



**WRITE ON! 2020**  
**LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
**ADULT SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST**



**Welcome to the 2020 edition of Loudoun County Public Library's  
annual Write On Short Story Contest. In this collection,  
you will find the top three winning submissions,  
along with 10 honorable mentions.**

**This contest is made possible thanks to  
the generous sponsorship of the  
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First Place: Catherine Minnehan

Chantilly, VA

## Lily

Raindrops soak into the leopard-print flats that your husband gave you at your fourth anniversary dinner last night. *Great, you think, of course it would rain before I had a chance to waterproof them.* Looking down, all you see is your swollen belly, but you can feel the slow drip of water percolating between your toes and saturating the insole of your left shoe; your right shoe is completely soaked. Your laptop bag slips off your shoulder as you struggle to collapse the large golf umbrella that you need to cover your newly large frame. You miss the small auto up and down umbrella you normally keep in your purse. Navigating around your belly, you stumble and almost fall as you push open the door.

“Do you need any help, Ms. Greene?” said the security guard.

“No thanks, Pam. I’m fine now that I don’t have to balance both an umbrella and my bags.”

“April showers bring May flowers.”

“And wet shoes, apparently.”

“Oh Ms. Greene, cheer up! Soon your baby girl will be here. Babies bring so much joy.”

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

“Well they do. When you give birth, your whole world will change. I remember how it was with my two.”

“I’ll just be glad to be able to see my feet again.”

“Oh, I bet you’ll look back at this time fondly one day. All in good time. Take care and let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

As you squeeze into the elevator and hit the button for the fifth floor, you think about all you have to get done today. Since you will be out for six weeks starting tomorrow, you have to get your coworkers up to speed on your projects before the end of the day. The elevator doors shudder open and you shuffle down the hall and through the suite door. As you meander through the rows of cubes, you notice that your desk has been consumed by a mess of pink balloons and a banner that says “Welcome, Baby Lily!” Someone yells “Surprise!”

You get many lovely gifts at your surprise baby shower, but your favorite one is an impossibly-soft stuffed bear that reminds you of the stuffed bear you took everywhere as a child. You name it Beary and hope that Lily will come to love her Beary as much as you loved yours.

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The sound of crying startles you awake. At first you are disoriented because you don’t recognize your surroundings, then you realize that you fell asleep in the recliner in Lily’s room again. The red light on the alarm clock burns 1:03. Since the curtains block all outside light you are not sure if it is morning or night, and not sure if you care. Only catching snatches of sleep (and food) at odd hours for the past week has caught up with you. Yesterday in your brain fog you put Beary in the cabinet with the baby bottles; it took you a few hours banging open every door in the condo to find it. The last time you showered was a few days ago (you think), which is also the last time you changed your

clothes (pajamas, actually). Pam was right, your world has changed. Actually, you feel like your world has been ripped in two; the world everyone else lives in is now fully detached from your insular world of survival. Every day you sit on your couch with your legs tucked beneath you and stare out of the window at the other world passing you by; dog walkers play on their phones as the dogs sniff every blade of grass on the lawn, commuters pull into and out of parking spaces, and parents escort their kids to and from the school bus stop. You find it strange that everyone else is acting like there hasn't been this great divorce, a tearing of time, a shift in the universe. And here you are, clutching to your world like you would fall off into oblivion if you let go. Time expands and an hour can feel like a day, or a minute can feel like a week. It seems like you can never get enough sleep; but you know that even if you could sleep normally, it wouldn't be enough to stitch the worlds back together. Preparing meals is impossible in your current state. The mental energy required to find a recipe, make a list of ingredients, then cook the meal is much greater than what you currently possess. Your husband has taken over "preparing" (really, warming up) dinner and packing his lunch for the next day. This evening he brings a searing-hot bowl of Campbell's chicken noodle soup to you in bed. Balancing the bowl on the bed tray, you only manage two halfhearted spoonfuls of the soup before it singes your taste buds. *That's ok*, you think, *nothing tastes good anyways*. You set the bowl down on the bedside table, slouch down as far as you can, and stare blankly at the TV until you drift off.

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Eventually you start taking walks, albeit short ones at first. Taking the first tentative steps out of the house in a month is like a reawakening, a melding together of

the two worlds; at least while you are outside. Soon you are able to walk to the park and back and it quickly becomes a routine, a time to be with Lily (and Beary) outside of the house. At first the sights and sounds of the cars on the road and children jabbering away to their parents seem bright and loud, almost jarring, as if you are experiencing them for the first time. You learn to don dark sunglasses and a hat before you step outside, and you walk with your head down, hoping none of your neighbors stop you to chat. Luckily, a bone-white stone bench lies at the very middle of your walk, beside a heart-shaped path. Still weak, you always stop and rest on the bench before walking back home. Today you sit with Lily and watch two birds swoop low, snapping the air just beyond your reach. As they beat their wings and fly away, you lose them in the sun. You decide that bird watching will always be the thing that you and Lily do together. That and watching the ducks at the pond just down the hill. Your eyes are drawn to the tulips along the pond; their bright reds and yellows sharply contrast with the bright green of the just-awakened grass. Thank goodness you remembered sunglasses. When these sights and sounds start to wear on you, you start your slow slog home. At least you can tell your husband that you got dressed (in real clothes) and got out of the house today.

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A year on, and you've fallen back into your old routine; commute, work, commute, gym, make dinner, pack lunch for both your husband and yourself. This is doable only because you are now sleeping in your own bed more often than in the recliner in Lily's room. The two worlds, before and after, still haven't fully melded, though, and you have begun to think that they never will. You still find yourself separating time into categories of "then" and "now". The brain fog has mostly cleared,



thanks to better quality sleep and regular meals, and you are no longer putting things away where they don't belong. Your strength still waxes and wanes, and some days are better than others, but following a routine helps you do more and think less. Your daily walking habit has persisted, now moved to evenings, and Beary still comes along. *This is better* you tell yourself, because you get to enjoy the sunset with Lily, and only start to walk home once the last soft spread of light begins to dull into night.

On your walk to the park this evening, you think about the past year; all that has changed and all that has stayed the same. While tracing the same steps you have committed to memory over the past year, you realize that the once jarring sights and sounds have faded into the background. You can now handle being outside without dark glasses and rarely ever wear a hat anymore. You even wave to your neighbors most of the time. Since you are going to the gym regularly again, you no longer get winded or tired during your walks but you still stop at the bench you long ago started thinking of as *your* bench, mostly to enjoy the sunset with Lily. As you ease yourself onto the cool, flat stone, your eyes track over the familiar plaques nestled inside the heart. You lean down and brush some clots of soil off the newest addition.

Lily May Greene

Our May Flower

May 1, 2015 – May 1, 2015

Second Place: Margaret Zaepfel

Leesburg, VA

**Skins**

Grandma says I am tender-hearted. She also says I have “a sensitive skin”, and Mom ought to be careful of what she says around me. She doesn’t want me to get nightmares like Mom did as a girl. I love when my mom tells old stories about herself, though, even if they freak me out sometimes.

When Mom was seven, Grandma left her in their red station wagon in the parking lot of the grocery to go shopping. The world was safer then, Mom explained. It was a different time, a different country than it is now.

Grandma told Mom she’d “only be a few minutes.” She promised to buy a pack of Mom’s favorite grape bubble gum, so sugary it makes the back of your cheeks hurt when you start chewing.

To kill time, Mom played with the door lock – up and down, up and down – and pretended her seatbelt was a snake. One by one, the nearby cars drove off and were replaced by other cars. Eventually, the snake became bored and fell asleep. When a strange lady peeped through the window, Mom pushed down the lock for good.

Mom was bawling, her throat burning and her cheeks slick with tears, when her mother returned with a loaded shopping cart. Grandma said she couldn’t believe how long the lines were. She dug through the paper sacks and handed the package of gum to Mom. Mom whimpered as she shoved three pieces into her mouth. Grandma did not protest.

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Bubble gum won't help me now, not even if I chewed the whole pack. My whole Saturday is going to be ruined, I just know it.

This morning, when my parents suggested we have a breakfast picnic at Kleider Elementary School, I felt happy. My little sister, Negest, was so excited that she turned cartwheels all over the living room. Negest is four, but her birthday isn't until the end of October. She gives Dad a tantrum every morning at the bus stop when I get on the bus without her. It is so embarrassing. Negest is what my parents call a "strong willed child".

My parents adopted Negest from Ethiopia three years ago, when I was in kindergarten. My grandma came and stayed with me while they were in Africa. When Grandma and I dropped them off at the airport, and they vanished behind those sliding glass doors, I burst into crying. On the way home Grandma told me stories about a spotted puppy named Pepperoni, the same ones she told my mother as a little girl.

The next day, Grandma wasn't at the bus stop after school, so I couldn't get off with the other kids. I just sat there in the front seat, biting my hangnails, the bus panting. I stared at the bus driver's beard, so long it rested on his belly. I saw his eyes reflected in his mirror, squinting. I couldn't tell what he was thinking because his beard covered up most of his face.

Did Grandma forget about me? I thought. If she doesn't come, do I go home with the bus driver?

Next thing I knew, Grandma waddled out from under my garage door at high speed. Red faced, she apologized to the driver and me. Even though I'm not supposed

to tell other people this part of the story, it turns out my grandma was late because she was in the bathroom.

When Grandma and I went back to the airport two weeks later, I was so excited to meet my baby sister! That first day we were all home I didn't want anybody to hold her but me. When I pretended her skin was made of chocolate and licked her on the arm, everybody laughed. My parents have told me I had a full head of black hair as a baby, but Negest was mostly bald. I loved rubbing my fingers over the curly fuzz on top of her round head.

I felt happy as we walked to my school for our picnic. A few crispy, brown leaves crunched under my sneakers. We'd left the house earlier than I thought because Dad had already rubbed sunscreen on his pancake-white skin, while Negest and I were changing out of our jammies. It was warm enough outside that my parents didn't make me bring my panda hoodie, even though Mom wore her Kermit the Frog one. Best of all, my parents agreed to let Negest and me hang upside down from the jungle gym while we ate our breakfast.

When we were crossing the street to my school, I made a deal with Negest: I'd play basketball with her (which is so boring) if she'd let my best friend, Laura, borrow her scooter this afternoon. I wasn't expecting to see the meanest girl in my class, Lacy Wilder, playing basketball on the court behind the gym.

Even though Lacy is new at Kleider this year, she's already one of the popular girls. Grandma has a magnet on her fridge that says, "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice." I agree. I'm friends with my friends because they're nice to me, not because they're popular.

Lacy and the other mean girls hang out together at recess by the bushes and talk about clothes. To be honest, I think Lacy got popular because she has about a thousand flippy shirts (the ones with sequins that can flip over and make two different pictures.)

Not to be mean, but I don't think Lacy got popular because of her hair. She's got the same kind of hair as my sister, except that hers is crazy. Negest's hair used to be like that. Once a lady in the grocery told Mom she shouldn't wash Negest's hair so much because it was damaged, and suggested special hair products. Mom was so embarrassed she watched black hair videos on her phone that night. Now, Mom gives my sister swirly, maze-like designs on her head, and braids with colorful beads on the ends. I wish my hair could look pretty like that, but it is so slippery that hairbows slide right off.

On the second week of school, Lacy handed out birthday party invitations. I didn't get one, she stated, because her dad didn't want to buy movie tickets and snacks for the whole class.

"Like I care!" I said, but I told my parents about it at dinner. There is a rule at Kleider, my mother explained matter-of-factly, about birthday invitations: They aren't allowed, not even when the whole class is invited. Mom emailed my teacher, Mrs. Speed, about it.

The next day, Mrs. Speed called Lacy up to her desk during reading time. After Lacy went back to her beanbag, her back to the teacher, she glared at me. At recess she came up to me while I was picking dandelions and called me a "tattletale." She also called me another name that I don't want to repeat right now, although I didn't know

what it meant at the time. She placed her fingertips at the outside corners of her eyes and pulled them sideways until they were narrow slits.

When I told my parents what happened at recess, their faces looked angry. I was afraid they were mad at me, but they said no, they weren't mad at me at all; they were upset at how Lacy had treated me. Dad sighed loudly and said he was "frustrated with ignorance". When I asked what exactly ignorance was, Mom said it was a fancy way of saying "stupidity".

Dad emailed Mrs. Speed while I was eating dessert. Just before my bedtime at eight-thirty, my teacher called my house! I wanted to hear the conversation, but Mom ushered me upstairs to bed.

The next day, my parents said they wanted to talk to me. Dad sent Negest into the backyard to play on the trampoline. When we sat on the couch, Dad scooped me up into his lap. Mom said she was grateful I came to them; she told me to never be afraid to tell them anything, good or bad. I wasn't a tattletale, either, because it's important to use my voice to speak up and ask for help whenever I need it.

Dad explained the meaning of that ugly name Lacy called me, and why she had done that thing with her eyes. It is wrong for one person to make another feel less important, Dad explained; We are all important, equally. He said he was sorry, so sorry, that the world is the way it is; He would give anything to shield Negest and me from prejudice, but it wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

"We love you so much" Mom added, "And we want you to be proud of yourself, because we are so proud of you."

I didn't say anything. I leaned into my dad and put my head on his shoulder. He smelled like sunscreen. Mom started stroking my hair, which I love. I love how her hand glides up my forehead, over the top of my hair, and down the back of my neck. I was too young to remember this, but Mom says when she and Dad first met me in the hotel in Nanchang, China, I was hysterical. I had a heat rash from all my crying, and wouldn't take a bottle. When mom stroked my head the way I just described, I stopped crying, drank my rice milk, and fell asleep in her arms.

