

Trinity College Trinity College Digital Repository

Senior Theses and Projects

Student Works

Spring 2018

Modern Grievances

Claire Quigley

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, claire.quigley@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quigley, Claire, "Modern Grievances". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2018.
Trinity College Digital Repository, <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/700>

TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

MODERN GRIEVANCES

submitted by

CLAIRE QUIGLEY 2018

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2018

Director: Ciaran Berry

Reader: Lucy Ferriss

Reader: Francisco Goldman

Unauthorized reproduction is prohibited by copyright law.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
AT A HERMITAGE	1
AT A PETCO IN COOSCA COUNTY THIS AFTERNOON	12
AT A SPEEDWAY IN OXFORD, MAINE	21
AT AN INTERSECTION, WATCHING A MAN IN A PINK POLO SHIRT	37
AFTERWORD	41

to my mother and father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Woodard for his unwavering patience, enthusiasm, and mastery as my advisor during this process. His mentorship was instrumental in the completion of this project. I would also like to thank Prof. Berry, as Director of Creative Writing, and my readers, Prof. Goldman and Prof. Ferriss for their close consideration of my work. I am eternally grateful to the entire Trinity College English Department for making the past four years so memorable. You have not only shaped me as a writer, but as a person. Finally, I would like to thank my parents. Your enduring encouragement and support mean the world to me

AT A HERMITAGE

Francis Hubert Mortimer opens his eyes to the phosphorescent stars on the ceiling above. He counts to ten, and the alarm clock on the nightstand beside him crackles to life.

“A study emerged yesterday claiming that approximately 80 percent of the ice atop Mount Kilimanjaro’s glaciers will be melted in the next—”

“—five to six months,” Francis says in accordance with NPR’s morning brief.

He decidedly turns down the volume by spinning the pointy little knob on his radio. This morning, for a change, Francis can do without the bleak, however brief, reminder of all the ways in which the vast world that he lives in has evolved into a steaming pile of dog shit.

Francis inhales deeply through his nose and out with a whoosh, sending his breath to where his body is in need of some extra attention. Reaching his arms above him, he stretches to

the corners of his bed. Wiggling his toes, he points and flexes his feet. Francis listens closely for any new cracking sounds. His right ankle seems to pop one octave louder than usual. Noted.

Francis eventually swings himself up to a seated position. He spreads his toes on the thick shag carpet covering every inch of his bedroom like a fresh layer of moss. While the shade of the carpet is downright offensive, Francis has grown accustomed to the way it feels beneath his dragging feet. Although most of the apartment's 1970's décor has been buried beneath the eclecticism of its most recent tenant, the carpet persists.

The plastic stars pasted to the ceiling begin to fade as morning light seeps in through the bedroom window. Sounds of the hot summer day outside climb up from the busy streets below. Francis assumes a position behind the thick brown curtains that drape over the sliding door of his balcony.

He puts on a dust mask before peeking his head around the layers of fabric. The balcony is covered with avian fecal matter, and a peeling iron chair sits unaccompanied in the corner. On the railing hangs a bird feeder. Francis arms himself with an aluminum hook bar stored beside the curtains, and slowly slides open the balcony door. Inching his way out, he manages to grab ahold of the feeder.

The sun is blinding. Fleeting, yet blinding. Francis makes a concerted effort not to let his gaze linger on anything but the birdfeeder. He can feel eyes on him, coming from all directions. Francis hurries back inside and slams the door tightly behind him. The curtains follow. He takes a moment to catch his breath, leaning against the door, gripping the bird feeder in his sweaty palms.

He thinks about who or what might have glimpsed him on the balcony. He thinks about the type of people occupying his same airspace. Perhaps there is a young boy. Sitting at the

kitchen table in the luxurious 15 Central Park West, he is enjoying a bowl of vegan, gluten free cereal before he heads off to private school with his driver. No one will believe his story of the stranger with a hook. His mother coos, “Oh sweet heart, that’s just wonderful isn’t it?”

With a flourish of her manicured hand she drops a Xanax in her smoothie and loudly taps away at her iPad, adding new arrivals to her shopping cart.

The other kids at school will say, “Pictures or it didn’t happen.”

But there won’t be a photo op, because, as a precaution, Francis will be sure to never again replenish the bird feeder at 8:33 am on a Tuesday morning. Routine materializations into the public sphere are not worth the potential implications.

The child across the way will inevitably forget about the robot with affection for pigeons living in 25 Central Park West, and will eventually grow into just another fully developed spawn of the 21st century.

Reminding himself to order another bag of bird food, Francis turns on his heel, off to make the bed.

“Each of the four posts in either corner of the bed is fixed with round finial accents to add style and class without detracting from your comfort,” Francis says, mimicking whomever it was that sold this gargantuan piece of furniture to his Great Aunt Gertrude.

Careful not to pull too hard on the sheets, he shimmies the plush duvet to a center position on the mattress.

“Was that a rip?”

He bends over to check the corners of the mattress, which he has safety pinned to the sheets. Just in case.

“Pristine.”

He arranges the pillows in order from largest to smallest, back to front. He karate chops their middles for the optimal center crease.

“A rip?”

He gasps, bending over to check. Nope. All good, he smiles to himself.

Once satisfied, Francis looks around the room for anything that may be out of place. The floor to ceiling bookshelf on the wall opposite the balcony is, temporarily, arranged by publication date. For the last several days, however, he has been grappling with an urge to browse his bedroom literature in order of author’s last name. For now, he will leave it.

Grabbing one, two, three, Clorox wipes from within the chest at the foot of his bed, Francis wipes down all of the surfaces in his room. Taking the lamb wool extension industrial duster leaning against the wall with its companion, the aluminum hook bar, Francis reaches up to the top of his bookshelf, the corners of his ceiling and over the 43-inch LG LED screen mounted to the wall across from his bed.

All while humming to the tune of Steely Dan’s “Do it Again.”

Francis wraps a thick white bathrobe around his wide frame in order to protect his modesty, though he is alone in the apartment, and heads to the kitchen to fix some breakfast. The warm smell of coffee, set to brew at 8:45 every morning, leads him through the apartment’s narrow corridors. In the front foyer, Francis switches on a record player. This week, the theme is 70s classics. He fingers through albums in a milk crate labeled with the according decade, singing the alphabet out loud until he arrives at Santana. Francis pulls the vinyl out with extreme care, and says with an approving click of his tongue, “Abraxas. Noun. An ancient charm of the late Greco Roman world, linked with both Gnostic beliefs and magical practices.”

...

In the kitchen, Francis flicks on the overhead fluorescent light bulb. The cabinets in the narrow kitchen are an accosting shade of robin's egg blue, staying consistent with the theme of Aunt Gertrude's achromatopsia. The white porcelain counter tops are cracked where they meet the tile backsplash, presumably from years of disuse. A stainless steel coffee maker sits next to a rusty old toaster that refuses to quit. There is a small window over the sink, offering a view of the adjacent building's concrete backside. Francis has never opened the window but faithfully tends to the small succulents lining its sill. There is an old telephone mounted on the wall next to the doorway and a small table in the corner. Like his bedroom, the kitchen remains spotless.

Francis pours himself a piping hot cup of French roast, and reaches into a drawer for his favorite pair of plastic orange scissors. With the utmost precision, he snips across the tops of five Splenda packets, and creates a delightful cascade of white crystals leaping into the brown abyss below. He toasts two English muffins. One, he garnishes with crunchy peanut butter, banana slices, and a sprinkle of flax seed; the other, with butter and jam.

Tomorrow it will be the same.

