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The Molloy Student Literary Magazine Volume 16

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The Molloy Student Literary Magazine

Volume 16 (2018)

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Given sufficient content, *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine* is published twice a year in Spring and Fall. Otherwise, *MSLM* is published annually.

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Letter from the Editor

The Molloy Student Literary Magazine, produced out of Molloy's English Department, is devoted to publishing the best previously unpublished works of prose, poetry, drama, literary review, criticism, and other literary genres, that the Molloy student community has to offer. The journal welcomes submissions, for possible publication, from currently enrolled Molloy students at all levels.

All submitted work will undergo a review process by the Managing Editor prior to a decision being made regarding publication of said work. Although *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine* is generally a yearly publication, given sufficient content, it may upon occasion be published twice annually in Spring and Fall.

Interested contributors from the currently enrolled Molloy student community should send work via e-mail attachment and brief cover letter (including a two-sentence biographical statement) to:

Dr. Damian Ward Hey, Managing Editor, *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine*: dhey@molloy.edu.

Enrolled students who are interested in becoming members of *The Molloy Student Literary Magazine* staff may e-mail letters of inquiry.

Excelsior!

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Note on Content and Editorial Policy:

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Due to reasons of space, not all accepted pieces may appear together in the same issue of the magazine. If, for example, a contributor submits multiple pieces and more than one piece is accepted, the Managing Editor reserves the right to choose which piece is included in the current issue. Accepted items that do not appear in the current issue may appear in an upcoming issue.

All decisions made by the Managing Editor regarding publication or non-publication of any particular piece or pieces are final.

The Molloy Student Literary Magazine

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Vampyre

Meghan Bevan

The people in town knew about the castle on the hill. They knew what had happened there, hundreds of years ago. They knew what had lived there. They knew better than to go up there now. The story was the sort of tale that was passed down to children as a warning. Your great-great grandmother's sister didn't die so that you could win a bet. All of those girls didn't lose their lives so that you could go messing about with things no decent person could ever understand. The town was the sort of place where threats like that still worked on the young and apathetic. The gravity in the teller's voice was always enough to pierce their indifference. The townspeople passed down the story and with it, their conviction that what still remained inside that castle should never be disturbed.

The years had not been kind to the fortress. The wooden floors had rotted and stone had crumbled away. No one had gone past the gate since that night all those years ago. Whatever went in there now did so at its own risk. Sure, there was a certain beauty to the place if one was willing to look past its grisly history, the cobwebs, and the dust. It was hard to find that beauty once you remembered what other beautiful things had resided within those walls. She had been beautiful. Those girls had been beautiful, too.

When the years had passed and the national government became more firmly established, there was a movement from outside organizations who wanted to preserve the castle. It is a historical treasure, they said, there is so much we can learn hidden within those walls. The town put it up to a vote. Everyone knew better than to let those naive researchers past the gates. They might have had good intentions. They might

have been intelligent. But they would have been no match for what lives inside the castle. It would have been cruel to let them try. So the castle remained untouched for three hundred and fifty years.

For four hundred years the room remained dark and still. The door was locked, bolted, nailed, chained, and cemented over. Even the unluckiest of birds would never find their way in.

Eternity is a tricky thing for even the sharpest of minds and in the best of circumstances. Hundreds of years in a dark room with nowhere to go and nothing to do is a punishment no one can endure. Time ceases without light and motion. She wanted to scratch the walls, claw her way out. Her fingernails were useless against the stone so she scratched herself instead. The hunger gnawed at her insides, a constant ache, a companion. Soon, it became easier to sleep, instead. Once the screaming, crying, and wailing had passed, she was still. She lay down on her bed, her rage constant and numbing. She fell asleep.

Though her chest no longer rose and fell, taking in the stagnant, dank air, she slept. She lived. She waited.

The townspeople couldn't keep the world at bay forever. Tourists are relentless in so many ways, not the least of which is their ability to find the smallest towns, the cheapest hostels, and the most obscure experiences. Outsiders came to the town a few at a time, with one or two promising to bring ten or twenty in the following months and years. The town didn't have much to offer in the way of attractions but the day-to-day life of a village that had largely remained the same for so many years, even after the advent of cell phones and the internet, was a spectacle in and of itself. If tourists became bored of the place after a few

days, it was all the better for the people of the town. Their economy didn't survive on tourism alone.

They welcomed the visitors as best they could. The two groups didn't always speak the same language, but there was a hot meal and a sturdy barstool at the tavern for anyone who wanted it. Translators were few and far between, but the people of the town got on well enough with these interlopers and conversation grew in fits and starts. These conversations revealed two types of tourists to the town. Most of the visitors came to see the idyllic village and the impressive castle. Those people respected the limits the town had placed upon them. They took their pictures and left in a day or two without causing too much damage in their wake. The second group appeared later on and were thankfully fewer in number. They were less willing to talk to the locals, but when they did it was loud and mostly concerning one topic in particular: the castle on the hill.

The townspeople were uncertain as to how the story had escaped the limits of their county, but they supposed that a scandal of that magnitude could not remain a secret forever. The first book about the incident reached the town three hundred and fifty years after it had ended. The town's vehement restriction on anyone being allowed to go into the castle had not been able to quell speculation about what had happened there. If anything the secrecy had made things worse. Before long there were academic articles, conspiracy theories, and ghost stories more fiction than fact. The second type of tourist was often inspired by what they had heard on the fringes of popular discourse and they were hungry for truth.

Christopher and his friends were tourists of the second kind. Though their appearance marked them instantly as not being of that sort, their manners belied their true intent. Amongst themselves, they made rude jokes they thought the townspeople couldn't understand. They were boisterous and had

a tendency to be clumsy and messy with things that did not belong to them. When they spoke to the townspeople, in the tavern and at their hostel, they put on more serious faces. They wore wide-eyed masks with pensive frowns and spoke in slow, soft voices. With the townspeople, they did everything in their power to ingratiate themselves. The townspeople might have excused their rudeness, they might have gone back on their assumptions about the boys, had the boys not asked about the castle. Past their initial pretenses, it was clear that the castle and the mystery that surrounded it was why the four boys had come. It was the only thing they wanted to speak about. Their doe eyes lit up intently whenever someone gave in and told them something about it.

No one ever came forward and admitted that they were the one who told them the story. No one ever admitted that they told the boys how to get in. Perhaps some pretty girl at the bar whispered in their ears. There were other strangers in the tavern that night; anyone could have told. Somehow, the boys learned everything they needed to and they were ready to go inside.

The de-facto leader of the group was a man named Christopher. He and the other boys were well off and taking a year off between school and heading into the working world. Harold and Timothy were brothers, with Harold a year older. They were best friends and the worst of enemies and had the potential to be the rowdiest of the group. James rounded out the group of four, a quiet and intelligent man and Christopher's best friend. After being roommates in freshman year, Christopher had taken James under his wing and the two had been nigh inseparable since. James was the most scholarly of the group and had learned about the town first. He had been the one to introduce the legend to Christopher and an obsession had been born. Exploring the castle hadn't been the sole motivation for their grand tour of Europe, but it had been a significant draw.

James planned and researched the place as best he could and he was just as eager as Christopher to see it for himself.

They left their room in the hostel late at night, long after the innkeeper had fallen asleep. Christopher insisted that they needed the cover of darkness to successfully enter the castle undetected. Harold and Timothy were perhaps a bit nervous at the idea, but one sensing fear in the other declared that only a coward would be afraid to go at night. A brave man would go in regardless. The boys had learned enough to set off on their quest and not even the most suspicious farmer could stop them now. They knew which path led up to the castle. They walked the road under the light of a bright moon. No one stood in their way.

The four of them undertook their mission with surprising sincerity. Even Harold and Timothy who had no respect for what had happened here and where they were going managed to keep quiet as they hiked along. The castle's dark silhouette was even more imposing up close than it was leering down at the town from on high. It seemed even darker than the forest surrounding and trespassing the bounds of the castle's walls, absorbing the light of the moon like a black hole. The sight stole the mirth from each of their faces but left them with enough determination to carry on. Time had brought the castle's defenses low and with a bit of sportsmanlike maneuvering, they made their way inside.

The castle had been left exactly as it had always been three hundred and fifty years ago. Like a faded photograph, it bore the destruction of age while still preserving an image of a past long gone. The boys, despite themselves, took in the sight of the courtyard with awe. They saw the castle for what it truly was, a piece of history no one had looked upon in centuries. It was a marvel, even for those without the proper knowledge to appreciate it. James was the first to remind them of their

purpose here. He stepped forward and opened the large wooden doors, the entrance to the castle's interior. The lock crumbled under his force and gave them entry.

Once inside, Christopher turned on his flashlight. Outside, they risked being discovered but in here, they could not see without it. There were hardly any windows to allow the moon to light their way. Soon four beams of light roamed the walls of the entryway, struggling to illuminate the whole room at once. The sturdy stone foundation left most of the rooms intact. They were able to venture upstairs without fear that the floor might give way beneath them. There were marks of time on other surfaces; rats, spiders, plants had all made their homes here and the remaining furniture had been cast aside and rotted where it lay. Harold and Timothy regained some of their bravery and went off to explore in a way most archaeologists wouldn't have approved. Christopher and James let them go. They had another mission.

They searched for one room in particular. Her room, supposedly, where the town had imprisoned her for her crimes. It was not concealed, not within the castle's walls. It did not need to be. No one should have been in here. Christopher and James found it with ease and called the others to them. Taking down the barriers was a task for all four of them to manage. The nails and chain were rusted through. The locks gave way with a snap. A few scrapes with a chisel made short work of the crumbling cement and their combined weight forced the door open. This room was not like the others they had entered. The others were all in part open to the air. This room was completely dark, as though it were the heart of the black hole they had perceived while outside. They turned on their flashlights.

This was a bedroom. There was an old four-poster with the curtains shredded and one of the posts destroyed. On

instinct, they stayed away from the bed at first. This was tricky as it was one of the few objects in the room and it stood there large and imposing at the center like an altar. When they turned to it at last, they all jolted in realization. The bed was still occupied.

She lay there either dead or asleep, with perfect skin pale and cold as porcelain. Her sweet red lips held the only life in her monochrome complexion. Her raven hair spilled over her shoulders around and beneath her. She was beautiful and still and terrifying.

After the initial shock, there seemed to be one thing to do. They all dared each other to kiss her. This was too much like the fairy tales. She seemed to be alive. Even if it didn't work, didn't they owe it to themselves to check and see whether true love's kiss could break the spell? The girl appeared real, but there was still something off about her. Unlike the castle itself, she was untouched by time. She didn't seem to be a doll or a corpse, but there was no way to be sure. The boys fought about it for some time before Christopher gave in. He would do it and save all of them the trouble.

He positioned himself as dashing as he could manage without touching the girl anywhere preemptively. The other boys helpfully lit the girl's face to guide him. With a deep breath and a cocksure smile, Christopher leaned in and kissed her, long enough to be impressive to his friends but fast enough to give into his heart's desire to leave. Her skin was cold, but her lips were soft. Christopher squeezed his eyes shut as he did it. He didn't feel like a noble prince in least.

The boys held their breath as they watched her, waiting for even the smallest twitch of life. They waited on a hairpin trigger, ready to bolt.

The girl's eyes flickered open drowsily, as though from a gentle afternoon doze that had mistakenly lasted several

lifetimes. Her gaze landed graciously on the four men in front of her as she sat up slowly and carefully. She was a beautiful woman, that much was clear, even after so many years asleep. Her eyes squinted against their flashlights and the four men direct them towards themselves by way of introduction, though she didn't need light to see.

Her limbs were unused to motion and weight, but her strength returned. The four boy's fear crept over them like ice on the surface of a lake, real and paralyzing but consuming them before they realized what had happened. She stepped towards them slowly, curiously, her attention turning to each of them in turn. She stood in front of Christopher first, and inclined her head to him. She smiled. No one moved as her lips curled back to reveal a full set of sharp, jagged teeth, teeth that couldn't have fit inside her dainty mouth. She had no words for any of them. Those had been stolen by time and hunger.

She slaughtered each of them in turn. Her teeth and nails tore into them. She drank their blood and dropped their bodies to the floor. None of them managed to escape.

When she was done she stood above them, satisfied for now, and stepped gingerly on bare feet out of her room for the first time in hundreds of years. She felt the cool night air on her skin and breathed deeply with lungs that had no need of it. A circle of her loyal servants waited for her in the courtyard, their skirts swept the floor as they kneeled before her. They were the girls she had supposedly stolen all those years ago. They were the ones the townsfolk said she had killed. They had spread her story to the outside world. They had been able to free her and she thanked them with the gift of the boys' blood. Together they would be able to begin their work anew.

A Vampire Fiction

Kathryn O'Brien

It's just a game.

C'mon it'll be fun.

"Fun, my ass," Teagan groaned rolling her eyes as she squirmed painfully alone in the darkness, her right foot bent at an unnatural angle. It was a stupid game of truth or dare that led her to her current position. She never should've agreed to it. Her plans for that night were simple: after work, she'd order some takeout and watch movies in her pjs. And she was halfway there, already in her favorite pajamas, just about to pick a movie, when her friends, Megan and Reilly, barged into her apartment demanding she join them for a night out.

They were belligerent, not taking no for an answer, and simply resorted to pulling her out of her apartment, physically, and bringing her to the pair's shared apartment a few blocks away.

After a series of drinks that had them all feeling buzzed, the trio had left the apartment, moronically, despite the near freezing weather that late October night. And as they walked through the residential area of their mini city home, Reilly declared they'd play a game of truth or dare to 'spice' the night up. One dare led to another, and eventually they'd ended up at the oldest, most decrepit looking house in the city.

"You wouldn't."

"I would."

"Megan, don't."