At school Monday morning, Lacy handed me a folded-up piece of paper. Inside was written:

Jin Jing,

Sorry for what happened.

From, Lacy

She never looked at me. I went over to my backpack and stuffed the note inside. When I got home, I threw it in the trash.

When I saw Lacy behind the school playing basketball, her flippy shirt sparkling in the sun, I stopped walking. I pulled on Mom's hoodie until her face was down to mine. I told her I didn't want a picnic anymore. I wanted to go home, right now.

Mom's green eyes always looked greener whenever she wore her Kermit hoodie. She smiled, straightened up, and pulled me into a hug.

"It'll be okay, Jin Jing," Mom said, "Lacy can't hurt you. You and Negest can play basketball after she leaves."

"Okay," I answered reluctantly. Negest was already running to the playground, her beads clicking.

My sister and I ate our cinnamon rolls dangling from the jungle gym, while my parents watched from Grandma's old checkered blanket. The world was so funny all upside down, I started laughing. Negest stuffed the rest of her cinnamon roll in her mouth and laughed, too. I didn't want her to choke, so I flipped onto the grass, grabbed her tiny waist, and pulled her down to the ground.

"Why did you do that?" she howled, spewing crumbs on me. She was loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear.

"You were choking!" I yelled back. I'm not afraid to yell at my own sister, especially when she deserves it.

"I was not!" She screamed. I saw Lacy staring at us, her basketball under her arm. Negest ran and got our basketball from Mom and Dad, then sprinted to the court. Lacy just stood there, watching Negest hurl her ball at the hoop.

"Come play with me, Jin Jing!" Negest shouted, tossing the ball up into the sky. This resulted in a basket, and whooped out a cheer for herself.

Lacy looked at Negest, then at me, and back at Negest. Her face had a puzzled look to it. I looked over my shoulder to my parents. They nodded.

I jogged to the court and stole Negest's basketball right out of her hands. She shrieked, grabbed it back, and darted away to the soccer field. Dropping it into the grass, she began kicking it around.

It was just Lacy and me. I held my breath. Lacy spoke first.

"Is that your sister?" she asked. Her voice was soft.



“Yes,” I answered, without looking her in the eye. I noticed that her skin was almost the same color as mine. Not light like my dad’s, and not dark like my sister’s, but darker than my mom’s. It was the color of a toasted bagel before the honey goes on it.

“But how can you be sisters?” Lacy asked, her voice slightly louder. “You don’t even look the same.” I took a deep breath and raised my gaze.

I told her that people don’t have to look the same to be a family, and that how someone looks doesn’t matter. I explained that my sister and I were adopted, and I was proud of that. And yes, those were my parents over there on the checkered blanket, even though we don’t look the same, either. I said I was happy to be Chinese, except that my mom was forcing me to go to a Chinese language school every Sunday, which I hated because I’d rather play.

Lacy said that she lived in the houses behind the school with her dad, and that he was Black. They liked to go swimming together at the rec center. She said they just moved here from Florida because her dad got transferred. She missed the ocean. Her mom lived somewhere in Arizona, and she was White. She hadn’t seen her mom since the summer after first grade. She said she liked my little sister, especially her hair, and wished her dad knew how to do it that way.

When Laura came over that afternoon, I asked my dad if we could tag along when he ran errands. Before we went, I took some dollar bills out of my wallet and slipped them into my unicorn purse.

Monday morning was so chilly that Laura and I hopped up and down to keep warm at the bus stop, hands stuffed in our pockets. She pulled on her jacket hood

strings so tightly I couldn't see anything but her mouth and nose. We giggled as I did the same.

Mrs. Speed says we're not allowed to bring gum to school, but I had a really good reason to break the rules. When I got to my classroom, I looked around to make sure nobody was watching. I unzipped a tiny section of Lacy's emoji backpack and shoved in the pack of grape gum. I heard it drop to the bottom, like a coin in a drink machine. I don't know when she'll get around to finding it, but I think she'll be surprised.

**Third Place: Tara Ayn Bahr****Brambleton, VA****Lost But Found**

It wasn't here. It wasn't in the flurry of bills littering her desk, their bright red numbers mocking her like the high school cheerleader behind her in the lunch line. It wasn't in the pile of divorce papers awaiting her signature which, despite everything, she still couldn't find a pen to sign. Wait, was this it... "We regret to inform you..." definitely not! She had to find it. Now more than ever, she needed it. She searched her desk for the sixth time in as many minutes with no success when suddenly, a red sticky note popped out "Don't forget!" The words, "Permission Form 10th Grade Overnight Trip" peeked out from under the less than subtle sticky. How could she have forgotten! Her palm absentmindedly connected with her forehead in a self-flagellating ritual she now conducted daily. She grabbed one of a dozen pens littering her desk and scribbled her name across, hesitating only when she came to her last name before shaking her head and completing the signature she'd scrawled with ease for the past 24 years. Before she could get back to her search, the Alexa reminder redirected her attention.

She grabbed the stack of papers and ran into the kitchen yelling "Boys let's go!" She picked up the bagel before putting it back on the plate and cursing carbs. She pulled her hair back in a hair tie (wondering when they had stopped calling them scrunchies) as she yelled for her sons again at a decibel and tone her Italian mother would have been proud of. When her cry elicited an unenthusiastic "mmm...k" but no actual sounds of movement, she smiled as she said in a less beseeching tone..."ok, good luck with the bus." Plaintiff pushing and shoving ensued, followed by two

remarkably handsome (she was biased of course, but they were striking) teenage boys thundering down the stairs. She held the stack of papers out and her oldest, Grant, grabbed them as if the final runner in a relay race and sped past her and out the door, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Her younger son, Luke, the non-morning person, was ambling at a more leisurely pace and rewarded her with a sideways glance and what she liked to think might have been the start of a smile as he took the paper sack from her other hand. The door slammed and all too quickly they were gone. The silence left in their place was more than she could take right now, even for a minute, and she grabbed her keys and rushed after them.

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Having wasted the last ten minutes mindlessly clicking through work email, slouched in her chair and hiding behind her cube wall, she now straightened up to attempt the 30 second meditation she'd read about last week in the overpriced glossy magazine. Here goes! Eyes closed, deep breath in....slowly...and out. She opened one eye, reading the digital stopwatch on her computer screen which told her she'd made it 14 seconds, and she congratulated herself on her new record. The celebration was short lived however, as her mind drifted back to the hot mess that was her life. Six weeks ago her millennial boss had excitedly promised a pay raise or a bonus or both (!) as she took the completed project binder from older, prematurely wrinkling hands. Now, with a sobering realization she knew that promise was as sincere as a Kardashian product endorsement. Annoyed and angry she deftly avoided the career disappointment downward spiral and instead focused her thoughts on what was really bothering her.

Two days ago she had received a call from Grant's school counselor. The counselor's bubbly voice implied she was likely used to speaking in emoji's or emoticons or whatever the heck they're called, but the counselor's words had snapped her to attention. "Son...having trouble adjusting...isolated...no friends...slipping grades...divorce...professional help?" Each word shredding her confidence as a mom until she felt as flawed as the ceramic "I'm so glad you're my mom!" mug that held her pens since her first day at the company 15 years ago. The call had ended with her befuddled and holding the receiver in her hand until the incessant fast beeping began signaling once again someone had left before she was quite ready.

The ping of her email brought her back to the present as she braced for what was sure to be another problem. Sure enough, her hus...ex...the boys' father, had sent an email in which, in a mere four sentences, he conveyed that he refused to provide any funding for the out of state field trip (not surprising), asked if he could have the Tiffany bowl his aunt had given them as a wedding present because he and Kiki were hosting a dinner party on the 19th (seriously?!) and then last, and certainly least he complained about Grant's attitude towards him (it was always about him). She quickly scribbled a note to herself "drop Aunt Enid's bowl"...accidentally on purpose leaving the "off" off. As she slowly lowered the pen she felt dread wash over her.

She was worried about Grant. Her mind flashed back to him scraping his remaining dinner into the garbage, the counselor's call...his obtuse father picking up a shift in attitude, the sunglasses and closed room door. When had the change occurred and how worried should she be? Take a breath. He was fine. They played cards together all the time. Wait. When was the last time they had played cards together?

Dammit! Had she been so absorbed in her own problems that she had missed the signs in her son's behavior? She started to spiral, beating herself up for being a bad mom. Pausing, she took a breath then frantically dug in her purse for the letter which she knew wasn't in her purse. Maybe, she hoped, maybe it was safely on her desk at home.

It had been there last night. The yellowed envelope bearing the postal stamp with the date, 7 May 1975, clearly emblazoned above an address she no longer remembered. The wavy black lines carefully cancelling out the colorful, funky 10 cent stamp proclaiming, "It all depends on zip code". She sighed as she took a moment to both celebrate that zip codes had indeed caught on while mourning the demise of the cent symbol. The plain white, now yellow, paper inside always made her feel better. This past year she had read it so many times she could recite it like the Pledge of Allegiance.

It seems like only a few short days ago you were born. On the day you arrived the whole world became a bit brighter, the birds sang very loud, sweet and happy because I suppose they heard the news too! I can remember holding you in my arms, my angel, your beautiful eyes as big as saucers. How tiny and fragile you were. And I knew that looking at you then, as I do now, what an amazing life you are going to have...what incredible things you are going to do...how many wonderful adventures you have ahead of you. Just remember you will have magnificent days and you will have troubling days, but everything is temporary. So on the difficult days, remind yourself that they will pass, and enjoy the spectacular days because they will end far too quickly.

Embrace and enjoy every moment. Know that no matter what happens, I love you with all of my heart.

Love,

Her grandfather's name was a mere ink blot now. She so frequently cried while reading his words that by the end, tears would plop down on his signature, and the forty-five year old ink had no fighting chance. He had been gone some thirty plus years now, but his words were relevant for her more than ever. She needed someone to believe in her. Someone to tell her it was going to be at least tolerable if not "magnificent".

On the drive home from work she formulated a plan. When she got home she would research teenage depression. She would ask her single mom friends for counseling recommendations. She would interrogate his younger brother to see if he had noticed anything, and she would make his favorite dinner. Running into the house, she kicked the front door closed behind her. She threw her bag down on the counter with the mail and pre—heated the oven. She opened the fridge and threw ingredients on the counter before running into her office. On the floor she noticed a yellowed envelope with a colorful stamp and she snatched it up. But when she opened it, it was empty. She gently placed it on top of the divorce papers. Balancing her cell between her ear and shoulder (she really needed to go Bluetooth) she waited for Allison to pick up and was already skimming the Mayo Clinic's page on teenage depression when she heard the raucous laughter of teenage boys. Wait...laughter? She ended the call faster than a bad first date and minimized the browser. Running into the kitchen she saw her oldest putting his bag on the floor, a Twizzler hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

Grant spied the ingredients on the counter and an infectious smile spread across his face. He came over to her and said “Thanks for the letter mom. I almost handed it in with my permission form...man that would have been embarrassing! Did you cry writing it...I could barely read your signature!” His hug ended before she realized it had started and he left the room. Halfway up the stairs he paused and shouted down “Mom, you want to play cards after dinner?” And suddenly the day was magnificent.



Honorable Mention: Melissa Hogarty

Chantilly, VA

### The Smoothie

She is in the shower when the idea first drops into her mind, like water rushing through cracks in broken pavement.

You could just escape.

Bex has longed for respite frequently over the last four years, a feeling she assumes is normal. All moms want to grab their keys and flee sometimes, right? She dismisses the desire every time. Where could she go, after all?

But this little scheme sheds new light, making possible the impossible. She aches for it, physically leaning toward the front door of the townhouse from inside the claustrophobic walk-in shower, pressing one palm against the glass and wiping a stream of water from her face with the other. She feels her breath quickening, her pulse racing as she turns the plan over in her mind.

Is this crazy? Of course it is. But maybe it will work.

No! Bex speaks to herself sternly, using the same no-nonsense voice she so often employs on her boys. Don't be selfish. Get a grip.

Her need to run into open space—alone—is visceral. But she centers her posture and shoves the twin flickers of hope and fear back, out of her head. She runs her fingers through her short, wet hair one more time and turns the water off.

Maybe the idea will evaporate with the rest of the steam.

+++

"I'm just...tired," Bex finishes faintly, twisting her body to look up at Bobby. They are in their familiar corner of the old cracked leather couch, her head in his lap, pressing

her cheek into the coarse warp and weft of his gardening jeans. She can smell the earth on his fingers as he strokes her hair, listening patiently to her litany of woes. This evening ritual used to be an exchange of thoughts, both of them sharing the highlights of their days.

As the boys have grown, their conversations have shifted. Bex tramps out every complaint, every small crisis and chaotic moment she had to weather. Fred yelled this and George broke that. Bobby has become more like her therapist than a husband.

“Maybe you need a vacation,” he suggests now, his own voice heavy. “I just don’t see how we can keep doing this. You are obviously miserable—it’s all we ever talk about—and it affects more than just you.”

Bex snorts, choosing to ignore the insinuation that her husband is unhappy even as a wild spark of panic shoots through her nervous system. “How on earth would that work? Nothing is open, and the boys can’t stay home alone anyway. Who would watch them?”

“I would,” Bobby returns, sounding a little wounded. He lifts his hand from her hair and tilts back a few degrees so he can peer down into her face.

“In all your free time?” Bex snaps back. “You’re hardly here as it is. I feel like I have to apologize to you when I need to take a shower. Heaven forbid I ask you to pay attention to the boys instead of your computer screen.”