Swooping up his breakfast, Francis matches his steps to the guitar strings that Santana plucks through the record in the foyer. He sprinkles a pinch of food flakes into the bowl of his goldfish Homer, his constant companion and confidante, serenading, "And she's tryin' to make a devil out of me."

The phone rings and Francis' ebullience dissipates.

"This is the residence of Francis Hubert Mortimer," he answers.

“Yes, hello Mr. Mortimer, this is Michael Charnas. I’m calling from the development team over at Riverdale Realty Trust. I believe my colleague spoke with you a few days ago regarding the new ownership of your building.”

“Your belief is accurate.”

Covering the mouthpiece of the phone, Francis makes an exasperated face at Homer. Rolling his eyes, he says, “Can you believe this guy?”

“Right, well – ”

“Michael, I will say to you what I have already said to your dim witted colleague this past Friday afternoon at approximately 3:23 pm. I know the precise acreage of this block and exactly how much Riverdale paid in its recent acquisition. I have calculated the taxes, insurance and carrying costs of the empty properties. If, and only if, I ultimately agree to relocate, it will be on my terms. You will serve as my personal realtor in determining my next living quarters and I will walk away with perhaps more, but certainly no less, than the market price for this unit after its renovation. Finally, I refuse to entertain your negotiations until I am the last tenant remaining in this building.”

“Yes, sir, well I’m afraid – ”

“If that is all, Michael, my English muffins are getting cold.”

Francis hangs the phone back up on the wall.

...

He is completely lying, of course. He knows how evictions work. He probably knows more about evictions than Michael’s entire development team. But he can’t bear the thought of

stepping outside, of moving to a germ-filled apartment, of strangers, with dirty hands, placing his life in boxes and transporting them in grimy vehicles.

The night before the great Gertrude Mortimer died peacefully in her sleep at her Santa Barbara estate, she penned brief instructions for her last will and testament onto a handkerchief: “As for the New York properties, leave them all to Francine’s grandson, the one who can’t stand to be around any of us. That will cause a scene.”

Gertrude was right.

Francis hadn’t spoken to anyone in his family since he turned 18 and moved downtown. Consequently, plenty of people had plenty to say about his inheriting 457 million dollars worth of New York real estate. Distant relatives flanked by high profile lawyers were incessantly knocking on his old front door. *New York Times* reporters chased him down the street, back when he could still manage to walk down the street, eager to catch a picture of the black sheep of the Mortimer family.

Francis made only one statement during the entire scandal, to a particularly domineering reporter. He said, “There may be some nice people in the world, you know, I just don’t happen to be related to any of them.”

Francis wanted nothing to do with any of it. And eventually, he wanted nothing to do with anyone. When Francis’ phone rang with the twelfth call from Gertrude’s lawyer, seven years ago, he was reeling from another painfully awkward encounter with the pretty music teacher that lived in his building. He picked up the phone and said, “I’ll take the smallest one.”

As he digs into his breakfast—brunch, now—Francis reaches for his iPad.

“Good morning, Francis. Here is the news tailored to your interests for today,” greets Siri.

Francis scrolls through this morning's news stories.

GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN ENTERS ITS 26TH CONSECUTIVE DAY, OVER PRESIDENT'S VETO OF GUN CONTROL BILL FOLLOWING DEADLIEST SHOOTING IN U.S. HISTORY.

Francis shakes his head. A familiar feeling of despair originates in his stomach.

POLICE ARE STILL SEARCHING FOR THE MAN WHO DROVE A VAN ONTO A CROWDED PARIS SIDEWALK YESTERDAY MORNING.

He's sweating now. Francis continues scrolling, searching desperately for some uplifting news.

MORE ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT HAVE SURFACED AGAINST SILICON VALLEY "EXECUTIVE CLIQUE."

He wonders how people can even stand it out there.

Francis eventually puts his dishes away and makes his way back to the bedroom. Switching on the 43-inch LG LED TV, he scrolls through the fitness channel, finally settling on a session of "zen yoga." He rolls out the yoga mat from underneath his bed and considers cracking open the sliding door to let in a breeze. Only a crack, though. He reaches for the door handle, and then changes his mind.

Better to hoard his zen from the turbulent world outside.

After thirty minutes, Francis is feeling adequately energized. He hops in the master bathroom's shower to get ready for work. He hops right back out 90 seconds later. He gives himself a precise shave. He dons a pair of crisp Dockers khakis. He shrugs into a white linen shirt. He always wears white; it compliments his natural olive skin tone. He winks at himself in the mirror, "Have a good day, handsome."

Grabbing his briefcase and a banana, Francis crosses the living room with a skip in his step. He whistles to the tune on the foyer's record player. It's still Santana, side B now, for the second time, and the song is "Hope You're Feeling Better." He doesn't know the lyrics yet, but will have them memorized by the end of the week. He'll know the lyrics as well as the note progression to all the 70s classic by the end of the week.

The living room features a large, L-shaped couch adorned with Gertrude's throw pillows and crochet blankets. The modern slab of a coffee table is currently covered with a 4,000-piece jigsaw puzzle depicting Australia's Byron Bay. Francis reminds himself to order some more puzzles in bulk. Standing in the corner of the room are four large telescopes.

The view from this room, Francis imagines, would be beautiful today. The sun is shining over Manhattan's Central Park and the city is teeming with people ready to tackle their days. Or self-destruct. That's their problem. Francis' living room curtains remain shut.

At the far end of the room is a set of French doors. Francis opens them to reveal a highly equipped home office. Two computer monitors sit adjacent on a wide oak desk. A large-scale map of the globe decorates the wall beyond.

"I'll never get sick of that commute," Francis grins to himself.

Francis powers up, and settles in just in time for his first class session to begin. One by one, faces from all over the world join his virtual classroom. "Right then, that's everyone. Shall we begin? Our lesson today is on object-oriented programming in electrical engineering."

...

Three lectures later, Francis finally has a moment to breathe. He leans back in his large chair, taking a nice long overhead stretch. He really knocked his talk on applied mechanics out of the park. Every one of his students was clearly captivated, he could tell by the looks on their digital faces. He loves when he can feel their excitement about learning through the screen.

A knock at the door sends Francis flying out of his seat.

Who could possibly be at the door? Is it the realtors? They wouldn't come here, would they? They can't do that, can they? He wouldn't have said all that stuff if he had known they would show up here!

His breath shortens. His lungs pump double time. He can't stop the sweat rolling down his face. Francis feels like he has no control over his own body, his anxiety has taken over. The tightness in his chest is rising up through his throat, choking him, and crippling him. He feels like he is going to faint.

He's hyperventilating as he racks his brain, sputtering, pacing across the living room. Is it his prescription delivery? No, no, that's not until tomorrow. No, he groans.

Frantically pulling at the ends of his hair, he walks in circles now. He tells himself to calm down. God, Francis, get it together. Wiping his palms on his pants, he makes his way towards the door.

Francis is comforted by the sight of the triple bolt lock. They can't get in unless he lets them in. Careful not to make a sound, he peeks through the peephole. Christ. He breathes a sigh of relief.

It's the delivery girl with his groceries. He recognizes her from her long braids and plastic framed glasses. She wears a t-shirt that reads, " Super Callous Fragile Racist Sexist Not

My Potus.” Francis almost laughs, but then she knocks again. Why is she knocking? Why is she lingering? His panic returns.

“Um, hi, so sorry to bother you but I checked under the mat like always and there isn’t a tip?”

He must have forgotten to put cash under the mat last night. Francis leans his head against his arm on the door. Such a stupid mistake, so unlike him.

All he has to do now is open the door and hand this harmless young woman some cash. That’s it, he tells himself. That’s it. Can he slide it under the door? No, there’s no room. Maybe he can just stick his hand out, she’ll just grab it and leave. She doesn’t want anything else from him.

