missed you.”

“Just wait until you see the sunflowers,” her mother said. They turned toward each other, and for the first time in a long time, Olya felt she was home. She couldn’t wait to tell her dear friend, David.

## **Honorable Mention: Just Another Day**

By: Donel Gillespie

The morning started like any other.

I heard Mark's alarm through my bedroom door, shut and locked the night before.

Right on schedule as usual. Everything would be fine, I told myself. Nothing to worry about it.

Mark would get up, shower, shave, get dressed, get his phone and wallet, then drive to his office. Just another day.

It became my mantra as I heard him move through his routine. *Just another day. Just another day.*

It was strange how clear everything seemed that morning. I could hear the shower starting, even the knob turning to get the temperature just right. I could feel the tension in my chest, tight like a wire pulled too thin. My fingers kept drumming against the side of the bed, a nervous rhythm that wouldn't stop. Every sound seemed amplified—a door creaking, a faucet turning, the floorboards groaning under his weight.

If one thing went wrong...everything could change. Today it couldn't.

Too many people were waiting for me, too many things to do. One mistake and everything would collapse. It took me nearly five years to get to this day.

Five years of slowly waking up to the reality that my fights with Mark weren't just normal arguments. They were laced with verbal and emotional abuse. Insults about my weight, my appearance, how I dressed, who I talked to at work, where I went during the



day. It took me years to realize that just because there wasn't any physical abuse, what I was enduring wasn't right. The verbal abuse was insidious, wearing me down until I couldn't take it anymore.

The weight of my decision pressed down on me, though, nearly shutting me down. Every thought screamed at me to turn back, to give in. Yet, there was also a voice, small but steady, that reminded me of the life I wanted for my kids—a life I was determined to give them.

I didn't have the energy to do this again. I'd put everything I had into this one plan – escape, without leaving my kids behind. Even when he mocked me for having no money, no place to go. I couldn't back out now.

I heard Mark walking through the kitchen. I kept my eyes closed, listening to every sound. I prayed nothing went wrong. If it did, everything I'd carefully planned over the past few months would fall apart.

I started to sweat. I moved my legs restlessly under the covers, prayed he wouldn't wake the kids. Today had to be just another normal day.

I heard him at my bedroom door. As usual, he tested the knob. I held my breath.

"Goodbye." His voice felt hollow, flat, even indifferent in my ears.

I didn't answer him as usual. I just needed him to leave.

My heart thumped in my ears and my breath grew ragged as the seconds ticked by, waiting for him to back up and go towards the front door.

*Don't move, don't make a sound*, I repeated silently. Because if I faltered, everything fell apart. This was my one shot. I couldn't afford to let fear stop me now.

Palms sweaty, I started to slowly ease myself off the bed as I listened to each one of his steps back up and turn away.

I counted to 20 as he gathered his keys, his work bag and his phone from the small desk near the front door. I envisioned him taking that last look at himself in the mirror to make sure he looked good. I'd seen this routine hundreds of times, nothing different. Just another day.

Once the door shut, and the lock turned, I leapt from the bed, quickly changing my clothes. I heard the muffled sound of Mark's car starting up, the engine growling to life. I could almost feel it vibrating in my bones, like a signal that everything was finally in motion. I wiped my sweaty palms against my jeans, the salt of my nervous sweat leaving a bitter taste on my tongue.

Refusing to let my nerves stop me, I glanced at the corner of my closet, remembering all the times curled up in a ball, talking in hushed tones to my friend. Or crying harshly, ugly, into a rolled up towel, hiding my pain from my children. They didn't deserve this life, but I had no choice now. It was time to protect them.

As I opened the door to my bedroom, I could hear my sons getting ready for the day.

*Please don't be sick. Please don't have a tummy ache. Please don't say you want to stay home today.* I silently repeated this in my head. Today had to be just another day, nothing different.

I quickly moved to help them get them ready for school. They scuttled down the hall to the kitchen to grab a quick bite as I nervously scanned the clock on the oven, the wall, even looked down to my watch, making sure we were still on time. I tried to breathe normally, keep my composure and not be hurried and alert the kids. I couldn't give anything away.

We loaded up the car with bookbags and coats, and I drove them to school, even parking in my usual spot to help walk them in. Today they wanted to walk in by themselves. I tried not to panic. *Yeah, that's okay. They've done this before. Not a biggie.*

“Take care kiddos. Have a great day. Learn lots, have fun, be kind.” Our usual morning goodbye.