Bobby waits a beat before responding. He has occasionally been able to work from home, reviewing results of his lab experiments—but his research position at Johns Hopkins hasn’t slowed down one bit since the Covid-19 crisis began. He is “essential” everywhere he goes. Bex needs him, but so does everyone else. “I have to work,

honey,” he finally says. “Don’t you think it’s important work? I’m not just doing it for you, but...well, it does pay the bills.” Bobby gestures vaguely in the air, indicating the whole house.

Bex sits up, propping her body against one arm and nodding, contrite. “I know; I didn’t mean to attack you. I’m just worn out, and there’s no end in sight.”

“We can figure something out. Maybe my mom would come. Do you think a week off would help?”

“I don’t see how it could work. There’s nowhere to go right now—and I would feel guilty even asking. I’ll just...” she trails off and shrugs, unable to think of a solution. Nothing will relieve the overwhelming problem of parenting two energetic boys who are completely uninterested in personal space.

She combs her memory for a time when she didn’t feel so exhausted, so on edge. She has been primed to spring into action for four years, every muscle quivering at the ready to respond to cries and crashes. In fact, the only time she can remember feeling truly rested, freed from being “on call” to handle demands and dilemmas, was when she had a stomach bug the year before. She couldn’t muster the energy to move from their bed for a full day, so she just threw up in a red, plastic bucket and then rolled over to fall gratefully back into oblivious sleep. You really needed that break, she thinks to herself now. You felt so relaxed the next day!

She hovers over that thought, frowning, before asking herself the obvious question: How sad is it that you think of running a fever as taking a vacation?

“I’ll get it together,” she says after a minute. Bobby rubs her shoulder and Bex buckles, curling her body back into its familiar, prone position, her head in her husband’s lap. She closes her eyes. You will have to do better.

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Bex has always been the sort of person who can muscle her way through anything. When she watches documentaries about immigrants and the terminally ill, she imagines herself in their place, reaching for the embers of determination inside her, the certainty that she will press on no matter what.

But then she had twins.

She knows their presence shouldn’t feel so oppressive. In a few years, they won’t want to touch her anymore, won’t care what wisdom she can supply. In a few years, they might not bring her every single idea like it’s a prize. She knows she should treasure these years, but they are just too loud, too messy, too much.

Bex would give anything for ten minutes of absolute silence. Instead, her days revolve around answering questions in slow, endless succession, one question per minute, with just enough pause between them that she thinks she might be able to concentrate on a news article or prepping dinner. When she runs out of answers and cries uncle, her 4-year-old sons shrug and start telling her about the monsters in their dreams; they speak with one relentless voice, interrupting and talking over each other, diving in to speak as soon as a brother pauses for breath.

Bex bought noise-cancelling headphones in an attempt to find a moment of peace and quiet, but they did little to dull the shrieks and grunts of wrestling little boys,

who tear through the house using empty paper towel rolls as swords and picture books as shields.

During their enforced “quiet hour,” she pulls the headphones on anyway, barely muting the thumps coming from the boys’ bedroom as she sits down to her laptop. Rhubarb she Googles, peering out the back window toward Bobby’s garden plot. He planted rhubarbs in a cluster of giant pots near their back fence, informing her that they are hardy perennials and will bring sweet-tart flavor to pies and jams long before their dwarf peach tree produces any ripe fruit. The spindly rhubarbs have grown bushy under the crisp spring sun, and she can see a few flashes of dark pink peeking out amid the wide sunward leaves.

She looks over her shoulder before scrolling through the results, checking to make sure the boys haven’t snuck up behind her. She clicks on a video and shifts in her seat as a lanky British man tromps through a field while talking about green and red varieties. She watches as he snaps off a few stalks and caresses them lovingly. When he starts talking about the leaves, her heart skips a beat. She slides the volume down a few degrees and peeks behind her again. Fred and George have grown suspiciously quiet—never a good sign—but she turns back to the screen and leans in. How much? she wonders. How much will it take?

Bex knows she shouldn’t indulge this idea. But it is too tantalizing, the possibility of someone else taking over for a while, the hope that she might find somewhere lonely and quiet to rest.

It’s just a daydream. You’ll never do it, she reassures her restless mind as she plays the next video.

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It's the pull-up fluff that puts her over the edge.

"Pajama time!" she shouts. She reaches into the melee of writhing 4-year-olds and attempts to open her arms like jaws of life, wrenching Fred and George away from each other.

The boys giggle and wrap themselves around her legs. Bex rolls her eyes and smiles. With each of her sons barnacled onto her shins, she shuffles toward the stairs. "Okay! The Mommy Express stops here. Pajamas," she says again, pointing up at their bedroom.

Fred yells, "Race you!" and dives for the bottom stair. George scrambles free and lunges after his brother, and the two boys run up the stairs like cougars, on all fours, growling with pride. Bex shakes her head and returns to the kitchen to scrape pasta off dinner plates. She stands at the sink in her rubber dish gloves, watching the water run. Today wasn't so bad. Everyone is getting used to being stuck in the house.

"Moooooom!" George hollers from the top of the stairs. She knows it's George instinctively—she has no idea how she can tell the boys' voices apart from a distance. Even Bobby thinks they sound identical. Maybe it's mother's intuition, maybe just a blessed mercy.

"Yes?" Bex calls back as she sets a plate into the bottom dishwasher rack.

"I can't put my pajamas on!" he yells.

Bex huffs in exasperation. "Just do it!" she yells.

"But I can't!" he cries, a frantic edge rising in his voice. Sighing, Bex shucks off the purple rubber gloves and lays them over the edge of the sink.

“Why not?” she asks, trudging up the stairs. She hears a whimper followed by a stifled laugh. Uh-oh.

When she pokes her head around the door to peer in at the boys, she first spots Fred in monkey cowboy pjs, bouncing on his bed and trying very hard not to look at her. Her eyes swing down to George.

Stay calm. George is standing in front of her completely naked, a pull-up dangling from his left hand.

“This,” he says in a small, forlorn voice, gesturing at the floor. The floor is covered with cotton snow. Bex struggles to string the story together.

“What is that?” she asks, her throat tight, eyebrows knitting together.

“It came out of my pull-up,” George admits. “I was pretending it was a lasso...and it accidentally exploded.”

Horror dawns and Bex takes one step into the room. She steps on something wet, even though she has not stepped on any visible pull-up fluff. George has been playing with a used, completely full pull-up. And there is now stale, cold pee everywhere.

A door slams downstairs, the thunk echoing through the house. Bobby has finished weeding the vegetable patch, Bex realizes faintly. Maybe Bobby will help her clean up this mess. “Bobby?” she calls out. “Can you come up here?” But when the jars in the refrigerator door rattle as it opens, she knows he hasn’t heard her.

You really need a break, she thinks desperately as she steps on another patch of wet carpet, making her way into the room to begin scraping pee-soaked rubble off the floor. You won’t make it much longer without a change of pace.

+++

Bobby smiles brightly as he presents her with a bulging canvas bag. “Babe, will you wash these for me?” he asks, holding the straps out to her. Wide, dark green leaves are exploding from the top of the bag, leaves Bex instantly recognizes—Bobby has harvested the rhubarb.

“Sure,” she says, forcing her voice to remain calm. He delivered it right to you. It’s a sign, her mind whispered.

“I’m going to go hop in the shower. Maybe we can work on making some jam together when I get out?”

Bex robotically begins to wash the rhubarb, rubbing her fingers down the center grooves, listening for the thumping sound of Bobby climbing the stairs. She hears him greet the boys, who are jumping on the couch as Daniel Tiger plays on the TV.

As soon as Bobby makes it upstairs, Bex stops fiddling with the rhubarb and gets down to business. She quickly chops all the tops off the rhubarb. There must be three or four pounds of stalks, way more than she needs. She fingers the rumply leaves, almost the texture of Lacinato kale, and then turns to pull her blender from the cabinet next to the sink.

It’s just a strawberry-rhubarb smoothie, she tells herself, pulling a bag of strawberries from the freezer. She dumps in a handful and then throws in two stalks, breaking them in half so they fit. She returns business-like to the refrigerator for yogurt, spinach, and almond milk, throwing the ingredients into the blender.

She only hesitates a moment before ripping three of the large, green rhubarb leaves in half and folding them into the blender with the rest.



Above her head, the pipes begin to whine as Bobby turns on the water. She hears the shower door slam and knows he has stepped in. He won't hear the blender. He won't guess.

Did you put in enough? she wonders, holding the top of the blender in her hand and peering down into the bowl. Symptoms of oxalic acid poisoning are unpleasant: blisters in the mouth and digestive tract, difficulty breathing, vomiting, and even seizures. She doesn't think three leaves are enough for the worst of it—but even as painful as the prospect is, she hopes she will require a hospital stay, a few days at least.

She hopes she will be well enough to drive herself there. She hopes she won't collapse, the boys won't find her...but it's a risk she's willing to take. This is the only way, she tells herself firmly. It will look like an accident, like a careless mistake. She firmly seats the top and turns on the blender.

No one comes running into the kitchen as the mixture liquefies into a pale brown sludge.

Bex pours the smoothie into a glass and carefully rinses out the blender bowl.

She lifts the glass and studies it. Bottoms up, she thinks, as she raises it to her lips and throws her head back.

**Honorable Mention: Mathew Annis****Ashburn, VA****Our Hero**

The sun was higher in the sky now, beating down on the hillside with merciless heat, but Hanun barely noticed. He had been excavating in the rough rocky terrain for the last half hour, looking for rocks with particular patterns. He had a half-broken pot in which he placed his finds. His favorites were the kind with shapes of creatures in them, shellfish that must have been trapped in the rock somehow. His uncle said these came from the time before the Great Flood, though he couldn't explain how they had gotten into the rock.

Hanun's mother wondered why he did not play with the other children in the village, and was often pushing him to go and join them. He preferred collecting rocks to playing with the other children though. Their games mostly were about fighting battles or keeping house, things that did not interest him much. And when he did try to play with them, they would complain that he was being too rough, or that he was ruining things, when he was only trying to do what they were doing. He could never tell what they wanted.

And so he came out on the hillsides to look for rocks. He had a collection lined up along the back wall of their house, full of treasures. One rock had a streak of gold in it. Another had a large and very clear outline of a spiral shell. His mother complained to his stepfather that he was wasting his time on playing with rocks when he could be helping more in the fields or with the household chores, but his stepfather brushed these complaints aside. The boy is only six years old, he told her. Let him play while he can. And so whenever his chores were done he walked into the hills with his pot.

Today was different though. Yesterday morning they had packed all their things together, herded their animals together with the neighbors', and with the rest of the village, tramped away from the rising sun. War had come to their land, not the pretend war that the children played with sticks and pebbles, but the real thing, the kind that left houses burned and animals stolen. So they took everything of value with them, and prayed that their house would still be there when they could return.

In the evening they set up camp in a valley where thousands of others had already gathered. At the head of the valley was a collection of brightly colored tents, which housed the King and his personal household. There were chariots at rest on the ground near the tents, painted bright red and gold, with eyes and teeth marked out on the sides. Hundreds of horses of all shades were grazing further up on the hill. On the other side of the tents, dozens of men in armor and helmets sparred with swords or practiced spear throwing. They would be safe here.

Hanun did not feel safe though. He was in a strange place, surrounded by strange people. His rock collection was still at their house. He had only been able to bring a small handful with him. He was afraid the rest would be gone when he returned. As soon as he could, he broke away from the camp and went into the hills to look for more. At last, with the wind in his hair and the noises of the people in camp a faint hum in the distance, he felt happy.

He was so preoccupied with his search that he did not notice the man until his shadow fell across the ground in front of him. He fell back with a start, and was scrambling to his feet to run when the man reached down and with one hand held Hanun by the arm. His hand was huge, like a bear's paw, but he held on gently while

he spoke reassuring words. Hanun realized after a moment that he had seen the man the night before, waiting at the valley entrance as the villagers trudged by, welcoming them, handing out skins of wine and discs of fluffy white bread. He was one of the King's men.

After a minute he let go of Hanun's arm and sat beside him. He asked about the rocks and Hanun told him the kind he liked. He nodded gravely, and told Hanun he would help him look for more rocks. So for a while, in companionable silence, they sifted through a dry riverbed to see what they could find. Hanun added two more to his pot, both pieces of pinkish crystalline rock, and then the man came towards him, holding something in his outstretched hand. Hanun's arms straightened and stiffened with excitement when he saw it. It was a large flat piece of grey rock with the imprint of a creature on it, one with arms and legs and a head, something like a lizard! It was easily the finest piece he had seen. He stammered his thanks, and the man's face crinkled into a smile. He reminded Hanun of his stepfather, who was a kind and gentle man.

Then the sound of a trumpet call came from down in the valley. The man's smile faded, and he stood up again, dusting off his tunic. He ruffled Hanun's hair, told him to keep finding those rocks, and strode off down the hillside, towards the camp. Down around the tents, there was much movement. Men were running back and forth, strapping on shields and sword belts, horses were being saddled, and outside the largest tent, a man with shining silver armor and a dyed horsehair plume in his helmet stood, surveying the activity. In the distance, beyond the next hill, a dust cloud was rising.

Hanun wanted to see what was happening, so he made his way along the hillside above the camp, closer to the valley entrance. By the time he got there, his mouth dry with the dust, the warriors too had reached the entrance, and were gathered in a ragged line across the valley floor, some distance from him, but close enough to hear their shouts and the whinnying of the horses. There were men on horseback gathered around the king, and on one side of the line. The chariots were gathered at the other end of the line. The men in the middle of the line were on foot.

Then, from behind the hill on the other side of the valley floor, came more men, in a long column, marching through a rising cloud of dust. They reached a point about as far from the King's army as he was, and then shook themselves into another rough line. After a moment Hanun realized these must be the Enemy. They were clothed and armored in much the same way, but their banners bore different colors and symbols.