Or does she. How can he know for sure?

“Hello?”

He wants to open the door, just to know that he can. He reaches for the top bolt with his right hand. It’s shaking uncontrollably. Francis has to remind himself to swallow the saliva building up in his mouth, but there’s a lump in his throat. He touches the top bolt, then pulls back. Why is it so cold? Is it always that cold? Francis wipes his sweaty hand on his khakis then reaches for the bolt again. He turns it slowly until it clicks out of place.

“Hey man, no offense but like, I know you’re in there. You kind of always are.”

Francis pauses with his hand on the second bolt. How does she know that? He starts to whimper. Turning around, with his back against the door, he slumps to the ground. Francis sits there listening until her footsteps disappear down the hallway.

He doesn’t want to hate people. He just feels better when they’re not around.

AT A PETCO IN COOSCA COUNTY THIS AFTERNOON

Alfie bursts through the layers of wood shavings. Spinning several revolutions around himself, he wiggles his nose, sniffing for confirmation of his growing suspicion. He rises up on hind legs. Freezes, with his tiny little hands hanging limp in front of him. Listens, his ears standing upright.

Alfie is no longer alone.

He puffs out his chest. In an amicable yet matter-of-fact squeal, Alfie says, “That’s my corner.”

The newcomer, who looks like he could benefit from a couple of go-arounds on the wheel, turns to face Alfie. His body is stout and stocky, and although he is bigger than Alfie, the extra pudge around his middle clearly weighs him down. His fur is mostly

white with splotches of dark grey. It seems to have lost some of its shine. He stares back at Alfie with dark, almost jet black eyes. Tired, too.

“Okay,” he replies, uninterested, slouching off to find a different corner to pee in.

Like Alfie, he is also a Russian Dwarf.

“Hey! Hold up,” cries Alfie, scurrying after him. “So, what do They call you?”

“Dusty,” he says.

“Oh wow, that’s a nice one. They can be so creative, right?”

“Before that it was Doggy. And before that it was Sabrina.” Dusty serves up another glare before stalking off to the farthest corner of the seemingly shrinking tank.

“Sabrina,” Alfie repeats dreamily, following behind his new littermate. “So where do you come from? How old are you? You look pretty old. Would you like a tour?”

Dusty nestles into a plush pile of shavings, ready to surrender to the weight of his drooping eyelids. “Water. Food. Got it.”

“What are you doing? You don’t want to play?”

“I don’t play.”

For once, Alfie is at a loss for words. He’s unsure how to respond to such an absurd statement, so he decides it’s best to just give the tour now.

Having had plenty of time to explore, Alfie sure knows how to give a good tour. He quickly combs the fur around his middle, and gives a tight tug to the ends of his whiskers. Spherical in shape, Alfie is about the size of a tennis ball. His fur is mostly gray, a bit lighter on his belly, with a thick, dark stripe extending from nose to tail. Alfie’s oval eyes are a brilliant shade of mocha brown, and perpetually shimmering.

He reminds himself to project loudly, takes a deep breath, and off he goes. Bouncing around every surface he comes in contact with, Alfie zooms around the space like there's a stick of dynamite pinned to the end of his tail. He points out the many redeeming qualities about Dusty's new tank.

“ – and right now you're probably thinking this place feels a bit too small for two strapping young rodents like ourselves, but I just so happen to be very, very good at hiding places. Watch, you'll forget I'm even here!”

Dusty cracks open one eyelid, letting his curiosity get the best of him. He immediately regrets this when Alfie erupts from underneath the food bowl in an obnoxious blizzard of shavings. Dusty retreats into his slumber.

“Oh, and, at some point you may find yourself crashing headfirst into a solid wall of invisibility. I can't see very far so I try to feel for the wall with my whiskers. You should too. Now, watch this.”

Alfie hops into the purple painted plastic wheel, shouting, “This is the best wheel I've ever run on. Like, ever.” He exits the only wheel he has ever run on to grab some water. “You should always drink water after the wheel, and don't worry, we never run out of water because They always bring more.”

Alfie rattles on and on. He goes into detail about every little piece of plastic, the always clean, always fresh shavings, and oh, the delicious food, don't even get him started on the food. It is a good thing that he remembered to project, though, because one of the guinea pigs next door is snoring up a storm and Alfie can hardly –

He halts. Then he listens.

This snoring is not coming from his neighbors, but from his own audience. Alfie plops himself down a couple of inches away from the sleeping lump of fur, silently observing him with curious, questioning eyes. He's not sure what to make of Dusty. Like, does he really not play?

Isn't that the whole point of it all? Playing?

...

Alfie has turned his attention to a stick that looks like it needs a good chew. Suddenly, a dark shadow falls over the sea of shavings where he stands. A familiar sweet scent wafts down to his wiggling nose. It must be his favorite time of the day.

He scurries over to his hut where he likes to hide when They come.

Their smooth, pale white paw slowly lowers into Alfie's world. Their paws actually aren't much different from Alfie's, except their nails are a wonderfully bright pink color that sends sparkles shining in every which way. They take Alfie's bowl away, then return, this time leaving small carrot slices scattered around the tank. They know all of his favorite spots, one on the wheel, one at the end of his tunnel, one on top of his hut. Alfie exits his hut to follow the trail, stuffing each and every treat into his spacious cheeks. He leaps with determination onto the wheel, wondering how he's going to squeeze this last piece in, when he hears an alarming hiss coming from his very own tank. Turning, Alfie sees that They are dangling their paw directly over the pile of shavings that Dusty is, or was, sleeping under.

The hissing grows louder as They get closer. They must not notice him. They must not hear his warning signs.

Alfie spits the food from his cheeks, dashing towards Dusty before it's too late.

But it's too late. Pouncing out of his nest, Dusty latches onto Their flesh with his two front teeth. Maintaining his grip for a whole two seconds, he swings back and forth in the air as They try to shake him off. When he finally lets go, he scampers off to hide under Alfie's hut.

"What the heck did you do that for?" Alfie asks bewildered. He looks skyward, but They are gone.

"Mind your own business," Dusty replies with a shaky pitch.

"They weren't going to do anything to you."

"You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know all of Them. Go away or I'll bite you too," Dusty says, this time hissing at his littermate.

"That's my hut," Alfie mumbles to himself. Dusty doesn't respond, however, so he trots away.

...

Alfie decides that maybe he could use a few miles on the wheel to clear his head. He's had littermates before, here and there when moving tanks around, but never one like this. He has never, ever met a hamster that doesn't play. What's that all about? Maybe he just needs some cheering up, Alfie decides. He is determined to show Dusty just how delightful his new home is.

When he hops off the wheel, Alfie heads straight for the water. Wheel. Then water. He is careful not to walk too close to his hut, where Dusty is either sleeping or moping. Alfie knows that he should give his new littermate some personal space, although he's still not sure why. Alfie gets along with everyone. That's why They have never moved him from this tank, because he's so easy to live with and so good at playing. Well, that and the fact that he's adorable.

Alfie is munching his way through his food bowl when the shadow returns. He is quick on his feet this time, and hurries over to his sleeping littermate.

"Hey, uh, Dusty? So sorry to disturb you, but just wanted to give you a quick heads up that, well, They're coming, and—"

Dusty shoots out of his nest and the hut. He spins around himself twice, then hops onto his hind legs in a defensive position, with his nose wiggling up in the air and his two front teeth clicking together in warning. "What? When? Where?"

"Okay, you need to cool it," Alfie says, fluffing up his own coat and whiskers.

"You have three seconds to tell me what's going on," Dusty says, switching positions now to lie on his back facing upwards, baring his two front teeth with his paws outstretched in front of him. It's a mildly intimidating pose.