"Why not? After what Teagan did to me last time we played, I think I deserve to dish out a little revenge," Megan said, her arms crossed as she stared intently at Teagan. She was

referring to the last time they'd played the game when Teagan had dared her to find and lick her then-crush's cheek.

"Oh come on – it wasn't that bad."

"That bad?! He was horrified and all his friends laughed at us!" Megan whined as she relived the memory of the fateful night.

"Yeah but I didn't dare you into breaking and entering!" Teagan hissed at the slightly shorter girl raven-haired girl.

"Oh, so you're not going to take dare. So that means you're going to chicken out?" Megan said with an all-knowing smirk.

"Don't call me that," Teagan growled. Her fists clenched as her eyes turned to the cement sidewalk.

"What? Chicken?" Megan taunted her with a snarky smile.

Again that word. Megan knew she hated that stupid word, and yet she was using it.

"Tea, don't listen to her," Reilly said grabbing the taller girl of the group.

"I'm not a chicken," Teagan said eying Megan almost viciously.

"Prove it. Go into the house and take something."

"Fine, but how do I get in? All the doors and windows are boarded up."

"Aaactually, there is one board that is pretty loose we could probably squeeze you through," Megan said with a sinister smirk.

"How do you know that?"

"No particular reason." That was a lie...

"Fine let's do it."

Megan lead the way towards the two story abandoned and decrepit house built in the early 1800s. The grass surrounding the house was dead weed filled with patches of dirt

scattered about, broken glass and trash were all around.

Rounding the house, Megan stopped just before reaching the back of the house at a dutch-door that was only half-covered by some plywood that was barely hanging on.

“Help me with this,” Megan said digging her fingers under the wood and pulling at it making the nails squeak and the door creak.

“Why would I help you? You’re the one that dared me to break into an abandoned and perpetually haunted house and steal something.”

“Quit being a baby and help me!”

Sighing, Tealan joined Megan and Reilly as they started to pull back the board just enough that a person could slide between it and the wall.

“The door’s unlocked, now get in there!” Megan hissed looking to her taller friend as she strained to hold it open.

Grumbling, Tealan did as she was told, sliding between the gap and quickly opening the bottom half of the door, squeezing in before it snapped shut loudly.

“I’m in!” Tealan called to her friends as she dug out her phone from her pajama short pockets and turned on the flashlight app.

“Good! Now find me something cool, oh! Like some jewelry!” Megan called back knocking on the wood that now separated Tealan from her two friends.

“You’re a jerk!” Tealan called one last time before addressing her new surroundings. Of course the only source of light in the room came from her phone but it was next to nothing. The side door she’d gone through to get into the house led into a small tight staircase with dust completely coating the steps.

The stairs going downwards probably led to the basement but there was no way in hell Tealan would go down

there, so the only way to go was up. Following the stairs up to the next landing, Tealan fiddled with the rusty slightly jammed door knob before the door finally creaked open.

Cringing at the sound, Tealan could feel her heart pang anxiously in her chest as she tried to swallow the rising anxiety hitting her body. She had entered into a hallway that was so full of dust and dirt she could pretty much see the clumps floating in the air. Raising her flashlight, she took in her surroundings yet again, paint peeling off the walls, dust caked every surface and patches of mold were in every corner or crevice and there were spots on the ceiling she could practically see into the floor above.

Looking down to her feet, Tealan jumped back when she realized she was standing on the edge of the ceramic flooring, the boards, normally below the tiles, were just barely there. Some had rotted straight through showing the basement below.

“Oh, shit,” Tealan hissed out almost dropping her phone. At this point she was certain she could hear her heart pounding in her ears.

“Calm down Tea, calm down,” she said to herself bringing her free hand to her chest trying to steady her breath. As she tried slowing down her breath down, she was almost positive she heard another person's voice.

“Megan? Reilly?” She called out hoping that it was just her friends trying to pull some stupid practical joke on her.

“Guys come out – I know you're there,” Tealan said, raising her flashlight and moving towards the room she was sure she'd heard the voice come from.

“Hello?” she called as she rounded the corner into the room. It looked like the decrepit dust-filled room had been a living room. In the corner was a piano missing a leg on the floor, a sofa with no legs at all, and its cushions torn to shreds, a

fireplace that had half the bricks missing and an old fashioned ugly wallpaper peeling.

“Holy...” Tealan stopped halfway through her comment when she heard some shuffling from a darker corner of the room and the floorboards creaking. Whipping her head around towards the source, Tealan gasped spotting a large shadow in the corner. It was large, scary and imposing and there were a pair of glowing golden red eyes.

That moment, Tealan felt her heart stop, turning Tealan went to make a mad dash for the door she’d first come into. Of course as she spun around she ended up falling face first into the floor cutting up her exposed hands and knees on shards of broken glass.

Scrambling off the ground, Tealan ran towards the door she’d originally come from ignoring the harsh stinging of her new wounds. Reaching the door in a matter of seconds, Tealan tried desperately to open the door but the knob had jammed.

“Come on! Come on!!” She begged trying to get the door to open.

Then with a blast of air breezing past her, Tealan felt her blood run cold.

“You’re bleeding.” A deep rugged voice hit Tealan’s ear, turning only slightly Tealan’s eye’s latched on the glowing golden eyes. Screaming, Tealan jumped back away from the figure but her feet never reached the ground.

Instead, Tealan felt herself drop into the darkness. She’d stepped too far back and off the floor. The hard cold cement ground of the basement came fast and hard, and when it did her right foot was the thing that hit the ground first. And when it did, Tealan felt and heard a loud, painful snap.

Crying out in agony, Tealan crumpled to the ground as tears started swelling in her eyes. Before the figure could reappear, Tealan picked up the phone beside her, shining the

light around the room. Finding the nearest wall, Tealan dragged her body to it, pressing her back against the cold cement.

Looking down at her leg, Tealan bit back on the bile that rose into her mouth when she saw her right foot was perpendicular to her leg. She tried to move it only for a wave of scorching pain to hit her ankle yet again.

It's just a game, c'mon it'll be fun! Megan's voice rang in her head as another wave of sickening pain hit her.

"Fun, my ass," Teagan groaned rolling her eyes as she squirmed uncomfortably and painfully. There was a loud thud that came a moment later and Tealan squeaked lifting her phone back up and pointing it at the source of the new sound.

She was genuinely shocked when the light caught the figure. The light finally illuminated the glowing golden eyed figure. It was... a man. He had curly raven hair, icy pale skin and dried blood covering his neck and staining his white button up.

"You're hurt," he called out. But he did not move an inch from where he was standing.

"Y-You're covered in blood," Tealan retorted with a slight stutter, pointing a shaky finger towards his chest.

"It's a given for me," the man answered all too nonchalantly, and yet the way he said it sent shivers goosebumps across Tealan's arms.

"Those eyes – you're not human are you?"

And in response he simply shook his head no, "Then what are you?"

With that, the man opened his mouth revealing a pair of razor sharp fangs, two on each side of his mouth where his incisors would be. Realization hit Tealan like a ton of bricks, she quickly pulled her body into a tight ball and tried to keep as far away from him as she could, but with her leg in its current condition she wouldn't be able to get very far.

“My friends are outside, they’ll come to find me if I’m gone too long,” Tealan spat out quickly to try to scare the figure in front of her off. Only for the man – no, the *vampire* – to answer her almost bitterly, “They got scared when the cops rolled by and left just after they helped you break into my home.”

Tealan realizing quickly she was the one at fault in the situation let out a small apology wincing when she shifted the wrong way. There was a silence that came over the pair for a brief moment, as neither knew what exactly they should say.

“I can heal it for you...” The raven-haired vampire called almost gently, “your foot.”

She looked up at him. “H-how?”

“I give you some of my blood.”

“Won’t that turn me into a vampire?” she asked. She still was in disbelief that before her was an actual vampire. She’d heard real ones existed, she even read about them in the past, but never in her wildest thoughts did she think she’d meet one.

“Not necessarily, a few drops can fix your leg and close those cuts on your knees and hands. But any more is addictive and surely will turn you into a vampire.”

“Fine,” She answered in a near whisper. The pain in her leg might’ve been clouding her judgement, but she didn’t care. She just wanted the pain gone. Her words gave him the permission he was waiting for. Slowly, the vampire made his way towards her until he stood next to her huddled-up form. Lowering himself to his knees, the vampire’s piercing gold eyes began to bear into Tealan’s icy greys.

“If I’m going to give you some of mine, it’s only right I take some of yours, isn’t it?” He said with sneaky smirk giving Tealan no time to react before diving at her neck plunging his fangs piercing her skin. Tealan let out a strained noise, unsure

of how to react otherwise, the sensation felt so weird like energy was being drained.

After a moment of sucking her blood, the vampire pulled away. His eyes were now a luminescent crimson red. Shifting backwards, the vampire licked away the fresh blood from his lips before bringing his own hand to his mouth pressing it against his fangs. A somewhat sweet smell wafted into Tealan's nose. Was it his blood?

"Remember, only a few drops." He said before bringing his wrist towards her mouth. Tilting his hand over Tealan's mouth, she felt a few drops of blood drip into her mouth. For some reason it tasted as sweet as it smelled, it tasted like some addictive sweet. She wanted more, immediately, but before any more fell into her mouth, the vampire pulled away.

Looking down, Tealan was in awe. Her foot was back to how it should be and the cuts on her hands and knees were magically gone. The smell of his blood lingered in the air and something inside Tealan wanted more of it.

Why did she want more?

"You were right, it is addictive." Tealan laughed at the realization before coming to a second one. "You never told me your name."

The vampire stood up holding his hand out to help Tealan off the ground, "I am Quincy Corthopp. Before you called yourself Tea, is that your name?"

"It's Tealan Hara." She laughed looking at the vampire as an idea came to mind. "So Quincy, would you like a friend?"

Don't Go Near the Attic

Kelly Farragher

An old, blood brick house stands tall next to a pleating oak tree, dropping leaves for the passersby to crunch their shoes on. The grass is yellowish green, and the flowers are slowly bowing to the seasons. Two windows on the second floor stick out like black, bulging eyes. That's my house. I've lived there all my life, in the bottom half anyways. You see, when you walk in the front entrance, there's a set of stairs leading up to a brooding, brown door, but if you turn left, you'll see a door with SpongeBob stickers. Yup, that's mine, and my mom's still mad about it.

Anyway, back to the upstairs door; the door I hadn't been through in years, since I was a child. You might think it's just a silly place where my family keeps their Christmas decorations, but it's not. It was a home to a couple. A man, Joe Runick, and a woman, Erin Jezi-Runick, lived there for a few years before my parents bought the house. The deal was that my parents could have the whole bottom half, if they kept quiet about the neighbors upstairs. My mom thought it was for legal issues, seeing how it's not legally an apartment and the couple could get in trouble for living there, then inevitably become homeless.

Once we moved in, everything was dandy. Erin would even babysit my sister and me sometimes when our parents were away. I was extremely young, so nothing seemed off to me. But as I got older, the couple became crazier. Joe lied about Erin having cancer, while he actually had it himself and quickly passed before we could even tell he had lied.

After that, Erin was a woman no more. She was more a creature of the night, creepy and scarce. She rarely opened her

door to speak to us, but went wandering the streets at all hours of the night. She would scream at the top of her lungs at the devil's hour, and then sing until the sun came up. She would move furniture and vacuum when the moon glowed through the windows; a lunatic my mom called her. She always claimed there were people in the ceiling and walls, but we knew there was nothing there.

Being alone was driving her crazy. We wanted her to leave, but she refused to look for a new home. Years went by with her living, if you could even call it that, upstairs. It was finally my time to go away to college, and I decided upon going far, from New York to North Carolina. But, my first year wasn't so hot, therefore, I came back to live with my family. . .and the crazy lady upstairs. But to my surprise, she was gone.

Unfortunately, while I was away at school, the lady upstairs had passed onto her next life. While this was disturbing to hear, my family knew it was for the better. Whatever made her so crazy, we still do not know, but we do know that she wasn't happy. So, we prayed she was in a better place and moved along.

Now, with a vacant quasi-apartment, there were only two things to do: clean it up and make it mine! That was the plan. We would get rid of all of her items, deep clean the walls and floors, decorate, and call it home, but it could never be that simple. Going through her items was difficult. Neither Erin nor Joe had any family left, so we were left to throw out all of her memories; the post cards, the yearbooks, the anniversary cards, everything. But upon further inspection, there was something unsettling about Erin's possessions.

The anniversary cards were dated as far back as 1890. All of the letters were written to Erin Jezi, although they weren't signed by Joe, but by various other men, like Drack and Drake. "Erin must have been named after her mother or

grandmother and these letters were from when they were writing men overseas,” I thought, convincing myself that there was nothing odd about it. People have told me that I jump to conclusions, so I threw the cards out and let the idea of them slip my mind.

Moving on to her yearbooks, I noticed that she looked the same each and every year, from high school to college, like she never grew older. “Huh, wish I could ask her what moisturizer she used.” I said aloud as I threw the books into a brown, beaten-up cardboard box. One yearbook was left on the floor, so I turned to her page to confirm my suspicions; she looked exactly the same, but there was something else that was odd about the yearbook. “Erin Jezi. . . and Jackie Jezi? Who is Jackie?” I thought. The photo next to Erin’s showed a young girl who looked almost identical to her. They both had the same beaming blue eyes, so bright they were almost glowing.

“So, she had a sister? I wonder if mom knows?” I said as I placed the book next to the stairs, adamant on remembering to show my mother. I continued working through the room, finding small oddities, strictly golden jewelry, some dentures in a container with a smiley sticker on the top (that I couldn’t even stomach to look at), and an oddly shaped bed. “Hmm, that kind of looks like a coffin. The goth aesthetic is real in here. I think it would skeeve me out, trying to sleep in a bed like that; but some people like it. I guess she was one of them.” I tried to disregard the hairs that stood on edge at the nape of my neck. My mom suddenly called up the stairs to let me know that she was home. I went down to tell her about Erin’s mystery sister in the year book.