Hanun found a large flat boulder, and sat on it. He wanted to see what would happen, though part of him would prefer to be off in the hills, well away from everyone and everything. He shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun. It was overhead by now, beating down on the valley. It flashed off the helmets and shields and spear tips, and nearly blinded him. He moved his hand to cover his eyes and peeked through his fingers.

Through the small gap between his little finger and the one next to it, he could see a man step out from the line and stride towards the Enemy. He was taller than the rest, by about a head, and he wore a bronze helmet and breastplate. In his hands he carried a shield painted with a wolf's head, and a bronze-tipped spear. On reaching a point halfway between the lines he stopped, and shouted something in the direction of

the Enemy. Then he stood for a few moments before shouting again, this time shaking his spear above his head. There was no response from the Enemy warriors, he just stood and watched. Then the man turned and paced along the lines, first this way and then the other, stopping here and there to shout and brandish his spear. Hanun knew from the games the other children played that he was shouting a challenge: Come out and fight me if you're brave enough.

As he strode in Hanun's direction he lifted his head momentarily, and the sunlight fell on his face beneath the cheek guards of his helmet. It was the man who had helped him collect rocks earlier on the dry river bed. That man had been kind, perhaps his friend. It crossed his mind to be worried for him, that one of the Enemy might kill him, but he looked invincible, roaring his challenge to their ranks and finding no takers.

Finally, there was movement from the Enemy ranks, not a warrior taking up the challenge but a group of men, with one tall man in the middle leading the way. They were armed, but had their spears tilted over their shoulders and their helmets tucked under their arms. Seeing them approach, the man took his own helmet off and attached it to a strap on his belt. Then, unnoticed by the group of men, a slight figure dashed out from the Enemy lines and took up position at their rear.

The Enemy warriors halted a short distance from the man, and they talked. The tall man in the middle of the group spoke in long stretches, occasionally pointing with his spear towards his own army and to the King's army. The man Hanun had met on the hillside spoke much less, but emphatically, tapping his hand on his breastplate to point to himself. Hanun was intrigued by the slight figure that had rushed behind the group of the enemy. He looked no more than a boy, about the same age as his older brother,

and was clad in a light tunic rather than armor. Hanun flicked his gaze between the boy and the two men, till finally the Enemy leader shook his head and turned to leave. The man stared after him for a long moment, then turned to leave himself.

Then it happened. So clearly but far away across the valley, that it looked like time had been slowed down. The slight figure did not turn and leave with the others but instead darted forward. He swung his arm and appeared to throw something. Then Hanun saw a flash of something swinging from the boy's hand. A sling. He could not see the stone flying through the air but he had watched his brothers bringing down deer often enough to picture its progress. The man, the kind man who had helped him find rocks, stumbled forward as the stone caught him on the back of the head, his helmet still hanging uselessly from his belt. The dust billowed into the air as he came crashing down. And then the boy was on him, pulling a long dagger from his tunic and stabbing down, again and again, the blade flashing in the white sunlight.

There was a distant sound of cheering from the ranks of the Enemy. Hanun heard a high pitched shrieking sound, above the noise from below, and realized it was coming from his own mouth. But now he was up and running, scrambling down the hill as fast as he ever had, falling sometimes, rolling head over heel through the dust, and finally on level ground sprinting till his breath came in ragged bursts. He was back in the camp now, and in a few seconds he'd bury his face in his mother's skirts. All around him there rose the sound of despair like a rising wind in the long grass, as the news went round the camp.

Goliath is dead.

Honorable Mention: Becky Retherford

Ashburn, VA

### Milk Jug Day

Someone I know once told me that the mind is kind of like a junk drawer, which I thought was a pretty smart comparison.

They said, “First of all, everyone’s got one.” Which is true. And then they said, “Every time you recall a memory it’s like taking an item out of that drawer. You pick it out, examine it from different angles. Sometimes you share it with other people. Maybe you even break off tiny pieces.” Like what someone was wearing, or the exact words in a conversation. “When you stop remembering and put it back, you’ve messed with the order of things.”

The whole idea of it made so much sense—makes so much sense. But then, what about those things you remember over and over? You keep pulling out those memories and putting them back until your drawer is in total disarray. So is it possible that the things you remember don’t look like the things that actually happened at all?

I guess that’s all to say that the following events did happen, but they are only true insofar as this is how I remember them...

It was right after Christmas and I was visiting my parents because I didn’t live there anymore. You were visiting your parents because you didn’t live there anymore either.

You came to pick me up in your car (it was black), and we drove into the city to the park downtown that people love because it has so many tulips. Except that it was late December then which meant there were no tulips but also, there was no snow,



which is why we thought—well hell, let's go walk around the park (it was just hard to find any other place to be alone together).

My gosh! I remember how it felt. Being there with you.

Strange to remember things like that...

But it was a strange feeling—a lightness in my whole body.

You made me laugh all the time and I made you laugh, too. I felt like I could float away (but I wouldn't). I was so happy to be right there where we were.

Oh! Do you know what else I remember? There was this pond there in the middle of the park.

We got out of your car and followed the walkway through all kinds of trellises with no tulips on them. We walked right up to the edge of the pond and then we crossed over a bridge. It was cute and painted white, like the kind of bridge you would stand on to have your senior pictures taken.

I'll bet you we laughed about those ridiculous senior pictures. Did you have mine? I had one of you. I remember it. You were making this very serious face, and you were sitting there with your guitar on your knee. Come to think of it, I'm surprised I had yours... You know we were barely friends when you gave it to me? But I had it and not too many others.

You played the guitar back then, and you had horrible hair and really bad acne (through no fault of your own, but still). Those were the reasons I kind of didn't like you in school. But it turns out you are funny and smart and you're a nice person. I should have given you a chance. Maybe we both had growing up to do. Maybe you wouldn't have given me a chance anyway. Maybe you shouldn't now...

We stood on the bridge and looked at the water and you pointed somewhere far off and said, “Look at that swan!” So I looked, but after a minute I was really sure it was only a milk jug.

I said, “I think that’s a milk jug,” and we started to laugh, but you were adamant it was a swan, so we walked closer to get a better look.

And it was! It was a milk jug, Adam! Do you remember that? Silly, I know. It was just so funny! We both were laughing so hard!

So suddenly, there it was again. More of that lightness. Lightness with you.

The sky that day was overcast, and it was cold. I was wearing a coat that I bought in Paris because I lived there. I felt chic in that coat, but I was also shivering. You put your arm around me in a ‘casual-romantic’ way and rubbed my arms in a “friendly” way and either way I was much warmer than I had been just seconds before.

We took slow steps around the park and talked about the people we wanted to be one day, like after you graduated and other abstract milestones we knew nothing about. I listened to you talk about things.

You were on such a straight track: in school to become someone with a career in some form of engineering I’d never even heard of (you always were smart – even in high school). I wasn’t on any track like that. I was too scared of life. I could only wonder what it would be like to be on a track like yours.

You said you wanted to buy a sports car “before my money becomes ‘our money’” and we said “our money” at the same time because I’d heard that phrase before. Then we said jinx at the same time, and then we laughed at the same time.

I knew you were speaking of some very hypothetical unknown future. Of course, I knew that. It wasn't our money you were talking about. It was your money with your wife. We (you and I) weren't together. We were just here in the same place.

But.

In an instant I let myself be transported to a world where you and I were together. A world where we shared things like cars and money. Would we also have kids, and before that would we have had a wedding?

I hated weddings. Cars too. Cars were a waste of money. I hated the idea of a sports car and I told you so.

"I walk everywhere, and I love it."

I was an idiot, Adam. I just said it like that. And for some reason that I can't really remember, it felt like I had closed a door.

As we crossed back over the pond from the far side this time, the white object you had once mistaken for a swan - but was really just a milk jug - drew no laughs from either of us. The joke had run its course.

Was a sports car really the deal-breaker...? That wasn't it, was it?

It was getting dark. We didn't talk anymore, really. We just walked back to your car. I got in my side and you got in yours, and you turned the key to start the engine. The warm feeling returned to my chest (quite possibly stoked by the actual heat coming from the car's radiator) and that made me warm about us again.

I wasn't mad at you. Nothing had ended. Nothing had ever really begun. It was make-believe. Pretend.

You turned on the radio and we started to talk about music. Music that I loved that you also loved. Music I didn't know, so you put it on. What is it about music that makes you feel so intensely? I don't know, but we listened anyway.

You and I were in the same second grade class. Our teacher was Mrs. Cummings – remember? This one day your dad came to school and read a story to the whole class, and when he was done he told us that one of your first words when you were little was “readabook.” It was more of a phrase really, but he said you just loved reading so much. Back when he said I thought it was so embarrassing. I think it's nice now. He loved you a lot.

We listened to music and you drove us to dinner. It was dark and freezing cold by then. We needed a place to go and not be seen - but it was still winter break and that meant a lot of our old friends were home visiting their parents.

We didn't want to see any of them.

You parked in the garage and we got out of the car again. Like magnets we clung, our shoulders pressed together and we entwined our fingers for the first time (but we didn't talk about it). We walked in silence toward the warmth of the restaurant.

You sat on the same side of the booth as me. It was weird but kind of nice. We ate crispy duck and steamed buns, because you thought I would like them - and they were really delicious, and to this day I don't think I ever would have tried them if you hadn't ordered them.

And that's where it ends, mostly.

I did go to visit you a few weeks later - at your school this time. I saw your real apartment where you lived. We made dinner together and listened to music that I knew but you didn't. You introduced me to your friends, and later that night you asked if you could kiss me. I remember that. The rest doesn't matter; it isn't so important.

Do you remember the day with the milk jug? Do you ever think about me? It's okay if you don't. But that was a really good day for me. I guess I just want to say thanks.

Honorable Mention: Sharmin Ahmed

Sterling, VA

### The Story of Night and Day

Once upon a time, there was only the day without night, light without sun, moon, or stars. Once upon a time, in the time when time did not exist as we know it, a young girl named Aloe peered over a boy, shielded from the light with a book laid over his face, and cheerfully introduced herself.

“Hi,” she said to the boy, who made no movement. “I’m Aloe.”

Slowly, squinting as he inched the book off of his pale features, he peered up at her, observing the rosiness of her chubby cheeks and the warmth in her kind smile and eager eyes. “I’m Ando,” he offered hesitantly, raking a hand through his inky hair. And because Ando always said what he meant without consideration or refinement, he asked gruffly, “What do you want?”

“To chase you,” she responded matter-of-factly, though her eyes widened in hope. If she took note of his broody reluctance, it was not apparent; by nature, she was both friendly and forthcoming to a fault. “And you can chase me. We can keep switching. Deal?”

An older Ando will wonder time and time again if this exchange was the moment his fate was sealed.

The young Ando apprehensively stood to full height. Aloe grinned excitedly—and Ando, who hated the light, found himself flinching; but rather than from irritation, he found it was from the impact of her blazing smile in full force, the purity of her delight that he agreed to play with her. She turned on her heel and took off in a sprint. Ando, in turn, followed.

This was how Aloe and Ando became friends. If a cycle has a beginning, this was the start of theirs, and the origin of ours.

~

As Aloe and Ando grew, they found themselves always with one another. Everyone knew that where one was, the other surely, indefinitely followed – Aloe in all her brightness, in her bubbling joy, in the warmth that seemed to wrap around everyone who had the pleasure of being in her company, and Ando in his cool and calming aura, like a sea breeze next to a fire.

Since the time when they were children, Ando found himself in reverence of Aloe, in the way others seemed drawn to her, in the way they looked at her as if she were something between the charming child she was and the warmest blanket after being plunged into freezing water. It was only because he understood the way they felt that he found himself in awe rather than envy.

He, too, attracted the stares of many – Ando figured they wondered why a girl as dazzling as Aloe spent her time with a pale, intimidating boy like him.

If he asked Aloe, she'd laugh, ruffle his hair, and tease him – they're staring because you look like romantic poetry, she'd say, earning a scoff and a flick to the head. You have twinkly eyes, Ando.

Ando would blush furiously, set his brows, and look away, grumbling about how ridiculous she was. It would earn him another giggle, set off another flame inside of him that he couldn't quite explain for a long time.

~

To all the townspeople who knew them, it seemed inevitable that Ando and Aloe would remain side by side until death do them part.

To Ando, it seemed equally inevitable that one day, Aloe would see him the way he saw himself – subdued, steely, always held at a distance – and find a companion who was more like an inferno. Someone like her.

Nevertheless, Ando found himself, now and years later, debating when exactly it was that he fell in love with Aloe. Whether he had loved her from the moment she introduced herself, hovering directly over his head, smiling like she already knew he'd love her.

He'd bemoan, years later, how he had missed it, how he hadn't seen the way she looked at him with equal wonder, for Aloe always understood the longing in all the eyes that followed her beloved companion, knew they too were taken by the way he seemed to glow despite himself, thought how lucky she was that she could find herself reflected among the galaxies he seemed to hold in his eyes.

But Ando, perpetually clouded by his own fears, didn't know any of this. At this age, Ando was certain of two things: that Aloe would eventually leave him behind for someone more deserving of her love, and that he would go blind if he looked at her directly for too long, if it was any indication of how blank his mind seemed to go every time she turned the full voltage of her smile directly at him.

Much later, he'd wonder how he could be so lost in his own yearning that he missed the soft way she looked at him, with the eyes she only ever had for him.



~

In the time of Aloe and Ando, all people on earth sent their prayers to the God of Everything. The God of Everything was listener to the most wholesome wishes, the most benevolent ambitions, the fondest love.

But the universe and all its people have never been without balance – indeed, every wish, every ambition, and every love is part virtue, part vice. The God of Everything sees all and extols his wisdom as epiphanies to keep those who seek his divinity on the path to their paradise. His balance, the Lord of the Underworld, hears only the most desperate whispers of vice.

