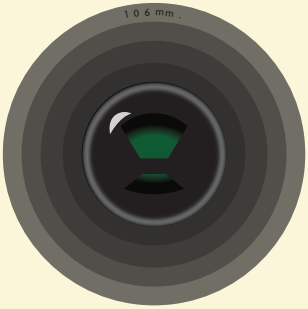
FOUNTAINS
31ST EDITION



refocus

2020

A PCC STUDENT PUBLICATION

Cover Designer
Atticus Van De Brake

refocus

FOUNTAINS 2020

A PCC STUDENT PUBLICATION

Introduction

Life is busy. As college students, we know and experience this daily! Amid the exams, projects, papers, and homework, we're also expected to balance a social life—oh, and responsibly do laundry every week!

In this hectic digital world, it's easy to lose focus. We're overwhelmed by the problems, struggles, and even tragedies of life. Sometimes we feel as if we can't keep up with it all.

But we need to remember to pause. Breathe. Take a step back. Refocus.

What really matters? How will our short life affect eternity?

When we refocus, we're able to grow and change by learning from the negatives in our lives. We develop from both our own experiences and those of others.

Just as a photographer focuses his camera lens on a beautiful subject, so must we also focus our hearts and minds on the loving mercy of Christ. When we refocus our eyes on Him, our perspective changes. And when troubles and failures seem to overwhelm us, His mercy renews us.

This 31st edition of *Fountains* will give you the chance to see life from a new perspective. We hope that these stories and poems will encourage, inspire, and motivate you.

Janise Anderson

Janise Anderson

Jenneth Dyck

Jenneth Dyck

Contents

flashback

develop

retake

flashback

The Door to Room 311

by Hannah Bryan

In loving memory of Mrs. Walker.
Thank you for your influence.

The back desk was where students were sent when they had to visit the principal. The secretary had them wait on the scratchy, blue-cushioned bench that sagged in the middle while she sat at her desk and peered through telescopic glasses, making sure no one talked to anyone or tried to make a run for it. Emilia slouched in the middle of the bench, her back resting on the bare white walls. Her hands, clasped together, rested on her stomach.

She wasn't in trouble. She just needed to be alone.

The bench sat directly across from a dark classroom door. Emilia stared unseeingly into the small window of the door to room 311. Down the hall, the sound of the kitchen workers laughing and knocking pans together drifted from the cafeteria. The AC unit hummed and chased little dust bunnies across the tile. A bell rang, signaling the end of class, but Emilia showed no sign of getting up. A stream of students filed down the hall, went to their lockers, and meandered to their next class.

"Emilia?" Sean stopped by Emilia's feet. "Emilia, are you going to class?"

Emilia looked up at him blankly.

His forehead creased slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched down.

"You've got to get up eventually. You've been here all morning." He extended his hand and helped Emilia to her feet. Slowly, they walked together down the east hall. The crowd of students thinned except for a few stragglers running to their lockers. A bell rang again, marking the beginning of the next class, but Sean and Emilia didn't hurry.

"I know it's a stupid question, but are you doing okay?" Sean asked.

"I shouldn't have come to school today," Emilia said. "I thought that maybe, maybe seeing the room would—I don't know—help."

"She only died yesterday." Sean put a comforting arm around Emilia's shoulder. "You're not okay. That's fine."

"She always told us to be tough."

She wasn't in trouble.

"I really don't think that counts this time." They paused at the fourth door on the left. Sean gave her a quick hug. "It's okay to be sad. We all are, and you were the closest to her."

He opened the door, and they went in. The teacher had his back to them. He scribbled something on the chalkboard that only he could read and dusted the chalk off his hands onto his sweater. He turned at the sound of the door.

"Sean, what have I told you about being la—" the teacher stopped abruptly when he saw Emilia. "Okay. Just go sit down."

Emilia felt her classmates' eyes on her as she took a seat at the desk situated in the front right corner against the wall. She kept her eyes firmly on the floor.

"Where was I?" the teacher asked. "Right, Industrial Revolution. So, pre-steamboat era transportation was slow . . ."

Emilia tuned him out and unzipped her backpack in search of her history book. As she pulled it out, three stapled pieces of paper came with it. It was her persuasive essay for English. Large, familiar red-inked handwriting decorated the margins and spotted the double-spaced lines in dramatic swirls and loops. Emilia could still hear the voice that used to accompany it.

"You can do a lot better than this," said Miss Stewart.

"Okay, maybe—but I don't have the time."

"Emilia," Miss Stewart slid her oversized red glasses down onto her face. She firmly believed in having dramatic flare. "We both know that is no excuse for poor arguments. As this stands, I have no idea why I should want the Electoral College to remain intact."

"Yes, you do! Look, I said it right here, 'Due to the dangers of a direct democracy, the Founders felt it necessary to—'"

"Keep going with that." Miss Stewart emphasized her words with a tap of her pen. "You need to put the same amount of passion you just spoke with into this paper. Right now, this sounds like you're reciting memorized facts, and maybe

you are, but I don't need to know that." Miss Stewart handed the paper back to Emilia. "Maybe being good at forming arguments will help you in your future."

"I don't know what I want to do with my future," Emilia said. She stuffed the paper into her backpack and slouched in her chair. Miss Stewart, the high school English teacher, was her unofficial guidance counselor—more accurately, her friend.

"That's okay. A lot of high school seniors feel that way."

"Yeah, but they at least have some vague idea. I have none. Not even a general area or plan. Maybe I'll just work nearby and live here for the rest of my life."

"You could, if you really wanted to do that," Miss Stewart said thoughtfully. "But I think you're capable of a lot more than that, even if you don't."

"Do you actually think so? Do you think I'm good at—well, at anything?"

"I think you're good at this." Miss Stewart tapped her grammar book with her index finger. "Who knows, maybe you'll turn out to be an English teacher."

"Oh, gross, no way!"

"Hey now! I've been teaching for fifteen years! Don't judge it too harshly," Miss Stewart laughed. "But really, Emilia, you can do whatever you put your mind to. Have you prayed about it?"

"Are any of you even paying attention?" Mr. James's voice brought Emilia back to the present. "Cory." He snapped his fingers to get the student's attention. "Cory, tell me who invented the steamboat?"

Poor Cory had been absentmindedly pulling at his red curls, trying to straighten them out. He had no idea what Mr. James was talking about.

"Um, was it, I think it was—Booker T. Washington?"

"No, Cory, it—I literally just said it. It's not like this is the first time any of you have taken American History either." Mr. James sighed heavily and leaned on the desk. He thoughtfully scanned the senior class. They all looked at him expectantly. "You know—let's just not do this today. They shouldn't have made you all come in."

Mr. James pulled up a three-legged stool that didn't rest evenly and sat down. "You all lost Miss Stewart yesterday. Something sudden—car wreck like that—can be hard to deal with. As small as this school is, a lot of you probably knew her in elementary, didn't you?"

A few students nodded.

"Let's talk it out then. I've only been here a year; I didn't know her that well. Tell me about her." Mr. James waited expectantly. The buzzing fluorescents were his only answer.

"I hated her." A student in the back stood to talk. It was Ian, a tall, dark-haired boy, who up until now, had been occupying himself by flicking balled-up pieces of paper at the girl in front of him.

All eyes turned toward him, some with disgust, others with shock.

"I hated English, man. Every other teacher in this place just gave me a 'D' and let me keep moving. I had these awful papers I turned in all the time; they wouldn't even mark them up. I didn't care, and they didn't care. It worked. I'm not planning on

having anything to do with English once I'm out of here, so it's pointless. But then Miss Stewart ruined everything. This lady hands me back papers and tells me it was a 'rough draft.' What does that even mean? Why am I doing the same paper twice?" Ian looked down at his shoe and scuffed it on the carpet.

"Stupidest thing anyone ever had me do. Then, she was always on my case in class, too. Like, I'd just be minding my own business in the back of the class, and she'd want me to be involved or whatever. Lady, just leave me alone. That's what everyone else does. But basically, yeah, that's why I didn't like her."

Some students shifted awkwardly in their seats, not sure if the outburst was appropriate. Mr. James started to stand, but Ian interrupted him.

"I didn't want to go to college. I didn't think I could. But then, I'm working on this essay with Miss Stewart, and she says something about how I can maybe recycle it for college applications. I never had anyone believe I could go to college before. And she helped me. Like—" Ian's voice cracked. He took a few deep breaths before speaking again. "She cared." He sat down abruptly.

Emilia remembered how much Miss Stewart worried over Ian. As a teacher's aide, Emilia had helped look over his drafts more than once.

"I just don't know how he can make this many errors." Emilia scratched out another word in red pen and scribbled the correction beside it. "Did he take Elementary English?"

"Be kind now."

"I just don't know how he thinks he's going to get through life with grammar this bad. You actually need basic English skills for pretty much every occupation." Emilia finished off the last page and set it on a pile of graded papers. She absentmindedly straightened them, staring but not seeing. "Not like knowing grammar will help me at all. He at least plans on being a bum. I have no plan whatsoever."

Miss Stewart set down her pen and turned to Emilia. "Why don't you try deciding on something broad and narrowing it down from there? It can be generic, like do you want it to be a nine-to-five job, or do you want to make your own hours?" She smiled knowingly. "Or do you want to be a bum in New York rather than Chicago? Although, I don't know that we should go around assuming people will be 'bums.'"

Emilia smiled sheepishly and thought for a moment. "I want to influence people."

"I want to influence people."

"I hated English class, but I loved her," said Jordan. His comment pulled Emilia to the present.

Ian's outburst had broken the silence. More students began to tell stories about Miss Stewart.

"She never let us quit," Jaylynn said. "Even when it wasn't very good, she only accepted our best effort."

"She pushed us to be better than who we thought we could be."

"She inspired us to reach for the goals we thought were too big."

"She *cared*."

"I remember the day after my dog got hit by a car," Will said. "I had a paper due that day but I hadn't finished it, so she—"

The bell rang, interrupting him. Teary-eyed students looked up at Mr. James.

"I know this isn't going to be an easy time for you, but I hope that talking about her helped some. Keep doing that, guys. It's okay to miss her." Mr. James scanned the room, looking at each student briefly. "Head to your next class, then."

Emilia walked out of the class alone. She headed to her next class, the opposite direction of the office bench and Miss Stewart's old classroom.

The stories brought memories back, flashing like clips from a movie before her eyes. The next few classes were surreal, the teachers' voices hollow and echoing. She didn't hear a word.

When the final bell rang, Emilia lingered at her locker. Once most of the hall had cleared out, she slowly headed back to the office bench while texting her volleyball coach to say she wouldn't be at practice. She didn't feel up to it today. The clamor of squeaking shoes and hurried conversations faded, replaced with the occasional footfall of the janitor. She sat in the middle of the bench and slouched against the wall, eyes closed. She remembered her last conversation with Miss Stewart.

"Maybe I should take a gap year. Give myself some time, you know?"

"It's not a bad option," Miss Stewart had said as she entered grades into the computer.

"But what do you think?"

