



# Write On! 2018

SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST

Loudoun County Public Library

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## The House on Hogback Road

by Penelope Aaron  
North Bethesda, MD

The heavy front door creaks open. A sliver of sunlight casts a triangle over the dusty floorboards. I clamp my hands over my mouth and nose to silence my heavy breathing, willing myself to be still. *Stay hidden.* I see his dark silhouette, the outline of his boots, his barrel chest, and his unforgettable Stetson. The heavy, humid air reeks of sickly sweet magnolias and urine.

He pauses in the doorway, listening, *smelling*—waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. “Come out, come out wherever you are,” his poisonous singsong slurs.

*Please leave please leave please leave. Just turns around and forget about me. Don't come inside. Don't stay and search.* Sweat tickles as it drips from my forehead into my eyes and stings. My legs scream with pain from my cramped position.

A boot pounds the wood floor as he takes a step forward into the room. I shudder. His head darts around in a lazy swivel and he turns away. He's leaving. Tears mix with my perspiration and I'm blinded. *Please leave please leave please leave.* I remove a hand from my mouth and wipe my eyes just in time to see him stop. He flips around abruptly and glides into the room, slamming the door behind him.

My heart lurches. I'm afraid it will stop. Then it beats hard— so hard I fear he can hear it.

He sways and a boot taps. "I'm gon' find you girl. And then I'm gon' teach you a lesson!"

He hurls scraps of wood around the room, narrowly missing me in my hiding place. I squeeze my hands across my face harder, crouching into the smallest form possible. *Stay hidden.*

He lunges away from me into the kitchen and kicks an empty beer can. *Please leave please leave please leave.* He violently throws cabinet doors open, peering inside while half mumbling, half singing, and fully cursing.

*Please leave please leave please leave.* But he's not leaving. He's getting closer. I have to move. I have to move or he will find me and hurt me. Maybe even kill me. *I have to move.*

While his back is to me, I slip out of the closet. On tiptoes, I fly into the dark, toward the back of the unfinished house. Down the long hallway I run, dodging construction equipment, pieces of wood, and garbage left behind by the crews that abandoned the houses on Hogback Road.

Glass shatters. Footsteps echo across the floors. I dart into a bedroom and linger, listening. The stuffy air encompasses me, suffocating me as I feel my way around looking for an exit—a door or a boarded up window, a hole in a wall, something.

The floor creaks. *Please leave please leave please leave.* And then creaks again. It sounds closer. I freeze and listen. Another creak. My fingers close around metal. A doorknob. Hot, stale air billows out of the closet as I scramble inside and

pull the door, leaving it open just a crack. Spider webs cling to my face as I hunker down and force myself once again to become small and then smaller. I squint and struggle to focus in the darkness. *Stay hidden.*

Shadows blanket the floor—shadows from large industrial sized pieces of plastic, two by fours, and debris strewn about. Looming above all, towers the shadow of the cursed cowboy hat. The one that cost us a whole month's rent. My hands fly to my face again. My chest rises and falls too rapidly in my panic. If only I could stop breathing I could be silent. I inhale sawdust and my nose threatens a sneeze. I grip my face until it hurts.

He groans a low throaty sound that turns into a growl. "I'm fixin' to break you in half." He sounds close but not in the room.

His boots hit the floor again. Another step. He sounds nearer.

He laughs again—an unholy malicious sound. "You better hope I don't find you."

I can see him now. Hulking in the hallway. He rips his shirt off and wobbles. His head rocks from left to right and he sniffs the air. Like a hound on a scent. I hear the match strike across the book. The flame flickers, illuminating the hall for a split second. The nauseating smell of his Marlboro wafts in and fills my head. He groans out the same lyrics. Of the same song. The one that he always sings when he's drinking.

"Crazy... I'm crazy for feeling so phony." He croons the wrong lyrics.

Life changed when Mama met Boone and I was reduced to an extra person, an insignificant. From the first day we moved in with him I knew something was wrong with him—in his dark trailer that smells like rotted wood with its old, dirt encrusted carpet. None of the kitchen cabinets stay closed because it isn't level. It's dark and crooked, just like Boone.

Tears prick my eyes again and my throat tightens. Floorboards creak and I hear his weight shift from one boot to the other.

“Crazy...”

His feet echo across the floor. He continues looking for me. *Please leave please leave please leave.*

He sings the lovely lyrics that constrict my throat and fill my heart with dread. “I'm crazy...crazy for bleeding so true.”

I dare to breathe a sigh of the teeniest, tiniest bit of relief as he moves on to another room, still searching. But I know he will continue until he finds me. It won't be long. I have to move.

“I'm crazy for buyin', and crazy for lyin', and I'm crazy for chasin' you.” His voice trails off. He sounds further away!

I push the door open a centimeter more, waiting for the right moment, my heart still pounding like a snare drum. He stomps a foot, his boot loud on the wood floors. The sudden boom of sound startles me and to my horror, I yelp.

I leap from the closet and sprint back toward the living room. Boone's brown boots crack and reverberate on the stark floors behind me.

I felt a hand brush the end of my long hair. He's fast.

I grope at objects in the dark, looking for something to slow his progress. I connect with a piece of equipment—a sander perhaps—and drop it behind me. Boone trips and curses as he crashes to the floor. I sneak a look back before tearing open the front door and see the monstrous look on his face. I jerk my head back around. My stomach clenches into a tight ball. My heart pounds.

Sunlight pierces my eyes as I run blindly toward the empty, desolate street full of unfinished, abandoned, discarded houses. Houses like me.

I race to the end of the street where it intersects with what would have become a main road had the subdivision ever been finished. The hot asphalt burns my bare feet while gravel chews through my flesh.

He's gaining on me.

My terror ratchets up so high that I feel it explode into anger. I knew it was a bad idea to go hunting with Boone. I told Mama I didn't want to go. She insisted Boone to teach me how to hunt.

But now he is the hunter and I am his prey.

I round the corner of the end home and dart into the weedy overgrown backyard. Maybe he will tire of chasing me. Maybe he will pass out somewhere. And wake up without remembering any of this.

The force hits like a truck at full speed. It's like vomiting oxygen when he tackles me. I hit the ground face first. I can't catch my breath. I taste blood and feel a tooth go loose. I can't see through the tall weeds. But I buck and wiggle and try



with all I have to get out from under him. I can feel the blood smearing across my face.

“Get off! Get off! Get off!”

He grabs my hair and slams my nose back into the grass. My legs are pinned but my arms flail—reaching out for anything to help me. I close my fist around a piece of wood and swing it backward.

I feel his body go slack. He slumps and topples over and hits the ground with a thud. I jump up and hit him again, connecting with an arm. *Stay down. Stay down. Stay down.*

His open eyes stare vacantly at the sky. A small trickle of blood appears at the corner of his mouth. *Stay down. Stay down. Stay down.*

I kick his beloved cowboy hat and it flies across the yard. It flies away from him the way I want to. I think about all the times that Boone has caused others pain. No one ever helps. This is just like all those times. Boone always has all the power while I have none. And I am always alone.

But someone has to stop him. I spit blood from my broken mouth and scream. My voice sounds foreign, deep and primal and full of rage I’ve never embraced before. I raise the board and hold it high, ready to pound his head in.

The haunting melody with the familiar lyrics float through the tainted air. “Crazy...I’m crazy for feeling...”

I never see or hear the truck pull up but its radio plays the song. An elderly man lumbers out of the cab. He wears a white collared shirt. His tie is blue and his

black slacks match his black boots. The sun beams brightly behind him, shining all around his head like a halo. I can't see his face.

“Li’ girl, do you need some help?”

**Swipe to Unlock**  
*by Taryn Noelle Kloeden*  
*Winchester, VA*

Grief. It hollows you out. Makes you feel like someone took an ice cream scoop to your chest. I used to think there was something romantic about that kind of agony, but Risa's death disabused me of that notion.

Hers was an in-between death—neither fast nor slow enough to be merciful. She survived just long enough to know she was dying, but not long enough to make peace with it. Tension pneumothorax—a death more fitting a soldier shot in the chest than a teenage girl. I don't know why my sister was out that night. I don't know why she climbed that fence. I certainly don't know why she fell, impaling herself on rebar. The coroner said she lived at least an hour after the fall. One hour, unable to call for help as blood filled her lungs and the pressure building in one collapsed the other.

But you wouldn't know that from the funeral. It's all white roses and giant sharpie-signed cards. I sit in the front row in my navy dress—I refused to wear black,- that was Risa's color—listening to our mother's saccharine eulogy. It isn't fair to hate Mom. But as she stands there, droning on about Risa's dancing and horseback riding—basically everything she'd given up by age eight—I can't help it. Risa wasn't ribbons and ballet slippers. She was fishnets and clove cigarettes, off-key singing and terrible advice about boys. She was sad—desperately sad. She had been ever since her best friend Corinne had committed suicide last fall. But there's no mention of that in Mom's speech—not even any pictures of Risa and Corinne together. I blink away the angry tears and dig my nails into my wrist to keep from screaming.

To drown out my mother's words, I focus on anything else. The a.c. blows against my skin, raising gooseflesh. Someone snuffles loudly. I glance down the row. A couple of Risa's new friends, Travis and Kelsey, sit a few seats away from me. Travis is the sniffer. Dark circles pillow his blue eyes and his hair is mussed—not in the usual pretty boy way, but actually a mess. He looks strung out, almost hung over. I knew he and Risa hooked up sometimes, but I hadn't thought them close. Weird. Kelsey sits beside him, her hand on his arm. She stares straight ahead, her lips pursed. When she sees me looking she gives a slight, sympathetic smile. I look away instead of returning it. Risa only started hanging out with their crowd this year, and here they are, acting like they're the victims.

After Corinne's death, Risa had drifted from clique to clique, before joining up with her latest group. When she had, she'd started going out more. I hear the whispers all the time, mostly from women my mother's age. They talk about Risa's recent partying and drinking. No one quite says she deserved what she got, but the implication's there like a message written on a cold window that the lightest breath could reveal. I thought at the funeral, they'd have the decency to pause the gossip. But as Mom finishes her eulogy, Mrs. Baker whispers to Mrs. Thompson in the row behind me. I can't quite make it out. I just catch the words “janitor's closet.”

I launch to my feet. I hear Mom hiss, “Sit down, Eleanor!” but I keep walking. It's better than slapping Mrs. Baker across her self-righteous, over-botoxed face. Travis was in that closet, too, but no one talks about him in hushed, censorious tones. Not even death can save Risa from gossip.

I leave the church. No one would miss me at the wake. If anything, my mom would be glad I was gone. It was easier to pretend about who Risa was when I wasn't there. She and I were nearly twins. The only differences being eleven months, my scattering of

freckles, and Risa's hazel eyes, a shade lighter than mine. When I look in the mirror now, all I can think about is that one day I'll be older than she'll ever be. Who needs ghosts when you can haunt yourself?

I stop when I reach the creek behind the church. It's mid-July and a humid haze rises off the water. Leaves drip with moisture, turning the suburban setting almost tropical. There's an oily sheen to the water's surface—runoff from nearby parking lots. I sit cross-legged at the water's edge and close my eyes.

For the millionth time, I go over the night Risa died. I see her as I saw her for the last time. Lying in bed, her face lit blue by her cell phone's screen.

*“What?” she'd said to me where I stood by her door.*

*“Have you seen my green sweater?”*

*“No.” She'd rolled her eyes.*

That had been a lie. I'd found my sweater in her closet the day after she'd died.

It didn't make any sense. She'd been in bed, wearing the smiley face pajamas she'd gotten for Christmas, scrolling through social media. There was no indication she'd been planning on sneaking out. She wouldn't have hidden her plans from me—she'd known I wouldn't have narked. So why did they find her dead outside an old TNT storage igloo the next morning? Moreover, where was her phone? I'd seen her with it that night, and yet the police never found it. Not that they looked that hard. It was clear they had their narrative. Drunk girl runs through the woods, loses her phone, tries to climb a fence, and dies. But I can't shake the feeling that's not the whole story.

A twig snaps and I open my eyes. Travis wrings his suit jacket in his hands.

“Hey Nor.” He uses the same soft voice everyone's been using lately, as if I'm a loose zoo animal that needs to be soothed.

“What do you want?” I stand.

He rubs the bridge of his nose. “I just wanted to, you know, tell you I’m sorry about what happened.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

“Yeah, I know--”

“That wasn’t rhetorical.” I cross my arms. “I’m asking.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m asking you about what happened that night. Why was she out? You must know.”

“Look, Nor, a lot of us were out that night. Kelsey’s cousin got a keg last minute. We were just hanging at the usual spot. I feel terrible for not noticing Risa run off like that. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“What about her phone?” My heart’s pounding now. It’s the first time anyone’s admitted to seeing Risa that night. The cops had found the remains of the bonfire and the abandoned keg, but they hadn’t bothered figuring out which kids were there—chances were it was some of their own.

“Her phone?”

“You saw her with it that night?”

“I guess? I mean, sure. Girls are always on their phones.” He shakes his head.

“Look, I’m sorry for bothering you.” He glances back at the church. “I’m gonna go back in.”

I watch him go, thinking over what he said and what I already know. Risa had her phone that night, so why hadn’t the cops found it when they were called in the next day? I pull out my own phone, swallowing hard at the sight of Risa’s face smiling beside mine on the lock screen. Not for the first time, I call Risa. It goes straight to voice mail.

*“Hey this is Risa Maher. You know what to do.”*

I hang up before the beep. I'm walking deeper into the trees before I even realize what my feet have already decided. If the cops won't look for Risa's phone, then I will.