He, in turn, whispers back.

~

One day, with excitement behind every syllable, Aloe expressed to Ando her desire to travel the world.

To Aloe, it was obvious that Ando would join – everyone knew they were a package; it was the only conviction of which Aloe had ever been sure. There would be no world worth traveling without her eternal companion.

To Ando, this was what he had dreaded his whole life – the day she would leave him behind, disappearing even as she hopped into the footsteps he left in the damp sand of the beach, trailing a few steps behind.

He bent down as they walked, swam his fingers through the translucent water crashing against the sand, marveled as the waves rose and fell at his feet, and tried to let the sound of the sea drown the storm inside his heart. With a sigh, he stood at full height and shook his hands dry, flicking drops of water at Aloe until she covered her

face, laughing, and hoped she missed the rising anguish in his eyes. He loved her, and she wanted to leave him.

Aloe held his wrists until he stopped, then lifted her hands and held his face, wearing that warm smile that reached her eyes and always wreaked havoc inside of him.

“I have to go,” she said. Ando was unsure if she meant for the day, or for good.

It was some time after her retreating silhouette had faded from his sight that Ando looked at the sky and begged not to lose the only person he had ever truly loved.

The God of Everything heard his wish, and sent an epiphany.

Ando wondered if he should show Aloe his heart, pondered how she might receive it, and thought maybe he could do it.

No sooner had the epiphany struck him that fear, and something much uglier, like the sound of deprecating laughter, twisted painfully inside of him – as if he could ever hope for more than perhaps pity that someone as stoic as Ando could dare to love a blaze like Aloe. He despaired that if anything, she would leave him faster if he burdened her with his affection.

Thus, Ando turned away from the epiphany, and whispered his wish again. This time, Ando hoped she'd change her mind, no longer wish to pursue her dream of exploring the godforsaken earth, and stay with him, and he'd never have to expose his heart to her and experience the sharp pangs of certain rejection or loss.

This time, the Lord of the Underworld listened, and wondered what Ando truly desired.

Ando thought back to the moment he met Aloe for the first time, to the delightful way she had asked him to play with her, to chase her and let her chase him, and wished that he could have lived in that moment, that every moment for the rest of his life was like that first moment.

The Lord of the Underworld smiled to himself, and pitied Ando as he pitied all other humans, for the way their desperate wishes always came without care.

~

Not long after, Aloe realized that no matter where she looked, she could not find Ando. It was unlike him to ever be more than a few steps from her for a long stretch of time, but he was suddenly nowhere that she could see.

No matter how she ran or where she looked, anxious as she carried herself through the markets, the fields, the seaside, anywhere she thought Ando could be, she could not seem to find him.

It did nothing to ease her frustration that everyone she encountered seemed to have seen Ando not long before she had inquired of his whereabouts. Her legs burned from exertion and still she persisted, seeking him behind every corner with no luck.

It was only when she was near collapse, exhausted beyond coherent thought, that she finally caught sight of Ando's ever-familiar figure from afar. She paused with her hands on her knees, panting for breath as relief washed through her.

Even from a distance, she noted that he, too, seemed to be coming down from an equal panic, calm easing his shoulders as his eyes caught hers.

Aloe's racing, frantic heart steadied as she mustered what little strength she had left to meet him. Despite the worry that had gripped her as she searched for him, she smiled affectionately as he approached, her insides warming in comfort with each step.

"I didn't see you anywhere," she said to him.

"Everyone else saw you except for me," he answered.

They held each other's eyes for a moment. Aloe brushed her fingers reassuringly along Ando's arm, relieved to be reunited with her eternal companion, her first and only love.

Then, Aloe spun on her heel, tugging her hand away, and beckoned for Ando to follow. She turned a corner, Ando close behind.

But as he turned the same corner, he was met with a deserted corridor. Aloe was nowhere in sight.

"Aloe?" Ando called into the empty alley. No one answered back.

~

Confusion welled up inside Aloe as the footsteps behind her turned suddenly silent and she looked back only to find no one there. She ran back down the alley, turned back around the same corner, but with no luck. Once more, Ando was suddenly nowhere to be found.

~

"What have you done?" the God of Everything asked tiredly.

"I granted his wish," the Lord of the Underworld answered pleasantly.

The God of Everything sighed, and not for the first time, regretted the balance of the universe. For just as the Lord of the Underworld cannot intervene when a human accepts an epiphany, nor can God undo the power of the Underworld.

And so, the God of Everything resigned himself to accept Ando's fate. Still, he lamented that humans cannot see Everything the way he can – that Ando could not see Aloe's love, nor could he predict that his wish to the Underworld would ruin them.

The God of Everything sees all, and so he watched Ando and Aloe with a heavy sadness for the rest of their lives.

~

At first, it puzzled Ando and Aloe, frustrated them to the end of their wits that no matter how long they sought one another, how long they ran, or how close they seemed to be, they only managed to ever find one another for a fleeting moment before disappearing to each other once more.

It began as a nagging thought, that Aloe wanted to travel the world but now she seemed unwilling to leave, and as time passed, Ando slowly remembered, slowly realized his mistake in rejecting the epiphany to show his heart to Aloe and twisting his love into desperation. In horror, he understood who had heard his second plea.

It broke him. He cursed the flaws of his humanity, begged for Aloe to be spared this fate.

No other epiphany ever came to him again. God cannot overrule the Underworld.

~

It was in those stolen moments when Ando and Aloe met that Ando explained to Aloe what he had done, and finally opened his heart to her in tears, knowing it was too late.

She forgave him in a whisper, and then she was gone.

She told him she loved him, and would only ever love him, and then she was gone.

She admired his beauty, teased him for the galaxies in his eyes with sadness in hers, and then she was gone once more.

Ando and Aloe spent the rest of their lives chasing one another as they did when they first met, only to meet momentarily before the cycle continued again.

The God of Everything saw their tears, heard their pain. Lamented their fate.

~

They tried until their last breath, but Aloe and Ando were never able to undo their curse.

It haunted the God of Everything for the entirety of their lifetime. It was even as they took their dying breaths that he bemoaned that Ando never felt the full blaze of Aloe's happiness again, that no one ever saw Ando's eyes shine again. It was as their souls were departing the earth that he made a decision.

With Aloe's soul, he created the sun, as warm on skin as she had been in Ando's heart, brightest directly overhead, just like Ando's first memory of her.

With Ando's soul, he created the moon and stars, with a striking beauty that would inspire centuries of romance and poetry, just as Aloe had teased, twinkling in the night as his eyes only ever did for his one love.

And so, the God of Everything created night, day, and time as we know it. For all of time, Ando and Aloe continued to seek one another as moon and sun, in a constant rotation that overlapped none but twice in a day: once when Ando finally found Aloe for just a moment, called dawn, and once when Aloe reached Ando, at dusk.

The God of Everything decided night and day would cease once more the moment Ando and Aloe grew tired of their love, of their desire to be together. To this day, he's still waiting.

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Author's note:

In Bangla, "Ando" (pronounced ohn-dho) means blind, or pitch black. "Aloe" (pronounced ah-lo) means light.

Honorable Mention: Lindsay Manis

Bluemont, VA

### Kiss These Virgin Lips

Moms really know how to say the wrong things sometimes. When I turned sixteen, my mom came up to my room and brought me pancakes with a candle on top. That was sweet and all, but what wasn't sweet was that instead of singing me "Happy Birthday," she crooned,

"Sweet sixteen and never been kissed."

Thanks, Mom. Way to rub it in. It's pretty sad when your own mother makes fun of you for how far you *haven't* gone with a guy. She was kissed by the time she turned thirteen. And I thought we were the progressive generation.

Since middle school this kissing subject has made me squirm. In seventh grade most girls still hadn't experienced their first kiss. But by eighth grade, the boys' hormone levels finally started kicking in, and one-by-one my friends began getting kissed.

Every night I'd lay in bed with my flowery quilt lying irritatingly straight across my mosquito-bite breasts. Just as my dark curls hit the pillow, my eyes dropped, and I began rattling through my standardized prayer. After pushing through all the required stuff, I concluded with a request that I hoped God would take seriously.

"Please God, please let me be kissed before I go to high school. I just don't know what I'll do if I have to go to high school without being kissed. I have to get the first one over with now before it's too late. Oh dear, holy God, please. I'll be forever grateful."



Apparently finding me a guy to kiss failed to make God's things-to-do list because I went to high school with lips as stagnant as a Florida swamp in the summertime. My dog, Jake, licked me once in awhile, but that's about all the action I got.

By this time, I had lost all hope in the so-called all-powerful presence. I decided that I would just have to lie about the tragic fact that I had never kissed a guy. Certain circumstances call for certain measures. I needed to familiarize myself with kissing in order to secure my testimony. I needed practice. One day as I was flipping through the internet, I stumbled upon a *Teen Vogue* article highlighting necessary kissing techniques. The article read as follows:

*Step One: To signal to him that you're ready for a kiss, lick your lips or dramatically apply a coat of lip gloss.*

*Step Two: Make eye contact with his gorgeous eyes and begin inching closer to his face.*

*Step Three: Slightly part your lips, but KEEP EYE CONTACT. If you lose your eye connection, the results could be disastrous.*

*Step Four: Find his lower lip and place your top lip on it. When your lips touch, slowly close your eyes. But remember, not until this point!*

*Step Five: Slowly bring your top and lower lips together in one fluid motion.*

*Step Six: End with a sweet peck on the lips. If you really want to hook him, whisper something romantic in his ear like, "That was great," or "You're wonderful."*

It continued from there to describe more complicated kissing techniques such as the head turn and the French kiss. I decided to concentrate on the basics—I'd worry about the advanced steps later. My eyes shifted around my room to find something to practice on. I grabbed my pillow, imagined I was gazing into the eyes of an adorable guy, and went through steps one through six.

I became an expert pillow kisser, but by the time I reached the beginning of tenth grade and still hadn't kissed an actual person, I started to feel completely juvenile and silly. When I turned miserable sixteen, I vowed to stop practicing all together because surely I was destined to grow into a bitter old maid.

The end of tenth grade came, and the flowers and trees began to bloom while my love life remained in hibernation. I definitely had my crushes and my flirtatious encounters, but no guys I ever liked, liked me back. I proceeded down my lonely path, until one day my friend Maria brought me a slice of possibility.

"Hey, Evie! Wait up." Maria dodged through the crowded halls as I searched for her raven black hair amidst the mob.

"Hey. You riding the bus today?" I asked.

"Nah, my mom's picking me up. So Evie, how come you never told me you liked Garth?"

"What? That came out of nowhere. Where do you come up with these things?" I opened the lobby door and pushed my way outside trying to avoid eye contact with Maria. My face felt hot.

“It was just funny watching you guys in Anatomy today. I’ve never seen a squeamish girl so energetic to dissect an animal. I thought maybe it had to do with the fact that Garth was your partner. I saw you two “fighting” over what to name your dead cat and who got to cut it open.”

“Oh, like that means anything, Maria. We were just having fun. He’s fun to hang out with, but I don’t know where you come up with the idea we like each other,” I said nervously, combing through my curls.

“Well, maybe because Garth talked to me today in Pre-Calc. But if you don’t like him, you don’t have to hear.”

“What did he say?”

“He just asked me how long we’d been friends. Said that you were a fun girl and that he’d like to get to know you better. He asked if you had a boyfriend.” Maria’s chocolate-colored eyes smiled at mine.

“Shut up. I don’t believe you.”

“I swear, Evie. You know I wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“Well, that’s interesting. I better go down to the bus.”

“Hey, wait! Tell me what you think about him.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Maria.” I turned toward the bus. I offered a quick backward wave and tried to walk as steadily as possible, praying she wouldn’t notice my shaky limbs.

Over the next few days, I attempted to play it as cool as possible. Unfortunately, in Anatomy, I ended up falling out my chair and answering a question in front of the entire class with “celibacy” instead of “cellular.” I could hear God’s laughter. But even still, on Friday I had a special guest at my locker.

“Hey, Evie.”

“Hey, Garth.” I looked up at his tall, muscular frame. His blonde waves and blue eyes resembled a dreamy angel’s. Maybe God decided to stop laughing and take me seriously for once.

“I know this is kinda last minute, but um, I was wondering about, um, I have these passes to the putt-putt place on Route Two. And you were just mentioning the other day how you always loved playing putt-,” his voice dramatically lowered, “um mini-golf. So are you free tomorrow?”

“I don’t remember saying that I wanted to play mini-golf.” Just as the words fell out of my mouth, I wanted to sink into the cold, hard ground and bang my head against my locker.

“Oh, okay.” Garth’s eyes dropped to his black Converse sneakers, and he turned to walk away. If there was one time in my life to be bold, it was now.

“Wait! I just remembered. Yeah, I totally do remember saying that now. So, I guess I better keep my word, don’t you think?”

His blue eyes widened, and as I stared deep inside them I felt my knees bend.

“Of course. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at four.”

Garth picked me up at a quarter to four. We played a competitive game of mini-golf and then, to celebrate my victory, we went to the local Dairy Queen. After the date, he coolly pulled his white Jeep Wrangler into my driveway, got out, and walked me to the front door. My glossed lips tensed, and I began praying, “Don’t you dare let him kiss me. I’m not ready, I’m not ready.”

Fortunately, Garth only offered the usual polite remarks. He ended the night by randomly saying, “I’m real excited about the upcoming boat show in Annapolis. Those are always cool. Do you like boats?”

“Yeah,” I lied.

“Cool. Um, yeah, I love boat shows. Always a good time.”

Before I started laughing, I interrupted his rambling. “I’d love to go to the boat show with you, Garth.”

