

W R I T E
O N

Short Story
Writing Contest

2021
Contest Winners



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First Place: Leanne Manzo**Purcellville, VA****Words**

Tillie sat in the car in the strip mall parking lot, waiting for her girls to get out of tap class. She used to be able to go in and watch the class; since COVID, however, she'd been banished to the hot car in the eventless parking lot. Located between a kitchen fixture store and cell phone dealer, the dance studio had managed to find the perfect combination of cheap rent and uninteresting surroundings. Tillie appreciated the fact that their rent was cheap, as it meant more affordable classes; she did not, however, appreciate sitting in a stuffy car in the middle of summer. A cigar shop and dry cleaners finished out the store fronts. There was no coffee shop, no donuts, not even a smoothie shop. She was officially trapped in sweltering boredom.

Flipping through a magazine, Tillie glanced out her window from time to time, hoping to see a cute bird or the stray cat she'd seen months back. Maybe an acquaintance would walk through the parking lot and she could exchange a wave. It was on the third of these glances that she spotted him. She wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there.... maybe he'd been there all along just as he was now, stone still, wearing a long sleeve shirt and pants that almost matched the tan walls of the store fronts. The only reason she noticed him at all was because his sign moved slightly when a breeze brushed past him.

At first, she didn't pay any attention to his face; she was too busy trying to make out the writing on the canvas. It was not unusual to see people asking for help on this side of town. She could have passed him half a dozen times already and would not have thought a thing of it. What was unusual, however, was a sign that looked like his. It wasn't just the colors that drew her eyes, but the artistic quality, the entire layout. She instantly was struck and found herself almost gawking, both trying to make out the writing on it and genuinely drawn to the mini masterpiece itself. She was unabashedly staring when a slight movement switched her focus up, where she saw two eyes watching her. There was no smile in them but no animosity, either. If anything, she would have described his expression as void of emotion, but he didn't come across as cold. Instead, it was almost as if he were waiting for her.

Startled by the unexpected eye-contact, she quickly looked down at her lap and made a show of how interested she was in the fancy mac and cheese recipe on the page in front of her. A few minutes later, she side-eyed him to see if the man was still looking at her. He was not. The sign, however, was.

After a few moments, curiosity outweighed courtesy, and she decided it was more important to her to read the painting than it was to pretend that she didn't care. As she continued to stare at it, determinedly avoiding looking at the artist, she finally made out a few words: "YOU ARE DOING WELL." This was followed by another sentence she couldn't quite read. She was pretty sure there would be some request following, such as, "...SO CAN'T YOU PLEASE SPARE A BIT?" She decided that she would take him a couple of dollars when she walked up to get the girls from class, if only to offset her guilt for staring. And, he must have spent some money on creating such a sign. Maybe he needed more paint.

For the last 20 minutes of her wait, she stopped flipping through the magazine or even looking at the canvas. She simply sat where she was, blindly staring out the window and pondering: Was she really doing well? This was a thought that had been gnawing at her for weeks, although she'd not had the words to place the uneasiness she was feeling until now. Financially they were doing fine, with Brian's new promotion at work. Her part-time job wasn't even necessary for them to meet their bills, but she loved working a few hours a week at the small gift shop in town. But, was she truly doing well? She had friends but did not have time to see them much. Were her girls really doing okay? Was her husband happy with her? Should she be doing more?

The timer on her phone beeped and she grabbed a couple of dollars from her purse before heading toward the walkway with the painting and its artist. As she quickly walked past and started to bend low to drop the money into a cup, two things struck her: The first was that there was nowhere to put the money. The second was that she had incorrectly predicted the second line on the canvas. It did not say anything about sharing what she had. It simply said, "YOU WERE CREATED FOR THIS." As she was processing these two things, she once again noticed the eyes of the silent man on her. This time, there was no other option than to acknowledge him.

"Hi. Um, here," she said, awkwardly, holding her hand out with the two dollars.

"Hello," he replied. Now that she was up close, she could see that he appeared to be about her parents age, maybe a retiree. He was mostly nondescript, but his face was kind, almost serene. He did not reach forward to take her money.

"This is for you. I like your art," Tillie tried again.

This gave him a slight smile, but he still stood still. "I'm glad you like it. And thank you, but it's not needed. I have enough."

Perplexed as to why he was standing outside if he did not want donations, she opened her mouth to ask when she heard Alice yell, "MOMMY! We're DONE!" quickly followed by Bella's "Hi, Mommy!! I tapped sooooo fast!" She gave the gentleman a quick and somewhat confused smile, nodded, and walked over to get the girls from the of studio where they were poking their heads out the door, waiting for her.

The whole way home, Tillie could not stop thinking about the words, about her life. As she listened to the girls laughing in the back seat, talking about how funny their tap teacher was, she realized they truly were happy girls, doing great in school and surrounded by a group of friends they loved. Her husband still asked her on dates. Her friends called whenever they needed an ear. She was never bored, felt challenged, felt loved. She WAS doing well. And she did feel like she was living the life she'd been created for. She pulled into her driveway, both thankful and content, and completely forgetting about the art or its artist before she even exited the car.

The following week, her husband took the girls to dance class while she was subbing at the shop for a sick colleague. Tillie, therefore, didn't return to the dance studio for two weeks. As she walked the girls up to their class, she walked past the same man, now with a new sign. In truth, she had not thought of him once since she'd left the parking lot weeks before. She had, however, felt a distinct shift in her perspective ever since that day.

Seeing the new painting brought it all flooding back, as it was just as striking as the first one, although the words on this one just seemed somewhat random...something about courage, but nothing that made sense to her. However, again, it was so beautiful, she would have described it as artwork. She intentionally walked past the gentleman unhurriedly as she headed back towards her car, slowing down even further as he looked up. She wanted to tell him that his words had somehow changed her.

"Hi again," she started awkwardly. "That's beautiful. Do you sell your paintings?"

"This?" he asked, nodding to the sign. "Oh, this isn't for sale. It's not really my creation. I'm just sharing the words."

"Oh? Well, it's really nice. I loved the one the other week, especially," she shared, almost embarrassed. "This probably sounds weird, but it was almost like the words changed my heart, like they were there just for me."

He simply gave her his serene smile, “I know,” he stated, without a hint of pride. Not quite sure what to say next, Tillie simply gave him a friendly nod and went back to her car and magazines.

Weeks went by, and along with them, signs came and went. Almost every time she was waiting for the girls, Tillie saw someone pass the man and stop to have a quick chat. He never seemed to say much but always gave a kindly respond. Once, she saw one of the college students who worked at the cell phone store talking with the man, clearly excited about something. Several times, she saw people try to hand over money, but it was always politely declined.

The paintings were all beautiful, and with each one, the words changed. Most of the time, the phrases made no sense to Tillie, but she appreciated the thought put into their creation. Maybe the man was just a struggling artist, trying to make a second career out of painting, hoping he’d be noticed by someone important? She wasn’t sure who he would find in a strip mall, but perhaps he just wanted to be seen. She would often nod at him and sometimes smile, but she never went back for another conversation.

Summer turned into fall and headed into winter, week after week, until one evening, the man and the signs were suddenly gone. Tillie hoped that the artist was simply taking a week or two off, but he never reappeared. She had not realized just how much she’d been comforted by his art and the words until they were no longer there.

After several weeks passed, she decided to see if anyone knew what had happened to him. She remembered that he’d worn the same shirt and pants every week; maybe he was just too cold to be out here, now that the weather had turned? Perhaps he just needed a coat and some gloves? Recalling the interaction she’d witnessed between him and the employee at the cell phone store, she decided to go see if the student might know where the signs had gone.

As she walked into the store, she was immediately greeted by a friendly young female employee, wearing a badge with “I’M GEENA!” and a heart emoji. “Hi! Can I help you today?!”

“Actually, I just wanted to talk to another employee who works here? He’s about 20, 6’2”, dark hair?”

“Yah, that sounds like Zach,” the girl responded. “He doesn’t work here anymore. He moved out of state to follow his dream job! Is there something I can help you with?”

“Really? Wow, that’s cool,” Tillie responded. “I actually don’t even know him...I just saw him talking to the man outside with the paintings and thought he might know where he went. Do you know who I’m talking about?”

“Oh my GOSH, yes!” Geena gushed. “I LOVED his art! I said hi to him all the time! Tried to give him money, but he said no thank you, so then tried food, and he said no thank you and then - don’t tell my boss - but I even tried to give him one of our old display phones! For free! But, he always said that he had enough. He was so cool!”

“Yah, I loved his signs!” agreed Tillie. “Do you know his name? or where he went?”

Geena looked like she’d never considered either question before. “You know, I DON’T! He just wasn’t here one day and that must have been a week ago or two ago already?” Tillie thanked her and left the store, leaving Geena behind looking like she was trying to remember something important.

Tillie could not explain it, but she somehow felt unsettled, as well, like she was missing something. She picked up the girls and drove slowly home, wondering why she felt this stranger’s absence so keenly. She didn’t even know his name. As she walked into the house, Brian greeted them, walking over to hug the girls, and quickly glancing over at her. “What’s wrong?” he asked offhandedly, as he set down Alice and picked up Bella before sending them off to play.

“Huh? Nothing really,” Tillie answered as she hung up her purse and sat down on the bench to remove her shoes. “Just that the sign guy from the strip mall disappeared. So, no more words. You probably have no idea who I’m talking about,” she mumbled as Brian plopped down next to her.

“Oh, I totally know who you’re talking about. It was that guy who held the awesome painting that said, ‘GRATEFUL OR RESENTFUL?’ outside the dance studio, right?”

Tillie was surprised for a moment, until she remembered that Brian had taken the girls to dance that one week. “Yah. I mean, I never saw that one, but he had different paintings every week. The first one I saw, you wouldn’t believe how powerful it was. It was about how I was doing what I was created to do. Like the words spoke directly to me.”

Brian stared at her for a moment, looking stunned. He then exclaimed, “That’s exactly how I felt when I saw the grateful sign!” He usually only exclaimed during football games,

so Tillie was genuinely surprised to hear the emotion in his voice. “I’d been having a hard time at work, adjusting to everything, you know, and then you asked me to take the girls and I was, sorry, but just really frustrated with everything. Then, I saw the words and I started thinking about WHY I was frustrated. Because a promotion? Because I’m a dad who sometimes needs to drive my kids places? And as soon as I thought about how grateful I was for all of you, for everything, it was like this peace just flooded me. Then, the guy holding the sign looked at me and it was almost like he was confirming that it was meant for me, you know? I wanted to go buy it from him or something, but he just waved and walked away. So crazy, right?”

Silence hung, as they processed what each had experienced. Both of them had been completely moved, their outlooks altered, by the words shared by this stranger. Tillie thought of all the other people she’d seen talking to the man. Did they all have similar stories? Yet, no one had even known his name. He had refused to take anything from anyone. He had simply shared his beauty with strangers, then disappeared, nameless, without a trace beyond the life-changing words he’d left behind...

Second Place: Shelby G. Caputo**Ashburn, VA****The Residents**February 2020

I walk down the hallway, always looking at each of the residents' names listed outside their rooms. Ken's room – Ken with the smile and soft eyes who is always dressed so nicely. Joan's room, Dorothy's room. I always confuse Joan and Dorothy because they truly look like they could be sisters. Dorothy usually has a scowl on her face, but will occasionally smile when I greet her. When she sees my daughters (ages 6 and 3), though, her face lights up. I quietly worry about Joan because she always looks panicked. I find myself helping her locate her room each time I walk down the hallway.

I arrive to my mother's home – a large room in the corner purposely selected with noise, safety, and location in mind – and I knock, insert my key, and begin my visit for the day. I help clean up the room, organize the bathroom, and ensure the hamper has clothes in it (that way, I know Mom is changing her clothes). I turn off the television, giving it a break from its constant broadcasting (Mom likes the background noise). I quickly inventory her room, always keeping track of where her belongings are, or where they could be when Mom decides to "redecorate."

We leave the room and I glance at Pat's door. We walk past Gerry's room, whose door is always open, and continue toward the dining room. Pat is the retired nurse, amazing artist and owner of Maggie, the adorable and impeccably-trained Goldendoodle. Gerry has captured my heart. He is Mom's dining partner. A man of few

words, he listens intently and remembers the smallest of details, a fact not at all lost on me considering where he lives. I peek in the dining room, now empty since it is after lunch time. I look the opposite direction out the door into the courtyard. In the spring, the flowers will begin to bloom again. We continue down the hallway at a comfortable pace.

“Strong steps, Mom.”

“Okay,” she answers, as she straightens her back and takes longer strides to minimize shuffling her feet.

I fill the silence with my daily ongoings, updates about her granddaughters, and plans for the weekend. We pass Missy’s room. Missy functions at a higher level than most of the residents. I still hope Mom and Missy will become friends. Missy is always sitting in the courtyard with her little dog, Lady. It is too cold for them to be outside today. Mom and I pass Jack’s room, Billy’s room, and Judy’s room. Jack lost his ability to articulate his thoughts, but we waive and give each other a “high-five” once in a while. Jack, with his kind eyes and radiant smile. Everyone knows Billy – the retired naval officer with the sweet face. And, no one can keep up with Judy, who speed-walks her way around the residence as if trying to qualify for the Olympics!

We arrive to the open area where residents gather to enjoy activities, listen to music, or sit, lost in their own minds. Maggie, the Goldendoodle sits quietly near Pat, well-behaved as always and doing wonders for her owner’s well-being. I love seeing Maggie; as do my girls when they are in tow. Mom and I decide to walk again. We walk toward the other dining room on the opposite end of the residence, passing Hilda’s room, Bernie’s room, and Carol’s room. Carol loves playing with my youngest daughter.

Bernie likes to walk with me, which annoys Mom to no end! We steer clear of Hilda; she's agitated most days. We see John – the infamous John who always confuses Mom's room for his. Oh, the trouble that causes! We turn the corner and stroll by Robert's room and Muriel's room. Robert is an engineer and fairly quiet. Muriel always has such a bright smile on her face.

When it comes time to leave, I hug and kiss my mother good-bye, make plans to pick her up for dinner on the weekend, and make my way out of the memory care residence that became my mother's home 14 months earlier. I run errands before receiving a call from daycare that my youngest daughter was not feeling well and seemed to be exhibiting flu-like symptoms.

