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Poetry

Randoms—*First Place in Poetry*

Taylor Grzybinski

When will you stop with the randoms?

The ones that you don't know

The ones who you don't care for

The ones who only want a show

When will you stop with the randoms?

The ones that you don't even like

“Wait, what's your name again?”

“Taylor...right?”

When will you stop with the randoms?

They only make you feel dead inside

Strip you of your sense of pride

Make you sit in your room and hide from the idea of feeling alive

When will you stop with the randoms?

Yeah sure, it feels good for a second

Although inside you know you're just a beck and call

But in the moment it feels like you have it all

When will you stop with the randoms?

You know what I say is true

After all, look at you

The tears that stain your pillow

The mascara streaks that turned into tattoos

When will you stop with randoms?



The ones who you don't know
The ones that you don't care for
The ones who only want a show



Sleep

Kristine Wagner

I have a lover and his name is Sleep.

Every day I wait for night to be back in his warm embrace

Doing homework I feel his breath on my neck

During class he attempts to seduce me.

The more I have of him

The better I feel.

Life has been pulling us apart,

I don't know when we shall rendezvous again.

But I hold onto a hope that we can be together once more.





The Puurfect Night

Stephanie Ricker



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The Progression

Lily Gold

Sometimes I want to know what it was like to be like you
To lose control
To know that things are spiraling out of control, but do nothing
I wonder what it's like to have no motivation
To not want to get up and simply vegetate in bed all day
To sit and rot in a trailer, while lives continues to move forward, while you remain stagnant
What is it like
To lay idly by while your children grow up without you there
I don't understand
How you could let yourself get like this
You were so strong willed and resilient
But you lost
And while you were digressing, I was progressing
And while you lost your strength, I slowly began to take it
With each new beer you opened, I built sturdier armor
With each night you left me alone, my feelings grew calloused
With each school event you didn't attend, you diminished, and I roared
Maybe I sucked the life from you when I was born
And over the years you became weak and I grew powerful
Maybe the thing you are proudest of is actually your downfall
And now I leave you decrepit and afraid, while I am invincible



The Silent Advocate

Blue

There are tales of a voiceless leader.

I hear it often still

Of a blue-eyed girl

Claimed as such

But a follower, she did feel.

Hailed with a title, all the while

With self-doubt in hand.

She marched to battle

Losing her voice

Amongst charismatic clamor.

Speechless, she cowers

Trapped in the shadow Of this grand façade.

Only to ponder, to wonder

“Can I lead without a sound?”



The Artist

Lily Gold

She stalks her prey like a hawk in the night
Encircling it until it cowers under her power
She twitches
This is not the moment, she says
This is not the one
And like that she retreats to the comforts of her house
Where her husband waits under warm sheets to inhale her
She is tense
All that fills her head are the failures she has acquired over the years
Small mementos of marriage, jobs, children that won't let her escape the past and see
the future
She is so bogged down by her nightmares and constant darkness that surrounds her
Can she pull herself out of this?
Is this just a phase like last time?
Will she be a failure?
And slowly, almost invisible to the human eye, a piece of her dies
She no longer carries the zeal and robust sense of confidence
Her mind withers away until it is non-existent



Fairy Flowers

Kristine Wagner

Every morning I walked down to give water
To the chickens and the ducks, A bucket half my weight in one hand
My other arm stretched out for balance.
That is when I saw the fairy flowers.
They were shorter than the grass,
Their blooms no larger than my thumbnail was.
Four perfectly petite petals unfurled
From the slender leafless stem
In shades from ballerina pink to lavender.
Every year they appeared
Just after onion grass season
And just before the violets.
Most of the flowers I found in the grass
My mother dubbed “Weed Flowers”,
But I knew these were different.
These did not overrun gardens
Or stand out garish against
The side of crumbling sidewalks.
Only a dozen or so tiny flowers
Would grow in a grove, In a little fairy circle.





Fairy Clocks

Stephanie Ricker



The Grand Waltz

Lily Gold

I live in a world of silence

While he lives in a world of darkness

We dance around each other in a waltz like state

With no music

We have been doing this since the day I was born

He, unable to see me

And I, not hearing him

But I can feel him

And he can feel me

We can feel each other's presence

And it is this, this energy

That keeps me here

That fosters some sense of a relationship because I know, and he knows

That he is my father

And I his son



Hold On

Karina Mehmert

I know it's getting harder
Harder to hold on
But no one knows that better
Than those who've loved you all along
It's hard to see you like this
Especially when I can do nothing
But I know you can get through this
Please keep trying

If you won't try for yourself
Then try for me
I wouldn't ask this of anybody else
So please
Just try for me

I owe so much to you
You helped me be the person I am today
And there's still so much left to do
Please don't throw your tomorrows away
Don't you know what's out there
There's so much we haven't seen
Don't you want to go out where
You can live just one more dream



If you won't dream for yourself
Then dream for me
I wouldn't ask this of anybody else
So please
Just dream for me

I want to learn everything about who you are
There are so many stories I haven't heard
I feel like I've only scratched the surface so far
You know so much I hang on to your every word
I know so little about faith and life
You have a lot more to teach me
You helped me see the world in a new light
But I'm scared of a world without you by me
When I look into your eyes I know I can do anything
I don't want our time to be through
To me you are everything
I love you

So if you won't hold on for love of yourself
Then hold on for your love of me
I wouldn't ask this of anybody else
Because I believe together we are strong
Just hold on



Straw Man

Kristine Wagner

You have made me a straw man,
Interpreting all my silences for bitterness,
Stuffing my head with opinions not my own.
When I tried to speak my own thoughts
You sewed up my mouth and would not listen.
You stitched on a pair of shiny button eyes,
Calling me unperceiving in your own denial.
All these pinpricks day after day
Do not garner the response you want,
For the straw man you attack
Has none of my blood left in it.



Reaching the Shore

Lily Gold

I don't understand the phrase "battling depression"

I can barely do anything let alone hold my own against a restless, unforgivable force

I'm not battling

I'm taking a beating

Every day I feel wave after wave of doubt, anger, despair, hopelessness come crashing down on me

And I'm drowning in it

But when the feelings finally recede things don't get better

Instead of being able to breathe it's like I can't anymore

I can't take a deep breath or feel relief

Instead I'm numb

Enveloped in the silence that pounds in my ears

No ship can find me

No life preserver can lift me out of the dark depths

Instead I'm weighed down by my thoughts so I sink lower

Making it harder for me to swim back to the surface again

Some days I come surging out of the ocean and get a glimpse of the shore

Brimming with hope and gladness from finally feeling the warmth from the sun on my face

For feeling something

Some days I barely keep my head above the water

I strive to stay afloat amidst the chaos

Waiting to be caught off guard and submerged again

Some days I stay anchored to the ocean floor



Tethered there by my own thoughts and emotions that make the world darker, bleaker
Where no one is willing to dive deep enough
Or know just how far down I am
Because when they see me in my own private ocean the water usually appears calm
Only I'm aware of the degree of turbulence that happens just below the surface
But I've become exhausted from struggling to survive for so long
It's hard to keep treading water when I start to think I might never walk on land again
So I'm not really battling
I'm just trying to not drown
And reach the shore





Colorado Mountains

Candice Lake



The Truth About You

Amber Brevig

It pains me to say this but it's you pilfering my last semblance of sanity fighting every word that comes out of my mouth you consistently overcrowding me, blocking me seemingly purposefully cutting apart clear reasoning you without even knowing with a surgeon's precision, slicing taking the truth only to remodel, suiting you to the last idea your mind is cancerous craving attention too much to think, apparent to all who know the truth about You Causing me suffering oblivious to such ill-informed "facts" sliding off your tongue, the true calamities

YOU

Catastrophic in your lack of knowledge your theatrical play-acting in truth to be endured by me like a parent a child YOU! forgoing reason in preference to fiction demonstrating stupidity with laughable ease, and it truly pains me to say this, but

it's all

you.



Final Offerings

Lily Gold

Let me hold those shaky hands, let me steady them

Let me look into those eyes, see the hurt and suffering, and take on that pain

Let me bathe that decrepit body and surrender it for you

Let me see the world through your eyes and find a silver lining

Let me take on the weight of your past on my shoulders and bare the pain you hold in your heart

Let me take the addiction and internalize it until it ceases to exist

Let me mend your broken soul and help you see through clear eyes

Let me be the crutch for your entire being to lean on

Let me take the cancer that is consuming you and take it on as my own

You are weak

Let me take the burdens you cannot carry

I am strong

Let me do this one last thing for you

Let me let you go



Dreams

Victoria Lane

A young mind is infinite,
Filled to the brim with
Potential, possibilities,
Dreams.

You imagine what can happen in your life
And what you desperately want for it to be,
Until one day they tell you to "wake up,"
To realize that this is real life- not a dream.

And that burning passion inside your soul
Is deprived of oxygen,
And the brilliant lustrous gem it was,
Now, can barely gleam.

And again, they tell you to
"Move on,"

"Get real,"

Or "think about reality." Then you begin to doubt yourself,
And then you begin to believe.

Maybe you were wrong.

Maybe you should do what is safe or what is expected.

Maybe you should try to find your happiness

From a more practical perspective.

And every time we get told "No,"

"You can't,"



Or "Nobody ever really does,"
Our once bright flame dwindles
Until the precious stone that was
Is no more than a dull, cold rock, Extinguished from it, all chance at euphoria,
And absent of even the warmth of hope.
Then,
When all is lost,
And your heart is broken,
And all that remains is the empty shell
Of the person you've become and never wanted to be,
They will demand from you, "Why did you give up?
You should have followed your
Dreams."



The Dead's Unspoken Cry for Help

Amber Brevig

Sunlight filters through the shades,
casting dusty shadows in the empty house
where the unknown woman died, the
windows of which have finally cracked
and given way to her fermented smell

The slightest of winds pass through to stir
the scent of rot and urine undulating through
the air

It slithers through small openings,
breaking free and spreading out;
allowing sinuous tendrils to unwind
and choke unwitting passer-by with
its longing for life

It crashes, smashing through clasped nostrils and held breaths,
disregarding its overwhelming nature
in the hopes of sparking
a memory.

This sickly sweet scent of decay and
death, having drawn the attention it
ached for so desperately, dissipates
finally through the town



as doors are forced in and its decrepit
birthplace is discovered, lamented,
and buried deep down, leaving its
scream to fade away and die.





Artwork (a.)

Rachel Miller



Consuming Words

Isabel Manu

I wish.

I wish I possessed catastrophic words

Dangerously malignantly unsparingly piercing words

I wish my mouth poured with them deliciously

Or spat them out viscously Killer words who are so maliciously running out of my mouth in their infantries

I wish we possessed them.

Words pungent with havoc Exploding, Erupting, Escalating drowning you with their Mavericks of treachery I wish I possessed murderous words with their own fatalities,

Spurting out with so much brutality.

With no regards to the banalities

For they are on the verge of declaring insanity.

But society said SH

I wish my words raised goose bumps on your flesh that they created such apocalyptic tragedies

With the death of your sanity being a formality I wish my words were reeking with noxious fetor that their truest nature something of a horror

I wish my words had their own poisonous diagnosis Fatally almost explosive

Leaving your new self deformed and affected stripping your being with the feeling of being molested lacerating your beliefs like no one ever could

Scorching through every single person's livelihood

Igniting wars and the genocide of stability Leaving in ruins homes, cities, and countries pillaging conformity and comfortability

But society said SH

I do not know how to put this so bluntly

I wish I possessed words with such violent measures



I hope they bring you the worst of displeasures

Words that you can not swallow so gently

Affecting you so intensely

Killing you so abusively

I wish I spoke these words I wish I spoke these words but society made me swallow them and in silence my words shall succumb

So, SH

Silence



Short Story

His Father's Pen — *First Place Winner*

Nathan Appelbaum

Royce's father had a beautiful quill pen. Royce used to watch his father write with it. There was nothing interesting in the words, dull names and endless numbers. It was the pen that held his younger self's attention.

The point, a shimmer of gold. A bright star against the harsh, domineering, black of the feather, like volcanic glass. Lacquer of some exotic and expensive variety had been lathered lovingly onto it during its momentous creation, giving it the sheen of polished silver. A gentle stream of navy blue ink poured onto the paper and molded itself according to his father's will.

It was the weapon of a mighty hero.

In his mind's eye Royce saw the greats; Cuhulain with his deadly spear Gae Bulg, Arthur with his mighty blade Excalibur, and between them, himself, wielding that wondrous pen. He imagined that any word he wrote with it would spring off the page and come to life. Royce had story upon story of his heroics with the pen. He would solve mysterious murders, fight monstrous monsters, and save a precious damsel who was repeatedly locked away with a sleeping dragon.

Alas, the beauty and wonder of it all was lost to his father, whose thoughts were only concerned with the pragmatic ideas of business and wealth.

The pen had been around before Royce's birth. He had asked his father about where he had gotten it, but Royce had received the usual answer to such questions of superfluous importance, "I don't know, and if my mind thought it unimportant enough to forget then so should you." His father went on writing. Neat, carefully drawn, numbers were filed into little boxes and next to each set were scribbled, barely legible, names.

As much as his father might have wanted him too, Royce could not forget about the pen. His pen, as he thought of it.

He had asked to use it on many occasions, but always was given an exasperated excuse, "I am working boy, Find a different pen, or No, that is my work pen." After a few years of this his father went so far as to forbid Royce's presence in his study.