“Oh, cool. That’s a great idea. We can talk about it more at school on Monday. Have a good night, Evie.”

“You too, Garth.” I ascended into my house, shut the door, and breathed an elated sigh. The corners of my mouth remained stretched high for days.

Before our second date, I searched for the old article with the “kissing steps” and studied it like I was preparing for the SAT’s. But my practice proved unnecessary because once again he dropped me off at the doorstep without playing tonsil hockey,

and once again I felt a sense of relief. Over the next month, Garth and I continued dating. I kept mentally preparing, practicing, and psyching myself up for that first kiss, but I got nothing. Not even a kiss on the cheek. If our doorstep could talk, no one would want to listen.

One Friday afternoon, I found a note in my locker which read: *Meet me at my Jeep as soon as school is done. Can't wait to see you. ~Garth*

I thought this odd because he had just told me yesterday that he was going to hang out with his friends that night. Quickly, I gathered my books and walked toward the Jeep with the sunlight of the afternoon hitting my freckles.

“So what’s this all about?”

“Well, this is the first really warm day of the year, so I think we should enjoy it. How about going to Quiet Waters Park?”

We drove to a spot overlooking the Severn River. As we sat on a picnic bench and watched the boats glide over the sparkling waters, Garth intertwined his fingers with mine. His feet softly kicked the gravel, and then he took a deep breath that pulled his stomach in tight and pushed his stomach out loose. Garth turned towards me. Our eyes met, and he said, “So, I took you here because I wanted to make this special.”

And then it happened. Within the shortest second of my life, his lips pressed up against mine.

My entire body froze. Dozens of images came shooting at me. I saw the article from *Teen Vogue*, but the words had mouths, and they were laughing at me and

mockingly puckering their lips. I saw mom shaking her head disapprovingly and saying, “Don’t mess up your first kiss, don’t mess up your first kiss.”

I felt like my mouth was drowning in a giant pond. Suddenly, I remembered two key phrases: part lips, eyes closed. My eyes quickly shut, and I widened my mouth.

“I think I figured it out,” I thought as I tried to get over the fact that I could taste someone else’s saliva. I was getting ready to close my lips and give him an ending peck, when something like a fish jumped into my mouth. Something wet and squirmy. The fish flopped on the backs of my teeth and the roof of my mouth.

“Did his lips grow into a fish?” I thought. Then I realized what it was.

The next thing I remember is watching Garth spit blood onto the gravel. I had bitten his tongue.

“Garth, I’m so sorry. I feel so stupid. I’m so, so sorry.” I could feel my throat closing in around my voice box. The sobs had begun. “Garth . . . I’ve never kissed anyone before, I know that’s hard to believe, but I haven’t. You just took me by surprise.” The drops of blood on the ground seemed to glare at me. “I’m gonna walk home. It’s not that far.”

“Evie . . .”

My sandals smacked the concrete parking lot as I ran away from the crime scene. Twenty minutes later I found myself on my front lawn vigorously wiping off the streams of mascara that marked my face. I hurried up the wooden stairs of our house

and dashed into my bedroom before Mom could hound me with nosy questions. My daybed squeaked as I dropped my body like a whale in the ocean and sank into misery.

Mom tapped lightly on my door. I opened my eyes and glanced at the clock.

7:00 p.m.

“Evie, honey. Garth’s here. He wants to see you. He looks sorry for whatever it is that he did.”

“Tell him I can’t see him.”

“Evie, come on. Just hear him out.”

Little did she know that I did the messing up.

“Might as well get the official breaking up over with,” I thought. So, I muscled up all my strength and pulled myself out of bed. Garth stood in our foyer. His hands jingled the keys in his pocket, and his left foot tapped the ceramic tile. My face reddened.

“Hey, Garth.” My eyes stared at the coat rack. “You wanna go out on the front porch?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

We sat on the wicker glider in silence. Finally, Garth mustered up enough courage and spoke.

“Evie, I’m sorry . . .”

“Garth, I know, I know it’s over. You don’t have to make a list of excuses.”



“No, that’s not what I was gonna say. Not at all. I was gonna say that I’m sorry for screwin’ things up today. I’m really sorry for . . .” he glanced back at the front door and turned toward me. He pointed to his mouth and said, “This.”

“Garth, that was my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t. I totally ruined our first kiss. I guess I just thought . . . I don’t know what I was thinking. I was just so nervous, and I didn’t really know what I was doing and . . .”

“Wait. You mean you’ve never kissed anyone either?”

“No, you were my first kiss. Why is that weird or something?”

“No, not at all. I mean it was my first kiss, too. I guess we were both pretty nervous, huh?”

Garth took my right hand and squeezed it.

“So you don’t want to break up?” I asked.

“Of course not. But if you don’t mind, I would like to give you another kiss. I promise no tongue this time. Plus, it’s kinda sore at the moment,” Garth said with a wink.

“Sounds like a deal.” My eyes brightened as I watched a smile emerge on his face.

“Are you ready?”

“Never been readier.”

Our faces slowly moved in together, our eyes shut, and our lips gently touched.  
And I thought of nothing else.

Honorable Mention: Erin Price

South Riding, VA

### Swipe Right

He wiped his brow with the restaurant's linen napkin. Would she notice how fast his heart was racing? Would she be able to tell that he hadn't been on a real date in years?

He looked down at his phone, opening her profile for the tenth time. She was beautiful, at least as beautiful as she could be without being too good for him. I mean, he was approaching 40—he couldn't be picky. She liked children, baking, and candy. What's not to love about that?

He looked up, and she was there. She looked even better than her picture: flowing dark hair, large eyes with long eyelashes, a charming little mole on her cheek. Her nose looked a bit larger than it had online, but who was he to care? He wasn't exactly Brad Pitt.

"Hello, are you Hans?" she asked. She had a European accent, but he couldn't place the country.

"Yes, yes, sit down." He was embarrassed that she'd walked up while he was looking at her profile. He was embarrassed that he was here at all. He'd always told his friends that he would never resort to a dating app. But how was an almost 40-year-old man supposed to meet a decent woman these days? And she looked decent. Even better than decent. He took a breath.

"Mary? It's nice to meet you." He extended his hand and she shook it, not seeming to notice how sweaty it was.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” she said. “And if I can say, you look much better than your picture—simply delicious!”

A very European thing to say. Hans chuckled nervously. Mary laughed along with him, loudly enough for the couple next to them to turn around. Hans tried to ignore them. He liked Mary already. Confident women always put him at ease.

The waiter approached them. Hans ordered a steak, and Mary, a piece of chocolate cake.

“So, what is it you do?” asked Hans when the waiter had taken their menus.

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that,” said Mary, flicking her hair seductively behind her shoulder. “I have many hobbies. And what is it you do?”

Hans bit his lip, trying to focus and not just stare at Mary. She seemed to get more and more beautiful by the minute. “I practice law. I help businesses file for bankruptcy.”

“Lawyering makes it tough to maintain a good figure, does it not?” she asked. “All that sitting?”

“Yes, it does, but I do try to get to the gym every day.”

Mary looked away distractedly. Most women were impressed that he went to the gym every day. Maybe she hated gym rats?

The waiter arrived, and Hans tucked into the delicious steak. Mary picked at her cake while batting her eyelashes at him. He knew he should flirt back, but he wasn’t sure he remembered how.

“Are you not hungry?” asked Hans.

“Oh, I’m very hungry,” said Mary. “I just prefer other foods.”

“Do you want to order something else?”

“Oh no. I have much better treats at my place. You will join me.” Mary smiled wide at Hans, her perfect teeth gleaming. Hans caught a scent of her perfume, a sweet smell like gingersnap cookies, and he felt giddier than he had after kissing his first girlfriend in high school.

Hans hadn’t expected Mary to be so forward, but he’d heard that’s how women were these days. First date, and they were already asking you to come to their apartment. Hans hadn’t expected something like that to happen to him, and from a beautiful woman, too. He felt flattered.

“Uh, sure, I’d love to.”

Mary winked, a twinkle in her eye. Hans looked down, embarrassed, hoping she liked him even if his flirting skills needed work.

Hans finished his dinner and paid. Remembering his manners, he helped Mary put on her coat. As he did so, she leaned over and whispered in his ear, “Aren’t you a sweetie pie?” Hans blushed, proud that his attempts to be a gentleman were appreciated.

As pleased as he was that Mary had invited him over on the first date (what a story to tell his buddies!), he was a bit worried. What if she lived miles away and she

turned out to be a crazy cat lady or something? What if he couldn't figure out how to get back?

Hans opened his location tracker app. Every few feet, he pinged his location to his sister, Greta. She was like a mother to him, always worried about him. If anything crazy happened, at least she would know where he was. Mary didn't seem to notice; she was walking unusually quickly, leading the way to her place.

He was surprised to find that Mary's apartment was just a few blocks away. It was the most colorful apartment he'd ever seen—the wallpaper was bright orange with pink stripes. And Mary hadn't lied about liking treats. There was not just one candy bowl in the living room, but five, all overflowing with candy.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable!" said Mary. "I'll start the oven!"

Hans pushed aside a pile of candy to sit down awkwardly on the couch. He heard Mary in the kitchen, clinking pots and pans and muttering to herself.

"Eat as much candy as you want!" called Mary.

Hans slowly picked up a pack of Smarties and unwrapped it, placing each one in his mouth and letting it dissolve on his tongue. Then he sat back and waited. And waited. The longer he waited, the more candy he ate. Soon, a pile of candy wrappers surrounded him. He was starting to feel sweaty again. A giant clock ticked on the wall, and Mary continued to bang around in the kitchen. What was taking her so long? Should he help her?

He walked toward the kitchen—and was blasted back by a wave of fiery heat. It was blazing in here! A giant oven dominated the kitchen space, and the temperature read 700 degrees. What in the world was she baking?

Mary stood on a stepstool, stirring the largest pot he had ever seen. As Hans walked toward her, she turned suddenly. “What are you doing in here?” she said, smiling, although there was fire in her eyes. “Dessert isn’t ready yet! It’s supposed to be a surprise!”

“Sorry,” said Hans, embarrassed. “I was just looking for the, uh, bathroom?”

Hans walked down the hall in the direction Mary pointed. He breathed hard, thinking of that angry look in Mary’s eyes. The fact that it didn’t match her smile was worrying him. That look reminded him of his last ex-girlfriend, who would slide into fits of rage with no warning. Maybe he should have listened to his buddies when they tried to talk him out of online dating. But surely, Mary couldn’t be as bad as his ex.

He opened the bathroom door and squished up his nose at the smell of formaldehyde. On the shelves in the bathroom were various glass jars with small cards attached to each. He moved forward to read one of the cards; it looked like a recipe. “Add  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp nutmeg and 3 cups sugar,” it read. Then Hans jumped back in horror. Inside the jar was a floating eyeball. The other jars contained various body parts, including an ear, a toe, and a finger.

A human finger.

He turned, and he was face to face with Mary.

“Hansey!” she called, a lopsided grin filling her face. “Dinner’s almost ready! We just need the main course!”

Thoughts raced through Hans’s mind. He knew he shouldn’t ask about the body parts. Why in the world would she keep such a thing in her bathroom?

“I, uh, I think I need to step out for some fresh air,” he said.

“Not until after dinner!” said Mary. The expression in her eyes looked wild. He couldn’t remember why he had found her so beautiful. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the kitchen. Hans’s brain was screaming warning signals. He could hear his own heartbeat.

The temperature on the oven read 1,000 degrees. Mary pushed him towards it.

“There’s some delicious dessert in the oven,” said Mary. “Can you check on it for me?”

Hans shook his head. “Why don’t you check it?” But Mary was already behind him, grabbing him by the arms and pushing him toward the open oven. She was definitely crazier than his ex.

The heat was so intense his face was melting. Hans twisted, trying to break free of Mary’s strong grip. She grabbed him by the back of the neck and began pushing him headfirst into the oven’s fiery depths.

“Let go of me, you witch!” Hans screamed as Mary laughed. Hans tried to kick his leg at her but missed. She cackled loudly, and a spray of her spit hit the back of his neck. Her laughter might be the last sound he would ever hear.



A ring sounded from his pocket. Hans pushed his arm toward his pocket, and Greta's voice came on the line.

“Hans? Hans, are you there?”

Mary, momentarily distracted by the voice, loosened her grip on Hans. Hans pulled away and raced toward the front door. He gripped the knob and tried to turn it. Locked.

And Mary was behind him, cackling. “Where are you going, Hansey? Aren't you hungry?”

Hans jumped from her outstretched arms and raced toward the bathroom. He had seen a window there. It was his last hope. He burst through the bathroom, knocking down jars on his way toward the window. An eyeball rolled on the floor beside him.

And then Mary was right behind him, cackling, grabbing at him. He jumped toward the window, pulled it up, and launched himself through it. He felt Mary grab at his foot as he rolled to the ground. He stood and ran, faster than he'd ever run in his life. Sweat rolled down his face as he raced down the street, pushing people aside. Mary must be right behind him, but he didn't dare turn around.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a bright yellow cab, and he waved his arm. Amazingly, it stopped and he jumped in. “43rd street!” he screamed at the driver.

As the cab zoomed away, Hans tried to control his breathing. He couldn't believe he had been about to become somebody's dinner. He picked up his phone from his pocket and dialed 9-1—but then he stopped. Who would believe him if he said that his blind

date was planning to cook him in her oven? He would love to see the look on that cop's face. Besides, he was safe now. He was headed home. He sat back in the seat, wiping sweat from his forehead and letting himself breathe.

He texted Greta: "U saved my life. Explain later. Thanx."