Ten days pass. The flu struck my youngest daughter and then my husband. I call my mother each day to let her know I am not able to visit because I am taking care of my family. On the last three days, I call Mom to report that the flu caught me too, and I'm laid up in bed. Within a few days of recovering, I receive news that the schools were shutting down because of COVID-19. Then, as if he reads my mind, the Executive Director of my mother's memory care residence, sends out an e-mail closing the building to non-staff members. But I still have my mother's laundry to return and I have not seen her in 10 days. This cannot be happening.

"Okay," I think, "I'll probably see her in a week or so," not fully comprehending the calamity ahead of us. I beat myself up for not having visited Mom after my fever broke. But I know that would have been risky and selfishly unwise of me to enter a memory care residence not 100% recovered from the flu, so I toss those feelings aside. One

week later, Mom begins losing her ability to understand how the telephone in her room functions. Is this really happening?! This is really happening.

March 2020-June 2021

Over the course of the next 8 months, I made appointments to visit with Mom through video chats, telephone calls, and window visits where I stood outside and talked to her through the bedroom window. My daughters and I celebrated Mom's 80th birthday through a window. I mailed cards and hand-drawn pictures from the girls. I showed Mom our new puppy over a video call. I emailed instructions to the resident family ambassador on how to unblock my phone number from my mother's phone (an accidental, but regular occurrence). Close to Thanksgiving, we were able to visit (two at a time) inside an isolated room reserved for 30-minute family visits. Despite rules to keep six feet apart, I did not stop my mother from walking up to me and hugging me. And, staff at the residence did not stop it either. As long as family members sat six feet away from residents and wore masks, staff was not going to deny those much-needed hugs!

On Christmas Eve, we spent our 30 minutes rotating, so my girls and my husband were able to visit. That evening, I received an e-mail that the residence was shutting back down because a resident tested positive for COVID-19. Back to the drawing board we went, as we returned to video chats and outdoor/window visits. We celebrated Valentine's Day through a window with Mom cozy (thank goodness) and me freezing in the bitter cold. Sometimes through the window, I saw other residents, but none of the "usual suspects".

By spring time, the visits were held outside on nice days and through windows on not-so-nice days. Mom and I had some of the best and funniest conversations through those windows. Some days she thought she was visiting with one of her sisters. Most days, however, she knew who I was. She began to slow down: when walking she shuffled her feet more frequently; her physical therapist wanted her to use a walker to assist with longer walks; her occupational therapist wanted her to use a shower chair to minimize the risk of falling in the shower; and our conversations became more one-sided. On an amusing note, with visits to the hair salon curtailed, Mom's hair grew to its longest length that I could remember in my lifetime. Despite all of the changes, Mom never asked why I wore a mask; I am not sure she processed that.

By late spring summer, the doors opened! I could visit with Mom inside of the room. That first visit was overwhelming. I tried my best not to organize the "stuff" that was scattered about. I focused on the fact that I could just sit and chat with Mom inside of her room. During the next visit, however, I brought my cleaning supplies. I dusted, cleaned, and threw out papers that my mother would not remember. Within a few weeks, I was able to have visits inside Mom's room and walk around the residence. I was ecstatic. Mom was unphased. I made my weekly appointment to visit for 50 minutes inside my mother's room. While I straightened up or took mental inventory of her belongings, we talked about everything and anything. Sometimes I dialed my aunt's phone number so my mother could speak with her. Sometimes my mother needed to rest, so I sat quietly in a chair next to her bed.

By Memorial Day weekend, family members were permitted to take their loved ones outside of the residence. So, that following week, we celebrated her birthday in my

home. What we could not do for her 80th birthday, we did for her 81st! When it was time for me to drive her back, she was more confused than I had ever witnessed. This was the new normal.

Now

With permission to take loved ones out of the residence came authorization to walk around inside the residence during in-house visits. I encourage Mom to participate in activities located in the main area. I encourage her to walk the hallways with me or to sit in the courtyard to get some fresh air. I have an opportunity to “notice” the building again...and the hallways. I do not see Ken’s name anymore. Joan’s and Dorothy’s names are replaced with different ones. Pat’s name is still on her door, but Pat looks very different. Maggie must be living with other family members, as I have not seen her at all. Gerry is gone. My heart broke when his wife told me. Missy is gone. News of that shook me to the core. Jack is gone too; I was surprised and sad. Billy’s name is no longer on the door. Judy roams the hallways, but in a wheelchair. I cannot find Hilda’s name. I look for Bernie’s name, but the name plate is empty. Carol’s name is gone. I still see Robert and Muriel and I am relieved. John is no longer around.

I see so many new faces now and smile through my mask when Mom and I are in the main area or walking the hallways (with the help of a two-wheeled walker). I see Fred from Philly now. Rose always wanders near Mom’s door, but I have not yet figured out where Rose lives. Maybe she’s the new John? I hope not! Haydee hovers over the main area’s entertainment center, grabbing the remote control. One resident walks up to

me and kisses me on the forehead. I thank her and give her the biggest smile my mask will allow. I will figure out her name and commit it to memory.

Third Place: Jessie Nastasi

Chantilly, VA

Kite

The kite cost a dollar, which was probably more than the thin plastic with a couple of oversized straws and some twine was even worth. But it was Paw Patrol, the show with the puppies that all his friends watched, and that Arjun pretended that he watched too. He would never let on that they did not have a television in their cramped, chana masala scented townhouse which he shared with his three little sisters, two aunts, Mama and Baba. When Baba was around, anyway, and not flopped half off the second-hand couch, snoring, reeking of cigarettes, and clutching an empty bottle with a red label.

The metro tickets had cost more. He could see this trip to a free event in the capital wasn't really Free by the lines that etched into Mama's brow as she tucked her credit card back into her red vinyl purse. Her smooth brown hand clutched his tightly, almost painfully. Perhaps she was afraid someone would snatch him away. Or that he would wander off, like a dog off its leash, chasing some squirrel only to be lost.

Inside the silver shell of the metro, the seats and worn carpet were a vomity orange, clinging to the sweat of previous occupants. There were not enough seats for them to sit together, and he absolutely would not sit on Mama's lap like baby Shivani! So they stood for the ride into the city. Mama's fingers were hardly able to reach the bar above. She clung to that with one hand, him in the other, and he held fast to the kite. He stared at the other riders, who all stared at glowing phone screens, or pointedly out the window. Anything but get caught looking at each other.

When they got to the Mall, Arjun's breath caught in his throat. The air was perfumed, thousands of delicate pink petals carpeted the grass. The Japanese cherry trees were in full bloom, making a cotton candy forest. Around the white sword of the obelisk, there was a colorful flock of strange birds. As he grew closer, Arjun's mouth gaped and his eyes widened.

Every size and shape and pattern of kite was there: floating, diving, sometimes colliding with each other in the air. There were fighter planes, phoenixes, and massive butterflies. There was even a dragon one, with streamers trailing from its glorious wingtips.

Arjun glanced down at the kite in his hands as his cheeks burned.

Mama gave his hand a squeeze and released it. "Go on. Fly."

A lump in his throat as he unspooled the line, Arjun tried to ignore the other flyers. He let out a little sigh, before flinging his dinky kite away from him like the piece of trash it was.

But when that thin bit of plastic caught the air, small magic happened. It hovered, then shot for the heavens, as if an arrow loosed. Transformed, it was now a live thing weaving and bobbing at the end of the thread.

Arjun imagined it was a bird, and then that he was the kite itself. Lofty. All things below were small to the kite. How free it was, how weightless. But still tethered to him. Not entirely free.

He looked over at Mama, wanting to share this idea. She was within an arm's reach of him. The lines between her brows had softened. A faint smile quivered on her

lips, as if afraid to allow herself the indulgence. Her breath came quickly. Her shoulders were thrown back, a pair of wings unfurled. Her eyes traced the flight of the kite through the blue sky.

Honorable Mention: Cara Cavicchia

Aldie, VA

72 Hours

There is something special about looking up at the sky. You know that every single person on this planet is looking at the same sky, even though it may look completely different depending on where you stand. From my view, the endless stars were twinkling brightly in the cloudless sky. The full moon was lighting up the ocean waters with such luminosity that I could clearly see the fish swimming. I felt thankful for the slight breeze on the warm summer night as salty air hit my face.

I thought about him and what the sky looked like from his point of view. It was early morning on his side of the world. Maybe the sun was just starting to rise. Maybe he would soon be waking up. Maybe he would also look outside and think of me

I lived my entire life searching for something, never really knowing what it was... until I met him. He made everything in life make sense. He made me laugh. He made me smile. He made me feel complete. I knew right away that I wanted to spend every day of my life with him.

But I had no idea that I would be spending so many of those days without him near me.

So many days. We were currently on Day 147 apart.

He told me from the beginning that he was joining the Marine Corps, but I had no idea what I was in for as a Marine girlfriend. Our first summer together was like any other new relationship. We were young and in love, and nothing could stand in our way. Then he left for bootcamp, and everything changed. The lack of communication during bootcamp and subsequent training was difficult. The cross-country long-distance relationship was fatiguing.

However, none of that compared to this.

Deployments were excruciatingly painful.

So many hours spent crying myself to sleep because I had mistakenly watched the news. It was a constant emotional rollercoaster. Feeling your heart ache with worry, having your mind filled with so much doubt, but then receiving a reassuring phone call and a feeling of happiness as the days on the countdown decreased.

So many countdowns.

52 more days until we were able to spend a total of 12 days together.

Every homecoming was so brief. It always felt like mere minutes cherished until it was time to say goodbye again.

I glanced down at the tiny golden ring on my finger. How many times throughout the day would I look at the golden double hearts? I was hoping for a diamond, an engagement, something to look forward to. But, he wasn't ready for that. We were incredibly young, after all. But asking someone to wait over a year with no physical contact and limited calls and e-mails? It was a lot. The ring wasn't quite the one I was expecting, but it was still a promise. And I did intend to keep that promise.

Even though sometimes the days were long, and the nights just seemed to never end.

"We are in love," I said to anyone that questioned how I handled the long distance. It's also what I kept reminding myself when tears fell from my face.

And even after all the time apart, I was still so very much in love with him.

Love.

It is what makes it all worthwhile.

Love.

The reason why I kept going through the motions when my life seemed to be in limbo.

"No, I don't want to go to the movies. I am supposed to be getting an important phone call."

"No, I don't want to go out on a date. I am flattered, but I do have a boyfriend. Yeah, I know. He is never around."

Sometimes I would think to myself, "Mia, why are you doing this? You should be going out and enjoying being twenty."

Because he was worth it.

Because I would rather risk everything else in life than risk losing him.

I lived for those 4 AM phone calls and back and forth e-mails. My heart skipped a beat when I would hear his ring tone. Those conversations meant more to me than anything in the world. Nobody in my life understood what it was like to be a military

girlfriend. The loneliness, gut-wrenching goodbyes, and living as just a broken shadow of yourself.

Still, I was the lucky one in the relationship. I had my family, friends, school, work, and day-to-day activities to keep me going.

He had the desert, packages that I sent, e-mails that I wrote, letters that I hand wrote to keep things interesting, and photos that I took of our hometown — the beach where we used to sit, the restaurants where we used to eat, and the ever-changing shopping strip where we used to walk around aimlessly.

My heart fluttered as I heard the chime of my phone. New e-mail. From him.

"Will call at 7 PM your time."

Short and sweet. Or just short. He could probably work on the sweetness.

Another chime.

"PS. I love you."

I smiled. There was the sweetness. It's like he could read my mind. And I was getting a phone call. That was a rare occurrence these days.

I skimmed through the long lengthy novel of an e-mail that I had written to him. I wondered if he actually read my full e-mails. I was sure he didn't care about my Statistics professor and his endless coughing or any of the other mundane occurrences in my life, but he always insisted that he enjoyed reading the normalcy.

I counted down until 7 PM and took a deep breath when my phone rang.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"I am glad you called. I missed your voice," I said.

"I know. It's been hard getting time to call, but luckily I am always on the computer and able to e-mail."

"Yeah, that is nice," I agreed.

"I miss you," he said.

"I miss you too. I have been thinking of ideas of what to do when you come home for your break."

"Not much longer."

"Only 52 more days."

"That's nothing," he said.

There was a long pause.

"Hey..." he stated again, "I wanted to call because I will be traveling. Briefly. I won't be able to contact you."

"Oh. Okay."

"It's not a big deal. It will be like 72 hours, but I won't have communication."

"I will miss you," I said softly.

"I know. I will miss you, too. I always do. Listen, I can't stay on here long. Just wanted to let you know."

"Thank you. Don't be surprised if you come back to 100 e-mails from me."

"I love you, Mia. I love you and miss you so much."

"I love you too, Paul."

Click.

I sighed. This was just part of deployments. Sometimes you had to go days without contact, but the knowledge that this was just a normal occurrence during deployments did not ease the pain of missing him. I tried to hide my anxiety and put on a happy face. I worked extra hours and tried to preoccupy my mind. 72 hours was nothing, right?

72 hours passed, and I still had not heard from him. A sense of dread filled me, but I knew that I was being ridiculous. He had said "like 72 hours" so it could be more, or he could be back but too exhausted to call.

77 hours passed.

80 hours.

85 hours.

I could barely sleep.

90. 96. 100.

Every hour I was doing calculations in my head of how much time had passed and when I should start worrying.

At hour 115, I walked into work, hoping that the busy summer day would distract me from my compulsively glancing at my phone every five seconds. I kept the ringer on just in case.

“Hey Mia,” my co-worker April said when she saw me. “Did you see what happened on the news? Just terrible.”

“No, I don’t watch the news,” I replied.

“Oh. I recognized the name of the base, which is why I was asking,” April said.

My brows furrowed. “What?”

“The base Paul’s at. My thoughts immediately went to him when I saw the news, but you talk to him like every day don’t you?”

“Usually... yeah...”. My voice trailed off, and I felt a lump in my throat.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you,” April said.

I took a deep breath and grabbed my phone out of my purse. Then I did something that I swore never to do. I looked up online the latest news on the war.

“Five Marines killed in action Saturday morning,” I said aloud.

I felt sick.

Five Marines. On his base. And he sounded worried on the phone. My heart rate increased.

“Have you heard from him today?” April asked.

“No,” I replied as I could feel the sweat forming above my brows. I pressed both of my hands against the counter as black dots scattered across my vision.

“Well, I am sure he is okay. No news is good news,” April reassured.

I thought about that. If something did happen to him, when would I find out? I wasn't his next of kin. I was just the lowly girlfriend. And I wasn't close with his parents. Who knows when or if they would think to tell me? Should I reach out to them? No, that would be weird. I would just wait it out. No news is good news.

120 hours.