And so he would sit outside the office for hours until his precious mother would come by and see him in his depressed state. She would be his shield as they entered the office together, but even still they were never allowed to stay long, especially his



mother. She knew of his little obsession, and would chuckle under her breath as she listened to him describe, in depth, his adventures with the feathered pen. She had argued many times on Royce's behalf to be allowed back into his study and once for his father to give him the pen. This had been met with resounding confusion, "We have plenty of pens dear. He does not need my work pen."

"It's special to him."

"The answer is no."

"At least let him be with you while you work then. He just wants to be close you!"

"Nonsense, a boy should be out exploring the countryside with his friends at his age, not getting cooped up in an office."

The conversation moved away from where Royce had been playing, under a table in the kitchen.

He did not come out, not until his mother found him under there, a concerned look on her tired face. Puffy, red, blotches sat under her eyes, like a crimson army laying siege.

Royce imagined taking the gold and black pen and smoothing away her worries with a single word, but all he could do was smile. That seemed to help, at least a little.

She helped him out from under the table and got one of the servants to fetch a glass of milk.

He gave her a great big smile, ear to ear, as she handed him the drink, and this time she laughed. The red had almost completely fled from her face, but the little wounds that dotted her slender arm would never quite fade away.

Time slipped by, tick by tock, but the pen was never forgotten to Royce, although he did his best to ensnare it in the recesses of his mind. But every time he would see it, sitting on a desk or in his father's hand, he could not help but stare. The image, born of innocence, was still so fixed so fresh in his mind; beauty, magic, heroics, excitement.

Then the pen would be gone and he would chuckle at the silly mutterings of his youth.

Tick by tock.

Finally becoming a man, his father said as it came close to his coming of age. Now Royce too wished he could be out exploring the countryside instead of sitting in his father's office all day, learning the finer points of running a business; how to keep your clients happy, how to get new clients, how to keep a good log, and many more dull things of that nature.

Every day he saw that pen. He even almost got to hold it once.

His father had spilled a container of navy ink and thrust the pen towards Royce to hold, who, in shock, did not take it. He could not take. Something inside of him could not get the muscles to respond, and then it was over. His father set the pen down and



went to go get some cloth and solvent. Royce stared at the pen. He could not touch it, but at that moment he knew it had to be his. He'd rather that pen than the most beautiful woman in the world. He'd rather that pen than all his inheritance. He'd rather that pen than his father.

He resolved to get it anyway he could. He would demand it of his father, who was not at the manor at that time, which gave Royce the opportunity for preparation.

He imagined every response, every excuse, his father could give as to why he needed this particular pen, and he removed them.

He had found every single pen in the manor and hid them in the attic, beneath a bit of torn up cloth. He had purchased a fine, new, silver and navy, quill as a present for his father, to replace the, "old and dated one" he currently used. He had finished all the work his father had to do upon his return, leaving him open for discussion. He had even sent a letter to his mother, telling her not to come visit Royce for a while.

Then the day came, and his father arrived. Royce waited until the servants had unpacked all his things, until after he had some food, and until, at last, he retired to his office.

Royce entered, the silver and navy pen hidden behind his back.

His eyes searched for his golden wonder, his Helen of Troy, but he did not see it. Likely his father had yet to remove it from it's black leather carrying case, which, Royce saw with much pleasure, was sitting on the desk. "Hello father. How were your travels?"

He looked up from the desk at Royce, "Ah son, what did you do with all the pens? I cannot find any of the extras."

"What about your pen father? The gold and black one?"

He shook an indifferent hand at Royce, "That old thing. I lost it somewhere along the road."

"Where did you lose it?"

"I don't know boy, and if my brain thought it so unimportant as to forget then so should you."

Without blinking Royce handed his father the silver and navy pen and sat down at the small desk in the corner.

He sat there a long while, staring at his father as he scribbled "Just like you forgot mother?"

His father looked up at Royce, his eyebrows sunk and his lips curled into a sneer, "Shut your mouth boy!" As he yelled he slammed the new, silver and navy, pen against



the desk, leaving little wounds which would never quite fade from the tender wood, and snapping the silver and navy pen in half.

His father tossed the remains in front of Royce’s small desk, “Get me another boy. I have work to do.”

Royce got up and picked the two halves of the silver and navy pen off the floor. The point was still sharp. He looked at his father, and he wished he could forget.



Of Mice and Mendel

Kristine Wagner

“My scientific studies have afforded me great gratification; and I am convinced that it will not be long before the whole world acknowledges the results of my works.”
Gregor Mendel

There are those few and fearsome teachers who are determined that their lessons will not be forgotten. Instead of teaching their students to become monkeys that spit information back to them, they endeavor to teach their students to think, a really quite tricky business if you think about it.

In science there are the discoverers, and also the sadly-overlooked keepers of the flame, who laboriously make sure information from past generations is not lost, and that the new generation rising up is building upon what has already been found so that science can progress instead of running in a continual loop of starting from nothing.

My Biology professor sought to do just that. Genetics was our topic of the day and Gregor Mendel was the man of the hour. That great scientist who had predicted so many years ago that his findings would be acknowledged by the world was right, but on the fateful Tuesday morning Biology lab that I stumbled into bleary eyed and deodorantless, my professor was determined to make sure it would also be understood. At least by the twenty students of his class. So he started from the beginning.

Gregor Mendel was a monk, an Augustinian monk if you're interested in that sort of thing, but he is more commonly known as the Father of Modern Genetics, because between the ages of 34-41 he watched peas reproduce. Why peas? Well actually, good old Gregor did not start with peas, but rather studied heredity in mice, but his bishop thought it wouldn't be fitting for him to watch Mickey and Minnie copulate, so pea plants it was. His findings laid the foundation for tons of important sciency stuff, but all of that is entirely over most of our heads. In fact, most of it would probably have been over Gregor's head too, because while he was able to draw correlations between his findings, he could not determine their causes. It was 1865, genetics was just beginning, give the man a break.

Now genetics, as you can probably guess, has a great deal to do with genes. What is a gene? The simplest answer is a strand of DNA. These genes, these strands of DNA which are found in the nuclei of your cells, do not determine what traits you have. DNA has one function and one function only, and that is to be a code for



proteins, and the proteins determine what traits you have. Same difference? So it would seem, but it's really not.

Proteins are crazy little molecules, and can be or do whatever the heck they want basically. Proteins can be enzymes, which help break apart and bring together other molecules. Proteins can be pigments and decide whether or not a girl is hazel-eyed and merely pretty, or whether she has blue eyes and now meets the requirement for becoming a Miss America. Proteins determine your traits, and genes determine your proteins. Hold on to that fact, you'll need it later. So my professor assured us all.

To ensure that we did hold on to this fact, our professor gave us a proposition. If we scored 20 out of 20 points on this lab, he would bump our midterms up to an A. This wasn't much of an incentive for me since I already got an A on my midterm. So he made the deal a little sweeter. If someone who got the lowest grade on the midterm needed 50 points to get an A, 50 points would be given to everyone who got a perfect score on this lab, and the extra points would be tacked on to the next test. Considering his tests are about 60 points, I would be sitting happy with an A on the next test even if I only got a 5 point question right. Considering there were people who only got in the teens on the midterm, many eyes widened with hope. He smiled at us, said he would make the deal even sweeter later, and then returned to conducting the lab as usual.

To start at the beginning with our dear friend Gregor, you're going to need to know about Punnett squares. Punnett squares are—you guessed it—squares. From dominant and recessive alleles you can determine the likelihood of pea plants being green or yellow with remarkable precision and only a two by two graph.

A thing of beauty if there ever was one.

This is the basic Punnett square scenario you will see in any basic biology class or textbook, and while it is important, my professor was not content with stopping there. After all, it is perfectly reasonable to go through the basic Punnett square without realizing that proteins come into play at all. Realizing the role of proteins is crucial for understanding genetics, but thinking through the process is more than what any non-biology major would want to do in an 8:00 AM lab.

So my professor decided to give us a carrot. If we were able to explain the last scenario he was about to give us with Punnett squares without any help from him, he would give us an A for the whole course, and we would never have to show up for that 8:00 AM class ever again.

“This scenario I have crafted is a thing of beauty. I know what areas all of you have weaknesses in, and I am targeting them with this question. You will have to draw upon all your knowledge from the course up to this point to answer it. The answer is very simple, it will be staring you straight in the face, but you will not see it. Isn't it scary I know you all that well? But if any of you can adequately explain the scenario I am about to give you with no help from me, you will never have to see my face again.”



This isn't just some game anymore, is it?

This isn't just some crazy monk watching peas, this isn't just some useless information about Punnett squares that you will never use again for the rest of your life.

This is important.

This is getting to sleep in Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday again.

This is life and death.

This is war.

The last, fateful scenario he gave us had to do with mice, ironically enough. The last scenario was given to us as follows:

There are two types of mice, agouti and albino. Agouti is a type of brown mouse. A purebred male agouti is bred with a purebred female albino mouse, resulting in 12 agouti offspring, half male and half female. These mice are left to breed with themselves in an incestual paradise for a year (no wonder the bishop had reservations about his minks performing experiments with mice!) resulting in 384 mice total: 219 agouti, 96 albino, and 69 black. Explain this without using the internet.

I immediately whipped out my calculator to find the percentages for the third generation. 57% agouti, 25% albino, 18% black, so by that point it definitely wouldn't be a 2x2 Punnett square in the end. But a 4x4 Punnett square usually resulted in four different outcomes, with the ratio of 9-3-3-1, and we only needed three outcomes.

"Hey, Kristine." I turn around to see a classmate, Mike. "Do you want to come work with us?" I look around, everyone has divided back into groups around the tables in the back.

"Sure!" I said, gathering my stuff and moving to a table. A few other guys join, including Mr. Baseball. I don't remember his actual name, but he misses class a lot and was one of the ones in need of the extra points. I start spitballing Punnett squares right and left. The black didn't make sense; the scenario clearly stated there had been no mutations, and unfortunately it wouldn't make sense to claim black was a combination of agouti and albino. Albinism was the lack of pigments, and I knew Melanism was when there was pigment overkill, resulting in entirely black animals, but if there were no mutation would melanism even be possible...

"What are you saying there Miss Wagner?" My professor asked, coming back to our table in his rounds around the class.

"Just how albinism is the lack of pigments and melanism is the..."

"Yes! Yes!" My professor affirmed enthusiastically. "And what are pigments?"

I stared at him blankly. "Proteins."



“And what else are proteins?”

“Enzymes.”

“Yes! And what do proteins do?”

“Everything basically.” He grinned at me.

“Exactly Miss Wagner. You’re on the right track! You have all of the pieces, you just need to put them together!”

“But what track am I on? How do I know where to go from here?”

“Think! Proteins!” The professor gave me a wide, evil smile and resumed his rounds about the classroom. I returned to the scenario, even more confused than before.

The first generation seems fairly straightforward. Two agouti genes (G,G) across the top with two albino genes (a,a) down the side, creating all agouti offspring (G,a) assuming that agouti was the dominant gene. However, somehow, somewhere, they started reproducing black mice. Black couldn’t be a recessive gene because the original two mice were purebred. Where did the black come from?

Mr. Baseball hunched over his phone, trying to hide the fact he was googling for the answer. I knew it would do no good. The question was beautiful, the professor said, the answer was simple, he said. He smiled as he watched us all. He knew exactly what he was doing, making us all go out of our minds fighting for an A in the class. He was a bit of a sociopath. We got along really well actually.

It was nearly four hours into the lab. My lack of deodorant was beginning to become obvious. Our professor had not only succeeded in making us think with his little A for the whole course stunt, but he had driven many of us to skip classes and work in learn in pursuit of the ever elusive answer. Many flawless Punnett squares were drawn up, the roles of proteins were gone over again and again, DNA replication and translation into the amino acids was even well understood by all of the students. The professor merely smiled at us and told us we had all of the pieces we needed. But I did not have the time I needed.

It was 11:30. I gathered my papers.

“I’m giving up. I’m asking for the second hint.”

“No!” Mr. Baseball wailed. “You’re the smart one here! You’re our only hope!”

“Find a new Obi Wan,” I quipped back, and went up to the teacher. “I want the second hint.”

“You will want to hit yourself when you see how simple and logical this answer is, Miss Wagner.” My professor told me, leading me to his computer. I already wanted to beat my head against the wall, so I was not worried about sinking any lower at that



point. And then he revealed to me the answer, which was in our eyes, truly a thing of beauty.

Reach back into your memories about how traits are determined. Do the genes determine the traits? No. What determines the traits? The proteins. In this case, there were two different types of proteins: pigments and enzymes. There was a pigment for black, and an enzyme that broke it down into smaller brown pigments. If you have a dominant black pigment, you get a black mouse, *unless* you also have a dominant enzyme, whereupon you have a brown mouse. If you have a recessive black pigment, you get an albino mouse no matter if the enzyme is recessive or not. If you have a dominant black pigment and a recessive enzyme, then you get a black mouse. All three colors factored for with only two genes, one gene that codes for the pigment and one that codes for the enzyme.

I returned to graph out a four by four Punnett square and write up my paper to turn in. Everything was explained perfectly; everything made sense. The logic of it all, the streamlined functionality, it made so much sense. The crazy professor was right, it was even rather beautiful how everything fell into place. Gregor Mendel became acknowledged worldwide years ago, but in that single lab another goal was met; a professor had all his students think through and understand the basics of genetics. The very, very basics, but any step forward in understanding is a moment to be rejoiced in, even if the motivation for it came from shameless bribery.