“Well, that’s weird. She never told me she had a sister. Maybe something happened before we moved in. I wouldn’t blame her for not wanting to talk about it. It would have been nice to know however, seeing as this Jackie lady could have

wanted some of her sister's things, or at least to know she's passed," my mom said as she handed me back the book.

Feeling slightly saddened knowing that Jackie was out there somewhere with no knowledge of Erin's untimely death, I wallowed back upstairs to finish the cleaning. The last place to clean was the kitchen. It was filled with bowls and cups stained reddish brown, golden cutlery instead of the average silverware, and lots of Tupperware full of what seemed to be spaghetti.

"Soo much red sauce," she said aloud while rummaging through the fridge, "Pasta, Pasta, Pasta. She must have been Italian or something. How could anyone eat this much tomato sauc-" BANG! A heavy thud came from above me, except I was upstairs and above me was the real attic, like "little whole in the ceiling, takes a ladder to get up" attic. I stood quietly, listening for more noises.

"We don't keep anything in the attic," I thought "because we didn't even have access to it. You know what, it's probably a bird or a squirrel." Another bang comes from above me and I jumped. "What the fuck could that be? Is this what Erin was talking about?" I fearfully thought as another thud came crashing through the ceiling tiles.

I quickly ran into the bed room and threw open the closet door that had the attic hatch in it. Inside of the closet, the walls were wetly gleaming as seemingly fresh red liquid dripped down to the floor, which was covered in dusty, beige bones. "This has to be some sick joke. Halloween is next week, she must have been planning something," I thought to myself, attempting to keep myself from having a panic attack. "These aren't even real" I said as I kicked the bones with my sneaker. Another noise fell from the ceiling. I took a deep breath, steadied my mind, and looked up. To my surprise, I gazed into glowing blue eyes peering out of the darkness. Before I could even think to scream, everything went black.

When I woke up, I was sitting in the bathroom. All I could see was red, pooling over my white floor tiles, rolling down my arm, coming from my neck. I wearily stood to see myself in the mirror, left hand over the bloody wound while I craned my neck to make sure there weren't any other openings. I took a deep breath and removed my hand to reveal two holes, one next to the other, and some faint indents around them; like a bite mark. I was shocked, nervous, confused...but not disgusted.

The blood looked enticing, delicious almost. I didn't know why, but I smiled, a wide smile with a slight glow in my blue eyes and noticed I looked sharper than ever. I cleaned up my bloody body and rosy floor and continued about my day.

I've been living up here for over a year now and whenever I hear a thud in the attic, I open the closet door and give her something juicy to eat.

Going to See Evangeline

Erica Brienza

It was an unseasonably cool morning on the docks. The smell of salt water and rotting fish penetrated the air and filled my lungs. I stood quietly at the edge of the dock, holding a bundle of rope under one arm and a pair of thick black work gloves under the other. In the distance, plowing through the glass like waters, was Mister Augustine La Fontaine's fishing boat, Big Momma. Mr. La Fontaine is an old, graying sea dog who also happens to be my boss and mentor. He took me under his wing when I was a child and molded me into the strong and tough dock hand I am today.

Big Momma slowed down as she came in to dock. Mr. La Fontaine stood on the bow of the boat directing his helmsman, Smitty Wardworth, to get as close to the dock as possible.

"Good mornin' sir!" I shouted as I tossed him one end of the rope. He caught it midair with one hand and quickly tied it to the boat's cleat.

"Mornin' Boy! Make sure you get that cleat hitch real tight now; Don't want Big Momma floatin' 'way".

"Yessir!"

I slipped the thick work gloves on and went to work. I tied the rope around the cleat as tight as I could then ran back to the end of the dock. Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty were climbing down the side of the ship and onto the dock beside me. Before I could say anything, Smitty thrust a dead largemouth bass into my arms.

"Start unpackin' Boy." He said thumping the back of my head with the palm of his hand.

Smitty doesn't like me very much because he wanted to be Mr. La Fontaine's apprentice, but Mr. La Fontaine chose me instead. So Smitty treats me like shit, but I don't mind. He's no real threat to me. He'll just occasionally razz me but I can deal with it. I climbed the ladder and up onto the ship, then down to the hull where the fish are kept on ice.

I tossed them from the hull, two at a time, up to the top deck. Once I had about two dozen out of the hull, I climbed back out. Smitty was standing on the dock smoking a cigarette with a sour look on his face.

"Took you long 'nuff." He yelled, flicking his cigarette into the water. I responded by chucking him a largemouth bass as hard as I could. He caught it, glared at me, then turned and tossed it to Mr. La Fontaine, who was waiting a little ways down the dock with his ice truck ready for loading.

We worked like that all morning in silence until the hull was empty. By then it was past noon, and I was hot, sweaty, and smelling of fish. I climbed out of the hull, down the side of the ship, and back onto the dock. Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty were sitting on the bumper of the truck smoking cigarettes and chatting away. I joined them.

"So 'Lijah, how're the folks?" Mr. La Fontaine asked as he handed me a half drunk bottle of water. I poured a little on the top of my sweaty head then chugged the rest.

"They've seen better days. Wha 'bout you? How's the wife?" I responded as I sat down on the rock beside the truck. I grabbed a stick from the ground and scrape the dirt, guts, and scales out from under my nails.

"She's killin' me faster than diabetes ever could."

Suddenly, Mr. La Fontaine's watch began to beep signaling that we had to head to the fish market. The three of us groaned as we piled into the truck. Smitty was in the driver's seat, Mr. La Fontaine in the passenger, and I was sitting in the

bitch seat between them. Smitty turned the truck on and left the docks heading towards the market.

Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty talked over me the whole time about sports. Any time I would try to put my opinion in, Smitty would snap at me and tell me that the adults were talking and I should be seen, not heard. So I just sat in silence listening to them scream about the Saints.

We turned into the fish market parking lot as the Sunday morning crowd was leaving. The afternoon rush was only an hour away, leaving us only a half hour to get set up and ready for business.

We got to our usual booth, right smack dab in the middle of the market. We share that booth with Mr. La Fontaine's longtime fishing buddy, "Catfish" Carter Landreneau. He runs the booth in the morning and we run it in the afternoon. I've only met Catfish a couple times and every time he sees me, he gives me a single packet of hot sauce and tells me to enjoy it. I don't know why he does that, but I always take it and add it to the collection.

Smitty and I began to unload the truck. A couple other men from different booths came over and helped us, but they all left before I could shake their hand in appreciation. After we were all set up, the gates of hell opened and the market was flooded with locals looking for, as Mr. La Fontaine put it: "good fish and great deals". Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty's job is to sell. They're both natural born salesman. Me, not so much. My job is to sit by the truck and make sure no one damages it. Sometimes, I'll be in charge of holding the money, but Mr. La Fontaine likes to keep a close eye on that. I sat on the bumper of the truck and watched two brown pelicans fight over fish guts and bread scraps. They were my only source of entertainment.

“Did you know they’re our state bird?” said a voice behind me. I turned and saw a young lady standing there. She was short and very beautiful, with long, curly dark brown hair and darker brown eyes. She wore an all-black, completely buttoned-up peacoat, black pants, knee-high black boots, and her hands were tucked inside a red muff that matched her red ear muffs. She pulled her hand out of the muff and tossed some bread crumbs onto the ground near us. Instantly, a pelican came over and started eating the crumbs.

“The early European settlers were impressed with the pelican's generous and nurturing attitude toward their young.” She said tossing another small handful of crumbs. Some more pelicans came waddling over, tripping over one another just to get to the food faster.

“Awkward creatures, aren’t they?”

I nodded as they squawked all around us.

“My name’s Evangeline Lawson,” she said, extending her hand. I stood up and shook it softly. “And whom might you be?”

“I’m Elijah Dauterive.”

“Well Mr. Dauterive, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Same to you, Miss Lawson. May I ask what a pretty young lady is doing in a place like this?”

She giggled and tucked her hair behind one ear.

“Would you believe I’m here to buy fish? My mother sent me to get it. She couldn’t be bothered to do it herself. What are you doing here?”

“Would you believe I’m working?” I pointed at our booth. “That’s my boss’s booth. He’ll give ya good fish at great deals.” She looked over and saw the small crowd gathered in front, then looked back at me.

“Thanks for the tip, Mr. Dauterive.” She smiled sweetly, then turned and walked towards our booth. I watched her walk

away until she was completely out of sight. Then, I sat back down on the bumper. I couldn't shake her from my mind. There was something about her that was so enchanting that it stuck with me. I turned hoping to catch another glimpse of her but she was nowhere to be seen, so I went back to watching the pelicans.

"Elijah?" a voice said a little while later. I turned and it was her. At her feet was a big brown bag with her name written in pencil on it in Mr. La Fontaine's chicken scratch.

"Do you think you could help me carry this home? It's much too heavy for me. I'll tip you, of course."

"Of course!" I said standing up.

"I hope you don't mind! I don't want to be an imposition."

I grabbed the heavy bag and tucked it under my arm resting it on my hip. I didn't care that I was leaving work without telling anyone. They would understand.

"It's no trouble at all. Actually, it's my pleasure!"

She smiled and linked her arm around mine and, together, she and I walked out of the market and towards the center of the town.

"So," my voice cracked. She smiled a little. I cleared my throat. "So Miss Lawson, tell me about yourself.

"Well..." She said holding the L out for a while.

"There isn't much to tell. I just turned twenty-one, so I've been living it up. Um, I go to school, I study acting. I want to be an actress. I'd do dramas because I can make myself cry on command. What about you?"

We turned the corner and entered the Garden district one of the more expensive and premiere parts of town. Only the richest of the rich can afford a place here. Mr. La Fontaine's

house is in the Garden district so I was a little familiar with my surroundings.

“Well, I’m twenty-three, and I’m a ship hand in the mornings and a barback at night. I like having two jobs. I like staying busy. I don’t... I don’t really have a life outside of work.”

She put her head against my shoulder as we began to climb up the Garden districts hill. The higher you are up the hill, the more money you have. The houses began to change from small shacks to large mansions with long winding driveways and thick overgrown gardens.

“Tell me about your family.” She said softly.

I cleared my throat. She wanted to get so personal so quickly. It was exciting, but a little scary.

“Okay, well my mother used to be a nurse. She got sick recently and was forced to quit her job. My father works on an oil rig in the middle of the ocean three thousand miles away. The only time we hear from him is in his letters when he sends us money and in a monthly phone call. Then there’s my sister who just turned three, despite my dad being gone for four years and my mother’s sister who stays with us every now and again. What about you? What about your family?”

She turned and looked over at me, our eyes met for a brief second, then she let out a soft chuckle.

“Well, my father owns one of the bars of Bourbon Street, and my mother owns her own sewing shop where she makes custom Mardi Gras attire. My brother, God rest his soul, died in the war. His widowed wife has been staying with us. She’s a real pain in the ass and nobody likes her, but she won’t leave; and then there’s grandpa. He spends his days sittin’ on the porch in his wheelchair drinking sweet tea.”

We stopped walking in front of a huge house, midway up the hill.

“I like that you were so open with me,” she said as she let go of my arm.

We walked up the red tulip-lined walkway to her front door. She rang the doorbell and turned to me.

“I’m sorry about the mess. My parents are renovating.” The door swung open and standing in front of us was an older woman wearing a highfalutin blue dress with flowers on it. She was holding a very full glass of red wine.

“Thank God you’re home, Angie. Where’s the fish?”

I shook the bag in my hand and she turned and looked at me.

“Ah!” She took a long sip of wine, then she grabbed the bag from my hands.

“Thanks, kid!” She said loudly. “Angie, can you tip him? Mommy’s too drunk to sign a check.”

“Yes, mother!” She said pulling the door shut just as she nearly fell over.

She stood in front of me; her face was red.

“I’m really sorry you had to witness that. We’re having a dinner party, and she really likes her wine.”

“It’s alright, my mom’s partial to Chardonnay herself.” She smiled.

BANG! Her eyes widened.

“Look, I should probably get in there and see what that was...” She fished into her pocket and pulled out a small wallet. She took a few dollars out and handed them to me.

“For your time.”

I hesitated but eventually took the money from her and put it in my pocket.

“Thank you for your help today Mr. Dauterive.” She flashed me a big smile then turned to leave.

“Wait, Miss Lawson....” The words jumped right out of my mouth before my brain had time to process what I was

doing. “Pardon me if I misinterpreted some signals, but, is there a chance I might see you again? Perhaps take you out someplace for a nice dinner?”

She stared at me for a good couple of seconds before leaning inside her house and grabbing a piece of paper and a pen. She scribbled something on it then handed it to me.

“Perhaps you could.” Then she went inside.

On the paper, in pretty cursive, was her name: Evangeline Lawson and her phone number. I put it in my pocket with my money and ran as fast as I could back to the market. I had to tell Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty about this, and I also needed to apologize for leaving work without permission.

When I got back to the market, it was much emptier. Practically everyone was gone. Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty were sitting at the booth, smoking their cigarettes and counting up today’s earnings. When they saw me coming over, Mr. La Fontaine stood up.

“Damn it, Elijah, there you are! We thought something happened to you. Where were you?”

I pulled up an overturned bucket and sat in between them.

“Do you remember that fine young lady with the red earmuffs?”

“Oh yeah, the pretty young thing, with those killer eyes? Yeah, what about her?” Smitty said wrapping a rubber band around a stack of money.

“Well, she asked me to help carry her bag home and her number and a tip.”

Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty both cracked a smile and put their hands on my shoulders and shook me.