At hour 122, I left work and drove home. I barely remembered the drive and walked straight to my backyard when I reached my house. I collapsed to the ground and let out all the emotions that I had been holding back at work. The tears came easily and uncontrollably as I sobbed. My eyes burned, and I struggled to breathe as the sticky, salty summer air filled my lungs.

I was only twenty years old. I should be drinking cheap beer in a college dorm and not sitting alone in the grass at night in hysterics because my boyfriend is in some desert across the world, and I did not even know for certain if he were alive. I stayed outside as the hours passed.

125 hours. 127 hours.

I wished upon every star in the sky. I prayed to anyone that might be listening. I obsessively checked my phone for new e-mails.

130 hours.

I forced myself to go inside my hour where my parents were obviously sleeping and climb into my bed. My dreamless sleep was interrupted at hour 135 by the sound of my favorite ringtone.

“Hello?” I said in a panicked voice.

“Hey, Mia.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” I started sobbing again.

“What? What is it? Mia, are you okay? What's wrong?”

I was filled with relief to know he was alive and laughed at the irony of him being worried about me. "I'm just so happy to hear your voice."

"Is everything okay?"

"I was just so worried about you. I saw on the news that five Marines... at your base..."

"Oh. Yeah. That delayed things a bit. But I am fine. I was fine the whole time. I told you not to watch the news."

"I know. I know. I try to avoid it, but it just happened and ugh I have never been so scared in my life. And if something did happen to you who knows when I would hear about it."

Paul sighed.

"I know. I think about that too. And when I couldn't talk to you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I wanted to read about your Statistics class and the drama at work. I wanted to see the new pillow you bought and wanted to read letters written with your new colorful pens."

I laughed.

"And I thought about when this is over, and I come home to you," he said.

"That's the only thought that gets me through each day."

"Me too."

"46 more days," I said.

"When this is over, I want to come home to you every day."

"I want that too."

"I'm done with the separation. I'm done with sharing rooms with someone who isn't you. When I get off work each day, I want to drive off the base and home to you."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

“Mia, let’s just do it.”

“Do what?”

“Get married.”

I gasped. “You know there is nothing I want more. We can get engaged on your break and plan to get married sometime next year.”

“Why wait?”

“Well, you kind of are in the middle of a deployment.”

“We can get married on my break.”

“What?!”

“When I have to come back to this awful desert, I want to have a wife on the other side of the world waiting for me.”

“We are getting married?”

“I know this isn’t much of a proposal, but Mia, will you marry me?”

“Yes, but you better give me a real proposal getting down on one knee when you come home.”

“Deal.”

“So, when you come home in a month and half, we are doing this? You aren’t going to change your mind?”

“Of course not. Are you?”

“Never. Just making sure if I go planning a wedding that you won’t be leaving me standing alone at the altar.”

“Well, the bride is usually the last to enter so you wouldn’t be standing alone.”

“You know what I mean.”

"This place gives you a lot of time to think about what's most important in life, and that's you. However far away. However long I stay. I will always love you."

"Love Song. That will be our first dance."

"It's perfect."

"I can tell me family and friends and all right?"

"Of course. I am not changing my mind. I promise."

"Okay."

"Your soon to be husband needs to get some rest, but don't worry, no more traveling until I get on that plane to see you."

"And marry me."

"I can't wait to marry you."

"Well, you will have to wait 46 more days. Oh my God that sounds so soon."

"And you are usually complaining about how far away it is."

"Well, that was before I knew I had a wedding to plan."

"Good night my love."

"Good night. I will always love you."

I stared at my phone for several minutes when he hung up. I shook my head in disbelief. One minute I was praying that he was alive and the next I was hearing a marriage proposal. I smiled as I closed my eyes again. I would have to thank the stars for keeping him safe. I would also have to create a new countdown... days until I become a Marine Wife.

Honorable Mention: Erin Price

South Riding, VA

The Date

The clinking of glasses rang in her ears. She tried to invite his gaze, but he continued to look at his lap.

“What’s your favorite childhood memory?” she asked, reading from a list of 100 Get to Know You Questions she had saved on her phone.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

Look at me. Look at me.

He didn’t.

The diners around them laughed, talked, toasted, and here she was, waiting for this new person she didn’t know.

“Well, my favorite childhood memory is the first time I spent Christmas with my nana and papa,” she offered. “They spoiled me that year, even bought me that American Girl doll I had been wanting. I was so excited I spent the whole day dressing it up. I loved that doll. I couldn’t believe it when Trevor broke off her arm a year later.”

No acknowledgement, not even a nod. This was harder than the first date with that guy back in college (what was his name?) who talked about Dungeons and Dragons the whole evening. At least he talked.

“Are you ready to order?” asked the waiter. He seemed too young to be working at such an upscale establishment, and he was smiling a little too wide. He had certainly seen them struggling to talk to each other and judged them.

I'd never have a date like that, he'd thought. And when I'm married, we'll never tire of talking to each other. We'll never be one of those couples who sits in a restaurant and says nothing.

Never say never, chump, she thought, as she said aloud, "I'll take the chicken confit." It was what she'd ordered on their first date.

"Excellent choice. And you, sir?"

"The same."

They handed over their menus, the waiter waltzed off, and there were no more distractions. Just the two of them, silent.

It wasn't how she expected their fifteenth anniversary to go.

She had never thought it would be this way. They were happy. She thought she knew everything about him.

It started with something at work. His boss hated him, was giving him the cold shoulder. He was stressed, needed to cut back his hours. Then suddenly (or was it gradually?) he couldn't work at all. He didn't talk anymore, didn't go anywhere with her, just sat and stared at the wall.

It's just a phase. He'll snap out of it once he gets a new job.

She didn't know it could get worse, but it got worse. That night coming home to the silence and the scattered pills. The squeezing hand in her gut. The sirens. The cold hospital room with its flimsy dividers. The month in the psych ward. A patient screaming, "Help me! Get me out of here!"

He hadn't screamed. He sat silently. He improved slowly. And *she* felt like screaming, because what had that horrible month been for anyway? Why could not even the doctors, those so-called experts, tell her what was wrong and how to fix him?

How could she get her husband back?

She looked at him now. He stared at his lap, his hands shaking—a side effect, they said. A tear dropped slowly down her cheek.

The chicken confit arrived, and they ate in silence, while other couples laughed and talked about their hopes and dreams. She had to get him back. She had to try.

"How are you feeling?" she ventured, knowing this subject was dangerous territory.

"Fine," he said.

One word. Progress. Maybe.

"Better than yesterday?"

He avoided her gaze and shrugged.

She glanced at the wall behind him. A picture of the French Riviera stared back at her. They had planned to go to France this summer. She wondered if they ever would now.

"This is good chicken confit," he said, snapping her out of her reverie.

"Really?" She couldn't believe he'd said more than one word. Then—

"I forgot how good it tastes. Much better than that hospital junk."

The most words he'd said in a while. She chuckled. "You mean it's even better than the hospital meatloaf surprise?"

He laughed. Actually laughed. She hadn't heard that sound for months. She had forgotten how much she missed it. He looked up at her. She quickly tried to wipe her eyes, but more tears came, so what was the use?

"It's going to be alright," he said. "Just be patient with me, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

He kept eating. She watched him and said nothing. It wasn't how she had planned their fifteenth anniversary to go, but it could have been worse, considering that their fourteenth was spent sharing a plate of hospital meatloaf surprise. Maybe their sixteenth would be better. But that seemed so far away. She couldn't even picture how the next week might go.

"What do we do now?" she asked him.

He set his fork down and sighed. "I wish I knew."

"A day at a time, right? In sickness and in health, right?"

"Yeah, something like that."

He reached out and took her hand. Their eyes met and held. They were one of those couples, the ones who trusted each other well enough that they were comfortable with silence. It was okay. Different but okay.

"Are you two finished? Do you want a takeout box?" asked the young waiter. His wide smile didn't bother her as much as it had before.

"Yes, please," her husband said. She watched as he filled the takeout box, calculated the tip, signed the check, just like he used to do before it all.

She stood. He helped her with her coat.

"Ready to go home?" he asked.

She nodded. Tomorrow they could eat their leftovers together at their kitchen table. They didn't have to talk. It was different. But okay.

Their new chapter was just beginning.

Honorable Mention: E.G. Reid

Round Hill, VA

The Housewarming Gift

Aunt Mia is the first visitor Chloe has at the new apartment, and that's not by Chloe's choice. Aunt Mia is the busybody everyone hates having around, yet somehow can't turn down. She paces the room once, like a tiger in a cage. In seven clicks her red high heels cross the grey linoleum that covers the main room and kitchenette; the space is about one and a half times long as wide. "When we helped your cousin Max move into his first place, it was bigger."

Chloe's fingers wreak havoc on the hem of her shirt. "How nice for him. Really, though, this is perfect for one person. Not too small, not too big..." She knows she sounds like an idiot.

"Hm. Well, it's a nice place."

"Thank you," says Chloe, as though they both mean the platitudes.

On her way out, Aunt Mia flashes a \$20 bill. "A housewarming gift to get you started on your new little adventure. So exciting. Buy a rug. The floor looks like crud."

Chloe crumples the bill to a damp wad. But prudence wins over pride, and she does not throw away the money. She manages to flout Aunt Mia however, though it is not exactly intentional. She is at a home goods store, and stops at a display of house plants. There are cacti, flowering vines, feathery bi-colored leaves, herbs, potted bushes, and decorative trees. She cannot say why, but all that green makes her feel hopeful. She's never kept a plant before, but suddenly she cannot leave the store without one.

The \$20 buys a Miniature Fiddle Leaf Fig. "Have you owned one of these before?" asks the clerk at the checkout. "As plants go, they're tricky. They need a lot of care to thrive."

Chloe's first instinct is, *Give up*; but a new urge in her counters, *Just try*. The little plant goes home with Chloe, and it does more to brighten the place than a rug could. Already things look better than they did a month ago, on Monday April 1. That first night of her lease, she had slept on the cold linoleum, huddled in a quilt and a flannel blanket.

"Why would you want to do that?" her mother had asked when Chloe said she was going to sleep at the apartment that night. "Wait until you move your stuff in. We're not kicking you out, you know."

Chloe did not know how to explain that she just had to go, had to break free, and now. Her family had moved into their little blue-and-white suburban house when Chloe was starting 4th grade, and that was the last major change in her life. She had not even moved away for college, since she studied at a local university. Timid and invisible by

nature, she clung the familiar. She is twenty-five years old when she feels, for the first time, a restlessness that replaces all other considerations. When she found the listing for this apartment, offering little space and a bad commute for a cheap rent, she caught a breeze of hope for a life of her own.

In this little apartment, every choice, from décor to dinner, is a declaration of independence, and it thrills her. But even with the furniture moved in and arranged as she wanted, the apartment had felt blank. It is the Fiddle Leaf Fig that breaks the monochrome. It sits on the counter next to the coffee maker. The wide, shiny leaves reflect green around the room. She has captured an enchanted sunbeam in a little orange pot, and even as dusk gathers, the verdant plant keeps glowing in the warmth of the kitchen light. She never does buy a rug. And the plant tentatively stretches out its leaves and, finding space, grows.

She goes to the library to find something to read – lunch breaks are lonely for people like Chloe. A stack of fliers screams from the checkout desk in neon letters: *Sewing workshop – Improve your skills and learn new techniques – Sewing machines provided.* She is not considered creative by anyone, including herself. *But*, wonders Chloe, *who knows who I really am?* She imagines princess costumes and party dresses, décor of which she can say, “I did that,” and outfits of which she will say “I made it myself.” She takes a flier and tapes it to her wall.

Her plant grows denser and larger. A spider appears in the leaves. It is the color of a peeled banana with black stripes on its legs. Chloe has many memories of being held hostage by a spider or moth or a cricket, and her father rushing to her room to investigate her calls for help. Then he might scold her for overreacting, or sometimes he would just laugh. And he would walk away. Chloe had to save herself, and learned to kill the little monsters without mercy. Now, though, she hesitates. This spider is so tiny, like a wingless gnat. And he’s the only other living creature in the apartment.

When Chole arrives at the sewing workshop, she feels like she’s crashed a party. The others students look like they’re in highschool. She plans an escape, but then something in her says, *Take a chance.* So Chloe slumps at a lonely end of one of the tables and picks at a spot of dried green glitter glue.

The instructor is a woman with short, greying hair and glasses that perch above her bangs. Her name is Debbie, and she teaches the students to make a simple tote bag.

Painstakingly Chole traces the pattern pieces, slowly she cuts the fabric. She is so excited, she forgets about feeling awkward. Her palms are sweaty when she finally sits down at the machine. When her sneaker toes the pedal, the machine roars. An ugly line like highway markings mutilates the pristine fabric.

“Stop being a fool!” snaps Debbie.

Chloe shrinks from the machine. For a long and terrible stretch of time, she is not sure she will not cry in front of these people.

“Now you’ll just have to take those out.” In a few quick flashes, Debbie uses a seam ripper to pull out unwanted threads, and then hands the mess to Chloe to finish. When Chloe brings her pieces back, Debbie sighs in her raspy, matronly voice, “Let’s try again.”

Very, very slowly, Chloe runs the fabric through the machine. She is still working after all the other students have left and finally Debbie says, “You’ll do the rest next time.” She adds, “You’re very careful, very focused and meticulous when you work. Those are good traits when you’re sewing.”

A wide smile spreads over Chloe’s face.

The plant shimmers under gentle drops of water, and the little mote of a spider quivers on its tightrope between the tip of a leaf and the edge of the pot. Chloe looks at the flier, still on her wall. *She basically said I’m a natural*, thinks Chloe.

She is simmering with anticipation when she goes back for the next sewing session. There are a few new faces this week. One of them is a guy who looks older than the others. Chloe is relieved not to be the only one out of college anymore. She slips into her spot with the glitter glue and glances down the long grey stretch of table to the new guy. He smiles. Chloe looks away, then is embarrassed for being rude, so she looks back and smiles, then blushes for smiling at a stranger and looks away again. One more shy smile leads to an introduction. His name is Alexander; he’s a cosplayer honing his craft.

The plant grows larger in its rich soil, the leaves fill out, sleek and deep emerald. The hours Chloe spends as a data entry clerk at an IT sales company do not define life anymore. Those spreadsheets and deadlines are just superfluous patches roughness at the edges of her existence.

It hardly matters when the sewing classes end. Chloe is just as glad she and Alexander have to do something else to see each other. Sometimes they go to a movie, and afterward sit on the wall that outlines the parking lot, talking until the sun withdraws below the horizon. The Fiddle Leaf Fig has shifted. It reaches for the sun, but Chloe does not notice.