"Emilia." Miss Stewart set the tests off to the side and placed her glasses on the top of her head. "It doesn't matter what I think. What does matter is what God wants you to do. You told me you're praying about it—I think you already know what you need to do. Now, you just have to trust God." She moved her glasses back onto her nose and returned to her gradebook.

Now, sitting outside the school office, Emilia felt frustration welling up inside her. None of this made sense. Emilia leaned forward, head on her knees. *God, why did you take her? She had so much left to do, so many students left to influence and so many lives to change. Why would you take away someone like her?*

Hot tears escaped her closed eyes. The harder she tried not to cry, the more the tears flowed. She shook her head, disgusted with herself, and tried to wipe the tears away. As she raised her head, she saw the door.

The door to room 311 was still locked. The lights were still off. But the door was covered in Post-it notes. Slowly, as if she were afraid they would disappear, Emilia stood and approached the door, her fingers lightly tracing over the words on the paper.

Thank you for checking my papers for other classes.

You didn't give up on me. Thank you.

You always had something nice to say to me.

Between classes that day, the students must have

written notes for Miss Stewart, telling her thank you. Emilia's tears flowed freely now, and she didn't try to stop them.

All these people, some of them not even her students, had loved and appreciated Miss Stewart. Emilia touched the door gingerly and smiled. She could almost hear a faint, *I told you so.*

She knew what she wanted to do.

Emilia grabbed a blue Post-it note from the stack piled next to the door. She scribbled a note in black pen and stuck it firmly to the center of the door. With a determined nod, she turned on her heel and walked away.

I want to influence my students the way you influenced me.

Anvil Cave

by Gage Crowder

At the gaping mouth of the cave, I faced my fears.

In ordinary Washington fashion, the fall of 1987 was cold and rainy. The sun, much like us kids, had ended its summer vacation in Washington and was replaced by a sky of ominous gray clouds, which brought frequent drizzles and a perpetual wet-cold in the air that was almost palpable. The ground of the woods behind my house, which for the first thirteen years of my life had been used as the prime summer getaway for my friends and me, had started to form its characteristic slush of wet leaves and mud, and Mt. Rainier once again donned her perennial fog cloak. This meant only one thing to me and my childhood confidants, Larry and Patrick James: it was time to go back to school.

But the days of freedom remaining, coupled with the usual boyhood malaise of feeling that we had wasted our entire summer break on arcade games and pizza bought with lawn-mowing money, inspired something in our barely adolescent hearts: we wanted adventure; we wanted danger.

Or should I say, *they* wanted adventure and danger. Myself? I was perfectly content with the dark, cozy confines of the arcade and the feeling of sweet regret after consuming an entire Lamar's gas-station pizza.

However, Larry and Patrick were discontent with the norm.

In fact, in more ways than one, Larry and Patrick were abnormal. For adolescents—or "future humans" as our science teacher, Mr.

Jinkle, would call us—Larry and Patrick were visibly different. Patrick was, might I say, round. His hair, a dirty blond, was shaped as a perfect dome on top of his head and fell just below his eyebrows. Between his hair and his cheeks, it was nearly impossible to see his eyes. Larry was in every way Patrick's opposite. Larry was tall and lanky with buzzed hair and thick black glasses. Patrick was freckled from head to toe, but Larry had a nearly translucent pallor. I suppose that I was somewhere between the two: shaggy brown hair and a medium build.

But, generally, something happens to a boy around the age of thirteen. Much more than biological changes, and more than physiological changes, like the ever-increasing drive for food, the male brain undergoes some cognitive construction—and in some cases, deconstruction. Whereas girls typically mature mentally in these adolescent years, the minds of thirteen-year-old boys remain a mystery. At this age, the ideas of young men usually lead to what my father always referred to as a "stupid tax," which, as I slowly learned, had nothing at all to do with cents on the dollar. Basically, a stupid tax was a funny way of saying that you reap what you sow: if you do something stupid, you receive harmful (sometimes painful) consequences from those actions.

What is worth noting, however, is that somehow this tendency for stupidity and adventure did not affect me.

Don't get me wrong—I loved backyard tackle football as much as the next guy. (My friends always told me that I was the best referee in all the middle schools in Tacoma.) But I was soon to be shaken—somewhat unwillingly—from my nervous apprehension of life.

My dad was the first to take notice of my skittish tendencies.

Once over the summer, after he observed a game played between a bunch of us boys (a game that I opted to watch), Dad sat me down and told me, "You gotta stop being afraid. Grow up, Art."

And I had chewed on those words all summer.

It was only two days before Patrick, Larry, and I started eighth grade. But, thinking it was like any other day, I had already begun to make my way to our usual post-lunch meet-up spot across the creek at the big, fallen oak tree on the corner of Mr. James's lot. The engine of my 50cc Honda Dream dirt bike roared through the woods, my tires turning into blades that easily tore through the September slush. But halfway across Mr. James's lot, Patrick and Larry intercepted me, beckoning me with a wave to follow. Moments into what they communicated to me as a "short drive"—which I deduced from the way Patrick held up his hand to me, placing his index finger and thumb roughly an inch apart—we encountered a problem.

"You gotta stop being afraid. Grow up, Art."

You see, Patrick lived on the corpulent side of life. So, near the back field, when the softness of the mud puddle was compressed with the weight of both Patrick and his dirt bike, the bike sank into an enormous mud puddle.

"Great!" I said, slinging my choking dirt bike down into the mud. "Help me get this out, Larry." We wrestled for a few minutes to get the bike out, but it was no use. Our gaunt and boyish frames had no chance of dislodging the sunken bike.

"You want me to help?" asked Patrick.

"No, Patrick, just keep standing there while Art and I get it," Larry interjected. His glasses fell into the mud. "Ah, what's the use? It's stuck!" he yelled in frustration. "What did you guys bring me out here for anyway?" He kicked the front tire of the submerged bike.

"I wanted to go to Anvil Cave," Patrick said. "Joe and Daniel went last week, and—"

"Anvil Cave! That's where you were taking me?" Larry shouted. His eyes grew wide.

"And me?" I added. "Patrick, you know my mother would kill you if she knew you took me there. Remember how she chased you around with a broom handle when you accidentally took me to explore the abandoned concrete factory on 12th Street? Do you want to die?"

"Yeah, but Joe said—"

"Who cares!" Larry interrupted again.

Anvil Cave had a reputation among the youngsters of Tacoma. In fact, the fear of Anvil Cave was the scourge of adolescents. In the seventies, it was rumored that a homeless man who lived there used to kidnap children and hold them for ransom until their parents paid to get them back—that's what the high schoolers told us anyway.

Larry and I went home, leaving Patrick to gather his dirt bike by himself. He didn't even bother trying to stop us. He knew we were upset. But that night as I lay in bed, I thought more about what my dad had said to me: *You gotta stop being afraid. Grow up, Art.*

We now only had one day until school started back. So, in an attempt to numb the anguish that gnawed at me like a saw on a log, I picked the Tacoma Mall arcade as my medicine of choice. I was assiduously playing my game of Gallaga, climbing the ladder of names to the first-place rank, when I eventually felt Patrick and Larry staring at me.

"What is it?" I asked as my spaceship dodged one more electronic bomb.

"Patrick convinced me, Art," Larry said in a low, serious voice.

Boom! A little electronic bomb destroyed my spaceship—I was still second place.

"Well, you're not convincing me." I kept my back to them.

"Come on, Art! What's the worst that's going to happen?" Patrick asked.

"Yeah, we want to know what it's like, Art! What, are you scared?" Larry inquired. "You're just always so scared of everything!"

I spun around from the game and marched silently out of the door, down the long, white-tiled corridor of the mall.

"Art?"

I flung the glass doors open and started my dirt bike. I could hear the words of Larry mixed with my father's: *What, are you scared? You gotta grow up, Art. You're not a little boy anymore.* As the words spun around in my head and the chilly air blasted my bare face, hot tears began to stream down my cheeks. (I later told the guys it was from the wind.) My red plaid mackinaw flapped behind me in the wind, as if it were waving goodbye to my friends, waving goodbye to my childhood.

I went as fast as my bike could go—and then faster. I never looked back, but I could hear Patrick and Larry coming up behind me.

"Art!" I heard Larry scream, as the hard asphalt melted into mud under the wheels of my dirt bike. I didn't even know where I was going. But as an army of trees gave way to Mr. James's open fields, I knew that I was close. I could still hear it: *What, are you scared? You gotta grow up, Art.*

"I am!" I screamed to the open air around me. I clicked into sixth gear and tore through the soggy ground until I could see the large open mouth of Anvil Cave. What was I—scared?

The moment I arrived at the cave, something sparked inside me as I felt the full force of my impending manhood hit me all at once. I heard the distant echoes of my father's disappointed and frustrated exhortations to be a man. I let my bike fall to the ground. No, I threw it to the ground in a fever of adrenaline.

Larry and Patrick arrived. I stood at the cave, looking in. They ran to me, leaving their bikes wheezing in the cold mud.

"Art, what are you doing?" Larry asked, almost angrily.

I didn't say anything back. I ripped the flashlight from his hands and stepped toward the cave with all the courage of a lion. I could feel the bewildered stares of Patrick and Larry as I crossed the threshold of the cave.

"Art, wait," Larry shouted. "What if—"

"Yeah, what if you get—"

"What's the matter, guys? You scared?" I asked.

They were silent.

I looked down at the floor of the cave; it was littered with empty cans and cigarette butts—both were fresh. Someone had been here before us. *It was probably just the teenagers.* A breeze circulated through the cave and wafted into our faces. It smelled old and sweet, like a sunburnt, old church.

"Art, do you want to wait and draw straws?" Patrick yelled up to me. "Maybe me or Larry could go in first?"

I didn't answer. But in an instant, Patrick and Larry were at my side. This was my moment to prove that I wasn't scared anymore, that I wasn't afraid—that I was *not* afraid.

We slowly shuffled forward, a huddle of technicolored plaid penguins until we were far enough in to where I needed the flashlight. The photonic fingers of the flashlight felt their way across the jagged walls of the cave.

We all relaxed a little, breaking our huddle and letting our shoulders fall.

"Art, are you crazy?" Larry whispered, his voice echoing through the deep labyrinths of Anvil Cave. "We weren't really serious about all of this. We just wanted to mess with you, man. What's the matter with you? Look where we are. We could be—"

"I just didn't want to be scared anymore, okay?"

Then there was a shuffling noise.

"Art!" I heard Patrick cry, as he jumped onto me.

And by the time I jerked the flashlight back over to see what it was, the fingers of light did not touch the walls of the cave but rather caressed the face of a man—an aged, gray face, with a long white beard and yellow-black teeth.

"Hey!" the face said, opening wide its solitary, glassy blue eye.

Without even being conscious of it, Larry, Patrick, and I simultaneously screamed and sprinted out of the cave. We ran clear past our dirt bikes, for with the mind-intoxicating tea of fear coursing through our veins, we did not think of pausing—not even for a moment. We ran as fast as our legs would carry us, past trees and past shrubbery, never looking back. We ran through Mr. James's lot, slinging mud off our boots ten feet into the air.

