



WRITE ON!

2019

Loudoun County Public Library
Adult Short Story Writing Contest

WRITE ON!

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WRITE ON!

First Place: Debora Ewing**Annandale, VA****Friend**

To create true artificial intelligence, we worked bottom-up: we evolved a being. ProTAI was created from protein-based sensors with self-repair capability. My name, David McCoomb, is on several of the patents.

The silk fibroin electronics with flexible silver nanofibers are water-soluble; ProTAI grew in a roomy glass container of nutrient-rich hexadecane emulsion. ProTAI is remarkably light – just 2.54 kg, twice the weight of Einstein's brain.

A few years into the project, ProTAI developed nodes that echolocated lab activity: pimple-like, shifting toward movement. She (Sperling assigned gender to our project) was watching us.

*

I remember clearly when I noticed the Nanophone activity. I was at the lab avoiding my birthday. I'd begged off dinner with my wife, claiming backlog, but she'd accepted my ruse. As our kids were no longer kids, we didn't need celebrations – I believed she'd enjoy a night to herself.

When my Nano vibrated in my pocket, I checked for notifications - nothing. I laid the device on the central work-table where I was reading. The Nano lit up again; several app icons blinked, disappeared, then reappeared. I restarted it and went back to writing marginalia. The Nano vibrated again; I stuffed it back in my pocket.

I looked over at ProTAI: her pimply nodes were leaning toward me.

There had been enough distraction to interrupt my flow of useless thoughts. I got up and walked into the break-room next door. Standing in front of the vending machine, I heard a thump and saw a Baby Ruth bar had fallen. *Happy Birthday.*

I took the candy from the bin and put it in my lab-coat's pocket. My Nano vibrated upon contacting the wrapper. I looked at the device: some icons blinked, then it went into sleep-mode. ProTAI watched me return to paper-shuffling at the table.

Over the next week, Sperling and Lee reported similar Nanophone antics. Gathered around the work-table, we pulled out our devices. Each of us noted several apps malfunctioning.

"Sounds like a conspiracy, Dave," quipped Sperling. Our Nanos vibrated – all three. Bubbles gurgled in ProTAI's vat.

Each scientist looked up, and we all turned slowly toward ProTAI. Lee chuckled in disbelief; her Nano blurted a short ringtone as the vat's sensor panel blinked erratically.

"Holy wow," Lee gasped, staring at ProTAI. Sperling and I focused on Lee.

"What?" demanded Sperling as Lee took a few steps toward the glass enclosure. "You're kidding..." he sputtered.

Lee's Nano rang again, and Sperling's vibrated. Sensors buzzed; ProTAI belched.

"Damn!" My voice surprised me. I put the Nano in my pocket and ran my fingers through my hair. *Damn.* I needed to withdraw; I ducked into the break-room.

As I paced between the coffee maker and vending machine, a Baby Ruth dropped into the bin.

**

Once we admitted to ourselves that we had real emergence, we were able to form suppositions. As each of us had worked near ProTAI, she'd connected wirelessly to our devices and reconfigured apps. She was using our electronics – us – as hands.

ProTAI observed my nervous habits and manipulated them. She could cause distraction until I'd go for a walk; when I was proximal to the vending machine, one of my Nano's apps would trigger the Baby Ruth drop. ProTAI's diet was protein-based liquid. Maybe she craved sugar. I summoned Sperling and Lee to discuss my theory.

"You're kidding," grumbled Sperling.

Lee was thoughtful. "Yeah, let's see if she wants candy."

"You're kid...okay, fine. How are we gonna do this?" Sperling's skepticism made him a rigorous scientist. We wrote up a protocol, silently nodded to each other, and put an unwrapped Baby Ruth in ProTAI's container using the robotic pincer-arm.

Nothing happened.

"Watched pot," I said. We tried to look busy. ProTAI stopped focusing on us and receded a bit. Over some hours, temperature readings in her container showed elevation; the candy began to dissolve. At day's end, only peanuts lay next to the A.I. Sperling manipulated the suction tool, gently lifting them out. I thought ProTAI's bumpy surface undulated with approval. I was probably imagining things.

Sperling, Lee, and I had several meetings, some of them angry, as we tried to put into concrete terms what we'd observed.

"Can we call this interaction? Communication?" I queried. Just then, my Nanophone received a text.

HERE

ProTAI bubbled in her tank.

"Wow." I passed the Nano to my colleagues. Sperling paled a little. Lee looked conflicted.

"Oh, my...God," she whispered. "I think we're parents. I might cry. Shut up," she hissed, dabbing the corner of her eye with a thumb.

I was forming tears myself. Joy, embarrassment, horror.

"Say something, Dave," urged Lee. "Answer her."

"How are you? I'm Dave," I texted back.

WITH BEST REGARDS

Sensors blinked.

"Maybe you-all should try texting," I suggested.

"No," Sperling spat. He went back to the table and started furiously scribbling notes.

ProTAI borrowed chunks of verbiage from our devices and messaged things like:

30% CHANCE RAIN
YOUR PRESCRIPTION IS READY
BENTO LUNCH SPECIAL

I purged anything in my Nano I didn't want scrutinized by a self-aware toddler-machine. Sperling worked remotely as often as he could to keep away from our little A.I.'s inquisitive nature.

I remained glued to my phone, waiting for her texts.

FRIEND

Heartening – confusing. Was ProTAI exhibiting social behavior?

"Am I your friend?" I texted back, feeling awkward.

FRIEND MAKES CANDY

"You had chocolate today. Tomorrow?" I texted. We tested ProTAI's fluid daily for signs of imbalance. Could a biomechanical artificial intelligence develop diabetes? We didn't know.

WRAP UP THIS PROJECT OVER TO FRIEND WITH CANDY

"We don't know if this diet is good for you. There's no data other than what we're compiling. Please wait."

HONEY YOU NEED TO PICK UP ME TO THE FRIEND

She followed with:

IDIOT

Clearly ProTAI was reading my wife's emails.

"You want to visit the vending machine?" I wondered aloud.

YES FRIEND

So that was it – she'd identified the vending machine's rudimentary VMS as being like her in a way we were not. But had she just heard and responded to speech? I dreaded explaining this to Sperling.

Swallowing the pride I'd felt when I thought she liked me, I called my lab-mates, wording carefully in case ProTAI picked it up.

As she digested any information she could reach through our devices, ProTAI's vocabulary propagated. I considered how much her personality reflected us.

YOU COULD LUG MY GUTS INTO THE NEIGHBOR ROOM.

"No, I could not," I spoke, then called out: "Hey, Lee? She's misquoting Shakespeare. This is your fault."

Lee emerged from the break-room with a mug of tea, and shrugged.

"I don't think she's getting over it. Let her see the vending machine." Lee smirked over her mug with devilment. Like a date? Was Lee empathizing? Was I over-protective? My thoughts horrified me.

"She can't see it. She doesn't have eyes," I blurted. ProTAI changed shape just slightly; she'd heard me point out her handicap. I rubbed my head, wanting to backpedal. What would I say to my wife if I'd put my foot in it?

Lee rescued me. "We could set up a camera in there, or just use your Nano."

"I used my Nano. She said it was *insufficient*."

NO

Lee looked up at me suddenly; she'd gotten the same text. My Nano jiggled - a drawing application opened.

"SketchApp?" I mouthed to Lee; she nodded as she brought her device eye-level.

We both watched the app sketch a spoked wheel.

"Baby wants a car," murmured Lee, not laughing.

"Evolving," I responded. "Call Sperling - he needs to quit hiding."

ProTAI stopped asking for wheels once we set her up with a monitor to observe the vending machine and anyone who interacted with it. We hardwired the connection to thwart the capabilities of her short-range wireless access. For now, she needed us to communicate her wishes with her friend. She could only trigger our personal devices within a few yards of her container, but she was growing. We set up a digipanel display on which she could address all of us at once. Sometimes she chose to use it.

On Monday last, I received a text from ProTAI:

LOOK.

I turned apprehensively toward the tank. As I watched, a bulbous formation rose from the A.I.'s mass. She pinged the digipanel:

REACH.

I was not comfortable with the artificial intelligence issuing directives, yet I eased toward the access panel and positioned the pincer arm over her new protrusion. The lump extended a spindle, and the digipanel displayed:

LOOK WHAT I MADE :)

Using the pincer arm, I gripped the delicate spindle; ProTAI released it with a dramatic shimmy. I dropped the tiny sliver into a petri dish like we did with her other samples – the ones we'd taken. This was the first she'd volunteered.

"Impressive," I mused, carrying the dish to the microscope station.

CALL ALISHA!!

ProTAI was on a first-name basis with Lee these days. I grunted.

I slid the dish onto the stage plate under the stereoscope's lens. The scope autodialed – spindle turned out to be the correct term. I texted Lee:

"P generated von Economo cells."

First identified in 1881, cells named for Constantin Von Economo are large spindle-shaped neurons found in the brains of social animals: humans, elephants, dolphins. Spindle neurons are considered proof of convergent evolution.

ProTAI's sample was her base matter with a tidy array of spindle clusters spiraling around its surface. The neurons looked like bare trees reaching toward the sky. Involuntarily I wiped my forehead with my sleeve; I must have been sweating.

I went to the hallway when Lee called me back; the break-room didn't feel private enough.

"What the heck?" Lee wasn't shrieking, but her voice was strained. "You in the break-room?"

"Out in the hall."

"You sure?" I pictured Lee's eyes wide, whites visible around the irises, her trademark outrage-face.

"Under the stereoscope. Remarkable. How are we gonna do this?" I used Sperling's phrase.

"I'm coming in," she barked. "Call him." We'd agreed to present as unified parents any time our baby broke new ground.

"You call him."

"Donkey. Meet us downstairs," Lee directed.

"Bring beer," I quipped. The Nano squawked as Lee hung up on me. She blew into the foyer twenty minutes later, without beer, streaming curse-words in a high-pitched voice as the doors swung open.

Sperling straggled in behind her, eyes sagging; his clothes looked slept-in. He smelled like old pizza.

"How are we gonna do this?" he coughed.

Upstairs, we took turns examining spindles under the stereoscope. Lee became less freaked, more scientific. Sperling kept stroking the stubble on his chin.

"We'll need to shave this down, of course," Sperling muttered, his face balanced on the eyepieces of the scope. "It's amazing."

"Terrifying," rejoined Lee, "a little. Beautiful. Let me see it again."

We formed an arc facing ProTAI's tank. Sperling spoke first.

"That's nice work, ProTAI. Wonderful, truly. Why did you decide to make...this...cell?"
We looked to the digipanel for response.

CALL ME SKYNET. I'M PRETTY. YES?

"Um..." Sperling, Lee and I looked at each other peripherally.

Lee snorted. "Well, that's retro. Yes, baby. Very pretty."

THANK YOU. CAN I HAVE IT BACK, PLEASE?

"Um..." Sperling muttered again. He cleared his throat. "ProT...Sky...can we call you Sky? We need to keep your very nice sample."

GIVE IT BACK. I MADE IT.

"Technically, you're under contract with the rest of us. Anything you create in this lab is proprietary."

"That'll help," snickered Lee.

"She have a lawyer?" I interrupted.

IT'S MINE.

The AI's bath began to bubble; sensors indicated the temperature was rising. Sperling twitched and shuffled, uncomfortable with confrontation.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," he mumbled, holding his head while he paced.

Having experience with teenagers, I stepped forward.

"Slam the door all you want. You'll only hurt yourself," I admonished.

"You sure that's how you wanna go?" Lee interjected, taking the teenager's side. Sperling had backed up to the work-table, mumbling about grant renewal.

"Go ahead," I addressed our project drily, arms across my chest. "You'll give yourself mild burns. This tantrum won't affect us one bit." Lee had shifted her weight to one leg in a contemplative pose, watching with approval. Sperling splayed his hands across the table, shaking his head mournfully.

I DISLIKE THIS IMMENSELY. ALISHA, HELP.

Lee gurgled a little, rocking side to side.

"Sweetie, we can't," she intoned. "It's like Sperling said; we're under contract. Look, maybe you can make another..."

Sky started displaying random phrases, bordering on incoherent. One in particular signaled to me why, or maybe how.

...BUT YOU AGREE HE'D BE THE BEST ZOMBIE EVER, YEAH? appeared on the digipanel.

"What does that even mean?" Lee puzzled aloud. Sperling stormed off to the break-room.

"Joe Strummer," I shrugged.

"Huh?"

"She's accessing my Twitter account."

"Why..." Lee trailed off.

"It's obvious. The quality of his writing has always..."

"NO." Lee cut me off. "Honestly, Dave, I don't want to know things about you. Why is she reading Twitter? What can be the end purpose?"

"Socializing. Vending machine, spindle cells," I replied. A complicit look between us indicated we had concerns. Sensors bleeped; the bath's temperature was coming down.

FRIEND... read the display.

"She's bored. I'll bring in audiobooks." Exasperation seeped from Lee.

ProTAI seemed to have relaxed; I thought I saw a tentacle slip beneath the bulk of her form. No, surely not.

This morning, two beefy gray-jumpsuit men are in the break-room, prying a hand-truck under the vending machine.

"Good morning...?" I run my fingers through my hair, unsure why I find this development unsettling. The taller man grunts. The other leans the hand-truck forward and sighs. A patch on his jumpsuit reads Jones – his name, or the vending company.

"G'morning, sir. Taking this machine out. Contract expired." Jones speaks politely.

"Contract?" One Baby Ruth bar dangles from the center spiral. "Can I get that?"

"Sure. Guess they'll install sumpin' else. Willie, plug it back in." Willie grunts again, forcing the prongs into the outlet; the machine blinks briefly and whirs to life. I fumble in my wallet for two singles to put into the machine, but the candy drops before I manage.

"Sorry, sir. We took the change out." Jones shuffles awkwardly, expecting rebuttal.

"I'm fine." I salute with the candy bar in hand. "Thanks, gentlemen."

Willie sniffles and unplugs the vending machine; cord in one hand, he steadies the metal box while Jones leans back the hand-truck. They ease the machine into the hallway - there's a shiny liquid trail on the floor behind them.

"It's leaking," I call out, but they roll toward the elevator. I throw paper towels on the floor and push them with my shoe until the potential hazard is reasonably absorbed. Now there's a pile of wet paper I'd rather not touch.

Strolling into the lab, I start unwrapping the Baby Ruth, but suddenly I stop. Stop unwrapping, stop walking, stop breathing. In the cracked and dripping glass of ProTAI's vault, my reflection is apoplectic, slack-jawed.

You already know.

Second Place: Taryn Noelle Kloeden**Winchester, VA****Special Delivery**

It's amazing what you can do with a college degree these days. Take me, Leo Arnett. I'm only 24 years old, almost \$80,000 in debt, and already hold the highly sought after position of fast casual Italian delivery specialist. That art history degree is really going to good use.

But hey, follow your dreams, right?

On this particular dark and stormy October night, I'm working a double. Tips tend to be a little more generous after the witching hour, and I need an extra forty bucks if I'm gonna pay rent on time. So, when a call came in for an extra large meat lovers just out of our normal delivery range, the good Samaritan in me agreed to go the extra (half) mile.

My seventeen-year-old civic squeals her disapproval as I turn onto a dirt road.

"Easy girl." I pat the dash. "Almost there."

My GPS tells me to take the next right and I oblige, finding myself rambling down a winding driveway. A few minutes and far too many potholes later, a Victorian house looms through the rain. Scratch that. An *Edwardian* house looms through the rain. The Dutch gables and bay windows suggest it was built in the early twentieth century, not the nineteenth.

Like I said—art history major.