The days go on, and now the sun is gone by the time they’re at their spot on the wall, and brown leaves chase each other under the blue parking lot lights. Chloe shivers in her sweater, and Alexander hesitates, though Chloe is not aware how long he deliberates or how close he comes to pulling back, and then puts his arm around her. Chloe feels as though her heart stops and her life starts all over again.

Alexander doesn’t know what to do with the pumpkin from his cousin’s garden. Chloe tells him she knows how to make it into a pie. Alexander’s visit to learn to bake pastries

becomes a habit of dinner at Chloe's place, several nights a week. "Can I help with anything?" he asks as Chloe cooks.

"No, I've got it," she always replies.

One evening when Chloe is alone in the apartment, the sunny lights give hollow farewell pops and fall into darkness. Chloe shines a flashlight around the room. The beam cuts through dust motes and reveals the plant, which has accumulated brown spots on its leaves.

The new lights she puts in are bright white, and make the room feel like a doctor's office. They glare down on Alexander's next visit. There is more silence than usual, a silence heavy as the grey sky outside. "It's nothing," Chloe insists, and goes back to peeling ginger. The oil in the pan is hot, waiting to sizzle on contact with the onions, ginger, and pepper.

"Tell me," says Alexander.

Chloe forces a smile. "I overreact, get all knotted up over nothing." Alexander is the first person to do a double take at who might be under the quiet veneer that everyone else knows as "Chloe." For once, though, she wants him to believe her practiced mask.

Alexander gazes at Chloe. What if he walked over to her, and placed his hands over hers, and took her work from her fingers? But this requires the courage to risk rebuff. So he just keeps rolling the edge of the placemat between his fingers. Still, he urges, "Tell me."

"It's silly. Just... you know how Thanksgiving get-togethers are." *What are you up to now, Chloe? Your job? You've been there a long time, haven't you...? What did you study in college, again? Tell me, is this where you envisioned ending up...?* Then the smiles of pity or disgust. As much as the rest of the family disliked Aunt Mia, they were not so different from her in many respects.

"*That's* stressing you out?" Alexander's intention is harmless, but Chloe sees her father in the doorway, his disdainful eyes not on the wolf spider that is making Chloe cry, but on Chloe's tears.

The ginger is diced, and the ingredients go into the pan. "I *told* you, it's *nothing*." The snapping of hot oil fills the room.

"Hey, skip out on them and have Thanksgiving with my family."

Chloe finally looks at Alexander. "That's... that's a big step." Still the oil crackles.

"What?" He leans forward.

"That's a big step, meeting the family, I mean."

"No, my brother and sister do it all the time."

“Oh.” Chloe stirs the vegetables, and the pan quiets. “Well, my family won’t let me get out of it.”

“Then take me with you.” He smiles up at her. “I’ll fight ‘em off for you.”

“I can hold my own.”

A few days later, the plant is even duller and more spotted, a rebellion against the chill of winter. The little spider swings carefree from its thread. *What good was it anyway?* thinks Chloe, and crushes it a piece of toilet paper. She is alone again.

Chloe has the worst flu ever, but gets herself to her parents’ house on Tuesday, December 31st. The clock strikes midnight, they watch the ball drop on TV, and Wednesday January 1st comes and goes. Shriveled leaves gather at the base of the plastic pot, but Chloe is shaking with chills and hacking with a terrible cough, and does not think of the plant.

On Wednesday January 15th, she’s back to work, and falls fast into the worn routine of counting days by the workweek and spending evenings and weekends alone. She does not know what to do about her plant’s remaining leaves, which are drawn in and dark and bitten with brown at the edges. Dusty remains of spider web waft in a draft.

By now, it’s on the news and on everyone’s lips: Pandemic. Shut down. Chloe says nothing, only listens and dreads. If her office shuts down, then what? And when it happens, she hangs on a little longer. But means are not elastic. She sits at the table gripping a mug of cold coffee. The light glints off the mug’s wide rim. She stares at nothing in the clinical light and faces the facts: It’s over. The plant is brown as the bare trees outside; though it is long since dead, it is the last thing Chloe throws away.

She is at her parents’ house again, hesitating at her bedroom door. It is like sinking into a grave when she finally enters the room. She puts her head against the cold window pane and looks out at the dismal, familiar view. When she hears the noise behind her, she hardens her face against tears.

It’s her father. “You okay?”

She faces him. “Yeah,” she lies.

He is holding a clay pot. Something like a tiny, greyish rose sprouts inside. “Call it a room-warming gift. I know you kept a plant at your place. Welcome back.”

“Thanks. My last plant died though. I think I underwatered it, and I let it get too cold, and I didn’t monitor its sun exposure, which I was supposed to. Basically—” her voice cracks, but she finishes, “I did everything wrong.” Then the tears come, and she can’t stop them.

Her father pulls her close.

A few minutes later, Chloe wipes her red eyes. “So, what’s this?”

“Looked it up online. It’s called ‘Perle Von Nurnberg.’ Just give it light and, once in a while, water. And they’re not too picky as far as temperature goes. They’re pretty resilient, even without much tending.”

Chloe sets the plant on her desk. *Resilient*. The word hangs in her mind as she gazes at the leaves’ edges glowing in the spring sunlight.

Honorable Mention: Anna Emeliyanova

Aldie, VA

Lucy

She was lying on her bed in a state of bliss that accompanies the simplicity of being a mother of an infant, her thoughts comfortably mundane. It was a good day. As she listened to the hushed voices, she looked at the dim light finding its way through the gap under the door. Friends they had over would be gone soon and it would be back to normal. Or so she thought.

Even though she could not get much sleep this way, she didn't mind sharing a room with her son. The sound of his breath and the little sighs he sometimes let out filled the air with the tranquility of innocence – a quiet reminder to slow down and accept the little gifts life only offered a handful of times.

I couldn't help myself and peeked into the crib. He was perfect. I was glad to see him with my own eyes at last. Photographs and video calls did not do those chubby cheeks justice. He slept with his mouth open, his tiny fists to his side as if he was determined to have a good night's rest. She couldn't see it yet but, yes, his eyes will stay blue, and his hair will turn blond. That was as definite as the fact that it won't matter in the slightest.

Time was slipping away, and I knew I had to move on. I've never done it before, and I was nervous. True, my voice managed to sneak into her brother's mind quite easily, but it was different. His was a dream, and dreams – it turned out – were simple. There was no chatter, no resistance, no fear. An open door waiting for me to walk through it.

It would be more difficult with her, I could tell. Already I was overwhelmed with what I could hear: thoughts running, rushing like the never-ending traffic on a busy highway, some cars passing so fast she wasn't even aware of them. How do I squeeze in?

The answer came the moment I approached her. I thought her stream of consciousness would simply slow down allowing me to step in and become one of the

countless drops in its waters, but it froze altogether, giving in to the force behind me. This was the first time her mind met with this power, yet it knew right away there was nothing quite like it. It did not have a choice.

That's when she saw me.

I knew I looked different. Actually, I was glad I looked different. She was too fragile to see the version of me I was leaving behind. This was much better – a twenty-year-old girl I knew she'd recognize from those black and white photos we sifted through and sorted together. The final bow to my insecurities pushing me to always present my good side to the world. The tidy, meticulously decorated room around us told me I passed them to her, too.

Although I stood right next to her, I knew it looked different to her inner eye: a carefully crafted setting laying the boundary between us, protecting her from the world she was not yet to enter. I could not tell her anything either. Words didn't travel through the wall dividing us. So, I just stood there for a moment, seeing the reflection of my own anxiety in her eyes.

She could feel my fear, and I scolded myself for it. My relationship with the unknown was my burden and I should not have shared it with her. She was always the intuitive one, though, reading people's faces looking for the hints of emotions hiding in the corners of their eyes. She could even see him, even though he had gone so far even I had trouble doing it. I wondered what he looked like to her – was it the same milky shape I saw carrying the traces of the being we both knew so well?

I expected to remember everything I did wrong. All the times I let her down, all the times I was a helpless child when I was supposed to be her rock. I dreaded the moment I'd have to face being a failure at one of both the easiest and the hardest jobs in the world, but it never came. There was no time for regret now. In fact, there was no time for anything other than just being there. After all, I haven't seen her in three years, and I would never see her again. Not like this anyway.

Her thoughts were getting impatient trying to wiggle out of the stupor induced by the now diminishing power that only had that much time to take care of everyone. I couldn't blame it. I was grateful for this opportunity, as fleeting as it was. The rumbling noise of the stifled thoughts was getting louder, and I knew I had to leave.

It was ok. They were just doing their job, eager to offer her the words she needed to label this experience. I caught a glimpse of a couple of them as I got closer to the white mist that once was my husband.

– This was really weird, – said one. – So out of the blue.

– I don't like it, – said another.

– What was this about? – asked the third.

I gave her one last glance before I followed him into the unknown.

In a moment, a wave of confusion and worry will wash over her body but the steady breath of the little bundle next to her and her stubborn desire to be happy will give her what she needs to brush it off as a freak thought, a poorly timed burst of imagination.

– A vision, – one of the quieter thoughts will offer, but she won't hear it because she doesn't want to.

She'll fall asleep.

In about two hours, she'll wake up from a vibration filling her insides with icy dread. The fear will paralyze her as she stares at the unfamiliar number on the screen of her phone thoughtfully muted to protect the peaceful slumber of her son. She'll clutch onto the wild hope that if she doesn't answer, it will just go away and she won't have to accept the message that was ready to burst out of the speaker in a million shatters, poking through the invisible dome she didn't know was covering her.

She'll even win in this rigged game for a moment when the screen blinks off. It won't be long, though, until she hears the ruthless piece of metal give a buzz.

– Call me, – the words will say, and she'll follow the instructions even as her blood rushes to her ears, deafening her with the throbbing so fast and loud it will barely resemble the heartbeat anymore.

– Hey, did you just call me? – she'll ask meekly in her last attempt to play dumb in the face of the unavoidable.

– Yeah, – the voice will answer, a stifled sigh confirming what she already knew.

– Mom? – she'll state rather than ask.

– Yeah... Mom.

Between the flight and the funeral and the wake, she won't realize right away that the invisible dome is gone, but once she does, there will be no going back to the safe, soft cocoon of being someone's child.

The time will come for her to face the world on her own, her skin crawling with primal fear she'll now forever share with other orphaned adults. The thought of it tortured me, taunted my earthly maternal instincts, but from where I stood now, I could see she needed it like a bird who has to fall from the nest before she learns to fly.

It will take her a while, but she will see this fear for the blessing that it is – a reminder that it's never too late until it's too late. And even then – our last encounter will tell her – there is one more chance to do something, even if it's just seeing someone you love one last time against the odds, the logic, and the science.

In a twist of fate, my sleep will awaken her, daring her to live the kind of life I wasn't brave enough to live.

– It's high time, little one, – I whispered as my spirit dissolved into the eternity over the neat rows of houses with luscious gardens she wanted to show me one day.

It's high time.

Honorable Mention: Larry Shea**Leesburg, VA****Numbers**

They tell you to turn into the skid. If your car loses its grip on ice or snow and you are about to slide off the road, they tell you to turn the wheel in the direction you're afraid of going.

Robert has never believed he would follow this advice. Imagine if they said the best strategy when a bruiser is about to punch you in the face is to run toward his fist. You wouldn't do it. Robert hadn't followed the skid advice, either. That might be why he is now sitting in his Nissan tilted at a 30-degree angle, ten feet off a snowy, deserted mountain road at two a.m., miles from anywhere, with a powerless phone and no way to call for help.

Besides his handling of the skid, a few other missteps had led him here. That morning, just before driving three hours to meet with one of his firm's clients, he decided at the last minute to take the Nissan (with more gas in it) and leave the Subaru (with all-wheel drive and his phone charger on the front seat) for Jane, his wife.

After the client meeting, Robert had gone to his friend Phil's house for the monthly poker game he had been a part of right after college. He had seen a few faces from 20 years ago, and won \$35. Phil suggested Robert stay over, but he wanted to get back home. An hour into the drive, a pre-Thanksgiving snowstorm swooped in. As his car climbed into the mountains, it began to slide a bit on the unplowed roads, making Robert's heart leap when it did so near an unprotected curve.

At the mountain's highest point, Robert pulled on a side road to think. The road ahead was 45 minutes to home on a normal night, but it led down a series of steep

switchbacks that he shuddered to imagine with inches of snow on them. Maybe he'd make it. Maybe he wouldn't. Here, a few darkened houses lay away from the road. He

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could knock on a door and ask for help, a phone, a couch to sleep on, anything. But how embarrassing—and frightening for all concerned after one a.m.—would that be?

Robert knew this side road ran through a state park where his family had rented a cabin when he was a teenager. And beyond that the road led to a state highway that was a longer but less steep way home. He decided to try it. This plan worked well for the first couple of miles, until that one curve he took at just a little too much speed.

Now he sits in the car, seeing if there is a way out of this ditch. He guns the car in reverse, and the rear wheels spin first through the snow, and then through the mud underneath. He switches to forward, and sees the speedometer jump to 40 mph, while the car itself remains firmly stuck at zero.

Robert considers his options. Remaining in a freezing car all night is not a good one. Leaving the car running with the heater on and possibly dying of carbon monoxide poisoning is even worse. He thinks the state park is at most two miles up the road, so he decides to see if anyone is there. First, he searches the car for anything useful to take. A bottle of lemon sparkling water, a Snickers bar, a dead phone, and, best of all, a headlamp he uses for riding his bike at dusk.

As Robert sets off, the snow has slowed to a whisper. His fleece jacket just about keeps him from shivering. However bad this is, he thinks, he probably isn't going to freeze to death. That word “probably” bothers him, though.

After what may be a half-hour or may be an hour, there is no sign of the park campground. Robert pauses to rest and take a few bites from the Snickers bar. As he does, he glances to his left. About eight feet away, a deer poses stock-still just off the

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road. Robert freezes, and stops eating in mid-chew. He doesn’t want to startle the deer into suddenly bolting off. And so, for several very long seconds, they stand without moving. Just two dumb animals both trying to pretend they don’t exist. Maybe just one dumb animal, Robert thinks, as he is pretty sure the deer hasn’t recently driven a two-wheel-drive Nissan Sentra off a deserted road into a ditch. Then, as if remembering an appointment, the deer breaks the standoff and saunters off into the dark woods.