“Did I miss anything?” I asked, holding out my completed answer. He didn’t even look at the paper as he accepted it.

“I’m sure you have everything.” I thanked him and left, feeling like I had just exited some sort of psychology experiment. It was noon. The other students who held out for the extra points for the midterm got them, but it took 5 hours total. Not a single student was able to get an A for the rest of the course. But none of us will forget what we learned in that lab anytime soon.



Not My 21st Birthday

Marissa Bylo

“Hi. My name is Jared and I’m a closet alcoholic.” That’s what I should say to my old 6th grade teacher and classmates who gather around a Steak N’ Shake table on the eve of my 19th birthday. But I don’t say quite that. This isn’t AA. I tell them I have enjoyed the move to my new school and that I’m making good decisions. Mostly. People don’t believe I still meet with these people. To be fair, I’m friends with three of them – Abby, Nicole, and Melissa. Abby and I have remained particularly close friends since the 3rd grade. Granted, most of our time together consists of drinking and food runs to Jack N The Box because I’m dating another girl. Abby keeps me in the friend-zone for her own reasons. Nicole is always up for a chat every now and then. Melissa is too good for me.

After all the half-truths and considerate chatter, I walk with Abby to her car. It’s a typical Midwest July night. The only difference is my impending birthday.

Before we part ways I say, “I’m having some people over at Blake’s house for my birthday. Wanna join?”

“Oh! Your birthday is tomorrow. Hell yeah! Someone should drive me though. You know me and directions...”

Blake’s parents are gone tonight which equals instant house party. Well, an illegal house party technically, but who really cares other than the police, absent parents, and the vacation-ing Melissa? Bring on the drinks! Being under twenty-one doesn’t mean you can’t get alcohol. Know where to go and not to go. You’ll also need an expensive fake id that says you’re from Illinois, religiously memorize the address on your fake, and walk through the liquor department with confidence.

Blake welcomes Abby and me into his nondescript suburban home. Lauren soon saunters in to the house, winks at me, and kisses my cheek, followed by Nicole and Mikey – Mikey and all the glory of forty Jello shots. Add Jose Cuervo and Bud Light and you have all the appropriate drinks for a small house party; we have what we need for a good time. Blake is such a gracious host. He sips an O’Douls, leaving the real stuff for the rest of us. He doesn’t say too much, letting the party unfold. He’s an omnipresent, non-interfering host. The good kind.

Lauren approaches me as I grab a Bud Light. “Don’t drink too much, okay? We both have work tomorrow,” comments Lauren as she eyes my first beer suspiciously. I have downed a few of those Jello shots already. I’m not the only one drinking though.

Everyone but Blake has followed suit.



My favorite defense goes like this, “I can control myself while drinking.” I empty the first beer bottle with a smirk, and she rolls her eyes. I’ll convince her.

With my second beer in hand, I lead her outside to join those playing Twister. This game was so much more innocent and easy as kids. We were smaller, flexible, and didn’t think to consider how close we were to other people. The game doesn’t last long as things get awkward fast between Lauren and I while Nicole crashes on to the mat.

Maybe she’s feeling the shots. They are disappearing at a steady rate long with the beer.

Everything is completely fine up until 11:59pm. We all know the song. “Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday Jared. Happy Birthday to you...”

All hell breaks loose at 12am. Happy 19th Birthday to me!

“Shots,” immediately yells Mikey as he and I give a clink of cheers and bottoms up that tequila.

Abby shuffles over. “Hey! I’ll match you guys shots.” It will be fine. She can handle it.

And with that, tequila and vodka disappear. I lose count, but I feel the drink’s effect. That floating feeling that makes life not so serious; the stress of life is suppressed. The alcohol brings me clarity, and I’m more of myself under its influence. Drunk words equal sober thoughts.

The three of us stumble over to the couch, bellowing about God-knows what. Abby fits herself in between us, leaning a little close to me while her legs are pushed against Mikey. There are several types of drunks, and Abby falls under the clumsy, flirty drunk. She grows bored of me, so she turns to Mikey. She’s taking his hand and trying to make him get up and go with her somewhere. The next few minutes are me trying to break the two up from serious PDA and watching Lauren give me the death glare.

I leave the couch to brave the storm of an angry girlfriend. “What’s wrong,” I ask. Lauren gives me the most menacing look. “Abby was trying to kiss you. I also told you not to drink so much.”

“She’s interested in Mikey. I’ve had more drinks before. This is nothing,” is all I can say before she stalks away. I feel the fury brewing in me, this anger at myself for upsetting Lauren. It stays there, waiting for something else to provoke it. I can control myself though.

We continue pouring and downing the drinks, the night blurring in to strange, mixed up pieces. I think there’s more pulls of vodka. Maybe there are more games of Twister. At one point I fling my phone because Lauren is still upset with me, but it somehow lands in Nicole’s purse. I obviously know what is happening.



Where is Abby? I look around, getting angry with every second that passes. There she is, curled up in the fetal position, looking a little too sick. She throws up suddenly and Nicole and Lauren rush to her side, holding her long hair back and pulling her to the deck. Shit. This is all my fault. I know better than to let her have all that alcohol. It is my fault for even inviting her. I'm so stupid and I should know better and... Blake is showing me a hole in the wall, a fist-sized hole in his parents' home's wall. He keeps telling me I punched it. Shit. Actual Shit.

Mikey lays in the middle of the floor, drunkenly staring at the ceiling. Conscious thankfully. This is all my fault.

Nicole appears at my side saying, "We should probably call Abby's mom. She might have alcohol poisoning."

We scroll through Abby's phone and cannot find her mom's number. Nicole calls Melissa but of course it's late for her. She's asleep like a good little girl. Maybe we should take her to the hospital. Seems the most logical thing to do. She's also underage. We are all underage. I'm not really sure how they will take that fact.

"Let's just get her home," decides Nicole.

Abby is still so sick, puking and very unaware of what is happening to her. Shit. I am pretty sure she is gonna die or something. It's my responsibility too. Nicole leads Abby to her car. I hope she doesn't puke again because Nicole is fond of her car, Dean. We probably should take her to the hospital. This is all my fault...

I fall asleep sometime that morning at Blake's house. An ear-splitting alarm jolts me awake around 8am. Shit. I have work today. Despite a dull headache, the hangover symptoms are not present. I can control myself, even the hangovers. You have to know what you are doing, and you can escape the dreaded after-party sickness.

Damage control- I first text Abby to make sure she's even alive. Next is Lauren, and I apologize for the hundredth time. I also promise Blake to fix that hole in the wall. Hopefully he's not too mad about my brief lapse of self-control. Last is Melissa, so she can hear about this story from me before anyone else tells her.

Now I tell this epic story to anyone that will listen. Of course, I embellish it a bit but no one needs to know that. This party makes me feel like I'm truly living out my college years well. Even though it sucked while it happened, it makes for a great story. I had this crazy 19th birthday party. My 21st probably won't measure up.



The Ancient Secret

Courtney Thomas

If the aliens attack it will be the end of society. And if they find out, if the public finds out about the aliens that started the wars thousands of years ago, they would freak out. For the end of human society as we know it, would end. Everyone in the top governments knows that. It is what is kept top secret in buildings in the middle of Area

51.

Luke had grown up with his family involved in the CIA and he had known this secret. Of course he knew better than to go into the area alone and unsupervised, but for once he had a really hot date. He was geeky and nerdy, and he hated himself for it. So when his grades started slipping, and he started to lose his geekiness, he became popular and well average. Which for him, was a huge improvement on his part. It was late October of his Junior year of high school and while everyone was nagging on him on what colleges and scholarships he should apply for, he was tired of hearing it.

He looked over at his date, Amber, and smiled at her. They had just been to Homecoming, and he had snagged one of the hottest dates in school.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked looking at him unsure.

“Of course. Amber, I wouldn’t let you down. Besides,” he said smirking and pulling something out of his back pocket. “I nicked a key.”

“Alright,” she giggled. “Let’s go, before the security comes.”

The 2 of them climbed out of the car, locked it and made their way to the building. A sort of warehouse that had burned down back when they had tested the Atomic bomb, and had now been repurposed as a lawn care shed, and the occasional top secret weapon, that occasionally might tick. It was just outside area 51 and they knew better than to just hop the fence as the area had several warning and danger signs explicitly warning trespassers about the use of lethal deadly force if they dared to trespass.

“Hello?” A voice questioned as the 2 teenagers entered the building.

Amber looked over at him Luke questioningly and reasonably scared shitless.

“Bill? Is that you?” asked Luke trying to force a smile. It was only Bill, an older gentleman with glasses and white hair. A ‘retired’ security guard who had served in Vietnam and occasionally worked the night shift.



“Luke, you know the rules. You’re not supposed to bring a girl in here. What would your dad say if he caught you sneaking a girl in here?”

Luke and Amber’s face fell. Of course, you just can’t sneak into a top secret building and have a good time without getting caught or in serious trouble.

“I’m sorry Bill, we were just leaving. Please don’t-”

Bill chuckled and held up his left hand cutting her off.

“Which is why, I’m the cool security guard and I won’t tell your parents or anyone. But I, uh need your help with something. I don’t exactly want the others to find out about this, because well it’s just--I don’t even know. Come quickly,” he said. “Girl are you wearing heels?”

“Yeah. And the name’s Amber.” “Alright new plan. You both get changed and follow me. And hurry.”

After finding some old clothes and they had both changed Bill led them carefully out to the middle of a field in Area 51. They walked until they saw something glowing in the distance with red and green lights.

“What the ****?” Asked Amber.

“No, not the giant alien spaceship,” said Bill dismissively. “Look at the thing just below it. They looked and sure enough after about a minute or so, they could see it. It was about 2 metres tall, and had a red skin partially covered in fur. It could’ve been a human but it obviously wasn’t.

“Is that what I think it is?” Asked Amber looking back and forth between Luke and Bill “and is it dead?”

“Yes. It is an Alien and we don’t know.”

“You, you do not know if it is dead? Should we like take a shot gun and shoot between the eyes just in case?” Amber asked hopefully.

“Well, the only problem is, if we kill it and they find out that we killed it could we get in trouble?” Bill reasoned. “But if we don’t kill it and it attacks innocent civilians then we’d also be in deep shit. So, that’s why I needed your guy’s help.”

“I say, that we just kill it now. And we will explain everything later we might wanna hurry before it wakes up,” said Luke. Bill took out his shotgun cocked it and told them to stay back before he shot the gun at its head several times.

After the 3rd shot, he was pretty sure that the creature was dead. The three of them were wrapping up the body of the alien when the creature’s eyes suddenly shot wide open and grabbed Amber’s leg. Amber let out a terrifying scream of pure terror and kicked the alien in the groin area as hard as she possibly could. To her surprise, the creature let go of her leg and where the creature had grabbed her leg, it had



burned like no tomorrow. It muttered something in Russian about Americans before trying to climb in its spaceship. Amber took the gun and instead of the head she had aimed for its chest area. She kept shooting the creature until it was a bloody mess and most definitely dead this time. Just when she had ran out of bullets she felt a force take the gun away. The three of them turned to face and angry mob of about 10 more red aliens, each about 1 to 2 metres high. This particular took the gun and threw it across the field.

“Amber?” Asked Luke scared.

“Yeah?”

“Do you have a plan on getting us out of here?”

“No, not unless-- hang on where’s Bill?”

As she said that, they heard a loud crash, and a cat’s angry meow before they heard the roar of an older looking Jeep.

Bill, had pulled up in a 1996 red jeep.

“Quick! Hop on!” They climbed on and lurched forward on the gas pedal but the red aliens paid them no mind. They climbed aboard their spaceship and the three soon saw their spaceship zoom off in the distance.

“They’ll be back,” Bill warned. “I’m afraid we haven’t seen the last of those terrible creatures.”

“I bet the Russian military, had something to do with it,” Amber spat.

“And why is that?”

“Because it was speaking Russian.”





Artwork (b.)

Rachel Miller



The Ones Who Disappear

Kristine Wagner

The sheer size of the entryway astounded Noelle as she stepped through the door. She gripped her little brother's hand tight as she stepped from the threshold, sinking deeply into the Persian rug. So this was the house they were going to tour, although no one seemed to have arrived yet. The rest of the tenth grade was taking the bus, but she had driven from picking up her brother from kindergarten. Her parents didn't come home from work until well after her brother was let out, so guess who got to take care of him every afternoon after school? Noelle's mom had gotten permission for her little brother to tag along on Noelle's after-school field trip so she wouldn't have to hire a babysitter, which Noelle was not the most thrilled about. It's not that she didn't love her brother, but there comes a time when a teenage girl just wants her own space. A place like this would be nice to have to myself. Noelle thought as she looked up at the vaulted ceiling and the magnificent chandelier that hung from it, then around her. To her left was a sitting area for visitors. Everything seemed to be made of dark walnut wood and upholstered in a deep blood red fabric.

But up a little farther up on her left was a narrow hallway, which seemed much too small in comparison with the rest of the entryway. Lining the hallway was a row of white doors with frosted glass panels, not unlike something you would find in a doctor's office. Sunlight streamed through the door windows despite the hallway being too far into the house to have any windows to the outside for those rooms. Before she could ponder the impossible physics of sunlight in the middle of the house and the oddity of something so utilitarian and sanitized in a mansion of such obvious grandeur, her little brother suddenly let go off he hand and ran off down the hallway.