"Is he still back there?" I called out to Larry as we fled through the trees.

"Who cares—just run," was his violently scared reply.

Sometime during this affair, Patrick, motived by fear and the power of will, even began to outrun Larry and me, and that is saying something. We ran up Farmington and down Cottonwood Street all the way to my front porch, where we finally collapsed in an exhausted heap, our lungs stinging from the cold fall air.

"What is going on here!" my mother shrieked, bursting out of the garage door, seeing that we were obviously winded, afraid, and bikeless. My father was right behind her.

"We—we were—at the—" My words were stunted as I wheezed between deep, painful breaths.

"You were what? You were what!" Mother inquired again, slightly more concerned.

"Go on, son," Dad added, nodding his head in that unmistakable, concerned-father way.

"We—were at Anvil Cave and—"

"What have I told you about playing near that dangerous place, Calvin Art Wilson?" Now Mom's face was pinched and serious as if she had just sucked on a lemon.

Dad's face was concerned; his eyes shifted back and forth from my mother to me.

"I know—I know, but I—" I tried to get the words out through the stinging pain, but it was no use. We were busted.

By the time we could all catch our breaths, Mom had already called and asked Patrick and Larry's parents to pick them up and the police to get the homeless man away from the neighborhood.

From my upstairs jail cell, I watched as Patrick and Larry were marched to each of their cars in shame.

After being marched upstairs by Mom, I fell asleep by the window, looking out over the cold, gray neighborhood. But I awoke to the smell of food and came downstairs famished. Mom was standing silently in the kitchen, leaning against the stove and biting her lip with her back to the dining room. Her legs were crossed one over the other in an X, and one hand assiduously stirred the noodles while the other hand rested on the countertop, her index finger insistently tapping to an irregular, angry beat. Dad was reclined in his chair, shrouded by the black and white curtain of the day's newspaper, headlined "Back to School for Pierce County." I shuddered when I read it, so I turned my attention to the kitchen.

"Mom, I want to say—"

"Save it, Arty. We will talk about this later. Go wash your hands for dinner."

The silence at the dinner table was drowned out by the heavy rain. After washing dishes and brushing my teeth, I lay in bed contemplating and half-laughing at what had happened at Anvil Cave. I stopped, however, for fear of reprimand, when I noticed a long shadow come over me. It was my dad.

He walked into my room and sat on the end of my bed. "Now," he said in a low voice, "I may have led you astray."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Arty, when I tell you that you need to grow up and face your fears, I don't mean that you should go out and do something dangerous. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," I said, consciously avoiding eye contact.

"Listen to me, Arty." I looked up at his face. "I am proud of the young man you're becoming, and I can commend your attempt to do what you thought I was saying. But, next time, remember this: a lack of fear is never shown through an act of danger; the mark of courage is much more about our character than our actions."

I nodded my understanding, though the rebuke stung.

"You're going to be a fine man one day. I can see it now." Dad paused, then said, "Get some sleep. I love you, son."

"I love you too, Dad." I barely whispered the words.

I lay for hours with my dad's voice ringing in my head. Only this time, it wasn't frustration over the quirks of a nervous boy growing into manhood; it was the wisdom and love of a father to his son.

Though it wasn't my brightest moment, my father's words were timely, and I've remembered them to this day.

Hands

by Brittany Weaver

This piece was inspired by a question I was often asked during my first semester at school. My whole life has been spent in the ministry, and in Scotland, I became used to the touch of hands—little ones pulling at my hands to show me their coloring papers, older ladies gently holding my hands as they told me about their week. These memories inspired this free verse poem about the importance hands have in my life.

People ask me what I miss most about home.
They guess, "Is it home-cooked food? Having your own room?"
At this, I shake my head and whisper,
"No. I miss hands."
Their confusion is clear. *Hands?* They wonder.
How can she miss hands?
I laugh. Yes. I miss hands.

I miss chubby baby hands that clasp tightly as
courageous first steps are taken.
I miss sticky toddler hands
grasping leaves and dirty white feathers,
pushing these treasures to me as tokens of innocent love.

I miss warm, wrinkled hands that
lovingly stroke mine and whisper the secrets
of a well-lived life.
I miss the roughened hands of women
who have built empires,
yet stopped to help build me.
I miss *those* hands.

I miss the hands of my mom who taught me
how to guide a needle through a button,
how to knead bread dough,
and how to open my hands and just let go.

I miss the hands of my dad which folded over mine,
helping me shift our car down
rough back roads. The hands that taught me
to shoot pool and hugged me tightly
in the Edinburgh Airport,
patting me on the back to give me courage.
I *miss* those hands.

So, go ahead. Ask me what I miss the most about home.
Sure, I miss the food and having my own room,
but mostly? Mostly, I miss hands.

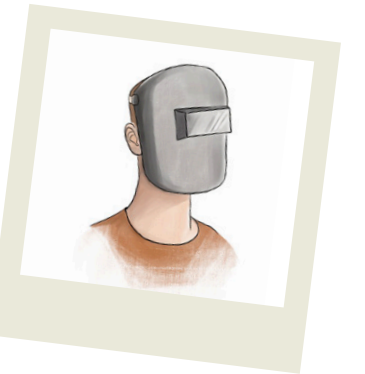
COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
EXTEMPORANEOUS ESSAY

The Keys My Father Kept

by Rebecca Ramsey

Encouragement is sometimes found where we least expect.

Dad carried his keys on his belt. He was a rugged man—scraggly beard streaked with gray and grease, calloused hands, and a focused face. His deep blue eyes seemed to change shape in the fluorescent light in his workshop where he spent most of his time. First, they were small and slitted, scrutinizing, analyzing his designs as he made check marks beside his list with the red pen he kept tucked behind his ear. Then they grew wider, purposed, focused as his rough hands clamped the metal pieces down, and he began to work.



I remember the burr of the cutter—how the sparks would fly like an avalanche of shooting stars as I watched from a safe distance. I remember the huff of the welder like the voice of a dragon. But I couldn't watch. Dad had to wear his helmet.

But the sound I remember most was the jangle of his keys. He had nearly fifteen of them—all tied to a loop on his work belt. Half of them were orphaned, wherever they once belonged long

gone. Yet Dad kept them all—the tractor's, the tool box's, the shed's, and many others clamped to his belt.

Clinking, jangling keys—the sound of my Dad moving around his shop, the sound of him entering the house late at night, the sound of him bending to kiss my forehead goodnight.

"Do you need all of the keys?" I asked him once when I was small, and I sat on the floor of his workshop. His eyes moved gradually from his page and focused on me, changing shape from small to large and bright.

"Maybe not," he said after a moment. "But I will keep them anyway." He wiped his oily hands on a towel.

"Why?" I raced my toy car across the floor. He analyzed the question like he did his designs. Then he smiled.

"They keep me going."

I watched my toy race across the floor, the winding mechanism turning until it stopped and the car did too. Dad walked over, picked up the toy, and knelt beside me, placing it on the floor.

"I have collected these keys," he said. "They all belonged somewhere." He lifted one from his belt, drawing attention to it. It was old and rusty. "This was your grandma's," he said. "It made her music box play." He dropped it among the rest. Jangle.

"This one," he lifted another, "was from my old toolbox—the first one I had—that I got for Christmas when I was a teen." Jangle.

"These keys," he said, "each hold a memory that keeps me going."

"This key," he lifted yet another, "was from my friend Robby's four-wheeler. We used to take turns riding it down the back roads behind Willow Creek until it broke down." He smiled. Jangle.

"These keys," he said, "each hold a memory that keeps me going. They remind me of where I came from and keep me moving forward." He wound the stick on the side of my toy car and sent it across the room, where it bonked against the leg of his workbench.

I never forgot Dad's words, and the sounds of those keys echoed ever louder in my mind. Jingle, jangle—Dad was moving, he was working, he was moving forward.

Whenever I feel sad and as if I can't keep going, I remember the sound of those keys and know that I will move on. I will remember the good times—the keys of my life—and never quit.

Joy of Checkers

by Jenneth Dyck

Remembering was weakness.
Forgetting was strength. Or, at least,
that is what they wanted him to believe.

The stretch of hemp fibers and rawhide creaked as a lone archer drew back his primitive bow from a crook in the maple tree. The waning sunlight reflecting off the metallic glass of the distant cityscape bounced in just the right way to dribble through the forest trees and onto the arrow's straight shaft.

Aaren swallowed as he squinted at the deer in the clearing below. His tongue peeked out between tight lips—an expression he'd adopted at six years old, when the Community first taught him to hunt with a bow.

The deer turned its backside to Aaren, blocking the path to its lungs with its own body. Although the bowstring cut into Aaren's fingers while he waited for the beast to turn, he still wouldn't allow himself to grow impatient. While the seconds ticked by, he tried to keep his mind from losing focus. This amber hollow, cooling beneath a canopy of autumn leaves, did things like that: coax his mind to wander where and *when* it shouldn't.

Before Aaren had a chance to retrieve his criminal thoughts, he recognized this clearing—remembered what happened here all those years ago. Evan had been collecting wild turkey feathers for his new arrows. The two hadn't been at it for more than an hour, when . . . .

Aaren forced an unsteady breath as he tried to block the memory: the bear that reared up behind Evan . . . the way the

leaves glistened red after the battle . . . the Community's ritual and promise to forget the accident in order to protect the people from weakness. No one had spoken his brother's name since.

Aaren cursed his mind's disobedience. He wished he could set his bow down to wipe the sweat from his shaky hands. *Just nerves*, he told himself. It happened to every hunter before the release of an arrow.

But Aaren knew that was only part of the reason.

He chanced a glance from his loitering prey long enough to glimpse the Authority city and its larger-than-magic architecture that was a day's run away.

If the Community discovered that he still honored Evan's memory, the Community Mayor would send a *phone call* to the Authority city from a private office. No one but the Community Mayor actually knew what a phone call was, but Aaren didn't want to find out. To remember the past blinded him to what was possible in the future—at least that's what the Mayor always said.

That girl had cost him his kill.

A snap of a twig caused the deer to yank its head skyward, white tail vertical in apprehension, before bounding away toward the horizon.

Aaren let the arrow fly, whipping past his forearm, but the arrow dropped, only skewering a few unfortunate leaves. The deer dipped into the underbrush then disappeared for good.

Aaren let out the breath he'd been holding and glared in the direction that the sound had come from.

A short figure weaved through the trees, blonde hair ablaze in the dying light. Aaren slid from his perch and landed soundlessly below, slung his bow over his shoulder opposite his quiver, and crept after her. He was supposed to let go of the past in order to embrace the future, but this was different. That girl had cost him his kill.

Aaren had no trouble tracking the girl. Her feet swished through the brittle leaves, twigs snapping after every three feet. Aaren squatted low, torso erect, and followed toe to heel until he could see her more clearly.

She was maybe half his age—ten, if he had to guess—with flowing golden hair and bright clothes that clashed with the surrounding trees. She carried an armful of small sticks, rocks, and beech leaves. Unknowingly, she led Aaren to a swollen creek and a weathered bridge.