About 20 minutes later, as far as he can tell, Robert reaches the entrance to the state park. A sign reads “Open March 15–November 1.” So only a four-month wait before the booth will be attended by a helpful state employee. He walks to the park office and, next to the front door, just as he vaguely remembers, stands a snow-dusted pay phone.

At this time in history, seeing a pay phone is like seeing a thatched roof. You know they probably still exist, but why? Robert pulls all the change from his pocket—a dollar and five cents. He looks at the coin slot. “\$1.25.” The last time Robert had used a pay phone it cost fifty cents, and he’d been surprised it wasn’t still a quarter.

He picks up the receiver and taps its cradle to see if he can get a dial tone without dropping in coins. Nope. He inserts his change, hoping for the best. A dial tone,

thankfully, buzzes in his ear. Robert starts to call his wife, then realizes he doesn't know her number. He knows only two phone numbers by heart: his own—but just to enter at the Whole Foods checkout for his Amazon Prime discount, as he never calls himself—and the number of the New Jersey house he grew up in, where his parents have not lived for 10 years. Of his wife's number, he knows it's the same area code as his, and "579" sounds right for the next three numbers. But the last four digits are up for grabs,

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leaving 9,999 possibilities to try. The dead phone in his pocket knows the number—and much, much more—but it isn't talking.

Robert pushes "0"—if pay phones still exist, maybe so do operators. After a heart-dropping silence, a voice comes on the line.

"Insert 20 cents, please."

"Oh, oh, oh . . . hello, hello," Robert says. "I don't have 20 cents."

"It's 20 more cents to complete a call, sir."

"No, no, no," he says, "you see, my car is in a ditch and I'm at a state park and it's empty and it's snowing and I really need to call someone. Can you just put me through to my wife for the dollar-five I already put in?"

"All right, sir," the operator replies. "What is her number?"

Miraculously, after Robert's confession that no, he doesn't actually know his wife's number, and isn't that kind of strange, further conversation leads to the operator finding the right cell number—turns out it did have a "579"—and she connects him.

The phone is on the third ring before Robert recalls a week before, when Jane had mentioned it had been months and months since she had picked up their phone for a name or number she didn't recognize. At the eighth ring, Robert can just about see Jane's sleepy hand fumbling to swipe left on her phone, and the line goes silent.

So no phone calls. Robert again considers his options. That word "probably" annoyingly remains in front of the words "won't freeze to death." He goes over to one of the park's cabins. A sturdy padlock guards a sturdy wooden door. He imagines breaking in through one of the cabin's small windows. Then he imagines getting stuck halfway through, in a Winnie-the-Pooh-style situation. Embarrassing and possibly dangerous,

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especially if he could only unstick himself after a few days of not eating. Even if he were to tumble into the cabin, how much warmer would it be inside? As for starting a fire in the cabin's rustic fireplace, there might not be any matches inside. For the first time, he regrets not being a smoker of anything.

About an hour's walk behind him is a car that is not going anywhere. Up ahead, he knows the road slopes down for several miles—how many he isn't sure—to meet the state highway that leads into Mercerville.

Onward.

Robert continues walking past the cabin area. The snow has stopped falling, and the only sound is the soft crunch of his sneakers breaking into a few inches of sugary powder. He wonders when anyone will wonder where he is. He knows he had told Jane that he might sleep on the couch at Phil's house if the game ran too late. So it would

probably be noon, after she returned from the farmer’s market, before she would be surprised at all to not see him at home. He doesn’t want to consider how long it would be before one of his children (Brent, 15, and Lisa, 12) would say, “Hey, where’s Dad?”

Robert raises his head, and his headlamp illuminates a sign just ahead at the campground’s exit that reads “Thanks for Visiting!” He turns his head a little to the right, and the lamp shines on something else. A bear.

The bear leans a paw against a tree as though it were a lamppost. The first thought that comes to mind is advice he’d read for surviving bear encounters. Don’t run away—bears are faster than you—but instead intimidate the bear by making yourself look bigger and scarier. Raise your arms over your head and fiercely growl. Robert knows instantly that whoever thought this had never stood before a 400-pound bear,

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with nothing between man and bear but 25 feet of cold mountain air. No bear is dumb enough to be convinced it is less fearsome than a doughy, 46-year-old lawyer in old running shoes, even one holding his hands high and making loud growly noises.

He next thinks of a strategy he had imagined years before but never had cause to try. Robert had considered what he might do if he came back to his home to find someone inside robbing it. Instead of yelling “What the hell are you doing here!” and provoking a dangerous (for him) confrontation, he could instead calmly pretend he was already expecting someone he hadn’t met before to be in his home. He might say, “Oh, hello. It’s Steve, isn’t it? I was told you’d be coming by today. How are you doing?” This

might confuse the burglar so much that he would pretend to be Steve and leave without any trouble.

Robert looks the bear in the eye. “Hey there! It’s Steve, right? Funny meeting you here. I was told whenever I was in the woods to be sure to look up Steve. Nice to see you, Steve.”

The bear stares back at him. Perhaps it is thinking, “Wait a minute, am I Steve?” A long moment passes, and the bear ambles away from the road. After a few steps, it turns its head back for one last look at Robert. As it slouches into the woods, Robert sees, or thinks he sees, the bear slowly shaking its head.

Beyond the camping area, the road begins to gently wind back and forth and slope downward. Soon, Robert’s headlamp flickers and then goes out. Luckily, the sky has cleared and a half moon shines off the white road. His crunching steps follow one after another. Cold and tired as he is, Robert somehow takes comfort in not knowing exactly when it is, where he is, or how long he has to go. In being the only one here in

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the forest (besides Steve, of course). In being precisely at this spot and nowhere at all. Maybe, he thinks, there are too many numbers out there, too many measures that we—or our phones, at least—keep track of. Four a.m. (possibly). 35 dollars. 46 years. 25 feet. 579-something-something-something.

Eventually, the sky brightens through the trees ahead. By the time Robert reaches the hill that runs down to the highway, it has a rosy glow. The hill is steep, with

several inches of wet snow. Robert edges down the side of the road, moving from tree to tree and being careful not to fall.

He crosses the highway and looks back at the hill. If he had reached it in his car, he might not have been able to slow down. He could have slid right across the highway and down the embankment beyond into whatever nothingness lay below. Maybe there was a reason the state park was closed until March.

Robert understands now that people might not die from embarrassment, but they sometimes do trying to avoid it. People who say to themselves, “Cindy will think I’m a wimp if I say I just don’t do drugs.” Or “If *he* can jump off the cliff into that lake, I can too.” Or “I can definitely make it through a deserted state park on a snowy mountain road by myself.” Just more dumb animals. He also realizes that bad luck—with a helping of stupidity—may have gotten him into the woods, but his usual good luck had gotten him out.

Not long after starting his walk down the highway shoulder, Robert rounds a bend. Ahead, a billboard displays an impossibly tall stack of pancakes dripping with syrup, and the words “Cracker Barrel. 2 Miles Ahead.” He quickens his step, or tries to.

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Just as Robert gets up to the billboard, a county police car slows to a halt just ahead of him. A young officer lowers his window and says, “Do you need any help, sir?”

Robert considers asking for a phone to call his wife, but he has already forgotten the four digits the operator told him. And anyway, an early-morning phone call from a number identified as “County Police” might frighten Jane. “No, I’m fine,” he says.

“Would you like a ride somewhere?” the officer asks.

Robert glances at the billboard. Two miles further, there will be scrambled eggs. Biscuits. Sausages. A friendly waitress who will lend him an iPhone Lightning charger. Coffee. More biscuits. And he has already made it this far by himself.

“Thanks, but no,” he answers. “It’s a nice day. I’ll walk.”

Honorable Mention: Shruti Sekar

Aldie, VA

One of Seven

Her voice serenades swiftly and strongly through the students' ears. Everyone is transfixed on her prose, the fascination of her presentation on solar energy evident in their eyes. But I still stare outside, heart thudding, looking at the creature leering at me through the glass.

Green swirls of smoke emanate from the shadow outside the classroom window, perching under the willow tree 50 feet away. The ugly demon materializes as a cacophony of emerald scaly flesh, two grey grotesque horns that point out of its head, and a lopsided grin with spiky teeth. Under the beast's skin lies a pulsating orb where it's heart might be.

Perhaps that is it's heart.

"Jini!" Mr. Freedman calls, "It's your turn next."

I step up, passing Kanashimi as she sits down at her desk. She winks at me, sending me a beaming smile that stretches across her tan skin. She twirls her long dark hair, tilts her head, and mouths *Good luck!*

But my throat feels parched and my hands shake. I can feel some classmates stare down at their desk and some develop the glossy look in their eyes as I mumble.

"And this timeline of oil use shows..." I flick my eyes between the window and the room. "It shows..." I look at Kanashimi, wondering how she could give the presentation so easily. I jolt when I look back through the window.

The demon taps the glass, laughing as the outside world changes to pitch black, reminding me of the darkness outside of a train in the underground subway. The only light is the ambiance of the inner classroom. No one looks at the fiend. They all wait for me. Am I the only one that sees the beast?

Silence envelops the room, twisting every slight laugh of the demon into a screeching cackle. The projector light blinds me, and I can feel my own shadow writhe behind me as I stand still and blink. My mouth turns dry.

“Jini? Are you alright?” Mr. Freedman asks, lightly tapping his desk to direct my attention to him. I wonder what I must look like to the class right now. Kanashimi leans forward in her seat, as if she wants to leap out and hug me reassuringly.

She probably does. We help each other like that.

I gulp, turning back to face the front. The rest of the class simmers with heated tension, like water that hasn’t boiled yet but is too hot to touch. More than 20 pairs of eyes stare at me.

One of the pairs is the demon’s blood-red eyes. *It* has moved back to the willow tree. The sky is not dark again. I can breathe again.

“I’m sorry.” I awkwardly laugh my panic off even though it lingers in the pit of my stomach. “As I was saying, oil is primarily used for transportation and energy.”

When I finish the presentation, I make note of how the applause at the end is quieter than the applause Kanashimi received. But I smile when she turns around in her chair and says, “*You did great! Your presentation was amazing!*”

When I walk home that afternoon, the demon stays 50 feet away. *It* matches my pace. I take a look behind my shoulder, shivering when I see that *it* never breaks eye contact with me.

I stop walking and *it* stops walking too. *It* tilts its head at me as I turn back.

“Stop,” I whisper, too afraid to shout it lest someone might hear me. I take a step back to test it, but *it* takes a step forward too. What is it?

“Stop.” I say, this time raising my hand forward, feebly begging it not to follow me home. *It* merely grins and moves with me.

“Stop!” I scream, trying to run home, not looking over my shoulder as pure adrenaline fuels my race to home.

As I close the door, I can make out the apparition standing near the mailbox.

“Mom!” I yell, bolting the lock shut. “Look outside!” Footsteps echo from upstairs, then I see her racing down the stairs while still wearing her headset from work. We both go to the cotton curtain, peeking at our green lawn.

“What’s wrong?” She panics, pulling the shade back. A few moments later, she calms down. “What am I supposed to be seeing?”

My mouth falls open. When I look back at the lawn, *it* is gone. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. I quickly change the subject. “Look- Look at the storm clouds. We’ll need to bring some of the outdoor plants inside, so they don’t get overwatered.”

She laughs and sighs, “I already took them inside. But thank you for noticing. Maybe next time...” She receives a ping on her smart watch. “I need to head up. I made some mango juice for you. I’ll come down for dinner in two hours.” My mom pats my head, but she goes back upstairs to her meeting. I can hear her talking to her colleagues even from down here.

I constantly look over my shoulder and glance at the windows outside. Every sudden AC reboot or creaky floorboard step snaps up a defense instinct deep in my body. Dinner comes too slowly.

Mom and I sit on opposite sides at the wooden table, devouring our aloo tikka with rice and raita. The dining room light is far too dim and the night sky approaches far too quickly. Snow starts falling in the evening, and the kitchen is darker than it usually is despite the bright ceiling light.

“Did you do your presentation well?” Mom asks in between bites. She takes a sip of her juice as I respond.

I tense up, not wanting to talk about the presentation. “Went fine,” I answer curtly. I pick at the potatoes on my plate.

She sets her spoon down. “Just fine? You said it was one of your bigger presentations this year?” Gravity pulls the corners of her mouth down.

“I don’t know. I froze up. I... I wasn’t able to answer a lot of questions. I just... felt tense,” I drift off. Apprehension flips my stomach over and sets a swarm of moths flying in my head, buzzing around as my thoughts, just searching desperately for light.

“How did Kanashimi do?” The question strikes me with an impact as if I walked into a telephone pole: visible on the street but not really giving attention to it.

“She did well. Her presentation was really good and I’m really proud of her. Mr. Freedman said he would nominate two of the projects for the regional competition.” I hang my head low, murmuring into my plate. “And I’m proud of her because I know she deserves a spot.” ~~But I want to be her.~~

Do true words with false tones become lies?

“It’s okay. You’ll get it next year. Besides, I always knew Kanashimi had a mind for science.” Her eyes wander to a distant memory, a habit she keeps in her palm. “Do you remember the time she taught you about the solar system? You were both mere kids at the time.” She giggles, amused and nostalgic at our years spent together.

Do old memories starring you, but not remembered because of you lead you to be forgotten?

“Ya!” I plaster a smile to my lips, holding back words that I’ve been wanting to say for so long. My throat is dry again and it could be Halloween because I feel like a ghost at the dining table once more. “She’s really good at the subject.” In the back of my mind, there is a question I want to ask.

“Mom, can I audition for the theatre club?” I shift the subject. Her smile drops as her raven eyes steer towards me like a lighthouse beam.

“What for?” She inquires, genuinely confused about why I would ever want to join the theatre club.

“Well, Kanashimi said it’s really fun. And I think it would be an interesting extracurricular.” I try to make my voice enthusiastic, but it comes out weak and feeble. “I also really want to star in one of the roles.” I beg, “Please.”

She sighs and toys with her old wedding ring. “Honestly, I just don’t think it would be good for you. You need to get your academic grades up. You could improve your English and science scores.” She continues, “And just because Kanashimi is doing it doesn’t mean that you have to do it. Theatre is a lot of time and effort. Do you really think that you can handle the gifted program and theatre and your piano lessons? What about when softball season comes? Will theatre work then as well?”

I can hear the logic in her voice - the clear practical reason - but I know that her own fears - the way she plays with her wedding ring - also cause me to adopt her fear of failure. She wants perfection, not disappointment. I do too.

Do all unlit hopes die if no one is there to light the fire?