The pang I felt in my chest as they waved goodbye was suffocating. Tears quickly came to my eyes as I wiped them away. Conscious the entire time of who was behind me, if anyone was following me.

The next hour was a blur. I mentally ticked off the list of what to pack – only the essentials for me and the children. I’d created the list weeks ago, walking through every room in the house. Beds, dressers, clothes, shoes, little things I knew if I left behind, I’d never see again.

Tears streamed down my face without warning as I rushed past my dogs, whimpering in their crates. I couldn’t take them with me. I hated myself for it, but there was nothing I could do.

As I rushed around, I thought back to the night I’d told Mark I had shingles, that I’d finally gone to the doctor to see about the ugly, burning, red rash on my face and the blinding, aching headaches.

Mark’s reply, cruel and dismissive, “Really? That’s bullshit. You got that from your boyfriend. You’ve been sleeping around. You stay away from me with your STD.”

The words burned, but they had to be left behind. Today, I had to move forward, even if it meant forgetting everything that had come before.

After packing, I scrambled to get my purse and keys and headed back to the school to pick up the kids. I had only taken them so that the office didn’t call to ask why they weren’t in attendance. I had to keep everything like a normal day.

As I drove, I kept an eye on the road, watching for any signs Mark was following me, or if I passed any of his friends or work colleagues who would mention they saw me.

After getting my sons in the car, I hurried to the hotel up the road. Where my friend Karen was already waiting for me.

Friends for the past few years, she had listened and offered to help me after a call one day when I realized I had a chance of leaving. She was the first person to encourage me to leave Mark. She was the one person who always believed I could do this, even when I couldn't. She was the first to show up, without question, without hesitation, even sending me money to go to see a lawyer. I owed her more than I could ever repay.

She arrived the night before as part of my plan to help watch the kids while I frantically loaded my belongings and furniture.

I walked into the building and went straight for the elevators.

"Why are we here, Mommy?", my youngest son asked, holding onto my hand. Not nervous or scared, just curious.

"I've got a surprise for you today. Mommy has to do some work, and I couldn't get the babysitter to come to the house, so we are going to meet her here", I answered with a hitch in my voice.

He accepted the answer and continued walking with me and his brother, also holding my hand.

As the elevator door opened, I scanned the room numbers on the wall and went to the right where my friend was already set up in her hotel room. Already had the tv going and some snacks ready.

I knocked and within seconds she opened the door.

"Thank you, thank you," I repeated over and over as I ushered the children in.

"Are you kidding? This is going to be a blast."

"Hey guys," I shakily replied to the kids, ushering them over to the tv and helping them sit on the floor. "This is my good friend Karen and she's going to help watch you today while I get things done at the house. All is good, and I'll get you later for lunch. Mickey D's sound good?"

Both replied yes, and started watching the cartoons, as I shuffled over to the door to leave.

“Truly, I thank you so much for this. And I appreciate the long drive.” I hugged her as I went through the door.

“Please don’t thank me. I’m glad I could help” Karen answered, a smile lit up on her face.

My heart ached as I watched them through the open door, Karen turning from me to sit with them and asking what they were watching. So trusting, so oblivious. I felt the guilt settle in like a lead weight in my chest. Did they deserve this life too? Had I done enough to shield them from the pain of what we were leaving? But I had no choice—today, I had to be strong for them.

I turned and rushed to get back to the elevators and back to my car to start the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of my plan.

I was scrambling to put some photos in a laundry basket when I heard the truck brakes. I looked up and there was the moving truck, doors being pushed up and moving guys walking to the front door. As I let them in, silently instructing them to be silent with my finger across my mouth, they asked, “Where?” I pointed them to the kids rooms on my left.

No one spoke. No one said anything. I was adamant about this when I arranged for the moving truck to come. I wanted this part to be fast, quick and efficient.

They moved silently to the first bedroom closest to them and began to dismantle the bed. I’d already stripped the sheets and comforter using it to hold clothes. They quickly took it apart and began loading the truck with bed parts, followed by the dresser and drawers, while I scrambled to get my last few books, a few photo albums from the study downstairs.

We worked silently, no one saying anything, and no sounds heard other than the scrapping of shoes on the wooden floor, the end of a bed hitting the floor as it was

released from its bolt, the grunt of someone as they picked up furniture and hefted towards the truck.