Why do I always have to be chasing after a five year old? Noelle wondered to herself as she ran after him. He ducked behind one of the frosted glass doors and it swung shut just before she could reach him. She yanked the door back open immediately only to find a windowless room about the size of a cubicle equipped with nothing but a plain desk. Surely this was the room he went in, she had pulled the door back open only a nanosecond after it swung shut, she had seen his shadow through the frosted glass. Noelle turned around frantically, but she saw nothing but white walls, a plain desk and herself. Wait what? She whipped her head back around and stared at herself. There was a full length mirror hung on the back of the door she had gone through. Suddenly a small figure darted across the view in the mirror. She jerked her head over her shoulder; she was still the only one in the room. She lifted the mirror off the hook it had been hanging on and used it to look over her shoulder. There was her brother, sitting on the edge of the desk, smiling and swinging his legs. She lowered the mirror and quickly looked around the room for herself: nothing. She lifted the mirror back up to see behind her and there he was. He seemed fine, but he clearly could not see her in return.



She stumbled backwards out of the room and the door swung shut immediately. Sunlight streamed through the frosted glass onto her face. The mirror, I forgot to put it back, she thought, trying to recover her mind from what she had just seen, or maybe not seen rather. She opened the door and looked at the back. The mirror was hanging there. She shut the door from the outside. Sunlight still poured through the frosted glass. She opened the door one more time and lifted the mirror again, to find nothing but a painted white door; no glass.

Filled with a sense of confusion she ran out of the room and back down the hallway to entryway. What was this place? What had happened to her brother? Why couldn't she see him? Before she could collect her thoughts fully, the rest of the group came in through the door. Oh yes, she remembered, the house tour. Her eyes immediately fell on Andy, a boy from her grade. He strode through the entrance at the head of the group, and turned left into the sitting area by the door.

"Dang," he said. "This place is nice." He walked to take a seat, but as he did his head began to disappear. Noelle ran to grab his arm and jerked him back. He was still there; he hadn't disappeared like her brother. Noelle was about to sigh with relief when she looked up into his face. It wasn't there. His whole head was nothing but a dark blue blur, the insubstantial shadow of what had begun to disappear.

"Andy?" She called fearfully. Was he dead or worse?

"What just happened?" Andy's voice came from the undefinable void which hovered over his shoulders.

"Where is everyone?" another voice asked. Noelle turned around; it was Martha, one of Noelle's friends who must have been at the back of the group. But now the rest of the group was nowhere to be seen. In her panic over Andy, Noelle hadn't noticed the loud chatter of the crowd suddenly silencing. The group had disappeared just like her brother had. Her heart pounded so loudly she was almost sure the other two could hear it. Martha's muffled swear when she saw Andy's head echoed around the room. "They're right over there." Andy said pointing up the stair case to the right of the door. Noelle looked up the huge staircase the curved down from the upper floors like the tail of some gigantic beast. It was empty.

"What is going on?" Martha demanded, her glance darting from the empty staircase to Andy's absent head. "What happened to Andy?"

"What is up with you guys?" Andy asked. "I'm fine; we should probably join the group."

"There's no one there! Your head is missing!" Martha shrieked at him.

"You're off your head," Andy retorted.

"No Andy," Noelle said, leading him to a gold framed mirror hanging on the wall.



“Your head is literally gone.” But as she looked into the mirror with him, there was Andy, head and all, and the last of the group could be seen walking up the stairs in the background. “Martha! Come see this.” Noelle yanked Martha over to the mirror. Martha gasped and whipped her head around to look at the staircase herself. There was no one there.

“Noelle, what’s going on?” Martha asked, her voice trembling.

“My brother disappeared. He just walked through a doorway and then he was gone. I don’t know how it happened but I can only see him in mirrors. Andy was about to disappear when I pulled him back and now the group is invisible too.”

“Disappeared? You mean you can’t see them? You can see me, right?” Andy seemed confused. “Why can you see me and not them and I can see everyone?”

“I don’t know,” Noelle replied tiredly. “I can’t see anyone who has disappeared except in mirrors, but only part of you started disappearing, your head. Maybe your eyes are in the other dimension or something, I really don’t know.”

“Like parallel timelines?” Martha gasped excitedly.

“Or the Matrix?” Andy injected.

“Or the Twilight Zone?”

“I always knew I was meant to be a super hero.” Andy whispered as Martha hummed *A Whole New World* in the background. “I’m a freaking super hero.”

“Guys! It doesn’t matter!” Noelle exclaimed. “We just need to find a way to get them all back. I need to find my brother.”

“Well, I saw him go that way with the group.” Andy said pointing to the stairs. “Let’s go.” They all started going up the staircase, which led to a passage lined with doors. “They’re going through that one,” Andy gestured. Martha went to open it and Andy screamed. Martha froze and stared at him. His hands covered where his mouth presumably was.

“You just walked through Mrs. McCarthy.” He whispered, horrified. Martha cringed. Mrs. McCarthy, their teacher, was an ancient, frail, but lovable creature that looked like she could die from a common cold at any moment.

“Is she alright?”

“Oh yeah, she didn’t seem to notice, are you ok Mrs. McCarthy?” Andy called. “Mrs. McCarthy? Mrs. McCarthy??” He started towards the door, but Noelle held him back.

“You’re still in our world since you didn’t disappear all the way I guess.” Noelle explained. “She can’t see or hear you.”



“Well then how are we going to get them back then?” Martha asked. Noelle shook her head; lips pursed and chin quivering, then sunk to the floor with her face in her hands and began to cry. Andy sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

“We’ll figure this out, don’t worry.” He reassured her. “At least they all seem safe.”

“But how are we going to be able to see them again?” Noelle sobbed.

“We disappear too.” Noelle and Andy looked up at Martha in shock. “What?” Martha said. “They are all safe as far as we can tell, even Andy is surviving well in this amphibious state, we can’t seem to get them back, so we’ll have to go in with them. This place seems to be full of portals anyway. It shouldn’t be hard.”

“But we need to get them back out!” Noelle insisted.

“Perhaps we’ll have to go in to get them out.” Andy suggested. “Come on.” He pulled Noelle off the ground. “Let’s try to catch up with them at least.” Noelle would have been somewhat comforted by this if it hadn’t been coming from a headless classmate. As it was, she was hardly reassured.

Andy stepped through the door and vanished. Martha swallowed deeply and followed, disappearing as well. Noelle stood there with a lump rising in her throat. She didn’t want to be stuck in that mansion forever; she didn’t want to live in some alternative world. She just wanted everyone to reappear so she could hold her brother and go back home. What would happen once she disappeared? Her whole body shook. I can’t do it. She thought. But then she thought of her brother and she knew she had to. Shaking violently, she held her breath and did a mad rush at the door like she was about to jump into a freezing swimming pool.

She was in a sunlit hallway lined with white doors with frosted glass panels.

Martha and Andy stood on either side of her.

“Where did you guys disappear to?” a boy snickered as he walked past with the rest of the group. Noelle started to protest, but Andy stopped her.

“No, don’t you see? This is the real world.” Noelle stared at him confused.

“But we saw those people disappear; we have to get them back.” She insisted.

“We were the ones who disappeared!” Andy exclaimed. “Don’t you see? We were on a tour of the medical institute near school. Your little brother was thrilled he was allowed to come along with us. Do you remember?”

“No.” Noelle said without hesitation.

“No, stop, think.” Andy said exasperatedly. “Maybe I can remember better because I was in the other dimension less than you were. Just try to remember how the day went. After school you picked up your brother for the field trip here at the medical institute.”



“But,” Noelle stammered, “the mansion...”

“Made no sense. It was physically impossible.”

“But I remember it all so clearly!”

“Do you remember how you got there?” Martha interjected. Noelle stared at her.

“Of course, it was huge; it was amazing the moment I stepped through the door.”

“Once you stepped through the door. I was amazed too. But if we had seen the outside of the mansion, why would we have been so surprised at how big the inside was? Can you remember the door? Or the drive there? Think Noelle.” Noelle thought, but she could remember neither the outside of the mansion nor the drive there, and as her memories of the field trip to the medical institute grew stronger, her memories of the mansion faded until she was convinced. They were the ones who had disappeared.



W



The Adventure is Out There

Candice Lake



Arrow Rock • 50



Night Terrors

Victoria Lane

Have you ever been so tired that you can't fall asleep? It's not that uncommon. You feel more tired than you've ever felt before, you can barely keep your eyes open, and all you want in the entire world is to fall asleep. But, instead, your limbs feel too heavy, your eyes burn, and your mind races. Sleep doesn't come, and you fear it never will. Well, tonight seems to be a lot like that for me. It's not really surprising; it seems like lying awake next to my wife has become an almost nightly tradition. I can't even really say that I'm disappointed about another night spent without good rest.

Lately, my nights are spent either in silent envy of my lightly-snoring wife or plagued by terrible, unnerving nightmares. So, what reason would I have to be upset? Instead of living through my own personal hell every night, I get to stare blankly at my ceiling. It's not ideal, but at least it's not the intense fear and desperation my mind forces me into when sleep does come.

I'm not really afraid of these recurring dreams; I know they're not real. But, still... They haunt me, even when I'm awake. Staring up at my ceiling, the darkness consumes me, and I am once again trapped in the depths of my own psyche.

I wake up, but the room is even darker than before. It is silent, and all I can hear is the sound of my own breath as it rises from my chest and out of my gasping mouth. I blink repeatedly, but my eyes cannot adjust to the darkness. It is pitch black, and no light pours in through the window as it usually does.

A sudden feeling of unease washes over me, and I realize that I cannot hear the soft murmurs of my wife as she dreams peacefully beside me. I reach out for her with my arm, but it is stopped short by a cold, hard surface. I feel along the edge of it, questioning its material, its existence. I reach to my other side, to the edge of the bed where I might find the switch to my lamp, but the other arm is stopped short as well, only inches from where it had lay by my side.

I try to sit up, to find out what these strange objects are once and for all, but I am constrained, held down by an unseen force. Something strong, coarse, and cold, so cold, blocks my path. A sudden panic swells within me, and I suck in a shaky breath as I bring up my hands to touch whatever is above me. Wood. Wood surrounds me completely, and as I begin to push against it, it only seems to swallow me more.

My breaths become shakier and more rapid, and the air that escapes me evaporates, the heat on my face telling me that with every breath, I waste precious air. This thought gives me no relief nor reassurance, and my intake of air only quickens as I realize more and more that my fate is grim. Something takes hold inside of me, and my fingers start scratching at the surface, doing, trying anything that could set me free. As the scratches deepen, I can feel my muscles lending more pressure to my hands as they scratch, scratch, scratch, at the same deepening grooves. I'm making



progress, and as hope rises within me, my fingers start digging more furiously and ferociously at my prison. I claw my way through the wood, barely noticing as it splinters and imbeds itself in my skin. I hardly realize that the force I exert onto the wood causes my fingernails to split and tear from their beds. I can barely comprehend the sensation of warm blood hitting my face and the smell of copper entering my nose. I would rip every nail and limb from my body if only to be free from this wretched box. I will not die here.

After what feels like hours, I feel an end to my digging, and what is left of the nerves in my fingertips brush pieces of the naked earth. I grasp the pieces of fractured wood and pull violently in an attempt to sever it enough so that I may crawl through. With every piece I pull away, more mud and dirt fall into my space, causing me to gag and gasp for my last breaths as all air is lost to the grave.

I struggle to pull myself out, and it takes so long, I fear I may suffocate under the avalanche of fallen grime and filth. However, my determination is far stronger than I realized, and I reach toward the surface. Crawling, crawling, I dig through six feet of solid earth. A hand pierces the surface, and although blood, dirt, and sweat pool in my mouth and around my face, all I can taste is victory.

However, the sweet gasp of air and sigh of relief never comes, and I awake, lying in my bed. I look at the clock. Unforgiving, red numbers tell me that it is nearly four, and that I have been asleep for only a little more than an hour. It is still dark outside, but as the moonlight fills in through the drapes and my wife turns over next to me, I feel at least moderate comfort knowing that I am not alone in the darkness. My heart beats rapidly in my chest, and I know, I am alive, something I have to keep reminding myself over and over. Something I never even had to tell myself, well, at least regularly, until fairly recently.

About eight months ago, I collapsed at my job, and when I woke up a few hours later at the hospital, I was unable to account for anything that had happened. A few scans later, and we found out I had a brain tumor. Luckily, we caught it in time, and it was still operable, so the next day, I went into surgery.

However, I am told, there were severe complications, and the operation went very badly. When I finally woke up again, nearly two weeks later, I was told that while I was on the operating table, my heart stopped not once, but twice. After that, I was put into a medically-induced coma. The doctors feared the worst, but when I woke up, coherent and tumorless, they said it was a miracle.

Maybe the news of dying and coming back to life may not seem that bad to you. I mean, I get it. I'm alive, so what do I have to complain about? Some people don't wake up at all. But that's just it: If there is one thing I fear in this world, more than any mythological monster, disease, or natural disaster combined, it was death itself. I know it is inevitable, but that doesn't help me come to terms.

Ever since I can remember, I have feared death. Specifically, I feared what came after. What if we could see, hear, feel, remember everything? What if our spirits didn't



leave our bodies? What if we were buried, but we were never really dead? I used to lie awake at night worrying about what would happen. The idea of my body, decomposing in a box in the ground, rotting, flesh mingling with festering entrails and maggots... It was the most terrible thing I could imagine.