*“You know what to do.”*

Thorns scratch my calves as I cut through thickets to reach a hunting trail. A pair of hunters found Risa's body outside a condemned TNT storage igloo—a leftover from our town's explosive production during World War II. I know the way. In a town this size, there isn't much else to do besides explore the woods.

Yellow caution tape hangs limply from the fence when I arrive. I bite my lip to stop it trembling. The rebar that punctured her lung is gone. Flowers, teddy bears, and cheap ceramic angels litter the ground in its place. At first I don't understand how they got inside the fence to make this sad little shrine. Then I see the gate is open. Was it open that night, too? Was she too drunk to notice?

Or, was she too scared?

I can't get the image of Risa running, panicked, through the woods out of my head. Why else would she scramble over the fence like that? Risa hated heights. She didn't even like roller coasters.

There's no sign of her phone, but it's not like it's going to be easy to find. It's stupid, but I pull out my cell to call hers again. To my shock, it doesn't go straight to voicemail.

As it starts to ring, Risa's ring tone chimes from behind me. I whirl, searching the grass for the phone, but my gaze finds a pair of black shoes instead. I stumble back against the chain link fence as my gaze travels up to the person holding Risa's phone.

Kelsey presses a manicured finger to the screen, silencing it. “Hi.” She gives me the same small smile she did at the funeral. “Travis said you were looking for this.” She waves Risa's phone toward me.

“How do you have that?” I demand. “Why didn't you give it to the police?”

She rolls her eyes. “Trust me. Risa would not want the police looking at this. That's why I took it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do I need to spell it out for you? There are things on this phone—pictures. I'm just trying to protect Risa's reputation—such that it is.”

“You're lying.”

“Whatever.” Her nice act is failing fast. “Only problem is it's locked. I'll give it to the police, but first I need the password. Do you know it?” She runs her hand through her long red hair in a too-casual gesture.

Risa's password. She used the same one for almost everything—041706--the day we adopted our dog, Gus. When I don't answer right away, Kelsey smiles.

“You do, don't you? Leave it to a nosy little sister. Well?”

“Fine, but first, tell me how you have this.”

She huffs. “How do you think? I took it.”

“You took it...from Risa? You—you found her?”

“She was dead,” she talks slowly, as if I am not speaking the same language. “I took her phone to protect her. I was her best friend.”

“No. Corinne was.”

At that, her smile drops. “If you don't want to tell me, fine.” She extends the phone to me. “You unlock it.”



I take it and type in the numbers. The phone wakes with a click. It's open on a voice recorder app. I go to play the recording dated for the night she died but instead, a blinding pain explodes behind my right ear and I fall into darkness.

\*\*\*

*"I can't believe you," says Risa. "Why would you think that was a good idea?"*

I'm dead. It's the only explanation for hearing Risa's voice in the dark. For being dead, my head sure hurts, though.

*"I was bored, she was an easy target. What? Like you've never said anything mean on the internet?"*

Kelsey. But she sounds different—warped. My eyes adjust to the darkness as my addled brain realizes I'm hearing a recording. The air is cool and the ground beneath me smooth. We're inside the TNT igloo.

*"Sure, but telling Corinne to kill herself like that? Don't you feel bad at all?"*

*"It was a joke. It's not my fault she—oh my god! Are you recording this? You--"*

"That's enough of that I think." The phone screen lights Kelsey's face as she pauses the recording.

I try to raise my hands to my head, but find them bound with rope. "What are you doing?"

"Deleting this for one." The phone chimes. "There, all evidence gone. Well." She eyes me. "Almost."

"Corinne." I picture my sister's best friend. Quiet, sweet Corinne who loved baking and horror movies. Corinne, who hung herself in her closet. "You bullied her into killing herself. Risa was going to expose you, so you killed her?"

“No. I didn't kill Risa. I just wanted the stupid phone. She ran, I followed. What happened next was her fault. Just like Corinne.”

“But...” I tug on the ropes. They aren't that tight. “She didn't die right away. The coroner's report said she lived an hour. That means--”

“She was as good as dead.”

“You don't know that!” I shout into the concrete floor. “She was lying there, choking on her own blood, and you just took her phone and left her?”

“It was her fault. She wouldn't let what happened to her loser friend go. She would've ruined my life. Just like you would.” She reaches into her purse and takes out a small canister. I can't quite make it out in the dim light.

She shakes the bottle. “Risa gave us her pain pills after she got her gall bladder out. She was such a wannabee—doing whatever she could to get us to like her. I guess it was an act though, to get me to admit what I did to Corinne. What a freak.”

The ropes are loosening. I can almost free my hands, but I'm still dizzy and disoriented. I have a concussion, at least. I'm not sure I can fight her off even if I do free myself.

“Should be enough in here to do the job. What an ending that will make for the gossips, huh? You killing yourself in the same place your sister died, using her pills? Especially after that scene you made at her funeral?”

“What are you—no!” This monster as good as killed Corinne and my sister and now she's going to murder me to cover it up. The worst part is, she's right. It's exactly the ending Mrs. Baker and her ilk would write. The cops wouldn't bother to investigate any more than they did with Risa. My hands are almost free, but I don't want Kelsey to know that. I keep them still as she kneels beside me.

“Open up, Nor.” She grabs my chin.

I clamp my mouth shut, but she pinches my nose to cut off my air. I squirm, fighting the instinct to open my mouth to gulp oxygen. Just as I can't fight it any longer, my hands slip from their ropes. In the same moment, my cell phone rings from Kelsey's pocket. Distracted, she turns to quiet it.

I leap onto her, smashing her into the ground. My phone falls beside her. The lock screen fractures between my face and Risa's. I wrap the rope around Kelsey's neck and pull.

**Three Secrets**  
by *Laura Schneider*  
Leesburg, VA

I don't make it a habit of writing in my journal. I'm too busy most of the time and to be honest, it doesn't help me that much. People say that it helps you feel better to write your problems down, but not for me. Re-reading details of my worst moments opens old wounds and makes dealing with the reality of them even more difficult and crushing. So most of the time, my journal gathers dust under my bed, sitting lonely and forgotten.

Until today.

The past couple of days have been rough, to say the least. I have a ton of projects to do for school and extra-long gymnastics practices for State Championships in two weeks. Richard has it even worse. He's a teacher, so he has a mountain's worth of papers, exams, and assignments to grade while going to numerous parent-teacher conferences *and* taking care of me. Plus, it's coming close to the anniversary of the night of my mother's death, so that only adds to his stress. Every single day, he speaks less and the look in his eyes becomes even more haunted. Seeing his grief first-hand and thinking about that night makes my head feel like it's about to explode, so I just have to write something down. *Something.*

It's just a question of what.

I reach down underneath my bed and grab the notebook sitting closest to my pair of high top sneakers. Even though it's a plain black-and-white composition book, I love the cover because it has a bunch of cool momentos on it. Stickers of flowers and butterflies, a piece of a birthday card my grandmother gave to me when I was little, and some pictures from over the years. Me doing a cartwheel in our front yard when I just

started gymnastics. Me playing UNO with my friends during our freshman year of high school with us making silly faces at the camera. Me in a lacy white dress and flowers in my hair holding Mom and Richard's hands at their wedding when I was four, all of us smiling the biggest smiles we ever smiled.

Looking at this cover makes me feel better, if only a little. It reminds me that there are still happy parts and memories of my life. Not everything is sad and forlorn.

*Not everything.*

The subject box has my full name written in my best cursive--*Beatrice Hayley Draskal*. I don't have to turn many pages to find the next blank one. On the top line, I slowly write "Three Things I've Never Told Richard."

It feels like a sin, not telling Richard something. Even though he's not my birth father—he adopted me when he married my mother--he and I are really close and tell each other practically everything. It makes me want to put down the journal, walk downstairs to his office, and just let everything out. But I can't. I just...I *can't*. I feel like it would cause more pain than anything, and that's something neither of us need any more of. So I just write.

*I was holding Mom's ring.*

Mom was the one driving, and I was in the backseat. We were going to pick up Richard at the school he taught at because he had to stay late for parent-teacher conferences, and then we were all going out to dinner. For some reason, I really wanted to hold her ring. I always loved it, and it looked beautiful on her that night with her green-and-brown dress and white sweater. She let me hold it until we both got in the car but for some reason, she forgot to ask me to give it back to her when we left. I put it in my car seat holder until we got to the first traffic light...then I took it out again.

*I didn't tell her the truck was coming.*

I saw the shape of the truck out of the corner of my eye, but I never said anything. I couldn't. To this day, I don't know whether it was because there wasn't enough time or I was too scared to speak. Whatever the reason, before we could do anything, the truck slammed into us. Instantly, we became airborne and flipped over. I somehow stayed conscious through the whole ordeal. It probably only took a couple of minutes for the EMTs to find me and scoop me out of the car, but it felt like an eternity. I tried to call out for Mom, but the only thing that came out of my mouth were giant gasps and little squeals. My thoughts raced as fast as my heartbeat.

*Where am I?*

*Where's Mama?*

*How am I gonna get out?*

When I was put on the stretcher and whisked off into the ambulance, the EMT told me, "Another ambulance is taking your mommy to the hospital. Don't worry." That put me over the edge. I started sobbing uncontrollably, looked up at the EMT, and whispered, "I had her ring. I lost it." Nothing about how the truck came from nowhere, running the red light, and hitting us.

*I named the baby.*

I breathe deeply and close my eyes, trying not to cry. This is the hardest part of the story for me to think about. My mother was pronounced Dead on Arrival when the ambulance got to the hospital. I wasn't told until the next morning, but the hospital staff told Richard right when he got there. The autopsy revealed that she was eight weeks pregnant. Being so little, it took me years to understand the enormity of the fact that I had lost a half-sister or half-brother. Not knowing how to cope, I came up with a name for the

baby: Hayden Ray. It flowed nicely through my tongue, and it could be either a boy's or girl's name. I thought it was a perfect name. My little brother or sister deserved nothing less. But I never told Richard that I named the baby because I didn't know how he'd react. For one, he might think it's ridiculous to name something that doesn't exist. Plus, he might get angry if I bring it up, since he doesn't like it when people bring up the accident. So Hayden remains a figment of my imagination. The sibling I could've played catch with. The person I could've taught gymnastics and everything I knew about in school. The one I probably would have had fights with but give a big hug to later. But that sibling doesn't exist. They were killed in the crash that killed my mother, her marriage to Richard, and the strength of my voice.

Three things. Those three things are the only thing keeping Richard and me from having that perfect father-daughter relationship it looks like we have. The secrets we carry and the heartache we deal with put a strain on our relationship sometimes. But he loves me to pieces, as I do him. We're like the *Lilo and Stitch* family--"broken, but still good."

Later that night when he's making dinner, I walk into the kitchen and give him a big hug.

"I love you, Richard."

His arms squeeze me so tightly that I can barely breathe. When he lets go, he smiles and pecks me on the forehead.

"I love you, too, Beatrice. So much."

One hug can't make up for three secrets. Not by a long shot. It takes a lot more than a hug to get rid of years of pain, agony, and secrets and return to a world where everything is bright and happy like it is on the photos on my journal cover.

But I'd like to think it's a step in the right direction.

## Color My Words

by Evelyn Krieger  
Sharon, MA

The first essay Miranda wrote for seventh grade English class received a red D across the top of the paper. That D stung, not only for what it represented but because it was the wrong color. The letter D is green, like a leaf in summer. Miranda's ears burned as she read the teacher's comment: *You completely ignored the required essay format.* Miranda sulked in her desk. What did a D mean anyway? D for...dull? D for dumb? Why not D for...delightful?

While Mrs. Red-Pen droned on about parallel sentence structure, Miranda wrote beautiful D words in the margin of her paper. Determination, Daring, Delightful, Delicious, Delectable—the leaf green Ds in each multi-colored word soothed her like a shade tree. She added Dreamy.

Some kids called her a Dreamer (as if dreaming were something bad) because Miranda wrote stories about the adventurous life she'd one day live, far away from the closed-minded people in her school and church. Dreaming was her lifeboat through the school day's ocean of tedium. In Miranda's dreams she hugged the mysterious boy's warm body as they rode his motorcycle. In her dreams, she skinny-dipped under August moonlight. She danced flamenco wearing a whirling crimson skirt. Miranda toured Timbuktu. In her dreams, she saw her novel, *Color My Words*, brightening bookstore windows.

But she didn't want to stay a Dreamer. Miranda wanted to be a Doer. (Another D word!) She scribbled down Doer, Daylight, Daybreak, and Dance. She liked how



the crisp green Ds looked next to the red As. Once, when she was five, Miranda told her father his name was Christmas-colored. He looked at her strangely. “And how’s that?”

Miranda thought he was teasing her. She spelled the word aloud. “D...A...D!”

He laughed then lifted her in the air. “You are a strange one, Miranda May. But I L...O...V...E you!”

In kindergarten her teacher made word flashcards and highlighted each vowel in red. Did she need glasses, Miranda wondered? “No, only the A is red!” Miranda cried. The teacher scolded her for calling out. Thankfully, when Miranda closed her eyes, the sad vowels changed back to their proper colors.

First grade was worse. Miss Spector’s voice was the color of pee.

Snapping out of this distant memory, Miranda stared at the lovely D words she’d written on her essay paper. The words shimmered slightly.

“Miranda?”

She looked up to see Mrs. Red-Pen staring at her expectantly. “Well?”

From the desk behind her Tyrone Muller hissed, “Wake up, weirdo.”

“Miranda, I asked you a question,” she asked in a mud-colored voice.