"We're going out."

"We're going what?"

"Out, Dusty! We're going out! To see the sights, get some exercise; maybe stop for a few treats along the way. Trust me, you're going to love this."

Dusty doesn't have much time to argue before They scoop him up into a surprising embrace. A rainbow assortment of brilliant warm colors wraps around his

middle. They are warm and tender, so different from the shavings he is used to. Dusty is enveloped in a sweet, perfumed scent unlike anything he has ever smelt before. The air around him becomes colder and lighter as They carry him higher. He can feel his airways opening up. Now below him, he hears the tail end of Alfie's warning, "No biting!"

They lower Dusty down until he finds himself standing on a hard surface. He inches forward, discovering that the surface surrounds him on all sides. It's a bubble.

He has seen one before, in his old cage. They randomly dropped it in there one day, adding to the assortment of junk that They littered his cage with. It took up so much room, too much room; Dusty didn't know what to do with it. They never put him inside. They never took him outside. They never did anything with him. He did find, though, that when his hunger was too much to bear, the ball was fairly edible.

Leaning forward again, Dusty begins to run. He turns to his right and then left, letting the ball tip over in every direction. He can't see beyond the bubble, but feels surprisingly comfortable roaming free. Occasionally, a gentle push from outside sends the ball in a different direction, changing Dusty's path to keep him out of harm's way.

They're watching over him.

...

When he is eventually returned to his tank, Dusty has completely lost track of time. He joins Alfie by the food bowls, having worked up quite the appetite. Alfie takes a moment to breathe between mouthfuls, "So, what'd you think?"

"We really get to do that everyday?"

“Of course, silly. Welcome to the land of playing, eating, sleeping, and playing.”

“I could get used to this,” Dusty says, plopping himself down next to his littermate.

He’s beginning to feel guilty about the way he’s been treating Alfie. This place isn’t so bad after all. Actually, he’s realizing that it’s pretty great. Enjoying a delicious meal, after a delightful spin in the bubble, sitting next to his new friend. Maybe he was wrong about Them. Maybe They do care.

Dusty and Alfie are leaning over their food bowls together. They’re intently focusing on chewing every last bit of their bowls, with their whiskers and tails twitching happily.

A peculiar sound in the distance disrupts them.

It’s like a cracking, over and over, growing louder. It seems to be getting closer. Something’s not right.

Alfie spits the food from his cheeks, scurrying to the front corner of the tank. He rises up on his hind legs, listening. He wiggles his nose, smelling. Times like these he wishes he could see.

The sound is getting stronger, louder, and angrier. There are other noises now, splintering, crashing. Low-pitched wails can hardly be heard over the incessant cracking. It’s an awful racket, an awful noise.

Alfie is petrified now. What are They doing? He turns around to see Dusty scampering towards the hut to hide. Alfie moves to join him.

But then, something happens. Something that neither of them can really make sense of. Something that no one, ever, can really make sense of. Something happens.

The cracking sound is on top of them now. Every single crack sends pieces of blazing heat, at a speed unimaginable, straight into their tank.

Everything just, shatters.

The invisible walls around them, the edges of their world, disintegrate in a matter of seconds. The water bottle bursts. A sharp pain punctures the air. Shavings are replaced by shards of glass.

Dusty, sheltered under the plastic purple hut, desperately digs into the sharp shavings. He is trying to hide but there is nowhere to hide. Should he run? There's nowhere to run. He doesn't even know what he's running from. He knows he shouldn't have let his guard down around Them. He knows They couldn't be trusted.

He tries to squeal to Alfie but nothing can be heard over the cracking.

There is no telling how long Dusty waits.

When the noise ceases, what follows is a silence more deafening.

Dusty can't stop shaking. His body stings. He attempts to lick a wound on his right side, but discovers something sharp lodged into his fur. He tries to squeak but nothing comes out. He wills himself to try again.

"Alfie?" When there's no response, Dusty inches his head out of the hut.

His littermate is lying facedown in the center of the tank, motionless. He must be playing dead. Alfie has always been so good at playing.

AT A SPEEDWAY IN OXFORD, MAINE

I open my eyes to some fat kid going in on an orange creamsicle.

He steps out of dodge as I jump from the bed, already hunting for my clothes. I look around the empty bedroom, squinting from the sun sneaking in through the plastic blinds.

“Kid, get back in here with that thing, dripping every—well, hello there.” Mikey stands in the doorway for a few seconds, slowly tilting his head to the side with a hungry grin while I try to untangle my white tank top.

“Hey moron,” I hiss, snapping my fingers in his face, “what are you doing showing this model right now?”

“Well, shit I thought you slept at your place last night. Why didn’t you? I fell asleep at my brother’s.”

“Poker night at Johnny’s next-door was too loud, couldn’t sleep. What time is it?”

“Half past ten. Hey, aren’t you racing today?”

“Yeah. I’m making a run for it,” I say as I hurry past him, throwing a wink in his direction, “see you at the finish line, baby.”

I grab the creamsicle from the kid still standing there and duck into the kitchen hiding behind a sea of lemon scented linoleum. Mikey follows behind, holding the wailing child out in front of him at arm’s length. “Well, I think someone’s got a brain freeze!”

As soon as the distracted parents have their hands full, I slip through the front door.

“Watch your step,” hisses Mikey as I step into thin air, tumbling three feet to the ground out the front door of the modular home. Luckily, the model I chose last night has recently been upgraded and now stands on a fresh patch of green turf. A sea of modular homes, elevated above a concrete lot, surrounds me.

I toss the creamsicle, haul my ass up and head for Main Street. It’s racing time.

Nobody likes racing, by the way.

Liking it isn’t enough. I like to go to the lake. I like to sleep in late. I don’t like to drive stock cars.

I fucking love it.

I’ve never been much of a smoker. Like, cigarettes, I mean. But, I can imagine what that desperate need for nicotine feels like. When Tuesday rolls around, and I have a whole other night of waiting, oh yeah, that’s when it really hits me. My hands get all

shaky, I ruthlessly bite my lip, start fussing with my hair. I can't focus on anything, not for the life of me.

Pat, my boss at the casino, he always thinks I'm like strung out or something during my Tuesday night shifts. Yeah, Pat, wouldn't that be nice. Only addiction I've ever known is racing, and that thing has had me wrapped around its finger for as long as I can remember.

Just sitting in that driver's seat, strapped up so tight I can hardly breathe. Or, maybe that's the adrenaline, the kind that knocks the wind out of you. A lot of people will never know that kind of adrenaline for as long as they live.

For me, it starts in my fingers then shoots up my arms. It's a tingling feeling, like red-hot charging up through my veins. I got so fired up during my first race that my Dad had to tell me to keep my damn hands on the wheel. My right arm—a mind of its own, that thing—kept banging on the roof of my car, while I shouted, “Come on, baby, come on!”

That was my first race. And that is really the only way it goes. There's hate or there's love, but there's no room for liking.

I've had an RV parked about four minutes down the road from Mike's Modulars for about five years now. On the left side of the street, I pass a sign selling dry kindling for 15 bucks and inhale a lot of dust. But, on the right side, shining so bright and standing so tall, is Oxford Plains Speedway, my sweet slice of paradise.

The track is massive. I bet a lot of people pass this place on some random trip through Maine and do a triple take. A sandy parking lot and some tiny little ticket booths are the only things that stand between Route 26 and the main grandstands. The skyboxes

at the top of the metal structure are white, with OXFORD PLAINS SPEEDWAY painted in tight red letters over the entrance. It's a bit faded so they've stuck a sign on the side of the road now, too.