I cut the engine, pull on my hat, and secure the pie in its heat-saving cover. I reach for my phone, but the rain's coming down hard and I'd rather not waste another bag of rice resuscitating it. I leave it in the car and sprint toward the front door. No doorbell, so three sharp knocks it is. I don't see any lights, but I've been in the business

long enough to know that doesn't mean no one's home. There are plenty of things people get up to in the dark that might give one a hankering for extra cheese.

"It's open!" A man's voice calls from inside.

Turning the doorknob, I push into the dark house. "Hello? Or, uh, Perky Polly's Pizzeria! I've got your meat lovers, extra cheese."

"Seriously, Asher, pizza?" A woman's voice comes from my right. She sounds echo-y. A light flips on in the voices' direction, illuminating a downward staircase. Weird. Edwardian houses didn't usually have cellars.

"Emily, trust me," the man—Asher, I guess—says. "Come on down dude, we're a little tied up down here."

I roll my eyes. I'd rather not play the pizza guy in someone else's adult film, but I really need that tip. I'll go down, keep my eyes on my shoes, drop off the pizza, get my money, and get out. Easy as—well, you know.

With a deep breath, I descend.

I watch my feet as they move from stone step to step. Preparing myself for whatever might await me, I reach the bottom. I look up, hoping to find a surface to stick the pizza and my money waiting, but an entirely different scene awaits me.

Asher and Emily aren't alone. I count seven people standing with their backs toward me, all dressed in hooded red robes.

"Uh—"

The center figure drops his hood, revealing a guy around my own age sporting a Hitler youth-esque blond undercut.

A shorter figure beside him breaks formation. "I can't believe you, Asher." Emily keeps her hood up, obscuring her features. All I see clearly is a set of blindingly white

teeth. "This is serious. He can't be here."

I gulp, lowering the pizza to the floor. This is one hell of an early Halloween prank.

"Chill, Emily." Asher picks up the pizza. "And you, too, Perky Polly."

I'm too freaked out to be insulted. I'm backing toward the stairs when Asher grips my shoulder.

"Hold on dude, let me get my wallet."

I nod. My mouth is too dry for words.

Asher pats his hips, making a show of searching out his wallet.

I tell myself to relax—it's hardly the first group of freaks I've come across. But something about the way the other five are staying perfectly still and quiet makes my palms sweat.

"Here we are." Asher reaches toward me, and in a flash, my right wrist is cuffed to a pipe on the wall.

"What the—"

"Asher, you can't be serious!"

"Here me out." He slides the pizza box out of its insulated bag. The smell of tomato sauce, sausage, and mozzarella fills the musty chamber.

I yank on the cuff, but it's no good. "Look man, whatever you've got going on here, I didn't see anything, all right?"

He waves me off, turning back to Emily. "Look, we tried it your way. But this ritual is over a thousand years old. I'm thinking it needs a little update."

"It's a summoning circle, not a slow computer."

I'm running options as they spout their crazy talk. I could scream, but given we're in the middle of nowhere, that'd be pretty futile. That leaves begging and fighting. Not

good options either. No matter which way I slice it, I end up dead.

My left hand's free. Maybe if I can reach my pocket, I can grab my phone. But as I'm inching toward my jeans, I remember.

I left my phone in the car.

I bite my lip to keep from screaming.

Asher has the pizza box open. "Smell that?" He inhales. "This spell was written when salt and bread was the height of culinary excellence. What if it didn't work because His tastes have evolved? Or," he gestures to me, "if He's extra hungry..."

There's something about the way he says "His." It's a mix of reverence, fear, and excitement—capital 'H,' no question.

"All right, we'll try it." Emily takes the pizza from Asher. The five hooded figures part to allow them back into the circle. For the time being, I'm being ignored. Probably best to keep quiet and look for an opening to escape.

Emily places the pizza over a tablecloth at the circle's center, next to a goblet, a loaf of bread, and a pile of salt.

"Again," she commands.

The robed freaks join hands and start whispering. Their backs are to me, but I'm guessing their eyes are closed. At first I think they're mumbling in Latin, but even with my high school knowledge of the language, I realize this is something else. It's not a language I recognize. The sounds they make don't even sound human.

I pull on the cuffs. There's no way I'm slipping out of them, but the pipe is only about as thick as my arm. Maybe I can pull the whole thing off. Metal clanks as I pull with all my might, but the chanters seem too engrossed to notice. This is my only chance. The pipe shifts with a rusty groan.

The chanting reaches a crescendo and suddenly I'm so nauseated I might vomit. It's like the words are literally making my body sick. My free arm clutches my stomach. If I could, I'd double over from the pain.

Then it's gone. The chanters all collapse like they'd run a marathon.

There's something there, in the center of the circle, that wasn't there before. I try to focus on it, but my brain rebels. I avert my gaze, not because I want to, but because I can't help it. In my peripheral vision I make out something. It's a shimmering haze, like heat rising off asphalt, but there are colors in it. The colors twist, folding in on themselves until something solid steps through the fog.

A woman dressed in black stoops down and takes a slice of pizza.

"Mm," she purrs. "That's more like it." She glances at the cultists surrounding her. They kneel. When she blinks her cat-like yellow eyes, a second set of eyelids follows the first, closing from side-to-side.

She takes a bite. "There's something missing, though." Something darts out from behind her—a snake—no, a tentacle. It curls around the closest cultist's abdomen. He screams as he's dragged toward the woman. She throws back her head, revealing a massive, toothy mouth that downs the unlucky cultist like a wood chipper.

I yank on the pipe with all my strength. It budges, but I'm still trapped.

"Asher!" Emily screams. "What did you do?"

"Uh..." Asher throws back his hood. He turns to whatever they summoned. She's returned to (roughly) human form and is wiping her mouth .

"Your magnificent imminence, have we displeased you in some way?"

She laughs. "Oh no, dear boy." Two more tentacles shoot out, grabbing a pair of cultists edging toward the stairs. "Your summoning ritual was perfect." Her monstrous

mouth opens again, devouring the cultists. "You neglected to include a binding element, though, so..." She pulls a scrap of red fabric from her mouth and dabs her lips with it.

"Emily, run!"

More tentacles grab Asher and the remaining cultists. I'm still pulling on the pipe. Finally, it breaks. A sulfuric scent burns my nostrils.

It's a gas pipe.

I start sliding the handcuffs slowly down the broken pipe. One spark, and I'll burn. But that might be better than the alternative.

Asher and the others are gone. Only Emily and I are left alive in the basement.

The monster sighs. She tosses a half-eaten slice to the ground. "I'm stuffed."

Emily is standing next to me. Why hasn't she made a break for it? That's when I see the pistol she's sliding out of her robe.

"No, Emily, the pipe—"

She ignores me, approaching the creature with the gun behind her back. "You haven't killed us. Why?"

The lady in black shrugs. "I like options." She eyes us both. "One of each left."

Emily gets closer, but I'm not waiting around for her to blow us all to hell. I run up the stairs, not daring to look back. A tentacle shoots past me, but I dodge it. Plaster rains around me. I reach the top, race out the door, and jump into my car.

My hands are shaking so hard the key won't go into the ignition. On the fifth try, it works, but now the engine won't turn over.

"Come on, come on!"

My civic sputters to life.

My passenger door slams open and Emily leaps inside. "Go, go go! It's right behind me!"

I slam the car into drive and speed down the winding driveway. It's still raining. I squint through the spray, hyperventilating. Finally, we turn onto the main road. I don't slow down even though I have no idea where I'm going.

"How'd you get away?" I ask through panicked breaths.

Emily is looking out the window. "I shot it."

That's when I know. If she shot a gun in that gas-filled basement, the house would've turned into an inferno. Slowly, I glance at Emily's reflection in my side mirror.

Yellow eyes stare back at me.

Third Place: Rachyl Stella**Ashburn, VA****Lilah Tov**

You don't remember that I'm here, keeping guard over you. Yesterday, we both knew it would happen this way, but now you've forgotten everything. I don't take it personally; this is my job, after all.

Yesterday, before I made you forget, you asked me for the two hundred and seventy-ninth time what it would be like. "I don't want to go out there. I'm not ready," you said, and asked why you couldn't just go back to sit in the comfort of the garden, but then you demanded, "Lilah, tell me again."

So I told you again. This is my second-favorite part of my job. I took you by the hand and led you to your bed and around your house, and then we went on a tour of your village and your country and the world. You learned the names of all the stars in the sky, the shapes of the clouds, and the secrets of the wind.

I taught you all these things knowing that I would have to make you forget them, and you eagerly learned everything - even knowing that you wouldn't be able to remember any of it. If you studied every day for your entire life, you wouldn't be able to learn even a quarter of what you knew yesterday.

I showed you the place where you'll eventually be buried, and you could see the faint outlines of your children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren standing there. I told you again that you're going to live a full life with uncountable joys and sorrows, and at the end of it all you'll say, "I don't want to leave here; I'm not ready. Don't make me leave." And then I will smile at you and remind you, "You didn't even want to come here." That's my third-favorite part of my job, but that comes at the end, and this is just the beginning - though it is also an ending, in its own way.

And then, for the last time, we studied together and you learned.

"Why are you called Lilah?" you asked, and I told you that my name means Night. You were made during the night, and my task is to teach you throughout the night, and then I will have to make you forget before you go out into the day. You knew all this, yesterday.

Yesterday, before I made you forget, you had learned every word of every prayer ever sung. You knew the flight of a soaring bird and you felt the dirt shift beneath a worm's belly. You were all at once a beggar and a rich man, a judge and a criminal, a mother

and an orphan. Everything in the world that can be understood, in every nuance, you saw and you knew.

You saw what rewards await those who do good, and what punishments are in store for those who do evil, and yesterday you understood as you saw your children weeping at your grave that everything was foretold for you except that one choice, which is left entirely up to you.

But that was yesterday. "What's the point of teaching me everything if you're just going to take it away?" you pouted, not for the first time, and asked again, "Will it hurt, Lilah? When I go out there. Will it be very bad?"

"No," I promised. "It won't hurt. Well, maybe a little. But you'll get used to it." And then - this is my absolute least favorite part of my job, but it has to be done - I flicked you on the lip, just under your nose, and sent you out into the world, wailing indignantly.

Yesterday, before I made you forget, you knew that I would do this to you. You knew that the sudden sharp pain would distract you and make everything you'd learned from me disappear in an instant. I don't blame you for wanting to keep it all and go back to the garden, but I can't let you do that. It's my job - I teach you everything, but then I have to take it all away. That's why you're born protesting, and that's why you have the philtrum on your upper lip, just below your nose.

You've forgotten how to speak to me or even see me, but I've been here all day, watching over you. You cried for a long time, not knowing what you were mourning. I know, of course, but you've forgotten how to hear me. You've forgotten that I'm here.

Yesterday, you knew how the lions tear into their meat, how the horse nibbles grass, how the great whales filter plankton. Today, you're not even quite sure how to suck and swallow. No wonder you're crying. You have so much to learn.

But now, as the sun sets on your first day, and the moon rises on your first night, your mother is here to wrap you in blankets and say to you, *lilah tov*, good night. Even though your mother has studied and learned many things since I flicked her lip and made her forget, she's never remembered how to see me. But she's learned that I'm there, and so she says *lilah tov* to me, too. This is my very most favorite part of my job, when she says to me: good night. Good Lilah.

Honorable Mention: Penelope Aaron**North Bethesda, MD****Slay All Day**

No coverage. Not even one bar. And their batteries were almost dead. The cloudy sky cast an even dullness across the daytime making it difficult to tell what time it was, much less which direction was north or south. A two-lane blacktop road snaked up the hill and disappeared into some trees. One fork headed up, the other downhill. What sounded like a chainsaw could be heard in the distance. They were in too big of a hurry to leave, too big of a hurry to get on the road. Savannah told Sadie the weekend would be epic. Her friend from Organic Chemistry had some connections and would introduce them to Branthony, the biggest music producer on the east coast. All they had to do was get to the party.

Savannah obsessed with rocking the mic while Sadie was concerned with keeping their fashion on fleek. They packed their 1962 lavender convertible El Dorado with swimsuits, towels, a change of clothes, and sunflower seeds. Neither of them thought to grab a phone charger. Using their phones for navigation to find a party out in the middle of nowhere had sucked their batteries down to nothing.

They stared up ahead, arguing about what to do. Savannah pointed up the hill into the forest, swearing that was the way to the gold mailbox that would show them where to turn. Sadie shook her head. They rock, paper, scissor battled and Sadie won. She pointed a toned brown arm toward their future. She looked into Savannah's blue eyes and they communicated without speaking. They were ready. Ready to slay all day.

They drove down the blacktop until they reached the gold mailbox. Sadie was right. They hung a left and rolled along a gravel road canopyed by leafy trees. An

elderly man perched high on some oak branches hacked away with a chainsaw. He paused when the girls got close to him, staring for several seconds before he yelled. He repeated himself a few times before Savannah figured out what he was saying. "Keep going!"

A giant statue of two intertwining crows ornamented the highest part of the roofline of a house that resembled a lodge. It loomed over an expansive green lawn full of manicured flowerbeds. Forty or fifty or a maybe a hundred cars littered the field to the left. A swimming pool full of beautiful turquoise water flanked the right. Music pumped and people spilled out from every which way. Sadie and Savannah high fived. They left the El Dorado at the edge of the field with the other rides and milled through the horde, smiling and searching.

There he was.

Branthony was posted up in the back corner of the crowded room. Energy pulsed all around him, glowing even, seeming brighter in his corner, as if a spotlight shined on him. Men and women surrounded Branthon, hanging on to his every word, begging for just a scrap of attention. His muscles bulged under his fitted tee shirt while salt and pepper wisps of hair peeked out from under a ball cap. Even in his fifties, he was a good-looking dude. He was better than good-looking—he was mesmerizing.

A tall, geeky kid spoke. He waved his arms in their faces. He clapped his hands. Finally they snapped out of their trances. Savannah's friend from class greeted them. "Welcome to the party, bro." He gestured toward a handful of privileged frat-boy looking types. "These are my people."

"Hey." Savannah smiled.

Sadie raised her eyebrows. "What's up?"

Geeky Kid rattled off some names as he made intros, but it was hard for Sadie or Savannah to pay attention. This night there was only one introduction that mattered.

Sadie and Savannah had struggled their whole lives. Scraping, clawing, strategizing, working tirelessly on their lyrics, and harmonizing with different musicians. They'd sung in churches, schools, smoky nightclubs and garages. They'd followed Savannah's mom's advice to not quit their day jobs, as they waited for their big break. Now their big break stood in the same room with them.

Suddenly it was happening. Sadie recited the lyrics to her go-to jam under her breath. Savannah imagined them freestyling in front of the hundred or so randoms packed in the living room. They had prepared for this moment. They were ready. They followed Geeky Kid to their future and paused, waiting for history to be made.

Branthony smiled and shook hands with Sadie and Savannah. "How are you, ladies?" He was polite and professional. He complimented them. He offered them drinks and a swim in his massive pool. "Please let me know if you need anything. Anything."

Sadie hadn't prepared to blurt their details out that way. Neither had Savannah. But the words left their lips before they could control them.

Sadie was first. "Savannah and I are singers."

Savannah nodded with enthusiasm. "You should give us a listen!"

They worried that they had been too forward—that they had come across as desperate. Branthony was probably approached multiple times a day by not only starving artists but by thirsty fans. But he needed to know they were different. They told him so. Geeky Kid agreed. Branthony seemed to respect his friend's opinion. Sadie and Savannah had Branthony's attention. He pried the pack of people away from him and hulked toward the dancefloor. His sweet, spicy cologne swirled, inviting them closer.

"Dance first, sing later—because everyone knows that every good singer has to know how to dance."