At one point, I looked out towards my car and the moving truck, and thought I spotted a couple walking a dog. I froze. My heart beat hard against my chest as I just stared and stared out my front window, trying to see through the copse of trees that were blocking my view. Slowly, achingly slowly, I realized it was just the branches moving with spring breeze. I shook all over, and silently screamed in my head to move, move.

Within 30 minutes everything was loaded. That was it. Everything I thought was vital and important for my survival and the kids loaded into an SUV and truck in 30 minutes. As the guys closed the truck door and latched the lock, I walked over to the dining room table, noting the newly bought flowers in the vase, and paused. I took a deep breath and pulled out the sheaf of papers I'd been holding onto for 3 months. My official separation papers.

Years and years of fighting, emotional withdraw, through several marriage counselors, individual counseling, the months and months of planning, clandestine meetings with a lawyer hours away so that nothing could be whispered about or talked about in our small town, all distilled down to this singular moment, this infinitesimal speck on my timeline.

Images, memories, fights, feelings, and words all came rushing into my head, each one a microsecond moment as one after another flitted and raced through my mind. Overwhelming confusing thoughts, hurt, pain, anger, they all coursed through my body as I placed my wedding ring on top of the papers as well.

And whispered out loud, "Please let this be a good decision. Please help me and the children get out of this life, and onto something bigger and better. Please help me."

The movers left. The house felt empty already, as I looked around noticing all the muddy footsteps leading from the front door around the living room, to the kids' rooms

and mine. I took a deep breath and walked out, locking the door behind me. There was no turning back now.

I drove to a local gas station, a last pre-arranged meeting with the moving guys. To catch my breath and to hand over a bag.

“Here’s the GPS unit I got out of the car. What are you going to do with it?” I asked, handing over the bag, my hand shaking and my gut rolling with anxiety.

“Oh we were just talking about that, and we’ve got an idea.” I watched one of the movers take the unit from the bag, hefted it into their left hand, and walked casually over to a produce truck parked on the other side of the gas pump from the moving truck. The owner of the truck had been walking into the convenience store as I had rolled up to the gas pump.

He leaned over, like he was adjusting his shoes, took the GPS box, and pushed it up onto the underside of the truck. He stood up and brushed off his hands as he walked back over to me.

“Go. We’ll see you later,” he replied and started climbing into the moving truck driver’s seat.

I turned and started up my car, driving directly back to the hotel, which was across the street, and picked up my kids. While they were busy getting their coats, I silently turned towards my friend and whispered thank you.

We left the hotel and drove straight to the first McDonald’s I could find. No questions from the kids as they were excited to be out of school. We chatted about little things and played music as I drove north for a little over 2 hours. I didn’t see anyone following me. Mark didn’t call during the entire trip, no calls from work, anyone.

As I entered the parking lot, and stopped in front of my new apartment, I turned off the engine and removed my seat belt.

I took my first deep breath in hours.

The world felt different now—lighter, but also heavier in a way. I wasn't sure what was waiting for me, but I knew one thing: I had left, and I was moving forward. I was going to do this. I had no idea what tomorrow held for me, or even the weeks and months ahead. I just knew I had to keep moving, to show myself, to show my children, we could do this.

"Are you two ready for a new adventure?" I asked my sons, my voice thick with emotions.

I turned in my seat towards them and pointed up to the apartment in front of me, watching as their eyes followed up over the front seats to the apartment's windows.

"I need to tell you some things, and you're going to have lots of questions. I love you both, and just know I did this for us, for a better start."

As we all turned to get out of the car, I nearly missed it. A corner of a blue envelope peeking out from underneath my coat and purse on the seat beside me.

With my heart thudding, I carefully slid it out.

I already knew. Somehow, I already knew. My fingers and body started shaking, and my eyes blurred as I turned the envelope over and slid open the seal.

Inside was a card, a clown holding a bunch of colorful balloons with the word *Congratulations* printed on the top.

I opened it and read the message written inside, "Congratulations on your new apartment, honey. Looks like a great place for us to start over. Can't wait to see you and the boys later!, Love, Mark."