The racetrack is a paved oval with short straights and wide, sweeping turns. It's exactly 3/8 of a mile. It seats 14,000 people, so it's the "largest seating capacity of any sporting venue in Maine." I only know this 'cause the announcer reminds us at every goddamn race.

I hurry towards my RV to grab my gear for today. My plot is towards the center of the lot, and closer to the pool. Her name is Gypsy. I bought her used, from a mechanic that was working on a car for me a while back. My neighbor Joanna is watering her plants. Johnny's place is quiet now; he's probably still sleeping off poker night. I give Joanna a wave and she shouts back, "Good luck today, baby!"

Inside, my place is a bit of a mess. I kick some shoes to the side, move all the clothes from my floor to my bed, and, well, I'll get to the dishes in the sink later. I suck in my gut to squeeze through the little trap door of my bathroom. I look like ass. I rub some Old Spice on my underarms, smear some purple eyeliner onto my lids to match the purple ends of my hair, and tie the whole knotty mess on top of my head in a bun. I almost forget my lucky headband. Staring at myself in the mirror, I already know, "You got this, girl."

...

Standing in the pit entrance, with my cousin Jesse barking strategy in my ear, I don't even remember that girl in the mirror. I get really nervous at this part. My suit gets all itchy, I feel like I can't even breathe with the thing on.

“Okay, Macy girl, you got this one in the bag. Now, think of this as practice for Saturday. Do your thing. You know exactly what you're doing out there. Just drive, girl!”

I tune Jesse out just about as soon as he starts talking. He doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, anyway. Nicest guy, and a damn good racer, but for him, there's nothing more to it than just getting behind the wheel and driving. He's skinny, skinnier than me for sure, with an easy, wide smile to show off his crooked teeth. He's always wearing a different colored flannel, no matter the temperature, or what he's wearing on bottom.

This race is in the “Ladies Division.” For all of us tea-sipping, doily touting ladies, I guess. Not a single woman on this track thinks like a lady when they slam their foot on that gas. No room for ladies here. But still, they give us the worst time slot. We race first on Wednesdays, and then the guys' leagues have the track for the rest of the night. It's bullshit.

This Saturday night, though, I'm gonna be racing with the “Outlaws” for the series championship. A few lucky ladies get to hang with the big boys if they're good enough. And let me tell you, the boys do not like that one bit. But that's what makes it so fun. Their faces when I pull up next to them, putting pressure from behind, they give a quick glance over my way, and then back again when they see my purple hair like a ball of flame flying around my head.

They call me Medusa. I like that.

I look around at my competition today, while Jesse rambles on about driving with the heart, and yaddi yadda yadda. I joined the ladies division when I was 16. Twelve years later, I've got 6 championships under my belt and I've raced with the Outlaws, even the 250 once. People come from all over the place for the Oxford 250, because the purse is almost 200 grand and the winner gets 25k. It's actually the richest one-day short track race in America. The one time I raced in that I almost scrapped my way into the top 20. I didn't stop smiling for a week. It's not gonna happen this year, though. I would need to get a whole new fit on a car and I just, I can't afford a new body right now. Maybe with a few more sponsors. But that's alright, I've got the rest of my life to win the Oxford 250.

Looking around the pit entrance, the girls around me are young. They come from all over New England for these races. I know almost all their names. It's the same girls every year, staring each other down. Donna Chambers, she won the Outlaws championship last year. Jodi Sands, Tracy Somerville, the list goes on.

In stock racing, independence is prized. There's no handshake before or after the race, where everyone claps each other on the back and says, hey, you played a good game out there! The girls carry their rivalries from season to season.

And if my car goes up in flames in front of the girl behind me, all she sees is empty space between her and the finish line.

Chrissy Crowley is on my left. She's really good. But I mean, damn, she better be with all the fancy shit she's got. Her manager is Pete Mergner, who she pays a pretty penny for. His name is all over the record boards here. Her whole team is wearing

matching t-shirts and hats. Right now, she's got a team checking her tire pressure, wiping her mirrors down. Her mom is giving her a shoulder rub.

My mom came to a few of my races when I was still in high school. She hated them. She had to suffer through it when my Dad was racing, and I mean, look at him now. Can't blame the drinking on the racing. That's all him. She never thought I'd last this long, and I think she kind of hates me for it. I do give her a quick call after my races, though, just to let her know I'm okay. Think it helps her sleep a bit better at night. Just cause she knows the facts of getting hurt. Something could happen to me. People have died racing this track before.

"Go time, little cuz," Jesse's goofy smile brings me back to reality, as he slaps me on the back.

Mikey and his brother decked out my car this summer. She's perfect. The engine is from used parts, but runs so smooth. The number 86 is painted on the side in sparkly purple paint. Accents in green and gold decorate the hood and the bumper. MEDUSA is stenciled on the back windshield.

I take a deep breath and climb into the driver's seat. One by one, we all pull into a single file line, heading toward the track entrance. A piece of purple hair is poking out of my helmet, obstructing my view. I reach into my pocket for my keys. I have this fancy little cat shaped self-defense keychain, and use the razor sharp ears to chop off the annoying chunk of hair. The sound of engines growling around me makes it hard to think. That's probably for the best.

I can't see much from behind the wheel. The cars in front of me leave a cloud of dust in their tracks. I pass the grand stands on my right, behind a tall chain-link fence.

They're rarely filled to capacity, but that's only 'cause they're massive. We can always count on a group of regulars at every race, Oxford locals who spend their summers watching the races. I can make out a little girl in the front row. I wish I could wave or something, tell her this could be her out here. Turning away from the grandstands, a backdrop of tall pine trees borders the short sides of the speedway, with the pit entrance opposite the grandstands. Large billboards advertising local businesses are scattered around the track. All I can hear is the thundering engines surrounding me.

After one slow lap around the track, we're off.

I've got a good starting position.

I'm hugging the inside of the track. My grip on the steering wheel sends vibrations through my entire body. There's no one in front of me.

Shit.

Someone knocks into my right side, sending my back tires swerving. I gain control. Crowley pulls ahead on my right. I steer into her, making contact with the left side of her body.

The message is clear. *Get the fuck out of my way.*

Crowley gains speed coming out of the turn, and she uses it to position herself directly in front of me. I have to slow down, try to get around her. But someone's on my right now. Is that Chambers? Sands?

I can't see shit.

Jesse's in my ear, spotting for me from their section in front of race control. For such a squirrely dude, he always remains calm once the race has started.

It takes all the strength in my arms to keep my steering wheel steady, it keeps spinning wildly from side to side as we come up on the first lap.

“Alright, Mace, you’re in a good spot, stay behind. Keep speed,” Jesse tells me.

The chorus of engines around me is deafening. I don’t bother looking in my mirrors. I know there’s one car in front of me, one on my right, and many more behind, waiting for us to screw up somehow. All I can see out my front windshield is the never-ending stretch of pavement. Crowley hugs the inside of the track so that I can’t squeeze through.

We’re coming up on lap 2 now.

“Lap 2. Get funky, Mace. Gotta do something now. Room behind.”

With no one behind me, I slow down a bit, enough to pull behind the driver on my right. *Yes*. She took my spot on the inside, like I was hoping. I slam my foot on the gas, pulling up on her right. We’ve swapped spots now. Crowley’s not slowing down, so I gotta go faster. I try to squeeze her off the track, putting pressure on her back tire.

“Sands is gonna get behind you.”

She’s trying to do what I just did to her. Not today, sweetheart.

“Speed!”