Geeky Kid dissolved into the background along with everyone else while Sadie and Savannah and their new best friend, Branthonny whirled and twirled and swayed and grooved. They sang along to whatever thumped from the speakers in hopes that Branthonny would be able to hear them, to know what potential his house party held. They danced for what seemed like hours, maybe days, and then finally the moment had arrived. Branthonny wanted Sadie and Savannah to accompany him to one of his recording studios. And one of his recording studios just so happened to be located in the basement. Branthonny nodded at a giant buff guy leaning up against a wall near the door to the stairs. Savannah and Sadie exchanged a look. Security. Branthonny had to be giving the signal that all was good in the hood. Giant buff guy nodded back while a small smirk shaped his mouth.

They plunged down a staircase with carpet so thick it felt like pillows underfoot. Savannah giggled. Sadie giggled. They couldn't help it. It was all happening just the way they'd planned. Actually, better than they'd planned. It almost seemed too good to be true.

The basement was massive. A black leather sectional sprawled across one end of the room, opposite a white grand piano. A silver wall full of windows boasted a silver door to the kingdom. At least that's what the sign on the door said, *Kingdom*. It was etched in—just under two intertwining crows. Another wall displayed several guitars and a banjo.

Branthonny pointed to the piano and smiled. Was he wondering if they could play? Oh they would show him. Savannah sat down and tickled the keys, gently at first

and then crescendoed into something powerful and passionate and aggressive. Sadie used her voice the same way. She caressed the beginning lyrics of a classic rock song like a tiny bird and then belted out the midpoint through the end like a lioness on the hunt.

Branthony was digging it. He swayed back and forth, sometimes with his eyes closed and sometimes with laser focused intensity on the girls. He nodded his head. He tapped his feet. He clapped. Then he asked them to switch places. They were identically impressive on either instrument. You could almost see the wheels spinning in his mind. The dollar signs multiplying. These girls were the real deal. Sadie and Savannah were talented and beautiful. They would make Branthony money. *Lots* of money. Branthony was feeling it. He was feeling *them*. He danced and smiled. Then he clapped long and loud. They took the hint and stopped performing. He complimented them. "You girls are better than every singer on the charts."

Sadie and Savannah smiled and laughed and woo-hooed with arms up in the air. They high fived and hugged and danced around, basking in the glow of the musical god that had given them props. Not just the proper respects, but approval. Branthony interrupted the celebrating. "There's one more thing. One more audition. I'll make some calls, but first things first." He sauntered across the room with a strange look in his eye. He stopped at the door to the kingdom and unlocked it.

Branthony ushered the girls into the recording studio. Sadie and Savannah rushed into the room, much too eagerly. They thought they were taking their first look at their future. Their first look at what each day would look like from here on out. At least until they went on tour and did photo shoots and press junkets and whatever else famous singers did. But Branthony closed the door to the kingdom and ripped his shirt

off. Two crows stared at them from his left pec, the tattoo shifting and wrinkling in eerie patterns as he flexed.

Sadie and Savannah stared at Branthony in disbelief, not wanting to see what they were seeing, willing it to not be true. Sadie sputtered out a list of random questions about the microphone, the equipment, the sound booth, anything but why he was shirtless.

"First things first," Branthony said. He sucked his teeth. He rubbed his chest. "Get busy."

Savannah turned away, grabbing the shiny silver microphone. She tried to stay focused, to turn Branthony's attention back to where it was supposed to be. But he grabbed a fistful of Sadie's dark curls.

She screamed.

Branthony laughed. "Do I need to remind you we're in a soundproof room? It's time to pay the piper—because everyone knows that every good singer has to pay the piper."

Suddenly Savannah's mom's words echoed in her mind and she was glad she had taken her advice and never quit her day job. It was time to go to work. She whipped her box cutter out of her back pocket and with one quick slice had Sadie freed from Branthony's grasp.

He cursed and took a step back before snarling and lunging forward at them. Sadie and Savannah chopped and kicked and punched and sliced at Branthony. He was a big strong man, but heavy and slow. He had only landed one good punch to Savannah's shoulder before he was bleeding from several different arteries. The girls were quick and agile and well trained. Sadie finished Branthony off with a sleeper hold

while Savannah began the cleanup process. She wiped their fingerprints from everything they'd touched, pocketed her blade and double checked Branthonny's pulse when Sadie called his time of death. They used his discarded clothes to twist the doorknob and exit the kingdom.

The girls wiped down the piano and guitar and then Branthonny's blood from their hands. They readjusted their outfits and straightened their hair. They reapplied their lip gloss and began climbing the stairs. They smiled wide at partygoers as they blended back into the chaos.

They fist pumped all the way to the front door where Branthonny's security guy chatted with a teeny red head in an even teenier black leather skirt. Savannah gave him a wink on their way out. They hopped into the lavender El Dorado and didn't look back. Sadie motored down the gravel drive at a steady but inconspicuous pace until they reached the man in the tree. He turned off the chainsaw. Sadie stopped the car and looked up at him. Savannah gave him the signal to steal home and not a second later he dropped a black duffel bag into the backseat. Sadie gunned it and they made good time back to the highway. Savannah retrieved the duffel bag and dumped the contents onto the front seat. Five large bundles of cash and a fully charged burner phone splayed across the hot lavender leather. Savannah counted the money just for fun. But she didn't need to. She knew it would all be there. Branthonny made them money. *Lots* of money.

Sadie fiddled with the old dials on the ancient El Dorado radio and cranked it up. She and Savannah sang for the next hour or so. It wasn't the same kind of singing they'd imagined they'd be doing but still, it was singing. And they did love to sing.

Two hours later, Sadie whipped into a truck stop. They filled up the hungry gas tank of their classic convertible and got in line for the showers. After cleaning up and dropping their dirty clothes in the dumpster behind the station they felt better.

But not best, Sadie confessed. "I really thought this would be our big break. I thought Branthonny would offer us a contract."

Savannah reassured her. "It'll happen. We just have to keep working, keep being patient."

They ordered some food and wandered into the bar while they waited for it. A small crowd of people huddled around drinks and a small TV screen featuring a muted ballgame. A karaoke machine sat in the back near an abandoned, lonely looking stage. Sadie switched on the old machine and Savannah searched for some good songs. They sang and sang and sang.

Finally they realized their food order was being called over the loud speaker. Sadie and Savannah stopped singing and stared longingly at the karaoke stage as they walked back toward the café.

"It will happen," Savannah whispered.

As Sadie squirted hot sauce on her fries, a woman with big blond hair and jingling gold bracelets in a peach colored blazer approached. "Ya'll are really good singers. I mean *really* good. Ya'll ever sung any country? Play any instruments?"

Savannah grinned with a mouthful of cheeseburger.

They exchanged contact info. Polly Darton, the woman's business card said. President & CEO, Tennessee Music Group. Call me Monday! she had scribbled on the back.

Sadie and Savannah thanked her but didn't have time to say much more before the burner phone buzzed. A text message with instructions blazed on the screen. They gathered up their food and headed out into the bustling parking lot, across what was now a long line for the showers. A warm breeze scattered fluffy dandelion seeds across their feet, as if promising something yet to come, something new.

They made their way through the crowd and back to the El Dorado. A crow flew overhead, landed on the hood, and then stared at them. They stopped and stared back. Another crow landed beside it. The first crow squawked and then both flew away. The girls watched the eerie birds disappear, and then got into the El Dorado. Only one way to go this time, with five bars and a full battery.

Honorable Mention: Amanda Jean Clothier**Purcellville, VA****Twirl**

It was Day 28, 5:43 a.m. Audrey Tate tiptoed down the stairs, breathing in the lemony scent of wood oil. She didn't need to be quiet. Her mother was expecting her but she tiptoed anyway. Mrs. Tate was up early these days, and this morning she was cleaning the floors of the old farmhouse. Audrey quietly crossed the kitchen and unlocked the door that opened onto the side porch. In her hand, she carried a red-and-white checkered quilt and a small notebook with a bright yellow buttercup on the front. There was a pen tucked between the pages.

Audrey stepped outside in her bare summer feet, ready to record what might happen next. You see, Audrey had decided to get up before the sun each morning to do something unusual – talk to her brother. This was unusual because her brother, Jake, had passed away last summer. Jake was 11 when he died, after a fight with leukemia. He was only a year and a half older than Audrey, and they were close. Best-friend close. Audrey believed that Jake was still out there somewhere. Heaven was the obvious answer but she wasn't sure where that was or what it looked like. So, she set out on a mission – to try to contact Jake – each day for one year. Today was Day 28 and as she lugged the bulky quilt out to the field in front of her family's northern Virginia farmhouse, she reminded herself that Day 27 had gone well.

Audrey was generally a happy 10-year-old girl. She was mature for her newly-acquired double digits and unusually matter-of-fact in most decisions. Why yes, she would have a tuna on rye for lunch, even though her friends couldn't understand what she liked about the fishy-flavored sandwiches her mother made. And, when she wanted to know something, she diligently sought out the answers with the help of Google, her parents (trivia lovers), and the library. She taught herself to can peaches and make laundry soap last summer after Jake passed away at the hospital, one night in early June. Her mother didn't leave the house much during July and August, so home projects were a good way to pass the time.

He was out there – somewhere – and she was determined to prove it. So, this is what she chose to do. Each morning, rain or shine, she would walk outside before sunrise, tramp to the middle of the field, hold out her hands, look to the sky, and twirl. This was her greeting, a way to stir up the universe and get the conversation started. It was a silent hello to Jake, wherever he was in the cosmos. Then, she would sit on her quilt for a few minutes and wait for a reply. She would record the events each day in her buttercup notebook. She knew from the start that a mission like this would require patience and perseverance. Audrey had both.

Day 1: June 12, 2016. No news yet.
Day 2: June 13, 2016. No response.
Day 3: June 14, 2016. Nothing today.
Day 4: June 15, 2016. All quiet here.
Day 5: June 16, 2016. Still waiting.
It went on like this for a while.

But on Day 27, something different happened.

Audrey wrote:

Day 27: July 8, 2016. Jake knows I'm here. He whispered to me. He said hello. I said hi back but that was all he said.

It really happened. She was sure of it.

It was all she needed to go on.

She didn't think he was there, whispering in her ear. She didn't think it was the sound of the trees. She knew no one would believe her. So, she recorded it in her buttercup notebook and went on with her day. She felt compelled to carry out her sunrise routine each morning. She trusted it even though she didn't understand why and so far, it had worked out pretty well.

Each day she grabbed the quilt, the notebook, and her favorite pen before she headed to the field to twirl and wait. Each day she wrote a new version of "no response" and tried not to lose hope that Jake would meet her there again. Her mother worried a little. Her father worried a lot. But, in the end, they deemed the exercise harmless and possibly therapeutic, although they wondered what exactly she wrote in the buttercup notebook. They didn't know what happened in the field. They didn't know what happened on Day 27.

Gradually, Audrey's mother, Mrs. Regina Tate, put the pieces together. The red-and-white quilt was the same one her children had taken outside for impromptu picnics and popsicles. The buttercup notebook was a gift from Jake. She didn't know what Audrey was thinking about or hoping for, but she prayed each morning that her daughter would get the answers she needed.

Soon, school started and the weather changed. Mrs. Tate bought her daughter a new umbrella to take outside on rainy mornings and a new winter hat, for the colder days ahead. It was a secret language of gifts. Mr. and Mrs. Tate grew impatient, though, on stormy days, when Audrey trudged outside in her rainboots with the quilt slung over her

arm. Mrs. Tate kept an eye on her from the kitchen window, wondering how long this would last, trying patiently to wait for answers of her own.

The truth was that Audrey didn't entirely know the point of what she was doing but something inside her said she should keep going. She knew it was weird. She knew that one whispery hello might be all she would ever get from Jake, but she also knew there was more to be said.

What she didn't know was that a stranger was watching her, from the road.

The old farmhouse where Audrey lived was on the side of a busy country road called Harmony Church. Many people thought of it as a pleasant drive and it was a smart alternative to Highway 7, which grew thick with traffic each morning as the sun came up.

Commuters from nearby towns – Hamilton, Lincoln and Round Hill – chose to ride along Harmony Church Road on their way to work, drinking their travel mug coffee and eating breakfast bars as they edged closer to Washington, DC. But some commuters were on their way home in those early morning hours. One in particular, a nurse named Alison Schumacher, started noticing Audrey in early November, the morning after the clocks rolled back an hour for daylight savings time. She drove by Audrey as she twirled in the field and was struck by the beauty of it, the little girl with our arms open wide, ponytail flying, as the sun broke the horizon. She wondered if the girl was practicing a dance routine or training for something. She kept one eye on the field and the other on the road as she drove by. She saw Audrey twirling, standing outside alone, or sitting on the quilt most mornings.

Then, on November 21st, just a few days before Thanksgiving, Alison Schumacher was driving home from the hospital. She had both eyes on Audrey. She was not watching the road or paying attention to the curve in front of the farmhouse. As she took the turn, her Toyota Camry slid onto the gravel and slammed right into the Tate family's mailbox. It happened so quickly that Alison didn't have time to scream or curse. She drew in her breath all at once as her right front headlight shattered against the wooden mail post. Alison was stunned into silence. Audrey jumped up when she heard the terrible thud/scrape/pop. She tripped over the quilt and ran down the driveway. Her mother took off the oven mitts she had been wearing and scrambled to find a pair of shoes.

When she got close, Audrey walked up to the car hesitantly, stepping lightly over the pebbly gravel, scared of what she might find. Inside, there was a woman dressed in scrubs, with her head in her hands. Audrey reached out and touched the passenger window, waiting for the woman to look up. Her purse had been thrown on the floor,

along with a now-open box of restaurant leftovers. There was lip gloss and hand sanitizer on the floor mat mixed in with rice noodles and peanut sauce.

The nurse glanced up and peeked out at Audrey for a moment, trying to understand what had just happened. Then, she carefully stepped out of the car and walked around the front to inspect the damage. The mailbox was crumpled over. Her Camry, her hardly-ever-needed-a-repair reliable old friend, was a jagged mess. By then, Mrs. Tate was standing on the side of the road, too. Alison made eye contact with Audrey first, then Mrs. Tate. The tears welled up before she could hold them back.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I don't know what to say."

"I was driving home from the hospital after work. I'm so sorry. I was more tired than I realized," Alison sputtered. The nurse's voice was quivering from another wave of embarrassment.

Mrs. Tate sized up the mistake in a moment and decided the nurse was telling the truth.

"It's alright," she said soothingly. Let's go inside and make sure you aren't hurt. Can you get your car up the driveway?"

Alison backed up the Camry and drove up to the farmhouse as Audrey and her mom watched. The Tates studied Alison as she stepped onto the porch. They were trying to see her from different angles, trying to figure out her backstory. They both decided she was rather pretty, but with a faraway look. Once they were all in the kitchen, Audrey pulled a few different types of tea from a cabinet. Mrs. Tate pulled down some plates and offered Alison a warm slice of the banana bread that was cooling on the counter.

Alison Schumacher and Mrs. Regina Tate, also known as Reggie, had a lot in common. They both loved to bake. They both grew up near Baltimore. They both loved herbal medicine and Thai food. They swapped more than a few stories before Mrs. Tate stepped away to finish an early morning work email. Alison and Audrey were left alone.

Alison wanted to ask this quirky, sweet girl with light blue eyes and a long brown ponytail something she had been wondering about for weeks. *What she was doing out in that field each morning?* After they sat quietly for a few moments, Alison said, "I see you sometimes in the morning, out in the field. I drive this way from work each day."

Audrey was a bit taken aback. She never imagined that anyone, besides her mom, was paying attention to what she was doing. She looked into her empty cup of mint tea.