Hans's phone pinged. It was a notification from the dating app. More to distract himself than anything else, he opened it. Amazingly, another woman had said she was interested in him. Her profile name was "The Fairest One of All," and she was stunningly beautiful. She said she was a widow looking for the right person. She listed her interests as "working in the laboratory, apples, and my beautiful stepdaughter." She was a scientist, she liked healthy foods (not candy!), and she loved her family. How bad could she be?

He swiped right.

Honorable Mention: Will Kohudic

Ashburn, VA

### Recall

Some folks say that the first thing you forget about a person is their voice.

That may be so, if you lose someone suddenly. Someone you haven't loved for most of your long life. If the pocket with her letters hadn't been the thing you covered with your helmet every time you jumped into an aircraft defense ditch. If you hadn't read every word over and over, hearing them in her voice, by lantern light between surgeries on the luminous sands of Okinawa.

Maybe you could quickly forget someone's voice if you hadn't raised a family together; started a medical practice with her encouragement; traveled the world with her; fought with her and made up with her a thousand times; retired with her and stayed active together in church groups and doing volunteer work together like recording audio books for the blind or Meals on Wheels.

Honestly, I can't say what might have been the first thing I forgot about Caroline. Alzheimer's took her away gradually, like a shroud that would wind a little tighter, a little heavier every day: It began imperceptibly; a forgotten word here, a misplaced object there. I realized what was happening before she did, and wanted so badly to protect her from knowing it, from feeling it. I couldn't bear seeing the light going out of her eyes and being powerless to stop it.

Her voice was one of the first things she lost. Or gave up, might be closer to the truth. I couldn't keep her from realizing her condition forever. She knew it, even before the diagnosis. I'll certainly never forget the look in her eyes as she held me quietly in the

doctor's office. I don't think I'd ever seen Caroline truly afraid before that moment. She felt lost, no longer able to trust herself to say the right things or follow a conversation.

When we were around others, then, she wouldn't say a word. Her beautiful eyes looked in other directions, and her hand never left mine. When we were alone, she would speak softly, a little, in need of something or lost in memories of other times. In the evenings I would put on records we had saved from our younger days; musicals and composers we had admired together. She could still smile then, and when she did, it was like the sun bursting through thick clouds.

One evening, as I got her settled in bed, Caroline pulled me close and whispered my name. She just said it once, and I never heard her say another word. It wasn't long before I realized I just couldn't care for her at home any more. I wasn't young, and there was too much for a home health nurse to handle alone. The facility we found for her was nice enough, as far as those places go, but it hurt me something awful to see her there.

Caroline had been so particular about her hair and clothes, her makeup and accessories. She wasn't trying to look like a movie star like young people try to do today; she was just classy like people used to be. (I always thought she looked an awful lot like Grace Kelly without any makeup on at all, but she would get mad and flustered when I said it to anybody else.) But in that place, they kept her hair terribly short and put her in the most hideous hospital gowns they could find.

Caroline no longer got out of her bed unassisted. Her hands lay limp by her sides, her eyes dull and unfocused. What small sounds her throat might make were nothing like her real voice. Over those years in the facility, I'm afraid I really did forget

much about her. I never forgot my love for her, though, or hers for me, and I went to be with her every day that I could.

The first thing I would do when I came to her room was shut off the horrible rock and roll coming from the radio by her bedside. "Playing music in the room is good for people," the nurse would say, and try to turn it back on. "Lady," I'd reply, "if there's any music in that noise then I'm the king of Spain." I'd turn the dial to a classical music station, instead. It would stay on while I was there, but I know those wretched nurses changed it the moment I left. I would've brought our record player and our whole collection if I'd been allowed to. The thought of my Caroline, dressed in those awful gowns and lying helpless while that racket played on was almost more than I could stand.

When her time came, I was heartbroken, but relieved for her too, because her earthly torment was over. Hard as they had been, I missed my visits with her. It was some time before our family was able to gather for her memorial, but it took me that long to try and prepare myself.

On the day of her service, I got to meet my great granddaughter for the first time, and bought her first ice cream at the shop in Old Town where we had taken her father when he was a boy. A few people shared their favorite quotes of Caroline's at the service, and I found myself struggling to put the sound of her voice to those well-remembered words. That troubled me. I wondered what else had I forgotten that I didn't even know I'd forgotten.

In the months that followed, I tended to take long naps during the time I would have gone to visit with Caroline. Sometimes I dreamed of her, but in the dreams, she

never said a word, and I would wake up feeling uneasy. Those naps, reading books, and the occasional poker game with other old codgers had become about the limit of my activity.

My biggest worry for myself wasn't dementia; my mind was about as sharp as it ever had been. The body, though, was a different story. It was letting me down in one of the worst ways imaginable for a big reader—my vision was going. Soon, I got the diagnosis—macular degeneration. I'd worn bifocals most of my life, but now I needed a giant, lighted magnifying glass on a stand to be able to read at all. It could be exhausting to use that thing for long periods of time, so one day my doctor made a suggestion I couldn't believe hadn't occurred to me before.

I got on the bus early the next day and went to the library. I knew where the right section was, but I had to get a librarian to help me with selecting a title (I wanted a long story that I could listen to all day) and getting the machine and headphones set up.

I thanked the young woman, leaned back and pressed play. I must have given her a terrible shock when I suddenly stood bolt-upright—almost as great as the shock I felt when I heard Caroline's sweet, clear voice returning to me over all of those lost years, narrating a book we must have recorded together two decades earlier.

I could picture her so clearly, filling the little recording booth with her scent, smiling at me across the microphone and gently nudging me with her foot when it was my turn to read. I smiled and wiped away tears at the same time.

My struggle to remember Caroline's voice was over. Now, I could hear her any time I wanted, for the rest of my life.

Honorable Mention: BRASH

Sterling, VA

**Moment***(To the painting, Touching the Past)*

Fingers splayed against the bark of the tree, the little girl preoccupies herself with examining her hand. Her father planted the tree the spring after she was born and its bark is as smooth as her own skin. She can't quite wrap her hand around it, though her father promises her that when he planted it as a sapling, it was barely thick as his own thumb, a thumb she used to clutch in her tiny fingers as he held her in his arms. "With room to spare for a rooster and a bundle of firewood," he would say, as they gazed at each other, eyes twinkling with wisdom and unspoken secrets.

She can't quite put into words what she is feeling, but she wonders how a tree can grow so fast and so slow. So slow she can't perceive its growth, except by the evidence from year to year that it has changed. In her own skin, she must be witness to her own growth, yet when does she ever perceive it? Even in looking through the corner-worn snapshots in the family album, she recognizes herself, but how can that captured image be the same her that contemplates some former self? And at the same time, how can it not?

So lost is she in her unvoiceable thoughts that she barely hears her father, but then his words are with her the way lightning remains in the retina long after the storm has passed.

"Remember this moment, Marga," he says, only once, though she will hear it, exactly as he says it, even years later. "In just a moment, you'll be all grown up, before you know it." He says it with a tone of curiosity, which is how he says a lot of things to

her, imparting the details about the flora and fauna and workings of the farm, and that is how she hears it, at least this first iteration when she is still a girl. In later years she will recognize, without anything changing her actual memory, in his voice an undertone of wistfulness.

In the ultra-literal way that a young girl can take things, she stands there a long moment, breathless, believing her father to be speaking the absolute truth, as she has always known him to speak. And yet, she is not transformed. Not a moment later, as he affirmed would happen. Not even a longer moment later, no matter that she holds her breath and crosses her fingers, not even if she closes her eyes, and wishes it with the earnestness of a girl impatient to be grown.

And then, despite this moment's seeming unwillingness to pass, finally, even as she remains a little girl, seemingly unchanged, gazing at her unchanged little girl's hand, her father's hand, impossibly bigger and rougher, encompasses hers, and they turn together to head back to the house. She is in all ways too big now to need her father to carry her the short distance, but still she relishes the game of it, though it has little variation, perhaps especially for that very reason.

“And will you carry me please, Daddy?”

“Oh dear, Marga. Don't you know you've gotten too big? If I carry you, who will carry the rooster?”

“Oh Daddy, I will carry the rooster, of course!” she replies, triumphant.

“But then who will carry the bundle of firewood?”

Her eyes grow big, her brows furrow, but her smile gives her away. “Oh dear, Daddy --- don't you have room to carry me and the firewood if I'm carrying the rooster?”



“No, Marga, you have just gotten so big since those days when I had room to carry you, and a rooster and a bundle of firewood too...” He makes his eyes look sad, but of course they still twinkle.

“Well then, Daddy, the rooster will have to carry the firewood!”

“Ah,” says her father. “Then of course my burden will not be too much “ And he scoops her up by her arms, and swings her around better than any playground ride. She closes her eyes, to savor the moment, to seal in the exhilaration.

And now, it is indeed that long moment later. She places her hand on the same tree, as high up as she can reach, as she had reached when she was a girl, though now she can reach a few feet higher than she could then. Her hand is transformed, as is the tree’s bark. In the same way they’ve become rough, textured, more interesting indeed to the artist she has become. And yet, here she stands, bewildered. How can it be that the girl she was is gone? How is it that her father is gone, truly gone, though it seems that only a moment ago that he stood behind her? Day to day she does not remember aging, and only at the very end had she noticed that her father's hand in hers felt smaller than her own. She is still the girl, as surely as she is still looking at the girl's hand against the treebark, and yet the girl is gone. And it only took a moment.

**Honorable Mention: Maggie Whittier****Ashburn, VA****Dimensions**

For a week after your wife left, you stood underneath the skylight for hours each night, staring up at the clouds in the darkness. The midnight sky strata through the glass pane, like paper stairs, led from your porch roof to the shores of unpronounceable planets. Your neck strained as the blue-grey cloud wisps paced the heavens, semi-eclipsed by a black leaf on the skylight, and you philosophized to no one, "I think we're limited by the stars we can see to name."

You ignored the details of your home and instead floated in abstractions, viewing your world from a safe remove: a dash of grey instead of a dirty granite countertop, a blurred red square instead of a lonely bedspread, an exposed cylinder instead of the empty rod where your wife's clothes once hung.

You ran through your vacation and sick days and then requested a leave of absence from the law firm. In no time, your sorrow plucked fifteen pounds from your forty-three-year-old body, and you stayed in bed during the day, reading books on botany. Your dark hair grew longer and curled at the ends. Your thin lips chapped. Life closed in around you, shriveling in proportion, you imagined, to your unfed stomach.

In rare moments of energy, you opened your wife's drawers and thumbed through their contents. Her nightstand contained, buried under two romance novels and a box of emery boards, a stack of computer printouts held together by a large black clip. You brought the stack to your eyes and zoomed in on the letters, noticing the way the fibers of the paper mingled with the black ink. Your dull brain swam over the words on the page for several seconds before recognizing them as your own: these were the

lengthy emails you used to write to her from work, rambling treatises on the softness of her cheeks and shoulders, the curved landscape of her body. Flipping through the stack, you counted over a hundred of these emails. The most recent one was over three years old. "Elaine," you called in a small voice, while the bureau collected dust and the bread moved one hour closer to molding, "when was the last time I touched you?"

She left the day after you forgot to attend another one of the art openings she had spent two months organizing. She took two suitcases and most of her clothes, including a tan winter pea coat in preparation for the coming season. You made some perfunctory phone calls, knowing better than to expect results: Elaine was a private woman, a good listener who was cautious about what she revealed to others. Careful. The curator of the museum, a soft-spoken older man named James, said only, "You may need to ask yourself if she even wants to be found." You hung up the phone and stared at your yellowed toenails for a moment, afraid of what they might look like in twenty years, or even five.

Two more weeks passed, and then an idea entered your head and came through your lips before you knew what was happening. "I'll go to Duluth to find Fountain Guy." You stared at the ceiling for a moment, processing the idea, and then began to repeat the word yes in the stillness of the bedroom air, the sound of the word bursting everywhere from your center like a marigold or a song. You threw the covers aside, exposing your naked body to the cold of the house, and crossed the bedroom to the oversized master bath, smiling. Duluth, Minnesota was 1,300 miles away from your home in Connecticut, and you knew Fountain Guy by reputation only, refusing to believe, as one might, that his story had been stretched and mythologized to such a

degree that confronting its reality could only be a disappointment. You whistled instead, as you lathered your body with white suds, your imagination already in Duluth, exploring new terrain.

"I have to see his aliens," you shouted from the shower, loud enough for your wife to hear. You received no response, of course, but the ceiling fan in the kitchen continued to twirl on low, ruffling the stack of napkins secured in a stainless-steel holder.

Fountain Guy's real name was Bob Hinter, and his most fervent fans insisted that he still lived somewhere in Minnesota, although he hadn't been seen in Duluth since the fountain incident that occurred two months prior to your breakdown. The version of the story that had made its way to your ears in Connecticut detailed a newly-divorced, overweight salesman from New Jersey who had traveled to Duluth on business, where he met a diner waitress who showed him an alien vista that appeared in a spray of fountain water at midnight. According to reports, when the light hit the water at a particular angle, a strange and beautiful landscape was illuminated. Bob Hinter had been inspired by the secret vision, and had painted the perimeter of the fountain in these alien shapes, allegedly using toothpicks to define the exact curves of the smallest landscape elements.

The police report divested the situation of its romance and noted only that Bob Hinter was charged with desecration of public property. The authorities returned the fountain to its original state of bland anonymity, and Hinter disappeared. A network of fans who had glimpsed his fountain work claimed that there was nothing more startling and life-affirming than the inspired art he had pulled from the fountain spray, and

speculation as to his whereabouts persisted. Fuzzy imitations of his work surfaced. Art dealers made their interest known.