“Good fo’ ya!” Mr. La Fontaine said with a chuckle. “She was quite a looker. Good catch, Boyo.”

“She was really nice. Very interesting girl.”

“Are you gonna call her?” Smitty asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You best,” Smitty said. “With a face like yours, you ain’t gonna get many more numbers.”

Mr. La Fontaine smiled and handed me a small envelope with my pay for today. I took it and put it in my pocket along with Evangeline’s number.

“Run home Boy, get some rest. See ya in the mornin’.”

Mr. La Fontaine said with a sigh.

I ran all the way home and didn’t stop until I was locked in my bedroom. I ran right past my mother and sister without so much as a hello. I was exhausted and out of breath, but I couldn’t wait to call her. My brain was telling me to wait, but my body wasn’t listening. I was just too excited.

I took out everything from my pocket and laid it out on my bed. I took my pay out of the envelope, fifty-six dollars, and eighty-four cents, and the four dollars that Evangeline gave me and tucked it away in my desk drawer. Then I took the little scrap of paper with her name and number on it. I grabbed the phone off my side table and dialed the number without even second guessing it.

I sat on the bed and listened to the phone ring a few times before somebody answered,

“Hello?” I said

“Who’s this?” a woman said. She didn’t sound like Evangeline.

“Uh, hello ma’am. My name’s Elijah, I’m looking for Evangeline?”

There was a long pause then some static.

“Mr. Deutrive? Is that you?” She said sweetly. I smiled so big it hurt.

“Yes, Miss Lawson. Sorry to call so soon.”

She giggled.

“It’s quite alright. This dinner party is a drag anyhow.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Maybe it’ll liven up?”

“Doubtful, unless mother starts throwing up in the begonias like last time.”

We both laughed. After that, we spoke about everything. We spoke until the sun set completely and the crickets came out. My body was so tired and my eyes so heavy, but I couldn’t hang up on her. I didn’t want this conversation to end.

“Listen, Evangeline,” I said when my body could no longer take it. “I have to get some rest. I have work in the morning.”

“Oh alright,” she said softly. “I didn’t realize it was this late. We’ve been talking for hours.”

“I know that. I enjoyed every second.”

“Me, too!”

“Evangeline, is there any chance I can see you tomorrow?”

There was a long pause. I listened to the sound of her softly breathing on the other line.

“I think we can make that work. What time are you finished with work?”

“Six.”

“So let’s say seven.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then!”

“Okay, I’ll see you then. Goodnight Mr. Dauterive.”

“Good night Miss. Lawson.”

It is an unseasonably cool morning on the docks. The smell of salt water and rotting fish penetrated the air and filled my lungs. I stand quietly at the edge of the dock, holding a bundle of rope under one arm and a pair of thick black work gloves under the other. I rub my frozen hands together as Big

Momma glides through the waters like a knife through warm butter.

“Mornin’ Captain,” I say tossing, Mr. La Fontaine the rope. He caught it with one hand.

“Mornin’ Boy. Make sure it’s a tight one. The wind’s be blowin’ today.”

I tied the rope tight around the cleat. Mr. La Fontaine and Smitty climb down the side of the boat and headed to their spots. As Smitty passes, he pours a little bit of seawater down my shirt. It’s cold, and I hate it, but it didn’t bother me.

In fact, nothing is going to bother me today. After work, I’m going to see Evangeline. We are planning on walking the shoreline and I’m going to teach her how to skip rocks. With that reminder in my head, nothing today is going to bother me.

Diana's Story

Natalie Pecoraro

Diana Caldwell was simply a catch. She was stunning with her sharp, defined features. She had luscious, thick, waist-long jet black hair that was so shiny you could see your reflection looking at it. She had a body that every person looked twice at as she walked by. Diana was a New York City girl born and raised. She graduated from The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and later nailed a job as the head anesthesiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital at the age of twenty-eight years old. She lived in a penthouse overlooking Central Park. Most would say she had it all, and at twenty-nine, Diana thought she did too. Her boyfriend of six years, Richard, had worked on Wall Street and was ranked one of the top brokers in the country for the past three years. The couple was the envy of all their peers. There one was thing missing in Diana's life, and that was a ring.

It was a vibrant spring day in New York City. She had plans with her mother to go for lunch. Diana was an only child to a loving yet semi-suffocating mother. Diana's mother, Nina, was crazy about her. As much as Diana enjoyed spending quality time with her mother, she found the constant hounding hard to bear. "*When are you getting married?*" "*When am I going to have my first grandbaby?*" "*What is Richard waiting for?*" The pure thought of the interrogation Diana was heading to irritated her. She reminded herself numerous times not to allow her mother to get under her skin. Unfortunately, that was always easier said than done.

"Diana! You look marvelous! You're eating, right? You better have time to eat at that busy hospital! You don't want to get too skinny, now. Ugh, my daughter. My poor, poor daughter

musn't starve. You're getting enough sleep, right? You look a little dark around the eyes, darling..."

And so, it began. Diana wondered if it was too late to turn around and walk out of The Palm Court, her mother's favorite restaurant located inside the Plaza Hotel. Nina was dressed in a pastel pink blouse that Diana had bought for her from Barney's. Her skirt was navy blue, and her shoes were a pair of Jimmy Choo's spring collection, which tied the outfit together being they were light pink with a navy heel. Diana reflected back to the days when she and her mother went for lunch at crappy, old diners in their favorite pair of loose jeans and oversized sweatshirts. She wondered when life changed so much.

"Hello to you too, mother."

"Oh sweetheart, don't mind me. I'm your mother. I'm supposed to worry!"

"You're right. How could I forget?"

The two sat down as the server quickly brought over San Pellegrino.

"Please give us some time." Nina cooed at the server. "This is my special, beautiful, angelic daughter who I barely ever get to see because she lives at work. I need time to catch up!"

Diana rolled her eyes. "Ignore her" she told the server. And finally, the interview Diana had been dreading, began.

"So, dare I ask...any talk on the engagement?"

"No. Not yet."

"Well what in the world is he waiting for?! Doesn't he know a good thing when it's staring him right in the face? I mean look at you, and it's not because you came from me. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. You make more money than God and -"

“Mother you need to stop. Richard and I are happy right now. We do not speak about the future. We live in the present. Why can’t you just accept that? This is my life. Damn it, I love seeing you but I can’t stand the thousands of questions you spew out at me. Enough already.”

Diana could see the discomfort in Nina’s eyes. She felt guilty for speaking to her mother in that tone, but it had to be done. The rest of their lunch flatlined after that. The conversations were dull and felt forced. Diana couldn’t wait to go home. After their meal, they kissed goodbye and went their separate ways. Diana let out a massive sigh of relief exiting The Plaza.

Upon entering her apartment building, Diana spotted Richard from afar. She called out his name, and he held the elevator door open for her.

“Hi sweetheart! How was lunch with your mother?”

Diana gave him a look.

Richard nodded. The two went up twelve floors together as Diana imagined how the conversation would have gone if she had indeed brought up getting engaged. Suddenly, like vomit it just came out.

“Richard, do you see a future with me, or what?”

Time had stopped. She felt her hands clam up and her stomach turn. She wanted to kick herself for asking the question.

“Honey, I love you, but now is just not the time - not when we’re both so busy.”

Holding back tears, Diana nodded. She felt so silly. The elevator made a ding sound. She leaped out of the doors, ran into her bathroom, turned on the shower and cried for half an hour. Every single time her friends and mother had asked about her future with Richard, it had broken her a little. Every single time she had felt broken, she had swallowed her feelings and

had kept her composure. But not this time. Every emotion she had felt for the past five years just came out of her on its own. She imagined having a family to come home to every night. She envisioned taking her children to Disney World and holding their hands while they got their vaccines. A life without children felt empty. All the money, fancy cars, luxurious apartments and overpriced lunches meant nothing if she had no family to come home to at night.

Once Diana worked up the courage to exit the bathroom, she found Richard asleep on the couch. She felt glad she didn't have to further deal with the situation that evening. Diana was too wired to lay down herself. She began to tidy up the apartment. There were some dirty dishes left in the sink that needed to be taken care of. As her hands were wet and soapy, she overheard Richard's phone ringing. She ignored it, thinking the caller could just leave a voicemail. The phone kept ringing, and that the person on the other end kept pressing redial. Diana thought there might be an emergency with work, so she quickly dried her hands and ran over to answer Richard's phone. The screen read "Stacey".

Diana peaked over at Richard to ensure he was in a deep sleep. She knew what she was about to do was wrong, but something told her to answer that phone. A voice inside her head was screaming for her to pick up that call. Her body had been acting before her mind all day, and it wasn't going to stop now.

"Hello?"

Diana was shaking. It felt as if it took a century for the woman on the other end to reply.

"Who's this?" Stacey answered back with an attitude.

"Who the hell is THIS?"

"This is Stacey, Richard's girlfriend. Who are you? Where is he?"

Diana's heart sank. She hung up the phone. She didn't need to hear another word. She *couldn't* hear another word. She was surprised her eyes weren't letting out any tears; however, she couldn't control her body trembling. Diana smashed Richards phone on the marble floor of the apartment building hallway. She then re-entered the apartment, shook Richard until his eyes opened and told him to pack his things and leave.

“What the hell is going on? What happened, babe?”

“Stacey happened. Get out of my apartment before I make you get out of my apartment.”

“Let me remind you, this is OUR apartment, Diana.”

“You have one hour to take your shit and go.”

It took him exactly fifty-six minutes, but Richard left.

Diana had a break-down that night. She sobbed into her pillow for till the sun came up. She wanted to call her mother or her girlfriends but she just couldn't. She couldn't say aloud that she was approaching thirty and not yet a mother and not even a wife. She couldn't admit her lousy boyfriend of six years had been having an affair for God only knows how long. She felt so stupid. Diana feared hearing “I told you so” from every person who warned her that there was a problem with Richard never discussing their future together. Diana felt that all her hard work and years in school had all been for nothing. All the fortune in the world means nothing when your heart's empty.

That next day, Diana made a decision. She was done waiting around for her prince charming. She was more than financially stable enough to start a family on her own. She decided to look into the in vitro fertilization process. Being in the medical field, she was quite familiar with the process, and felt passionately about having children who would have some of her traits. Adoption was also an option; however, she knew the adoption process could take years and she did not want to waste any more time. She made an appointment with one of New

York's top fertility doctors that morning. She was ready to act on her wish to become a mother.

The consultation went well. Diana was informed that the price would be, roughly, fifteen thousand per cycle but she did not care. This was something that was priceless in her eyes. The doctor stressed for her to begin as soon as possible, being that the success rates are much higher for women under thirty-five. Feeling anxious, Diana booked two cycles that month. She simply could not wait to start this journey.

About a month later, on a beautiful May morning, Diana got the news she had been waiting for. She was pregnant. She was painfully excited, yet nervous to explain her situation to everyone in her life. Diana had not yet told a soul about Richard, never mind being a soon to be single mother. She was fully aware of and ready for the judgement that was soon going to come her way.

“You're WHAT?! With whom? My, oh my, Diana!”

“Mother I'm done waiting. I'm ready. I can afford it. I'm not getting any younger.”

“Oy vey. Pass me my purse - I have a Xanax in there. Diana, you do know how impossible it will be to ever meet anyone, now. No man wants a woman with children, who would want that baggage? And what if the child wants to know his father? It's just not right.”

“I will handle that when the time comes. This is what I want, it'll make me happy. Please just be happy for me.”

Diana grew tired of explaining her situation to outsiders. No one knew what she felt, and she didn't care for the approval of others. As her pregnancy continued, she did begin to feel lonely. It was the little things that would upset her, like craving ice cream and not having anyone run out and get it for her; or shopping for the baby's nursery and not having a second opinion on any of the things she was picking out. There were

days when she truly wished she had someone to bring this baby into the world with, but she always reminded herself that in just a few months she would no longer be alone.

It was a long, hot, pregnant summer for Diana. She found that no matter what she wore, she was always uncomfortable and absolutely always sweating. The late July humidity was really starting to get to her. It was an early Saturday morning and she decided to hit the farmers market to complete her weekly food shop before the sun was at its peak. A brown-haired, tall man from a distance watched Diana struggle to carry her two baskets filled with fresh produce. Quickly, he ran over to offer a hand.

“Let me help you with those, please.”

Taken back by the random act of kindness, Diana blushed.

“Oh, um, are you sure? I really should learn to do this stuff on my own, though. I’ll make do. Thank you anyway.”

“No, miss. I insist.”

Their eyes locked and flustered Diana could do nothing but grin.

“Thank you.” She said in the sincerest tone, as she handed him her baskets. “I got the last red peppers though, so this better not be an evil scheme to steal them!” She joked.

“You have my word.” he replied.

“I’m Diana, by the way.”

“Hi Diana, I’m William. What’s our next stop?”

“I really need watermelon. I crave it every day.”

“Watermelon it is!”

Diana couldn’t believe a trip to the farmers market could be so much fun. As soon as their trip concluded, she asked William if he’d want to grab a cup of coffee. As politely as possible, he just glanced at her round belly. She rapidly replied “It’s not what it looks like!” William decided to take her word

for it, and the two went to a small coffee shop down the street from Diana's apartment.

"Would your husband mind you getting coffee with a complete stranger?" William questioned.

"No husband, no boyfriend either. But it's not like *that!*" Diana nervously stuttered. "I don't just go around getting pregnant with anybody. I mean maybe I do. I mean, I—" William giggled and cut her off.

"Hey, hey, listen. You don't owe me a story. Don't worry about it. Life's complicated sometimes. Do you know the gender?"

"Not yet. I wanted to be surprised." Diana's face lit up just thinking about it.

"Really?! I hate surprises. I'd have to know."