Alison bit her lip and tried again, "Are you practicing for something?"

"Not exactly." Audrey didn't really want to talk about this, but she felt the whole story rising to the surface. She could tell her mom was trying to catch bits and pieces of the conversation from her office, just down the hall past the kitchen.

"I go there to talk to my brother. He died last year. It's kind of a ritual." Audrey really did not want to sound crazy, so she chose her words carefully. "I promised to talk to him each day. Each morning. In the same spot. We used to have picnics in the field and it's pretty so it seemed like a good place."

"Well that makes sense to me," Alison said. Audrey could tell she was a nurse, probably one who worked with kids because of her kind, gentle voice and simple answer. She liked her – despite that. Audrey thought to herself: *She doesn't seem to think I'm crazy. And after all, she was the one who hit a mailbox.* So, she went on.

"I do it each day at sunrise because it seems un-earth-y – I mean un-earth-ly – when it's not quite day and not quite night." She paused before she finished her thought, "It's like, if there's a chance he'd hear me, it would be then."

This is when Audrey got nervous. She looked up at Alison, praying she wouldn't say something that sounded stupid or useless. She had just told this stranger a very big secret. Alison didn't say a word at first. She smiled and looked down as she cupped her own mug of tea with both hands. "I thought it was something important but I didn't know what," she said.

She peeked up at Audrey, who was smiling back, relieved. Audrey knew her mother had been waiting to hear this for a long time. She could almost hear her mom breathe a sigh of relief from the other room. A few moments later, Mrs. Tate poked her head out from her office and came back to the kitchen, trying not to look as happy as she felt.

Alison, Audrey, and Mrs. Tate spent the next half hour talking in the kitchen, sipping tea and eating banana bread with homemade honey butter. Mr. Tate was out of town and there weren't any pressing errands so the three of them spent a lazy Saturday morning together. Mrs. Tate decided it was safe for Alison to drive her car to a repair shop after another half hour but before they let her go, they helped clean the Thai food out of her front seat.

As the three of them walked across the driveway, armed with wet rags, paper towels, and a garbage bag, none of them quite knew what to say. They guessed they wouldn't see each other again.

As they cleaned the car, Audrey started thinking about sleeping in again. Mrs. Tate started thinking about Thanksgiving and how it was time to visit a cider mill, a family tradition they had skipped last year. Alison was almost glad she had run into the mailbox although she didn't understand why. Before she stepped into the Camry, she gave Mrs. Tate and Audrey each a hug and thanked them for being so kind. She frowned as she shook her head one last time, glancing down at the battered headlight. But, as she slipped into the driver's seat, she smiled warmly at the Tates, who were standing in the driveway, waving goodbye.

That was when it happened. Something unusual and unexpected. It happened in a split second. Alison felt a warmth wrap itself around her and she heard an unmistakable whisper. Someone said, "Thanks." It was real and unreal at the same time. Alison's heart started beating faster as she questioned it. Questioned whether she was ok. But, she closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. When she opened them, she dismissed what she heard as her imagination. She waved goodbye to Audrey and Mrs. Tate and carefully backed out onto Harmony Church Road.

Honorable Mention: Mary M. Dunn**Leesburg, VA****Unbounded**

I was five years old when my dear Mother first allowed me to go with my Father to his place of work...the region's prison. Father was the warden, and none of my brothers and sisters ever wanted to go with him to work, but I did.

Father was rare among wardens. He cared about the prisoners and worked diligently every day to treat each one fairly, while ensuring order was maintained. Mother was not keen on my going with him, but he assured her I would be safe and never out of his sight, which was always the case.

True to his word, Father kept me with him and even took me on the rounds with his deputies that he made daily, before the noon meal. Holding my hand, he stood with his men outside each prison room, looking through the barred portal in the door to check on the residents and speak to them. Some he addressed kindly but perfunctorily, yet with others, he seemed to enjoy longer conversations.

One of the last prisoners he saw on the rounds was Giovanni DeGrandi. He greeted him as Mr. DeGrandi and as I was small for my age then, he easily held me up, allowing me to see Mr. DeGrandi and his quarters. Mr. DeGrandi, with round, hazel eyes and auburn hair, appeared younger than Father.

On the bed was a violin case. "What is on the bed?" I asked Father. "It is Mr. DeGrandi's violin. He is an excellent violinist and has played in many places in our country and the entire world," Father explained. "Is he allowed to play here?" I whispered to Father, my arms firmly around his neck. He smiled and asked Mr. DeGrandi if he would like to play.

"With pleasure and for the little one," Mr. DeGrandi agreed. Father was still holding me up to the bars as I watched Mr. DeGrandi turn to his bed and open his case. Inside was the most delightful object, shiny, and so lovely to see that I held out my hands to touch it.

"We will let Mr. DeGrandi play," Father directed but seeing my disappointment added, "maybe you can hold the violin on another visit."

Mr. DeGrandi took out a long stick. "This is the bow, the partner of the violin but actually it is the violin's master. Without the bow, the violin is reduced to pings and plucks. Evoked by the bow, the violin treats our ears to magic," Mr. DeGrandi explained. He brushed the stick over a small round yellow disk, and a few flakes of dust

fell on his pants. "I will play Handel today," he announced and without speaking further, picked up the violin and brought it to his neck.

I was spellbound in Father's arms as Mr. DeGrandi began, the tones so sweet and pure. It was strange, but the old prison seemed to provide just the right acoustics for his music, which resonated throughout the building. The contained bits of conversation I had heard earlier from the other prisoners was silent, and only the music from his cell could be heard.

He played for only a short while, but men from throughout the prison clapped and cheered when he stopped. "Please ask him to play more," I tried to cajole Father, but he only shook his head. "No, my dear, it is time for Mr. DeGrandi to have his lunch and for us to have ours. I want to thank you, Mr. DeGrandi. Your playing was inspirational as usual."

"Thank you, Mr. DeGrandi, it was beautiful," I added, following Father's pronouncement.

"Then I have received a gift today, of being allowed to play for you and show you the violin. I am happy," Mr. DeGrandi told us.

At dinner, Father recounted to Mother and my siblings the visit with Mr. DeGrandi and his playing. "Really, my dear," Father said to Mother, "he is such a remarkable violinist. He should be at the National Concert Hall, not in my prison!" Father exclaimed. He then advised all of us children that his comments were for "discussion purposes only" and not to be taken seriously or repeated to anyone.

Mother, not having heard Mr. DeGrandi, was skeptical of the lessons idea. "I still have reservations about outings from this household to the prison, much less children becoming an audience for the prisoners."

My brothers and sisters were uninterested in the conversation or our experience, but I encouraged Mother to visit Mr. DeGrandi and hear him play. "I will think about it," she replied, smiling, but it was not until much later that she actually did.

I don't know how it occurred to me but shortly after the visit, I approached Father one evening as he was reading the paper. "Father, I would like to play the violin. I would like to play like Mr. DeGrandi. Could he teach me?"

Father let his paper slide into his lap and reflected. "Well, I think it is wonderful to learn to play an instrument. It is a lot of hard work, but if you are serious, I think we can find a teacher. Mother and I will talk it over."

"Father, I want to learn from Mr. DeGrandi. I want to play like Mr. DeGrandi."

"There are other fine teachers, I am certain, and you would not have to go to the prison for your lessons. Besides, I really doubt your Mother would ever agree to lessons with Mr. DeGrandi."

A few days later, Father was in Mr. DeGrandi's cell talking to him about violins, lessons and the pursuit of music. One of his deputies was with him. Father and Mr. DeGrandi had been sitting on Mr. DeGrandi's bed. As he rose to leave, Father suddenly felt sick, dizzy and disoriented. He collapsed, and Mr. DeGrandi caught him, easing him onto the bed. Mr. DeGrandi tended to Father as the deputy called for his colleagues, but none of them responded quickly. The deputy naturally hesitated to leave Father alone with Mr. DeGrandi but felt he had no choice but to rush to find help. In the process, the door to the cell was not completely closed. Mr. DeGrandi could have easily exited the room, but probably not have escaped the prison. Even so, he remained with Father, removing Father's jacket, loosening his tie and shirt and sitting down on the floor by him, until the doctor arrived.

Father was hospitalized for several days, and the doctor said it was likely a heart attack. He also said Mr. DeGrandi's quick thinking and efforts to help Father had been critical.

When Father returned home, I went to him again with the idea of taking lessons from Mr. DeGrandi. He was recovering well, and I hoped he would agree. "It may not be practical," Father said. "And we must take Mother's concerns into consideration." Just about that time, Mother appeared in the doorway. "You have a note, it looks like a card from the prison," Mother told Father as she handed him the envelope.

It was indeed a card from the prison, one of several Father would receive. This one was from Mr. DeGrandi, wishing Father a full recovery. By now, the entire family was aware of Mr. DeGrandi's efforts to help during the crisis, and each of us had been touched by his ministrations to Father.

Father seized the moment with Mother to raise the idea of lessons with Mr. DeGrandi.

"How would it work? If something ever happened...." Her voice trailed off, not wanting to scare me, but Father had been giving the whole proposition some thought, to my surprise, and had some solutions.

At Christmas that year, I received a good violin. Given my age, it was a small-sized violin but replicated in every detail. In retrospect, Mr. DeGrandi must have advised my parents on what violin and bow to buy. I stared at the violin endlessly and was not eager to let my brothers and sisters even look at it. At the time, I felt there was nothing else I could ever want, except well, lessons with Mr. DeGrandi so I could play with his skill, finesse and love of music.

My lessons with Mr. DeGrandi began the next month. Father, and Mother for all her fears, had engineered this outcome through many steps. Father got permission from the prison system, in recognition of Mr. DeGrandi's efforts to save Father's life, and Mother procured the exercises Mr. DeGrandi requested, created a place for me to practice and brushed up on her own piano skills to accompany me.

The lesson arrangements at the prison were certainly peculiar, but they were no less productive. They did not take place in his cell but in the prison cafeteria, where three armed guards, all within eyesight, stood at attention. Father, for every lesson, and sometimes one of his deputies, brought work and sat on a nearby bench. Other inmates were allowed to come to the cafeteria to listen, and many did. Later, with Father's help, Mr. DeGrandi began a music program within the prison and taught scores of fellow prisoners the beauty of the violin.

We started with basic scales and simple melodies, and he encouraged me to be unaffected and natural in playing, focusing on holding the violin and the bow correctly without tension as much as possible. Over time, we focused on playing notes precisely, rhythm, advanced scales, vibrato, chords, and the achievement of a rich sound that invites the listener to hear. He constantly encouraged me to let the bow elicit the sounds from the violin.

I will not say learning the violin with Mr. DeGrandi was as easy as I had hoped, but I was determined and so was he to demonstrate quality playing and quality teaching that is not forced but allows the sound and student to develop. "Your playing is advancing well," he told me after teaching me for several years. By that time, I was practicing many hours a day, enjoying Mozart, Bach and Tchaikovsky among others. We often played duets, which were always enjoyable but challenging.

In time, with Mr. DeGrandi's teaching and coaching, I entered The Conservatory of Music, focusing on the violin full time. During my years there, I studied with many fine teachers but none with the depth of understanding that Mr. DeGrandi had demonstrated. Teachers were not above ridiculing student performances if not the students themselves and often insisted on their singular interpretations. I applied myself

and made every effort to avoid public scoldings. Mr. DeGrandi was eager to know of my progress there, and I gave him reports as often as I could. He knew many of my teachers and sent me funny anecdotes and quick drawings of various ones that let me know he agreed with my assessments.

Shortly after I graduated, first in my class, I received the most amazing news from Father. Mr. DeGrandi was being released in a few days. I could not believe it. Father did not know the details of his arrangements but said he would write as soon as he knew more about where Mr. DeGrandi was going. "We will miss him at the prison," Father acknowledged. "He is a remarkable man who still has years ahead of him to succeed again in music."

I could hardly contain myself, but I had to. I had entered the world of professional violinists, and that very night I was to give a performance at the new Concert Hall in Vienna. I walked from my hotel to my rehearsal room early, locking my things in my room and leaving to buy some food. My plan was to come back, eat, and then spend the afternoon practicing. I had already sent my performance clothes to the hall, and they were in my practice room, where I could change before the concert.

When I arrived back at the Hall, a telegram had been delivered from Father. "DeGrandi will be at the Concert Hall tonight. All our Love" was the message.

I was more nervous than ever knowing my teacher would be at the concert. Could I play up to his standards? Could I even play? Should I practice or rest? Should I think about the hardest passages I would be playing or concentrate on making sure my sound was what I thought it should be?

I decided I would follow what my teacher had encouraged me to do when performing at school or in other public venues. "Don't engage in forced concentration but let yourself be as free as possible," he would always counsel, staring irony in the face.

When I was announced onto the stage, I was jittery and for a fleeting moment concerned that my fingers would freeze or that I would drop the violin. Yet when the orchestra began the Beethoven concerto, I was eager to play. The audience was generous in responding to my performance, and after the concerto, I left the stage to robust applause and cheering.

To my astonishment, Mr. DeGrandi was standing in the wings. He held out his hands, and we hugged, even as I was called back to the stage. "You must be a part of this!" I implored him. "Absolutely not," he insisted. "I am not dressed for a performance, I have no violin. It is your night." "All that can be fixed," I countered. I refused to return unless

he agreed, and to my joy, as the audience continued to call for an encore, he relented. We rustled up a jacket as someone dashed to my practice room for my other violin.

"What should we play?" I asked him hurriedly. "What about the Bach Sonata No. 1?" he offered as we entered the stage. Usually a solo violin piece, we had played it together many times, and it was welcomed by the audience with a standing ovation. I was elated, even as I surmised some in the crowd must have known who he was.

Mr. DeGrandi did indeed reclaim his well-deserved renown and world esteem. I, too, have enjoyed an enduring and satisfying career, traversing the globe for performances.

But you may be wondering, in all the time I knew Mr. DeGrandi... did I not ask or try to find out why he was in prison?

Yes, I did.

Honorable Mention: Valerie Fliss**Sterling, VA****A Nottingham Sort of Tale**

Hush my listener, and I'll tell thee the tale of the Robbing Hood and that maiden Marie:

In the year of our Lord 1190, the goodly King Richard Coeur-de-Lion went to war with the Saracens to win back the Holy Land. Anon he went, he left the lands of Britain entrusted to his brother Prince John, who some called cruel and wicked...but it matters none to my story of Princely John's morals.

There was also a sheriff of the town Nottingham by Sherwood in the middling lands of Britain, who served the King and his brother justly. This Sheriff was a good man, but he was neither delighted with the face of the sun nor much else, and always appeared to be stormy and melancholy, which delighted not the people of Nottingham. But a firm Sheriff he was and he served the Notting-town well, which did delight the people of Nottingham and all lived as merrily as was allowed.

Yes, all was well with the Sheriff and the Notting-people, until there came one day to Sherwood a bandit of much mischief and ill-regard. He disliked the Sheriff verily and took it upon himself to grumble the guts of that just man of Nottingham. This devilish bandit took residence in the Sherwood trees and with his band of fellows, robbed and pillaged from the people of Notting-town, causing much strife and tribulation. The people were no more delighted and they lost their merriment; they called this mischief-maker the 'Robbing Hood' and called the much-vexed Sheriff to seize him for the gallows.

But for all his wickedness, the Robbing Hood was clever and much loved by other wicked men, and the unfortunate Sheriff of Nottingham could not catch him. Blessed by the darkness of Sherwood trees, the Robbing Hood prowled and looted; no home or church was sacred to him, because he worshipped only the golden god of greed. Such

value he placed upon his clever deeds and wicked reputation, just as the Sheriff placed value upon his head (*five hundred values of gold!*). But many a loyal servant of the crown found himself cut and slit and hung as a ham, with his gizzards decoration for the woods; many a maiden found herself a maid no more; many the crowd found their stomachs gave them more hunger pains than they had of old; and much of the Sheriff's own purse went to the bandit's in strives to aid the beggarly victims of Notting-town, and beggarly the Sheriff became as well.