I stomp the gas just as she slows down, creating a gap between us. It’ll be too much for her to gain in the last lap. Atta boy Jess! I’m head to head with Crowley now. Coming up on the last lap side-by-side. She’s fast. I can’t make a mistake. First person to slip up just a little, they’re out of here. This is where it really matters. Staying calm. I’ve got a death grip on the wheel, and my foot heavy on the gas. Gotta psyche her out. Very

lightly, careful not to lose control, I lean into her side, adding pressure to slow her down. My upper arms pound from the effort. Keep going, Macy. I'm waiting for Jesse's cue.

“Gas! Now!”

I slam down on the gas, scraping against Crowley's side until I have enough room to pull ahead and cut her off. Our cars scratching against each other sounds like metal in a blender. When she least expects it, I spring off, giving myself enough momentum to slam once more on the gas. Boom! I'm free. I cut in front of her as we're approaching the final turn of the last lap. I'm already screaming when I cross the finish line.

I gotta remind myself to keep my hands on the wheel, to slow the car down before I really lose my shit. That was a great race. She almost had me, too. Jesse's in my ear, “Damn girl, it never gets old with you!”

Sure doesn't.

They don't even give you a moment to breathe before you're standing up on this little stage, getting interviewed in front of the grandstands. When I say little, I mean a makeshift platform that they wheel out onto the track. Behind me, flags of the United States, Canada and Maine are flapping proudly in the wind, on an island of green grass surrounded by the track. The grandstands that I'm facing are packed. I mean, not all 14,000 seats of course, but still, a decent crowd. In all the excitement, I almost forget that the pipsqueak shoving a microphone in my face has braces.

“The great Macy Lewis everybody! Let's give a round of applause for this hometown hero!”

I smile and wave at the crowd. My red suit is around my waist now, and I partially regret wearing a blue cheetah bra under my white tank top. I fidget with the bandana at the top of my head.

“Congratulations! You made some tricky moves out there, squeezing out Jodi Sands to eventually make a pass on Christy Crowley. How does this leave you feeling for the championships on Saturday?”

“Let the boys know that the ladies are ready to dance,” I smile sweetly.

“Right, well, that’s—”

A shout from the crowd cuts the kid off. It’s from Ricky Madewell. I didn’t hear what he said, but I heard how he said it. And I heard the drivers flanking him burst into obnoxious laughter. He’s wearing a gray t-shirt from Harry’s bait shop, with the sleeves torn off at the shoulders. His blue jeans are held up with a belt, resting below his massive gut. He’s probably a foot taller than me. I think it’s pretty sad, honestly. Ricky Madewell is like the queen bee of the Outlaws division. All the other guys follow him around like a flock of ducklings. Loud, smelly, fat ducklings. I ignore them.

The kid laughs awkwardly and squeaks, “Is there anyone you’d like to thank today, Macy?”

“Um yeah, a huge thanks to Mike’s Modulars, the Oxford Casino and Resort, and my cousin Jesse. Oh, and they’re doing a sale on fireworks down at his shop. So check it out. Thanks.”

...

Thursday nights at the Oxford Casino and Resort are exactly what they sound like. The gambling tables are open 24/7, which is just begging for trouble.

When I turned 21, my dad gave my friends and me 25 bucks each to come play on the slot machines. That was back when he was only drinking a little bit, and boy was that the best night of our lives. Most of those friends have all left town by now, but they knew I was staying right here beside that racetrack.

Now, we mostly just get bachelor parties and the regulars. The worst is when some greasy looking man comes in with a young woman he looks like he picked out of a shopping mall. It can be real sad sometimes, the types of people that end their nights here. But, as far as work in Oxford comes, it could be worse. During the day, if I'm not racing, or practicing for racing, I work housekeeping at the hotel. I actually like going through the rooms and thinking about what types of people slept here the night before, what kinds of things they might've left behind. At night, I work wherever they need me.

“Hey, Macy, go get a drink order at table nine, will ya?”

“Sure thing.”

Pat has already run off to do something else. I've never seen a man so busy from so little to do. His rotation of dark green button downs are always perfectly ironed and tucked into his too long for him khakis. He's shorter than me, which he hates, and gels his hair into a comb over to cover the bald patch at the top of his head.

The three middle-aged women at table nine want cosmopolitans. They're doing a girls weekend, and read online about the Oxford Casino and Speedway. I stand there for ten minutes with them talking at me. One of them, with thinning bangs across her shiny

forehead and a chunky blue necklace around her thick neck, turns to me, smiling, and asks, “Do you know any of the boys racing here on Saturday?”

“Well, I sure do, but only by the numbers on their cars and the sizes of their cocks!” I join them in their squealing laughter, raising my voice six octaves higher, “I’ll be right back with those drinks, ladies.”

Three cosmos, extra vodka, I scribble down in my notepad. Pat is back from doing nothing. “So Macy, when are you gonna bring your boy toy Mikey in for a drink?”

“Now, why would I subject him to that?”

“Well, just saying, now that he’s finally 21,” Pat says with raised eyebrows and a judgmental click of his tongue.

“Is there a list of eligible bachelors in Oxford County that I’m not aware of? Maybe with the name Pat right there at the top?”

That shuts him up. Fumbling for a cellphone that has yet to ring, Pat storms off faking a pressing phone call. Beats me as to why anyone in this town gives a shit about who I share a bed with. They should be talking about my racing.

...

I’ve never seen something so beautiful as the Oxford Speedway at sunset. The way the light shines through the grandstands, especially now, so empty. Nobody in their right mind would come to this track on Friday, the night before a race, everyone knows that’s bad luck.

I never said my mind was right.

And I need to pick up the assumption of risk form.

The office is to the left of the parking lot, so really you don't have to go through the track at all to get there. But I never get tired of running my hands along the tire tracks, feeling the heat of past drivers, and the only time to do this is when it's empty.

Eventually I make my way over to the office and push the front door open to a narrow hallway. There's a lobby at the end of it, and from there, a racer's lounge and private offices for the owners. The lobby's unlocked. Probably for all the other racers that forgot to fill out their forms. Taped to the front door of the lobby is a sign that says, "HELP WANTED for All Positions CALL or Stop by the Office for an Application." Inside, the walls are lined with old photos of the Speedway. My favorite is the framed poster of the Grateful Dead, signed by Bob Weir. They performed here in 1988. Van Halen, too. I'm admiring the poster when I hear a door slam behind me. As I turn, Christy Crowley runs past me. She's carrying a stack of papers, and crying hysterically. I shout after her, but then I hear voices coming from the back office.

I step through the open door, and am struck by the familiar scent of drunk men.

Ricky Madewell is the first to see me. He's sitting in a chair closest to the door, with two other guys that I don't recognize on the other side of the desk behind him. A nearly empty thirty pack sits next to a radio playing a shitty song by Lynyrd Skynyrd. Aluminum dead soldiers are scattered everywhere. He flashes me a yellow grin and says, "Well, what do we have here?"

"Why was she crying?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Miss Macy Lewis."

“Let me speak up for the gentlemen in the back,” I counter. “Why did a 17-year-old girl just run out of this room crying?”

Ricky stands up, staggering towards me.

“Now, you’re the one who likes to dance, isn’t that right?”

My feet stay planted as he reaches for my waist. It takes a lot of self-control to remain still, when every part of me wants to rip the bloodshot eyeballs out of his sweaty face. But, I know not to struggle. I bet Christy didn’t, but I know.

It’s like a race. Waiting for that right moment to pull ahead. I feel his hot breath on my neck as he pushes his groin into me. The ducklings are laughing from behind the desk. I stay perfectly still, letting both of his hands slide up my body. He thinks he has me. He gropes my breasts, humming along with the radio. One hand remains while the other slides up, resting on my shoulder before reaching up to stroke my face.

Now.