"Well, when you've endured what I recently have, you'd look forward to a happy surprise too."

"Hm." William murmured.

"I was with a man for six years. We lived together and all. But never, not once, did he mention starting a life together. No talk of a marriage, and definitely no talk of children." She explained. "It was always something I wanted, honestly. I never had a big family growing up. It was always just my mother and me. It was fine growing up, but I always knew for my future that I wanted a bunch of "hellos" to come home to."

"So what happened?"

"So it came out that Richard had been having an affair, which made sense why he didn't want to move forward as a couple. I decided that I'm damn near thirty and I wasn't going to wait until it was too late to start my family. I went the IVF route."

"Wow."

"I know, what a horrible thing to tell a man within hours of meeting him." She chuckled.

“No. I didn’t mean wow in that way. I just have never met someone so set on what they wanted before. I think that’s awesome that you didn’t depend on someone else to give you what you’ve always wanted. I’m happy for you.”

From that day forward, the two became very close. Coincidentally, they lived a block over from each other. William began helping Diana with everything as her pregnancy progressed. He knew her love for stuffed peppers and went to the farmers market every Saturday to pick up fresh red peppers for her. He cooked dinner for her almost every night. He brought her ice cream religiously every night at 8PM. He always made her feel like she wasn’t alone. One day in late September, Diana explained to William how she started feeling like she wanted to know the gender of the baby. William decided to plan her a gender reveal party. No one had ever made her feel so special before.

It was a perfect October day. It had been warm enough to enjoy an outdoor party; yet, cool enough to wear long sleeves. Diana was surrounded by all her family and friends to reveal the gender of her baby. As she cut open the cake, she saw blue icing inside. It was official, Diana was having a baby boy. Tears of joy instantly trickled down her cheeks, she looked over at William and smiled; she noticed as his eyes were glossy too. Everyone cheered and congratulated Diana. It was a magical day. After dessert, little by little the party emptied out. William stayed to clean up every last thing and insisted that Diana lay down on the couch. He explained to her that when the home was clean, he wanted to talk to her about something that had been on his mind.

“Hun, are you almost done?” Diana nervously questioned, wondering what was bothering him.

“Just a minute, babe.”

William approached Diana with a cup of tea as he sat down on the sofa next to her. Her stomach instantly dropped, thinking the talk they were about to have wasn't going to be in her favor. *"Is he over me? Is taking care of me too much for him? Does he not want to see me anymore?"* All thoughts flooded through Diana's head.

"So...I've been thinking, thinking a lot..." William began his monologue.

"William spit it out."

There was a short pause, and eventually he abruptly dropped the news.

"I want to raise the baby with you Diana. I know it sounds crazy. I know this was something you wanted to do on your own. I know I stumbled into your life during the most monumental time in your life. But the truth is, I've fallen in love with you. I've fallen in love with helping you out and buying fresh peppers for you every week and I've fallen so in love with this idea of being a family. I want to be here for you forever. I don't want you to go through this alone. I want to do it together."

Diana froze. She felt taken back, but didn't know why. At this point, William had become such a large part of her life. She couldn't imagine not having him around anyway. The idea of raising the baby with him just seemed so extreme, being their relationship took off so fast. She was nervous. She was terrified.

"I've fallen in love with you too, William." She blurted out. "I don't know what to say. You make all my days better, easier. But I just feel like this could be a mistake, you know? What if we're making impulsive decisions? What if we get into this and realize it was a mistake?"

"I promise you, it won't be a mistake. I want this. I can't explain to you how much I want this."

Diana sat still for a moment. She thought about everything she had ever wanted. “Then let’s do this. You and me. Let’s have this baby.”

William jumped up from the couch and tears began to pour down his face. “I love you, Diana.”

“I love you too.”

One cold, snowy night in mid-January, William woke up to Diana screaming his name.

“It’s happening!!! We need to go, now!” Diana shouted.

The two packed up the car and rushed to the hospital. The contractions were extremely painful for Diana, but her excitement was stronger. Shortly after, her mother showed up, and later a few close friends. As they entered her room, what they saw was magical. Light snow fall gently dropping down in the background out the window, William standing over the hospital bed, and Diana laying down with newborn baby William sleeping on her chest. He was so tiny and so perfect. The joy in the room was palpable. Everyone cried tears of joy and then the crowd shared a laugh as Nina began interrogating the nurses on the cleanliness of the room.

Addiction

Kristina Scheid

He was doing so well. The money for rehab had finally been paying off. All those trips to the clinics and hospitals had just finally started paying off. As I looked at him, passed out on the couch, the hollows in his face become clearer, the ghostly representation on his face and body become clearer; he was still breathing slow and steady breaths. He was alive technically, but he was dead in every other sense.

I wouldn't wish this pain – this conflict, this endless sorrow and worry – on anyone. Nothing hurts more than to wonder constantly whether my son will live another day. To move on in life and go to college and get his degree in what he's passionate in. To get a well-paying job and find the love of his life. To settle down and start a beautiful family of his own.

“Mom,” a soft cry comes from my son's chapped lips. I don't have anything to say. My son, my beautiful son, is dying in my arms, and I have nothing to say.

My husband finally comes home, ready for another trip to the hospital.

We're running out of time...

As he walks through the door, I can see that he had been rushing to get here. Sweat dripped from his reddened face, his sleeves were rolled up, and his hair was a mess. Being a former addict, this is the last thing he wants for his son, our son.

I can still remember the time I first found my husband, Thomas, passed out on the verge of death because of his heroin addiction. He and I were only dating at the time and still in high school. Those were the days leading up to our anniversary – we were celebrating six years of being together. I walked quietly into his room, carrying his favorite candies, some popcorn, and

his favorite movie. When I opened the door, I screamed at the top of my lungs. His parents came busting through the door to find me weeping uncontrollably, holding Thomas' cold, stiff hands. His mom ran over and picked me off the ground as his father hauled him over his shoulder to put him in the car.

"It's going to be okay, Sweetie. Thomas will be okay," She whispered to me.

Ever since that moment, I have vowed to Thomas that he would never end up like that, again. I forced him into rehab and was with him every step of the way. I helped him get through the pain; I helped him live his life, again. And after everything was over and he was all better, his way of thanking me was proposing to me.

"I love you more than life itself, Ella. And if it weren't for you, I might not have been kneeling here before you, today."

§

As we drive to the hospital, a million and one things are running through my head. I feel dizzy and nauseous. Can the doctor save him this time? Is this going to be an addiction that he breaks? Will my son be okay?

He went into the Emergency Room right away while the rest of us waited, pacing back and forth in the waiting room. I carry my daughter of four years on my hip. She's young, but she understands how this may end. My husband stands by the receptionist's desk waiting to hear what the doctor has to say. My parents are sitting in a section of chairs in the corner, trying their best not to make a scene while the rest of us wait. Finally, the doctor comes out, he's tired. My daughter, Anastasia, starts crying, and so do I. Thomas swiftly comes over and pulls us me and Anastasia into a comforting embrace. He's crying, too.

“The doctor hasn’t said anything yet. He could be okay,” he whispers.

Anastasia and I wipe each other’s tears away and walk over to where the doctor was standing. He stares into my eyes, noticing the hope in my eyes that maybe, just maybe, Daniel is going to be okay.

“I’m sorry...”

Smithereens

Mary Corbett

When I was young,
there was so much rain
that it filled my home
and the dog floated
on the bed like a boat.

With you,
I build a blanket sail
and pat the bed
for the dog to come up
and rest his head
on your belly below mine.

Budapest

Mary Corbett

I'm in bed while he's up typing
and we both have our reading glasses on.
We like to listen to music on our evenings in.
He presses play and my top lids alight to let the lightbulb filter
through.

The notes seep into my skin
like an eighteenth summer
when my split ends grazed the grass
when I sat and then
laid in a meadow with someone else
whose lips grazed like a question.

I turn over and place our glasses on the bedside table.
He knows to pause the music for me.
His arm wraps my ribs like an answer.

Thinker of Tender Thoughts *

Mary Corbett

I grow happy
like lotuses stemmed and rooted
in my scalp.

I dry the happy
upside down in my closet
and boil it down for extract

And then I bake the happy
into cookies
that I bring in Tupperware
for you to eat
and smile.

*Inspired by the illustration by Shel Silverstein

Exposure

Mary Corbett

I know a photographer who had a collection
of photos of couples like us.

They were in bed with flowers and open
hands and natural light.

They had underwear and binders and breasts and scars and
nothing.

I wonder if we were in the collection
if our photo would have our arms
or the sides of our faces
or my tattoo and your sock tan
or just the otherness of us as us
in the natural light.

Silence –

Kristina Scheid

Speech is one of the few things that evolution has granted us
The power of the voice, to form words and sentences
The power of the voice is greater than any other
But then you get people like yourself
Barricaded
Silent
Possessed
You surround yourself so much with the dark, the unnerved, the
sensitive
And when you have the opportunity
You're silent
Hushed
Annihilated
Defeated
Instead of voicing your opinion
You don't
Instead of telling people how you really feel
You don't
You're silent
Afraid
Deathly silent
And deathly afraid.

The Grand Exam

The First Three Chapters of a Novel
James Branker

Chapter One: The Decision- Jayce

Jayce quietly crept through the hallway from his room. The old wood worked its hardest not to creak, and Jayce knew the best spots for his feet to land to make the least noise. His legs moved slowly through the night when-
CREAK!

Jayce's misstep could have jeopardized his mission. He turned his head slowly and surveyed his surroundings. The thin hallway with dark grey walls and blotched stains from what had to have been years ago was still. He listened, but heard nothing save for the ticking of an antique timekeeper proceeding back and forth in the next room.

The fourteen-year-old turned the corner, entering the next room, the apartment office. In it resided a single chair with the desk it was attached to, but it was impossible to say whether the two pieces of furniture matched. While originally cut from the same tree, the desk was a dark brown, whereas the chair had faded to a white ash-like substance. Upon the desk was the antique timekeeper, its looks matching the rustic smell permeating the whole apartment. Aside from that, there was a dark lamp next to a stack of books, whose titles were unintelligible in the darkness of the night.

Jayce silently began to close the door behind him. He left it ajar in order to hear any movement in the apartment, and took steps towards the ashen chair, sitting in it as he had done for the past year and a half- swiftly and silently. His fingers

crossed the desk with ease and turned the lamp on. Instantly light burst out from the bulb, illuminating the previously black room.

Jayce's hand reached out on its own whilst his eyes readjusted. It grabbed the nearest book: Mathematics: from addition to pre-calculus and everything in between. The enormous book was brought to the center of the desk and opened. Jayce's eyes, now used to the light, began scouring the book for information. His hand picked up his pen and wrote in the empty space... which there was not much of left. Although Jayce had a disdain for math, the teen had been through this book countless times, along with many of the other books that resided within the desk.

While the residents of the apartment were asleep, Jayce had just begun his work. For the next few hours he read through the large textbook, skimming the parts he understood, while taking his time on the parts he didn't. Meanwhile, the antique clock ticked on. The time, which had originally showed 2:25 now shifted to 5:40. Without Jayce realizing, time kept moving along, and the apartment's remaining residents began to wake.

The shifting of a door as it slid open was heard by Jayce, but he hadn't noticed that it might have been an actual person that opened it. The steps outside the room he had entered meant nothing to him, as he had already been absorbed into the textbook, and once Jayce began studying the outside world would disappear. It wasn't until the door to the office was pushed open that Jayce's eyes hurriedly veered towards the entrance. There, he saw a short woman wearing sleeping shorts and a white t-shirt that said: "night-time is for nap time" across her chest. The woman's curly blonde hair flowed over the night and time of the sentence, so it read "-time is for nap", which Jayce didn't really seem to notice. Her teary brown eyes locked with his, and her smile faded. "Sweetie, why are you in the

office? Shouldn't you be leaving for the bakery?" Her voice was low, as to not awake anyone else.

Jayce hated when she called him that. In front of him was Amara, his sister-in-law. While kind, she was definitely overbearing. "I'll be heading there now, my stuff's all ready." Jayce stood up and walked towards the exit when Amara grabbed his wrist and began to chastise him. "Jayce, if you keep going in here all night it's going to affect your health. If I catch you in here again I'm going to tell Niklas."

Jayce's brother Niklas was the highest ranking member of the family. He was also the owner of the apartment and the bakery where Jayce and his parents worked. If Niklas didn't want him in the room, then Jayce would have no choice but to oblige.

Jayce slowly pulled away from Amara's loosening grip. "I know, and I was only in there for a few minutes... I'll see you later!" His voice never reaching too high, Jayce spoke while walking to the exit of the apartment. His hand felt around for the door-handle, and he pushed his way out into the open air.

On the other side, Jayce peered out over the Red County. The sun had yet to come up, so the red streetlights shone across the black pavement with a flame-like quality to them. Jayce began his walk to the nearby station, carrying his light backpack with him. In it was his lunch for the day. Jayce always filled his water up in the Red County, because in the outskirts the water was never clear. The brown, rusted water was barely drinkable, even if it did pass inspections. At least, Jayce wouldn't drink from it unless he had to. He moved past several apartments identical to his brothers'. As he walked, the lights in a couple windows slowly turned on, showing that the world was slowly waking up. Unfortunately, it also showed that Jayce was later than usual. He took off into a sprint, which, for Jayce, wasn't that quick.

Jayce barely made it two blocks before he had to stop. An all-out sprint was not something Jayce was any good at, in fact nothing physical was. He was a reader, a hard worker, and a creative teenager, but he wasn't the most physically capable. Within a few minutes, Jayce managed to make it to the station.