After your shower, you pulled on your most comfortable grey cable-knit sweater and belted your worn blue corduroys around the shrinking ellipse of your waist. As you sat on the edge of the bed to put on your socks and shoes, a crack sounded from your kneecap, reminding you of your aging bones. "I am dying," you thought, studying your hands as they held open a black sock. In the bright light of the room, you could see that they were dry and scaly with neglect, almost reptilian beneath the dark hair that covered them. You brought your knuckles up to your face and noticed how the pores and wrinkles of your skin resembled a desert terrain, and you imagined yourself driving across the landscape of your hand in search of a meaningful experience that could begin to supplant, or at least dull, the pain of your wife's departure. "I am dying," you said aloud, "but I could very well be resurrected within a few days."

Driving over the George Washington Bridge after dark, you were reminded of Whistler's Old Battersea Bridge. As you looked out at the glassy black water of the Hudson reflecting the lights of the Bridge, you felt the same audible sorrow that must have plagued the hunched figure in the foreground of Whistler's painting. Nothing about the fireworks or the lighted windows of the painting came to mind as you jabbed your right foot on the brakes to avoid an accident: everyone was in separate cars, sealed off from one another and on their way to a cousin planet that existed outside of traffic, outside of brake lights and the smell of exhaust. Nobody was celebrating.

But somewhere west of Ohio, you began to gather strength from listening to the quiet. Each town you traversed seemed to be on pause, something of the wind-up toy town frozen in place, its batteries removed and donated to more urban interests. A stiff weed bent toward you like a frog leg, and a rubber tire skin coiled on the side of the road, like a snake, or like the remnants of something that was once whole and turning. You stopped the car often to stare at a gnarled tree or a barren field, waiting, along with the towns, for the answer to come.

"Calendula," you whispered to yourself as you drove past a cornfield, savoring the liquid l's of your favorite botanical word. The tip of your tongue brushed up against the inside of your front teeth as you repeated it in the closed air of the car. The balm of that word: both flower and medicine.

The mid-afternoon clouds hung low over Indiana, dark and pregnant with rain. You drove for miles through empty fields before locating a gas station, where you stopped to fill up and stretch your legs. A fat man in his late sixties sat on a folding chair with his back against the convenience store, folds of loose skin flowing from his torso like pancake batter. He presided over the scene like a bullfrog, watching without interest as you filled your tank.

"Where you from, bud?"

"Connecticut," you replied, moving your eyes from the hypnotic flip of the numbers on the pump to the man's face.

"Why come all the way out here?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess it seemed like a place full of love," you said, looking around at the unremarkable concrete of the gas station that was covered with small bits of trash, chewed gum, and discarded pennies. He kicked one of his back tires.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of joke? My wife died two years ago last month, and you talk to me about love. Life is too damn short for your jokes, bud." You turned back to the pump for a moment, splitting away from the man's loss and into the safe considerations of car, hose, nozzle, and pump.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"So am I, bud." The man put his head down and pressed his thick hands together for a moment. When he looked back up at you, his eyes were shining in that fearless way the old have of displaying their emotions.

As you pulled your receipt from the tank, your eyes fixed on a yellow piece of paper taped to the window behind the man and watched as it lost its footing and dangled by a single corner. Judging it safe to speak again, you said, "I'm looking for an artist. Have you ever heard of a painter called Fountain Guy?"

"Fountain Guy? Hell no. What kind of name is that?"

"I don't know. There's supposed to be something miraculous about his paintings."

"Well whatever it is you're looking for, Fountain Man or otherwise, I sure hope you find it," the old man said after a pause.

You flushed and muttered a word of thanks as you approached the man and shook his hand, which was frozen into an arthritic claw like the topmost branches of a tree. You continued on your way after glancing in the direction of the convenience store as though expecting your wife to emerge with a coffee in each hand.

You went straight to the fountain when you arrived in Duluth after midnight, moving through the paved paths of the park without hesitation. Your nose perked up at the intoxicating scent of a garden, although it was the fall season and there was no sign of active vegetation. You thought you could hear wind chimes, too, but it was just the wind combing its way through the bare branches of the park's trees. You walked along crookedly, muttering the word *calendula* to yourself. When you reached the fountain, you found your wife crouched in front of it, squinting into the spray of water. She startled at the sound of your approaching footsteps.

"I couldn't remember the last time I touched you," you said, cupping your gloved hands around her cheeks before she could think to protest.

"I've been trying to see the alien landscape." She pushed her short brown hair out of her face and turned away from you, the outline of her slight figure thrown into relief by the lights of the fountain. She watched the water as it arced through the air in four places, bursting from the placid surface of the lighted pool like a family of dolphins.

"Elaine. I'll leave the firm. Let's start over."

She said she'd think about it. You stared at the circles of underwater light as they illuminated the dark water. A soft halo surrounded each one, causing them to look like a dozen tiny spaceships parked along the perimeter of the fountain. You checked the night sky and pointed out Orion's Belt. A bright star hung close to the crescent moon, and you asked her if she knew its name.

"I think that's a planet. Mars maybe, or Jupiter."



"Mars or Jupiter. Imagine that," you said, the bass of your voice softening with wonder. After a moment, you heard wind chimes again, and your wife began humming. Her right hand found your left, and you whispered her name into the night sky. Together you crouched down in front of the fountain, waiting for the miracle to appear.

Honorable Mention: Dorothy Vazzana

Lansdowne, VA

### The Summer Porch

The weather had turned quite warm, my junior year was in the books, summer vacation had started and Mimi was back on McHenry. We had all agreed at the end of last summer to make our “senior” summer one we would devotedly immortalize every weekday at 7 each evening by “porching it” at Ms. M’s. After all, this would be the last year we would be together. And Mimi was back.

Of the four of us, Mimi was the only one not at our high school. She goes to school in California but spent every summer with Ms. M., her grandmother on McHenry Street. We have been friends since the end of seventh grade. Even so, I know very little about her family other than Ms. M. Mimi didn’t like to talk about her mother. Her father is never mentioned. No siblings. During the summers we have always been two peas in a pod. I’m so excited because now she’s back.

Turning my bike on to McHenry, I am full of the free feeling of summer. It is pleasantly warm now with a promise of hotter summer days to come. There is a comfortable breeze blowing through the old maple trees that line the street of row houses all with generous porches on the front. It’s almost seven and there are children playing hopscotch on the sidewalk and a few boys playing a make-shift game of baseball in the street moving to the side whenever the occasional car passes.

I hear a scream and see Mimi running down the porch steps and up the street toward me. Running to meet her, we embrace in a torrent of giggles and rapid talk and dancing around. Walking arm in arm back to the porch, we see Sammy and Jake coming from the other direction loudly singing ‘Stand By Me,’ the Ben E. King

favorite. With greetings all around, we gathered on the porch with everyone talking at once – a common trait among us. At last, the gangs all here. Let the summer begin.

A half an hour or so later, Ms. M. came out on the porch with lemonade and snickerdoodles. This is something she did every weekday evening for the entire summer for a grateful group of teens who deservedly named her the Queen of Lemonade. Hers was the best. Not powder mix, but real lemons and simple syrup and ice. Nothing better on a hot and humid summer evening.

Friendship and genuine affection grew among the four of us that summer as we got to know each other on a deeper level – our opinions, our dreams, our fears, our preferences. Not that we agreed with each other. We didn't. But we did learn to accept each other where we were and to understand how many of the opinions were rooted in personal experiences. We all attended regularly with the possible exception of Jake. Tall, handsome and friendly with dimples and sandy-blond hair, he was a real charmer. He loved the girls and the girls loved him. So, there were a handful of summer Friday nights when he had dates. We didn't mind because we knew that come Monday evening, we would grill him for the details. We also felt it our responsibility to keep Jake from becoming conceited and self-absorbed which he was not and for which we took full credit.

As the summer progressed, there never seemed to be a shortage of subjects to cover in our discussions. Beyond family matters, school friends and neighborhood happenings, music was always a hot topic. Was it Pat Boone or Elvis? Moody River or Are You Lonesome Tonight? We all liked The Shirelles – Will You Love

Me Tomorrow? and Dedicated to the One I Love. Mimi insisted that The Drifters' Save the Last Dance for Me should definitely be on our list.

Sammy was the dancer of the group. He loved the sessions when the chairs were moved to the side of the porch to make room for the twist, the watusi, the stroll, the cha cha and more. You had to have all the moves. He was enthusiastic about everything he did. He aspired to the political life, maybe councilman or mayor which he knew would require higher education and possibly a law degree. He knew he would have to work hard to make that possible. He did have a habit which all of us considered quirky. He knew many dozens of adages and used them whenever he could which always drew moans and groans from his friends.

When Mimi's one and only uncle came to visit, they would never know how long he would stay. He ate a lot and didn't pitch in to help. Sammy happily added, "Fish and guests smell after three days." Now how is that helpful? We asked him directly, "How is that helpful?" But it actually was helpful. It made Mimi laugh. When Jake complained about a perfectly beautiful date that never stopped talking (all about things she achieved or owned), Sammy offered, "You can't tell a book by its cover." When I was struggling over applying for assistance and scholarships, he chimed in with, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." He had a million of them.

We all had summer jobs of one kind or another. I was fortunate to have a job at Evelyn's Boutique on Main Street where I worked Monday thru Friday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. This was my second summer there and I loved it. Evelyn was a friend of my Mom's.

During the summer, Mimi helped her Grandmother with the housework and she made clothes for both of them on Ms. M's old Singer sewing machine. She was really very talented. Ms. M. had been teaching her sewing techniques for years and she could do so much on that old machine even without the fancy attachments now available on newer models. Evelyn's Boutique always used her for alterations.

Sammy was a lifeguard at Five Oaks, the public swimming pool. He also helped out in his Dad's office making copies and running errands where they called him "the mayor." When we asked him why he had two summer jobs, he said, "Idle hands are the Devil's workshop." (group moan) Jake worked at the lumber yard where two of his older brothers worked. It was hard, hot work in the summer and it wasn't unusual for us to notice bruises and scrapes he had gotten on the job.

There were many exciting things happening in the world, good and bad, that the porch friends discussed thoroughly. The space race was mesmerizing. JFK had put forth space as the 'new frontier.' Russia had put a man in space. We had Alan Shepard in the USA's first space shot. It seemed like we were saying the impossible was now possible. The moon, the planets were now within our hopes and dreams. It was so exciting to learn the science of it all and to see what scientists had achieved. JFK also initiated the Peace Corps. So many young people, our age and older, responded with enthusiasm to the prospects of going out in the world and helping others not as fortunate as ourselves. It was the idealism that lifted all of us spiritually with a purpose in which we could participate in remote parts of the world. We all wanted to ask what we could do for our country. While we could be elated by positive news, we were deflated by the negative. The losses of the Bay of Pigs loomed large. There was

concern over the construction of a wall between East and West Germany and the frightening consequences paid by those who tried to breach it. It was also the year the United Nations General Assembly condemned apartheid and the world was introduced to Nelson Mandela who believed in something that seemed impossible and persistently devoted his life to the cause until the impossible happened. We all offered our young and idealistic opinions on all of these subjects as we prepared to enter a world where it would all be our responsibility.

As the summer progressed and became hotter and more humid, the evening sessions on Mimi's porch were the highlight of our lives. While there was much laughter, music and debating on the porch, there was also a heavy pall that hung over our socializing. It was a shroud of storm clouds that seemed to be growing daily. The news each night on the Huntley/Brinkley Report told of our increasing involvement in Vietnam. It was not a war. It was a police action. It seemed like a war. Jake's older brother was already there. The numbers of troops on the ground were steadily increasing as the summer progressed. There was much division over our action in Vietnam. Some draft eligible young men were moving to Canada to avoid being called up. Others proclaimed themselves to be conscientious objectors. The porch conversation reflected the concern about decisions that were becoming eminent for Sammy and Jake. We debated waiting to be drafted versus signing up and selecting the branch of your choice. There was no good answer.

The summer was drawing to a close. Our bittersweet last session on the porch was a goodbye party for Mimi who was leaving to go back to California. There

were all sorts of promises made through laughter and tears. We were no longer children. We vowed we would stay in touch.

The years flew by. Mimi and I did stay in touch – at her wedding, at Ms. M.'s funeral. Eventually she moved back with her husband and two children to the house on McHenry. Whenever I visited, I experienced huge waves of nostalgia as I crossed her porch to the front door. Mimi had continued study in fashion and eventually partnered with Evelyn at the Boutique on Main. Evelyn was so happy to have her as she looked forward to retirement.

I went to nursing school. I met and married my husband. We adopted a beautiful daughter. We were in the process of adopting another child when my husband became ill. At first, we thought he would recover but he didn't. I am grateful my friend, Mimi, was close by.

Sammy, our enthusiastic, adage-proclaiming friend was sent to Vietnam after two years of college. He did not become mayor but remained in the military finishing his education. Sammy never spoke of his experiences in Vietnam. He married, had a son and progressed up through the ranks and is currently working at the Pentagon.

Jake, our handsome ladies' man, became a priest. We all attended his ordination. He had written each of us a most beautiful letter in which he talked about our summer on the porch and how influential it was on his life. He thanked us individually for specific ways we had affected his life. Over the years, each of us at different times had turned to him for spiritual guidance and support. He and Sammy

were very close. I think he is the one person Sammy could talk to. He was recently assigned to a parish in downtown Manhattan.

It has been forty years since our summer on the porch. Mimi and I were so excited because we had planned a reunion. We are going to meet in Manhattan near Jake's parish. Sammy is not able to attend – responsibilities of a high-ranking military man at the Pentagon. Mimi called for the details of our plan. "When are we meeting Jake," she asked. "Just a minute and I'll get my calendar," I replied. "Here it is," I said. "It's September 11."





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