“No.” I agree. “I’ll get my grades up.” My shoulders drop and I pick at my rice some more. Mom stands up and moves into the kitchen to wash the dishes, letting me finish my meal.

But all I see is *it* through the window. *It* comes back. Staring at me, tapping on the glass like before. The green monster with the sharp teeth and scaly skin.

It is snowing outside and dark outside and *it* is outside.

Horror runs through my veins and my lungs stutter for air.

“I’m going upstairs mom,” I yell and acknowledge I’m passing on an episode of House Hunters with her. “Got a load of homework due in two days.” I get up from the table and put my dish in the sink, feeling slightly guilty as I’m leaving her with all the plates.

I try to control myself as best as I can. I can hear the beat of its heart in my head. Loud. Steady. Angry.

I close the bedroom door and lock it. Turning the lights on, I see my phone ding with a text. As I walk to my chair and sit, I can already read the notification. *Kanashimi*.

Mi-AndWe: Freedman just posted grades. EEEEE 😊

Jini239: Really?? So soon? You sound happy...

Mi-AndWe: :) How’d you do?

Jini239: Hold on a sec... OMG... A 74?!?!?!?

Mi-AndWe: WHAT but your content was good? why would he give you that low score when you earned better

Jini239: ldk. i get it tho cuz i could’ve been clearer

Mi-AndWe: Nooo you should talk to him and see if you can increase it... I think your presentation was detailed

Jini239: nah it’s fine. How'd you do?

Mi-AndWe is typing.

Mi-AndWe: I GOT SELECTED FOR REGIONALS!!!!!!!

Jini239: AYYYYYYYYY CONGRATS

Mi-AndWe: YAA! But let’s talk about something else... you ask your mom about theatre? It’d be really nice if you could join me 😊

Jini239: nah she said i needed to get grades up first

Mi-AndWe: girl, i've seen your grades they look fine

Jini239: ik ik, it's just that i need to bring them up a bit. Anyways, gotta study. See ya tomorrow.

Mi-AndWe: Oh okay. Bye!!! 😊

Jini239: bye

I set the phone down and rub my temples. I don't know if I see *it* because I'm tired, but that night, it stands by my phone. Even as I fall asleep, it just lingers in the corner, facing me, watching me drown in nightmares.

When I wake up, I don't see it. But then the events of yesterday flood and I blink and I see it standing near the door. I get up and it stays there just smiling wickedly.

Days and months and years pass.

What used to be a monster that was invisible to my own eyes changes into clarity. That day was the first time I saw it and became aware of its existence. But over time, we coexist.

It walks with me to school. *It* watches as Kanashimi gets first place in the regionals competition. *It* sulks as I watch her perform in the role, hiding in the seat behind me. *It* cries with me as I fail my first trig test in high school. *It* feels my dull pain as I see mom talking on the phone, fiddling with her unnecessary wedding ring.

I am aware of *it* and yet now I grow unbothered to its presence. *It* is not alarming and frightening anymore, and that's what scares me the most. *It* cages me metaphorically, overwhelming me with the staccato tempo of its vociferous heart, the sour odor of its gleaming flesh, and the malignant beam of its omnipresent scarlet eyes.

In the worst moments, *it* is practically me.

7 years. *It* follows me for seven years.

As I become older, *it* starts to put distance between us.

One day, I glimpse another creature. Albeit it doesn't move like *it* or look like *it*. This creature isn't looking for me. This one follows Kanashimi instead, lulling behind her with drooping footsteps. With blue velvety skin and soft avoiding eyes, it stares down at the ground.

Unbeknownst to my blindsided vision, I failed to see how it had really been there all along with Kanashimi. Also staying for 7 years. She tells me the details later when I ask. But when I see her for the first time with her unwanted companion, I am struck by how much unhealthy baggage I've been carrying.

"Kanashimi!" I yell, darting across the crosswalk to meet her on the opposite sidewalk. She beams for a moment when she notices me, and her creature does too, perking up a little.

"Are you alright?" I ask, pure concern etching on my face.

She hides her emotions with a tight smile, "I'm fine. Why do you ask?" She tilts her head, her face going out of my vision for a bit.

And I reply honestly, "You looked upset. If you need anything, you know I can help right?" I don't mean to be sappy, but these words feel right at the moment.

She grins freely, a truthful smile playing to her lips. "Of course! I can always count on you. Now come on, we're gonna be late!" She grabs my hand and we race for the school entrance before the bell chimes.

I look back. *It* is no longer following me. *It* stands there underneath the willow tree. I hope *it* one day vanishes. It'll take time.

Her creature follows, yet it fades in color. I know then that I want to be there for her when her creature disappears too.

Author's Note: Kanashimi = sorrow in Japanese. One of seven highlights how "it" is jealousy.

Honorable Mention: Meighan Hogate

Sterling, VA

Rise of a Legend

In most cultures, it is generally considered the height of discourtesy to awaken a stranger with unnecessary explosions. Groggy, Bloodscale ponders this as dust and dirt drift down from the ceiling towards his now open eye, the latest casualties of the ill-mannered primates. He doesn't care if they murder each other, truly. They leave fantastic treasure completely unguarded when the dust settles, but must they be so loud? And must they dull the shine of his illustrious hoard with filth loosened from the ceiling by their chaotic idiocy?

His nictitating membrane slides into place unconsciously before said filth reaches his pupil and he sighs despondently as he hears the muted sound of human "music" above him.

He talks to himself as he opens his other eye and stretches his arms, his legs, his wings, and his tail and prepares some ash-snuff to cast off his sleepy lethargy.

"My orchard. You just have to fight in my orchard, don't you? Thousands of miles of forest and wildland, and you choose *my* orchard..."

He's not too upset about the firefruits. They'll grow back quickly enough once he re-ashes the ground. Their silly little detonations will merely scatter the seed pods normally ensconced within the fleshy pulp. It would take a deliberate effort towards herbicide to eliminate the firefruit's generations, and he doubts the humans have bothered to look past the offending checkered patterns of their neighbors' tunics to do so.

He curls open his maw slightly and allows a small burst of flame to light the contents of his excessively extravagant snuff-bowl, then quickly covers it. It takes a practiced talent to roast the ash-snuff just long enough to preserve the flavor without destroying it utterly, and Bloodscale had long ago mastered this forgotten art. He allows himself a quick sniff of the heavenly aroma and savors it in his nostrils, closing his main eyelids in a sort of ecstatic meditation.

A detonation, much louder this time, shakes his cavern. The piles of polished precious stone and metal jingle lightly, and two dozen or so coins roll from their usual resting spots: haphazardly strewn about in the dragon's mountainous monuments to beauty.

He mutters to himself, "Couldn't even give me that little moment, could you? Jerks."

Bloodscale dips his head into the snuff bowl and snorts ferociously as he inhales the precious mixture. He shrieks with pleasure, creating a wave of sound that causes his lustrous peaks to jingle with a more harmonious vibration. He can hear the gold and silver alloy instruments in his private concert hall tremble with excitement at the touch of his voice.

"Perhaps later, my friends," he muses to himself while simultaneously shaking away an irrational urge to attempt to engage the humans in a melodic duel.

While he would relish the opportunity to participate in a musical duel with members of his own kind, the mere fact that he would have to listen to the humans' drums and horns disharmoniously intertwined with nettling primate shrieking about their

misconceptions of love and glory and sex was an effective deterrent from making such an offer to these pests.

He pauses for a moment. Perhaps they heard him. Perhaps they'll scurry away and he can just spend the day inside serenading the spiders with some creative endeavor. Perhaps the Nocturne Symphony. He's always wanted to perform it in one sitting, but never feels he can do the delicate tail-harp undertones justice without keen observation of his movements over the strings.

"A real master would be able to do it by muscle memory," he thinks to himself bitterly as another boom rattles the chamber.

Heaven forbid the humans should be deterred from their petty conflict by the sound of a literal dragon awakening! His mind races, the full effect of the ash-snuff kicking his senses into overdrive. Did they forget we exist? How long have I been hibernating? DID THEY PAVE OVER MY ORCHARD!? No. I would have heard that.

He belches forth a plume of fire. The light of the flame reflects against his glittering hoard, which in turn reflects against his mirror-like red-tinted scales, which in turn reflects against an actual enormous cavern-sized mirror built right into the wall. Bloodscale admires himself, then notes with annoyance that the vibration has caused some cracks to form on the top edge of his mirror.

"PESKY RODENTS!" he roars, and makes his way towards the cliffside entrance.

It isn't there.

He slams the collapsed walls of stone rubble with his claws.

"NOW WHEN DID THAT HAPPEN?"

His irrational fear returns that the humans may have paved over his orchard. If he didn't hear the main entrance collapse, he may not have heard the humans engaging in the wholesale herbicide of his firefruits after all!

He drops to a crouch and begins trembling, focusing his internal fire for a mighty blast. If these overgrown mice think they can seal him up underground, they're in for the shock of their lives.

David Wyvern is not having a good day. It started with the cavalry run on Inshep's Immolation. It wasn't that the riders were incompetent, or even that the mounted equine raid looked unrealistic. It was that the entire rush from the left flank was *off key!* Months of training on horseback so that he could have a full cavalry perform *The Legend of Bloodscale* in live action without ADR and somehow, the *entire* left flank managed to hit every single octave *except* D major!

"How hard is it to ride a horse and sing, people!" he had shouted through the sound system, having never once actually bothered to attempt to ride a horse himself on slick grass while trying not to *really* get stabbed by the prop weapons, which could still do quite a bit of damage, while making it *look like* they were doing damage.

Morale was quite low by the time the pyrotechnics technician completely and utterly failed to miss his mark with Bloodscale's detonation of the Holy Armory. That detonation was meant to be the *crescendo* not the *decrescendo!* They sound nothing alike! Then David came to find out that the pyrotechnics technician was deaf, and had some kind of paper clip covering the "decr" in "decrescendo." Of all the stupid, incompetent, idiotic...

A sudden earthquake followed by an enormous sonic boom rocks the director from his chair atop the watchtower's battlements. He screams in horror, then realizes he's fallen to his left onto stone, not to his right off the overhang towards the churning waters crashing against the rocks below. He probably has Jackie to thank for that, his loyal bodyguard and lover. She had told him not to put his chair there, but it was the only way he could really see everything without the blasted monitors, which kept cutting out every time the earless detonation expert let off a charge. Jackie had insisted on keeping a muscular hand on his chair, and he was now thankful that she had, but not thankful enough to actually express his gratitude in words, instead opting to replace his bulky headset and shriek at the top of his lungs at the intern he had placed in charge of relaying messages to the pyrotechnician.

“THERE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE ANY BLASTS IN SCENE 111A! THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE MAJESTIC PLUMES OF FIRE DURING THE DOOMED MARCH OF MARIA'S DOZEN! IT IS A SOLEMN HYMN! SOLEMN! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS TO ALLOW THE NATIONAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION SOCIETY TO LET US FILM ON LOCATION WITH REAL EXPLOSIONS!?! I CAN'T AFFORD TO HAVE YOU KEEP BLOWING THINGS UP AND SETTING THINGS ON FIRE COMPLETELY OFF SCHEDULE FROM OUR PREARRANGED DETONATION TIMES! WE DO NEED TIME TO MOVE THE FIRE CONTROL TEAMS TO THEIR PROPER LOCATIONS, MORON!”

Two hundred technicians, audio engineers, assistant producers, and interns stare in horror at the sky behind David and, in varying stages of panic, attempt to make a chaotic egress. The infuriated director doesn't notice. The two dozen drone operators,

by contrast, all wanting to get what is sure to be award-winning footage, spin their cameras away from the mock battle and towards the sky just above the stone outcropping with its deadly overhang. Once again, Davîd doesn't notice. Jackie attempts to get his attention, using increasing force until Davîd loses his patience and slaps her, prompting her to abandon him in a combination of fear and fury.

Bloodscale hovers in place and waits. Never before has he witnessed a human that is so engrossed in his own petty concerns that he doesn't run in horror at the sight of him. He's letting thousands of other humans flee, both here and down on the battlefield, but it isn't like he's not planning to enjoy hunting them down later. Not a single one will leave this mountain alive, though he does find it strange that there are so few casualties on the battlefield. Those that he had mistaken as casualties were apparently just laying on their backs, as every single one had stood and is now sprinting towards the panicked mob running from the top of the mountain. He also noticed a fair number of males and females scurrying off carrying musical instruments instead of weapons. Odd, though it would explain how he was able to hear their battle songs underground.

"How and when did the humans build a fortification here without me noticing?" he wonders to himself with some confusion, "And when did they learn to make their little toys fly?"

He blows the drones out of the sky with a single plume of arcing flame.

The drone operators decide this is now the perfect time to extricate themselves from the battlements and rush into the inner fortification.

Finally, and at long last, Davíd notices the people leaving around him, and begins an entirely new round of shrieking into his headset.

“NOW JUST WHAT THE HEL---”

Davíd turns and finds himself face to face with a living legend. Bloodscale opens his maw in a sincere attempt to display a malignant grin. He succeeds magnificently. Davíd’s lip trembles. A puddle appears mysteriously under his feet. Bloodscale glances up. Odd that the puddle should be so localized, and without a cloud in the sky.

“D-d-d-d-d... d... do you... do you wanna be in the movie?”

Bloodscale has absolutely no idea what a “movie” is, but his amusement with the man is starting to wane and he really must make haste if he’s to hunt down the rest of the pesky rodents before they have a chance to escape. He glances in the direction of his orchard. Look what they did to his trees! Of course, Bloodscale is happy they didn’t pave over it completely, but he’s quite unhappy with the diminished condition of his mountaintop arboretum. After all, they did plop a castle right on top of it!

Smoke curls around his teeth and he trembles, summoning his inner fire.

Davíd falls to his knees and begins to weep into his lap. Looking at Auteur Extraordinaire Davíd Wyvern’s exquisitely stitched pants, Bloodscale suddenly figures out where the pool at the man’s feet came from. He will never understand the human need to cover every inch of their bodies with cloth. Of course, if he had a human body, he’d cover it too: in shame. Not every creature is blessed enough to look as magnificent as him after all.

He casually blows a plume of flame in Davíd’s direction, effectively evaporating the puddle and the rodent that dribbled it, then begins pest control on the rest of the little

vermin who had the gall to disturb his rest and mangle his orchard. As the inferno bursts forth from his gaping maw, he casually wonders if the farmers in the meadowlands below still raise sheep. He loves roasted lamb chops. The taste is always ashy, but the scent is practically divine.