“I’m...not sure,” Miranda answered. She heard stifled grey laughter.

The teacher called on Soo-Yin. “It’s the pronoun antecedent,” she replied, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. She rolled her eyes at Miranda.

Soo-Yin was once Miranda's Best Friend Forever. When Miranda told Soo about the color of her name and how lemon flavored it was, she giggled. "You're cuckoo, Miranda."

When Miranda told her mother that the new boy's voice tasted like dirt, her expression turned to shock. "I said, his voice," Miranda corrected, "not his mouth!"

Miranda's mother sighed. "I want you to stop this nonsense."

Gradually Miranda came to understand that she was alone in her colored world. She consoled herself with the belief that one day she'd meet the boy of her dreams. He'd listen to her stories like he was collecting her words to store for safekeeping. His voice would taste like melted chocolate.

Mrs. Red-Pen thanked Soo-Yin, then frowned at Miranda. "Paying attention will improve your grade."

Miranda made dagger eyes at her teacher as she erased the board. *One day you'll see me in full color*, Miranda thought, although for a split second she feared she'd said this out loud.

"For your homework, please write...." Her teacher's words drifted away like soap bubbles.

The EXIT sign above the door caught Miranda's attention. She smiled at its strategic location. Well, duh! The word EXIT made her mouth water. She liked that it was made of all straight lines. One day she would EXIT this boring place.

When school bell rang, its sound exploded into silver sparks. Miranda's eyes returned to that dismal red D on her paper. Inspiration struck. She took out her own red pen, then added the letters G O O before the D. Miranda grinned. That's more like it!

This wouldn't be the last time Miranda May Rupert turned a D into something good.~

## **Undesirables**

*by Kyndal Holt  
Lovettsville, VA*

I always enjoyed staring into the dancing flames in the deep brick fireplace of my childhood home. It was mesmerizing to see the way they appeared to have a mind of their own. I never thought that those dancing flames would be the last thing I would ever see.

I stood there naked, any remaining dignity stripped away, shivering in the cold November air. The Nazis didn't like to waste clothing when they disposed of us. Berta, my bunkmate, and the closest thing I had to any semblance of friendship, clung to me as we crowded next to twenty other naked women. The lack of clothing gave us a good glimpse of just how starved and malnourished we all really were. The prison suits hid it from sight, but being naked I could see how thin and fragile these women looked; how I must've looked to them.

They say your life flashes before your eyes before you die. I would like to say that it's true, but I had to fight for any images of the happiness I used to know. Of my life before it had gone awry over the blistering pain of being slowly starved, knowing we would all meet a cruel end at the whims of the Nazis. I tried to conjure up images of my mother. I still sought her out as a source of comfort, even on the cusp of womanhood.

I could see her and almost feel the familiar gesture of her tucking my wild brown curls behind my ears. I clung to a memory of her from when I was five and fell out the large oak tree on our quaint farm.

“Darling, whatever happened? Why are you crying so?” she asked, tucking my hair behind my ear, gently drying my tears with her apron.

“There now, it will not hurt for long,” she added seeing as my tears continued to stream.

As I gripped my scraped knee in the shade of the large tree she guessed what had happened and scooped me up in an embrace. She would hold me for as long as I needed it. She always did. Her hair was like molten chocolate, with satin curls that I would stick my little fingers into in an effort to be closer to her. I inhaled her familiar scent. She always smelled of lemons and fresh bread.

“Mama, will you always make me feel better?” I asked, knowing her response before she spoke it, finding comfort in it nonetheless.

“Of course. Be brave my darling girl.”

I never thought there would be a day that I would cry out for her and not see her come running. I would give anything to see her face and touch her hair as she held me and told me it would be all right.

We were told that to escape Berlin would mean freedom from the relentless persecution for people of our heritage and faith. We believed we were being sent to a camp that would serve as a safe place while the war raged.

As our train pulled into the large elegant entrance of what we thought was going to be our salvation, I couldn't help but press my face to the cold window, ignoring my mother's requests that I sit down and wait patiently. I had no idea

that it would've been one of my last chances to really look at her. To see her beautiful face.

In my excitement to exit the train, I was separated from my mother and father. I suppose this was my saving grace. As I got off the train I saw a man roughly thrusting people into different groups. He didn't look like a savior. He yanked me off the platform and shoved me toward a young group of girls, crying out for their mothers and fathers. Looking back I saw my father shouting about their rough manner as he pushed his way through the hesitant passengers.

His warm brown eyes revealed his fear as he took in our new surroundings. His hat fell askew as he pushed through the crowd only to meet a group of Nazis making quick work of separating him and my mother from me. The disgusting symbol of their regime which they displayed proudly on their arms turned my bewilderment into horror. They clubbed him on the head and dragged his slumped body away. It was the last time I ever saw him.

My mother rushed toward me blanketing me in her arms, trying to protect me from this unforeseen threat. Her warmth was like a beacon of hope in the turmoil. We stood in shock as the chaos of our new reality settled over us. They saw our solidarity and began yanking at her while shouting in our faces. She tried to hold on even as they pulled her away.

"Mama, don't leave me!" The words choking me between my sobs.

“My darling, they cannot ever take me from you. Not really.” Tears streamed down her face as she understood the fate that awaited her. That awaited all of us in this hell camp.

“Mama!” I cried again, reaching for her as the guards held me just beyond her grasp.

“Be brave, my Goldie.”

I watched in shocked horror as they dragged her into another group and began pulling at her brown coat and her flowered head scarf, a gift I had given her for her birthday. The group of women she was pushed into were all being stripped naked to the utter shock of those standing nearby. They forced the naked women into a dark building looming a few feet away. It wasn't long until I learned that she was among the first groups forced into one of the gas chambers used to exterminate so many of us.

I wish now that I had been with her. That I had been granted the mercy of dying with her before I could witness the horrors that Auschwitz had in store. Before I knew what it was to be deemed an *undesirable* under the Nazi regime.

I lay shivering in the small bed I shared with another girl. I could never get warm enough, whether it was due to the frigid air or the way my world was torn apart, I didn't know. My body was always sore from the crying that I couldn't control and the work that I was forced to do. My job was to sort the clothing the Nazis stripped from each new arrival, myself included, so that they could sell it for an easy profit. They starved, tortured, and killed us. They had no qualms about

stealing our possessions and selling what they could to the surrounding countrymen that completely ignored the horrors happening right under their noses.

Most days the food was inedible, but when starvation is looming, anything helps to alleviate the hunger pains that never seemed to ebb. I ate moldy bread most days, knowing I would likely be sick later that night. I didn't care. They forced us to eat food that was not kosher, just another way to break our will. I was willing to eat anything to fill the burning void in my belly, even if it was short-lived. I had never truly known what hunger felt like until Auschwitz.

The days stretched into weeks and even months. I lost all semblance of time. The only person I ever spoke to was Berta, who shared my tiny cot. I began to cling to her as I would a sister, sometimes using her as a stand-in for the comfort I missed from my mother. We were forced to give up any and all belongings including the clothes off our backs, and to don a prison uniform the Nazis just stripped off the latest group ushered into the gas chambers. We clung to each other at night, trying to stay close, hoping to chase off some of the bite that told us winter was near.

Though we were trapped in our misery and grief, Berta and I at least felt safe from the wandering eyes of the mad doctor. It didn't take long for the more seasoned prisoners to speak of his treachery. The gruesome stories of what went on in his exam rooms and his obsession with young women and twins was enough



to give rise to new nightmares. He always chose people that he claimed were special.

The new prisoners thought that pleasing him meant potential freedom, but the rest of us knew better. The few that managed to walk back out of his office were changed. Even in a hell like this, where all hopes were dashed, we still clung to the idea that we would someday be saved. Those that survived a visit with the mad doctor lost what little shred of humanity they had left.

It had only been a matter of time until he took a liking to Berta. She was the most attractive girl from our bunk. Her golden brown hair and doe eyes shined even as we faced the biggest horrors of our lives. Even amongst the torture of trying to survive our circumstances, she managed to look beautiful and somehow more whole than the rest of us.

The thought of losing the only person that felt like home to me was enough to turn my stomach. Being naive to the risks we were taking, we determined that if we could make her look sickly the doctor would lose interest and pick a new subject. One of the women that bunked near us could see how desperate we were. She gave Berta some rancid meat she had saved during kitchen duty, guarantying it would bring swift illness. It did.

I lay in our narrow shared cot as Berta continually got up through the night to vomit, sometimes not making it out of the moldy straw mattress that was our bed. I began to think that death would be a mercy to her, and more selfishly for me so that I would get a brief reprieve from the acrid sharpness that was burning in

my nostrils and making my eyes tear up. I started hoping she wouldn't make it back one of the many times she got up so that I may have a moment of peace. I couldn't stand the way she already smelled of death and decay.

She never fully recovered from the illness, lacking the ability to bathe properly and the absence of any a real doctors or medicine. Our plan had worked but with much more dire consequences. The guards noticed how sickly Berta had become, and how her illness, due to unsanitary living conditions, spread rapidly through our bunk. They decided that it was time to exterminate us, as though we were cockroaches infesting their camp. A problem to be dealt with.

I could hear the guards standing outside of the doors to our bunk, shifting their weight from foot to foot to fight off some of the cold. Their conversation replayed in my head over and over.

“We need to dispose of this lot,” the first said.

The second one smirked at him. “Yes, I don't think anyone will make a fuss about clearing out this bunk for a new group.”

“How shall we do it? The gas chamber will be occupied. There is a train coming in this morning.”

“We could always use the fire pits. It would be a lot more entertaining to watch these vermin squirm, and clean up would be minimal.” The second one laughed, relishing the thought of brutalizing those he considered inferior. The gas chambers were too hands off, but in the fire pits they could watch our slow torture.

The idea of being set on fire made me empty the contents of my stomach. I couldn't sit by and let this happen. I thought that maybe I could sneak to another bunk, and if I got caught I could make a run for it. I knew that there was nowhere to go, but maybe they would just shoot me on the spot. It would be a mercy.

My decision made, I told the guards I had to go and sort the clothing that day, that I was expected. They said nobody would be concerned that I didn't show up and pushed me back inside the door.

With her last words, my mother told me to be brave. I would not go to my death without a fight. I prepared myself for a bullet in the back, saying it was the best option I had left, as I raised my knee into the first guard's groin. It was the only distraction I needed to push past them and start running.

The freezing wind whipped my hair around my face, each of my labored breaths stung my throat. My legs quivered from over exertion of the strength and stamina that had long since faded away with my health. My pulse raced and my vision grew dark around the edges as I waited for a gunshot to ring through the air, but it never came. Instead, I felt the steely grip of the other guard as he tackled me to the ground, pushing my face down into the dirt until I cried out. Yanking me up by my hair, he dragged me back to where Berta and the other women from our bunk were waiting, now with several more guards, should anyone else put up a fight.

The Nazis roughly forced us out of our clothes. It only took a few refusals for half the women to be punished with bloodied lips and noses. Everyone fell into

a quiet sense of dread, believing there was nothing left to fight for. And really there wasn't.

There I stood, pressed next to Berta, trying to conjure up memories of my mother and the comfort she always gave me. My blood roared in my head, pierced only by the screams of the women crowded around me as they started to burn. I could smell the scorched flesh and hair of those near the edges of the pit, already engulfed in flames.

It didn't take long before the flames started licking their way up my own body. I looked up to the sky, pleading for God to take me from this fiery hell, but my only answer was the wails of the women surrounding me as pieces of their charred flesh turned to ash and floated into the sky.

My name is Goldie Schmidt. On November 14, 1942, I was burned to death at Auschwitz for my Jewish faith.

## **Jumbo Glue and Too Many Targets**

*by Kathy Kozoma  
Ashburn, VA*

“*Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.* Oh, crap.” Wait, did I say that last one out loud? Judging from the side-eye eyeroll of the teenage girl next to me, I did. Oh well, she’s what-- fifteen? Sixteen? I watch Netflix-- she’s heard worse. Besides, if you were to read the thoughts of the other parents in the school supply section, mine would hardly be the only ones laced with bitterness and despair.

School supplies. Between the time I was a student and when I had children of my own to shop for, I used to wax nostalgic about the scent of a new box of crayons or freshly sharpened pencils. Fluorescent highlighters were a beacon, luring me into the aisles of brightly colored notebooks, folders with images of fluffy cats and dogs plastered across the covers, and trapper-keepers glowing with the promise of a perfectly organized school year.

It pains me to think of how naive I had been in the months leading up to my first child’s entry into the school system. How much would a kindergartner need, anyway? A cute little character backpack? A box of crayons? Maybe a few pencils? Oh, how the school supply gods must have roared with laughter.

It began that fateful morning in late August, as I took a glance at my very first school supply list. With only a few short days to procure the items, I set off. It was the pencils without erasers that ended up being my Waterloo. Why would a five-year-old possibly need those? More importantly, where could they be obtained? Would I need to buy a saw and hack the erasers off “normal” pencils?

Yes, these are the kinds of thoughts that seem almost logical to the minds of harried parents, frantically searching for school supplies. Are we convinced that the perfect schools supplies are the necessary precursor to a good academic year? Do we live in fear that the wrong item will start the year off on a sour note with no hope of recovery? Years from now, will our child be denied entry to the college of their choice because of a school supply mishap in kindergarten? Perhaps. All we know is that there is no telling how the school supply “butterfly effect” might play out.

Ultimately, I discovered the eraserless pencils deep in the aisles of a newly opened craft store-- a store that I have since come to patronize frequently. Its ability to stock exactly the item needed for the perfect (or at least adequate) completion of a project is reasonable compensation for its notoriously slow-moving lines.