He got on the first 'loop heading eastbound towards the outskirts. The 'loop was large and filled with passengers. Nearly all were workers, and some were his age or younger. He stepped on, finally able to relax. There were no seats for him, but Jayce leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for a brief moment- *DING!*

Both Jayce's eyes and the doors to the 'loop opened simultaneously. He stepped off, disturbed that his short nap seemed to make him more tired than before. The dark flood of workers entering and exiting the 'loop meant that Jayce had to fight just to stay in one spot. He fought for his personal air, and there was no such thing as personal space. Luckily for him, as quickly as the workers flooded to surround him they managed to flow off in their own directions.

Jayce then got to take in the view of the outskirts. As he'd expected, it hadn't changed. The dark, dreary landscape was the same as always. Long lines of black apartment buildings with broken windows, plumes of smoke filling the air, and sweatshops that haven't stopped running since last year's R-day were chugging along. Jayce walked through the unkempt roads, careful to avoid any potholes. Aside from service vehicles, Jayce wondered how any normal vehicle would be able to make it down the road. Well, discounting the Flight-cars he had heard were all the rage in the higher counties.

Everyone in the outskirts seemed to be moved by one goal: get to work. No voices filled the air, only the sound of each black carder's dark shoes leading them to their job for the next shift. This crew got the day shift, so they didn't have to

stick around in the outskirts after dark. Jayce shuddered, thinking about the dangers he knew must've occurred out here when there wasn't anyone else around. He quickened his pace, and finally arrived at the bakery.

The dark wooden sign had the word Bakery etched into it, as any ink that existed there would have faded by now. Jayce opened the cracked wooden door, careful not to pull it off its weakened hinges. He walked through to the back, where his parents were already hard at work. Barely stopping, they waved hello to Jayce. This was normal, as he knew neither of them had time to chat.

Jayce turned on the Large Oven, feeling the heat burst out from deep within its depths. Then he began opening the boxes of flour, sugar, and other ingredients. He handed off the ingredients to his mother as requested, who mixed them and handed it off to his father, who kneaded the dough thoroughly before placing it in the Large Oven. The lack of verbal communication was usual, as there was little time for anything but work, so like that the trio continued for a while. The smoke and grime that covered the back of the bakery seemed to converge onto them. His mother Diana, originally looking short and pale with light brown hair, became covered in blotches of grime which darkened her aesthetic. His father Ren, taller than Jayce, was darker skinned, so the grime splatter wasn't a complete contrast upon his skin, or his already black hair. Jayce himself was darker than his mother, but fairer skinned than his father. His skin looked as if he had tanned daily, despite the fact that he rarely had time to enjoy the outdoors.

Finally the hours slipped by, and it was time for Jayce to head to schooling. He started to head out when Diana, Jayce's mother, finally spoke.

"Jayce, take a towel to wipe yourself off!" Jayce could barely hear her over the roar of the oven. "Use the mirror in the

bathroom to make sure you're clean, and good luck for your last day of school!"

Jayce nodded and shouted "I will, thanks!" He shuffled out of the chef's kitchen to the bathroom. Jayce walked through the nonexistent door and grabbed the clean white towel, one of the few around. There the teenager took a look at the mirror with one long crack across it.

In the mirror Jayce got his first look at himself since the night before. His wide nose pointed down to his slanted, thin lips. His facial features were a mixture of his parents, aside from his eyes. Shining back at Jayce was his dark, green eyes, shimmering with drive. Jayce wondered how his parents' eyes were so gray and sullen, while his were such a rich green. Jayce wiped the black grime off of his face, revealing chubby cheeks. Jayce wouldn't classify himself as overweight, but he certainly wasn't slim. Making sure he was 'clean enough', he wiped his hair. The curly black hair waved to and fro, so he used his fingers to comb it towards one side. "Good enough", he told himself. Jayce put down the now disgustingly black towel, turned around and gave a silent goodbye to the bakery.

Too many times had Jayce taken this path to school. Ever since he had moved in with his brother 6 years ago Jayce had taken the same route to the bakery, but the route from the bakery to the school was much older to him. This had been almost ten years, and now it was his last time using it. No more schooling, no more learning, just work. That sad thought stayed with him as he reached the school, which was the largest building in the outskirts, aside from the Enforcer Tower, admittedly. Jayce's emotional eyes took in the sight of the school for the last time. The large brick structure was stained black in some spots, but new bricks replaced them in others. The cracked windows that covered the school from the last factory explosion were replaced with new ones, which is much

more than could be said for the factory itself. Jayce walked through the newly cleaned door as the janitor walked away with the cleaning equipment.

Entering the school one could tell how important schooling was -well, in theory- to the higher counties of society. Bright lights lined the ceiling, and the hallways smelled of cleaning supplies, not the most pleasant, but Jayce preferred it to the alternative. He walked into the classroom, where he sat down with a few friends.

“Howdy Jayce,” squealed a high-pitched voice. Jayce turned, looking at the voices owner. The rat-like face with light brown eyes that greeted him was familiar. It was Max, one of Jayce’s closest friends. Max, Aaron, and Jayce went through all of schooling together, but they probably wouldn’t see much more of each other in the future. Aaron, a short, brown-haired twig-like boy waved alongside Max’s greetings. “Hey Max, Aaron, how’s it going?” Jayce responded. “Well, you know how it is, work at the lumber-mill was tough, and waking up early for school doesn’t make it any easier... I can’t wait for school to end!” Said Max, who spoke more than enough for the two of them. Aaron’s hand morphed into a thumbs up, but his face betrayed his true feelings. His sullen grey eyes which matched most of those in the outskirts began to well up with tears. Aaron’s older sister passed away a few years back in some sort of accident, and since then he hadn’t talked unless necessary. Though that wasn’t why Aaron was getting teary-eyed. *The last day of school meant the last day they’d likely see each other*, Jayce thought to himself. Patting Aaron on the back, Jayce sat down. He had a couple minutes till Mr.Dunnar would walk in.

“So what’d you do today? Are you gonna take over the bakery soon? How’re your parents?” Max commenced with peppering Jayce with questions. Jayce wondered why he was

still friends with him when he realized Max and Aaron were the only friends he could have. Many of his classmates just slept in class, choosing to stay awake while they worked nights. No matter how important school seemed to the higher counties, to the Black County it was often deemed as a waste of time and energy. The rest were loners, or arrogant, like the girl sitting to his right. As the thought crossed his mind, Emily turned her head directly at him.

“What are you looking at?” She screeched in his direction. Jayce shuddered, wondering if she could see into his thoughts. He studied Emily’s face, and how her violet eyes contrasted her slick black hair. Somehow her eyes had changed color again this week.

“Just looking at your over-the-top colored contacts,” Jayce replied. Emily’s confident look fell apart at his retort.

“I can’t believe you!” Emily exclaimed, turning away blushing. Jayce didn’t understand why Emily wore color contacts in the first place. Her goldish brown eyes were attractive enough to him, but her personality was... not the most tolerable.

“Weren’t her eyes green like yours last time? And what is that on her arm?” Max continued to pepper Jayce with questions. Upon Emily’s wrist was a small pink band which he had never seen before. Jayce was going to ask about it, when-

Suddenly, Jayce’s professor Mr.Dunnar slid the door open. His long legs somewhat nervously clicked across the cold concrete floor. Behind him, two large enforcers entered with their gear. Their black armor with yellow stripes followed Mr. Dunnar. The three of them turned almost simultaneously to face the class. Mr.Dunnar began: “You all know the class colors, and what they signify.” The class nodded, knowing the childhood they missed out on. “But humor me and allow us to go over it once more.” The enforcers set up a gray projector and pointed it

toward a white-board.

Images shone across the board, showing cards and their prospective colors. “There are 7 card classes: black, red, yellow, blue, purple, white, and gold. Since you go to this school, you are members of the lowest class. And why are classes necessary?” “To make sure everyone is working their hardest!”, the class resoundingly answered, including Jayce and his friends. Mr. Dunnar continued, “our society is unlike primitive societies before us, so we have class card mobility, a test that every single fifteen-year-old gets one chance to take: The Grand Exam.”

The classroom became silent, as the projector shone over lifestyles the students would do anything to have. Luckily, their society allowed for this class mobility. Unluckily, the test was nearly impossible. No black card had moved up higher than yellow in Jayce’s memory, and the one of the few who had made it to yellow was his brother Niklas. Jayce dreamed of climbing higher than even his brother, to the blue card. Mr. Dunnar was not yet finished, exclaiming “The Grand Exam is the only way to change your class card color, so the government implores you to do so. If you want to, sign the first paper on your left.” A couple of students started to stand up when one of the enforcers blew a whistle.

The piercing high pitched whistle sent the students shockingly down to their seats, hands covering every ear. The whistling stopped and silence took its place. “That’s not the only way to advance” stated an enforcer plainly. “You also have a chance to go through the enforcer boot-camp. Enforcers don’t abide by class colors, and have an enforcer badge instead. Of course, none of you whelps have much of a chance surviving boot camp. But, if you think you got what it takes, sign the paper in the center.” The students shuffled uncomfortably. The two choices seemed equally impossible to most of them.

Finally, Mr. Dunnar broke the uneasiness: “If you don’t want to take either of the exams, and plan to keep working with your families, sign the paper on the right. Be warned, once you bring a signed paper up to one of us, your decision is final. You have until the end of the day to decide.

Chaos shook through the classroom. Most of the students shot out of their seats, pacing back and forth. About half of them worked their way over to the rightmost paper, signed it, and headed out the door. *Those were the ones who were just scared*, Jayce thought to himself. Some students tried to sit in order to calm themselves down, but the tapping of their feet betrayed them. This decision will affect the rest of their life. A few more made their decisions, and out of the 30 students in the classroom, there were only a handful left.

“What do you plan to do, Jayce? I for one know the Grand Exam is impossible, and I heard it was dangerous too, so that only leaves two real options.” Leave it to Max to start talking when Jayce was thinking. Well, that wasn’t exactly kind of him. To be fair, Max talking has lightened the previously stressful mood a little.

“I’m not really sure”, Jayce lied, his mind already made up. “What about you and Aaron?” Aaron motioned like he was going to choose when Max interrupted.

“How about this: we all turn and face the wall. Then we go up one at a time, and sign whichever paper we want. After that, we can meet up on the roof and tell each other which one we picked.” Aaron shrugged, and Jayce did the same. “Seems we are all in agreement. Alright, turn around,” Max ordered. The two complied, and Max went on his way. Next Aaron turned to pick his future. As his footsteps got further away, Jayce’s heartbeat started getting faster.

THUMP-THUMP, THUMP-THUMP! Jayce’s heart banged violently against his chest. He took a step, and the room

started to spin around him. As he made it closer to the desk, Jayce's throat tightened more and more, until he could barely get air inside his body. His muscles shook, and his body began to sweat, but Jayce reached the desk. He re-evaluated his choices.

Option 1: Take neither exam. Sign the paper and live the rest of your life the same way you've lived so far. Nothing will ever change. This was what his parents wanted for him, and what his friends most likely chose.

Option 2: Become an enforcer. Surviving boot camp would mean you would have some authority and power, but you are chained to do the Enforcer Commands bidding, and from what Jayce heard, you'd have to see things you would never un-see. This was possible, but incredibly dangerous.

Option 3: Take a nearly impossible, potentially dangerous test that no adult is allowed to speak to children about. Those who fail are left as riffraff, black cards who wasted precious work time on a dream. This was a pipe dream, and no black card would ever amount to higher.

Blood rushing to Jayce's head, sweat dripping, air refusing to enter his lungs, Jayce's hand reached for option number three and signed it.

Jayce was taking the Grand Exam.

Chapter Two: The Return Home: Jayce

Jayce glanced at the paper once more. There, in the previously blank space was his name, so the line reads: “The participant Jayce Fuller is hereby enrolled in The Grand Exam, and takes full responsibility for any and all outcomes or effects that result from The Grand Exam, either directly or indirectly.” Jayce hoped he made the correct decision, but it was too late now. His legs carried him forward, he turned in his paper to Mr. Dunnar, and left the classroom.

Jayce was about to leave the building when he remembered Max’s deal. His brain, finally seeming to calm down, recognized that he shouldn’t leave right away but instead head to the roof. As Jayce walked up the long, retreating staircase he wondered why he had never been up there. Well, today was an end to his old life, and a start to his new. The blue door to the roof was easily pushed open, and Jayce stepped outside.

The scale of the roof was a large square, and the grey concrete Jayce stood on was fairly plain. It was comprised of smaller square tiles that were about one Max height long, which wasn’t too much. Jayce scanned the roof and found two figures overlooking the edge. Walking closer he saw his friends, but what struck Jayce more so was the view. From the rooftop, Jayce could see miles and miles of dirty factories, along with more apartment buildings. In the distance, he could make out another black card school, as well as a bleak enforcer tower. Turning his head left, he was able to see the greenlands, which is where most of the Commonwealth’s food was produced. Its dark green forests, brown wheat fields, colorful flowers, fruits and vegetables astounded him. Jayce had heard reds and yellows like to work there, and he didn’t wonder why; the colorful outlook of the greenlands were entirely opposite the

black, dreary landscape of the outskirts.

Turning the other way, Jayce was able to make out the Red County where he had come from. In daylight it looked much lighter than before. The buildings were unkempt but structurally intact. Undeniably, Jayce could see a bleed over of factories and apartments from the outskirts to the Red County, but the buildings there out-classed the buildings surrounding Jayce quite literally. Further beyond, Jayce could just barely make out the Yellow County. The buildings there were pretty close together, but there were little patches of green in between them, which you would never see otherwise. While Jayce couldn't exactly see it, his soul moved to the tidiness of the Yellow County. He was trying to look forward when he overreached and began to fall towards the black pavement below.

"Whoa, there!" Max yelled, pulling Jayce by the wrist. "Don't you dare fall off this roof! I wouldn't want to deal with cleaning it up!" Jayce's fight or flight response which had yet to even turn on slowly settled.