## **Honorable Mention: The Last Mission of Sergeant Kaplan**

By: Ethan Dahlby

6/2/██████- Sergeant Mark A. Kaplan, 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 102nd Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, XII Corps, U.S. Army, was declared M.I.A. after a skirmish near Moss Cliff Bend of Fox Creek. Kaplan's squad was ambushed by German forces while en route to their forward operating base. After the battle, at approximately 1415 hours, Sergeant Kaplan was found to be missing. Initial searches yielded no trace, and due to a strict timetable, further searches for Sergeant Kaplan are postponed indefinitely.

The battle was over. The stench of blood hung heavy in the air, floating on the humidity of the creek. Corpses of gray and green marred the gravel beach. The smoke drifting up from the burning wreck of a U.S. half-track was the only movement to be seen in that desecrated spot of jungle. The only sounds, aside from the ever-present melody of the creek, were the distant chatter of gunfire, and the faint bark of orders. The language was impossible to determine, but Sergeant Kaplan tried anyway. He couldn't afford complacency. Not now. He had been careless enough in the first place, when the jungle exploded, and the bullets sang around him while his friends- No. Don't think. Just focus.

Sergeant Kaplan took off his helmet. His face and clothes were soaked with sweat and humidity and mud and gore. Kaplan reached further back into the cave and pulled out the backpack he'd taken from the legless corpse of a Kraut. Digging through it again, he took inventory. Half-full canteen. He'd need that; he couldn't trust the jungle water. A few rounds of ammo. Didn't fit his rifle. A silver wristwatch. Maybe he could trade that with one of his buddies when his squad found him. One of his living buddies. Kaplan jerked his head and grabbed the next item. First-aid kit. Excellent. He pulled out the tweezers, and took a shaky breath. Ok, Kaplan. You don't want to die out here. If the Krauts don't get you, the infection will. Just get the bullet. Kaplan maneuvered the metal

instrument through his torn sleeve, past his ruptured flesh, until it clinked against the bullet lodged in the bone of his left arm. Kaplan grimaced. Slowly, agonizingly, the tweezers grasped the sides of the bullet. He drew a breath. Now for the hard part. Easy, now. After this, you just have to wait a couple hours, then you'll be back at base, taking a hot shower. On three. One. Two. Kaplan yanked the bullet out. Pure agony ripped through the jungle ambiance. He scrambled for his rifle and crawled deeper into the shadows of the cave. Did anyone hear? It was impossible to tell. Already his scream had been consumed by the lush ferns and deep mosses of the jungle. Kaplan's ear itched for German voices or the crunching of boots on gravel. He pointed his rifle towards the mouth of the cave as best as he could with his functional arm. He waited. Nothing. Nothing more than the song of birds, the whine of the flies, and the music of the stream. But still he didn't move, frozen as his blood ran crimson down the green of his arm and pooled on the cave floor.

That night was a hard one. Kaplan had bandaged the wound as best as he could with the first-aid supplies he could scavenge, but it wasn't enough to keep out the infection. Didn't matter. Soon enough, he'd be in a hospital bed back at camp, back at home. His friends would bring him extra rations, and they'd talk and laugh about his close call. Wounded in combat- they gave purple hearts for that, didn't they? Maybe then he could stop fighting. The infection bit deeper into his arm. The jungle water, the jungle mud- both drove the poison deeper into his flesh. The infection kindled a fever, a fever burning in him, heating the cave, burning his soul. Kaplan writhed and retched in the night, as his body fought for life. He was holding on, holding on through the pain and the fever and the bullet, even as his body returned to the plastic from whence it came. His mind wandered on fever dreams and fever thoughts. If only he could go home! You could get ice water from the cafeteria. Why hadn't he realized what a wonder that was? Ice water! And other people, people with medicine and people to talk to. People that would keep you from dying alone. Even when he was fighting, at least he had his friends beside him. When they come back for him, Denny would joke that he got lost because he forgot his survival training, and Leonard would tell him to shut up, the man's been through enough already. Geek would let him borrow his radio while he recovered, and

Lieutenant Jackson might give him a couple day's leave. He just needed to last the night, tomorrow they'd come for him. Tomorrow they'd come.

That night he dreamed of his friends. He saw them, saw their faces, and saw himself swallowed up by the jungle. He dreamed he called out to them, and they heard him. But no one came for him. He looked at his friends, and saw that they were frozen.

The fever left him in the early hours of the morning. It slipped out of the dim cave, leaving Kaplan sprawled on the cave floor like a ragdoll. It passed over the bloodied beach, where the bodies of soldiers who were little more than boys lay, never again to come home to their mothers. It slipped over Fox Creek, which trickled merrily despite the horrors it had witnessed, just like it always had for days and years.