I slice deeply across Ricky Madewell’s hand with my key chain. Good old lucky kitty. And while he’s writhing on the floor in agony and his drunk friends are trying to stumble around the desk, I bend over and swab his hand with my bandana.

Then I run.

...

“... largest seating capacity of any sporting venue in Maine,” booms the voice of the announcer above. We’re all waiting in the pit entrance, individual racers standing with their teams. I look around. There are a lot of racers today, and the energy is high. Jesse is

jumping up and down excitedly, pounding his hand against his chest. Scanning the lot for Christy, I find her a couple spots in front of me and make my way over.

“Hey, Christy,” I pull her aside.

“Hey, what’s up,” she says, looking at the pavement shyly.

“I have something for you,” I say, reaching into the pockets of my suit. I put the bandana in her hand and close her fist around it.

“What is this?”

“Have you ever driven a stock car with your middle finger sliced off? Not so easy,” I smile. “Now let’s get a lady on that podium.”

I walk back to my car, tying my hair back and cracking my knuckles before sliding my helmet on. I give Medusa a quick pat on the roof, a love tap. Then I climb into the driver’s seat, and wait for Crowley to pull ahead in front of me. I’ve already given Jesse clear instructions. Tell me whatever it is that I need to do to get Crowley across the finish line first. We inch towards the pit entrance. At the starting line, out the window of her car, Crowley waves the red bandana in the air. Ricky is positioned directly behind her and on my left. He grits his teeth.

Engines rev. The starting flag is dropped. It’s us against them now.

AT AN INTERSECTION, WATCHING A MAN IN A PINK POLO SHIRT

The first time she saw him was fleeting because she was in a car and he was on a bike and it was just a man in a pink polo, after all, so why should she care, given how little she cares about everything else?

He was pedaling toward her and then passed her open window. She followed his expression with her own placid gaze, looking over her right shoulder until he disappeared beyond the sloping street behind her.

It was the way that he was smiling. It was the way that he was smiling in spite of everything.

She returned her attention to the sun rising at the end of the familiar road ahead of her. “Are you even listening to me?” her husband whined from the driver’s seat.

No, she wasn’t listening to him. She thought that was rather obvious.

That same afternoon, the second time she saw the man in the pink polo, she was stopped in traffic at the green drawbridge and he was sitting on the rock wall beyond the sidewalk.

She resented him for the way he carried nothing but himself. Perched on the wall with one leg crossed over the other, he sat leaning back on both hands, watching the river.

She certainly wouldn't have noticed him sitting there if he hadn't been wearing the same pink polo, and she certainly wouldn't have stayed there watching him if he hadn't worn that same smug smile.

He stared out over the smelly low tide like it was the goddamn River Thames!

When she returned over the bridge thirty minutes later, this time with a wailing baby in the backseat, he was sitting in the same place, in the same position. She rolled up the car windows as they crossed the bridge because the baby, having just learned how to wave, was now waving at everyone and everything with reckless abandon, and she didn't want the baby waving now, waving at the man in the pink polo. That would be imprudent.

She saw him again the following morning when she was driving past the dog park that jets out into the river, about a half-mile in the opposite direction of the bridge, just past her own house. She was again driving somewhere for something, the way that she does. She was torn from her stupor by the sight of a man wearing a pink polo. Except this time he wasn't wearing a pink polo. Instead, he was wearing a thick flannel button down.

She remarked to herself that only a serial killer would be wearing a thick flannel button down on a hot day like this.

She took a real hard look at him through her open window. Harder than the looks she had taken before, because this time she wanted him to look right back at her.

He didn't. He sat on a bench facing the water with his hands folded in his lap and his face turned skyward. She twisted around in her seat and swerved only slightly into oncoming traffic in the opposite lane, able to make out his short frame, stout middle, and full head of choppy yet soft looking silver gray hair.

She didn't see his shoes, though, which was unfortunate. She could learn anything about anyone from the shoes they wore on their feet.

Finally, she had to tell someone about him. A few hours later, she called up her loneliest friend from down the street who ultimately agreed, over a glass or four of wine, that the arrival of this man in the pink polo was bizarre and, frankly, a bit unsettling. So they packed the babies in strollers and stumbled over to the neighbors, who also happened to be enjoying a bottle of wine, over which they expressed their concern about the man in the pink polo.

She proposed a harmonious confrontation. They laughed at that, so she laughed as well. Then a glass broke, a phone rang, a child woke, birds sang, and she was back on her own.

That evening, on that second day, alone again, she set out to do something about the man in the pink polo.

She was cooling down after a brief jog followed by a briefer walk to complete her exercise quota for the month. On a calculated whim, she decided it might be nice to explore that dog park she always drove past. The main area of the park bordered her street, and a walking path extended into the wide river, looping around a marsh fenced in

the middle. She was nearing the end of this path, returning to the main area of the park, when she saw him. A sour taste filled her mouth. He was sitting on a new bench. Her heart was beating faster now than it was during her workout. He wore lightly faded jeans that she hadn't seen before. On his feet he wore a pair of crisp leather boat shoes. She was momentarily confounded, expecting instead dirty sneakers or tattered flip-flops. They were probably second hand. This bench was positioned at the end of her narrow path, blocking her entrance to the main area. She thought this was rather insensitive of him. A bench that light could have easily been moved to make room for taxpayers like herself who enjoy walking this path. She knew that the clear logical course was to walk in front of him, and doing anything else would draw unwanted attention. She held her chin up high and swung her arms by her side with a purpose.

Then he looked at her, finally. He smiled briefly, and returned his content gaze to the river beyond.

She wanted to scream.

CREATIVE PROCESS AND INFLUENCE IN *MODERN GRIEVANCES*

I write my best stories when I am asleep.

I am fortunate in that I have vivid dreams, remember these experiences, and am able to recreate them through the practice storytelling.

This is a double-edged sword.

In the workshops I've taken at Trinity, I have created some of my favorite stories based off of my dreams. But naturally, when it was time to start my thesis, the dreams stopped flowing. Somewhere up above, the literary gods were sharing a laugh at my expense.

Consequently, the brainstorming process was, without a doubt, where I had the most difficulty with my thesis. I have a tendency to write stories about things that I know very little about. For example, an intelligent boy incarcerated in a high security prison, drug-dealing brothers running a South African slum, or a young Latina woman living through the gentrification of Brooklyn. Because I insist on torturing myself in this way, my stories have almost always required more research than they do writing. I always strive for authenticity, yet grapple with the guilt of misrepresenting a person, culture, or place that is unknown to me.

Over this past Spring Break, I was chastised by my mother for doing this yet again with "At a Speedway in Oxford, Maine." Chastised is a strong word. More like, seriously? You did it again? After several days of laboring over research, even using Google maps to simulate what it would feel like to walk down Oxford's Main Street, I

was pulling my hair out at the dinner table. She said to me, “Just write what you know.” Well, I’m a twenty-two year old living a charmed life at a private liberal arts college in New England. Who cares what I know? There are other stories out in the world that need to be told. Not for myself, but for those who don’t have the opportunity to do so. I have the gift of writing. I always have, and hopefully, I always will. But, until I have a story of my own that I think is worth telling, I strive to be the channel through which other, more important stories can be told. Nonetheless, my collection clearly reflects an attempt to move away from stories that I lack perspective on, which I will elaborate on later. Now, I will discuss these stories in the order that I wrote them.

My first story, “At a Hermitage,” was inspired by, actually, just the word hermitage. I had written this word down in my personal journal at some point during my creative writing workshop with Professor Ferriss last semester. I cannot remember why, probably just because I liked the sound of it. This, coupled with my frustration at the onslaught of distressing global news constantly popping up on my phone, had me thinking that living like a hermit actually sounds somewhat enticing. Through this, Francis was born.