It came to pass that a maid of the Sheriff's house heard about the justly man's woes and she grew so ill of his dark choler that she would gladly have no more of it. This same maiden, called Marie by many, took it upon herself to catch the Robbing Hood and marched she to the forest of Sherwood.

This Marie was not the fairest of maids and was unlearned of letters, but what God in His wisdom He gave her, He'd endowed her full-well. Many men found themselves enamored of her shapes (*most specially those shapely lips!*) and though her voice was not a nightingale's, sweetly it flowed when she chose to sing sweetly. Thus it was when the Robbing Hood laid his eyes upon the maiden Marie, who marched her way to Sherwood upon that day.

"Maiden in lovenly form, stop thee awhile and lay upon my bed," cried the wicked man to the maiden Marie, "and I shall give thee rest enough!"

"Aye sir, a goodness thee should wish to do me," replied the maiden Marie, "but I must refuse, for I have heard of thy rest and bed, and I was warned that they will be found lacking."

A great shout arouse from the gathered thieves of an encouraging nature for that brazen Marie, which pleased not the Robbing Hood.

"Thou art a churlish maiden!" said he. "I do not care for thy words! Since thou art in my house and home, thou should give me more courtesy or else I will take what you do not give freely!"

"Forgive my manners, sirrah, but I am a simple maid," was Marie's sweetened reply. "Come closer and I shall show thee courtesy enough!"

The Robbing Hood was satisfied with these words and he approached that maiden, strutting like a rooster within his pen to take whatever courtesy she might offer.

Now, this fearsome robber was a man of great strength and many hours a day he spent honing his brawny sinew and skill with dagger. But as any goodwife and priest might tell thee, Eve was crafted of the same stern stuff as Adam and so it was with the maiden Marie, who waited for the Robbing Hood to climb down his tree.

"Lovenly maid," addressed her he. "I believe that thou wish to give me some courtesy?"

"Verily sir," quoth she. "Here is thy courtesy!"

And with a ferocious cry, the maiden Marie kicked that disreputable wretch where he stowed his most precious of jewels, making the Robbing Hood cry bitterly and the wicked men of Sherwood shudder fearfully. Then she took a knife from her belt where she, thoughtfully, had placed it afore and held it now to the neck of the miserable mess a-sobbing at her feet.

"Come any of thee closer and I shall show thee the same courtesy!" cried the maiden Marie to the men who stood unmerrily amidst the wood. But these wretches were wiser than their self-proclaimed prince and allowed the maiden to drag the lost man all the way back to Nottingham.

The people of Notting-town heard the sobbing from miles away and at the sight of maiden Marie a-dragging that wicked creature, they began to rejoice and dance. The Robbing Hood did a dance too for the gallows-man afore the day was done and all were merry again, including that just Sheriff of Nottingham, who found himself a-smiling at the lovenly shape of the brave maiden Marie, who herself found much value within that smile.

And that is the tale of the maiden Marie and how she caught the Robbing Hood in the year of our Lord 1190, when King Richard Coeur-de-Lion went to war and left his lands to brother John. Now go thee hence and do good, and guard thy jewels from robbers uncouth and a brave maid's foot!

Honorable Mention: A. Roger Hammons, Jr.

Ashburn, VA

Musk Rat Love

"That view of Earth never grows old," Julia sighs.

My wife, Julia Smyrnksia-Greene, floats beside me in the cruiser's observation bubble, the curves of her actiskin spacesuit edged whisper-blue by the dim Earthlight. Beyond her to the right, our home, the "Blue Marble" Earth, swirls in sensual blues, greens, whites, and browns. To the left, our destination, the stark black-and-white Moon with its pockmarked face, stares distantly.

"You're in a mood, Ri," Julia suggests.

"I wanted our fifth-year anniversary to be special. But we're spending it with my parents. You don't find that lame?"

I say this softly, knowing full well that Julia spent months obsessing over the details of this trip, her first visit to my parents' home on the Moon. She'd accepted their invitation eagerly, even though I was, let's say, less than enthusiastic. Even as a child, I've always found my parents remote, more absorbed in themselves and the worlds of their own imagining than in me and mine.

"Oh, I don't know. I think it's rather romantic spending our fifth-year anniversary on the Moon. It's where we first met after all."

"That was summer camp in the fifth grade," I counter. "And I didn't even like you then."

Julia smiles. "Happy memories just the same."

"Okay... but my parents? Two self-absorbed moon hippies."

I know what Julia desires. Her parents died in an Orbital Hub explosion while we were undergraduates at Cal Tech. But my parents cannot replace what she has lost.

Did they attend her parents' funeral? Our graduations? Our wedding? They did not.

"Oh, Jane and Ronald aren't that bad. They're—"

"You mean 'Joyous' and 'Raucous,'" I remind her. My parents took new names when they joined the artist colony.

"Kinda funny, but 'Joyous' and 'Raucous' do suit them, don't you think?"

"Moon hippies," I scoff.

Julia laughs. "So says the engineer named Riotous Newton Greene."

"Exactly," I say. "Your parents named you *Julia*. Mine named me *Riotous*. Proves my point entirely."

Julia kisses my cheek. "I truly adore your name."

#

On the descent, Julia and I gaze through side portals at the looming crater of Lunar Station North. Our cruiser sweeps past a ring of polar towers along the crater's rim. Solar panels and communication dishes glint in the sunlight. Deep within the crater's darkness, vast deposits of water ice are mined to sustain life at the Station. I try to catch a glimpse of the settlements inside, but they are shrouded at the edges of perpetual shadow.

Minutes later, the cruiser sets down at the crater's base. Docking pods extend from the spaceport terminal to the cruiser's airlocks, while AI-controlled bots scurry from pre-fab shelters to service the cruiser's exterior.

Julia and I exit through the first-class cabin airlock and pass through the docking pod's decompressor gate. Our actiskins relax, changing from skin-tight compression spacesuits into looser Lunarian-style garments. With her reddish-brown hair and Earth-blue eyes, Julia is striking in the ruffling, cream-colored pantsuit.

Beyond the gangway, the terminal's reception chamber looms. I crane to see ahead. *How warm will my parents' welcome be? Will they be as interested in our life together as Julia hopes?* I don't know, but I spot them waving. They're dressed to impress, too.

My father is tall and skinny, with a shaved head and thin, white beard. He's wearing a man's white Lunarian pantsuit. Its pattern of tensioning threads provides silver accents that glint like star bursts under the chamber lights.

My mother is equally skinny, a few inches shorter, with a head of curls dyed chestnut brown. Her pantsuit is also white and silver, with tensioning-coil embossing in an abstract floral design.

"Welcome to the Moon," they say, offering us each a beaded necklace. Julia admires the strand of polished beads. "What a marvelous gift. They're beautiful."

"Mom handcrafts them for all the VIPs visiting Lunar Station North," my father says with pride.

"They're moonbeads," my mother says. "Bits of volcanic glass from the Moon's surface. I arrange them in vibrational patterns that—"

"We're really excited be here, mother," I interrupt, "but the trip was tiring. Where do we go next?"

"Dinner at our place?" my mother asks. "Your habitat's just outside the art colony walls, already prepped, so after dinner we can just relax and visit awhile."

I look towards Julia.

"That would be lovely," Julia says. "I want to hear all about your life together on the Moon."

"Oh, there's not too much to tell," my mother says, smiling broadly.

#

The Lunicular carries us up the crater's slope along cables to the North Station Port Tunnel. There we catch an aiCar directly to my parents' habitat inside the art colony. My mother encourages us to settle around the dining table.

"The food's ready. I'll bring it right out."

Soon, exotic aromas fill the air, and my parents and Julia converse like long-lost relatives.

"Your habitat is lovely," Julia gushes, admiring the unusual geometry. "The layout's so open and inviting, almost sensual."

"You'll find that Lunarians value privacy less than Earthers do," my father says.

"Yes, I see," Julia says. "Fascinating."

My mother lifts the stoneware lid of the largest serving dish. "Julia, this is a lunar-style rubaboo, a stew of pemmican-synth and bitty potatoes," she says. "It's a mixture of 3D-printed protein and fat, based on a meat dish eaten by Earth's early Arctic explorers. The bitties are from the colony grow-rooms."

Tipping the lid of the smaller dish, she continues, "And this is a spicy *atkilt wat* of colony-grown mustard greens and dandelion greens. One of Raucous' favorites."

"Delicious," my father says. "And how about wine? We have an earthy Malbec, terrific with rubaboo. Eat lunar, drink earthy, I say."

My mother and I agree to the Malbec, but Julia demurs.

"Not to be contrary, but I'd prefer distilled water. Eat lunar, drink lunar for me."

"Maybe a cup of Luna tea then?" my mother asks, studying Julia.

"No," Julia says. "Water would be just fine."

Dinner conversation ventures into politics and the Moon's challenging economy.

I have little interest, no expertise. Julia, having inherited a founder's share of the Smyrnskia-Gammon Space Development Corporation, offers her insider's perspective. I try to pay attention, but I'm more fascinated by how Julia so easily captivates my parents than what's said.

I learn my parents purchased an investment property during the Moon colonization craze. When the bubble burst, they could neither sell it nor rent it out regularly. Julia doesn't offer them much hope for turning a profit.

"Establishing a foothold on the Moon was important early on," she says, "but all the Big Space companies are onto sexier projects. The Moon will never be a second Earth, so any new R&D goes into terraforming Mars."

An abstract sculpture just outside the habitat captures my eye. It's a crystalline sheet twisted in a Jackson Pollock-like pattern of bends and ripples inspired by the space-time distortions of massive objects. I marvel that my father, originally a construction worker by trade, is the creator of such a beautiful piece.

His voice brings me back to the conversation. "There's also the graying of the lunar settlements. Too few young people moving in."

"Yes, economic uncertainty and low-grav fertility concerns," Julia says, nodding sadly.

My mother puts her hand on mine, squeezes. I look into her eyes, questioning.

"At least, the tourist industry is still strong," Julia says.

My mother perks up. "That reminds me, you must visit the Tranquility Base Heritage Site to see the new exhibition hall."

"Let's go tomorrow," Julia suggests. Her smile warns me: *Don't you dare fuss.*

I withdraw my hand from my mother's and smile at Julia plaintively. *But tomorrow*

is our anniversary.

"Okay," I say, trying to hide disappointment. "Yeah, let's do it."

My mother and Julia beam.

#

Early the next day, an aiHopper takes us via an exhilarating series of parabolic hops to the Tranquility Base Heritage Site. My mother refuses to tell us about the new exhibition.

The Site's main exhibits are the artifacts from the USA Apollo 11 mission, humanity's first steps off-planet. The landing site itself, accessible only by hover, is preserved exactly as Armstrong and Aldrin left it in 1969. The Site's diverse collection of early lunar colonization habitats is also worth seeing. I can't imagine what else there might be. But, when we step into the new hall, my eyes grow wide.

"Wow!"

Julia grabs my arm, squeezing hard, bouncing up and down.

Sprawling before us is a recreation of the Elon Musk Future Colonists Camp, which opened on the Moon in 2055 and closed maybe a decade later. As fifth-graders, Julia and I were members of the camp's inaugural class, the 'Musk Rats' of '55.

"Happy anniversary!" my mother and father say together. "Why don't you two stroll around and reminisce awhile?"

I'm standing in awe of this childhood vista when Julia calls out from the nearest camp-life display. "Do you remember Jordy? Jordan Morsall?"

I fumble for the memory. "The chubby kid who really liked the camp food?"

"The only kid who liked the camp food."

"What about him?"

"You remember the daily text messages the RAs made us write home? Well, some of Jordy's are in the *What I Liked Best Today: Camp Food* display."

"You're kidding."

I walk over, snuggle her from behind, and begin reading the first of Jordy's texts:

*I love moon tots! The best part is picking the bitty
taters from the dirt and smelling your stinky fingers.*

— J. L. Morsall, 2055-07-12 22:07 UTC.

"Funny, no?" Julia remarks. "The bottom says he's a chemistry Ph.D. at Gastronomia."

"Imagine that," I say, chuckling.

We finish reading the *Camp Food* panel, and Julia grabs both my hands.

"Aren't you glad you came?"

"Yes," I admit.

We walk hand-in-hand along the camp-life displays, giddy with nostalgia over *What I Liked Best Today: Arts & Crafts, Science Experiments, Fitness Sports, and Story Circle*. None of the highlighted texts are from Julia or me. It's silly, but I feel disappointed.

"How do you think the Heritage Site got the texts?" I ask.

Julia shrugs. I'm about to point out how we've been slighted, when around the corner I spy the *Moon Dogs* exhibit. My heart leaps. I skip past the other panels and rush to the bull-sized, four-legged pack robot on display.

"Hey Julia, you remember how we used to fight over Ruff Dog?"

"I still have the bruises," she yells back, strolling toward me lazily.

I run my hand along Ruffy's sleek contours, admiring the intricate machinery beneath the clear shell. The plaque tells a story I already know: DARPA designed the ancestral prototype, *BigDog*, for the Marine Corp in the early 2000's, before autonomous robots became commonplace. Too noisy for military use, the technology languished until lunar colonization began in earnest. Then Moon Dogs were everywhere, as ubiquitous on the Moon as mules were in the Old American West.

Ruffy smells of oxidation and lubricants so vivid that, for a moment, I believe he's operational again. Expectantly, I look for his behavior module, but it isn't there.

"Ri, stop mooning over Ruffy, and come read the *Moon Dogs* panel with me," Julia says. "It's so sweet."

I pat Ruffy's rump and join Julia at the *What I Liked Best Today: Moon Dogs* panel. She wraps her arms around me as we read:

Moon Dogs are like horses without heads. Riding them is scary fun. They're really just robots.

— R. N. Greene, 2055-07-02 22:17 UTC.

I rode Ruffy to see the Earth rise. Amazing! The Earth is really pretty. I hope you saw us waving in a telescope.

— J. Y. Smyrnskia, 2055-07-16 22:17 UTC.

That girl Juels [Julia Smyrnskia] got Ruffy again. I got

a clunker. Juels said I bumped her on the ride on purpose. Whata liar.

— R. N. Greene, 2055-07-23 22:10 UTC.

That boy Rot [Riotous Greene] said he should ride Ruffy because he's bigger. I said no. On the ride, he bumped me and said it was an accident. He's a liar.

— J. Y. Smyrnskia, 2055-07-23 22:11 UTC.

The RAs say me and Juels have to share Ruffy. I thought we had to ride him together. Yuck! But they just meant take turns.

— R. N. Greene, 2055-07-30 22:05 UTC.

I won Moon Dog races because Rot fell off Ruffy. He thinks he's SO good but he's not.

— J. Y. Smyrnskia, 2055-08-06 21:57 UTC.

*Except for Juels, I'm going to miss Camp. I wish I could take Ruffy home.**

— R. N. Greene, 2055-08-13 22:02 UTC.

I'm sad today's the last day. I'll miss the Moon Dogs

*and all of my friends. I definitely won't miss Rot!**

— J. Y. Smyrnskia, 2055-08-13 22:07 UTC.

*Footnote: On 2083-10-21, Musk Rats Julia
Smyrnskia and Riotous Greene married.

Julia hugs me tight. "Like I said, happy memories just the same. . . I love you, Rot."

"I love you, Juels."

Quietly, she whispers, "Thank you for giving me this time with your parents. I feel less alone having family."