The girl stopped abruptly in the center of the bridge, making Aaren duck under it for fear of being spotted. She sat crossed-legged as she arranged her treasures from nature before her.

Aaren watched from his hiding space, deer nearly forgotten. The girl busied herself by picking up a leaf, moving it, then picking up a rock and moving it as well, then moving the leaf again.

Inexplicably, she looked up and her eyes met his.

Aaren tensed, wishing he could vanish into the forest, but the girl smiled and gave him a friendly wave.

"Hey! Wanna play with me? It's called 'checkers.'"

Aaren stood, indignant that a child had spotted him—a child who couldn't take two steps in the woods without scattering all

the creatures that lived in them. "I don't know what checkers is," he said. "I'm working anyways."

"By hiding under a bridge?" The girl patted a spot on the smooth bridge invitingly. "I can teach you. *And* it's my favorite, so I'm really good at teaching it."

Aaren sighed and glanced at the horizon. He wouldn't have any more hunting luck tonight anyway, not after everything had been chased off. For curiosity's sake alone, he trudged over the bridge, walking toe to heel across the wood.

The girl cocked her head at his gait. "Why do ya walk like that?"

"It's quieter. You should try it sometime," Aaren muttered as he folded down across from the girl. Up close, he could see what she'd done with the sticks, rocks, and leaves. The sticks had been arranged into a square of some kind, with lots of smaller squares inside. The rocks occupied the squares on her side, and the leaves occupied the squares on his side.

"I don't have a real checkerboard," the girl said, completely missing Aaren's remark. "I've always wanted one, though, but the Authorities don't like anything old, Mom says."

Aaren tensed. "This is Authority banned?"

The girl shrugged. "Yeah, but a lot of what we do is Authority banned. Mom says they don't like it when we write books or keep old things. But our Community does anyway."

As if remembering something, the girl froze, a distinctly fearful look marring her childlike face. "You won't tell, right? Mom says I'm not supposed to talk about it."

Aaren shook his head and found himself saying "I won't tell," before he got a chance to think about it. He couldn't remember the last time he had talked with a child. Logically, he shouldn't be wasting time when there was so much work to be done in the woods. But her eagerness to break the societal norms briefly reminded him of Evan.

He guessed that he hadn't talked to a child since he lost Evan.

The girl seemed satisfied with his answer. "I'm Joy, by the way. What's your name?"

"Aaren."

"It's sad that you've never played," Joy said. "It helps me relax when I'm tired of working."

Aaren was about to say that he was always working, but Joy didn't seem interested.

"Okay. You be leaves. I'll be rocks. You have to jump over my rocks and capture them to win, and I have to jump over your leaves to win. Does that make sense?"

Aaren struggled through two rounds of checkers before he finally understood, but the game didn't intrigue him as much as Joy did. She mentioned odd places like Iraq and Egypt where the game had first come from, and all the famous people she wondered who might have played it—names like George Washington, Caesar Augustus, and Kublai Khan—none of which Aaren had ever heard of.

"Did George Washington come from Egypt?" he asked as he jumped her rock. It was the third rock that he had captured so far, and he felt pretty proud of it—until Joy jumped two of his leaves.

"No, silly," Joy sneered. "George Washington came from America. He fought in the *Revolution War* lots of years ago."

"Well then," said Aaren, feeling peeved over the way a girl half his age had condescended to him, "what was the . . . '*Revolution' War*?"

"America wanted to be free. They didn't want to be a part of England anymore, so they decided to fight." Joy looked up pointedly at Aaren as she held one of her rocks purposely in mid-play. "And they won."

Joy jumped his final leaf with a flair of triumph.

Aaren left the bridge that night with more questions than answers. The deer had been completely forgotten, and what replaced it were thoughts of books, wars, and Washingtons. Lying in his hammock that night, he decided that her Community must have been one of those outlaw Communities he'd heard about—the ones that kept remembering, even when they were told not to.

Every sundown that week, Aaren slipped off into the woods, eager to hear of the banned history. Aaren tried not to think about his Community discovering him. His desire for knowledge and his budding friendship with Joy outweighed the risks. Her sunny attitude reminded him of Evan in some ways, and smiles were rare within the Community: the Community Mayor would only squint with his beetle eyes set in the center of his moon-like face that

bunted at his chin. His attitude always caught in the comrades' souls like pneumonia—nothing like Joy's happy demeanor.

As the months grew colder, as snow began to frost the trees, and as ice chilled the creek beneath the bridge, Joy taught him about Christmas—about the manger and holly leaves and angels and carols and a fat man dressed in red pajamas.

"People used to kill trees and hang painted balls on their corpses," she told him with a look of fascination.

Before Aaren could digest the idea, a biting gust of winter air sailed over the bridge and knocked the leaf game pieces askew. Joy lunged for them, but only managed to grasp one brittle beech leaf.

She sighed at the leaf and twirled it sadly between her fingers. "If we still had Christmas, you know what I would wish for?"

"What?" Aaren asked, wrapping his arms around himself.

"A *real* checkerboard," the girl breathed. She looked skyward with a smile that Aaren now knew well. "One made of maple wood, all sanded down smooth, with painted flat pucks for the checker pieces." Her face fell then, the light dimming in her eyes. "But of course, . . . Christmas doesn't happen anymore."

Aaren only grimaced sympathetically, but inside, his thoughts were churning.

With the colder season coming in, the demand for food grew higher and his availability to meet with Joy became less and less.

But in the evenings, Aaren crouched by the Community bonfire after most of the other comrades had gone to their hammocks.

Joy said Christmas didn't happen anymore, but Aaren wanted to prove her wrong.

Aaren wanted to prove her wrong.

Muted footsteps faded into the camp as scouts made their rounds. As voices grew nearer, Aaren sat on the slab of maple wood he'd been carving and reached his hands out to the fire. He hoped the patrolling scouts didn't notice the splinters marking his fingers.

Finally, after weeks of sleepless nights, the checkerboard was completed. The board itself was a round, flat plate from a maple tree, its bark still lining the edges. The pucks, stained with doe blood and charcoal, were smooth medallions that fit in the palm of his hand.

When the snow started to slush and the first bird flew back to its perch, Aaren trudged into the woods, checkerboard propped under his arm. When he approached the bridge, he expected to find Joy waiting for him there, but the melting snow hadn't been disturbed.

He waited all day. And all the next.

By the time the snow had vanished completely, Aaren still had heard no word from Joy. Desperate, he risked asking the Community if there had been any Authority raids during the winter.

The answer? Yes.

"Yes," the Community cook had said, theatrically swinging a wooden ladle at him as she gossiped. Authorities had swept the woods at the end of December. They found an outlaw Community. No one knew or cared what happened to its comrades.

"I, personally, am relieved," the cook declared, her tall vowels suggesting an air of superiority that Aaren found particularly revolting. "To think a band of savages had been so close to our Community all this time. They could have taken our food. Our *children*, for sky's sake! I'd expect you hunters would have found and reported them before now . . ."

Aaren left the Community cook to her babble. He felt as if the entire world had thawed from the winter's ice except for his soul.

It was the first day he'd grieved since Evan was killed. But he refused to say why, even when the Community Mayor raised a suspicious eyebrow at Aaren's sullen expressions. Instead, Aaren took to hunting again. Harder than ever. He shot rabbits and deer—even a couple of bears—always hoping that a curtain of

blonde hair would catch the fading sunlight and distract his aim. But of course, it never did. He had lost his Joy.

He refused to let her memory vanish. He refused to let her be like Evan—a friend who slipped down the memory hole at the Authorities' whim.

Remembering wasn't weakness. Forgetting wasn't strength. Joy had taught him that during their first meeting—their first game of checkers.

Aaren sat alone beside the ashy Community firepit, which was wet from an early rain, as he examined the checkerboard that he'd created. The temptation to hurl it into the woodpile was almost too great, but his vow to remember Joy always quenched the desire. Instead, he found himself running his fingers along the sanded edges and imagining what Joy would say if she were playing with him.

"Whatcha doing?"

Aaren glanced up at a young boy, bow in hand, standing over him quizzically. He looked to be about the same age as Joy—and, come to think of it—he looked a lot like Evan had.

"Just . . . playing a little game," he muttered, rolling his shoulders defensively.

The boy plopped down across from him and the board, abandoning his newly whittled bow. "What's it called?"

“Checkers,” grunted Aaren.

“I’ve never heard of checkers before,” the boy said after a moment. “How’d you get it?”

Remembering wasn’t weakness. Forgetting wasn’t strength.

“I made it. It . . . it was a Christmas gift for a friend.” A burning in Aaren’s chest made him pause. He glanced up at the boy and studied his curious expression from life-long naivety. A hesitant question—*Christmas*?—danced behind the boy’s eyes.

A deep determination began to simmer in Aaren’s chest as he realized that it was his job to give the boy what Joy had given him—memories. A sad smile ghosted across his face.

“I can teach you how to play . . . and I can tell you about Christmas, too, if you’d like.”

Hint of Fall

by Aaron Kemme

There's a little something in the air—
That feath'ry breeze
And cidery golden glow;
The air, not quite crisp,
Just lacks humidity's blur.
Lengthening shadows of an early set sun,
The scratching of one lonely red-veined leaf
As, breeze-blown, it trips and scoots along.

Somewhere nearby a chimney's lazy smoke
Inspires the lavender dusk
With spicy-sweet scents of maple and oak.
And the sun, once set, lets its warm aura fade
As the crescent arises from earth's cold shade.

Once more the little breeze plays—
Its feathers brush against my neck.
I shrug up my collar, push my pockets down,
Smile, and take a deep breath.

Ah! That smell! That little chill!
Am I cold? Or am I thrilled?
Yes. For even here in the Sunshine State,
Fall visits, though a little late,
And though it's not home sweet home,
This hint of fall is worth the wait.

Fearing the Future

by Jenneth Dyck

Sometimes, looking forward can be scary.

My roommate says I have an unnaturally strong connection to my past.

I can't say I disagree with her. Not when we walk outside together and I declare that the nearby paper mill's stench on the wind smells like Play-Doh, or that the crisp in the air feels like that one specific day my family raked leaves on our townhouse lawn. Sometimes the sun shines just right to remind me of when I used to visit the park at the library. The grilled cheese in the college dining hall—although not very cheesy—makes me think of a Saturday lunch when I was in elementary school, complete with tomato soup, chips, peaches, and a big pickle.

My nostalgia might have something to do with a fear of the unknown. I stick to the past like the gel window clings that my grandma would let me put up every Thanksgiving on her glass door. The past is a representation of my childhood, a time when everything went right, life was simpler, and problems didn't evolve beyond the next level of a PlayStation 2 video game. Much like that video game, I can control my past. I can steer my memories along the maze of my mind and live in what is safe—what is known. But the future is walking with my eyes closed.