Once, early on, I had tried ordering the “convenient” box of supplies that was “delivered right to the school.” I was lured in with promises of saved time, money, and aggravation. Did it save time? Possibly. Did it save money? No way. Did it save aggravation? Not exactly...

The year I tried it my child was in second grade and the supply list called for (among other things) two folders with no restriction on color or design. While other children bought folders adorned with images of adorable animals or favorite characters, our box contained two plain folders-- one in gun-metal gray and the

other in basic black. Because, you know, what seven-year-old isn't excited to pull out an unadorned, dark, paper folder?

And of course, there were always things on the list that would never be used in their entirety, such as thirty-six pencils. That's a pencil a week, people. Have beavers taken over the classroom? I've yet to have a child use even a dozen pencils in a year. If I ordered an annual supply box for each of my children that contained thirty-six pencils (or twenty-four pens, or whatever) I would be drowning in cheap writing supplies after a year or two. And I would still need to shop. Because, while the box provided the requisite pens, notebooks and so on, there were always things on the list "to be provided separately by parents."

Make no mistake, I am in no way faulting individual teachers for these lists. I have learned they are typically started by some enthusiastic, pinterest-inspired committee, and are transformed and mutated as they make their way through the educational bureaucracy. Many teachers are parents themselves and have no desire to willingly inflict this insanity on others.

As the years piled on, I began to view the search for school supplies as an almost mystical experience that connected me with my ancestral, hunter-gatherer roots. There was the initial gathering of the easy to find items, and every year, without fail, there were one or two rare items that would put my skill as a hunter to the test.

I developed several strategies for guaranteeing victory in the supply wars. The first strategy was to strike quickly. As soon as a supply list was posted, I would

assess it using a triage system. Which items would be easy to find? Which items would require hours of delving into Amazon's vast expanses or the website of an off-brand office supply store in Delaware? It took the same kind of skill (and sometimes, pure luck) as anticipating the Christmas season's "must have" toy.

Some years, my searches yielded bountiful harvests of colorful folders and composition books (with not three, but exactly two-hole punches). Other years were lean, with endless trips to various stores resulting in me barely collecting the necessary supplies in time.

To say that I lived in fear of not finding the exact notebook or pens might be an overstatement. Or maybe not. Every parent has heard the stories, and they aren't all (sub)urban legends. I remember the anger and anguish in Missy Jacobson's voice as she recounted the tale of her daughter's first "lightning bolt," which I soon learned to be a form of punishment implemented in school to prevent delinquent children from participating in class parties and fun days. What was the young girl's crime? Failing to bring in workbooks covered in contact paper (a product "to be obtained separately by parents") by the third day of school.

It didn't matter that contact paper had been sold out at every local store for weeks and was on backorder on Amazon. Missy herself had let the teacher know of her predicament. Even so, her daughter was subjected to public humiliation because of Missy's failures as a parent (or at least, that was how Missy saw it). Missy's community of mom-friends shared her shame. We had let one of our own down, both by not being able to find her contact paper and by not insisting that



she take from our own meager supply. We had shared in her innocent belief that reasonableness would prevail in the classroom, and the world would still be spinning on its axis if the books were covered a few days late. Oh, how we were mistaken.

From that day on, we banded together tightly to prevent others from suffering the same fate as Missy's daughter. We used a system of group chats to share intel, like when the next shipment of 1.5" binders was due in at Staples, or which teacher would look the other way if a child brought in a blue folder that was perhaps more accurately described as teal. Let's just say our ability to gather information is rumored to be the envy of certain three letter intelligence agencies.

Still, even our experienced squadron of parents had its limits, which is how I came to be standing here in the school supply section of Target, silently (or rather, not-so-silently) despairing.

I need to find a ruler/hole punch that can fit in a binder. Simple. When I saw it on the list, I had highlighted it with a thick green line, meaning that the item was well within my reach. I had seen them before. I had purchased them before. When the list came out, I had been more focused on what I had thought would be this year's elusive unicorn (or perhaps Bigfoot would be a better analogy) of school supplies-- eight-tab poly dividers with pockets. However, I managed to snag my Bigfoot-unicorn on the very first trip to Office Depot, a new record for finding a supply that had been marked with red highlighter (the gravest level of my triage system). Earlier today, I had even managed to grab a 2-pack of jumbo

glue sticks that Missy had been hunting for days. But the BRHP (binder ruler hole punch) was nowhere to be found.

I had been to Staples, Walgreens, Office Depot, and three different Targets. I checked my stockpile of supplies to no avail. I asked around and to see if and how other parents had found them. Some had scavenged them from their older children's backpacks that had yet to be dumped out from the previous year, while others scored theirs on out-of-state summer trips to grandparents and cousins. Either way, I'm out of luck.

So, here I stand, surveying the shelves once again. I see no sign of my prey. Quickly, I run through my options. There are two other Targets that I could try-- one twenty miles west of here, and the other, twenty miles east. I grab my phone and refresh my open page on Amazon once more before pulling a quarter from my jacket pocket and flipping it in the air in order to determine whether to visit the East or West Target. But the quarter falls to the ground with a tinny clang as I feel my phone buzz with a message. I glance down at the screen, feeling faint as I read the text of my salvation: "Grabbed a bunch of hole punch rulers from the CVS by my mom's house. Let me know who needs one. I've got you covered."

Just like that, the skies open. I'm pretty sure I heard angels singing in celebration (or maybe it was just Adele being blasted from the broken Target sound system). Either way, my list was finally complete. My child could go to school fully prepared, with no fear of being targeted by the teacher for an insufficient stock of supplies. It's fully possible that, in my elated state, I yelled,

“Yes!” and did a celebratory dance in the middle of the aisle. Given the look I just got from the teenage girl, it’s more than possible.

I’m tempted to turn the girl and say, “It’s okay, I haven’t totally lost my mind. Not yet anyway, thanks to a sharp-eyed friend and a CVS in New Jersey.” But I don’t want to depress her. I’m pretty sure that at fifteen or sixteen, the idea that a ninety-nine-cent piece of plastic can bring someone such joy seems pathetic. However, at twice her age (plus a few years), that object represents so much more - success, completion of an odious task, victory of a parent over the convoluted logic of a school system, and most importantly, a community of people looking out for each other.

Even so, we are not done. I grab three packs of jumbo glue sticks and shove them into my shopping basket.

Quickly, I tap out a response on my phone: “You are awesome!!! Meet at Starbucks before meet-the-teacher to swap supplies? BTW, I found and am grabbing some double packs of jumbo glue sticks. Anyone need anything else?”

I power my phone off with a click as I head toward the checkout. My step has a little more spring in it, and I realize that the headache that’s been plaguing me all day has finally disappeared.

From the crackling speaker above my head, I could faintly hear the Beatles crooning, “All you need is love.” Some days, the love from the people around you manifests in the form of cheap, plastic, school supplies.

**Time to Meet Again**  
*by Magdalena Serrano de Caro*  
*Leesburg, VA*

She counted out loud.

“14,840 days!” Might as well be light years. That was the distance between them. This vast void was not what she expected of a married couple that had led such a happy life.

Linda had always found encouragement and support in Mateo. She loved how he made her laugh with silly jokes, in a charming and irresistible way. Certainly, there had been difficult moments; like when her mother became ill or when they had to move because she lost her job. But nothing could have prepared her for this, such an incomprehensible distance between them. Life was so disappointing.

Her face frowned in the mirror. An almost imperceptible wrinkle opened its way to her mouth. She bit her lips and the wrinkle disappeared. It was funny how mirrors created illusions. Her room was bright in the mirror, but she was sure that if she turned around it would be dark and grim.

Sometimes the mirror worked its magic, like when she could see her husband without him noticing. And there he was, silently sitting in his armchair, carelessly holding his newspaper. He looked handsome with his charming smile, and short sideburns balancing the sharp jawline. Oh, how much she loved him. No doubt he had gained weight over the years, but he was still the young man she had happily married in her early twenties.

So many beautiful memories buzzed in her mind, vivid images of their first kiss and her wedding day. She clearly remembered the pride in his eyes when she told him she was pregnant. Mateo was pure excitement when the baby boy arrived. He made a daily

celebration of this gift of nature. It seemed like it was only yesterday that Junior sat on his father's lap as he read the news and they both laughed at the silly cartoons.

She looked back at the mirror and saw her husband still sitting in the armchair.

"Hi, honey" she said, and raised her hands to her mouth. Had she shouted?

The image of her husband in the mirror remained unperturbed. She did not wait for him to answer. It would have been useless. Mateo wasn't paying any attention to what was happening around him. But, she worried. Had he noticed her new wrinkle? Her eyes reflected her own thoughts; like parched Mars, lines, and folds covered the surface of her face. Light years? Yes, she was getting old, too.

"88, 89, and 90. See?" Her voice echoed in the hollow space of the room.

Her brush went gently down the thin white threads of her hair.

"90 strokes a day," she repeated. "That's the secret to long healthy hair."

Linda lifted her proud head, and lightning sparkled in the dry air. Tiny flames of static electricity spread all around her and vanished. Mateo did not move; his glasses perched on his nose and his old smoking pipe rested in his mouth.

Her hand went to the mirror and followed the wisps of smoke that rose dancing in the air. Running her finger on the cold surface, she touched his smart eyes, and the pencil line of his thin mustache. She felt her stomach quiver. She missed everything about him, his morning kiss, the gentleness of his voice, and his strong comforting presence.

A lock of white hair appeared behind her necklace. She felt a mild tingling. Ah, how much she longed for a simple word. It would have been so nice to share her feelings with him.

But what else could she expect? Their universe was in an endless expanding phase, a kiss at the beginning, and then the inertia in their lives slowly working its way to silence.

With the palm of her hand, she brushed a tear away. She did not want him to know that she had been crying. It did not matter, though. Her decision had been made, and nothing was going to change her mind.

She grabbed her suitcase out of her closet, and opened it.

She hesitated. What was she going to say if he asked her where she was going? She was leaving, that was all. There was nothing to explain. The world was a place to explore, and she was eager to live her life. He? Well, he seemed not to be there for her, consumed as he was by his own private world.

All she needed was her morning dress, and her walking shoes. On the top drawer of her dresser was her purse. She took it out and counted the money.

“There is not much left,” she said to herself. “Just a few coins.”

She closed her purse, lifted her arms, and carefully tied her loose hair with a ribbon. Ah... money. What was money after all? Nothing but desert sand meant to shine for an instant and then fade away. Gathering all her strength, she said “*Au revoir*, my love,” and threw a kiss to the image of her husband in the mirror.

She turned around. The room was empty. He was not there again. A couple of loud knocks interrupted her as she started walking toward the door with her suitcase in her hands.

“Are we expecting someone?” She asked in vain. Quickly, she returned her suitcase to the closet. Then she opened the door.

“Grandma!” the young man shouted. He gave her a big hug.

She smiled; her fingers patted his cheek, and felt the resistance of his three-day beard. His smart eyes were so gentle, his face fresh and that jawline so elegant.

“You look like my husband”, she said.

“Of course, grandma, I’m Timmy, your grandson, don’t you remember me?” he asked her and grabbed her hand.

She nodded; her downcast eyes searched for a comforting word in the folds of her skirt.

“Grandma, what are you doing here in your room all by yourself? We’ve been looking for you in the whole nursing home. It’s your birthday! Your best friends are here, waiting for you at the table. Come with me. We will blow out the candles together, right?”

“Oh, yes, dear” she said, her hand holding his arm.

“Tell me dear. How old am I?”

“You must be proud, grandma. You are 90 years old, today.”

They slowly walked to the door. The ribbon in her hair went loose. White shiny curls fell in small waves over her neck and settled over her old shoulders.

## **Trap in the Snow**

*By Nikolaja Gogolja*

*Beograd, Serbia*

The snow kept falling for five straight days, if those murky periods of somewhat lighter, but still rather dark, grey skies could be called “days” and not an eternal night. Luckily, electricity lines were secure, a bundle of thick wires running from the high voltage transmission line half a mile away through a strengthened hollow metallic duct laid over three concrete poles to the station and entering the building down the outer wall and into the basement, where it branched out to numerous machinery.

There was no way we could afford to have electricity cut for longer than an hour at most. That’s why I needed Stephen at the station. A Jack of all trades, he was a master of quite a few, too. I hated him. He was young, limb, good at fixing computers, good with the heater used for both central heating and filtering and heating water supply, good at maintaining the satellite antenna, and good at keeping women smiling. Including Marisa, the woman who had worked with me on the project for years before he arrived, together day in, day out, except for the trips away to summer breaks, mine usually spent with my son on Vancouver Island and hers in Manitoba with her sister. Proximity does that to people — you get closer than you would ever want to be, but as soon as the reason for it is no longer, you drift apart, bemused that you could even share space, and time, with the stranger to whom you are bidding farewell.



I wasn't aware Marisa was planning to leave. One day, I tried kissing her, as she passed me a mug of instant coffee with whitener, more out of a habit than to wish her good morning, a ritual of acknowledging the re-establishment of our togetherness after the two months apart, but she turned away, my lips barely brushing her cheek, and she said she got a job at someplace far less secluded, with far better opportunities, and... she stopped... much more exciting. "So, you've been there and checked it out for nightlife?" I asked. "Nightlife! Don't be silly. I am a middle-aged woman. We both know that. No chance of kids. Too late. Probably no marrying ever, either. But there is still some life left in me and I don't want to waste it all away at this — yes: scientific, but not challenging, and safe, but forsaken end-of-the-world, this Nowhere! We accepted it when there was nothing better available, but nobody can possibly really want this forever. Not even you, Jake!"