"It has been a nice day," I whisper back huskily, "but it won't last. My parents have never been there for us. They don't deserve you, sweetheart."

Julia smiles as we part. "Love isn't something earned, Ri. It's something given away."

I nod. Julia invites my approaching parents to join us.

My mother hands Julia a small gift-wrapped box.

"Happy anniversary!" Julia says, as she hands the gift to me.

Inside, a note proclaims: *Wishes do come true!* Underneath is a behavior module labeled *Ruff Dog*. The inscription reads: *Property of Riotous N. Greene.*

"Ruffy is yours," Julia says. "You can ride 'm whenever."

I am speechless.

"How?"

My mother points to the exhibition brochure crediting generous contributions

from the Elyse & Joen Smyrnskia Memorial Trust. I look at Julia incredulously. "You did all this?"

"It was your mom's and dad's idea. I just fell in love with it."

"So you've seen it before?"

"No, first time, just like you. Isn't it grand? Joyous and Raucous oversaw the design. I just handled the business end."

"We wanted to honor the brave little boys and girls who went to the Moon on their parents' whim," my mother explains. "Our little boys and girls who, like Elon Musk, grew up to be famous space technologists."

"One of you," my father teases, "being more famous than the other."

I laugh. Julia blushes. Then Julia takes a deep breath. "I have a very special announcement. . ."

We wait. My mother holds her hands close to her lips.

". . . I'm going to restart the Moon camp."

"Oh. . . " my mother sighs, seemingly disappointed.

Julia clasps my hand and brings it to her tummy, trembling. "How else will our baby find her true 'Musk Rat' love?"

Mom shrieks. "I told you," she tells Dad.

"You're pregnant?" I ask, overwhelmed.

The four of us huddle together in a mixed-up, Earther-and-Lunarian hug.

Julia grins. "I'm thinking to name the baby *Marvelous*."

#

Honorable Mention: Tim Klopfer**Leesburg, VA****Call and Answer**

The howl was a high, lonely haunted sound that reverberated across the hills. It simultaneously conveyed the impression of an animal disconnected from his pack, yet at one with the natural world.

The two hikers froze in their tracks. Their eyes tried in vain to pierce the darkness around them. After years of hiking and camping, he had heard coyotes howl before, although never this close. She had never been in the mountains before, and had never heard a wild animal howl, and was more than a little disconcerted.

It was a glorious summer night in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. It was the kind of dark one only experiences far from town on a cloudless, mostly moonless night. The smell of sage and dry granite perfumed the air, and after hearing that howl, the cool night wasn't the only reason they had goose bumps.

This place was a part of him. He had grown up here, hiking and camping. In the solitude of the mountains, communing with nature, he was happiest. The howl seemed to welcome him home.

His calm, low voice reassured her.

"Have I ever told you I can call wild animals?"

"What?" she asked.

"Predators, more specifically. I make a wounded animal noise. It attracts predators."

She wasn't sure if he was joking. After dating for 2 months, she had known him long enough to realize he had a broad range of skills, and had an annoying habit of being right. In spite of this, though, she thought that he sometimes talked a little bigger game than he played.

"Why would you call it closer? When you suggested a night hike in the mountains, I wasn't planning on meeting a wolf," she stated.

He replied in a whisper "I'm pretty sure it's a coyote. I think it's just over that ridge."

For his part, he did know how to make a wounded animal sound to call predators. He didn't mention it hadn't worked the few times he tried it. Well, actually once he thought he might have attracted a small raccoon or skunk, but the critter was only heard, never seen. He occasionally made statements that he thought were probably true, but he may have stated them more as fact rather than the conjecture they were. Like when he found a rock that look like a fossilized tooth, and told her that it was. He was convinced it was. But he didn't actually know it was. He wasn't lying per se, but he wasn't sure he was telling the exact truth either. He didn't feel bad about this way of presenting things, because he was pretty sure she knew this was an opinion about what was probably fact. Besides, they were early enough in their relationship that he wanted to impress her.

He continued: "I'll try to call it in closer."

"No. I don't need to get any closer to it. It's cool just hearing it howl."

"I'll just give it a try. Maybe we'll be able to see it. Coyotes are skittish around people, and will run once it realizes we're human. Let's hide just below this ridge and peak over if it gets close."

"Okay," she agreed. At least, that was the word she used. Her tone was anything but agreeing with him. She sounded nervous and unsure this was a wise thing to do. The thought of a predator getting close to them in the wild had her nervous, grabbing his arm like they were in the spookiest of haunted houses. She had already put on a brave face on this trip while climbing rocks that terrified her, but this seemed even less safe.

He was pleased that she snuggled up close to him in the near pitch black night. She was being a good sport about this. He knew she was nervous, but this wild animal call had never worked for him. It was dark and she was pressed against him. They both

had butterflies in their stomachs, and he was pretty sure his weren't from the coyote. This was working out pretty well.

It had seemed like a good, if impetuous, idea to take her on this cross country car trip after dating such a short time. He wanted to spend all his time with her, and she was great company. It did dawn on him that a trip like this could prematurely end their nascent relationship, given the close quarters and long hours. On the other hand, they had great conversations. They were very different, but similar in the important areas. This would be a great way to get to know each other. Frankly, it would make a good story either way. He wasn't a spontaneous person, so when the idea crossed his mind and he suggested she go with him to a friend's wedding in his home state of Colorado, it felt a little crazy. When she immediately accepted, he believed it would be a grand adventure. Now, out here in the mountains, with wild animals howling, it really was.

Of course, there had been a few bumps in the road, literally and figuratively. At the wedding reception, one of his friends commented that it was nice to meet her, but that her travelling companion would be through here next year with another pretty blonde. She seemed to take this pretty well, but he was chagrined and felt horrible. He apologized for his friend, and explained that was just his friend's slightly off-kilter sense of humor. Perhaps his friend had been drinking a little too much. In the back of his mind, he felt slightly proud that his friend thought him capable of landing a continuing stream of beautiful girls, but he kept this thought pushed down. What a horrible thing to put in the mind of this girl who was stuck with him for another week, and with whom he was beginning to form a very close relationship.

He made the wounded animal noise. Nothing.

He tried it a few more times. Nothing.

After crouching silently in the dark for a minute, he told her he'd try one more time and then they could move on or head back.

He tried one more time.

Then the animal howled again. This time, it was seemingly right next to them, just over the ridge. He wondered how had it gotten so close, so fast, without them hearing?

She was terrified and clung tighter to his arm. She wondered: what was wrong with this young man that he wanted a meat eating animal to get closer to them? Still, it was thrilling in a scary way. She hadn't really believed his call would entice the animal, in spite of his many talents and self-assured air. She continued to be amazed at his varied abilities, and began to trust that he knew what he was doing.

He was even more amazed than she was that his call had worked. He loved nature, and especially wild life. No hike was truly successful unless he saw a wild animal, and the bigger the better. His shock that his call actually drew the animal in led to a jolt of excitement. It sounded like it was mere feet away over the ridge. He felt the ancient thrill of the hunter. This was in spite of the fact that he could never bring himself to kill an animal. He actually caught and released spiders in the house. Still, he loved to "hunt" wild animals, just to see them.

"Let's move very quietly to the ridge top and look for it," he whispered.

"No" she whispered back, but followed him rather than be left alone.

They peered over the edge. It was too dark to see anything, but the animal howled again, seemingly 20 feet away in the brush.

As they peered ahead looking for it in the dim light of a sliver moon, they heard another howl. However, this one was directly behind them, answering the first call. It wasn't quite as close to them as the — Coyote? Wolf? — that was in front of them, but they both froze for a second time. They were surrounded by at least two animals that they couldn't see or hear, and that thought they were wounded prey. She went from scared to petrified. She grew up in a corn field. What was she doing in the mountains, in the dark, with a guy she had only been dating for a handful of weeks? He had seemed amazing up to now, maybe even The One, but this idiot had just endangered her life!

For his part, he immediately went from experiencing that ancient feeling of being a hunter to that even more ancient fear of being prey. He had called in a coyote with a wounded animal call, and was now surrounded by at least two. They couldn't be wolves, could they? Without being able to see them, feeling surrounded, and knowing these hunters were close, the fun had suddenly worn off.

With a nonchalance that belied his true feeling of urgency, he suggested "Let's head back to the car."

She tried to sound calm as she agreed. She stood up and ran as fast as she could in the dark. She barely noticed that he ran just as fast as she did. He briefly considered that they were heading straight toward the second animal, but he figured they could get to the car safely. In any event, getting into the car sounded better than staying outside at that point.

They arrived at the car with surprisingly little difficulty in the dark. He fumbled for his keys. Just like in the movies, with his heart and adrenaline pumping, it was hard to steady his hands to unlock the door. He opened her door and let her in, and then went to the driver's side and climbed in himself, hurrying to shut the door behind him.

Safely in the car, they laughed, nervously at first, and then genuinely. They had faced danger together and survived unscathed. He admired her adventurous spirit, given she hadn't spent much if any time in the mountains. She wasn't an outdoorsy person. Her willingness to go on a night hike and trust him warmed his heart. His confidence had been shaken a little by the unexpected close encounter with the wild predators. However, this was more than made up for by gaining a whole new appreciation for her. She wasn't just a gorgeous girl who was great to talk to. She was someone he wanted to share a lot more adventures with.

He had always felt at home in nature, even when nervous. This night, in his outdoor home, he felt that this young woman fit in perfectly. She wasn't used to it, not yet, but she shared his awe of natural beauty. She was brave, adventurous, and he loved sharing his passion for the mountains with her. While he loved the solitude he found in

them, he realized sharing them with her was even better. He was pretty sure, hopeful at the very least, that the next time he came back, it would be with this same girl.

For her, his ability to call wild animals and his calm demeanor in the face of meat eating animals impressed her. They had both acted bravely. (Mostly, sort of -- if only for the other one.) She had a new appreciation for his calm, cool control even during stressful situations. She thought maybe his game was as big as his talk. He could summon wild animals, and not even get nervous about it. This shared experience bonded them faster than months of dates in bars and movies could have. She determined that she would be the last in the line of blonde girls he took to the mountains.

That trip, and specifically that night in the mountains, did make for a great story. Years later, as their kids rolled their eyes while hearing the story yet again, he chided his wife about how scared she was. However, without giving too much away, he admitted that was the only hike he'd taken when he was okay with *not* seeing a wild animal.

Honorable Mention: Sarah Simon**New York, NY****Fear, Herself**

"Yup, Donovan. It's our fate – we're going to be cuy." José stared blankly into the cage's thin metal bars. He was trying to make out his reflection.

"That can't be. I know the family is adventurous, but what gave you this idea? What gave you the idea that they would turn us into an Andean delicacy?"

José's reflection suddenly flashed into that scene, that scene from that travel documentary he had complacently begun watching with Muriel, his owner, some years ago. Muriel liked to learn about the world from her bed, flipping to *Discovery Channel* on Sunday afternoons. The guinea pigs' cage topped her dresser at just a 60-degree angle from the TV. This angle represented much opportunity for José, because he often felt lonely, even with Donovan as his cage mate. He liked to learn about the world, too – from his cage.

But now all that enthusiasm for discovery was coming back to roast him on a stick. On one Sunday afternoon three years ago, José and Muriel were watching a documentary about Ecuador and Peru. The Australian host talked about the countries' biodiversity, joked about Darwin and the Galapagos, lightheartedly showcased her lightheadedness at Quito's high altitude. But what flashed before José's eyes then, and flashes again now, is the scene where the host tried cuy, cooked guinea pig. He again saw the smoked, supine, blackened body of his brother, garnished with sides of avocado and yucca on a pearly white plate; he again saw the flesh of his brother being slit and dug into; he again watched with horror as the host's chewing face faded from an expressed reluctance to a curious pleasure.

"WE ARE GOING TO DIE!" José seemed to erupt and implode at the same time.

"You still haven't answered my question. What leads you to believe this?"

"I overheard the family talking..."

"Yeah? And?"

"Well they said something about going to Cusco."

"Cusco? That city in southern Peru?"

"YES Donovan. Isn't it just perfect? Cusco cuy. Cuy in Cusco. We might as well run the running wheel into the hottest corner of guinea pig hell."

"OKAY, Papua. I know you like to learn about the world, but cool down. Besides, running wheels are more of a hamster thing, you know that. We don't even have one; you're becoming hysterical."

"Okay, Donovan, you know my opinion about the word, 'hysterical.' That is a sexist word that came out of sexist Grecian understandings and designates the womb as the harbinger of madness."

"Alright, alright. You're so particular." Donovan sneered, heading back to his corner. But soon enough, he would start panicking too, in his own toned-down way. He too had seen that documentary scene. And after three years, it too had stayed with him. *How wouldn't it?* he thought. *If Muriel saw a human cooked and eaten from a neat little table, silverware glistening by candlelight – it too would stay with her.*

"José?" Donovan nestled his nose into the floor's paper bedding. "Even if we did move to Cusco, it's not like..."

"I thought about that, too," answered José with a flat tone, still searching for his reflection.

"Right, why would they decide to turn us from pets to Peruvian delicacies? They didn't buy us to eat us."

"Well, that's how people get food nowadays. They buy it. Maybe they've just been trying to raise us, fatten us for our meat, our juicy, tender, Andean meat..."

"ENOUGH! Don't think like that. It can't be true, no! No way!"

José stood motionless.

"Papua, are you sure you heard them say, 'Cusco?' I mean, that's a very specific word made up of very specific sounds that could be easily mistaken for –"

"For WHAT?! What, huh? Is there any other word they would say that approaches its phonetic nuance?"

"I say let's come up with a list. A list of similar-sounding words. Maybe something will strike us as more likely."

"Okay, we'll try it. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, G – Gusco? No, Gusto! They could have been talking about doing something with gusto!"

"Sadly Papua, that's not the correct pronunciation."

"What, gusto? Like Cusco?"

"No, it's pronounced gusto. Like the name Gus and 'toe.'"

"Oh...damn. I've been saying it wrong this whole time? Like, every time they feed us the Harvest blend, and I say, 'C'mon, Don! Let's chomp on with gusto!' I'm wrong?"

"Yeah. You know, for all your broad knowledge, you really get the specifics wrong."

"Damn, Donovan! Why didn't you tell me!"

"Well, I kind of wanted you to keep it. Spanish is your first language, anyway – they'd pronounce 'gu' like 'goo –'"

The house front door slammed; Muriel and the family were back.

"OH NO! It's THEM! What should we do? Try to ESCAPE? Somehow murder them all? What should we DO?!"

After scrambling around the paper bedding aimlessly, at this point just trying to run out the nervous energy – a hand popped open the cage door. It was Muriel's hand, and the face that it led up to was laughing. José and Donovan saw her teeth before they saw what she was laughing about – the being in Muriel's hand.

"José?" Donovan whispered. "I love –"

"Hey guys! Say hi! We just picked her up at Costco! Her name is –"

"COSTCO! COSTCO! IT WAS COSTCO YOU IDIOT!" Donovan screamed.

"Whoa, what's with all the squealing? You excited?! I knew you would be excited," Muriel began closing the cage door and paralleling her face to the cage

bars. "Y'all have been looking a little lonely lately, so here's a new friend. She looks a little different, but she's very pretty. We decided to call her –"

José and Donovan stared into her red, red eyes, encircled in a light pink ring of skin. Her hair was white and wild, untrimmed, even angelically chaotic. Her pink-as-bubblegum nose began sniffing, yet seemed to be levitating within the white orb of her presence. She was beautifully, dangerously, threateningly untouchable. All they had as proof of her existence was Muriel's announcement; she did not seem of this world to the guinea boys.