Apparently, I'm not the only one in my age group who is obsessed with childhood. Millennials, I once read, are considered the most nostalgic generation ever. Why? Probably because, in the middle of our transition to adulthood, the world literally changed before our eyes. Life went from relaxing days at the local

library and an afternoon at our best friend's swimming pool to a mindless drone of social media, deranged politics, and ultimately a detachment from physical reality with the invention of the App and Google Play stores.

Gone are the days of Blockbuster. DVDs are now dissolving into digital pixels and streaming fees. I remember walking through the aisles of Blockbuster's extensive VHS collection when I was little, appreciating all the colors in the children's section before asking the desk worker how to beat the video game levels I couldn't pass.

For someone who hated change, it distressed me when fancy DVDs began replacing the brick-shaped tapes. I hoped they were just a fad. But no. Suddenly, children's movie previews were skipped with a touch of a button. The familiar voice that introduced the movie with "AND NOW, OUR FEATURE PRESENTATION" vanished completely without even saying goodbye.

All around me my life changed without my consent. Shoes with wheels on them were cool; then they weren't. The Ronald McDonald gang broke up to leave the happy clown to smile alone. The lemur's name we could barely pronounce—Zoboomafoo—died after the show was canceled, only for the program to be revived later as a cheap cartoon. Purple and green ketchups were probably outlawed. The psychedelic Lisa Frank school folders and pencil cases disappeared in favor of pop culture references. No one remembers what a View-Master is, slap bracelets are a thing of the past, and Steve

Burns left *Blue's Clues* allegedly to go to college while we all sobbed in front of the TV. Even bubble wrap isn't the same as it used to be.

What happened to our childhood? We grew up, but the world grew up with us.

I hate change. I'm scared of the unknown future. I was that kid who cried on New Year's Day when 2004 became 2005—because poor 2004 was forced to leave, and we actually celebrated its lonely exile. I sat sullenly on the cream carpet before a large tube television in my grandparents' living room. Unlike my four-year-old twin brothers, I had the special privilege of staying up past my bedtime to celebrate.

What happened to our childhood? We grew up, but the world grew up with us.

And celebrate I did.

With teary eyes, I watched the giant New York ball slowly descend out of the sky. A massive countdown rang throughout Times Square and into our living room. The year was ending, and I felt helpless to stop it.

The ball touched down, and trillions of colored pieces of paper exploded. People cheered all around me. My parents kissed. Strangers on TV kissed. Noisemakers squealed from my aunts. I looked down in my hand at the confetti popper and pulled it out of obligation. A shower of happiness exploded in my face.

And then I cried.

Even now there's a slight tug of regret on New Year's. Another

year gone. Another moment past. Another step toward my unforeseen future. One moment closer to the next problem in my life. The fear of the unknown is a dark power in my spirit. While the past is a comforting friend, a safe knowledge of what is known and good, the future is only a shifting shadow of half-baked hopes and cold servings of worry.

High school graduation was a feast of fear. While I was busy working on classes, studying for tests, and planning a senior trip, I was able to put aside the idea of a cap and gown. I didn't have to think about growing up too fast, leaving home for nine months out of the year, or facing the government's tax hikes as a legal adult. But once Mom dragged me to Party City to hunt for graduation decorations, the realization set in. My life as I knew it was over.

As we walked down the brightly lit aisles, where happy cartoons smiled at me from paper plates, party hats, and stupidly large helium balloons, I again felt like I was back at that New Year's party. I, an eighteen-year-old almost college student, was about to have a meltdown in one of the happiest retail stores in the country.

Mom led the way down the colorful aisles, trying to avoid specific movie characters that would make my graduation party feel like a middle school boy's birthday. We passed the yellow section—the happiest color of the spectrum—and collected paper plates and napkins.

I was determined not to smile. "I feel like I'm shopping for my funeral," I said in a voice fit for a funeral setting.

Mom laughed at my melodrama. "Oh, stop it, will you? You're being ridiculous. This is supposed to be fun! It's exciting to graduate."

I knew if I kept talking about it, the tears would win the battle, so I didn't say anything.

Eventually the fear of moving on, the fear of change, faded. College classes were manageable. Teachers were informative. Friends were friendly. But I still worried. I worried about the homework load. I worried about designing collegian clothing on time. I worried about my First Amendment rights each time I read the news articles for journalism class.

As the 2016 elections approached, I tried to hide a growing panic behind the facade of "presidential debate parties" in the dayroom or in the campus's Sports Center. I'd buy Cokes and nachos and cheer on my favorite candidates. I wore my "Reagan-Bush 1984" T-shirt to every debate, discussed policies with fellow students, and stayed late after the event was over to listen to the commentators break down each side's statements.

But underneath the facade, I saw my party falling behind. The polls told us "no way." I had nightmares of sleeping through Election Day to wake up and find the wrong person living in the White House.

Walking out of chapel one morning, I followed the mass of students bleakly down the sidewalk. There was nowhere I wanted to go. I didn't want to be alone. All I could think of was the unforeseen future: I truly believed we were on the brink of God's judgment.

I watched one foot step in front of the other as I balanced on the stone wall of Varsity Terrace and called my mom. I let my hair fall in front of my face to hide the tears that were falling on my cheeks. It was the closest I'd ever gotten to a panic attack.

"Do you think we can win? Do you think there's any chance?" I would ask, over and over. Mom hated politics with a passion. In fact, some political topics were completely banned at the dinner table, much to Dad's and my disappointment. She wasn't the person to ask about statistics. She didn't like to think about losing. But instead of panicking as I did, she chose not to think about it.

"Jenneth, I don't know," she'd tell me, every time. "You're just going to have to let God handle it and quit worrying about it. You're going to make yourself sick."

My roommate Crystal said much the same thing whenever I would finish reading the latest journalism assignment. I would sit on my bed and rehash it to her, explaining all the implications of what a new law would mean, what the president wanted to enact, and who was saying what about the other candidates running for office.

Crystal didn't really let politics bother her. Hardly anything seemed to truly bother her other than an occasional rude or neglectful person she crossed paths with at college. I once said that Crystal either had incredible faith or was nearly consumed by apathy, because it just seemed that nothing ever bothered her.

"Do you not trust God to handle the world?"

"God's going to make everything okay," she'd tell me. She perched herself on the bed opposite of mine when our roommate was absent. In a pragmatic voice, she twisted the dagger of guilt deep into my soul by posing a single, direct question: "Do you not trust God to handle the world?"

Of course I trusted that God could handle the world, but we had never been guaranteed freedom. As Ronald Reagan said, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction."

Yet America's still here. We're not in the middle of a major nuclear war. Terrorists are not bombing every major city. In all of this, God told me that I should have listened to Crystal.

In fact, God told me I needed to calm down in general.

I woke up the day after elections to headlines of colleges cancelling classes, offering full-grown adults teddy bears as comfort objects, and opening safe rooms for all political losers to panic and wail away their fear and sorrow.

As absurd as it was to hear twenty-year-old college students and adults having complete mental breakdowns, had I not mimicked their actions over the past few years? While many skipped classes and screamed into their pillows from the safety of their bedrooms, hadn't that fear been evident in me? I had forgotten that God was the Master Storyteller, and God's story was a triumphant one for Christians. We win.

In 2016 God showed me that the future didn't have to be terrifying darkness. I didn't have to be afraid of the unknown. I shouldn't have worried when 2004 gave way to 2005. I didn't have to mope around Party City dreading party balloons. I didn't have to lie in bed petrified over what tomorrow might bring.

Had God ever let me down? Had God ever given me more than I was able to handle? No. Had He ever forgotten about me, failed to give me grace to help in time of need? Did He ever refuse to go before me, preparing the way in the dusk of the unknown?

The answer is always no. He never forgot about me or failed to help me.

And when change must happen, God will be there to prepare me for it. He'll be there to lead me through every new phase of life, every new problem that our society faces, every new president or government official. After all, not all change is bad, despite my child-self being opposed to the rise of the DVD era and the fall of Blockbusters.

Life can grow up with us. And that doesn't mean the end of the world.

Now I'm a senior in college, having just received a copy of my signed contract for the master's program. I'm signing away another two years of my life to the cause of education, sacrificing my five-week Christmas break on the altar of graduate classes. A Thanksgiving with my grandparents will have to wait for another two years. Summers won't be quite as sweet.

Once I graduate, real life begins. I'll have to find a job that will set me up for a career. The workforce will not be handing out bonus projects or study sheets. Midterms and finals will be a thing of the past. Adult life will soon fully eclipse childhood.

But does that mean I panic? Do I plan my funeral by buying yellow plates and plastic cups? Do I let my New Year's cracker pop in my face and stick to my tears? Do I wander the edge of Varsity Terrace on the verge of a panic attack?

Instead I need to charge forward, brandishing my torch of faith in the face of the dark unknown. I can't live in the past with the View-Masters, Blockbusters, Lisa Frank folders, and slap bracelets. Sure, the nostalgia will always be there, offering me a few moments to reminisce about the simpler times of life when taxes didn't exist in the minds of children, when GPAs didn't matter, and when an ideal career was only a distant star you wished upon from your window.

But we can never go back. We can only push forward. We can only go on. And this time around, I'm going to let God be the leader.

develop

To Be a Stutterer

by Shannon Connolly

Many people take for granted their ability to speak normally, but I never could.

"What's wrong with you?" the second-grade children asked me.

I stopped in the middle of story time and replied, "I stutter."

I understood why they were confused: many people ask me what's wrong with me, but few ask, "What is it like to stutter?" That question is a unique one, and I'm always touched when someone asks me that. If I had to answer that question in one clear, simple sentence, I would say that I'm an extrovert trapped in an introvert's mouth. I love talking, telling funny stories, and having deep conversations with people, but usually my voice is trapped within a mouth that doesn't want to speak.

I'm an extravert trapped in an introvert's mouth.

Let me be the first to tell you that growing up with a stutter was challenging. It meant that I should expect to have decent conversations only with people whom I knew intimately. I could talk to my family members for only short periods of time. I needed to constantly think of backup words to say in case I couldn't pronounce the words that I wanted to. I became terrified of answering phones. I begged someone else to order my food for me. I hated making jokes because I'd ruin the punch line every time. I also avoided talking to anyone attractive. Sadly, the list went on.

My stutter was hard to deal with when I didn't know what caused it. Stuttering is like a barrier between the words that I want to say and the words that come out of my mouth. You can think of stuttering as a verbal glitch.

According to Christian Büchel, stuttering is caused by "a disruption in the fluency of verbal expression characterized by involuntary, audible or silent, repetitions or prolongations of sounds or syllables."[1] When I stutter, the first syllable of that word is usually repeated or prolonged. For example, if I wanted to say the word *hello,* I would either repeat the first syllable like this: *h–h–h–hello*; or I'd prolong it like this: *hhhhlo* or *hellllo.* These repetitions and prolongations are what define stuttering, but what physically causes it?

The National Stuttering Association states that the difficulty with stuttering occurs when you "have too much tension in the muscles that help you produce speech or when those parts of your body involved in talking"[2] such as when the "brain, lungs, vocal cords, lips, and tongue"[3] don't work together. When people speak fluently, the body parts involved in talking are working in unison. But when I speak, they don't run at the same pace.