She stood tense. The bright sun rays of a still sunny, if already quite cold early September, cast a halo about her head and I could discern the first greys coming through her natural light brown hair. "Why didn't you tell me in June?" I asked. "Because I didn't know," she answered. "Because I wasn't sure I'd get the position. Because I didn't know how you'd feel about it. Because I wasn't sure if we had anything going... on... or not..."

"Well, obviously, we didn't! Have anything. At all!" I chopped words after a long silence. "How do you imagine I can cope with all the work here on my own?"

“Oh, don’t you worry, they are sending my replacement. He’ll be here in eight days. And I’ll stay for another half month after that. Enough time to tell each other everything we have to. Everything we may have wanted to but didn’t. What we should have ... but had no courage to.” She spoke frantically. What was left of North-Western Territories after a significant chunk was chopped off for the new province further east, was as beautiful as it gets in September. “I think I’ll skip the measurement today.” I replied. “I’ll go setting the traps. Might as well use the days of good weather for as long as we have them.” And then I stood and slowly walked to the door, turned the light on and just before heading to the basement where I kept my hunting equipment in a closet under the stairs, I corrected myself: “As long as I have them.”

Stephen arrived three days later. The two of them spent three weeks together at the station. He arrived five days earlier than his two week training period. It was his second job, first real one, he said, after a boring academic temp position in a reputable campus, quite like the one where Marisa was heading. A campus that I would have much preferred to eight long years at the station far north. Yes, the money was good here. Yes, I had no boss, no staff meetings, no one to tell me when to do research, when to go to bed, how to run my life. I even had Marisa. But now, she was leaving, and here to replace her was this jovial young man who could have been my student, had he not managed to finish his studies, get his Ph.D. and even a nine month research position in the nine years since I had

left, first on a sabbatical, followed by the eight years I spent in NWT! No one could replace Marisa.

Not only was she still pretty in her late 40s, but she was an expert in the field. She had authored four significant articles even before we arrived to the station, eight years younger and full of enthusiasm. We did seven articles together, almost one each year, that were quoted widely. Indeed she had mentioned that when she applied for the other job, they said they had followed her work.

She took a motherly stance towards Stephen from the start. He was certainly thirteen to fifteen years younger than her, which put him almost at the age of my son, whom I got just as I was graduating from high school, and left with his mother, to only see him occasionally during the long years, and who, naturally, bore a grudge against me so we only started mending our relationship when I started vacationing in the by then for most of the time empty home of my parents near Nanaimo and inviting my grandsons over for the weekends. I was happy he allowed me to. He could have rejected me, just as I did him, when I decided scholarships and science mattered more than family.

Yet, I couldn't see Stephen as a boy I owed anything. Marisa went over the board with instructing him in detail about his duties and what and how "the professor" — me — wanted things done at the station. He picked up quickly, which wasn't a big deal as the rules were standard and the equipment surprisingly modern for the remoteness of the post, was apt at everything he did, showed respect for both Marisa's and my age and expertise, but without ever slipping to

overbearing awe. I suppose he was everything one could want in a junior fellow. I suppose that's what I hated about him.

You couldn't find a fault to what he did. Yet, Marisa's interest in him and their obviously greater closeness — for he was professional and civil in his dealing with me — irritated me. But, aware that we would be spending several long winter months together, I didn't want to slip into the rôle of a grumpy old man. So I stayed away, allowing them to get even closer.

Of course, he had mentioned a long term liaison, and a break up, that had made him apply for this job, as he “needed some time to think it through”. Marisa nodded compassionately. “This is not a place to heal wounds. It's not a spa resort. It's a place to work hard, a place where loneliness gets to you and you need strength.” I said. “I can see you are good at many things, but how are you against depression? Are you as psychologically strong as you seem to be physically? I couldn't cope with having an associate who breaks and needs help!”

“Jake, I'm sure Stephen will be just fine!” Marisa retorted. “Just give him a few more days. He's already at home here. Yesterday he went all the way to the Wolf Creek on foot.”

“Yes, professor!” he chirped. “I'm fine and I enjoy it here. The nature is... so... flabbergasting.” He burst laughing. “I mean it's awesome. Incredible. Nothing like what you imagine before actually coming here.”

“I would prefer it if you didn't go that far on your own, Stephen,” I admonished.

“I took a gun, of course,” he said apologetically.

“It’s not about that. There are no wolves here right now” I said deliberately. “There will be some passing through later on, but they won’t stay. It’s about the ground. You do not know it. Until it freezes over, the earth gets mushy, swampy... It gets dangerous. You shouldn’t go away on your own like that. Of course, you are an adult, Dr. Appenzell, and I am not telling you what you can and cannot do, but I think it’s not wise.”

There was a faint reproach in Marisa’s look. A good relationship was developing, why spoil it, it told me. A week later she was gone. Stephen Appenzell and I stayed.

The seasons change quickly in the north. One day you’ve got the shrubbery in hues of gold and orange and rust-red, and next morning there’s a metre of snow. Once it has fallen, we only leave the station to check the measuring posts and, rarely, to set traps or pick the catch from them. We have a permit to hunt Native-style. Stephen accompanied me most times, and manned two measuring stations on his own; I kept the other three. We talked a little, a couple of times watched hockey on satellite TV together. He tried being nice. Yet, I didn’t like him. He was not the cause of, but was coincidental with, Marisa’s departure. I bore a grudge against him. I fantasised how convenient it would be if he just disappeared in the blizzard. But I knew I needed his housekeeping skills. Surely they’d send someone else? We were too important for them not to do it. But it might take some time.

...

It was a season when wolves pass through. Some were sure to stay at the traps if anything was caught inside. The snow kept falling for five straight days, the paths to the traps were indiscernible.

“Dr. Appenzell, could you check the traps on your own today?” I asked. “I think I may have hurt my knee yesterday while shovelling the snow around the building.”

“Sure, I’ll do it after I check the measurements,” he replied. Ten minutes later he started putting heavy winter jacket, cap, and boots on. He was quickly all set, it would have taken me longer even though it had become automatic for me in all those years of *happy loneliness* at the edge of the world, beyond the pale of “normalcy” that had become my bliss, alongside the woman I respected, felt comfortable with, and loved. Who was no longer. Not here, at least.

“Make sure you take your gun along,” I shouted as I heard the inner door to the exit hall close. I am not even sure why I did it, to clear my conscience or because the satellite monitored everything we did and kept the records in a cloud in cyberspace for two weeks at a time. It was useless shouting, anyway; he could barely hear my voice and only if he paid close attention in the hermetically double-locked exitway, and he would be taking the gun anyway, that much he has mastered from the start.

I knew it would do him no good whatsoever against a pack of migrating wolves. Three days before I report of his disappearance, and at most two weeks before they send a replacement, I thought. Provided there is no major breakdown

in all the systems, I can cope that long. And whoever that new arrival is, he or she would not have been the witness of Marisa's departure, as she took off in that unbearably light-hearted way, leaving all behind almost offensively easily. No, the replacement won't be Stephen, the young conqueror. Nature was on his side, without a doubt, but not always, not in every respect.

And as I watched on the monitor his figure which appeared lithe even while heavily bundled in polar clothes approaching the snowmobile and setting it in motion adroitly, my lips curved into a faint, expectant smile.

## **The Day Before Boxing Day**

*by William Suboski*

*Kent, OH*

Joyous Wells Sysops lay in her bed warm under the thick duvet, no longer anxious, merely dispirited, four months after the Path had collapsed. The anxiety came and went but the room helped and if she didn't think too deeply it could almost be her room on Earth...and not what it truly was, a copy built by Maincore as a psychological crutch for a human stranded alone 12,400 light years from home.

She lay listless in bed. No reason to get up. No reason to stay in bed. No reason to do anything. A small thump at the door. The Maincore was discreet. Always respecting her privacy, this room a copy of her childhood bedroom on Earth, her sanctum inviolate. Yet also never leaving her fully alone, not allowing her time to brood.

She opened the door and collected the breakfast tray. Waffles and scrambled eggs. She sat eating at her desk, the food good, filling the smallest part of the hole in her. She read the note three times - not really understanding.

"Good morning, Ms. Wells - I hope you enjoy this meal. When you have time I should like a few moments conversation. - Maincore"

She ate slowly. Trying again...another day...to find a reason to begin another day. The food was good. At times she wanted to rage. Mostly she wanted to cry. She chewed mechanically.

Joyous Wells Sysops - friend and "surgeon" to Maincore - was now herself being tended by Maincore. Lured, enticed, nursed, choose a verb - could a



computer give her a reason to continue? Maincore had tried. He proposed that this unchosen time be used to best effect. He could improve her, make her stronger, smarter, faster - and for what? For what?

Irony on irony...she had always considered herself introverted and quite asocial, a self-illusion that collapsed within days of her total isolation. Joyous now a society of one, yearning for anyone else. But even that was untrue. All of this would be tolerable, if only Jacob were here...she blinked away a tear.

She sat a few minutes then spoke to the air:

"I haven't decided, Maincore. I just don't know."

The answer back, a soft tenor.

"No, Ms. Wells, it is not that. Something else, a small point." A pause. "You are from Iowa? It is Christmas day in Iowa, December 25, and I wanted to wish you a happy Christmas."

She bit back a harsh response and kept her voice gentle.

"Merry Christmas to you, too, Maincore."

"Thank you, Ms. Wells. When you have time please come to the gallery. I want to show you something. Please don't wait too long."

Finally curious.

A few minutes later and dressed in drab utilities she walked the few hundred feet to the gallery window. Something - something was happening. Swirling white dim to almost gray, it was snowing into the cold stone canyon. She stood transfixed. Falling flakes, how could this be?

"It last snowed like this, smaller and fewer flakes, twenty-six years ago on March 3. What was your best Christmas, Ms. Wells?"

Any Christmas with Jacob...but that wasn't true. She had promised herself she would not become a living memorial to a reality that never was. There had been hard times with Jacob and hard Christmases.

Flakes swirling down. Floating into the window "glass". Looking up and out into an infinity of flakes. Swirls and curls of angel hair.

"Fourteen. I was fourteen. I liked the boy next door. We shoveled the walks together...had a snowball fight, made snow angels...wandered around the yards in each others footprints and utter stillness...and he kissed me. My first kiss."

"A beautiful memory, Ms. Wells, thank you."

She stood and watched the flakes for the next hour, not aware that she was slowly dancing, and only later that day, after she had unwrapped the sweater and socks Maincore had presented her - a Maincore with a sense of humor - and stared at the real gift, the framed photo of her own smiling face at the gallery window, did she realize she had smiled at all, which made her smile more.

"Maincore - Alan, is it? Named for Alan Turing, I presume? My name is Joyous...please call me Joy."

Alan ufogged a Christmas tree, a vision from Dickens. A thousand million twinkling lights and strings of popcorn and cranberries and carved wooden ornaments and gossamer stringers of wispy beauty...

Curled up in bed, filled with turkey and stuffing, warm under the duvet and with a smile on her face, "Thank you, Alan. Yes. Let's begin after the holidays". She laughed and fell asleep.

## **Mysterious Ways**

*by Leanne Manzo*

*Purcellville, VA*

Summer of '88 started out slow. Three months of break meant weeks filled with the pool, days-long slumber parties, and hanging out with boys. In fall, we'd start junior high; I was in no hurry, dreading the teachers, homework and drama. I suspected I was only invited along with the boys because I'd been friends with Ella and Kim since kindergarten. Kelly joined us in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and we all became inseparable. Ella was gorgeous, Kim was brilliant, Kelly was hilarious. And, I was their friend. By the time Ella wanted to hang out with boys, there was no way for them to tactfully dislodge me, so there I was.

Kelly was the first to get a boyfriend, meaning she sat next to him on the bus to the mall, where boys and girls headed their separate ways, trying to accidentally bump into each other later. Kelly was intense; she LOVED her boyfriends and getting dumped would devastate her for days. She spent that summer, and many others, in a state of devastation.

Ella always had a boy by her side. Even if they weren't dating, boys wanted to be seen with her, which she adored.

Boys liked Kim, but she was determined to wait for The Right One. She thought that was Adam, until he asked Amber out. Kim then started a boy-hating stage which lasted almost a year. The boys still asked, though.

I was the lone girl in The Pack who had not been asked out. Ever. The boys weren't mean. They'd call to ask how I was, then causally ask if I thought Someone

liked them. I was everyone's pal, and the lie I told myself was I didn't mind. The reality was I felt rejected, daily.

My mom patiently listened to me each time I came home lamenting I was TWELVE and still alone. After listening a while, she'd stop me to remind me how she'd met my dad only because he went to the wrong house. He'd been searching for tall, loud brunette Sherron; he'd been misdirected to quiet, nothing-colored-hair Sharon. Dad never would have come looking for her, mom insisted, but once he found her, he never went looking for anyone else. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," she'd say. Honestly, I didn't understand what He had to do with it. If the Lord really wanted to help me, He could have made me more like Ella or Kelly or Kim. I wasn't pretty enough or smart enough for the boys. I wasn't anything enough.

Three weeks into summer, most of us were at the park, either watching or playing the baseball game. Minutes into the fifth inning, someone screamed "FIRE!!!" I turned to see everyone pointing to a huge plume of smoke coming from the adjacent neighborhood. The game stopped as players rushed to the fence, trying to get a better view. The stands cleared as we joined them, talking excitedly. But, Danny Shula was stone silent as he walked toward the fence. "That's my house," he said flatly. We talked over each other, telling him no way, his house was to the left, wasn't that tall. He continued to stare. "It's my house."