After my near-death experience, or, rather, the time I died, I asked my wife to please cremate me instead. At least if I were to feel anything after death, I would only feel intense burning for a few moments instead of an eternity in solitude. My therapist believes that this excessive insomnia was brought on by my experience months ago, that it reawakened my fears as a child. And perhaps it has. Though sometimes I question if this fear isn't an entirely new being, something raging, metastasizing, in the back of my mind and the bottom of my stomach all hours of the day and night.

And while it is over now, and I am once again safe, at home with my family and with little other care in the world, I still wonder; I wonder what the chances are of experiencing something like this again. I wonder how long I have left on this planet. I wonder when these nightmares will end and even if they will at all. I wonder what truly comes after death, and I wonder if anything I do now holds any meaning, or if I am now trapped in a different box, one that I created myself. Most of all, however, I wonder what would have happened if I had remained dead, never waking up scared and confused as I do every night now.

I've become quite irritable, and I think my wife has begun to notice. I haven't slept more than a few hours in weeks, and it seems like every waking minute is spent in contemplation of my own mortality. I can barely eat, and now these nightmares are beginning to affect even the most basic aspects of my life. I feel like there is no escape from these torments, and all I want to do is close my eyes without feeling the chills of the frigid, stale air inside my own coffin.

I just want to sleep...

I do not even notice when the sun rises, and the night gives way to a bright, new day. Eventually, my thoughts release me back into reality, and I sigh. It is almost seven o'clock, and my wife will need to wake up soon to get ready for work. A part of me feels guilty for disturbing her sleep, as if her rest is the most precious thing on the planet. I stare at her another moment before deciding to welcome her into the world I have already been a part of for several hours.

With one hand, I reach over to touch her arm, but something stops me. I shift my weight to my other side, attempting to turn the light on next to my bed and shed as much light on the scene as possible. I bring my hand closer to my face as my eyes focus on a singular detail. My wife wakes beside me, terrified, as I begin frantically screaming.

She begs me to calm down, but her words cannot be heard. I sit, holding up my hand and staring through horrified eyes at the dirt beneath my fingernails.



Love Through the Ages

Marissa Bylo

Love was...

a tangible thing in elementary school; the special holographic Valentine's Day card she selected just for him; how they held hands under the table like secret lovers in rebellion of the prude lunch ladies' rules; their forbidden conversations on Neopets.com. Love was bold, disobedient. He smooched her cheek at a birthday party because his older sister dared him. She would never forget the name of the first one to cheek-kiss her (though she entirely forgot how his lips felt on her face). They picked on each other five days of the week, but this meant they liked each other. When they declared their future marriage to their first-grade teacher, she could only smile and nod. Their hand-drawn pictures sealed the deal.

That is, until the drama ignited and burned the blue and pink stick-figures standing in front of a church. Several boys lined up for her attention (and she couldn't resist elementary-aged boys fawning over her). Administrators assigned the lovers different teachers, and he eventually left the school. She was sad...for maybe a second. Other boys poked her sides, substitutes to hold hands with her and give upmost devotion. She forgot him soon enough, and he met other mean girls.

Love was... singling her out during the movie night and performing her favorite piano piece while in middle school. She closed her eyes, smiled that smile, and he hoped she felt the same about him. The butterflies killed his stomach as he watched her read the red

Candy Gram he bought her, acknowledging her disdain for Valentine's Day "but here was candy anyway". He never admitted his feelings out loud though (surely actions alone were enough). Classmates cracked jokes about them being a couple. He just wished it was the truth.

Instead of him, she busied herself with Facebook, asking the wise guru behind the screen the initials of her soul mate. She and her best friend fit their crushes' name into every song ever and sang the lines over and over until they exhausted the joke. Taylor Swift understood their boy problems. "You Belong with Meeeee" echoed off white ceilings; if only he could understand that, then love would bloom, and they could be soul mates. If only.

He faded into oblivion as she chased after fantasies. She reveled in the miniscule amount of attention given by her older brother's band mates; older boys were where it was at, whatever that meant. She braved the metal concerts, the flailing body limbs and crushing music, as their little fan-girl. That is all they ever saw in her. She didn't mind; they jokingly called her Shawty and the nickname deemed enough for her.



As the years passed, her cheeks and lips remained un-kissed while other girls went through boys like a game; love was a competition. She was losing. She knew it. He was losing. He accepted it. Thirteen and fourteen-year-old lip virgins- it was surprising even at a private school.

The Friend Zone welcomed another victim to its clutches while they labeled her a Villain, a heartbreaker for not returning his ardent feelings. How could she not love someone who loved her so? But no one asked her who she loved. The band-mates and Jocks were a distraction from the boy she loved- her best guy friend. His gift of a wooden red rose hung to her mirror. She sang the Taylor Swift songs about him in the car rides home. The Friend Zone was a cruel abyss though. They wallowed in the abyss together, but alone.

Love was...

writing #60, his jersey number, on her face at a high school football game; congratulating him on the win and him asking the whereabouts of another girl; sitting side-by-side at a bonfire with his enormous Letterman jacket draped over her shoulders like a cloak. He asked her to the homecoming despite the confusion of his friends; love knew no social bounds. They matched in their teal attires and danced the night away to corny love songs and dub-step. He lent her his favorite book, and she began running so she could join track with him. A couple that trains together stay together, even if they weren't "officially official" just yet. They couldn't even drive themselves to dates. His

16th birthday on February 14th would come soon enough. They could hold out forever.

She wore a red sweater the chilly November day that it ended. She finished the book (it turned out to be just as good as he swore) and left it on his desk; the book was like their kid, but she couldn't claim custody of it. She cried on her best friend's shoulder when she got home; no one had died, just a young love and the optimism of a teenager.

The next few months played like the typical breakup scene. Ice Cream? Check.

Tears and Taylor Swift? Check. Angst-stricken poems about "young love now lost"? Done and Done. Independent vows bound her now -either cat lady or to a nunnery. Love belonged to the movies and pretty people. She found saving power in being the 5th wheel when she and her friends (and their significant others) dined and watched movies. She was an independent woman "who didn't need no man". She could bat her eyes, giggle, and spend her time with any boy that would allow it- even if he was still in the closet or a fellow-nerd who didn't know how to declare his feelings for her.

She didn't need anyone. Two years passed by in this fashion.

Love was unattainable, stupid, selfish, painful, silly, make believe...



until a Senior high school boy in plaid asked her to Dairy Queen on the fateful night of February 14th. Some important basketball game played on the television before them; they stayed enthralled with each other's words. They spoke of future college plans, and the daunting realization that they would be split up soon hit; he put his arm over her shoulder in comfort. Then confessions of feelings spilled from chapped lips in cheap, red booths while ice cream melted. Their fingers intertwined during the car ride, and they declared to the world (or rather the people at the party) that they were, in fact, boyfriend and girlfriend. Now they needed her parents' permission; they would need some convincing.

Love was... two heart-broken teens resurrecting their old-fashion ideals for love; conversing for hours in parked cars; eating breakfast foods for dinner; being wrapped in separate blankets while wishing on falling stars. It was tears and long hugs and not running away after dark secrets spilled out. It was losing lip virginity after a movie night. Love took on many forms as they were growing up. Suddenly, all the other loves became obsolete,

false.

Love is... two twenty year olds arguing at Steak N' Shake and him calling her dumb (she wasn't even angry because he was right); the "I miss you/Can't wait to see you/ Let's elope" text messages that travel 200 plus miles between cellphones; staying together despite the naysayers who "just don't understand our relationship". Love isn't this tangible object- no butterflies, rainbows, or fireworks after every kiss (minus one). Love isn't competition- who can get the largest flower bouquet or be granted the status of "relationship goals". It is celebrating three years of a relationship on Valentine's Day even though deep down the day itself still annoys her. Greatly. Love means not giving up on each other. Simple as that.

What will love look like when they reach their 30s? Only time can tell. She only hopes that February 14th has nothing to do with it.





A Cherry Blossom Moon

Stephanie Ricker



Arrow Rock • 57



The Past that Swallows All

Kristine Wagner

Even now it is occurring. Even now our world is being constantly devoured and lost. Lost forever beyond recall our world is consumed by the Past. Most worry about the future, but to do so is the height of folly. What is the future but something that will someday be part of the Past? People worry about the present, but what use is that with the future barely being born before us and the Past stealing the present out from under our very feet? People are worried how they will live their lives and avoid death, but the

Past takes no heed to them and silently devours their thoughts as soon as they exist. Life and death are insignificant in comparison. No, the inescapable Past is what swallows all.

Most of your life has passed the point of possible remembrance even now. How then can we remember that which came before us? How then shall the discoveries and revelations of our ancestors be unearthed in the sands of time? The Past is not a world which is easily explored, yet I feel I must. We are not a product of the future but of the Past; we are the child of all we have forgotten. Oh for the knowledge locked behind the mighty gates of the Past, oh that I could freely explore that elusive land.

These were the thoughts of my mind as I sat in my study and stared at the barren trees and the garish walls. Something had to be done. Or did it? Perhaps I could forget the world which had consumed so much of my own, the world that would eventually swallow me as well without a trace of my existence in a history book, or any book beyond a census. Perhaps I would be happier that way. It would be simple enough; with a single night's sleep the edge of my passion would be gone and it would fade to a nagging thought. It would be all too easy to forget.

So I left the house immediately.

I drove to my work at the research institution and began a new creation, one I could hopefully find excuses for my colleagues about until I had finished it. Of course, even I could not say to what ends I performed my experiments. Nevertheless, I began programming a machine that could take me to another time.

As my creation began to take shape it consumed all of my time and passion as I poured myself into it. While I knew I could never create something as advanced as what was found in nature, I hoped for something a bit more nuanced than the crude binary systems everyone has been so obsessed with since the discovery we could code things rather than just pushing levers about. Of course, biological tampering has been explored, but this is merely cutting and pasting chunks of DNA about without really creating anything of our own. There are rules in the biological world that you must abide by. DNA will not say what you want it to say, it can only become what it is. Embryos can become whatever you want them to, but they cannot change species, and cannot be used for the same species if something as simple as blood type does not add



up. No, if I were to break the rules of the universe and transcend the fourth dimension, I could not be bound by such rules as DNA.

However, in my own, clumsy mind, I could not think of anything better than DNA either, and thus began to use my own, raw chemicals to create it. It did not copy the pattern of any living thing; it was my own code. Of course, in order for my code to work I had to feed it into a “brain” as I like to call it—a sort of biological motherboard would be closer to explaining its level of simplicity though. I was sure this sort of experimentation would catch the attention and financial support of the scientific community, and sure enough they began trying to use my creation in menial, physical tasks. All of their vision had been crushed by the “laws” of nature which they dutifully worked under, but I would not let my own plans be crushed so. My colleagues were never quite sure what to call my invention, so they simply named it after me, which I found rather endearing. Every day I would enter more information into Cecil’s database, coding exactly what I wanted and didn’t want from our journey.

The objective is to go to a place without time

The objective is complete if and only if there is no death

If we go to a place without time or death, then no one can forget anything.

If the object is complete, then I will have the height of human knowledge. It had been proven to work with basic commands, but I was worried that my personal hopes for the project would mean nothing to Cecil. How could he compute desires? How could he travel time? How can anything escape the ever-encroaching Past? Cecil, after all, wasn’t even alive. But I felt like he was alive. After all, he could process more advanced information than most people, he needed fuel to work just as we need food, and his brain had been slowly growing larger. The only thing he could not do was reproduce. Granted, neither could I. I laughed at the irony that the cells that comprised my body met more of the criterion for life than I did as a whole.

It was then I realized Cecil was missing something that made me greater than my cells beyond my intellect. It was then I decided Cecil must understand my emotions. The difficulty was not so much in my ability to do such a thing; after all, what are emotions beyond a series of hormones and chemical interactions? With my own flesh I made Cecil my own, and through the atrocities I committed, he was perfected. Soon enough, Cecil seemed more like a child than a machine, and I refused to let any of my colleagues touch him.

When I finally thought I had done all I could do to complete Cecil and the pressure for me to resign Cecil to the institution, as well as my position, became a threat, I decided it was time for us to leave the Present. I entered the cockpit and finally commanded Cecil to do what he had been created for. The world disappeared around me and I could not breathe, as though I was travelling too fast for my chest to expand against the resistance. I became more and more certain that I was speeding towards my death, but I no longer wished to live in such a world as I did, so I made no



effort to turn Cecil off, knowing I was in good company with Cecil, knowing he alone understood my intent and my feelings.

It was then that I passed out. Looking back, it is then that I wished I had died.

I woke up vomiting. I was in a crater, the remains of Cecil smoldering around me. I had sustained serious burns, but I was alive. I began to look where Cecil's brain had been, but the world spun around me, and despite my pilot's training there was nothing I could do but fall on the ground and continue dry heaving, my skin still seeming to burn apart from the wreckage. Once I was able to stand once more, I returned to Cecil, hoping to salvage what was left of him; he was my legacy, my one companion as I had careened toward death. I knew I could make another brain just as I had Cecil's, but it wouldn't have all of the emotions and plans that I had poured into Cecil. It simply wouldn't be Cecil anymore. When I found Cecil had been utterly destroyed in the wreck, I sobbed uncontrollably. His death meant no less to me simply because he had never been alive. I staggered out of the crater, half-walking, half-crawling up the sides until I reached the top. The air was heavy and extremely humid, and lush trees surrounded me.