Honorable Mention: Stephen Foss**Broadlands, VA****Sundaes on Sunday**

Sarah was working on her algebra homework as she waited in Dr. Murphy's waiting room. Her mother, Ann, sat with her, helping her with any problems she came across.

"I don't know if I'm doing this right," Sarah said, pointing to number four on her worksheet.

"It's tough to get at first. Keep at it," Ann said. "Number four is right."

They shared a smile, and Sarah continued her homework. Sarah was eleven, but reading, writing, and solving math problems at an eleventh-grade level. Sarah had been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder as well as hypervigilance and started visiting Dr. Murphy off and on when she was seven. She was undersized for her age and still had a squeaky voice. She had sandy brown hair that was always in a tight ponytail and eyes the very same color as her hair. Sarah heard the door to Dr. Murphy's office open and looked up from her homework.

"Sarah, ready?" Dr. Murphy said as she stood in the doorway.

Sarah clicked her pen shut in response and followed Dr. Murphy into the office, giving her mom a wink before closing the door behind her.

Dr. Murphy's office reminded Sarah of her sunroom at home. The office had lots of windows with cherry trees right outside, so as to give the impression that one was in a tranquil forest and not the suburbs of Seattle. The office had two identical leather

armchairs separated by a coffee table. Next to one of the armchairs was a long black futon that Sarah elected to lay belly down and legs crossed in the air with her fists supporting her chin.

“Same spot as last time, huh?” Dr. Murphy said.

“Yep. I like this one,” Sarah said

Dr. Murphy sat with her notepad and legs crossed on one of the large leather chairs as Sarah looked at Dr. Murphy’s degrees from The University of Tokyo and the University of Washington. Dr. Murphy had worked with many gifted children over the years, but Sarah was one of her most unique patients.

“Was being a kid in Japan as fun as being a kid in America?”

“Oh,” a look of amusement washed over Dr. Murphy’s face. “You know, I’m not sure. How much fun is it being a kid in America?”

Sarah tossed her head from side to side. “It’s fun. Different days are more fun than other days though.”

“And why do you think that is? Can you give me an example of a good day and a bad day?” Dr. Murphy said as she put her glasses on and clicked her pen into writing position.

“I dunno, really.”

“That’s all right. Is today a good day?”

Sarah paused for a moment and tossed her head.

“Yeah, pretty good. Lunch was good because I sat with Diane.”

“That’s great; is that a new friend?” Dr. Murphy took a sip from her tea.

“Yep, she’s always nice to me.”

“It’s good to have friends like that. Do you have any classes with Diane?”

Sarah shook her head. “Oh no, no. Diane is in charge of the bathrooms.”

Dr. Murphy hid a laugh behind her notepad. Sarah noticed.

“Mom thought it was funny too,” Sarah said.

“No, no. I’m sorry, it’s great that you’ve made a friend. I just assumed it was someone closer to you in age, that’s all.”

Sarah’s cheeks reddened. “Everybody my age still goes to middle school.”

“Right. You’re right. Let’s talk about something else.”

Dr. Murphy glanced down at her notepad and shifted in her seat. “Good days. How about you tell me about days you like?”

Sarah rolled over onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. “I like sundaes on Sunday,” she said.

“Sundaes on Sunday? Okay, tell me about those,” Dr. Murphy said.

Still looking at the ceiling, Sarah started. “On Sundays, mom makes sure all of the big kids are home so we can all have a family dinner. After the dinners, we always make sundaes.”

“All right, that’s a great start,”

“Yeah, but we haven’t had one in a long time. I dunno why.” Sarah swung her body into a sitting position on the futon. She looked up at Dr. Murphy and forced a smile.

Dr. Murphy looked at Sarah. “Sarah, I want you to tell me every detail about Sunday dinners.” Dr. Murphy leaned forward in her large armchair. “Lay down, close your eyes, and imagine you’re at a Sunday dinner, can you do that?”

Sarah nodded with enthusiasm. She loved to be challenged since so few things challenged her. She followed Dr. Murphy’s instructions and laid on her back with her eyes closed. Sarah took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Okay, so, our table is a dark brown table and it’s set in the middle of a rectangular dining room. The table is tilted slightly to the right. The tilt isn’t that bad though,” Sarah took a deep breath. “The table is the perfect size for the six of us. Mom and dad sit at opposite ends of the rectangle. I sit next to Tessie and then Nick and Gabe sit on the other side.”

Dr. Murphy extended her hand to stop Sarah.

“Can you remind me again how old your siblings are?” Dr. Murphy asked.

Sarah opened her eyes. “Nick and Tessie are sixteen, and Gabe is eighteen,”

“Got it. Keep going, you were doing super good.”

Sarah agreed and closed her eyes again. “I usually set the table, which I don’t mind because I get to give myself the napkins without wrinkles and the glasses without smudges.

“My favorite nights are the nights that we eat tacos. On taco nights I can stay in the conversation by asking people to pass toppings even if I don’t need them.”

“What do you mean?” Dr. Murphy asked.

“Well, like, everybody is louder than me. And sometimes I’m nervous to talk because, like, I dunno.”

“Okay, so you like taco nights because asking for toppings lets you talk to everyone?”

“Basically.” Sarah took a deep breath. “Tessie talks the most. She’s always talking about her boyfriend, Connor.”

“What do you think of Connor?”

“I think he’s dumb.”

“Why?”

“We’re in the same literature class,” Sarah said.

“Oh,” Dr. Murphy stifled another laugh. “Does Connor ever come over for dinner? Want to talk about that?”

“I guess. He comes over sometimes. It annoys me when he does because I get moved to the corner of the rectangle to make room for an extra chair. When I’m at the corner I can’t rest either of my elbows on the table,” Sarah huffed.

“How does Tessie like Connor being there?” Dr. Murphy asked.

“She likes it, I guess. Tessie is usually mad, though. She and Nick get in fights at dinner all the time,” Sarah said.

“What things do they fight about?”

“Well, Nick doesn’t say a lot. Last family dinner, Nick talked the least. He only talked three times.”

“Do you usually keep track of how many times everyone talks?”

Sarah shrugged. “Usually. Anyways, Nick doesn’t talk too much, but when he does it’s usually to rile up Tessie.”

“How does he do that?”

“Last dinner, he told her that she looked like Danny Devito if Danny Devito took estrogen pills.”

Dr. Murphy opened her mouth for a second or two and then closed it. “I see,” she said.

Sarah stood up and walked over to the open leather armchair and sat down.

“When did you get divorced, Dr. Murphy?”

Dr. Murphy rubbed her bare ring finger. “Well, Mr. Murphy and I separated a couple years ago.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“Yes, I do. I have a little girl a little younger than you.”

“That would be really tough for me if my parents did that.”

“Sarah,” Dr. Murphy shifted in her seat. “Let’s get back to you.”

“I want to practice your job,” Sarah said. “Can I have a pad like yours, please?”

“Why do you want to do that?”

Sarah scanned the office for conversations that weren’t about her.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk, Sarah. We can talk about anything. Let’s just have a chat.” Dr. Murphy got up and grabbed a spare notepad and pen from her desk and handed it to Sarah. “What do you like to put on your sundaes?” Dr. Murphy asked.

“Mint chocolate chips with peanut butter sauce, usually. Sometimes my mom will let me have coffee ice cream, though, and that’s my favorite.”

“Yeah, me too, I love the coffee flavor.”

Sarah smiled. “What do you like to put on your sundaes, Dr. Murphy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just the usual things I suppose. Whipped cream, chocolate, maybe some cherries.”

Sarah crossed her legs to match Dr. Murphy. “What does your daughter like on her sundaes?”

“Uh, well, she must like chocolate sauce, and she likes most ice creams, I think.”

“Do you and Marie make sundaes often?” Sarah asked as she scribbled on her new notepad.

“I--,” Dr. Murphy stopped herself and cocked her head to the side, “How did you know my daughter’s name was Marie?”

“You wrote her name on your notepad when I asked if you had a daughter.” Dr. Murphy’s forehead wrinkled with confusion, so Sarah continued, “I can read your notepad from the reflection off your glasses and the movements you make when writing.”

Dr. Murphy took off her glasses and looked sternly at Sarah. “Sarah, we’ve talked about this before, remember? You shouldn’t use your gifts to violate people’s privacy,”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t meaning to violate your privacy. I thought the things you wrote were about me so I thought it would be okay to look,”

“You should try your best not to look at my pad,” Dr. Murphy said.

“Okay.” Sarah’s eyebrows narrowed and her lips scrunched. “I’m not sad, by the way. I know you think I’m sad,”

Dr. Murphy sighed. “I don’t think you’re sad, Sarah. I just write thoughts on my pad, they’re not necessarily an opinion or a diagnosis.”

“Oh. I understand, sorry.” Sarah put down her notepad and pen facedown. She slid out of the leather armchair and went back to laying on the futon.

“Do you want to talk about school? How’s that going?” Dr. Murphy asked.

“School is good, but I don’t like to talk about it,” Sarah said.

“Why not?”

“It’s private.” Sarah crossed her arms as she lay on her back looking at the ceiling.

“Sarah, don’t start closing me off.”

“I wanted to learn about your family, and you won’t let me. I don’t think that’s fair.”

Dr. Murphy uncrossed her legs and put her notepad face down on the coffee table. She leaned forward and opened up her palms. “Okay Sarah, fair enough. You can ask me something about my family if you like.”

Without hesitation, Sarah asked, “Does your family have dinners like mine does?”

“Well, no. Like I said before, Mr. Murphy and myself are taking a break at the moment an--”

“Before you were taking a break, I mean,” Sarah rolled from her back to her hip and scanned Dr. Murphy’s face. “Did you have them before you were taking a break?”

Dr. Murphy leaned back in her chair. “Sure. Sometimes.”

“Not a lot though, right?” Sarah said with a wince.

Dr. Murphy took another deep breath. “No, not a lot. Now, Sarah, I’d like to get back to you, could we do that?”

Sarah gripped her pen between her index finger and thumb and pointed it at Dr. Murphy. “Do you hang with your friends a lot, Dr. Murphy?” Sarah asked.

Dr. Murphy laughed. “Sometimes. My job keeps me very busy.”

Sarah gently pushed the tip of her pen in and out, making small black dots on her forearm. “I guess we’re both a little lonely, huh?”

“What?” Dr. Murphy said.

“That’s why you were asking, right?” Sarah said. “You and mom are worried I’m lonely at school.”

“I think you’re assuming things.”

“No, you’re definitely at least a little bit lonely.”

“That’s not...” Dr. Murphy hesitated, “I was talking about you, Sarah.”

Sarah blushed.

“That’s okay,” Dr. Murphy took a sip from her tea and looked at the cherry trees outside. “But now you’ve made me curious, do you think you’re lonely?”

“Yep,” Sarah said.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“I don’t like being all by myself, but I am, so I’ll make it work.”

“That’s very brave of you.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Dr. Murphy sighed deeply, took her glasses off, cleaned the lenses, and placed them back on her nose. “Okay, so, your mom told me that your anxiety has been a little bit of a problem for you lately, do you want to talk about what’s been making you anxious?”

“Yep. Well, I can if you want me to,” Sarah said as if she was doing Dr. Murphy the biggest of favors.

“Yes, Sarah,” Dr. Murphy had exasperation creeping into her voice.

“I’m anxious about my family”

“Why?”

“Well, we haven’t had family dinners lately, and I was reading articles and they said there’s a direct correlation to family mealtime and a family’s health and happiness.”

“Those are just statistics, Sarah.” Dr. Murphy leaned forward in her armchair. “I’m sure your family is going to be fine,”

“Your family is real life, though.” Sarah mirrored Dr. Murphy’s movement and leaned forward in her armchair. “Look what happened when you guys didn’t eat together,”

Dr. Murphy didn’t respond. Sarah took this as a cue to continue. “Maybe we both need to start having sundaes--,”

“Sarah,” Dr. Murphy said. “For the rest of this hour, we are not going to talk about my family. Is that understood?”

“Okay, sure.” Sarah wrote some more on her notepad. “We can talk about whatever you like.”

Dr. Murphy chuckled at Sarah’s permission. “Thank you. Can I ask what you’ve been writing on your notepad?”

Sarah froze. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Dr. Murphy asked.

“Nothing. Can I see yours if you see mine?”

“I think you know the answer to that question already, Sarah. My pad is confidential.”

Sarah flipped her notepad around to show Dr. Murphy. On the left of the notepad were words written backwards, and on the right were the same words written properly.

“Your glasses make the letters flip backwards.” Sarah said. “I had to unscramble them.”

Dr. Murphy looked down at her notepad, and then across at its replica in Sarah’s hands. Dr. Murphy shook her head.

“Let’s talk about your medicine.” Dr. Murphy said. “Do you feel like it’s helping?”

Sarah weighed her head from side to side. "I'm really not qualified to answer that question, but if you think it is, I don't mind taking it." Sarah looked at the sun outside the window to gauge the time. "Could I leave a little early today?"

"Yeah. I think we've made as much progress as we're going to make today."

Sarah stood up and nodded. "I agree."

Honorable Mention: Hayley Kassraie**Ashburn, VA****When Gus Met Trixie**

Gus had assumed his usual position when his owner, Ariana left for her shift at the hospital. He laid his floppy big head down in front of him and napped. The three year old gray doberman hardly ever noticed when his owner left as she worked mostly night shifts at the local hospital, so the young dog would be asleep anyway. Gus was not a vocal dog in Ariana's presence. When she would return home he would run around their single family home in excitement. He would only bark in times of perceived danger. A good boy Gus was.

The birds chirped outside the window of Ariana's bedroom and Gus snoozed away on the queen-sized mattress in the master bedroom. All he ever knew was his mom and the other dogs he would meet in passing at the local dog park. Gus was happy with being the only dog, and a single dog at that. He loved his human and his human loved him.

Time had passed and nothing changed. Gus snored and wagged his little tail nub as he dreamed of chasing birds and squirrels while Ariana watched. He was content in his daily routine and was not looking to see any changes. Gus was a very happy dog.

Suddenly a loud crash came from the kitchen that woke Gus. As the man of the house Gus believed he was, he decided to investigate. After all, he had to keep up his good boy reputation.

He went into the kitchen and noticed a bigger and fluffier dog that broke his dog door. The other dog was a big and beautiful blonde Siberian husky that continued into the house.

“Hey! What are you doing? This isn’t your house!” Gus exclaimed.

“Oh hello doberman, I see you speak the same language as me,” the Siberian husky said.