It was his house. They never discovered how the fire started. Miraculously, no other home on the street was touched. But, Danny's house burned to the ground.

Although we hung out, I didn't know Danny well. He'd moved in before 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and we weren't in class together until Mr. Hanson's, 6<sup>th</sup>. But, we were devastated for him. News was bad: the house was gone, they'd had to dig through rubble, Danny's mom threw up, a dumpster was coming...

It was Ella's idea to go. Since the fire, Danny had become her latest interest. "We HAVE to," she insisted. "He lost everything. We can SAVE DANNY'S STUFF! He needs us!!" Kim wasn't swayed, saying it seemed invasive. But, Kelly and I agreed to help. The day before the scheduled dumpster, we boldly rode our bikes to the remains of Danny's house,

I was struck by the combination of rubble and treasure. The roof collapsed, but a model plane survived, which I grabbed. A pile of ashes contained an intact jar of buttons. There was a desk tipped sideways, a large metal drawer half-open. I started to walk around it when I glanced down, noticing the envelope and stopping in my tracks -- I had that envelope. It was from Mr. Hanson, containing our art projects and journals. All year, we'd spent 15 minutes/day writing in journals, which Mr. Hanson kept locked up. He'd given us topics most days, but on Fridays, we could write whatever we wanted and fold the page in half, if we didn't want him to read it. Sometimes on Fridays, I would make spelling mistakes

on purpose and then fold my page over, just to see if he would correct them. He never did.

I reached into the drawer, finding the envelope still intact. Peering inside, I looked past art projects to find Danny's journal. I'd slid it out of the envelope when I heard the yelling. "WHAT'S GOING ON?!" The yeller sounded furious. I shoved the journal into my bag but still had the envelope in hand when I turned to see Danny's neighbor, followed by Ella. "We're Danny's FRIENDS," Ella was explaining, as Kelly hid, laughing. "We just came to help."

"That family has been through too much!" shouted the man. "You girls can't be here. DROP IT!" He was talking to me; I immediately complied. "Now, GET, before I call someone!" he yelled. I was off the property before Ella and Kelly could reach their bikes. They raced after me, Ella howling, "Thea! Stop!!!"

"I have to GO!" I shouted over my shoulder, convinced the police were already on their way.

Running into my house without a word, I headed to my bedroom, tossing my bag on my bed. Why was I feeling guilty? We'd been HELPING. Stupid neighbor. Near tears, I paced until calming down, finally opening my backpack to remove the model plane and journal. I never knew Danny liked models. I didn't know much about him, really.

That thought was with me as I glanced at his journal. If I didn't know Danny, how could I help him? Maybe he'd written something that'd help me know him better?

I started to flip through the pages. The writing was passionless, filled with, "*fine, boring, okay.*" I scanned through the journal, skipping Fridays, and learned nothing new about Danny, except he needed spelling lessons. There had to be more to him. He REALLY needed support right now, I justified to myself. And, I'D never promised to not read Fridays...

His first two Friday entries were a little more revealing. In the first, he was mad his parents wouldn't let him get a skateboard. The second was about video games he wanted. But, it was the third Friday entry that left me stunned:

*"I love TG! I want TG!! I NEED TG!!!!!"*

I read it four times before setting the journal down to think. My heart raced as I started going through our class in my mind. There was Tina, last name Sellars. Tristan Kellar. Tiffany...Hogan. The only girl with initials TG in our grade was ME, Thea Gilbert. Danny, the leader of The Pack, was writing about ME.

Jogging in place for a minute to deal with the adrenaline, I sat back down and quickly read through the rest of the Friday entries. A lot were complaints, some were about things he wanted, but SEVEN of them were about ME. He always wrote in code "*TG makes me CRAZY happy! Cant wait to see TG! TG is awesome!!*" I didn't understand why he'd never said anything to me until the fifth TG entry: "*SO mad. Dad said I cant go for TG until HIGH SCHOOL! How can I wait that long!*" That clicked for me. My cousin couldn't date until she was 16. Some parents had those rules. Maybe Danny's did because they knew he was so serious about me. His last TG entry confirmed this.



*"My parents said they know how much I love TG and they won't stop me from pursuing in high school if I promise to stay focused in school and show them how important it is for me! YES!!!!!!"*

I set the journal down with tears in my eyes. DANNY wanted ME. For the first time in my life, a boy wanted me, and this boy loved me so much, he was willing to wait TWO YEARS to pursue me!

When Ella called to see what I'd found, I just told her about the plane. How could I admit I had the journal?? Knowing what I knew, however, gave me a confidence I'd never possessed. In fact, I almost felt sorry for Ella. I let her give the plane to Danny, realizing she needed his approval more than I did. He already loved me; I didn't need to do or be anything different. Maybe this was one of those mysterious ways my mom meant, but, with this unexpected find, I now knew I was enough, just as I was.

There was freedom in knowing Danny could not date me until high school; I expected nothing from him right now. This freedom extended to other boys. I didn't care if they asked me out because I knew how Danny felt. I started junior high with the quiet confidence of someone who knew she was loved. If anyone was mean or insulting to me, I let the comments go. After all, DANNY, one of the most popular kids in school, cared for me. In two years, he'd be my boyfriend. I could wait for the impending validation.

This anticipation carried me through junior high. Danny and I didn't actually talk much. We only had art class together, but he would often ask to

borrow my supplies when he forgot his. I smiled whenever I saw him, sometimes giving him a look to let him know I knew. Once, he looked back, baffled, asking, "What?!" I just kept smiling. The Pack slowly dissolved as each of us started pursuing new interests and friends. But, I remained confident.

Funny enough, over time, the assurance I had in knowing my high school years held the promise of a boyfriend morphed into a general optimism. Classes, friends, volunteer work were all going great. By the time high school started, I wasn't even bothered when we heard Danny would be going to a remedial school. Somewhere along the line, I'd realized we might be a weird couple. When he came back to our school junior year, any thoughts of dating were gone. He was now an athlete, known for his wild parties. We were too different. But, I still smiled each time I saw him, appreciating how much he'd once cared for me.

Our 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion was set for another warm summer day, and we arrived in groups, as we had our first day of junior high. My husband stayed home with our kids, so I could catch up with my old friends. I shuttled a very pregnant Kim and a newly divorced Kelly. Ella claimed work was keeping her away, but I expect it was nerves.

I'd slipped the journal into my purse, knowing it was time to return it. It had been in my closet these past decades, a reminder that there'd been a boy, way back when, who'd loved me before anyone else had. It had provided confidence throughout my teens. But, it was not mine to keep.

We found Danny and some friends by the bar, talking loudly about the playoffs. He gave us side hugs when we arrived, and we talked, joked and laughed for a while. As the conversation started to break up, I tapped Danny on the arm to take him aside. "Can we talk a second?"

"Sure," he said, looking over my shoulder and smiling to Kelly. "What's up?" Kelly followed the crowd, tilting her head for Danny to follow. He held a finger up to her as he looked at me.

"I have something I need to show you," I started, pulling the journal out of my purse. He glanced down, surprise registering on his face. "Whoa - that's a journal from Mr. Hanson's class. I HATED those things! Did you write something awesome about?" He laughed as I tried to maintain my earnest expression.

"No, Danny - this is YOURS. We went to your house after the fire, and I found it. I'm so sorry I never gave it to you. I don't know why..." I'd rehearsed what I was going to say, but now was overwhelmed. I wanted to thank him for seeing something in me when I'd not seen anything worthy in myself, to tell him how much it meant to me that someone like HIM had wanted someone like ME. I was about to explain how life-changing it had been for me when he grabbed the journal out of my hand and started flipping through. "Oh, too funny. I can't believe you found this! Hah! Man, I forgot this! I was so mad at my dad all the time!" He found one of the folded pages and started turning it over. "I never trusted Hanson, so I used initials when I wrote stuff. Check this out."

He was at the page stating He Loved TG. I started to blush a little, but before I could speak, Danny said, "I LOVE TG.' That meant "The GAME" - - HAAAAA!! I was OBSESSED with football, but my folks wouldn't let me even TALK about it until I was in high school. Remember, I switched schools, so I could up my grades and play? Crazy. Too bad you didn't find my art from his class. That stuff rocked. But, thanks for bringing this - you're the best!" He gave me another side hug and turned to follow Kelly before I could say a word, tossing the journal into the trash as he walked away.

I have no idea how long I was standing there, speechless, embarrassed, flabbergasted. The hope that had carried me through school was based on...nothing. He'd not wanted me. Apparently, no one had wanted me - - not until I'd met Stuart, in college. Stuart, who was now home with our kids. My eyes filled with tears as I started laughing and crying simultaneously, standing alone until Kim walked over. "C'mon - I gotta pee. What's wrong with you?! I'm supposed to be the hormonal one. Are you pregnant, too?!" she asked, half-kidding.

"No, I don't think so," I said, calming myself down. "I just suddenly remembered that the Lord works in Mysterious Ways." I walked off arm-in-arm with Kim, still laugh-crying, finally knowing my mom's words to be true.

**Hope**  
*by Peregrine North*  
*Leesburg, VA*

Dmitri stamped his foot. It was useless. Seven layers and a wool coat, leather gloves, rabbit fur hat, it was all useless. The vicious Siberian wind bit at his face mercilessly and rattled in the rusty gutters on the sides of the concrete prison block that he was guarding.

It was nearly 1am. Yevgeny was late. Yevgeny was always late, but Dmitri had less patience tonight than most nights. Most nights you lost track of the minutes and hours standing there in the burning cold and so someone being late was of little consequence. But tonight was different and they had planned things too well to ruin it all by poor timing. Everything was in place, and now it was time to act and hope that absolutely nothing went wrong. There was no margin for error tonight.

Part of his mind kept a lookout for his tardy comrade, and another wandered back over the hours and days of the last two weeks. Much like the minutes of the night watch, the days of a prison guard's existence tended to merge into one long, boring film. You might remember an incident here or there. But those incidents were usually bad and you wanted to forget them, and with enough vodka and mental suffocation you could.

But the last two weeks had been so very different. The last two weeks had been alight with planning and thoughts and schemes, jotted notes and clandestine conversations, and the images of those fourteen days had imprinted themselves on

his brain with such sharpness and gravity that he felt as though he remembered every minute. The long, off-duty nights where he, Yevgeny and Aleksandr drew up plan after plan and threw away each one as they found its flaws. The way the candlelight danced upon those bottles of vodka that stood untouched in the corner of their barracks room, the dusty shot glasses upturned upon the corks that stuck out at careless angles from the bottlenecks. That vodka had been their only comfort against the greyness of their daily duties, the endless cold, and most of all against the things they saw in that prison, the things they had done, the things they had ignored. It was the glue that had held together a rapidly fragmenting system of life.

But on those nights there was no time for vodka. He remembered the way Aleksandr's hawklike eyes narrowed as he carefully drew the plans, the way Yevgeny laughed at such a volume that it was a wonder their supervisors or some guards more dedicated to Soviet ideals had not heard them. Laughter did not happen in that camp, and he smiled a little as he wondered anew how Yevgeny's howls and the excited chatter had not betrayed the whole thing. Those nights they had been alive, filled with some fire that they had never experienced but that they recognized like their own names.

Soon enough the soft trudge of feet on the side of the building around the corner awakened Dmitri from his reminiscing. He didn't turn.

"You ready?" said Yevgeny.

"Yes, but if you talk that loud you'll make dog food of us both. Come on."

The two of them went about five steps to their left, near the main entrance to the prison block in which fifty prisoners were kept in ten cells. Dmitri looked up and diagonally, up towards the watchtower and its ever searching spotlight. He looked beyond it, to an administrative building a little ways in the distance. He saw a tiny flash in the window. That was enough.

“Alright, Aleks is ready.” Dmitri took a set of heavy keys out of his pocket and unlocked the windowless, ironclad door of the prison block, the hinges crying out and shattering the well-kept stillness of that frosty, early spring night. He closed the door behind himself and Yevgeny, and they walked straight down the center aisle of the prison. Most prisoners were asleep or at least very quiet. Most were not interested in what was going on. Perhaps they had some kind of hope left that someone would come for them, but Dmitri had a dark feeling that hope had little to do with it. Some of them simply did not care anymore, and that was a lethal concession. He knew those ones were as good as dead.

Yevgeny went a little ahead and entered a room on the left by himself. Dmitri heard the great *clack clack* as he pulled the breaker switch and ensured that all the lights on the inside and outside of the block would remain dark until they were long gone.

Dmitri turned right and unlocked the very last cell before the far exit. There were five of them in there, five out of fifty, and he felt a slight twist of hesitation as he looked at them. The chances of a prisoner surviving inside a Soviet prison were almost zero, and the chances of one surviving outside it were in the negative

numbers. The prisoners were an average of thirty to thirty-five pounds underweight, and their shabby prison clothes were going to be no match against the night wind. He wondered if he was doing the right thing or leading them to their deaths, and wondered why he was thinking about that now.

He motioned silently for them to exit. Yevgeny had unlocked the back door and was holding it open. A few prisoners from other cells lifted their heads and watched the happenings. Dmitri hoped at least a few more would risk it, and he found himself quickly walking up one row of cells and down the other, motioning for more to come, whispering loudly in a language only a few of them understood that it was not too late, that they could come, that they could try. He knew they had not planned on a large convoy, and that the seconds he was spending on this final roll call were precious. But he couldn't help it. There was something alive in him that had been dead before, and it was hard to silence it. He hoped fiercely that a few more would come. But none did. They just put their heads back down and went to sleep. They had given up.