This made no sense. Darting out of the bushes came a rabbit chased down by a lizard running on its hind legs as a basilisk might. It was about the size of a turkey and unlike any lizard I had ever seen. Despite of my pain and grief, a deep-seated urge in me wanted to begin studying and recording the flora and fauna around me as much of it was unknown to me, but other necessities called, and what remained in my digestive system after the vomiting made its exist through other means. My head throbbed in pain. As it felt like my skull was about to burst, I began to sweat furiously. It ran down my body in streams because of the high humidity, then I was overcome with extreme cold and violent shivering.

Thus I wavered between ice and fire for I know not how long. I know not how long I wandered or how long I writhed on the ground in my agony. I called out for Cecil and could not say if I was calling for my creation or my own sanity. Many visions of monsters and giants came across my path and I believe I spoke to them, touched them, followed them begging for release. But they all left me, even the beasts unwilling to kill me in my sickness. I ripped at my hair and it came out in handfuls, sometimes flakes of charred skin coming along with it. The very wind scraped against my raw skin rougher than any sackcloth could and the ashes of my own flesh covered me; thus I mourned my own existence.

After I came to my senses once more, I went to soak myself in a stream. It was clearer than any I had ever seen, and the water was sweet to taste. The trees that surrounded me were all twenty to fifty feet in circumference and I became certain that many of the creatures that surrounded me were new species. Cecil had transported me somewhere, and I knew I must find out where. I feared whatever I was suffering from would soon take my life, so I began at once, ignoring the pain, for nursing my wounds would do me no good.



The first people I came upon led me back to their city. They seemed to view me as a novelty, and showed me to others to responses of either laughter or disgust. They dressed in skins and primitive cloths, but they were clearly civilized, and I could see their city was already old. Their language was like none I had ever heard, but everyone spoke it without variance of accent or any seemed confusion. This indeed must be a civilization untouched by modern man entirely, I thought at first, but then began to fear that I had entered a post-apocalyptic society when I encountered their inventions. Primitive societies would not be capable of what these people were, and the violence and debauchery I saw within the city certainly seemed reminiscent of modern times rather than the simplicity of the ancient.

When I saw an enormous, crumbling statue of a man, I motioned towards it only to be answered with the word “Meshelah.” When I did not understand, I was led out of the city to meet an old man. He sat surrounded by many as he recited something to them. I was motioned to sit, and I listened as he spoke. Perhaps he told stories of Meshelah, this ancient hero they had honored in the city, but I never heard his name in the old man’s speech. For hours upon hours he spoke, and though I could not understand, I soon picked up on a rhythm in his words, and at times his voice almost became a song. I noticed another man mouthing along with the poem of the old man. I realized this must be how they transferred information, through spoken word rather than written. The knowledge and age of the old man I could tell was immense. When the sun set, the old man finally stopped speaking and the crowd chanted “Meshelah” over and over in what seemed to be their form of applause.

As they chanted, I realized I had misunderstood what they were saying, for a fourth syllable became apparent. “Methushelah.” In horror, I looked at the man and realized he had not been telling of the ancient hero after all, that he had been the ancient hero the statue was modelled after. I realized I had been sent back in time, far, far back.

My instructions to Cecil once again surfaced in my mind:

The objective is to go to a place without time

The objective is complete if and only if there is no death

If we go to a place without time or death, then no one can forget anything.

If the object is complete, then I will have the height of human knowledge. The delight I should have felt was stifled. Cecil had redirected me to the time that best fit my other criteria. Here was the land I had hoped to find. Here was a land where death only struck after hundreds of years, where men could complete incredible things in their lives instead of having to constantly pass on information to the next generation. Many generations could live together simultaneously, little was forgotten, the world was ahead. Time as of yet meant little to these people, the Past was still weak and small to them. But though I could hear their knowledge, I could not learn it. But the Past still consumed me, just as death consumed my body, and I knew I could never enjoy this land. My present was still constantly being whisked away from under me,



only now it was lost to a Past not my own. All my work was naught but a hollow and worthless endeavor.

I sat and tried to think of a way to avoid death which was perhaps only days away for me. I had no way to return to modern medicine, and these people, though advanced, would have had no reason to invent medicine yet due to their nearly-ageless bodies. An idea struck on me, and idea that likely would not work, but that had never stopped me before. I had no wormholes, but I had paradox on my side now that I was out of my time. I returned to the city, saw the corruption and murders about me, and joined it. I was weak, but I killed as many as I could. In time travel to the past, one must be careful of killing one's own ancestors or you will never have been born to come back and kill them at all. Perhaps if I did, everything I had done would become undone. If I failed, I believed I had nothing to lose.

As I killed, nothing happened. No rips in time, no ceasing to exist, nothing. I left the city and began killing people on my way through the countryside. I looked more demon than man by this point, and people fled at the sight of me. I thought surely, my actions must have some effect. I was killing fathers of entire civilizations, and yet nothing changed. So I killed not only the fathers but the children as well and the mothers heavy with child. Some fought back against me, and though they were much stronger they did not have my abandon, and the fear of death was still new and strange to them. My murders brought them horror, while their attacks upon me had no effect, for I had become one with my pain. So I slaughtered as many as I found, desperately hoping my torture would come to an end.

It was not until it began to rain and I saw people scream in terror at the skies did I finally understand. Rivers began to overflow and despite their knowledge, the people had no way of dealing with the rain, indeed, it seemed entirely foreign to them. I had made no difference because these people were doomed for destruction anyway, and I had only joined them in the wickedness that had caused the Flood. I watched their panic resignedly, knowing it would do them no good. Perhaps finally under the waves that would surround me, I would find my peace.



Toxic Dreams

Madi DiMercurio

The day was a happy one for both wife and husband. A family was being reunited after two years of war separating them. John walked slowly up the sidewalk as it started to drizzle. He wasn't sure what to do but move forward. The pure drops of water falling from the sky burned on his skin like acid. His hand shook, the one holding his suitcase, but he blamed that on the heavy weight. John didn't want to think about the other possibility that his doctor mentioned. He refused the doctor's diagnosis, that was meant to explain the dreams and panic attacks.

The front door of his house came into view as he looked up, away from the concrete sidewalk. He was home, not only a soldier's dream but a hope they all had.

Amy was home with her daughter. It was a Sunday. Unbeknownst to her, he was right outside. At that moment, she was finishing a grilled cheese sandwich for her six-year-old daughter, her ears zoning in on the sizzle of the bread. She cracked open a can of tomato soup and sprinkled Goldfish on top. "Emma, honey, lunch is ready!"

Amy heard Emma's soft footsteps thump across the second floor of the house -- she smiled. Soon her daughter bounded down the steps and climbed into her spot at the

table.

"There you go, baby," Amy answered Emma's arrival, placing juice down as well. Amy caressed Emma's golden locks before she walked off to make a quick salad for herself.

Sitting across from her daughter, she ate her salad and watched Emma practically gulp down her soup -- occasionally dunking her grilled cheese into the bowl.

"Are you ready to go back to school tomorrow?"

Emma shook her head and wiped a drop of tomato soup, that didn't make it to her mouth, off her chin with the back of her hand.

"Use a napkin, please."

Emma huffed and used the napkin to wipe off her hand -- instead of using her tongue like most times when Amy hadn't caught her.

While they finished up lunch, Amy telling her daughter to bring her half eaten plate to the counter -- thankfully before she ran up the stairs, escaping -- the doorbell rang.

Amy paused at the sink and turned to give the door a long look. Unlike her daughter, who ran for it, Amy was afraid of what it could be. She didn't know who



would ring the door on a Sunday. The dreadful idea that something might have happened to her husband fluttered across her mind, like a nagging fly that wouldn't buzz away.

Emma had been looking at her mother in expectancy from the door, knowing she shouldn't be opening it on her own. The man or woman on the other side could be a stranger. Talking to strangers is not safe. Even the teachers at school tell her that.

Seeing that her mother wasn't going to open the door, Emma reached on her tiptoes towards the knob and opened the door herself.

The door swung open slowly, teasing the nerves inside Amy. She breathlessly called out for her daughter. Amy was afraid of the possibilities, and the anxiety glued her to the floor. In the back of her mind, she chastised herself for letting her six-year-old daughter answer the door.

"Mommy," Emma called, and Amy heard the wavering uncertainty in her voice. The tone in her little princess's voice snapped her out of it.

Walking with a slight hop in her step, she looked out the wide-open door. It was John and he was looking down at their daughter with interest.

Amy gasped, "John." That got the poised man in uniform to look at his wife for the first time since she appeared in the doorway. It took Amy all her might, plus little hands weighing down her pant leg, not to step back. John's gaze was hard and unfamiliar. He almost scared her.

"Amy." John simply stated her name as if she didn't mean anything. But he was trying to hide the evidence of his doctor's diagnosis. The only way he knew how to hide was through his military training. Sometimes John felt like a robot, because he was always just going through the motions of everyday life. Trying to get away from the demons of war.

John's wife wanted to whimper in fear. Something was off and she had no idea how to fix it. His tone was far from warm. They were both uncomfortable and didn't know what to do next. Emma looked on in confusion and seemed to expect something to happen.

In her small voice, she sighed and grabbed Amy's shaky hand. Then Emma grabbed onto her not-so-familiar father. "Come on Mommy, Daddy it's raining and you're getting wet." Emma took this opportunity to act like a big girl and show her father how old and mature she had become. But of course, in the process she stated the obvious. She wanted to smile when both her parents looked down in shock.

They still stood there and she wanted to roll her eyes. Grasping both their hands as firmly as a six-year-old could, she pulled them away from the front door and into the living room.



Climbing up onto the couch, Emma patted the cushions on either side of her. Amy looked at John, still enraptured by his presence. John, on the other hand, felt unwelcomed and uncomfortable. His wife could only look at him with love, and uneasiness. When he looked down at his expectant daughter, it seemed like she had taken control of the whole situation.

Minutes ago, Emma wanted to roll her eyes at him, yes he knew that look, and now she did. “Come on, sit.” There was a girly squeak at the end of her plea, filled with excitement.

Amy sat down first, and John followed. Emma was pulled into Amy’s lap like she needed protecting from her father. But when John was situated, sitting as comfortably as possible, Emma pushed herself away from her mother and into his lap. Emma was so excited that both her parents were on the couch at the same time. She didn’t seem to notice the tension and unease pulling at an invisible rope between her mother and father.

She wrapped one arm around his shoulder, and her small cold fingers touched his neck. Emma was still facing her mother, but all her attention was on her father. Her eyes were open and innocent, once again waiting for what wasn’t coming.

John was very aware of his daughter, but he was taking in everything else. All his senses were alive. There was the television in front of them. The coffee table had stained rings of dried moisture from cups that weren’t set on coasters. A doll sat in John’s chair, and the corner of his mouth turned up for the first time. He could smell slightly burned cheese, remnants of lunch, and his hands touched the leather couch as well as instinctively holding his daughter’s legs that rested on the middle couch cushion.

John was brought back to both of his girls when Emma shifted to kneel in his lap, then faced him completely and asked, “Daddy, how are you?” Emma’s knees stabbed John’s thighs. Both of her hands were on his shoulders.

Immediately, John felt as if knives were plunging into his legs. What was wrong with his legs? Would the doctors have to cut them off? John knew they had great doctors these days but he hated the idea of surgery. John could feel the cloud of anxiety pushing in, and he clinched his jaw trying not to throw his daughter off his lap.

“Emma.” The sound of his wife’s nervous voice brought him back.

Amy could tell something was wrong with John when she saw him at the door. She hopes being home again would help.

That night, John couldn’t sleep. As he laid in bed, tense, he couldn’t shut his eyes. The static silence of the night was deafening; his ears rang like he had just gotten back from a concert. Every sound made him flinch. His jaw hurt from clenching it. When he heard the even rhythm of Amy’s breath, John rolled up out of his bed and



headed downstairs to the couch. He hated being alone, but maybe the sound of the T.V. would help.

“Daddy?”

John paused and turned outside of Emma’s room to see her slender form sitting up in bed. He inched into her room watching as she smiled sleepily. “What are you doing up so late, baby girl?”

“Umm, well I had a bad dream. Then I heard you.”

John nodded, understanding all too well. “Do you want to talk about it?” John asked, feeling like a real father more and more, as he sat on her twin bed.

Emma nodded slowly. “But if I tell you, you have to lay with me.” When she saw the hesitancy in her father’s eyes, Emma explained, “Mommy does when I have bad dreams.”

John smiled slowly, accepting her requirements, and waved his hand to indicate for Emma to make room in her small bed. When they were finally lying next to each other, with Emma’s small body in John embrace, Emma started telling him her bad dream. While she talked about this mean girl at school teasing her about John, her voice lulled him into a half sleeping state.

John slightly jerked awake in time to answer his daughter with reassuring words. “Well, your daddy came back because he fought all the monsters. I’m home with my two girls now, and you have nothing to worry about.”

Both Emma and John fell asleep that night, laying together in the small bed.

*

Shots pierced through the burning air. John could hear the constant pop-pop of the machine guns and the whop-whop-whopping of helicopters descending from the sky. It was a constant cacophony of sound every day, and the harsh music of war rang in his ears at night.

“Someone help!”

“Move, move, move, move!”

“Get down!”

The earth exploded above Lieutenant Thompson, and he braced himself against the wall of the trench. The picture that was clinched between his fingers trembled and John watched as the photo fluttered delicately, unlike the harshness that swirled around

it, to the dirt floor.



John swooped down quickly, holding onto his helmet and shouldering his gun, to pick up what he held most dear during times like these. Before his fingers could grasp the photograph, someone shoved him against the wall.