My speech therapist told me that my brain is sending out signals to tell different vocalizing parts that I'm about to speak. The problem is that those parts are running much faster than my brain can send those signals.

1 . Christian Büchel and Martin Sommer, "What Causes Stuttering?" *PLoS Biology* 2, no. 2 (February 2004): 159, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.0020046.

2 . "What is Stuttering?" WeStutter.org, National Stuttering Association, last modified March 18, 2019, https://westutter.org/who-we-help/nsa-family-programs/kids/what-is-stuttering/.

3. "What is Stuttering?"

My therapist suggested that I speak as slowly as I can while softly breathing out the words to force my vocal parts to run at the same pace as my brain.

But I was disheartened that I stuttered even though I was doing exercises to control it. I still had a problem, and I quickly realized that my emotions worsened my stutter. Büchel and Sommer also state that "these [physical causes] are not readily controllable and may be accompanied by other movements and by emotions of negative nature such as fear, embarrassment, or irritation."[4] Stuttering makes more sense now. Generally, when I was either frustrated, excited, nervous, or intimidated, I stuttered more. I would repeat and prolong my words constantly until I got frustrated, cried, and stopped talking completely.

Growing up, some people believed that finishing my sentences would help me with my stutter; unfortunately, it did the opposite. I remember a lady and I were talking at church, but when I tried to say *train,* I only prolonged the letter *T*. The lady tried to guess the word. She said, "taco, toy, tree," or any other word with a *T* sound. Even though she was trying to help me, her help was only deteriorating my confidence. I thought, *Why do I bother talking? People can do it for me*. I understood that they were trying to help, but the more people finished my sentences, the more I wanted to quit talking because I got frustrated with myself. I couldn't try to overcome my stutter because they were not patiently giving me the chance.

Speaking in public settings, such as in classrooms or in large crowds, made stuttering a challenge. One day at my school's convention camp, I had to recite a poem from memory to three judges. Because I had practiced and practiced, I could even say it

4. Büchel and Sommer, "What Causes Stuttering?," 159.

clearly and smoothly to my principal. I stood in the front of the judges, excited to finally recite the poem. My pastor and close friends came to watch me give my presentation, and I thought, *This is it! They're going to be so proud of me!* I began to give my introduction, and it happened. I already started to repeat and prolong my words. And the more I spoke, the more I stuttered. I felt completely defeated. *I'd practiced and practiced!*

In that moment, I remembered questioning God, telling Him, *I did my best! That's what You wanted.* I barely managed to finish the poem without crying. What should have taken three minutes took me ten. I was disappointed in myself—stuttering attacked my confidence, and when I thought about it, I believed it was a weakness.

I left the stage and sat down near my pastor. He told me that he was proud of me for getting up there and doing my best. In that moment, though, I didn't want to believe him. I told myself that now I had to prepare myself for disappointment. But years later, I found out that he was right. My stuttering wasn't a weakness: it was the biggest strength that God had given me.

For years, I thought that my stutter was a weakness. I admit, there were days I hated my stutter, and I would cry in my room wishing I were someone else. There were days that I began to blame God for making me with a stutter.

In my early teenage years, my family tried to encourage me to speak in front of people. They told me that there must be others out there who had overcome their stutter, leading me

to search online for anyone famous who might've had the same problem. According to the *Stuttering Foundation of America,* many famous people have stuttered, including Queen Elizabeth's father, King George VI; Winston Churchill; and even actresses Julia Roberts and Emily Blunt[5]. But they overcame their stuttering by speaking publicly in theaters or political situations. All I had to do was audition for a play, but I already knew that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. My previous experience with public speaking kept me quiet.

Besides, I'd always wondered what it was like for others to hear me stutter. Was it frustrating for them? Did they sympathize? Were they judging me? One day I asked my mother what it's like for her personally to hear me stutter.

She answered, "It's painful to hear you stutter because I know what it means to you to speak well."

At first, I was heartbroken because I never wanted to cause my mother grief, but I also knew that I could speak clearly and make Mum proud. I'm beyond thankful now that she told me because it gave me the courage to never give up trying to speak clearly. Other people told me that stuttering was just a part of me.

But I still wondered: What was it like to tell a joke and have people laugh at the punch line? What was it like to keep speaking with someone and have a conversation longer than five minutes? What was it like to answer the telephone without fear? What was it like to *not* stutter? I finally asked my mother what her thoughts were.

5. "Famous People Who Stutter," The Stuttering Foundation of America, last modified March 18, 2019, https://www.stutteringhelp.org/famouspeople.

She simply said, "It's just normal. We don't have to think about it."

From my perspective, some people don't realize how incredibly blessed they are to speak normally. I didn't want to envy anyone's gift of fluent speech, but I knew I did anyway.

After I finished my freshman year at PCC, I decided to sit out for a while. It was during this time, though, that I hit an all-time low. I was running away from family and friends, frustrated by my stutter and wondering why God had made me the way He had.

One afternoon, hoping for some spiritual encouragement, I opened my Bible and began reading. When I reached Exodus 4:11, the Lord seemed to whisper a response to my frustrations: "And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I the Lord?" When I read this verse, I began to cry and let the realization sink in. At that moment, my doubts turned into a quiet thankfulness. The same God who had made Moses' mouth had made mine, too. If He had an amazing purpose for Moses, He had one for me, too. If God sought Moses for His special plan, I believed that He had an incredible plan for me as well.

In that moment, I finally realized that my stutter was the biggest blessing of my life. Why? Because even though having a stutter was sometimes challenging and frustrating, I knew that God made me with a stutter for a reason and that He doesn't make mistakes. And with God's help, my stutter taught me how

to be humble and patient with others, helped me to realize who my genuine friends are, and allowed me to connect with people who share my struggle. Stuttering helped me see the beauty in other people's weaknesses and show others God's glory.

God made my weakness into the most beautiful strength I have.

God made my weakness into the most beautiful strength I have. When I have a bad day, I sometimes wonder how stuttering can be a blessing; but when I look to the Lord, it becomes clear that His strength is made perfect in weakness.

Stuttering is still challenging at times, and I will never entirely stop stuttering. There will be days I'll struggle talking on the phone, speaking in front of a class, and chatting with my family, but now I look at my stuttering from a different perspective.

Now you may ask, What is it like to stutter? It's knowing that God gave me the privilege to glorify Him in my weakness. God controls my mouth, and if He lets me stutter, I'll praise Him; and if He stops my stutter, I'll praise him. This is what it's like to stutter. And that's why I'll cherish my stuttering, knowing that I can have full confidence in what God is doing.

House #44b

by Sarah Jordan

"Where words fail, music speaks."
–Hans Christian Anderson

"Last one," Mr. Clef said as he turned on the radio to his favorite classical music station. "This is the last one for the day, and then tomorrow, you can sleep in."

The dashboard clock displayed the time—4:15. Mr. Clef would have been done thirty minutes ago, but his wife had tacked on one last job for him to do. The Bouleveir family desperately needed his help with their Fazioli. He had tuned several pianos already today—a baby grand for a church and a few upright pianos for a music teacher—and he was socially exhausted. After eight hours of dealing with customers, he fought to contain his patience.

Mr. Clef sat alone at the four-way stoplight. His shoulder-length silver hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. He peered at the stoplight through his Pantos-style glasses, mentally preparing himself for the last-minute job. When the light changed, he eased his way down the hill, coming to the cul-de-sac where House #44b sat in all its Victorian glory.

Mr. Clef pulled into the driveway, put his car in park, and looked up at the house. The expansive yard was littered with toys. He could handle dealing with adults, but an adult with children? No! He simply would not do it. He did not have enough patience to deal with children.

He put his hand back on the clutch when three identical boys, no older than nine, ran out of the front door. They ran around

laughing and scooping up the toys that they had left waiting. A woman stepped out onto the front porch, her hand on her hip as she directed the boys. Her belly was swollen with yet another blessing. Her bright blue eyes made contact with Mr. Clef's, and she waved enthusiastically to him.

"Oh, Mr. Clef!" she called out. Despite the distance, her voice was louder and clearer than the overture playing on the radio.

Too late to back out now. He turned his car off and waved back to her. Sighing deeply, he grabbed his leather tool bag from the passenger seat, then stepped out of the car. He manually locked his car and walked up the driveway. The three boys ran past Mr. Clef and into the house with their arms full of toys while he walked up the porch steps.

A woman with that many children . . . must be exhausted. And yet, she was still kind.

Mrs. Bouleveir smiled and held out her hand to him. "I'm so glad that you came," she said as she clasped her other hand around his. "I'm terribly sorry for calling you so late."

"All is well, Mrs. Bouleveir," he reassured her. A woman with that many children running around had to be in need of help. She must be exhausted. And yet, she was still kind. "An extra job before the weekend won't kill me."

A quick melodic laugh escaped her, and she put her hand on her bouncing belly. "I'm sure that getting an extra penny in your pocket before the weekend doesn't hurt either." She slid her hand from his and grabbed the porch railing to hoist herself up the

stairs. “Come in, come in.” She waved to him as she reached the sunflower yellow door.

The three boys stood waiting for him in the foyer. Getting a better look at the boys, he could see that they were not as identical as he had first thought. Each had a head full of dark curls, but the tallest had the longest curls, each individual curl springing out in a different direction. His eyes were brown in contrast to his brothers’ blue. He studied Mr. Clef with a mischievous grin. He’d be the one to look out for.

“This is Daveed,” she said, beaming as she rested her hand on the troublemaker’s head. “This is Frances and Theodore,” she said, gesturing to the other two. “Boys—” she paused and narrowed her eyes at them, “Mr. Clef here is here to fix our piano.”

“Hello, nice to meet you,” Mr. Clef said to them curtly. He flashed a quick smile then looked to Mrs. Bouleveir. “The piano?”

"Oh, yes, this way." She led him down the hall to a nearly empty room. Daylight fell through seven Dutch windows into the octagonal room. A cello case, trumpet case, and a small rectangular case aligned the walls, and a Fazioli grand piano sat in the center of the room with the mouth wide open, as if ready for the doctor to fix its vocal cords.

"My husband normally tunes her," Mrs. Bouleveir said, placing her hand on the lip of the piano. "But he'll be out of town for another week. My daughter was so upset when the first string snapped. She cannot go a whole week without practicing!"

Mr. Clef paused at the mention of another child but kept his attention on the string that lay ready to be tuned. He set his bag down on the floor and peered into the mouth of the piano. Three strings had snapped and another had been tightened so much that it was ready to snap. "You said your husband tunes your piano?" He raised his eyebrow at her. He was not impressed.

"Normally he does, but we have three little boys who want to do everything that their father does, and they got the bright idea to try their hands at it," she said.

He inhaled deeply and turned his attention back to the piano. He believed that if children didn't have enough respect to understand the value of instruments, they shouldn't be allowed to play them. He had never understood why anyone would trust such precious tools in the hands of a child.