"Thanks Max. I don't know what I'd do without you." He sat down further from the edge.

"Well, probably fall ten stories from the roof to your ultimate demise." The factual nature of Max's statement worried Jayce. "Have you ever wondered why there aren't any large school buildings in the other counties?" Max asked. Jayce hadn't, in fact he hadn't even noticed the lack of them while he was up there. He did a double take, and the only large buildings in the red and yellow counties were smaller versions of the outskirts' enforcer towers.

Jayce's best guess was "maybe education is done differently in the other counties." But that didn't make sense: if everyone had to take The Grand Exam, wouldn't schooling be the same for everyone? Well, it wouldn't matter to Jayce anymore, he was passed the age of schooling anyway.

“So, what didja pick?” asked Max, Aaron poking him on the shoulder. “Lemme guess Aaron, you picked the no Exam option?” Aaron nodded in response. To be honest, it was the least opportune option, and Jayce could detect no drive within Aaron’s sullen eyes. “Well, guess what I picked? Oh never mind I’ll just tell you, I went for the enforcer boot camp. Apparently it’s six months of intense training and weeding out the weak, but in the end I think I can survive.” Jayce didn’t want to dash Max’s hopes, but he didn’t have too much faith in him. “So, come on, tell me what you picked? Are you gonna join me with the enforcers, or are you just gonna stay working for your brother? Not that that’s bad, I’m just asking.” Max’s ability to rattle off words like a machine gun was probably not going to help him in the enforcer boot-camp.

“Neither,” said Jayce, “I’m taking The Grand Exam.”

The silence that followed was brief, but expected. Max and Aaron’s expression dropped into impossible shocked faces, and Jayce felt his face go red with embarrassment. Luckily Max was unable to remain quiet. “Really? Amazing! I can’t believe you’re taking it, but if anyone can do it, you can! I mean, your brother did it, and your grades are even better than his, right Aaron?” Aaron’s thin arm raised into a thumbs up, and his missing front tooth made his smile even more endearing.

Their support made Jayce feel much better. “Thanks guys, you always know how to cheer me up.”

Aaron outstretched his hand, and Jayce took it. The two started to walk back inside when Max stopped them. “Wait! I have another idea for you two. The three of us are going our separate ways, right?” The two other boys nodded. “Then how about this: We all have to meet the R-Day after next, and if we ever see each other anywhere else we need to promise we’ll help each other out. Deal?” Jayce didn’t know why, but this deal made him feel a lot better about leaving his old life behind.

He'll see them again one day. The three looked at each other, and shook hands. The sun shone on their hands as it began to dip, acknowledging their pact. After that, the trio stood in silence, reality slowly settling in. Life would never be the same for the fourteen-year-old boys.

"Well, I guess that's it for now. I'm sure you two need to be getting home soon." Max encouraged the two to leave. "I'm gonna just relax here for a bit more, take in the view."

"It sure is beautiful." Jayce agreed, "This isn't goodbye, just a see you later." Aaron nodded in response. The two hustled down the cold stone staircase, leaving their friend behind. Max stood resolute, his smile fading as soon as his friends were out of sight. He would miss them, even if he wasn't sure they'd miss him.

The stairs seemed to go on forever before Jayce and Aaron reached the base level, and Jayce wasn't sure how he'd made it to the top in the first place. At the entrance, Jayce assumed the two would part ways, but Aaron continued on with him. They weaved their way through the muggy streets, dodging and ducking between the workers as they rushed by. Smoke sputtered out of a factory to their right just as they rounded a corner, and Jayce tried to take a deep breath before it reached him... but he was too late. It filled his lungs, causing an intense itch within him, which Jayce automatically tried to relieve by coughing out the tainted air. Unfortunately, this just seemed to make it worse. Aaron reached for Jayce's hand and led him through to a small clearing nearby. Right ahead of it was the mostly run down station. Aaron continued along until they reached the 'loop platform.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye." Jayce awkwardly shuffled his feet. Aaron was a friend, but they were never really together without Max around.

“Not yet,” replied Aaron, in a voice much deeper than expected. Jayce recoiled at Aaron’s words, but before he could react, Aaron started reaching into his small pack. His hand fished around, and from it he retrieved a small pin. On the black pin was an image of a white staff. Upon closer inspection, two snakes coiled around its shaft, and wings seemed to protrude from the top of it. “This is for you.” Aaron remarked plainly.

“Wh-What is this?” Jayce had never seen this before in his life, but the usually silent Aaron was able to explain it. “This is called a caduceus. My sister picked it up years ago from our shop, and she gave it to me. While I’m not sure who this staff belonged to, it is supposed to grant safety and protection for travelers. My sister wore it with her every day, until she gave it to me when she left to take The Grand Exam.” The right words couldn’t form in Jayce’s brain to respond to Aaron’s gesture. Aaron continued, “Maybe if she had brought it with her, she would have come home safe and sound. But since she didn’t... maybe it’ll protect you.”

Overwhelming gratitude swelled from within Jayce. He reached out, accepting his friends generous gift. “Thank you Aaron. I’ll keep this with me, and I won’t let you down.”

Aaron smiled, and spoke one last time as the sun set across the amethyst sky. “Goodbye.”

As he turned away, Jayce couldn’t help but shout towards his receding figure wrapped in black, thin clothing. “This isn’t goodbye! I’ll see you later!” But there was no reply. Jayce waited for the ‘loop while facing the outskirts ahead of him. When he finally turned, a twinge of sadness cracked through to his thoughts: Jayce knew he wouldn’t be seeing either of his friends for a long time.

The ‘loop appeared on schedule, and Jayce hopped on right away. This time it was more spacious, the dark blue seats beckoning him to rest his weary legs. Jayce hadn’t realized, but

all that walking had a toll on his body. Taking the long route to enjoy more time with Aaron and hustling up and down the school staircases probably didn't help. The 'loop doors shut, and Jayce was headed back to the Red County. He stared out the window the whole ride back, and he watched the amethyst sky slowly darken into a dark blue. A couple bright stars shown overhead, but the smog of the factories blocked out most natural light. Without noticing, Jayce's eyelids slowly lowered, weighed down by his emotional day. Just when his eyes descended! Jayce sometimes wished his trip was a little longer, or that the 'loop didn't travel so fast. He forced his legs to lift him forward, and began his walk home.

The Red County during dusk could only be described as a mirror of what it was during dawn. Instead of the streets' flame-like lights turning off, they worked to burn brighter as Jayce neared his home. Bright lights in the windows contrasted to turn off in no particular order as the early birds entered their early sleep, yet he kept walking along. The cool breeze that accompanied Jayce was one of the last ones he would get before The Heating began, so Jayce welcomed it. Finally, he approached his apartment from the outside. It was a fairly rundown short building, with small cracks forming on the walls, and moss growing along the side. Jayce's hands approached the locked door, and pounded upon it methodically.

Bang, BANG, Bang.

The door flew open. "You're late" a voice rattled from the inside. Jayce's deep green eyes came face to face with empty grey ones. The soulless eyes came from a face that resembled Jayce's own: a sharper nose, slightly lighter complexion, but otherwise very much the same. Jayce could swear his brother's eyes used to be a bright blue, but for as long as he could remember they looked as they did now; empty of any emotion or energy.

“Sorry,” Jayce apologized to his brother. Niklas pulled Jayce inside.

“Well come on then, get inside! Dinner’s ready, and everyone’s here. We cooked something special up for you since you’re finally done with school. Congrats, by the way.” Niklas patted Jayce on the back with his four-fingered hand before heading inside.

Jayce muttered a quick “thank you” as he entered the apartment. The long wooden table with a simple white table cloth had his father Ren sitting down. He stepped towards his seat when Diana and Amara entered from the kitchen, carrying hot pots and serving dishes.

“Watch out!” exclaimed his mother Diana from his right. “This is hot stuff!”

Jayce quickly dodged to his left and took his seat. The pot contained a deep soup, with little bubbles of taste on top of it. “Is this chicken soup? Doesn’t that take a long time to make?”

“Amara was working on it all day. She took the day off just for you!” Jayce’s mother looked smug. “And guess what I made?”

At that, Amara placed down Diana’s cooking onto the table. Not only was there bread from the bakery - the family’s everyday meals- there were vegetables. Little green peas, carrots, and two whole potatoes to be shared between them. This was a feast.

“This is amazing! I should have my last day of school more often,” Jayce joked as the rest of his family took their seats.

Jayce sat opposite his mother towards the foot of the table. To his right sat Amara, who was opposite to Jayce’s father. Niklas took his position at the head of the table, between

Amara and his father. “Congrats to my brother for finishing school!” Niklas exclaimed.

“Congrats Jayce!” His whole family was congratulating him, and Jayce’s cheeks became flushed with red. His mother exclaimed “Bon appetit!” and the feast began.

The flavors that enveloped Jayce’s mouth were amazing. The saltiness he tasted as the soup swished around in his mouth worked well with the blandness of the bread. Jayce had a half of a potato to himself, which he filled with peas and a singular carrot. He took a single bite and his mouth lit on fire. “AH!”, Jayce yelled in pain.

“You have to let it cool first Jayce! Enjoy your food, don’t just inhale it!” Jayce ignored his mother’s chastising as he gulped down a glass of ice-cold water. *That feels better*, Jayce thought to himself. He blew on the potato before taking another bite. The homey-ness of the apartment matched the warmth of his potato-pea concoction perfectly. Jayce was in a state of bliss.

That was the exact moment the night started its downward spiral.

“I’m so glad Jayce will be able to work with us full time starting tomorrow!” Diana was in such good spirits, and Jayce had yet to tell his parents of his decision.

“Yeah, we can definitely use your help kiddo.” Jayce’s father Ren joined in as well. Jayce gulped.

“It’ll be a great family unit, with no school to interrupt it. Aren’t you excited Jayce? You’ll be a full time worker!” Amara wasn’t helping either.

The three of them wouldn’t let him get a word in, as they continued to describe his life for the next few years. Start working, help out his brother’s business, meet someone, get married, work more for the rest of his life. That was the life they all wanted for him. Jayce wanted his own life. “I’m not doing

that!” Jayce screamed to be heard over his family. “Mom, Dad, I’m sorry, but I’m not working in the bakery for the rest of my life. I already signed the papers, I’m taking The Grand Exam.”

The following silence was long, and this time there was none of Max’s friendly energy to break it. “You-You’re kidding right? That’s just a joke isn’t it. Don’t say that.” His mother asked hesitantly, but it was clear from Jayce’s demeanor that he was dead serious.

“Well go and change it right now!” His father who rarely raised his voice was yelling at him. The dread that filled Jayce left a deep pit in his stomach. He wished he hadn’t eaten that potato, as it was trying to crawl its way right out of his throat.

“I won’t. It was my decision, and I’m sticking with it. If I do well I can even get a yellow card like Niklas, or even higher.” Jayce’s wishful thinking did nothing to soothe the monstrous haze that now filled the air.

“You will go and change it this instant. If you don’t, there’s no more dinner for you!” Diana motioned to grab his plate when Niklas stopped it.

“If Jayce is telling the truth, then it’s not a matter of whether he will. The paper is signed. There’s nothing we can do.”

Amara attempted to excuse herself as Diana and Ren yelled at Jayce. They were relentless, telling him how stupid and reckless of a decision he made. “Anything would have been better!” “Your mother is right, even the enforcers would’ve been a less dangerous task.” “Listen to your father! How could you throw your life away!” These words continued to sting Jayce. All he wanted was a better life, like they had in the higher counties. He didn’t want to wallow in stagnation. But all he could do was sit and take it.

CRACK! A heavy four-fingered fist crashed into the head of the table. Pieces of wood flew from the point of impact, one reaching far enough to leave a small cut on Jayce's right cheek. "That's enough!" Niklas voice carried with a tone of finality to it. "Jayce, go to your room." Before Jayce could respond, Niklas held his hand up. "NOW, Jayce."

Jayce stood up to leave, tears beginning to flow down his face. He dragged himself into his tiny room and slammed the door. All that there was in the room was his bed, which Jayce fell into, now bawling. Why were his parents so angry? Did they not want a better life for him? *My parents don't believe in me.* This thought circled Jayce's brain.

In the next room, Jayce could hear his mother screaming in anguish. Jayce tried to cover his ears, but the sound overcame his small hands. He then resorted to using everything around to block out any sound by covering his head in blankets and pillows. Just before he was able to completely block it out, Jayce heard one last line from his mother.

"They can't... They won't take my baby!"

Chapter Three: An Old Friend- Niklas

Niklas woke up in his room with a splitting headache. He had been up for hours consoling his distraught mother, then a few more figuring out his plan of action. Niklas' blueprint for the rest of his life had been ruined. No longer could he count on his brother to continue the bakery business. Now that his brother's future is in question, Niklas was faced with a decision: give up on his brother, or throw all the resources he has into saving him. At face value, the decision was obvious; Jayce was family. Niklas had thrown his life on the line for family before, and he'd do it again in a heartbeat. But circumstances changed. No longer would Niklas be sacrificing his own well-being for his family. Niklas' eyes wavered to Amara's slightly protruding stomach.

This was sacrificing the welfare of my future child for my brother. Was Niklas capable of making that risk? The choice in front of him had tormented Niklas all night. The head of the household slowly rose out of bed in order to not to disturb his wife. He entered the bathroom shirtless, taking a look at himself in the mirror. What used to be his bright blue eyes had faded over the years, being replaced with grey lifeless ones. Niklas hoped that his blue eyes had passed on to his unborn child, and not his grey ones, but only time would tell. Below Niklas' neck was a large scar across his chiseled chest from years ago. The visions of that day haunted him on a regular basis, as it was the closest he had ever been to death. *And now my brother was going to go through the same thing, if not worse.*

While remembering his Grand Exam was the last thing he wanted to do, Niklas was glad to have remembered something specific. Niklas couldn't just drop everything for the next six months to help his brother. He didn't have the

resources, all of the money he had been saving to purchase a home in the yellow district wasn't even enough to cover the six months. But Niklas would do what he could for his brother... He could call in a favor.