“Watch it Lieutenant!” The sweat and dust smeared face of his captain stared back at him. “You’re safer against the wall. I wasn’t planning on you dying any time soon.” The Captain yelled to be heard over the soaring bombs and deadly bullets. He rushed further down the trench, yelling out similar words to others of Thompson’s rank. John found the picture that lay heavy on the ground and risked picking it up quickly. Looking at his wife smiling down at a daughter he’d never met, John nodded with confidence and climbed up the ladder to protect this country against the hell that was war.

Distantly John came out of sleep when he heard the whining of his daughter.

“Daddy, you’re squeezing me too hard.” He could feel her small body try to wiggle free.

“Daddy, wake up, please.”

His eyes snapped open. John registered his heavy, fast, breathing first, and then his white-knuckle grip around his daughter.

“Emma, oh God. Emma, I’m so sorry.” She scooted away as soon as John’s grip released her. He could tell she wanted to run. John’s fingers were sore from clenching them and he tried to relieve the aching feeling by clenching and unclenching them.

“Emma, baby, did I hurt you?”

“No, Daddy but you scared me. Your grip was getting tighter.” Emma sat on the edge of her bed looking down at him with uncertainty and fear. She seemed to seconds away from finding a more trusting adult. This was the first time they had spent time together after all.

“I’m really sorry princess, Daddy...Daddy has been having some bad dreams lately.” Immediate understanding sparked in her eyes. “Oh. Well, do you want to talk about it?” John was amazed. At six years old Emma understood more than he thought. He sighed trying to find a way to tell a six-year-old about his nightmare. “Well, let’s just say the monsters that I chased after like to visit my dreams.”

Emma nodded slowly. She came closer and laid her head on John’s chest. “It’s okay Daddy. Remember? You got them all.”

I sighed, “Yeah, princess, that’s right.”

*

“Night Hun.” John leaned down and kissed his wife goodnight, and then went to leave their bedroom.



“John, where are you going?” Amy’s brow was furrowed, and the bed-side lamp was reflecting two tiny stars in her tired brown eyes.

“I don’t want to wake you four nights in a row with my bed dreams. So I’m going to sleep on the couch.”

“Babe, you aren’t bothering me with her nightmares. Come sleep with me. I’ve missed you for two years.” She patted his side of the bed.

John still shock his head. The nightmares were increasing in severity. In the mornings, he wakes up with aching muscles and he knows his muscles tensed up for long periods of time all through the night. What if he lashed out and hurt his wife without knowing it? “I’m sleeping downstairs for a while. I’ll see you in the morning.”

It didn’t take long for another nightmare to surface that night. It was vivid and very real.

The U.S. army had raided the other sides trench. Throwing gas bombs and taking anyone alive as prisoners. The wave of soldiers had slowed so the U.S. Army, including Lieutenant Thompson, were ordered to find any last survivors and bring them in as prisoners.

There were two teams and Thompson was sweeping the eastern part of the trench. It was eerily silent no more bombs or gunshots. The air was still and yet still had some charge to it. Everything seemed to be covered in shades of grey.

Then Thompson rounded the corner and came face to face was one of the others. His arm with the gun in it snapped up and the barrel of the gun was pointed at the enemy. “You’ve lost. Put the gun down!” There was an edge to lieutenant Thompson’s voice.

But the soldier didn’t put his gun down and he started talking quickly in German.

He then proceeded to pull a picture of a woman and two kids out of his vest. Lieutenant Thomason kept his find on the trigger. John cut the man off not understanding a word he was saying as he gestured to the picture and tried to push it at John. He seemed to be getting angrier and more fearful. John had a feeling what the soldier was trying to say, but he had orders to follow. “I said put the damn gun down! I’m not going to say it again!”

The German’s ears turned pink with rage and John stood his ground. Then when the soldier finally stopped talking it was like he was waiting for something. Then he turned his gun on himself.

“No!”

But it was to late and the solder crumpled to the ground with a bloody built hole in his temple.



John woke with a start, and he felt cold and confused for a moment until he realized he was still on the couch and the blanket had fallen to the floor. Once his surroundings started to come into focus he noticed a familiar heavy, cold object in his hand. He cursed silently understanding what had happened, and so he went back upstairs to put the gun back in the safe. He saw that it was four in the morning so he decided that he needed to wash off that last nightmare.

After shuffling to the hall bathroom on shaky muscles, he pulled off his night shirt and found a rag to dampen with cold water. John then proceeded to wipe his chest and wrap the cold rag around the back of his neck.

John could still feel a creeping fatigue at the edges of his consciousness so he sat against the bathroom wall and dozed. Later that morning his daughter found him there with the rag still around his neck.

*

Three weeks later

“Dr. Peter Simmons.”

Amy shook the doctor’s hand and smiled back at his kind eyes. “Amy. Amy Thompson. Thank you for making the time.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem.” Dr. Simmons motioned towards the chair as he sat himself. Amy sat and placed her purse next to the leg of the cushioned, wooden chair. “So, how’s John?” His fingers were linked together, resting on the desk with ease. “Yes, that’s what I’m actually here about. John has been having a difficult time coming back home. He doesn’t act like himself.” “Define ‘difficult’.” There was a worrisome look to the way Dr. Simmons glanced at the computer in front of him, which had John’s file open.

“His emotions are all over the place. Some days he’s quiet and simmering with anger. He’s snapped at me once or twice, but then said sorry with tears in his eyes. Other days he’s looked at our daughter with guilt written all over his face. At night it’s a whole other story. It’s almost like he fears going to bed, Doc. I’ve noticed some nights he’ll leave and end up in Emma’s bed in the morning. He won’t leave the house and if he does it’s not for long. At dinner he spaces out, and I’ve noticed that he’s pulled away from me, but bonded significantly with Emma.” Amy paused to look towards Dr. Simmons, but then continued. “I’ve done my research and...and I think my husband has PTSD.” Dr. Simmons nodded slowly. “He never told you my diagnosis of him?” Amy sat there with glassy eyes. “Yes, he does have post-traumatic-stress-disorder. But, Amy, the good news is that it’s minor, from what you’ve told me.” His folded hands opened with reassurance. “So what’s next? H-how do we fix it?” Amy’s voice cracked with weariness. “I’m going to give you a name of a specialist that I recommend your husband go see.”



Dr. Simmons wrote a name in scrawled handwriting and slid the paper across the desk. “I also would like you to strongly encourage him to go out with you and your daughter. The more he leaves the house, the more he’ll become comfortable with his new reality. Amy, you have to remember he came from war. John was taught to always look over his shoulder and to sleep with a gun in his hand.”

Amy nodded. Tears stuck to her lashes at the reality of her husband's situation. She knew it was true, his PTSD, but it was hard to accept once heard aloud. The worst part was that she felt left out. Why hadn't he told her?

John did get better. It took time, but the Thompson family took it one day at a time. The monsters that haunted John's dreams began to pull away and he focused more on his daughter and wife. While Amy went to work, John took Emma to the park. It took months of talking with the specialist before John could open up to Amy.

John's mood swings were decreasing and he felt like he could breathe more as every day passed. Amy tried to understand what he was going through, sometimes it scared her, but she was happy when he felt like he needed to open up. Emma was very supportive of her father. Amy talked to her little girl and helped her understand what was happening. Emma took everything in stride.

The Thompson family would get through it all.



The WAFE

Courtney Thomas

St Patrick's Day, Dublin, Ireland 2001

Erskine's daughter had been killed just a few hours earlier. The killers, Culkin and Desmond, were Erskine's old mates. The three blokes had served in the Irish Military together and had even been ushers — (groomsmen as those Americans called it)—in each others' weddings, but that was all in the past. Erskine stood in the kitchen of his house, his arms folded in front of his chest, as he stared down Culkin and Desmond, who were now casually standing in his kitchen, as if they hadn't just made Erskine's daughter disappear just a few hours prior.

'You bastards! Get the bloody hell out of my house!' Erskine uttered raising his voice in Irish Gaelic, as he flipped them off and grabbed a knife, ready to pounce on them if they didn't leave.

'Now, now, Erskine, that's not any way to greet old friends now is it? Can't we just pay our dear friend a visit?' replied Culkin in Irish, mocking hurt as he helped himself and handed them each a beer. 'We just want to have a beer and talk - that's all. Calm down. No one needs to get hurt. Now put the knife down before you do something you

regret.'

Erskine did not want to put the knife down. He wanted to lunge right at the two men, slit their throats and beat them senseless. Suddenly, however, an overwhelming feeling of calm washed over him. No, he shouldn't be calm. But he was. Culkin was controlling his emotions.

'Fine,' he said setting the knife down. 'Now what do you want?'

'You know exactly what we want. And you're going to give it to us,' replied Culkin.

'And why would I do that? I'm not stupid,' replied Erskine.

'Don't you want to expose the truth? We could put the WAFE on the control panel and become immortal,' said Culkin. 'Those stupid gandraoidhals would want to know the truth and we could give it to them. Remember? Like we used to talk about in the good old days?'

'How could they forget that only the folks with magic, ledraoidhals (pronounced lay-dr-I-duals,) could know about nAirm Eiliminteach or WAFE? Uisce, Aeir, Dóiteáin agus Earth or WAFE. The Elemental Weapons; Water, Air, Fire and Earth.'



'Good times, Remember?' said Desmond backing him up.

'I remember,' said Erskine chuckling.

'So do we got our mate back? Will you help us?' Culkin asked laughing.

'Please,' asked Desmond backing him up again.

'I won't help,' said Erskine. 'We're not stupid like we used to be. The gandraoidhals can't know the truth, and the WAFE can't be kept together on the control panel.'

'Oh, come on mate,' said Culkin as he stood up to grab another beer. 'Just because Alois Eliáš was the last one to put them on the control panel doesn't mean it would go bad if we did it.'

'And besides,' Desmond added 'he wanted to protect the truth. If he hadn't of poisoned those sandwiches then maybe things would've been different.'

'Are you off your rocker? It backfired anyway, only killing that one Nazi Czech journalist, Karel Lažnovsky and then got him executed,' said Erskine.

'Served him right too for betraying his own country,' said Culkin.

'He was a hero,' said Erskine

'He wasn't. That stupid Nazi Leader trusted him and he let him down. The bloody Prime Minister of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Alois Eliáš, had been trusted with control of the WAFE. If Chamberlain, Daladier, Mussolini and Hitler had never signed the Munich Betrayal, then they wouldn't've given Sudetenland to Nazi Germany, and delayed war. They let the Czech part of Czechoslovakia keep their control of the WAFE, which they had had since the bloody First World War and that's the thanks they got?' said Culkin.

'Well, it did delay war -' Erskine argued.

'Look. I'm not saying Hitler was right,' Culkin interrupted 'But he shouldn't've betrayed his own country. Which is why we need your help. We could make Ireland a very powerful country and you mate can help us. We could find the other three families that have the rest of the WAFE and put them on the control panel.'

'Please. We could rule, the world. Make those pathetic gandraoidhals our slaves,' said Desmond.

'Had they not learned anything? Surely they couldn't be that stupid? Just because the gandraoidhals, (gan-dr-I-duals), didn't have magic, didn't mean they were meant to serve the ledraoidhal, (lay-dr-I-duals), the folks with magic. It just meant they didn't have magic and couldn't know about the WAFE or anything else ledraoidhal for that matter. That would expose our world to the gandraoidhals and



nothing good could ever come of that." Erskine took a deep breath and said, "The WAFE is split across Europe on purpose. You'd never -"

'But we could,' Culkin whined. 'If they hadn't've split the WAFE amongst four families instead of between a married couple, like Franz Ferdinand and his wife before

World War I, then maybe -'

'If the WAFE is united, it could cause World War III,' said Erskine.

'It's worth the risk though. For Ireland. Please?' Desmond said jumping back in the argument.

'Absolutely not. Never in a million years,' said Erskine. His anger crept back to him, as he finally broke out of Culkin's mind control.

Erskine grabbed his knife, stuffing it in his back jeans pocket, before he jumped on Culkin's back knocking him to the ground. The two wrestled around the kitchen floor as Culkin tried to push Erskine off of him but wasn't strong enough. Erskine managed to roll him over on his back and then pinned him down. He pulled the knife out of his back pocket and stabbed Culkin in the chest, leaving the knife in his body.

Erskine then stood up and tackled Desmond to the ground as he was trying to flee out the garage door. Desmond hit his head on a closet door on the way down, making it easy for Erskine to put him in a headlock with his right arm. He balled his left hand in a fist before punching Desmond in the stomach and then the face before making eye contact with him. Straight through Erskine's thick glasses, his hazel eyes concentrated hard on Desmond as Erskine used his eyes to cause immense pain to Desmond.

Desmond let out blood curdling screams of pain, as the bones in his body ached. The pain was about ten times worse than being kicked in the balls. He grabbed onto a kitchen chair for support as he fought to stay upright and fight back.

'Go to hell you bastard!' said Erskine before grabbing a handgun and aiming it right at Desmond's chest. He pulled the trigger and watched as the bullet flew through the air and entered Desmond's chest. Instantly, Desmond's body physically disappeared while his clothes, with nothing to support them fell to the ground in a heap. Suddenly, loud cries came from one of the bedrooms. He was about to go to them, but he looked over to see Culkin hanging on for dear life. He must have just missed his heart. He was barely breathing but miraculously still alive with the knife still in his chest. Erskine walked over to him before shooting Culkin to put him out of his misery. Culkin's body disappeared just like Desmond's had. The knife laid on top of the clothes with blood covering the blade. Erskine picked up the clothes before throwing them in a pile together on the kitchen floor. The clothes were both covered in a red and blue sticky substance, thicker than syrup and smelled like a strong mix of wine and grapes.