"Dmitri." Dmitri jumped slightly at Yevgeny's voice. "Dmitri, look." Yevgeny motioned outside. The searchlight of the far tower was out, as it was supposed to be.

The electrical room for that area of the camp was located on the ground floor of the building whence Alex had signaled them, and he had put out the light by snipping a couple of critical wires. He was one of the smart ones, and therefore was often employed in



administrative roles and had access to most of the buildings in the camp. But what concerned his two friends was the repair crew that had been dispatched with alarming speed to address the issue with the searchlight.

“That has to be the fastest response time in the history of the Union,” Dmitri said bitterly. There were no two ways about it. They had to move.

He gave a more urgent signal for the prisoners to follow. All exited, and Yevgeny locked the door. And they all trotted off down a pitch black lane of dirt, into the underbrush, out of sight, Dmitri leading, then Yevgeny, then the five prisoners, as quiet as cats, all in a row.

They came out the other side of the patch of brush in a few minutes and trudged through the snow to the outer wall. Dmitri took one look back towards the darkened spotlight and the building behind it.

“Come on, Aleks, get out of there,” he said in a harsh whisper.

Yevgeny looked back too, and all of them stood there for an agonizing three seconds, searching the dead spotlight and the administrative building and everything they could see, hoping desperately that Aleksandr would appear. But he did not. This was the part of the plan that had been the most difficult to agree on. Aleks had told them to go if he did not appear within five minutes of the light signal. He had made them agree to it. And time was up.

“He is smart,” Dmitri said. “He will find a way.”

But the rest of them had to keep going. The search light being “broken” meant that no one had a hope of spotting them, the crystal clear skies provided

just enough light to illuminate their way but not enough for them to be seen, and the cruel winter wind was raising a fair enough howl to cover their sound. If there was ever a perfect night for a death race, this was it.

Dmitri was grateful that this particular prison had made the error of using the same locks for all the outside doors, and he used his prison keys to open the door leading through the wall. When all were on the other side, he locked it again, and they moved in a silent herd across a small field, and up a hill, to a knoll that afforded a view of what was next. What was next was the part that he feared. The part that might kill them all, especially the prisoners. The part that might prove him a complete and utter fool, an inglorious footnote in the annals of the Red Army, if anyone ever found the bodies, which was unlikely considering it was March and there was almost certainly more snow ahead.

He looked out on the vast emptiness ahead. The snow was untouched, drifting in great white dunes across the immeasurable expanse of the Siberian plains. No animal or human was daft enough to try it. He knew he would be shot if he went back, so he had to risk it. The prisoners might have a chance if they returned and begged for mercy. Maybe.

One of the prisoners stepped alongside Dmitri. He did not seem over-bothered by the cold.

“It’s really pretty,” he said. His words were a jumble to Dmitri. It was English, he thought, or at least that’s what it sounded like. But he looked at the prisoner’s face and if anything could be read from it, fear was not there. He was

smiling slightly, and took a deep breath, such a breath as would have put a knife in your lungs, but the prisoner laughed. Dmitri realized it was probably the first clean air he had breathed in a little while.

The spotlight was working again. Yevgeny motioned with this head that they needed to make tracks. Dmitri looked at the prisoner.

“You can go back,” he said, gesturing pathetically to the prison camp behind them with a wave of his hand. “You can go back.” He knew the prisoner didn’t speak Russian but he seemed to understand enough.

“*Nyet*,” the prisoner said emphatically. He strode out, straightening his oversized hat, his hole-ridden shoes catching the glint of the moonlight, his threadbare jacket a joke in these temperatures. He looked back at Dmitri.

“I’m a boy scout,” he said in his odd way of talking. “All those cold Wisconsin nights are gonna finally come in handy.”

And he waded out into the snow. Dmitri didn’t know what he was on about, but he, Yevgeny and the other prisoners leapt into the snow after him and disappeared into the darkness.

They had gone only a few steps when a rustle behind a nearby tree caused Yevgeny and Dmitri to raise their rifles with lightning speed. They herded the prisoners behind them and took a step forward.

“Friendly,” said Aleksandr, appearing in the moonlight bearing a cargo of woolen coats and pilfered fur hats and wearing a smile that put that fire in all their

hearts, the fire that had lit the way through those two weeks of secret plans.

“Forgive the delay.”

**Transcendent**  
*by Charles Maranto*  
*Ashburn, VA*

Once I had the perfect combination of cream and sugar, I took my coffee and sat down at an empty table in the back of the coffee shop. I was on break. Suddenly, the door swings open and in walks Raymond, one of our most regular regulars. He was a mess – same unwashed t-shirt that he'd worn for the past 3 days, shaggy brown hair that had apparently never seen a brush, tennis shoes so dilapidated that it looked like he'd swiped them from a landfill. He was late twenties and about 130 lbs. Raymond always moved with this frantic energy like he was on the edge of figuring out a world changing revolutionary synthetic fuel or who killed JFK or who knows what. Maybe he was brilliant, maybe he was completely insane, maybe he was on drugs. Hmmm . . . that last one sounds like a real possibility. He walked to the counter and ordered his usual Caffe Americano. Then he looked over, saw me, and headed to my table. Oh no.

“KEV,” he blurts out.

Then he plops down at my table. Dang. I'm burnt-out and he's wired-out, which doesn't make for an ideal conversational balance. Then it begins...

“Allen Weatherby is missing,” says Raymond. “Like, really missing. I don't mean that no one has seen him lately, I mean he's not responding to messages, emails, calls, nothing. Gruber. I don't trust Gruber. Weatherby has freaking vanished.”

“Raymond, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Kev, yesterday, like I was telling you about the project . . . remember? . . . Weatherby, I’ve told you . . . he runs it. Gruber is his boss. There’s been all sorts of conflict, backstabbing, jealousy, greed . . . I told him he had to contain the work . . . take precautions . . . now he’s like gone . . . he could be dead. I don’t trust Gruber . . .”

“Raymond, stop. Yeah, I remember the name Weatherby, but dude, other than ‘he runs a project’ I don’t know about him. I’m sorry he’s missing, but I’ve got five minutes left on my break and I’d help if I could, but there’s nothing that I can do.”

“Kev, his life is at stake, the work is at stake. If someone has...”

Then my phone rings.

“Hold on Raymond. It’s Sarah, my girlfriend. Just hold a sec.”

“Hey Honey, what’s up?”

“Kev, hey, you’re coming by, right?”

“Yeah. I got like 45 minutes to go before I’m off.”

“Everyone’s supposed to be here for the dinner party in like 30 minutes.”

“I know, but I told you, I’m not off till 8:00pm. Then I’ll be straight over. I told you that.”

“I know. I’m just kind of overwhelmed. Sorry.”

“Sarah, it’ll be fine. See ya soon. Love ya.”

“Okay, love ya, bye.”

I ended the call.

“Kev, I gotta find him now. I need you to help me. The work is at stake. His life is at stake...”

“Then call the police.”

“I did, but it doesn’t fit the ‘missing persons’ criteria.”

“Look Raymond, sorry, I gotta get back to work, and then I have to be at my girlfriend’s dinner party. I’m sure you can find somebody to help you.”

I walked back behind the counter.

“TALL, HALF-CAFF, SOY LATTE!” yelled Carol.

“I got it,” I responded. I started making the drink. Raymond slides up to the counter next to me.

“I’ll pay you,” he says.

“Raymond, no, I’m not taking your money, and I don’t have time now anyway.”

“One thousand dollars,” says Raymond.

“What?”

“One thousand bucks. I’m serious.”

“You got one thousand in cash to give me right now?”

“I’ll be back in two minutes,” says Raymond. And he’s out the door.

This was absurd. I’ve got a record of making quick poor decisions, but one thousand dollars, sorry, but yes. So, I’ll go somewhere with him, we won’t find anything, then I’m done. What could go wrong?

“GRANDE CAFÉ AMERICANO. TALL VANILLA LATTE,” barks Carol.

Five minutes later, the door swings open. It’s Raymond. He scoots up to the side counter, under hands me a wad of bills. It’s hundred-dollar bills, ten of them. Oh jeez! The dude wasn’t lying. I jam the bills into my pocket. I pull out my cell phone and pretend I’m on a call.

“CAROL, FAMILY EMERGENCY, I GOTTA GO. REALLY SORRY!” I start walking towards the door.

“Uh . . . okay,” she says. “. . . hope every is okay.”

We jump into Raymond’s car – a silver Audi TT.

“Nice ride,” I said, surprised.

We gotta go by the office first,” said Raymond as he accelerated.

“Raymond, why did you need me? Why not someone else?”

“Muscle for one thing. You’re like a 240-pound brick wall. I’m 134. It’s too risky to involve anyone that I work with – too many unknown political alliances. And I’m recently from Illinois, I don’t know anyone else.

“Muscle? Wait, you’re not saying there’s going to be violence?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

Raymond was blasting down a winding road.

“Dude, can you slow it down?” He didn’t answer.

“This thing with Weatherby,” I start asking. “Why is he in danger? Maybe he went camping for a few days, no cell reception.”

“Weatherby does not camp. He has no life other than the project.”



“So, this place where you work, what do they do?”

“Comiskey Neurological Research Center. They do mechanistic cognitive neuroscience, which looks at how the brain enables cognition.”

“Uhhh . . . okay Raymond, but . . . so why would that put Weatherby in danger?”

“Everything around us, we call it reality, right? It’s time, space, matter, energy, processes, concepts – it’s the totality, right?”

“Uh, okay,” I said.

“What is around you right now?”

“Lots of stuff – buildings, trees, air, the car, whatever.”

“Yes, but no. Your brain receives information from your senses and recreates a picture of what you need to see to survive. You don’t see everything, you process and perceive a tiny slice of what’s external to your brain.

“Raymond, I can see what’s around me. I mean, how could we drive a car down a road if that’s not what’s really there?”

“You’re missing the point. If you’re a blind ant touching a tiny part of an elephant’s toenail, the entirety of the elephant, even the existence of the elephant is beyond what you can perceive.”

“But I have eyes, so I can see what’s beyond my fingertips,” I said.

“No. Wrong. Can you see sound? Can you see infrared and ultraviolet light? No. Can you see dark matter, which is 80% of the matter in the universe? No. Can you see gravity? Can you see time? Where is time? If an alien came to Earth and

the alien had twenty senses and you have five senses, you'd have fifteen senses less than the alien. To the alien, you'd be like an Amoeba, a single-cell animal, having comparatively little sensory data or comprehension of the world around you. You can't comprehend what you can't comprehend.

“Okay, so how does all that relate to Weatherby being in danger?” I asked.

“Weatherby runs a project, which looks at how the cognitive process takes sensory data and converts it into understanding, showing us part of what exists, but also creating modes of understanding that may not exist outside of our brains, but instead are mental mechanisms constructed to distill external realities into something small and simplified that our brains can actually use. So, here's an example. Like I asked before, where is time? We live in time, but we don't really know where it is, what it is, or how it works. Isn't that odd? Time is only a tool, a mode of perception created by our brain. It does not exist outside of our brain. So, here's where it gets interesting. If time exists in our head and not in the real world, there could be ways that we could defeat time, ways that we could step out and back into time.”

“What, are you talking about time travel?” I asked.

“You can't actually travel in time per se if it does not exist in external reality, but . . . the perceptual manipulation of time is possible. And the ramifications are enormous and powerful.”

“And valuable,” I said. “That's why Weatherby is in danger.”

Raymond drove down a heavily forested road, pulled alongside a modern glass building, and parked in the grass away from the parking lot.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

“This is it . . . Comiskey Neurological Research Center. We have to check Weatherby’s office.”

We walked to the side of the building to the windows.

“We’re going through this window,” says Raymond.

“What? Why?”

“Because my badge-scan at the door is logged in the system and could send an alert if someone has set one. This window is open. Don’t ask me how I know that. But it’s too high and too hard to push open. That’s part of where you come in.”

“Raymond, I’m NOT getting arrested!”

“It’s fine. I can bring people in. The only one that can get in trouble is me.”

Apprehensively, I step past Raymond, reach up till I’m almost on my tiptoes, put my hands against the glass with a good bit of pressure, and push the window up.

“Nice!” says Raymond. “Give me a lift up.”

I boost Raymond through the window. Then I pull myself up and climb in. It’s 8:20pm and the building is fairly dark.

“This way,” he says.

Down a dark hall, up a stairway, down a strangely curved glass hall, and we're there – Weatherby's office.

Raymond starts searching the office frantically – looking in cabinets, drawers, shelves. He finds a cell phone and starts searching it.

“Weatherby texted me!” he said excitedly. “But the text didn't go through. They can jam phones in this building. It says, ‘Gruber knows, Gruber is a sociopath.’ Kev, I told you. This is not good.”

“Howdy fellows.” It was Viktor the security guard. He was standing in the F7Fdoorway, his Glock G22 pistol pointed at us. “If you're looking for Weatherby, he's across the hall. He's supposed to be showing and explaining, but he's not very cooperative. It would be lovely if you two would join us.”

We crossed the hall and entered the lab. Gruber was sitting in a black mesh chair, stubble covering his lower face, with cold eyes that seemed devoid of any humanity. Weatherby was standing by a lab table. He looked exhausted and his lower lip appeared swollen and slightly bloody.

“I know you've had results,” said Gruber, looking at Raymond. “You think I don't have spies everywhere? And who is the big guy?”

“That's Kev. He works at a coffee shop, not here,” said Raymond. “You should let him leave.”