Kaplan woke up, and he couldn't move his left arm. He ached. The fever left him, but it left him as pitted and marred as the beach outside. But Kaplan rested, and time lent him strength. As the sun broke over the canopy, Kaplan could think clearly again. As the sun reached midday, Kaplan crawled to the canteen, the paltry mouthfuls of water disappearing like rain on the Sahara. And as the sun started to boil the air again, Kaplan found his feet, ready to face whatever the jungle threw at him. He didn't know how long his rescue would take. Better to be prepared. He remembered the training exercises they ran back home. Lashing shelters together out of logs. Crafting raw materials into bows and fishing rods. Making use of available resources. Kaplan knew what this meant. He hated it, but he knew. So out he went onto the beach, blood staining his footprints. Out he went among the field of corpses, hoping to find life. Out he went to the dead half-track, to the scattered ammo cases, to the packs of each one of his dead friends. He didn't look at their faces. He didn't know, didn't want to know, who they were. Which ones were waiting back home, and which ones would be lying here forever. In the end, Kaplan found enough scrap metal, toolkits, and K-rations to make him more confident of survival. He could make it. He could make it.

Dinner was a cheerful affair, as cheerful as it could get in his situation. He had found a spot where he could enjoy the scenery without looking at any bodies. The sun was setting, and the crimson and gold rays shone through the perforated canopy of the

ferns. The rays of light painted the jungle, painted gravel crimson and water gold. It was the first sunset Kaplan had seen outside. As Kaplan sat there, water boiling in a dead man's pot, he thought that the sunset was the most beautiful thing he had seen in his war-torn life.

Dinner was chicken noodle soup, which seemed to Kaplan to be just what he needed. He breathed in the aroma, and even the watered-down stock was powerful enough to bring back memories. Sunday was comfort food day, as comfort food as it got in the army. Last week this time he was eating meatloaf with the guys. Denny had just made a disparaging comparison between the meatloaf and Lieutenant Jackson, who had unfortunately heard. Two days later, Denny said his arms were still stiff from all the push ups. But at the time, they all laughed, even Leonard. Oh, right. He had meant to ask Leonard about a phrase he heard a Kraut shout at him last week. Leonard knew German, which made him the squad intellectual. What else did he have to do? He owed Robert \$2. Latrine duty was next week. Denny's birthday was next Wednesday, maybe he'd-

Denny was dead. Kaplan knew it. Kaplan saw it. He was shot in the mouth, a moment after he jumped out of the Jeep. Kaplan remembered how the splinters of his incisors flew out through his lips, and the thought crossed his mind like a stray bullet that those teeth would never bite into their twentieth birthday cake. Now Kaplan didn't picture the mess hall bright and warm and full of friends. He knew the mess hall was silent, filled with ghosts and empty chairs. His chair was empty too.

At that moment, Kaplan knew they weren't coming back for him.

The sun rose the next morning. It shone down through the fern canopy, creeping down the stalks of plants, crawling across the colorless gravel, warming a disembodied foot. Yesterday's carnage seemed all the more horrible in the innocent morning light. Kaplan was there, too, sitting on a rock. He stared at the battlefield, light not quite reaching his eyes. Questions flooded his mind, but he didn't want to think about any of them. So he sat in silence, as the jungle woke up.

He missed home. He could taste scrambled eggs and the bitterness of coffee. He could smell the bacon. He could hear the laughter. Camp wasn't home. If it ever had been, it wasn't anymore.

*Take me home, country roads...*

He didn't even know where home was anymore.

Time strengthened the light, but still Kaplan stayed on the rock. The war wasn't over, the Krauts were still crawling all over the area. Kaplan didn't care. He felt warm in the daylight, but not much else. He was on his own now, for the first time in his life. Abandoned by his country. They were a traitor to him. Kaplan tried to remember the old war songs, the ones that used to stir his heart. The ones that carried him from war to war to war to war. Who were they fighting now? The Germans? Before that, it was the cowboys, and before that, the dinosaurs. Before that? Kaplan couldn't remember. Was that his lot in life? To die fighting? An old saying echoed in his mind. Old soldiers never die, they just fade away. As Kaplan sat on that rock, he thought he saw Time walking by, and he imagined the sunlight shining through him.