"I can fix it," he told her. He bent down and pulled out his plastic bags of cords, a pair of pliers, and a tuning fork.

"I'll leave you to it then." She shuffled toward the door, her slippers slapping against the wood floors. Before leaving the room, Mrs. Bouleveir looked at her boys, with her hands on her hips.

"Daveed, Frances, Theodore," she said, looking at them one by one, "I'm going to check on dinner. Let Mr. Clef work. Don't bother him." And with that warning, she left Mr. Clef—and the troublemakers—alone. The children stood near the doorway, just watching him. Mr. Clef got back to work.

After replacing two of the three strings, Mr. Clef began humming. He had just taken the third string out and was getting ready to set it when a chair screeched on the floor. Mr. Clef looked up from the strings and at the boys. Theodore sat in the chair by the cello case, and Frances held the rectangular case tight to his chest. He raised his eyebrow at the boys, but said nothing. But where was the other one?

He glanced around the room—the boy was nowhere to be seen. The clanking of tools caught his attention—Daveed was crawling on the ground reaching for his tuning fork. "Can I help you, young man?" Mr. Clef asked.

The boy froze and stared wide eyed up at Mr. Clef.

"Daveed, was it not?"

Daveed nodded and withdrew his hand from the tool bag. The boy said nothing. Looking away, he clenched his jaw.

"What were you doing?" Mr. Clef crouched down to the boy's level. Daveed looked at his brothers who were snickering into their hands. He said nothing to Mr. Clef. Seeing that the boy would not speak, he stood and spoke again, "I should call your mother, but I have a feeling that you'd just sneak your way back in here."

Daveed grinned before forcing a frown back on his lips.

"If you want to see what I'm doing, you may stand and watch, but do not touch anything." Mr. Clef turned back to the strings, and Daveed shuffled closer to him.

During the next few minutes, Mr. Clef continued adjusting the strings. The entire time that he worked, he waited for Daveed to do something wrong. Frances and Theodore moved in closer to watch Mr. Clef align the strings. The next hour would be the most difficult—tuning required precision. After all the strings were in place, Mr. Clef had to adjust each individual pin that the strings were coiled around just right to produce its harmonious rhythm. Moving to the teeth of the piano, Mr. Clef pressed middle C and turned his tuning lever on. He went up the octave, setting each key into the correct pitch.

The three boys had gotten even closer to him while he worked.

"Don't think that I'll let you have a turn," Mr. Clef said as he prepared to start the next octave. "You boys are the reason that I'm here in the first place."

He waited for Daveed to do something wrong.

"We know," Daveed said. "I'm the one that did it."

"Daveed!" Frances hissed.

"Well, hopefully this has taught you that the piano is not a toy," Mr. Clef said, placing his hand on the piano. "This is an instrument that takes time and practice to perfect."

"I know that," Daveed said, his eyes brimming with tears. "I just wanted to help my sister play her piano." The earnest look in his wide eyes caused Mr. Clef to pause.

"If you want to help your sister," he said, lowering his voice, "then sit quietly and watch what I do. It takes years to understand how to tune a piano—"

"My dad has been doing it for years," he told him, his brows furrowing. "He tunes our piano all the time! He's been teaching me! I know what to do!"

"Obviously not enough." Mr. Clef looked over his glasses at Daveed.

Daveed's freckled face screwed up into an angry pucker, as if he were ready to throw a fit right there. Instead of arguing, Daveed turned his gaze to the pins that still needed tuning. Mr. Clef started to work again as Daveed watched.

Two hours passed—an hour longer than Mr. Clef had planned for—and the piano was finally tuned. Mr. Clef was so focused on his work that he had not noticed whether Mrs. Bouleveir had ever stopped by to check on them or not. Daveed stared into the mouth of the piano while his brothers played in the corner. Putting his tools in his bag, Mr. Clef watched as Daveed pressed a few of the keys. Mr. Clef snapped his tool bag closed and moved to his side. Daveed stepped out of the way and watched as Mr. Clef played a C scale, a D scale, and a cadence that led into the chorus of "Thunder Plains" by Nobuo Uematsu.

Piano tuning pin setter

Mr. Clef's piano playing caught the attention of the Bouleveir children. All three boys stared at him in wonder. A high squeal squeaked from

the doorway. Mrs. Bouleveir stood with a little girl, about the age of six, on her hip. She wriggled and squirmed her way free from her mother and came skipping over to the piano.

"You fixed my piano?" she asked him, her blue eyes shining at Mr. Clef.

"Yes, ma'am," Mr. Clef said, standing up. He smiled at the girl and gestured to the piano. "Would you like to give it a try?"

The little girl's mane of curls bobbed up and down as she climbed onto the piano bench. "Now be careful," he instructed her, clearing his throat. He took a step away from her, resisting the urge to pull the child from the seat to stop her from banging on the piano.

"It's okay, Mr. Clef," Mrs. Bouleveir said, patting her belly lovingly. "My children know how to play. My Fauveyette loves her piano."

Mr. Clef smiled at her sheepishly. Fauveyette pressed one key with her chubby finger to test the sound. She giggled at it and tickled the ivories into singing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." She played once and then started on a second round. Then Theodore joined in on his cello. On the fourth round, Frances began to play the flute, and—to Mr. Clef's surprise—Daveed joined in, belting out a tune on his trumpet. The four siblings played an upbeat version of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

The Bouleveir children held their own little performance in the music room of House #44b.

At the end of the performance, Mrs. Bouleveir clapped her hands and cheered. Even Mr. Clef clapped. Daveed grinned as he held his trumpet proudly.

"That was—" Mr. Clef cleared his throat as he tried to think of the proper compliment, "that was extraordinary."

"They practice every day," Mrs. Bouleveir told him. She smiled at her children as they circled around her. "Their father is the maestro of the orchestra on Palafox Avenue. One day he wants them to play in his orchestra, and above anything else, they want to make their father proud."

Mr. Clef raised his eyebrows at the woman. Daveed stuck his tongue out at Mr. Clef and then smiled at him. Mr. Clef forced his eyebrows back to their resting place and said nothing about Daveed's behavior.

The Bouleveir children held their own little performance in the music room of House #44b.

"Thank you so much," Fauveyette said to Mr. Clef. She blushed, holding onto her mother's skirts. "I missed playing my piano."

"You're very welcome." He smiled at the girl then looked down at his watch. "I should be going." Mrs. Boulevier followed him to the door. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, taking out her wallet.

"Nothing," he said. "Your children gave me quite the performance as payment."

He smiled and put his hand on the door knob to leave, but she grabbed his hand.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Clef." She gave his hand a squeeze. "God bless you."

Mr. Clef looked at the four children who had run up behind him. They watched the exchange between their mother and Mr. Clef. Mr. Clef smiled down at Mrs. Boulevier before leaving the house.

As he stepped down the porch stairs, he heard the children shuffling as they peeked through the curtains of the front window. He looked over his shoulder, smiled again, and waved goodbye before walking down the rest of the driveway to his car.

Mr. Clef put his tool bag in the passenger seat and started his car. Driving away from the house, he looked through his rearview mirror at House #44b for the last time. A peace came about him as he drove away. He always hated last-minute jobs, even if they did pay well. To him they were unnecessary work.

However, as much as he had dreaded doing this last-minute job, he could not help but feel thankful that he had done it anyway. He had received more from those children than what he had given to them. He smiled, wondering if he'd hear them play in their father's orchestra one day.

Comforting Angel

by Sarah Ermerins

In the darkness, the angel came.

Most of my teenage memories consist of anger, depression, and pain. My memories, riddled with recollections of the illnesses I contracted and the many failed attempts to treat them, still linger and haunt me—my personal ghosts.

I started feeling ill in seventh grade. The many ailments thrust their cold hands into my body and drained me of my energy and zest for life. A parasite had sunk its tiny needle-like jaws into my flesh and injected its poison into my bloodstream during a week at a summer camp in North Carolina. A speck of a bug—a tick—caused me to experience endless pain.

My parents took me from doctor to doctor to doctor. With each test ordered, the illnesses that afflicted me added up. That tick had given me quite the dosage of its poison. When all of the test results finally came back from the lab, the number of illnesses was shocking. I acquired Lyme disease, fibromyalgia, bartonella, babesia, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, mycoplasma pneumonia, hypothyroidism, and arthritis. All this because of a single tick bite.

I lived an active life before the incident. I played sports outside. I swam in the pool in my grandparents' backyard. I never stopped seeking some sort of activity to occupy my time—and tennis, my favorite activity, became the most affected. No longer could I spend time playing with Pop-pop at the racquet club. No longer could I run across the court to

get to a difficult volley, or catch a lob on the first bounce for the game-winning point. No longer could I see the proud look on Pop-pop's face when I managed to put top-spin on the ball. I missed tennis most of all.

By the time I was diagnosed, three years had crawled by, and my afflictions had grown worse. The agony from the combined diseases slowly took its toll on me. The pain plotted its course from constant to unbearable until it eventually became the norm.

I don't care what I have. I remember thinking this over and over as each diagnosis was delivered and each pain, old and new, grew more intense until they became giants that beat upon my body and spirit. I just want the pain to stop. I just want to play tennis again.

They became giants that beat upon my body and spirit.

I took countless medications and endured several treatments—antibiotics, thyroid medicines, supplements, steroids, pain relievers, physical therapy, psychologist sessions—the list goes on. Doctors even inserted a PICC line—a long skinny tube that snaked through a vein in my left forearm directly to my heart. I attached bladders of tremendously strong antibiotics to the PICC line and would sit and watch the bladder shrink as it distributed the medicine throughout my bloodstream. Doctors tried everything they could think of to help me. All their efforts failed.

Most of all, I hated the appointments. I dreaded the times Dad would tell me it was time to go to yet another doctor.

"Sarah," Dad called from the garage door, "hurry up. We'll be late."

Not another appointment. "I don't want to go," I half yelled, half moaned from where I lay enveloped in a cozy blanket on the cushions of the living room couch. It won't do any good anyway.

"I didn't ask if you wanted to go. I said, 'It's time to go.' Now let's go!" Dad always won these arguments.

Groaning from the pain it took to move, I sighed in frustration as I made my way to the door. I dreaded each doctor's appointment.

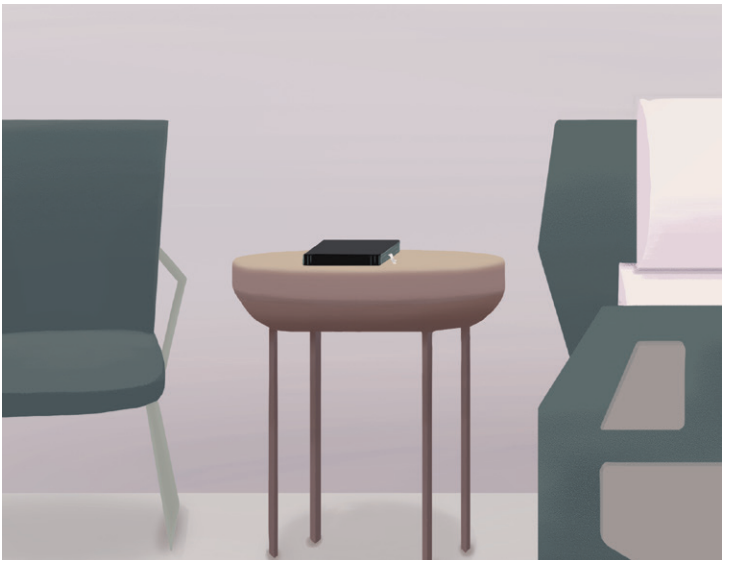
Several months after I was diagnosed, my Lyme specialist, Dr. Jallar—a tall man who carried himself with pride and dignity and thought way too much of his intellect—advised my parents to take me to Georgetown Hospital in Washington, D.C. He believed that this particular hospital would provide the help that I so desperately needed.