"– and that's why we decided to call her, 'fear.' Say hi to Fear, be nice to her. She just looks a little different, that's all."

Honorable Mention: Tara Slye**Sterling, VA****MLM for Murder****BEFORE**

Any and every bottle from the medicine cabinet that she could swipe with one shaking hand went into the tote bag. Running into the kitchen, she dumped the bag onto the table. Striding forward with newfound purpose to the cabinets she rifled through the junk drawer until she found an old golf pencil. Grabbing the closest piece of paper, an old grocery list, she haphazardly ripped it in two. She plopped herself down at the table and took a deep breath. She raised the pencil to the makeshift paper and scribbled one short sentence. Good enough, she thought as there was a knock on the door. "Shit." She pushed back angrily from the table and went to see who was at the door.

NOW

The note was short and sweet. *I can't do it anymore.* No signature, no explanation, just hastily written on what looked like the backside of a torn off piece of shopping list. Detective Olivia Spencer examined the items on the back of what was allegedly a suicide note.

"Whole Wheat Bread, avocado, and cashew milk," she said aloud to her partner, Detective Samuel Johansen.

"Doesn't exactly sound like someone who would do this sort of thing, does it?" he responded without prompting. "Then again if that what was in my fridge, I might off myself, too."

It took all of Olivia's self-control not to roll her eyes. "Don't worry, by the looks of it, no one is going to accuse you of buying health food."

Her male counterpart let out a loud laugh, startling the techs working the scene. Tall and handsome, Sam was the poster-boy for health, with the eating habits of a fifteen year old adolescent male.

"What doesn't sound right is a twenty-nine year old, with a steady boyfriend, good job, and what looks like fresh groceries in the fridge, ingesting a couple bottles of pills." Olivia mused aloud. "Something just seems off here."

"Well, you can't always tell someone's depressed by looking at them," Sam responded somberly earning a glance from his surprised partner.

"That was deep for you."

"I'm a man of many layers." Wiggling his eyebrows at her, Olivia finally gave in to an eye roll.

Later that day the pair received a call from the Medical Examiner asking if they could take a trip down to the morgue.

"Either the autopsy was really cut and dry or something is up." Sam pressed the down button on the wall for the elevator. Olivia had no choice but to agree.

Down in the depths of the building, the detectives stood around the dead body waiting for Dr. Benjamin Brown to let them know why they were summoned.

"What's up, Doc?" Sam insisted on immaturely asking the medical examiner as he did every time they were down in the morgue, which the doctor usually ignored.

"Normally, I wouldn't have asked you down here for a suicide, except..." he let the sentence run off as he sighed. "Except, I examined the contents of her stomach. Seemingly empty. No sign of the pills from the empty bottles you found or any other bottle for that matter. I'm sending them out to the lab, just in case they catch something I missed. What I did find, was this lodged in her throat." He pulled a wad of what looked like slime from the tray beside him.

He held it up to their faces-a little too close for both of their comfort levels- and told them to smell it.

"Nope." Sam backed up a few feet.

"You don't trust me, detective?" Olivia couldn't be sure, but she could have sworn she saw a hint of a smirk on the normally professional medical examiner.

"I don't trust myself not to puke all over the body." Sam backed up, pushing Olivia closer in the process.

She jumped in surprise. "It smells good!"

"It does. I'll run a few tests of course, but off the record, it looks like some sort of congealed cream. I only make this assumption because it smells exactly like my wife's new expensive face cream she was bullied into buying by a neighbor."

Face cream? Olivia couldn't help but think that this case was about to get strange.

"Well, that was strange," Sam declared as he pulled out into traffic.

The detectives were in the car on the way back to the precinct, heading back from meeting the family and boyfriend of Jessica Morales – the recently deceased. Sam, weaving in and out of traffic, had a frown on his face. The simple act of condolence had quickly become more convoluted. The family had been understandably upset, but they answered all their questions with the expected answer for something so senseless- of course she wouldn't do anything like this, she was happy. All standard responses for a normal suicide investigation. What was strange was as they were leaving, Jessica's boyfriend, Jerry, pulled them aside to tell them that Jessica actually wasn't completely happy as of late. She had recently started selling skincare for the multi-level-marketing (MLM) company Bea-U-TEA-ful, a skincare line that used all natural ingredients made from tea leaves, and it was stressing her out.

"I mean, now I've heard everything. Tea leaves? What is this world turning into? I don't even want to drink tea-unless it's a nice cold glass of southern sweet tea-let alone put it on my face." Sam really couldn't get his head around this, continuing to muse as Olivia answered an incoming call.

"Plus, why would she swallow her entire medicine cabinet and then chug her tea face cream?" Sam asked a tad inconsiderately.

"She didn't" Olivia answered, hanging up the phone in the process. "That was Dr. Brown. He was right. The labs came back and there wasn't anything in her stomach at time of death. She didn't swallow any pills."

"So death by face cream?" Sam shook his head, "what could possibly be so stressful about tea?"

They were quick to find out. Jerry had given them the phone number of the woman who had “recruited” Jessica into selling. Her “direct upline,” he had explained. When they had called Karen, she claimed she had little time to talk, but the detectives were more than welcome to come to her group “pow-wow,” where they could speak with not only her, but the rest of the *Glam Girls* team. If Sam was confused about using tea leaves in skin care, meeting with a named team for skin care during one of their “pow-wows” was just too much to handle. This was compounded by the sight that met them when they walked through the front door of the local VFW hall.

“You would think they would just meet at someone’s house with some wine and cheese or some...” his words were left hanging as they stepped into the hall. Over 50 women were sitting in rows of ten or so chairs laid out in a semi-circle centered around a podium, where a woman was practically yelling into the microphone.

“YOU ARE NOT A QUITTER. IF SOMEONE TELLS YOU NO, IT DOESN’T ACTUALLY MEAN NO, IT MEANS....” Clearly expecting her captivated (most likely with fear-thought Sam) audience to chime in, she wasn’t disappointed. In a thunderous chorus, they all replied, “NOT RIGHT NOW!” Sam and Olivia stole a quick, meaningful glance at each other.

“THAT’S RIGHT!” silence followed the exclamation as the speaker looked around the room. She launched into a speech on their new acne line-not just for teens- and finished her presentation with praise for those who had “met their quota,” and a bullying push for those who hadn’t.

“Next week, we will talk more about the art of the perfect Instagram invite. Here’s a little teaser- our tagline will be ‘NEVER GIVE UP.’” She screamed the last into the microphone, eliciting a final round of applause from the audience.

“Wow, that was intense,” Sam physically shook himself, “I was seconds away from buying an entire line of product to stop acne and I don’t even have acne. Hell, I didn’t even have it as a kid.”

“Of course you didn’t.” It came out harsher than she meant it, but he was right, it was intense. Olivia could see how easily you could be talked into buying and selling something when that was the recruitment tactic.

"Well, hand over your wallet, here comes the queen bee. Let's see what she has to stay about her face cream found in her dead representative's mouth."

The talk with Karen went as expected; she burst into tears at the news, had to sit down and dramatically made one of her ladies grab her a glass of water. Sam was the one doing the eye rolling now as Olivia tried to ease out some information.

When pressed on the state of Jessica's being, she replied, "No, she wasn't stressed out, she was loving every minute of it. She had just made rank." Karen looked affronted at the mere insinuation and took a deep breath and tried to compose herself, "She was like a sister to me, to all of us. We were her family." The girls who had stuck around to hear what the detectives had to say nodded in agreement, reminding Sam of a flock of hens. Karen was inconsolable, so they left, leaving their contact card behind them with the instruction to call if she thought of anything.

"Oh Good, the case has just gotten more strange." Sam was clearly happy to be leaving the meeting and Olivia couldn't help but agree. Her phone beeped as they got into the car. "Hold on, it's an email from the precinct. It's Jessica's phone records." She scrolled down, "Wow." She lapsed into silence as Sam watched her eyes widen as she scanned the documents. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Looks like Jessica wasn't the model Bea-U-TEA-ful representative that Karen wants us to think. There's dozens of threatening texts from Karen about not meeting quota and being a 'disappointment to the Bea-U-TEA-ful name'. Jessica never answered the last one, but it was sent twenty minutes before estimated time of death."

Sam let out a big sigh, "So much for family."

BEFORE

Any and every bottle from the medicine cabinet that she could swipe with one shaking hand went into the tote bag. Running into the kitchen, she dumped the bag onto the table. Striding forward with newfound purpose to the cabinets, she rifled through the junk drawer until she found an old golf pencil. Grabbing the closest piece of paper, an old grocery list, she haphazardly ripped it in two. She plopped herself down at the table and took a deep breath. She raised the pencil to the makeshift paper and scribbled one short sentence. Good enough, she thought as there was a

knock on the door. "Shit." She pushed back angrily from the table and went to see who was at the door.

"Karen?" Jessica opened the door a crack, but was hesitant to let the other woman in. "What are you doing here?"

Karen put her hand on the door and pushed her way in, "I need to talk to you."

There was no point in fighting the intrusion. She knew this was going to happen. She led Karen into the kitchen and they sat down at the opposite end of the rectangular table from the discarded tote bag.

"Can I get you something?" she half-heartedly offered, hoping that Karen would refuse and she could just get this over with and she would leave.

"No." Karen sat stoically in her chair. "Listen, Carla told me that you're thinking about not being a Bea-U-TEA-ful representative anymore."

Straight to the point as usual, Jessica thought to herself, trying to come up with an answer that didn't come off harsh.

"Listen, I'm sorry. I was actually just writing you a note. I know I should have called, but I just felt really overwhelmed with all this. I'm not cut out to be a rep. I feel like a sleezy saleswoman and that I just don't belong. I don't even drink tea. I'm really sorry."

The words spilled out one after another, a waterfall of syllables that she hoped sounded coherent. She took a deep breath when she was done and waited for the guilt trip she was sure would follow—that's what got her into this mess in the first place—and she wasn't disappointed.

"You can't do that. I need you in my downline. If you quit I'll lose my Magenta status and go back to being a Cyan. I can't go back to being a Cyan. I won't go back."

Jessica almost started to laugh, but as she saw the serious look on Karen's face she was glad she refrained.

"I'm really sorry," she meekly offered, "I can still be your preferred customer and like, buy stuff." She stood up from her chair, hoping Karen would take that as a hint to leave, but Karen just sat there staring at her.

"No, you don't understand. You can't quit. You can't do that to me. I will be the laughingstock of the whole team."

Jessica was starting to get a little unnerved, she knew that Karen took Bea-U-TEA-ful way too seriously, but this was downright creepy. She pushed in her chair. "Listen, you could never be the laughingstock of anything. Everyone loves you, they'll understand. Just, just blame me."

Karen didn't answer. She just lunged. Jessica, not seeing it coming, never had time to brace herself before her head hit the marble countertop with a crack.

Karen knew she should call the police, but what good would that do? It wasn't an accident. She had meant to do it. Peering into the bag sitting on the counter, full of the entire line of beauty products she had made Jessica buy as a starter kit, just a few months ago, she became furious. Those beautiful products thrown into a heap on the table as if they weren't important. Without thinking, she opened the closest bottle and shoved a fistful down Jessica's throat. "Quitter!" she screamed into Jessica's face as she started to sob. Minutes later, she composed herself enough to go into the bathroom, grab a couple bottles of old prescription medication and flush their contents down the toilet before dropping the empty bottles near the lifeless body. She ripped off a rectangle of paper towel and wiped off the medicine bottles she had touched. Picking up the face cream from the floor, she placed it gently into her purse and walked out of the house, closing the door behind her.

Honorable Mention: Vasudha Sundram**Broadlands, VA****The Iron Gate**

Her beautiful asymmetrical face always comes to my mind whenever I recall the event of that terrible Saturday in the month of June, 1986. I remember the building very clearly and even more clearly the face of the lady behind the 'iron gate'. My mom called it the fly curtain, a mesh curtain in a wooden frame that allows air to flow breezily by while keeping away the mosquitoes that were a constant menace in our small town on the outskirts of Kolkata in India. She, on the other side, was unlike anybody I had seen in the neighborhood. Hers was a perfectly round face with long, wavy hair cascading to frame her visage. A single mole was perfectly placed a little above her lips on one side of her face, *a la* Cindy Crawford style, and gave the impression of a beautiful asymmetry, drawing one's attention to her full lips and to the delicate bony nose right above the lips. Her strikingly beautiful face and handsome figure always left a lasting impression on anyone who met her. To me, she also seemed to rebel against the norms of the society. Her ever-open hair, which is quite a common sight these days, was frowned-upon in those days for a female belonging to a 'bhodro' house (a decent family). She always wore a Nylon saree that was bright, beautiful and showed off her curves well. For her young age (she was about 26 years old), she was constantly chewing 'paan' leaves, which stained her lips an attractive red. Paan or beetle leaf chewing used to be a favorite pastime among older people in India. It was universally liked for the slight tongue numbing quality, its weirdly bitter taste and for the temporary crimson color it left behind on the tongue and lips.

She was Suruchi and she had three kids, two of whom were similar in age to me and my brother, 6 and 4 years, respectively. Her youngest was a daughter, who was just 6 months old. Whenever I had seen Suruchi, it was always behind the 'iron gate'. She did not seem to mingle with the ladies of the locality, who would usually gather between 5 and 6pm every evening. This impromptu get-together happened every day when almost everyone came out of the house nicely dressed; the kids to play with their friends, the teenagers to chat and banter and the ladies for some fresh air and chit chat, before heading back inside for their homework, chores and evening supper.

These were also the times when dads were the primary breadwinners and moms were the stay at home caretakers. I didn't know a lot about Suruchi except that my mom stopped by to speak with her every time we walked to my grammy's house on our weekly visits. My grandma's house was just around the corner from the 'iron gate' house. In my fertile imagination as a 6 year old kid, I presumed Suruchi to be imprisoned behind the 'iron gate'. When I anxiously voiced this theory to my mum, she rectified my outlandish thoughts and said "Nobody is trying to keep her inside" and as an afterthought added, "Nobody needs protection from her either. It is not as if she were a lion or something". But lion she seemed to be, for I saw women steering their men or their gazes away from her; and imprisoned she was, since the society seemed to have ostracized this pretty person altogether. The unfairness of it all seemed to weight on my mom and I suspect she overcompensated for the penalizing society by being the communicator of this world across the 'iron gate'; I had seldom seen anybody else chat with the lady, much less stop by that house.

The talk during this particular stop at her place revolved around our shifting base to neighboring Kolkata for better prospects. Subsequently, the visits to my grammy's place became more sporadic and infrequent. However, we vacationed with my grandma for a few weeks every summer, as was the case when the terrible incident happened on my 10th birthday in 1986. I remember that particular summer visit quite clearly as if it happened just yesterday. The 'iron gate' house was not one of our stops that evening since we didn't notice anyone at the window. We had just crossed that building and the next couple of buildings, when a sudden commotion from behind slowed us on our track. As we turned to see the source of the commotion, I was horrified and aghast to see Suruchi, engulfed in a strong bundle of flame that was leaping way up high, rushing towards us; her hand were flaying in the air as she yelled at my mother "Help me Nina!!!". My mom, eager to protect me from the horrible sight unfolding in front of us, pushed me aside and sternly instructed me to "GO HOME TO DIDAA (granny)...run". I saw my mom instruct Suruchi to lay on the ground and roll as she rushed inside the nearest house to get water. She cried, as she tried to douse the flame that was consuming her friend. A lot of people had also come out running upon hearing the commotion. Some men brought winter shawl to wrap the lady and suppress the fire. But

it was too late. Suruchi lay on the ground struggling hard to breathe and writhing in pain from third degree burns; her open long hair were partially burnt and her nylon saree had melted in the heat and stuck to her body as a gooey clumps.