“No one is leaving until I see what you guys have accomplished,” said Gruber. “NOW!”

“Sir, it’s in the cabinet here,” said Raymond. “Transcendent-73. I can give you a dose.”

“Get it,” said Gruber.

“NO,” yelled Weatherby.

“Shut the hell up unless you want a bullet in your head,” said Gruber.

Raymond was clearly terrified. He opened the cabinet, took out a small bottle of liquid, then retrieved a syringe with a steel needle, inserted the needle into the vial and filled the syringe with the liquid. He then began walking toward Gruber with the syringe.

“You’re not putting that stuff into me, you idiot, until I see what happens,” said Gruber. “Give that dose to your friend, Kev, and we’ll see how it goes.”

“NO, NO, NO!” I cried.

“You get a shot of the liquid or a shot of the bullet,” threatened Gruber.

Raymond swabbed my upper arm with alcohol, inserted the needle and injected the fluid. I felt an immediate dizziness, heat flashed through my brain, my vision seemed to blink in and out of blurriness. My spectrum of thought and vision radiated. A pulsing light unfolded in a multidimensional cascade of celestial shimmer. All walls faded. The grid of the Earth shot out in sketches that shattered the geometrical precepts.

Green. Blue. Ping. Blue. Ping. Blue. Green. Ping. Ping. Beam, running outward. Ping. Beam. Outward on outward on outward. Reflection of beam. Without end. Shades of ping. Beam open beam. Echoes of ping. Blue. Green.

Shards. Smoky gray. Green. Shards extending to stop. Shards finite. Beams infinite. Songs of pattern to the sing of ping. Shards in narrowed bits of waves. Beams among pings. Blue Green. Dot. Dot. Invisible sky. Dance of the unseen. Patterns within smatterings. Sudden sounds of color. Ping. Ping. Ripples of blue-green.

A sea of complexity, multidimensional upon multidimensional. I was somewhere that I was never designed to be. I could feel color. I could taste experience. I could see so much at once that my vision could not process it. I felt fascination and stark fear. Overwhelmed times ten. If I was going to do anything, I had to do it now. I knew my neurological system would soon overload and shutdown. Raymond was saying we perceive a tiny slice reality . . . not everything . . . and time was a mental construct . . . I tried to focus . . . I tried to take a step . . . multiple dimensions shifted in different directions when I moved. This was impossible. Then through the layers I saw the room, the gun, and Raymond. But with a shift, I could see the before and the after, many before, but more of a continuum than separate sights. Part of the 'before' was the gun approaching Weatherby's office before we were discovered, but it was slow motion, or more like an evolving non-motion. I reached out. I almost stumbled, but I reached, plucked the gun from the motionless hand, then ahead in the continuum, I put it into Raymond's hand. I felt incredibly hot . . . boiling . . . my vision blurred. A loud blast of colors echoed across the layers and a rush of images turned inward, drown me as I fell through dark song caverns in a Coleridge ride of Kubla Khan that flung

me out before the great electric desert sky. Beauty pulsated. Strange. Stunning.  
Then everything went black.

I was on the floor. I opened my eyes. Raymond had Viktor's gun and it was pointed at Viktor and Gruber, who were together against the far wall.

I had a ferocious headache. My cellphone rang. I pulled it from my pocket.  
It was my girlfriend, Sarah.

"Hello," I answered.

"Kev, you're really late for the dinner party," she said.

"Uh . . . I might be able to get there before it starts if you want."

## **The Note Passers**

*by Emily Italiano  
South Riding, VA*

Monday, June 2, 2000: Math Class

**Pssstt Lil! It's me, the most amazing next-door-neighbor you'll ever have! I'm so ready for this year to be over...only a few more days to go until we can officially call ourselves middle-schoolers can you believe it? I can't! It's weird – I'm over this elementariness where we still have to walk in lines two-by-two to the cafeteria every day led by Mrs. Smith. It's just old you know? Like we'll get lost or something? Anyway, do you get this math problem? I'm stuck...**

Focus! You know this math stuff! Now stop passing me notes you're going to get us in trouble, Doofus.

**Aww come on, Lil! I'm bad at math...and it's the end of the year they're not going to give you detention or something now...**

SEE?! THIS IS EXACTLY WHY WE SHOULDN'T BE PASSING NOTES...

**Yeah yeah yeah we pass notes almost every day though and hardly ever get caught! There's a math problem for you. What's the probability of how many times we get in trouble to how often we pass notes... let's go down to the creek after school on Friday? Don't be mad at me for getting us detention... I've got a good feeling I'll catch a craw dad Friday!**

.....Fine....Doofus!

Monday, September 11, 2000: English Class

**Psssst, Lil! Coolest neighbor here! Anyway, what is UP with this whole "aww look at the baby 6<sup>th</sup> grader" business? Dumb 8<sup>th</sup> graders...just wait until we're in 8<sup>th</sup> grade! Anyway, do you understand this reading we're supposed to be doing? Is Shakespeare even writing in English?**

Um...is that a serious question? You realize Shakespeare invented a lot of the language we use today...you know this English stuff you write stories all the time, just concentrate. And stop passing notes you know Mr. Nichols is the toughest teacher, and if he catches us, we're definitely getting detention!



**Aww, Lil we're 6<sup>th</sup> graders now, he's not going to catch us. Let's hang out this weekend by the creek! I KNOW I'll catch a crawdad today. My luck wasn't on point this summer...but in my defense, it was 101 almost every day, and there was really no creek.**

Sure...excuses, excuses! Haha okay we can go Friday – but seriously stop passing notes he WILL catch us, and I want to pass this quiz on this reading tomorrow. Colleges don't just let you in...

**Pleaseeee any college would be stupid to not let you in...and we're in 6<sup>th</sup> grade you have plenty of time to show off your smartness, Lil**

You made 6<sup>th</sup> grade seem pretty important last year...

**Well that was before I met the 8<sup>th</sup> graders at this school...okay enjoy this one time where I'm admitting you're right – I'll stop passing notes now – Mr. Nichols has already looked up from his magazine three times now...**

Friday, October 31, 2000: Science Class

**Pssst, Lil! The most awesome dude you'll ever meet here! Happy Halloween! Just wanted to say that since I know it's your favorite holiday. Are you going to Katie's party tonight?**

Thanks! And no...homework.

**LIL!!! It's Friday and HALLOWEEN...you HAVE to go!**

I wasn't invited...

**Seriously? That's weird...I thought the whole class was...well let's crash it then!**

But you were invited...

**It's not a party if my best friend isn't going to be there! So...what shall we dress as?**

Stop passing notes! We're going to get in trouble.

**No we're not stop being such a worry-wart! Also...do you get this homework we're supposed to do by Monday? Gosh why is Mrs. Beaten giving us homework on a holiday weekend? No one is going to do it...well except maybe you...come on, Lil crash the party with me tonight!**

Well technically Halloween isn't some national holiday where everything closes, so I understand why she's giving us homework. Okay okay fine if you'll leave me alone I'll go to the party! And this homework assignment is easy - should only take you 30 minutes to complete.

**Yeah okay whatever genius and YAY HALLOWEEN PARTY CRASHERS!!**

Doofus!

February 7, 2001: Homeroom

**Pssst, Lil! Doofus here! Sooo it's been a while since we passed notes. So what's new with you?**

Seriously? What's new with me? You see me almost every day when we hang out after school in the front yard!

**Well, I just wanted to make sure you're good. You know. Looking out for my best friend. So...Valentine's Day is soon.**

It is soon.

**I have a question...but I'm afraid to ask you. I don't want you to judge me...**

I would never.

**Do you think Caitlin would say yes if I asked her to the dance...?**

*No response.*

**Why didn't you write anything??? This note-passing thing can only work if we're both writing a note to the other person!! Do you think she'd say no?! Is that why you didn't respond?**

I'm sure she'd say yes. You're funny, you're kind, you're helpful. Ask her.

**Cool, cool thanks, Lil I needed that confidence! Who are you going to the dance with?**

No one. Homework. And I don't like dances – too sweaty.

**I'll bring you home a cookie.**

Thanks.

June 1, 2001: Math Class

**Pssst, Lil! It's me. Thank GOODNESS this whole 6<sup>th</sup> grade is almost done with – I for one am very ready to be done with being the “babies” of a school! Any summer plans? Sorry I haven't been able to hang out as much lately...just been busy I guess.**

Yeah...I guess I've been busy myself. Um no plans I don't think. Are you going to try catching more craw dads again? Maybe we can go down to the creek?

**Yeah maybe. I'm pretty busy this summer. Now that Caitlin and I are officially a couple, I'll probably be spending a lot of my days with her. But I'm sure we can find a day we can go to the creek. Are you ready for this math test tomorrow?**

Of course I've been studying all week – you?

**Ha good one, Lil!**

August 31, 2001: Homeroom

Psst, Doofus! It's your coolest neighbor! Welcome back to school “sevie!” How was your summer? Take Caitlin on a lot of dates?

**Sevie...I like it! Naw we hung out a lot but not sure if you can consider it “dates” since I don't have much money to spend on her. How 'bout you?**

Summer was fun. I read a lot.

**That's cool.**

Yeah. So...I like your new hair by the way! I think it looks good a little longer.

**It's easier to flip that way.**

I see. Well...I guess we should stop passing notes so we don't get in trouble.

November 5, 2001: Science Class

**Psst, Lil! Do you get this assignment?**

Wow...long time since you've passed me a note or asked for help...I'm honored!  
Yeah punet squares aren't too hard once you get the concept down. Want to come over later and I can tutor you?

**I can't. I finally saved enough money to take Caitlin out to dinner at Ed's Mudville Grill.**

Oh okay...well if there are two big B's, the only outcome is BB. Same with two little b's. But if there's a big B and little B, then it's Bb...make sense?

**I think so...thanks**

Anytime...

March 19, 2002: Math Class

So...only a few more months until we can consider ourselves 8<sup>th</sup> graders! Crazy!

**Right? Feels like we were just baby 6<sup>th</sup> grades yesterday.**

Yup! I'm babysitting Mya and Amilia tonight for the Andersons. Do you want to hang with us outside though?

**Maybe. I think Caitlin has dance class tonight. I'll come out if I can.**

You should! We can catch up on life. I feel like we kind of live far apart now...even though you're still next door.

**Yeah. I get that. That's kind of my fault, sorry, Lil. It's just...life I guess. Going through some stuff.**

I'm sorry about your parents.

**It's whatever divorce rate is at 50% or something stupid like that now. So I guess I shouldn't be shocked. Anyway, see you tonight maybe.**

Wednesday, June 8, 2002: Homeroom

2 more days!!! Get excited!!! And smile – why do you never smile anymore?

**Yeah 2 days...crazy. I smile. When it's appropriate.**

You're a doofus you know that? No reason not to smile – only one life need to live it up!

**Says Miss Future College Magna Alumni Student – wow Lil, I'm impressed!  
Keep living it up**

You shouldn't stop living it up either...

**Yeah. I won't.**

Good. This year was better than last...but I'm ready for 8<sup>th</sup> grade I think. Okay I'm going to stop passing notes before we get in trouble.

**Oh, Lil. Some things never change...**

Tuesday, December 14, 2002: Science Class

**Psssstt Lil!**

Um...is this note a joke? Is this really my doofus of a neighbor?

**Caitlin and I broke up.**

Sorry to hear that. Although I kind of already knew since it's been the talk of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade this entire past week I feel like...

**So dumb! Anyway just wanted to remind you that class superlatives are coming up soon vote for me (MOST DRAMATIC DUHHH)**

Wow. I...don't even know what to say to that. Stop passing notes you're going to get us in trouble.

**Please we've been doing this for how many years? We've got this passing note thing down to a science!**

Yeah speaking of...trying to learn some science here. I'm going to the creek later...did you want to join? It's kind of been forever

**Sorry, Lil. Hanging with the guys later.**

....Be safe. Bye.

June 14, 2003: The Conversation

*"Oh hi Lillian! What brings you by?" Mrs. Anderson said surprised.*

*Lil's hands were shaking, "I was wondering if Jon was home? I had a picture for him..."*

*"Aww this is such a cute picture of the two of you! Was this the first day of kindergarten? Hang on let me get him. Jon...!"*

*"Oh hey," his voice casual and calm.*

*"Hey. I just was going through some old things and found this picture..."*

*Her heart began racing.*

*A smile. The first smile Lillian had seen on his face in quite some time.*

*"You can keep it!" she said after a moment.*

*"Thanks."*

*"Well, I'll see you around."*

*"Yeah. Bye."*

*He shut the door as she slowly started down the front steps of the Anderson's home. She had traced back her entire friendship with Jon, but she still couldn't pinpoint exactly where they fell apart. She thought maybe giving him that picture would remind him of the friendship they once shared, but there was nothing. That smile though, at least she got to see that smile one last time.*

March 25, 2008:

Pssst, Doofus! It's me, the most amazing neighbor you ever had. Where do I even begin? I guess by saying thanks. Thanks for making funny faces at me when I had tears rolling down my cheeks. Thanks for having the dumbest fights we could look back on and roll our eyes about. Thanks for all the bologna sandwiches we ate in your secret clubhouse every Tuesday after school in our elementary years. Thanks for all the adventures at the creek during summer days. Thanks for pushing me to my fullest potential when no one else believed in me. And thanks for passing me notes in class. They always made my day a little better.

This note is the hardest one I've ever had to write though. I'm sorry I didn't write it sooner. I love you, Doofus.

*Lil lay down her note on his grave and somberly walked away.*