A voice awakened Kaplan. His heart almost jumped at the thought of his squad, but his hope died before it was even born. The voice came again. It was German. Kaplan sprinted for the cave, kicking up pebbled, bending plants. He'd worry about stealth when he escaped a bullet to the head. Gun. Gun. Where was his gun? Kaplan had trouble loading a clip. His hands were shaking. He didn't want to die, he didn't want to be like one of those guys on the beach, brains decorating the gravel. He jammed his head into his helmet. He was too young. He couldn't die; he had to go home. The cave had no escape, he realized. Death ahead and behind. Kaplan crept towards the opening. Kaplan's faint hope was that his green might blend into the plant cover, camouflaging him from the bullets... He clung to that idea like a criminal to the chaplain's hand. Get me out of here. Get me home. He couldn't do that to his mother, the sadness would kill her. Kaplan couldn't remember his mother. He stared into the dappled green light of the mouth of the cave. He crept closer to death; closer to home. Voices came again, and he froze.

*“Wo ist das Essen?”* Kaplan searched his paltry German vocabulary for the lessons Leonard had given him. Were they talking about food? Kaplan peeked out of the cave. He counted five, six Krauts, maybe more. A Nazi tiger stalked in their midst. From his vantage point, Kaplan could clearly see the swastika spray-painted against the tiger’s grayscale stripes. It growled and sniffed the air, and for the first time, Kaplan was glad for the scent of blood in the air. One of the Krauts patted the tiger’s back and tried to unclip a bag. They were unaware of him. How many could he take out before the rest got him? One? Two? He glanced down at his hands, they were still shivering. He could already feel the bullets piercing his lungs, shattering his spine. His eyes squeezed shut. He was frozen with terror, frozen like the dead. He breathed. Time went on.

A minute later, he peeked open his eyes. They still hadn’t spotted him yet. He crouched down, flattening himself against the mud as best as he could. One Kraut started passing around sandwiches. Kaplan blinked sweat out of his eyes. The tiger yawned, lying in the sun. Fox Creek bubbled. A robin started to sing, somewhere.

As the Nazis talked, Kaplan tried to pick up words. Leonard hadn’t been a great teacher, but he managed to drill Kaplan with vocabulary words and he said that was the important part. Now Kaplan managed to string together the gist of the conversation. It seemed that they were a rear guard squad of the German 12th Army, which was vacating the area. They were leaving. And the Americans would be going with them, either chasing or being chased by them. Kaplan sank back into the mud. They were leaving. The war, the violence, the gore, all of it- leaving. Leaving the jungle, the bodies, leaving Kaplan. And sure enough, by the time Kaplan had thought it through, the Nazis were packing up their gear, falling back in line, and walking away. Kaplan followed them with his eyes, and as soon as they turned the river bend, he got up. He walked slowly after them. That was it. Those were the last enemy soldiers he would ever see. Kaplan reached the muddy bank of the river, and after a moment, stepped around it. The gray Nazi squad was visible, but just barely, through the leaves overhanging the creek. Kaplan stood in the middle of the river bed, watching them go. His mind drifted along with the current, with the Nazis. Was it better to be shot or die alone? Would he die or fade

away? Just before they vanished entirely, one Kraut turned around and looked back. Kaplan didn't know if the soldier saw him or not. Then they were gone.

Death itself had abandoned him.

Kaplan returned to the beach. Where else was there to go? Home? Kaplan looked at Fox Creek, looked at the bloody gravel beach, looked at his cave where he'd lived for the past three days. Maybe this could be home, he thought. As much of a home as camp ever was. As war ever was.

So Kaplan started homebuilding. He buried the bodies. He dug out the cave, cut down plants, crafted raw furnishings for himself. He hunted, first with the extra ammo, then with bows and fishing rods. He killed, this time to eat. He even planted a farm. When the rains came, Kaplan made a door for his cave and supported the walls with stalks. When the snow drifted down, Kaplan dug a chimney and brought in his harvest. The next spring, Fox Creek rose, and washed the blood away from the gravel beach at last. Summer came again, and Kaplan lived on. His wound was almost healed. Days passed, and years. Kaplan fell into a routine, working on the farm, maintaining his house, sitting, thinking. One day, as he was sitting on the same rock he had sat upon time and again, Kaplan looked at the jungle and noticed the sunset painting gravel crimson and water gold. His mind drifted back, he barely remembered life before. He looked around. He saw the sunset and the jungle and his house and his farm and his hard work and the graves of his friends and time. Was this home? What was home? He hummed a tune, as the sunset turned into sunrise and sunset again, as Time walked by and stopped to listen to the song he was singing. *Country roads, take me home...*