Erskine cleaned the blood off the knife before inspecting the kitchen, making sure that the only signs of the bad guys were their clothes. The cries from the bedroom had stopped. Once the kitchen was cleaned, he knew what he had to do. He finished



his beer before strolling into the first bedroom and pushing the trundle bed out of the way. He lifted the quilted duvets on the daybed to reveal his grandchildren. 'OK, you can come on out now. It's safe,' he said slipping to German granddaughter, Nicole, was only nine months old. Garrett slowly and hesitantly crawled out from under the bed as he looked around for his mother and the bad guys. Erskine picked up Nicole off the floor.

'Shh. It's OK. Look, here's your dummy,' he said calming down enough to finally revert to English as he gently rocked her, wiping the dummy on his pants before giving it back to her. "It's a dummy, not a--what do those Americans call it? Soother, binky, pacifier?" He shook his head. It didn't matter. He sang her a song in Irish, causing her to fall asleep as he put her down for a much needed nap.

Erskine picked up his grandson and carried him to the kitchen table, giving him a late lunch.

'Papa? Where the bad guys go?' asked Garrett pointing to the pile of clothes that were still on the kitchen floor. It was still covered in the red and blue sticky substance.

The bad guys were nowhere to be seen.

'To live with the devil,' he said, forcing himself to stay calm. He didn't want to scare his grandson by sounding angry.

'Mummy live with devil too?' asked Garrett.

'No. Mummy is with God,' Erskine replied as Conall, Garrett's father, stumbled in plastered from the pub. No doubt he had been trying to drink away his grief.

'Ya know what's funny?' Conall asked laughing as he slurred his words together.

'No,' replied Erskine humouring him.

'Mario won't grow. I threw the mushrooms, but he won't grow,' he slurred laughing. Erskine followed him as he stumbled into the living room before passing out upright on the sofa.

What was supposed to be a happy day had turned out to be a straight up terrible day. Erskine's wife, Izabela, had disappeared of cancer a few years back, so it had just been him, his three grandkids Gabe, Garrett, and Nicole and their parents that had gone into town to celebrate the holiday. They were going to go to the St. Patrick's Day Festival Parade like they had done every year, but it had been cancelled due to the Foot-andMouth outbreak. Without the parade, they had spent the day in town, trying to make the best of it. However, the day had taken a wrong turn when the bad guys had found them there and had killed or made the Garrett and Nicole's mother disappear. And what's even worse is that Garrett had seen his mother's disappearance.

A couple hours later, the grandpa and the dad heard Nicole's high pitched cries coming from the other room. She had woken up from her nap with a diarrhea filled



nappy and was covered in puke. Conall, now somewhat sober and awake, picked her up and carried her to the bathroom to give her a cold bath as he tried to soothe her cries, barely even looking at his daughter the entire time. He was trying to stay strong; he was after all, her father, but before he could even fill the tub, he took one good look at his daughter's piercing green eyes and instantly broke down.

'Y--you do it! I—Ich kann nicht,' he said breaking down and slipping into German: I can't. 'I look at them and I see her. They look like Bridget too much. I need a drink. Like really bad,' he said handing Erskine the baby and walking out the door. He stood there for a minute trying to just process what had happened. Realisation of what had just happened quickly hit him. He looked down at Nicole who was still crying. Erskine tried to shush her while he calmed himself. It was common for ledraoidhals to slip into German when they were angry or upset, regardless of their nationality. Erskine had also gotten so worked up that he had slipped into German.

He was upset about his daughter's disappearance and he could see the resemblance too, but that didn't mean he'd just get up and leave. 'Haven't these kids been through enough?' Erskine finished giving her the bath, before he changed her into a new nappy and cleaner and warmer clothes. If his son-in-law was coming back, he wasn't coming back any time soon. He had just lost his wife earlier that day. Erskine retrieved his grandson and led him and Nicole outside.

The air was thick from the rain. It could rain again anytime soon. In the opposite corner of the yard was a small grey and white wooden shed complete with a wooden ramp and next to it, was a run-down tomato garden that ran along the back fence. He let Garrett play with the footballs while he went to the shed and grabbed a box filled with needles, syringes, and two deep matching silver locket with an F inscriptured on the front.

The showers from that day had soaked the small table outside. Erskine set the supplies on the table, and he dried off the chairs before scooping up Garrett, despite protests of wanting to continue playing football, and sitting down with both of his grandkids.

He picked up a needle and tried to prick Garrett's left pointer finger despite Garrett's cries of fear. After a few minutes of struggling, he finally managed to prick his finger before doing the same thing to Nicole, without protests. She was too sick to care and the only thing that kept her quiet was her rapid sucking on her dummy and being held. Steadily, he held his grandchildren's bloody fingers over the lockets. Their blood spilt on the lockets, drenching them in blood. The grandpa picked up one of the lockets and tried to open it. He set it down and tried again with the other locket, but failed. The blood sealing recognition magic had worked. It was an uncommon magic. He had worked with it before, but not for ages. Satisfied, he handed a locket to each of them as Garrett's cries ceased.

Garrett traced his small fingers around it while Nicole just played with it, but didn't trace her fingers around it. The grandpa had Garrett help Nicole trace her small fingers around it and the lockets opened. The grandpa went to take a closer look, but it



snapped shut within seconds. The children traded lockets. Garrett traced his before helping his sister trace hers. Garrett smiled in victory, proud he was able to do something his grandpa couldn't. Garrett and Nicole's matching piercing green eyes widened in amusement as salty seawater gushed out of both lockets like a hose. The water's current cleaned the blood off the lockets, as it soaked them and the backyard as a small weapon fell out of Nicole's locket before instantly growing to its regular size.

The weapon was a cross between a sword and a gun. It had the handle and blade of a sword, but it also had a gun trigger on one side of it. The barrel of the gun was a mere perfect 5 centimetres in diameter, and the entire thing was 74 centimetres tall with a 42 centimetre blade and was 29 centimetres wide. The handle was blue and silver, as if somebody had spray painted it blue years ago. It had an intricate carving of a coral reef scene, complete with fish and seashells.

'What's that?' asked Garrett pointing at it in awe. He had seen swords and guns before, but never together.

'The Uisce (ish-ka) Weapon. The Water Weapon. It hasn't changed since Alois Eliáš had it,' he said looking at the weapon in admiration, and remembering the weapon's history.

'Can I play with it?' asked Garrett.

'No, that's not a toy. You can hold it, but only by the blue handle,' he said. Garrett grabbed the weapon and his grandpa had him push the pearl button on the handle. The blade retracted into the barrel and the handle part of the weapon leaving it to look like a gun. The water stopped pouring out of the deep locket, and the gun shrunk back down as it pulled itself into Garrett's locket, by itself.

Wanting to see it again, Garrett opened it again, but this time no water nor gun gushed out. Instead they saw an inscription on one side, and a picture of themselves on the other. A slightly younger boy was holding a younger girl, who sat on his lap on the top of a red slide, both were smiling wide at the camera.

'Look Sissy,' said Garrett pointing to the picture in his locket. 'That's you! And that's me! What's it say Papa?' Garrett asked trying to show his grandpa only to have it snap shut again.

'It says, "Mise agus mo dheirfiúr beag,"' he explained: Me and my little sister.

'Oh,' said Garrett understanding. Does Sissy's say that too?' he asked opening the locket.

'Close, but hers says "Mise agus mo dheartháir mór,"' Erskine replied: Me and my big brother.

Garrett kept opening and closing the locket, not understanding why nothing was coming out of the locket. The lockets were magical and had extension charms on them. Erskine had set up the blood recognition magic to keep the weapon safe inside the children's lockets. For the next month, only Garrett and Nicole would be able to open



or look at the inside of the locket. However, once the month was up, anyone would be able to open it, but only Garrett and Nicole would be able to retrieve the weapon from either locket. The lockets were linked, so it didn't matter which locket the Water Weapon had shrunk back into.

'Imrímid at park?' asked Garrett: We play?, losing interest as he was giving up on the locket.

Erskine smiled but shook his head. He had been trying to teach his grandkids Irish, and Garrett sometimes blended the two languages together.

'Ní anocht,' Erskine replied: Not tonight. 'It's almost dinner,' he said. 'Let's go inside,' he said picking up Nicole and leading them inside.

Later that night, Garrett let his grandpa give him his bath and get him ready for bed.

'How come we can open them, but you can't do it Papa?' asked Garrett as his grandpa changed him into his pjs. He finished changing him before he answered him.

'Draíochta,' replied Erskine: Magic, as he put Garrett to bed. 'Your mother and your uncle had lockets like those when they were little. Geall dom that you'll look after your sister and never lose your locket. I gcónaí!'

'Geallaim. I gcónaí,' Garrett said: I promise. Always.

'Good. Now if you want to be a football player you'll need your sleep,' said Erskine as he finished tucking his grandson in bed. He left the room, turning out the light and forgetting to turn on the night-light.

'Papa!' cried Garrett.

Erskine cursed himself, remembering the night-light and scrambling to turn on the night-light.

Garrett was too young to understand most of what had happened today. Part of him wished that Garrett would be too young to remember his mother's disappearance, but the other part wanted him to have been older, so he would've had more good memories with his mother. How, he wouldn't have to possibly grow up with just an alcoholic father. The father wasn't alcoholic yet, but he had a feeling it was headed that way. Perhaps he would explain it to Garrett when he was older. How his mother had disappeared to keep the weapon safe. How the guys who had killed his mother had wanted to expose the truth. The truth behind the disappearing system, which the governments and the United Nations had fought to keep a secret. If the gandraoidhals knew the truth, society couldn't live in peace. So any attempt to expose the truth had to be put down.

Erskine calmed Garrett down, as Garrett fell asleep thinking about playing football and always keeping his sister safe. Garrett was only able to keep part of his promise.



Contributors

Nathan R. Appelbaum was born a number of years ago in the place where he was born. He was almost gored by deer at an age slightly older than three, he is a descendent of someone, and is also writing this bio very quickly. Thee end.

Blue is simply a pseudonym for a timid girl hiding behind a strange name and a computer screen. Blue encompasses everything- the calmness of a tranquil sky or the vehement waves of the ocean's fury. I am both extremes.

Amber Brevig is a dedicated rugby player who enjoys telling people to "fight me" while only meaning it half the time, Amber loves attempting to write. Between watching various shows on Netflix and reading *The Walking Dead* she leads an extremely busy life, though she does manage to do some homework in her spare time. Talk Harry Potter to her and you'll steal her heart and soul faster than you can say "Dementors".

Marissa Bylo is a Nonprofit Administration major with a minor in Creative Writing. She would love to sit down with you over tea or coffee so she can explain how she can make money despite her schooling decisions. *Obligatory promotion of personal blog* (But really. Check it out please.)

Madi DiMercurio is an aspiring writer working on a Creative Writing Degree with a minor in Nonprofit Administration. She started writing stories in second grade. Her inspiration comes from everyday life but music is the main motivator for her stories. 'Toxic Dreams' was inspired by the song 'One' by Metallica.

Lily Gold is a current senior at Lindenwood University, majoring in exercise science. I originally came to Lindenwood for weightlifting, but have always had a deep rooted passion for writing. Although I am graduating in May, I hope to continue writing and possibly get my work published.

Taylor Grzybinski is an English major and hopes to one day teach high school students. Taylor loved English in high school and took a variety of courses to fuel her interest including AP Lit, creative writing, and journalism. Taylor has been writing short poems and stories since elementary school and hopes to continue sharing her work with her peers

Candice Lake is a senior in her last semester of her undergraduate program at Lindenwood. She is studying Art History and minors in Studio Art and Ancient World Cultures. She volunteers at the Campbell House Museum in her free time. Her hobbies include painting, photography, and getting new tattoos.

Victoria Lane is a freshman at Lindenwood University. I was born in raised in De Soto, Missouri, a small town 40 minutes south of St. Louis. I am a Video Game Design and Art History double major with a Creative Writing minor. I am passionate about everything I do, and I try to do a little of everything.



Isabel Manu is a freshman at Lindenwood University. I am eighteen years old and I play for the Lindenwood Women's Rugby team while majoring in English Literature. I enjoy writing and listening or reading to powerful pieces of literature, and that is my little biography of me.

Karina Mehmert is a transfer sophomore from mid-Missouri. She is a member of the Catholic Student Union and the Art History Association at Lindenwood. Karina is majoring in graphic design and wants to go on to design book covers.

Rachel Miller is from Saint Peters, MO and is currently a Freshman at LU. I have recently decided on being a Graphic Design major with a minor in International Business. I love to paint and draw in my spare time and I have a slight addiction to concerts (P!ATD is AMAZING!).

Stephanie Ricker is a graduating Senior of Lindenwood's Undergraduate Psychology program. She has hopes of becoming a k-12 guidance counselor and would love to see herself working in one of the school districts in Saint Charles County. She is a military veteran, a mom, a wife, and an aspiring artist.

Courtney Thomas is a senior Creative Writing Major. I'm proud to say that nobody inspired me to want to write. I've always wanted to write books. And I've never wanted to do anything else. I'm also a huge #Directioner and a #Zquad member.

Kristine Wagner graduated from LU in May 2016, but by the time August rolled around she found she missed learning, and began teaching herself Web Development. By January 2017, she was hired as a Junior Web Developer. And that's how a Creative Writing major gets a job, kids.



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