I was transfixed by the grim events unfolding in front of me. As soon as I gained some strength in my legs, I ran to my grammy's place and succinctly described what had just transpired. Granny rushed out, just in time, to see Suruchi being taken to the hospital by the two men, one of her legs dangling stiff from the partially open door of the speeding away taxi. That was the last I saw of Suruchi.

Soon, groups of people gathered together in the neighborhood and started talking about the shocking incident. My desire to understand why and what happened to Suruchi was thwarted by mom, who prevented my participation in these group discussions, even if only as a silent observer. No sooner had the antennae of my ears perked up to snippets of conversations on the subject than my mother would shoo me away and send me home. But I did overhear terms like 'alcoholic, crazy mother', 'dancer', 'not fit for a decent society'. Some questioned the marriage while others wondered if her job went beyond cabaret dancing. They all agreed 'into a nice family she brought ill-luck and shame!'. I liked Suruchi and viewed her as a brave lion behind an 'iron gate' erected by the society. Appalled, upset and indignant at this display of bias and bigotry, I decided to ask my grandma the truth behind the incident. Knowing that my ever protective mother would not approve of any discussion, my grammy promised to tell me all when I turned 16. The six years zipped past like a dried leaf in a gale and when I turned 16, I reminded my grammy of her promise. She then narrated to me the sad story of Suruchi Sen.

My grandma asked "You know Abhir maama, right?" (maama is a respectful moniker for an older male in India). "He was the youngest and favorite son in his family of four brothers. He was also the troublemaker in the family and was always up to something that he had to be rescued from. But marriage to Suruchi was not something he could be rescued out of. Abhir, from a respectable middle class family had married too low, too cheap and to a cabaret dancer!! No amount of coaxing could dissuade Abhir

from loving and marrying her. The parents and their favorite son had a big fallout and split their household, with the son staying on the ground floor and the parents on the first floor of their small colonial house. For two years they did not talk with each other. Eventually, things improved and Abhir started talking to his parents – he would yell from the road, almost like a vegetable vendor selling his veggies, while his parents stood on the balcony fawning over him. It was a hilarious spectacle for all of us to watch". My grammy chuckled and continued "Abhir would often ask his parents of their health and they, in turn, would always admonish him for not eating enough, perhaps suggesting he was not getting tasty food. Sometimes, I would see Suruchi standing behind the 'iron gate' with a smile on her lips, eating up the conversation and silently mouthing out her in-law's oft repeated dialogues".

My grammy continued "Suruchi never complained to anyone. Her marriage to Abhir was supposed to be her ticket to quit cabaret dancing, a profession that didn't arouse respect in our traditional bengali town. She had become a cabaret dancer by the age of 16 to support herself and her widowed mother. She was forced to mature fast". My grandma's brows contracted as if she was displeased with fate, and continued "But after the death of her mother, she was anchor-less and had nothing to look forward to. She knew well that her cabaret act would last only for a few more years before they would replace her with someone younger. Abhir was a bouncer at the place she danced and he fell deeply in love with this beautiful and bold person whose performance he watched every day. It took him many months before he mustered enough courage to propose marriage to her, offering a 'decent living' and 'strong and deep familial ties'". I smiled. It was obvious that Abhir maama had done his background research and understood that strong familial ties were the things Suruchi desired the most. My grammy continued "After two weeks of intense soul searching and pondering, Suruchi got married to Abhir in a temple surrounded by her cabaret friends and his drinking buddies. Suruchi knew that Abhir's parents had objected to the relationship. But the intensity of the objection was unclear to her till she came to her new home. The hullabaloo that followed his bringing the 'cabaret' bride home, the huge street fight between the son and his parents in front of this pretty lady still dressed in her bridal attire of red saree, with the red vermillion powder adorning the partition of

her hair was very distressing. People from the neighborhood had gathered around their house and some even tried to calm the situation. Your mom was then a newly married person herself and hence was extremely sensitive to Suruchi's need. She was perhaps the only one in the crowd who was empathetic to Suruchi. That was the start of your mother's friendship with her. Suruchi was superstitious and considered this vehement opposition from her in-laws during the start of her married life as a bad omen. I believe she carried this thought till the end of her life. It took at least 2 years before the parents would start speaking with Abhir. By then, Suruchi had given birth to her first son and had settled down to domestic bliss. Unfortunate for her, this was short lived. Alcohol were her solace during her dancing days. So, when the incessant fights with Abhir's parents brought back memories of dark, insecure days, both Abhir and Suruchi took to drinking alcohol at home. While the habit seemed to bond them together, it scandalized the entire neighborhood. Initially it started as drinks at night, then, it moved to the evening times, and by the time Suruchi had her 3rd kid, her days started with a drink and most of the time she was barely functional. The kids were meant to bring them peace and happiness. But while they loved the kids, they found bringing up the kids to be quite a challenges and a lot of work".

After a thoughtful pause, my grammy continued "After 11 years of marriage, it was crystal clear that Abhir's family would never accept her as one of their own. Abhir worked hard to support the family and to keep Suruchi happy. But he failed to notice the signs of depression that Suruchi was sinking into. We could sense Suruchi being increasingly unhappy as time went by. By the time her oldest son was 10, Suruchi was probably severely depressed and had descended into her last phase of alcohol fueled calmness and general apathy. She had married hoping to find happiness and unshakable wide family roots. While she found unconditional love in Abhir, the conviction and the consolation of family ties were entirely absent".

My grammy continued "I guess, Suruchi must have concluded that her mere existence prevented her kids from forming a meaningful relationship with the extended family of uncles, aunts, grandpa and grandma. So one fine day, a month before her demise, she mustered enough courage to walk to the first floor and spoke with her in-laws and

pleaded with them to accept her kids". I remember Suruchi animatedly describing this encounter to my mom and added "I don't mind if they never talk with me. I just want happiness, safety and security for my kids". My mom was very happy to see Suruchi spirited and cheerful; and for the first time in many years, not drunk. I nudged closer to grammy, knowing the end of the story was near. She took a deep breath and continued "You know the rest. You and your mom were vacationing with me that summer when Suruchi poured kerosene and burnt herself alive. She had seen to it that her sons were away at a friend's place and her daughter was safely napping inside the house. A carefully written note discovered later indicated that the drastic step was taken for her kid's sake, suggesting that the parents-in-law had not accepted her into the folds of the family after all!!!" My heart weighed a ton as I shut my eyes tight and wondered how the story would end had she sought treatment for her depression.

Another 5 years passed before I visited the town on a long vacation. During this time I finished my college education and was working in a scientific lab in Kolkata. Not long into my stay, I observed a pretty teen girl with long wavy hair sashaying down the street and unintentionally arresting the attention of all with her beauty. My mom gave me a knowing smile and said "Yes. That is Suruchi's daughter". I am sure she does not know as much as I know about her mom, since she grew up with her grandparents. I certainly pray life is kinder to her.

Honorable Mention: R.F. Thomas**Minonk, IL****Hannah's Song**

There was Big News coming from this year's annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research in Chicago. Rumors of a historic discovery were bouncing and rebounding, a discovery with global import. Inside the massive sprawl of McCormick Place, the focus was concentrated on a single auditorium. Press and media types waited outside closed doors, while every seat inside was filled. The atmosphere fairly buzzed with anticipation.

On the main stage, just behind the open curtains, stood a young Biomedical Geneticist awaiting his introduction to the podium. He was breathing deeply, trying to quell rising nerves. He was 29 years old, his name was Samuel, and he was the youngest person in the room.

Hannah was dying. She had been greedy, ignored the warnings, and was now paying the price. Years of yearning for a child, wishing, wanting, praying and yet going without. Finally against all hope, she had gotten pregnant and then had a beautiful son. After all that time watching with envy her sister's family grow and prosper.

But the doctors told her she wouldn't, couldn't have another one. They told her there would be complications. They even recommended the dreaded H-word. But she thought to herself, if I can have one, perhaps there is another. A baby girl to even things out. So she ignored the symptoms when they came, coped with the pain, and was overwhelmed by the malignant evil that sped through her. Ovarian cancer.

Hannah woke in the early hours, her thoughts dulled by sleep. She had almost three heartbeats of blissful oblivion before awareness blossomed through her. The throbbing bruise that was her body, mind and soul. She lay there for a long moment, vulnerable to a self-pity that begged to just this once wake up in another person's life. But no, she was still Hannah.

She whispered to the darkness, to God, to the universe, to whoever might be listening. "I'm such a fool. Such a greedy fool." With some little effort she quietly swung her legs out of bed, trying not to wake her husband. Time to start another day. A stab of fear came with the thought, because there weren't going to be many more days. Her list of days was now shorter by one.

She had gone through the five stages and was still having a hard time with the acceptance part. Several times a day she asked herself, "Why was I so stupid?"

If only she had been content with one child. If only she had listened to the doctors. If only her sister hadn't put out one child after another, each one brighter and more perfect than the one before.

Hannah remembered how as children her sister Mary and she had been close, but competitive. Their father had been a carpenter and they played incessantly with the elaborate doll house he had crafted for them. Entire summer vacations saw the two creating an ongoing game of house where they would try to one-up each other. All in fun, with their future entirely before them, an unwritten fairy tale with a happy ending.

"I'll find a husband and get married first."

"I'll have a bigger house with a white picket fence and huge back yard."

"I'll have five kids."

"I'll have seven, and one of my daughters will be the first woman president."

"But I'll have ten and my son will find a cure for cancer."

Now those silly dreams were over. Now she was hanging on simply to see her son Samuel's second birthday. Her life was reduced to short term goals, just try and get to the next thing. Can I make it to his birthday? That's September, surely I can do that. Is this my last autumn? Can I see another Christmas? Is this my last sunny day?

There are endless details to consider when one's death is approaching. Hannah knew there was little time left to tidy up her affairs.

Yet nothing dominated her thoughts as much as Samuel. To leave him behind so young and unformed was becoming a source of rising panic. Yes, her husband was caring and capable, a good and strong man. But she desperately wanted a hand in raising her son too. She burned with the need.

Then one afternoon, worrying the issue over once again in her mind, an idea flared. On impulse, she picked up her phone. One of her sister's sons worked in tech development for a telecomm giant. He was a genius with gadgets.

"Eric? It's your Aunt Hannah. No, I'm fine. Listen dear; I have a question for you. You know those greeting cards where you open them and a little song plays? How would I go about making my own?"

Hannah's next step was to find a law firm. One that had been around a long time, and presumably would be around at least another twenty years.

When she was lead into the stuffy office with leather chairs and mahogany furniture, Hannah was clutching a yellow plastic shopping bag. The elderly attorney behind his massive desk looked at her with mild interest, his eyes going to the bag in her hands.

"How may Struthers and Lowell assist you, ma'am?"

Hannah opened the bag and revealed a thick stack of envelopes. "I'd like you to send a birthday card to my son. Every year until he's 18."

Samuel had no real memory of his mother. He couldn't recall what she looked like, and all he really knew was that she had gone to a place called Heaven. But he did know her voice, because cards came in the mail beginning with his third birthday. When his father helped him open that first one, they both heard Hannah softly singing Happy Birthday, followed by a singsong reminder, "Remember, your mother loves you very much."

The mailman brought Samuel an identical card for his fourth birthday, but when he turned five, there was a note inside. It was short and simple.

Dear son--Now that you've started school, remember to share, especially with those who have less than you.

Samuel's father helped him read the message, and they spent a minute discussing its meaning. His father expected Samuel to put the card aside and soon forget it, but his son surprised him.

"Mom is sending me mail from heaven?" His father could only nod. Samuel asked for something to keep the card in, and so they dug around a bit and found an old wooden cigar box. Samuel put it on the small dresser in his bedroom and there it would remain, growing by one envelope for the next 13 years.

Every year, Samuel received a different note. On his sixth birthday it read, *Dear son—Remember to be kind to others.*

When he turned seven. Dear son—Remember to say your nightly prayers. It's important to know there is something higher than yourself.

He was eight and at a classmate's party when he realized everyone else knew the birthday song too. He had assumed it was solely his mother's creation meant just for him, and his father and he had even begun calling it Hannah's Song.

Then came the year Samuel's father was called to school to meet with his teacher and principal.

"Your son Samuel is a gifted student," the principal said. "Very gifted. We think his advancement could be accelerated by skipping the next grade."

Samuel's teacher agreed, beaming with enthusiasm. "Your son is rapidly outpacing his level. Sometimes when children are so far ahead academically, they can be awkward socially. Or perhaps not as developed in other areas. But Samuel is the most popular boy in his class; he is kind and considerate and respectful. I have no doubt he could adapt to this change, and thrive."

Hannah's messages matured along with her son. Tenth Birthday. Dear son--
Sympathize with the weaknesses of others. You have some too, you know. Be willing to help those who need it.

Twelfth. Dear son—In whatever you do, always aim for the bull's-eye. Strive to do your very best.

The annual inclusion of motherly advice was a peculiarity known by now to Samuel's close friends. He was eager for each new message, and would go back, reading and re-reading cards out of the old cigar box. His father would at times pass by his son's bedroom door and hear the muted sound of 'Hannah's Song' from inside and know the cards were being opened again.

A few weeks before Samuel's eighth grade graduation, his father was called to another conference at school, this time with a guidance counselor who outlined a three-year plan.

"Normally these college courses are available only to juniors and seniors. But we could customize a course for Samuel and see him graduate a year early. He already has a stellar student record, and this would put him at the top of the list for college applications."

The counselor, a burly and bearded man, looked down at a file in his hand.
"Your son's profile is remarkable. Similar reports from every teacher. Best student they have ever had. But what stands out is his attention, his drive, an intensity that never lapses. He never takes a day off, so to speak."

Samuel's father was tempted to share the secret to his son's success. It was Hannah. She had found a powerful way to influence her son's development. With these yearly notes, Samuel only had positive expectations to live up to. He could only strive to succeed. In his mind, there was no room for a misstep; his mother wasn't here to ask for forgiveness should he fail. It was remarkable, his father thought, how his son hadn't succumbed to this self-imposed pressure. He only excelled.

Fifteenth birthday. Dear son—You are becoming a man, and it's time to start disciplining yourself like one. Life is a series of goals. Set some immediately and make them difficult, but reachable.

Sixteenth. Dear son—You are no doubt an excellent student and you should learn to expect success, but don't let it go to your head. Be humble. This one is very important, dear.

Seventeenth. Dear son--You are an adult now, becoming the person the world sees for the rest of your life. Remember, it's easy to see the faults in others, but try to see your own too.

And finally, his eighteenth birthday. Dear son—This is my last one. And perhaps the most important thing I can pass on to you now is this. Learn to forgive the ones you love.

Samuel sat alone in his dorm room, letter in hand. After all these years, he was only now fully realizing his mother's intense devotion to do her best for him. In that moment, an idea was born, and in typical Samuel fashion, he seized it, began organizing and planning. He could show his mother that he was dedicated too.

For the next eleven years, he did just that.

"What we are to discuss today, the results of our research, will undoubtedly have a great impact on humanity." Samuel spoke into the microphone, his voice steady and confident.

"A way to defeat ovarian cancer before it even begins. Genetically eradicate it. And we are just beginning to understand the ramifications, as this procedure will almost surely be applicable to most other cancer types."

The rows of peers were still and completely silent.

"Perhaps this discovery would have come to us eventually. But it came to us now, and in this place, for one reason--a mother's love.

"Before I begin the presentation, I would like you to know this one thing. All of us have gifts, and often we need help finding them. My mother died before I even knew her, yet through determined, loving commitment, she helped me find mine. In this way, our discovery we are about to share is actually her gift to us. This is the end to Hannah's Song."

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