Many years later, on a bright June morning, a little girl in a raincoat and galoshes splashed up Fox Creek. This was the furthest up the creek she had ever explored, and she was almost ready to turn around. She sat down on the muddy bank of the river and fished a granola bar out of her pocket. She liked this place. The ferns were really pretty here, and the sun sparkled on the water. As she searched the riverbed and the shore for pretty stones she could add to her collection, her eyes fell on a different shade of green.

She picked the object off the pebble it was resting on. It was an old green army man. She smiled. She would take it home and wash it off. Her town needed more citizens, and she had an empty shell home in the garden where he could live. She set off back down the stream, army man in her pocket.

Sergeant Kaplan was going home at last.



## **Honorable Mention: Poker Night**

By: Carolyn Cullen

I've always loved games. And there's nothing like a game of poker with a group of Ivy League-bound card counters to shake up your Friday night—especially when the stakes are your sandals, one-piece romper and a white, cotton bra; the underwear having been overlooked that morning. Four rum and Cokes (when you don't drink) might make you think you belong at that poker table, but don't listen to your drunk self. Do not sit down.

"You're done, Emma. I'm taking you home." If your neighbor slash brother's best friend is there, he'll definitely knock you down a few pegs. John Asher looked like he was waging an internal battle between throwing up at the prospect of me losing my clothes, or throwing me over his shoulder and hauling all five feet ten inches of me home.

"I'm staying."

"Aw, let her play, Asher." My best friend for life Melissa had already won a hand of Texas Hold 'Em. The rest of the guys at the table all drunkenly chimed in before catching John's gaze and fizzling out.

"Or yeah, get out of here, girl. Wendy's is still open." Manipulative pansy. Melissa knew I had a weak spot for Wendy's French fries.

"Nope. I feel pretty lucky tonight." I flashed a smile at Brad Cope. It turned out he had a little crush on me since the fifth grade and I saw no significant reason to let that go unrequited for the summer. He was hot if you liked blonde hair and soccer player thighs, which apparently, I did. My overprotective twin brother, Ryan, was in Europe and out of the way.

I was still a virgin.

"Suit yourself," John muttered before walking away.

I clinked my drink onto the table and took a seat—ok, fine—clumsily fell into the chair, immediately aware that something round and squishy had already taken residence. A bursting, very unladylike sound erupted from under my romper. Initially, all eyes at the table went round, laser-focused on me. Jaws dropped. I pulled the red whoopie cushion out from under me and the table howled, myself included.

Even in my rum-fueled haze, I was mortified. Dying inside. But I laughed along and rolled my eyes playfully, because I would have rather eaten cow stomach every day for the rest of my life than give John Asher any shred of satisfaction. He would not see me squirm.

But he would definitely pay.

His dark eyes twinkled from across the amber-lit room, mid-conversation with two adoring and completely foolish girls. He didn't look back at me, but that smug little smile, the one that brought out his godforsaken left dimple, was all the proof I needed. Well, the joke was on him. Everyone may have been laughing at my expense, but Brad flashed me a smile that told me I was a good sport.

I took it as a win.

Thirty minutes later, I was taking off my second sandal and hazily questioning my choice to play poker when John appeared at my shoulder like the Grimm Reaper. I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Gah, I hate it when you do that."

"Forget Ryan, your dad will literally kill me if he finds out I let you play strip poker and puke all over his buddy's card table." His voice was low and menacing.

I shivered—Satan's breath like warm licks of air against the shell of my ear.

The guy next to me pushed back from the table.

"What he doesn't know won't kill him. Not that I'm going to puke." I waved a (hardly) reassuring hand at the table.

Brad looked back and forth between us. “I’m cashing out. Wendy’s sounds pretty good right about now.” He shook his head and rose from the table, down to gray boxer briefs and a tee shirt, his thighs less muscled than I expected. Hm. Everyone else, even Melissa after giving me a sheepish smile, followed his lead.

“Oh, come on! Where’s everyone going?” I glanced up at John to see his brows pulled together and his jaw clenched. His hands were on his hips and it made him look twice his size. He may have scared everyone else away—heavy sigh—but he didn’t scare me.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow for work, girl.” Melissa, fully clothed—shoes and all, hugged me and told John to drive safely.