“Of course! We’re dogs, no one else knows what we’re saying,” Gus said. “Now what are you doing in my house?”

“I live next door and I lost my mom’s favorite ball. She’s been so sad because we love that ball,” the other dog explained. “The name’s Trixie by the way.”

Gus knew the feeling of losing his favorite ball. He could see Ariana’s disappointed face in the back of his mind. But then he remembered how happy his owner was when he found it. He was given all of the treats he could ever dream of and unlimited belly rubs.

“I’m Gus, my mom is at work right now. I can help you find your ball. We’ve all been there,” Gus smiled. *She’s really pretty* Gus thought. *I have to find her ball.*

Both dogs agreed they would look for the ball together and as a reward for all of their hard work, they would try to get their owners to let them play fetch together. In the backyard of Gus’ house there were a bunch of holes Gus had dug all by himself over the years. He knew Ariana hated all of the holes he dug but he still couldn’t help but be proud of how many holes he was able to dig.

“So the ball is a bright green color and it fits perfectly in my mom’s hand and it squeaks,” Trixie explained.

“I have a ball just like that!” Gus exclaimed. “We gotta find this ball.”

Both the doberman and Siberian husky wandered all around the backyard and still there was no sign of the ball. In each of the ten holes, there was no sign of the

bright green ball. Beyond the backyard fence, there were train tracks that freight would often pass by.

“Have you ever been over there?” Trixie asked in reference to the train tracks.

“No, I don’t go anywhere without Ariana. I never leave the house without her either,” Gus said. The idea of going beyond the backyard and outside of the fence terrified Gus. He had no idea what lived outside his little world. “I don’t think it would be a good idea if we left the backyard, what if we get lost?”

“Ugh don’t be such a scaredy cat. We won’t get lost. I leave my house all the time when my mom, Sandra, is out and I always find my way home,” Trixie reassured him.

Gus couldn’t fathom leaving, yet the missing log of wood in the fence taunted him every day. He couldn’t help but feel somewhat curious about what else was out there.

“What if my mom finds out and she calls me a bad boy?” Gus asked.

“Then she’ll get over it! Come on, you’re a doberman! Isn’t your breed supposed to be tough?” Trixie nudged him.

“I think you’re getting us confused with pitbulls,” Gus sighed. He started to head back to the steps behind Ariana’s house when Trixie snuck away from him.

“You know as a gentleman, I can’t let you go alone!” Gus called out to Trixie.

“Then come with me scaredy cat!” Trixie shouted.

It did not take much more convincing to get Gus to follow her. She taunted him and yet she still looked beautiful even when she was being mean to him. Gus hurried close behind the larger blonde colored dog as they snuck out of the cedar wood fence.

Trixie hopped onto the oncoming train and Gus wanted to stay behind. But he didn't hesitate to follow her. He jumped onto the train flawlessly and appeared confident to Trixie. But Gus was scared out of his little doberman mind.

"Are you sure this is about a ball?" Gus asked. "You didn't even tell me the last time you had this ball."

"Right right right...the last time I saw it was at the park with Sandra. You know the one behind that building that has all the people waiting in line all the time," Trixie explained.

Gus knew exactly which park Trixie was talking about. He had the best memories when he was a puppy when he was first allowed at the dog park. He practiced his park a bunch of times in preparation to impress the other dogs. He smiled at the memory.

It was dark by the time the two dogs got off the train at the dog park. Gus didn't know when the next train cart would come. *I hope she's right that she'll get me home in time for when Ariana gets home,* Gus thought.

Trixie led the way and jumped over the chain link fence enclosing the dog park and Gus followed hesitantly. The sign advertising where the dog park was located read it was closed at dark. *It's dark,* Gus thought. *The pound could catch us at any minute.*

The two of them sniffed around and followed the perimeter of the fence. Trixie moved much quicker than Gus although she was two years his senior.

"Come on slowpoke!" Trixie called.

"I have a bad shoulder!" Gus defended himself a few feet behind.

It started to get quiet between the two of them. Quiet enough to hear the crickets' songs. Trixie came up closer to Gus and sniffed his nose. He gently sniffed her back.

“You’re quite cute for a doberman,” Trixie smiled at him.

“You’re not as loud as I thought huskies were,” Gus smirked.

They continued to wander around. Then out of the corner of Gus’ big brown eyes shined something green. His tail nub wagged excitedly.

“Hey Trixie, I see something and I don’t want it to hurt you. I’m gonna go investigate,” Gus lied. He imagined her sweet face lighting up at the sight of him finding the ball. *I’m gonna find the ball and win her over* Gus thought with a grin.

“Ooo now you have to be trying to impress me,” Trixie smiled. “Well okay, I’ll go the other way, so you can keep me safe.”

Gus hurried over to where he spotted the bright hint of neon green. His heart skipped a beat. *It was the ball.* He sniffed around it to make sure it was *the* green ball. It smelt exactly like Trixie. He scooped it in his mouth being careful to keep it from squeaking so he would still be able to surprise Trixie.

“I scared it away! Keep your eyes shut! It’s a bloody sight!” Gus ran back to where he was facing Trixie. “Okay it’s safe,” Gus dropped the ball in front of her.

“My ball! Oh Gus you are so wonderful,” Trixie licked him ever so gently as a way to express her gratitude. “Thank you so much.”

“Oh don’t mention it,” Gus blushed. “You owe me a game of fetch.”

Like Trixie said the both of them got home in a timely manner. The clock in the living room struck 6am, the time Ariana always got home to greet her happy dog.

Gus showed Trixie his favorite spot in the house, Ariana’s queen sized bed.

“I’m beat,” Gus yawned loudly. “Wanna take a nap?”

“Sounds lovely,” Trixie said.

Both dogs snuggled up together in the center of the bed, snoring in unison.

The front door creaked open and notified Ariana's security system that someone opened the door. It was Ariana and Sandra. Ariana was still in her scrubs while Sandra was in her pajamas coming home in the early hours of the morning.

"Thank you for treating me to breakfast. I got it next time," Ariana took off her shoes and Sandra followed her into the house.

"Oh my gosh, look at them. I'll worry about how Trixie got here later. They love each other!" Sandra referred to the two sleeping dogs.

"That takes care of us planning their first playdate," Ariana smiled.

From that day forward, Gus and Trixie were inseparable. They did everything together from chasing squirrels and barking at birds. And little Gus would never have the feeling of being lonely ever again.

Honorable Mention: Cathy Maziarz

Aldie, VA

Whispering Flags

The wind breathed against the window jarring me from sleep. My fur alarm clock must not have been set. I slowly pulled the shades up from my eyes and peered over the covers towards the end of the bed. He was still sleeping... but he was aware of my every movement. He had a built-in radar system, as powerful as his nose, and I knew that it was only a matter of time before he'd pick up the blurb on his screen... my eyelids had moved. I wanted to lower the blinds and turn my ship around, back to the direction of my dreams. I was not ready for today's battle; I did not want to face the news I had received yesterday.

But it was too late. Like a submarine that had been resting in the depths of the ocean, it was now surfacing; the Navy's finest, cutting through the dark waters of the bed. A periscope, a head, surfaced from the rolling waves of the covers. I could see his ears perked and his head tilted. Like a torpedo fired off the port bow, his fluffy tail came to life, pounding the warm waters. I reached out across the depths and scratched him behind the ears; I waved the white flag... surrendering my sleep and the warmth of the oceans.

Switching from naval warfare to amphibious, the sailor jumped off the bed, and like a Marine emerged from the ocean and invaded the shoreline. He sniffed and low-crawled searching on the smooth sands of the old wood floor until his mission was accomplished. I looked over the edge to see my boots dangling from the grips of his jaws; like the Marines, he was "always faithful," and like his breed, he was always retrieving.

I sat up in bed listening to the wind. The rain had finally stopped. All night it had fallen. I felt my pillow... soaked from another storm. My eyes stung as they opened wider. I moved aside a lace curtain and looked out of the tear-streaked window to the sleeping pastures. The sun was drinking its coffee... not yet quite awake, but the caffeine was slowly taking its effect as the land was beginning to take shape.

If I didn't know any better, I could have been looking out to the rolling hills of Ireland instead of Virginia. The muted green hills filled my rectangular picture frame. There was a thick haze that rose from the tops of the hills, an indication of the humidity that August would always paint the land with.

A bark pulled me out of the Emerald Isle, "Yes, Chessie, we will go," I responded to the impatient silhouette.

I slid out of the ocean of covers and onto the sands of the farmhouse floor. I picked up one of Chessie's toys and held it for ransom until a trade was made. Soon my boots, the POWs, were released and I could continue getting dressed. I put on a pair of running shorts, a tank top, long soccer socks, and my freed boots. I wrapped my long

blond hair into a low bun, taming the wavy curls that the humidity had already wrapped its fingers in.

Chessie and I were out the door faster than the rabbits that were shooed from our garden. I wanted to catch the sun before it became completely caffeinated. I was hoping to catch its slow rise in its delirious state of pinks and purples... quiet sips of its morning latte.

We stepped into a land that had been covered in a sheer curtain; you could make out images behind it... just without edges and definition. I noticed the red barn pushing through the curtain, and the stars and stripes that were pinned to its side. I stopped to watch the Buddhist prayer flags dance... the wind playing among the squares of fabric... their colors hidden behind the curtain.

This was my favorite time of the day; a moment of stillness; a small window that opened when night touched day... when they intertwined in one moment of beauty and peace. There was an unspoken reverence at this time. Animals sensed it. Chessie slowly walked ahead of me, with his ever-present stick jutting out from the sides of his mouth. I slipped and sloshed my way after him into the tall grasses of the pasture... his tail the only part of him I could keep track of. My skin became sticky as the heavy air pressed down upon me. I thought of the white prayer flag, and how it represents air. As I breathed in the warm, heavy air, I knew that the air *he* was breathing was hot and dry...rising from a desert void of water.

I looked ahead at the approaching hill, blinking back the rain that had gathered in my eyes as I thought of him. The land rolled ahead in layers of green. Ocean waves that had been frozen in time, never getting a chance to crash... yet holding that power within. A secret they kept to themselves. We continued to climb. The hills were bordered by a layer of trees... various shades of green and grey that blotted out the horizon. I thought of the yellow prayer flag, the one that represents land. As I felt the slippery grass and soft soil beneath my boots, I knew that *his* boots were standing upon a hardened land of rock and sand; a land that had been baked by the sun's rays.

The smell of the cows hit me before I was able to see them. We crested the hill as black apparitions appeared on the other side; their lower halves blending into the rising mist. Chessie and I slowly walked around the cows. Some moved with their tails sweeping like small brooms behind them, some continued chewing, and others stood still, staring at us with empty eyes. I watched as the ones from Texas poked their long horns through the mist... like civil war soldiers that had once walked this land... bayonets raised and ready.

Soon the smell of the cows gave way to a fragrance that dripped of honey. White and peach flowers were climbing their way up and over in a tangle of dainty vines ... clinging to the cracks in the old oak boards. I followed their example, stopping at the top to take in the view. The curtain had lifted away, and the hills and trees were taking on sharper edges and more color. To my left, round bales of hay were lined up in perfect

columns and rows, like a platoon of Army soldiers awaiting their marching orders. To my right, a gravel snake winded down a hill to a cattle guard.

Chessie had low crawled under the fence and was already at the water's edge. He sat staring into the mirror... fighting the urge to jump in. The pond, like the cows, appeared ghostly. The edges blurred and disappeared as the wetland grasses seemed to float around the perimeter. Hidden within the folds were small wading birds, their pronged feet leaving tiny prints along the shoreline. Chessie was zeroed in on the small force of invaders and within minutes of his patrol, the birds took to the air; another squadron that would have to find a new base.

As I looked out across the mirror, I noticed a Blue Heron standing in the shallows. He was so still and straight, that at first, he had gone unnoticed. Like an Air Force general, he stood with pride; his wings pinned to his chest as he stood at perfect attention. Like the squadron of wading birds, he instantly took flight. With one solitary flap of his six-foot wingspan, he lifted into the sunrise. His slow beating wings never touched the water, however, the wind from the wings touched the surface, creating ripples. I watched the ripples follow his flight across the pond.

When the last ripple hit the opposite bank, I thought of the green prayer flag... the one that represents water. It had only taken the heron ten full wing beats to cross the marshy waters... I thought of the ocean that *he* had to cross, and the bird that had carried him beneath its metal wings.

As we continued our loop around the pond, the mirror was reflecting the sun's sips of milky pinks and purples that spilled from above. I had made it in time. I stopped to watch as a red ball pushed above the horizon, stretching, and yawning above the trees...rising out of its slumber. I thought of the red prayer flag... the one that represents fire. The fire that burned on the horizon matched the one burning in my stomach. Sadness from the night before had turned to anger as I began to question what had happened. I wondered if the same fire burned inside of *his* stomach.

I continued to slosh around the pond's perimeter, each step... a thought. Each thought... centered on *him*. Chessie continued to lead the way, as he marked his territory and sniffed out potential intruders. We finished our loop with the sun directly in front of us, higher in its rise. It was fully caffeinated and had laid a blanket of light upon the waters, its fingers sprinkling diamonds across the surface and on the tips of the blades of grass. I looked up into the sky, to see areas of blue making its return to the stage. I thought of the blue prayer flag, the one that represents sky. I wondered if *his* sky was blue... or was it filled with smoke from bombs and gunfire.

As I walked slowly home, the sound of my mud boots hitting against my calves created a drumbeat. I continued to listen to the marching of my boots as my mind wandered to *him*. I could see his blue eyes peering out from the shadow of his brimmed hat; his six-foot frame covered in camouflage. A rifle held with controlled command across his chest. My nephew... a soldier ... who yesterday had to say goodbye to his

family. With packed-up bags and an American flag on his sleeve, he stepped into his boots for a nine-month mission he has been trained to do.

I walked over to the prayer flags that draped from one end of the barn to the other. Colors now visible... flags of white, yellow, green, red, and blue. Sutras, Buddhist prayers, were scripted in black on the front sides of the flags. The colors represent the five elements of earth, and when strung together, represent peace and harmony. They are hung from the tops of Buddhist temples, mountain peaks, and homes... where it is believed that when the wind blows through them... the prayers written on them will be blown out into the world.

I watched as the colors of fabric danced in the wind. I bowed my head beneath the stars and stripes... beneath the whispering flags. Like the flags, I whispered a prayer... a prayer of peace, protection, and love... to all of our soldiers... to my nephew... *prayers that the wind would blow across a distant ocean and into the desert sands of Afghanistan.*