Originally, I intended on writing a story in which Francis observes the same people every day through their Manhattan windows, until one day he witnesses something that causes him to leave his hermitage. As his character developed, however, Francis took control over the narrative. This story became more about his internal conflict with leaving the apartment, because he was clearly able to live a joyous, fulfilling life as a recluse, mostly thanks to 21st century technology.

I drew inspiration from several works of short fiction and film for this story. Alfred Hitchcock's movie "Rear Window," dissuaded me from having Francis spy on his neighbors. I realized Francis wouldn't do that, as this narrative is more about his conscious isolation from humanity. The documentary "Grey Gardens," was extremely helpful in shaping my narrative, especially Francis' background story of his family and inheritance. Additionally, I looked at Laura van den Berg's "Isle of Youth," and Quim Monzó's "I'm Looking out of a Window," as examples. These two stories write about isolated characters and how they observe the outside world.

One aesthetic choice that I struggled with was the inclusion of supporting characters. All of the aforementioned works feature supporting characters. My story is only Francis. I considered having a relative or realtors visiting Francis, but ultimately decided against it. I was struggling with how I was going to develop Francis as a character through narration only. This is why I incorporated 21st century technology. Francis is confident over the phone with the realtors and through the screen with the students in his digital classroom. However, when there is a visitor on the other side of his door, he completely shuts down. Because of this, I had to rely completely on narration to drive the story forward. I considered writing in a first person perspective to incorporate as much voice as possible, but found that a super close third person narrator was better in order to develop both Francis' strengths and flaws.

The other story in my collection that required intensive research was, "At a Speedway in Oxford, Maine." Over Trinity Days, I was driving up to Sunday River in Maine for a ski trip with my family. The drive along Route 26 is long and monotonous, so when the towering grandstands of the Oxford Plains Speedway appeared on the side of

the road, I did a quadruple take. There was a story there. I quickly reached for my journal and started writing down everything I saw, like the place selling modular homes across the street, the Oxford Casino down the road, and the types of local establishments along Route 26.

From there, I did the rest of my research about the speedway online. This included watching videos taken from the driver's seat during races, studying Google maps for spatiality, and reading league rules on the official website. Compared to my Francis story, this was more research, but an easier writing process. It was more natural for myself, as a feminist young woman, to get into the character of Macy. I wrote from first perspective because this story relies heavily on voice. I was able to include dialogue because there were other characters to work with, and the story took place over a longer period of time.

When I saw from my research that there was a separate league for female racers called the "Ladies Division," I knew that I wanted my main character to be a young woman. From there, it was fairly easy to develop Macy as a fierce competitor with a strong personality. However, this is where I struggled with writing about people and places that I lack perspective on. Was it fair for me to assume that these young women face gender inequality within their sport? I was imagining the worst-case scenarios. What if someone sitting in the audience at my thesis reading raises their hand and says, "I'm actually from Oxford, and there isn't any sexism." I struggled with the fact that I was writing about a real, tangible place, and could be inadvertently compromising the integrity of an establishment that I have never even stepped foot in. I considered changing the name of the Speedway, or maybe moving it to another state, and maintaining the details and characteristics of the setting. Ultimately, I decided to stick

with the Oxford Plains Speedway and strived to write with the utmost authenticity. This dilemma ultimately caused a shift in my stories for the rest of my collection, away from research intensive, longer narratives.

This is seen in my third story, “At a Petco in Coosca County This Afternoon.” I drew the inspiration for this story after a particularly long stare down with a hamster in a Petco. This, coupled with my experience attending Hartford’s March for Our Lives event. I wanted to use this piece to show how gun violence can occur anywhere, at anytime, to anyone. Even hamsters in a Petco store can have their lives turned upside down by a random act of human violence. This piece is shorter, and required far less research than my earlier ones. It was necessary to get acquainted with the body language and behavior of hamsters. For example, how they spit out their food when they’re threatened, and use their whiskers to accommodate for poor eyesight.

There are several aesthetic choices I made in this piece that are worth mentioning. I wanted to make this piece a pleasure to read, up to the point where it is suddenly not. The shift was meant to be sudden and surprising, as tragedy occurs. Additionally, I incorporated a ghost like perspective within this piece, with an ability to move anywhere in the story, altering between Dusty and Alfie. This perspective is compromised by the limitations of the natural abilities of hamsters. For instance, the shooting is described through the perspective of Dusty, so given his poor eyesight, mostly through sound and smell. Having never written a story from the perspective of an animal, I tried to find works of fiction to use as a guide. I quickly glanced over Paul Auster’s *Timbuktu* and Benjamin Kunkel’s “My Precidament: A Fable.” An additional aesthetic I’d like to mention is my decision to capitalize all pronouns referring to humans throughout the

piece. The purpose of this was to establish the hamsters' understanding of humans as a deity figure. The hamsters are completely reliant on "Them," for food, water, shelter and more. This was a stylistic element that I chose to incorporate after producing a couple drafts of this piece.

My final story, "At an Intersection, Watching a Man in a Pink Polo Shirt," was my first attempt at writing flash fiction. After completing my first three stories, I wanted to work on a shorter piece, with very little detail and characterization. This was the last piece I worked on, and required zero research, as it was inspired by my own experience. Once again, this piece was born from a short sentence in my journal about a time I saw the same man twice in one day. I was flipping through my journal with the intent of finding content that might inspire a piece of very short fiction. There were several pieces of flash fiction that provided me with ideas about how best to craft my own. Firstly, Kathy Fish's "Foreign Film" and "Shoebox." I focused on incorporating small moments that inspired big impact. Michael Oppenheimer's "The Paring Knife," and Gary Gildner's "Fingers," are other pieces that I looked at. I found myself really enjoying the process of writing flash fiction. The lack of accountability and detail leaves much more room for creative experimentation. Having always worked with page minimums in my creative writing workshops at Trinity, I do wish that I had more opportunity to master the art of flash fiction. It was through this thesis process that I discovered my appreciation for this genre.

The scope of my thesis took form naturally. I did not begin with a focus for the collection as a whole, but instead finished with four completely unrelated stories. Or, so I thought. Looking back through my completed drafts I found that all of my characters

were dealing with grievances of the modern world, all of which seemingly stemmed from my own personal beliefs and experiences. Moreover, these characters shared a fear of the outside world, and a fear of the strange. This is abundantly clear with Francis in “At a Hermitage.” His disappointment with humanity grew so overbearing that it developed into a phobia, and complete isolation. In “At a Speedway in Oxford, Maine,” Macy’s entire life has revolved around her obsession with reigning individually superior in an insignificant, almost decrepit racing community. Her narrow ambition has always prohibited her from venturing into the world beyond, until ultimately, a culmination of gender inequality and sexual harassment becomes enough for her to throw it all away. A similar fear of the outside world is seen from Dusty in “At a Petco in Coosca County this Afternoon,” as a result of the mistreatment he faces from humans. The shocking and morbid ending is meant to symbolize our country’s failure to quell the cycle of gun violence. Finally, in “At an Intersection, Watching a Man in a Pink Polo Shirt,” the main character directs her unwarranted anger towards a stranger. His arrival from the outside world disrupts the monotony of suburban dystopia.

I have considered many titles for this collection, including “All and Sundry,” and “The World Outside.” I jumped back and forth many times. I ultimately decided on the current title because it characterizes this collection as a whole. This thesis aims to tackle the ways in which the world can be unfair. The beauty of story telling lies in the way that these grievances can be aired without ruining the experience of reading about them. One lesson I’ve learned through this process, and perhaps most importantly, is that I can use my own art, the gift and pleasure of story telling, to deliver a message. A message that means something to me.