Oh Jesus, we’d be working at a children’s camp in a matter of hours.

“I’m only leaving because I’m really tired after spending all day with those little hellions and if I drink anything else I probably will puke all over the table,” I whispered to Melissa and pointed to my keeper. “He has nothing to do with this decision.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “Here’s what I think: You two will kill each other by the time Ryan gets back from Europe. Not sure if it will be in or out of the bedroom.”

I sucked in a breath and held a hand to my stomach. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.” A wave of nausea rolled through me.

The details of my ride home were hazy. Sadly, I got my revenge for the whoopie cushion. Twenty years later, I’d still feel John’s long fingers scooping my hair out of my face as I suddenly vomited between my legs in his beloved 1969 Shelby Mustang, inherited from his late maternal grandfather. He cherished it. He babied it. He detailed it every Saturday morning for two hours.

“I’ve got you,” he soothed.

“Was that for me or the car?” I moaned.

His only answer was a low chuckle.

The next morning, I bolted upright in my bed, immediately regretting it. My head pounded. I was past dry-mouth. I'd entered dry-lung territory. How did I end up in my bed?

John's father's voice scratched from downstairs and I realized the sound was what woke me. He should have been at one of his building sites by that hour. I pulled on a sports bra and pieced my night together; positive I was in for it with my parents. Wow, they even brought John's dad over for reinforcement, probably to warn me with a cautionary tale about straying from one's path.

Did I see either of my parents when I got home? No. I went straight to my room. After I tried to kiss John.

Tried. To kiss. John.

Oh God, he pulled over and cleaned up my side of his precious car the best he could before ordering me a soda at Wendy's. We argued about something—no surprise there—and he helped me hobble up to my door where details are hazy but...I'm pretty sure I looked up at him with big eyes and a goofy smile and leaned in to kiss him.

With assuredly awful breath.

This wasn't me. This wasn't us. I did not get drunk, let alone try to kiss my sworn enemy. It was like Ryan left and I went off the rails, finally free from Big (by two measly minutes) Brother. Melissa's parting words must have triggered an untapped part of my brain that I never wanted tapped again. I wanted to curl in a hole and die—at least until school started in the fall and I could slink away and never see John again. Except for holidays. Oh. My. God. I would never live this down.

Did he tell his dad? A lecture from his father about trying to kiss his son really would be the ultimate retaliation, so that was what I fully expected.

As I entered the kitchen, heart palpitating, all three parental units stopped talking and looked me over. It became apparent I looked how I felt.

“Sweetie, what happened last night?” my mom asked, concern written all over her puckered mouth.

“Umm...” Great, they know everything. John is probably watching us through his window with binoculars, tears of laughter streaming down his disgustingly beautiful face.

John’s father—who could be John Stamos’ ruggedly outdoorsy brother—saved me. “John left this morning. Said he was joining the Army.”

My jaw hit the floor. “You’re pranking me now, too, Mr. Asher?”

He chuckled. “No. John didn’t apply to college. Didn’t have a plan.” He pulled from his coffee, always cool and collected—a family trait, apparently. “I’m not sure if I’m worried or proud.”

“Did anything happen between you two?” my dad asked.

“What? God no, nothing. Same old, really.” Stop talking.

He arched a brow at me while Mr. Asher’s mouth drooped.

John sabotaged me with a whoopie cushion and rejected my awful kiss. I ended a twelve-year war on very bad note and there was no getting back at him now.

I couldn’t explain the sour, tangled feelings welling inside me except for being severely hungover. Tears stung the backs of my bloodshot eyes. My heart felt like a hole ripped through it. Was a holey heart a hangover symptom? *I’m never drinking again.*

“He asked me to give you this.” Mr. Asher studied my eyes as he handed me a folded piece of paper.

“Oh.” I unfolded it and read:

*Emma,*

*Sometimes you look up at me with those big, blue eyes and I can see my future there. Can you imagine the games we'd play? Go to college. Have your fun. I won't be there at the end of the night with a whoopie cushion. But, please consider me. Let me be the guy you end up with.*

*Love Always,*

*John*

I still keep his note in the top drawer of my nightstand. When he's made me particularly crazy that day or the baby can't sleep, I'll pull it out. And I can't help but smile, my heart completely whole.