Niklas decided to leave a note for his wife, parents, and brother. He was going to be away for the next couple days, and the rest of them would have to manage. Niklas' hands grabbed a pen and paper, and his legs carried him to the dining room table. Careful to avoid the hole and splinters he had left on the table before, Niklas began writing.

Dear family,

I have gone to see an old friend. I should be back in two days. Until then, Mom and Dad, I ask that you take care of the bakery on your own. Jayce, as of today you are fired from the bakery and hereby not permitted on the bakery's grounds. Instead, you must study for your Grand Exam and pack a bag for travel. Will be home soon.

-Niklas

The note wasn't perfect, but if Niklas wanted to be back in time, he'd have to rush. Niklas got dressed and made himself food for the journey. Then he returned to his bed, at his wife's side. His hand slowly caressed her face, and Amara turned to her side, still asleep. He leaned forward, and left a silent kiss upon her forehead. *See you soon, my love.* Niklas' love for his wife stayed with him as he exited the apartment and ran towards the station.

Unlike his brother, Niklas was in pretty good physical shape. If the Grand Exam taught him anything, it's that EVERYTHING matters. Not just how smart you are, not just how strong you are, and not just how emotionally capable you are, but everything. Since the Grand Exam Niklas continued to

push his limits, and so he was able to reach the station in just a few minutes. The hyperloop - what Jayce called the 'loop - arrived, and so Niklas stepped on it.

When Niklas normally entered the hyperloop, it was filled to the brim with workers. This time, however, it had more than enough space. Sure, there were some people here, but it wasn't that many. This was of course because Niklas hadn't taken the hyperloop down to the outskirts, but up toward the higher counties. Niklas looked out the window as he took a seat. He watched as his county flashed by in a few moments. The hyperloop traveled more than double the speed of a conventional bullet train back before the Commonwealth, or at least that was what Niklas had been told. The year was 207 A.C., so the Commonwealth was created two hundred and seven years ago. Thankfully for Niklas, the founders thought up the idea of R-Day. R-Day, while a different day across counties and districts within counties, was a day in which every civilian in said district or county was forced to take a day off. No working allowed. For the district that the bakery was in, known as Outskirts District Four, that day was tomorrow. Niklas felt some relief at this, as he'd only be away from his business for one real work day. *But I will have to get someone to replace my brother once I get back.* In the meantime, however, Niklas had a long ride on the hyperloop. While a trip from the Red County to the Outskirts was short-lived, Niklas was traveling a much further distance.

As time went on the hyperloop made a few more stops. It stopped at the Yellow County, which was beautiful to Niklas. He loved that each household had small patches of yard space. One day, if Niklas saved enough, he would move his whole family there. He knew his child deserved the best from him, and since Niklas was a yellow card, that would've been it. But Niklas did not get off there. The hyperloop went further to the

Blue County, where each house was two stories high. They had their own yards as well, which were much fuller. Niklas could barely see, but the tops of each building had solar panels which collect energy from the sun itself. While solar was integral higher up, the lower counties didn't exactly use too much electricity; it wasn't as important for them.

At the Blue County stop, two large enforcers stepped on, and Niklas froze still. He feared enforcers with every fiber of his being, and rightfully so. Enforcers were the lapdogs of the Commonwealth's government, and will fulfill any mission, no matter how cruel. They were violent creatures with no remorse. Twelve years ago, when Niklas was barely thirteen, the Commonwealth decreed that no child of the red or black card holders would be allowed to hear any information about what went on during the Grand Exam. If it were to happen, both the speaker and the hearer would receive a punishment. Most people didn't think it would be a big deal, and that the law would be ignored by most enforcers, since it went against the whole idea of equal opportunity of cardholders. The people were dead wrong. When Niklas' teacher held a special late-night lesson in preparation of the Grand Exam, Enforcers swarmed it, capturing everyone involved.

Niklas tried not to remember, but the thoughts flooded back to him. The town square was filled with the families of each person who attended that meeting. They watched as the teacher was tied down and burned alive. His unintelligible screams echoed through the square, the heat radiating outward toward the crowd. This wasn't all, however. The students who were present at the class were brought forward and presented their hands towards the enforcers. Slowly, each student had one finger cleanly sliced off by an enforcer, and were forced to have it cauterized in their teachers' flames. Niklas' left hand felt the sting of that blade and the burning of its wound for weeks to

come. Since that day, everything changed. No one, inside or outside of their homes would even mention the contents of the Grand Exam. Those that did suffered increasingly worse fates than even Niklas' class did.

Niklas shook his head, snapping back to reality. The next stop had arrived, the Purple county. The Purple County contained mansion like properties with miniature forests in between. Greenery surrounded the county with vineyards dotting the land every mile or so. "Guess the people here like to drink," Niklas muttered to himself as he envied the county's occupants. Individuals had their own privacy, but that was not all there was to the third highest county. About two miles from the station was a full town, where each building could've housed dozens of families. The town was named Pleasantree, which sounded like an amazing place to visit. Niklas wondered what it would be like to live in a town named Pleasantree, where a person could live without a care in the world. To Niklas, the area was almost too perfect, a dream come true. Unfortunately, the serenity of the town flew passed as the hyperloop traveled to its next stop and Niklas' final destination: The White County.

If the Purple County was a dream come true, then the White County was straight from fantasy. The Architecture matched that of the ancients: enormous yet dignified. Niklas stepped off the platform, and the white pillars around him contrasted with the colorful murals that peppered the walls. He hadn't even left the station, and yet he already felt enamored by his old friends' county. The path from the station was surrounded in a field of white lilacs, and the air had a slight vanilla scent to it. Immediately, a large man in a black suit and tie stopped Niklas from travelling any further, however.

"Halt! I do not know of you. What is your card color?" Niklas reluctantly obliged and showed his card.

“Ha! Your kind aren’t allowed here! Go back to where you came from!”

“I have a meeting with a friend, he’s a white card.”

Niklas pleaded with the man, fearing he couldn’t pass without the man’s permission. “My invitation code is RU-1284.”

Without moving from Niklas’ way, the man slowly raised his holo-computer from his pocket. He gazed at it for just a few moments as information poured into his eyes. “Ah, I see, one of Kaiv’s friends. He granted you access to one of his hovers.” The man pressed a button on his hand, then stepped to the side.

“Thank-” *WOOSH!* Before Niklas could finish, a car flew towards him. Through the air. “Whoa!” Niklas jumped out of the way of the flying car. Although flying cars have been the norm in the higher counties, the Red County and the Outskirts didn’t even have grounded cars, and if they did, the cars wouldn’t be able to handle the unkempt roads. The doors to the hover opened.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get in the hover and get out of my sight.”

As Niklas began to enter the flying car - or hover, as the man insisted on calling it, he was starting to think maybe this was a bad idea. Nonetheless, he entered the hover on the driver side. There was one problem: Niklas had no clue how to operate the vehicle. After his Exam, Niklas had spent some time learning to drive a grounded car, as he’d hoped to purchase one once he lived in the Yellow County. But flying through the air was different. And there was no gas pedal or break by his feet, nor a key to start the hover. Niklas bent down to search when the hover slammed its doors shut and soared through the sky.

At this sudden lurch Niklas nearly leapt from his seat. His heart was pounding louder than an old fashioned cannon.

He looked around, trying to find a way to stop the vehicle, but there was nothing he could press. The hover was alive.

Outside, the landscape became nothing but a visceral blur of color, lines representing whole mansions and properties. Niklas was mesmerized by the seemingly impossible method of travel. *I guess this is everyday life here.* Before long, the hover had reached its destination. It slowly drifted to the ground and the doors opened up to the outside world.

Outside the doors of the hover was a large metal gate already open for Niklas' arrival. The grey metal bars rested against a row of dark brown trees that lined the path towards Kaiv's residence. Niklas walked down the path, leaves falling and whisking passed his field of view. The residence was no larger than the ones he had seen in the Purple County. It was virtually a mansion, but given the increase in house size from each county, he had expected some sort of super-mansion. The white pillars held up a seemingly ancient roof, though Niklas rightfully assumed that this must have been new. Upon his arrival a camera at the door spoke.

"Please state your name, card color, and reason for trespassing." The mechanical voice took Niklas off guard.

"My name is Niklas Fuller, I am a Yellow, and I am not trespassing, but have come with an invitation from Kaiv."

At this response the camera went silent for a moment. Then for a minute. Then for a few more. Niklas wondered whether it was smart for him to come here and waste his day when, finally, the door burst open. Niklas looked up and saw a familiar face.

"Weren't we supposed to never contact each other ever again? You're just a lowly Yellow." Kaiv spoke with such disdain in his voice that Niklas took a couple moments to respond. The average height, barrel-chested man in front of him

was the only chance his brother would have at surviving the exam. What he said next would be crucial.

“I’m here to call in a favor. After all you do owe me one for all those years ago.”

Kaiv’s crisp brown eyes narrowed. “Get inside. You have ten minutes.” He turned around in a flash and entered his own residence.

Niklas followed warily. *Had Kaiv changed this much in the nine years since he had known him?* He entered the building and the inside was directly opposed to the outside. The ancient white building was contrasted by the dark futuristic indoors. Each wall had upon it one technological gizmo or another. He followed his friend through the dark corridor until he reached what he thought was the dining room. That was until Kaiv had pressed a button on the wall. In that moment the room opened up even further. The dining room table and chairs were removed by metal arms and replaced with a large couch that encompassed the room. Immediately a large fire was lit in the back, and Kaiv took a seat.

“Join me for a seat, old friend.” While there was a tiredness to Kaiv’s voice, his anger seemed to have disappeared.

Niklas took a seat upon the large couch and sunk into it. It felt comfortable. Really comfortable.

Niklas started feeling tired. Really tired.

“Don’t fall asleep on me Nik.” Kaiv’s voice jolted Niklas awake. He hadn’t heard that name in a while. As Niklas remembered why he came the comfortable cushioned couch began to feel like a big mistake.

Niklas stood up instantly while muttering an apology incoherently.

“Don’t just apologize Nik. Tell me why you’re here. I’ll do what I can to help you, but I don’t have all the time in the

world. I have my own job to do, which includes taking care of Daniel as well.”

“Uh, okay then.” Niklas then explained the long and extremely concerning events that led up to Jayce taking the Grand Exam. The sun that had been rising when Niklas came to town slowly started to make its way down. Niklas explained his brother’s strengths: reading and creativity, as well as his weaknesses: physical fitness and absolutely no will. “Make no mistake, Jayce has the drive to take the exam, but I doubt he’ll be able to do what’s necessary to win. He can’t do what you couldn’t earlier on. He can’t... take someone’s life.”

Being able to talk about the Exam freely was exhilarating, even if the topic was this dark. Training someone to become stronger, faster, or even smarter was possible. But how would someone learn how to take a life? Niklas knew he couldn’t teach that to his brother. In fact, even if he could he wouldn’t allow himself to do it. Kaiv didn’t have the same problem, however. Thinking back to his own Exam, Niklas remembered Kaiv being weak and afraid to strike an opponent. The fact that Kaiv was sitting in front of Niklas was proof that he had changed. *The Exam changes everyone who survives it in one way or another.*

“I understand what you want. The next exam is in a bit less than six months, so you want to bring Jayce here so I can train him, correct?”

“Yes.”

“What do I get in return for it?”

Niklas didn’t have an answer for that. He didn’t have anything that a higher county man could want. “But you owe me -”

“I know what you did for me during the test. I see it whenever I look at you. But six months is a lot of time, and I

can't afford to give it up for nothing." Kaiv spoke without emotion.

Niklas paused for a few minutes, unsure of what to respond. Should he beg? Should he try to guilt his old friend? Just then, a light bulb flashed in Niklas' brain. "Daniel is thirteen now, correct?"

"Yeah, his own test is going to be in two and a half years, and he needs to train as well. I have a brother to take care of just as you do." This statement worried Niklas, but it gave him a chance.

"Are you sure you can train him properly? You've never trained someone for the Exam before, have you?"

"No I haven –" Kaiv paused for a moment. "Are you telling me that I should use your brother as a test for seeing how effective my training will be?"

Niklas nodded. "You will have full control over Jayce for the next six months. It won't be as long as you have for Daniel, so you can crash course him through everything. If Jayce succeeds, then Daniel will too. If he doesn't - well - you can fine-tune things for your brother." The thought of his brother failing almost made Niklas stop mid-sentence, but he had to make his point.

Kaiv was starting to agree with Niklas. "Not a bad idea. The only problem is the money I'll be losing by spending hours upon hours on your brother, and that would limit the money and time I'd have for mine. If you could come up with enough, then I will wholeheartedly accept the task."

Money? This was one thing that the Fuller family did not have. The small savings that Niklas had was for his new house, and even that would barely be a dent in the amount that Kaiv would see on a day to day basis. "I don't think I have enough..."

“Thought so. Well, how’s this: Whatever color Jayce ends up reaching, be it black, red, or as high as gold, he will have to owe me one huge favor. He will work under me for six months after the Exam to make up for the time I’ll have given him.”

At first, Niklas was going to object immediately. He wasn’t going to condemn his brother to six months of working for a stranger. No way, no matter wha-

If Kaiv is willing to make this deal, then that must mean he truly believes Jayce can survive.

Niklas let go of his pride. “I’ll agree to that.”

The two shook hands, and Niklas was allowed to stay the night. Tomorrow, he’d have to begin the long trek home.