"She needs to be admitted for observation and treatment. Georgetown is the best place for her." His stuck-up tone made me stiffen in opposition. I glared at him from across his desk.

"Are you sure this hospital will provide treatment that can help?" asked Dad, a hint of hope in his deep, worried voice.

"Definitely."

My parents didn't hesitate. They took Dr. Jallar's advice, and the very next day drove me to D.C. and admitted me to the Georgetown Hospital. I remember the cold, sterile rooms and hallways, the nauseating scent of bleach used to clean every inch of the vast and towering building, the trashy smell of hospital food, the many blips and beeps of hospital equipment, the dreary décor of my private room on the third floor, and of



course the groans and grunts and moans of the many patients that inhabited the too-bright, too-white halls.

One week into my stay, I still had nothing to ease my pain. I endured the therapy sessions, the medication schedule, the doctors and nurses intruding on me night and day. This seemingly endless cycle drained me of my energy and emotion.

I wanted to go home to the solitude of my bedroom. I missed the comfortable layers of my bed, the loud purr of my cat Spunky as he curled up against me, the familiar scent of my lavender air freshener. I missed home.

"I just want to go home," I pleaded with Mom during one of her visits, a tear sliding down my face.

"I know, honey," replied Mom, her pale blue eyes glistening with unshed tears. She wanted me home too. "But you have to stay here. You need to continue the treatments." She took my hand

and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "Try to sleep. You look like you haven't slept for days."

My voice broke. "It won't help! Nothing works! Please take me home!" I shrieked. My harsh words startled her—they startled me—and she jumped slightly. The desperation in my voice was frightening.

After she recovered from the shock of my words, Mom tried to encourage me in her soothing, motherly way. "Everything will be all right," she said, leaning in to kiss my forehead.

One night—I don't remember which night because they all blur together—I lay in my hospital bed, my whole body aching and rigid. My legs especially hurt from the many leg presses I had done on that chilly metal beast-of-a-machine. The Lyme disease had attacked my neurological system and convinced my brain not to communicate with my legs. The strategy worked, for every time I tried to take a step or even simply stand, my legs would quiver and wobble like jelly before collapsing beneath me.

My mind reeled with thoughts of terror, depression, anguish, and desperation. I wanted relief. What if I never get better? What if I'm stuck in a wheelchair forever? What if I never get relief from the pain? What if I'm trapped in hospitals for the rest of my life? What if I never play tennis again?

No matter how hard I tried to force these thoughts out of my mind, they always managed to find a weakness in my defenses and creep back into my head. Their cruel blows gradually destroyed my will to fight. And I, exhausted, allowed them to win the battle.

As the night crept on, other more terrifying thoughts slinked their way into my mind's fortress. I want to go home, not to my house—but to heaven. I want to die and rid myself of these monsters. I couldn't think of anything else that night.

In the haunting silence of my blackened hospital room, I lay on the stone-like mattress and thought about everything from the tick bite to the time of my admittance to Georgetown. I allowed my thoughts to take control; the fight had completely abandoned me. I permitted my thoughts to jerk the wheel of sanity away from me. I swerved. I crashed. I broke. My wails of anguish were muffled only slightly as I pressed my face into the pathetic excuse of a pillow.

During my sobbing, I must have brushed the call-nurse button, because soon after the tears began to stream from my glassy green eyes, a nurse pushed the heavy door of my room open and poked her head inside.

I wanted to scream, but my voice failed me.

I don't remember her name, so I'll just call her the night nurse. I remember only two characteristics about the night nurse: her slight build and her voice. She couldn't have been over five feet, two inches tall and was so thin she could have disappeared if she turned sideways. Her voice, more memorable than her appearance, possessed a soft cadence—a rare quality among the hospital staff I had encountered. When she spoke, I imagined a distant lullaby that I could only recall just before it vanished into the silent air.

"Do you need something?" she asked, almost whispering.

There's nothing you can do. Just go away, I wanted to scream, but my voice failed me. I shook my head, rolled over with my back toward her, and buried my tear-stained face into my pillow, my body racked with now silent sobs.

Listening intently, I heard the night nurse softly shut the door and glide to the armchair next to my bed. Her scrubs made a quiet swishing sound as she moved to sit down. She positioned herself so that I could see her, but I allowed my tangled mass of hair to cover my face, creating a shield between me and her prying eyes.

On a small, round table between the bed and the armchair lay my Bible, the black leather cover worn with years of use. Through the veil of my hair, I watched the night nurse stare at it.

"May I see your Bible?" she asked.

I nodded.

She leafed through the yellow-tinged pages and settled on one in the middle.

"Do you mind if I read to you for a while?"

I shook my head almost imperceptibly.

She began reading in Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."

I had heard the Bible read aloud many times, but the way she read it captured my mind. She read with passion. Her voice transformed the words into a tranquil lullaby that penetrated my soul and quieted my heart.

She must have read to me until I fell asleep. I have no recollection of her angelic voice coming to a halt or of her leaving the room.

When I awoke the next day, the emotions and troubling thoughts of the night before seemed a distant memory. The night nurse had given me a much-needed gift—peace. She comforted me as no one else had. By simply staying with and reading to me, she helped me win the battle against the monsters in my mind.

It took several more months—almost a year after my encounter with the night nurse—but I did get better, although I sill struggle with the pain. The therapy sessions helped me learn to walk again, and once the doctors found the right antibiotics, the illnesses became more manageable.

Now I am able to keep the diseases under control. I still have to take supplements, two antibiotics, and a thyroid medication, but the pill count has dropped significantly from what it was at the beginning of this trial. I will have to deal with the symptoms for the rest of my life. However, I can now live my life outside of hospitals and do the activities I enjoy.

It may have taken several years, but I'm back to playing tennis, although not as well as before. I can still deliver a powerful swing, but I can't get to the ball as fast as I used to. I don't mind so much anymore. I'm simply thankful that I can play again.

After that encounter in the hospital room, I never saw the night nurse again. To this day, I wonder who she was. She had comforted me in such a simple way and been one of the greatest influences in my life. I will never forget her kindness. God used her to help get me through that difficult time.

I don't know if she read this far in Psalms or if she chose to read it to me, but a verse in the night nurse's voice still rings in my ear.

When I looked it up, the verse was Psalm 91:11: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."

I believe that God sent the night nurse to me at the exact moment I needed to be comforted. She gave me the most powerful medicine, and I have never forgotten her.

Because of this trial, I now look for angels in all areas of my life. I look for opportunities to be an angel to others, like the night nurse was for me. Who knows? Perhaps God plans to use me in a way similar to how He used the night nurse—my comforting angel.

The Angels' Grief

by C. J. Murray

The Son of God falls to His knees.
His arms can't bear the weight!
He looks up through His flowing blood to see His gruesome fate.
He tries to stand but falls again.
His chest can't bear the strain.
Yet still He presses on to where He will bear all hell's pain.

But just beyond the veil of man, we mourn above the hill.
The Father aches along with us, yet cries, "This is My will!"
We know the plan, we know the hope, we know He'll
resurrect—
The horror, though, still breaks our hearts, for we dare not
protect.

The King of kings lays down His limbs to feel the nails drive through.
His crown digs deep into His skull in royalty askew.
He's raised up high on Calvary with two thieves at His side,
Who bleed in shame along with Him, the Christ so falsely tried.

But how the thought runs through our minds!
"We're just a prayer away!"
"We'd rescue You at bid and call, but still You choose
to stay."
The Father too holds fast His ground as oceans
become tears,
In love He hides the Savior's shame as darkness halts
man's cheers.

Three hours first, but now's the worst.
Sin's punishment is come.
Today hell claims its finest prize, the Lord of lords undone.
With purity for sin's deep stain—His torture none can know—
The Son of Man becomes all sin and takes hell's every blow.

But just beyond the veil of black, we count the seconds gone.
The Father pours His wrath on sin until He is withdrawn.
"My God! My God!" cuts through our ears as we all hold
our breath.
"It is finished!" ends the work as Christ embraces death.

The bitter ground then claims His corpse, a stone to hold His head.
How could the One Who blessed with life now be One with the dead?
We bide our time, and three days pass. The stone rolls from the grave
As Jesus Christ strolls from His tomb triumphant, strong, and brave!

Now how we cheer and bow in awe as heaven's gates lift up
To let the King of glory in Who drank the Father's cup.
"My Son, it's done! The war is won! You bore the weight of hell!
Forevermore, let it be known, that You have finished well!"

More Than a Dreamer

by Blair Lane

Gain speed. Jump. Fall.
The endless cycle mesmerized me.

"Ella!" My mom called behind her as she entered the garage. "It's time to go! Are you ready—" Her startled expression eased into a grin when she saw me—already buckled into the back seat of the minivan. "Hey, silly girl. You excited?"

I beamed at her and peeped, "Yes, ma'am!"

No more watching from the sidelines. After years of dreaming, I'd soon be out there myself. My first ice skating lesson awaited me.

Ever since I first watched figure skating in the Olympics at four years old, I'd had a dream. I had spent hours sock-skating across hardwood floors creating my own routines. Now that I had turned ten, my parents signed me up for a skating class at a local ice rink.

I fidgeted with my seatbelt and watched the scenery fly by the car window. I caught a glimpse of my sparkling brown eyes, complemented by my flushed, pale cheeks.

"You're positive Bailey's going to be my coach?" I asked Mom.

"Yes," she assured me without taking her eyes from the road. "She told me herself you'll be in her class."

"Good." I sighed in relief. "I want to skate just like her!"

Bailey used to be my babysitter and had been skating for what seemed like forever, but she was only eighteen. I had watched her perform captivating routines at local competitions.

She was my hero.

Although I was bundled in my warmest sweatpants, a pair of tall pink-striped socks, soft pink mittens, and my favorite beanie with the tiny pocket on the side, my whole outfit was ruined by one thing: my giant, shapeless snow coat. The puffiness seemed to double the size of my thin frame. Not flattering.

"Do I really have to wear this?" I motioned with my puffy arm. "None of the skaters on TV wear snow jackets."

"Yes. I don't want you getting cold," Mom insisted.

"But the rink is inside. How cold can it be?"

"You have to wear the coat, or you can't skate. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." I resigned myself to being only mostly cute.

When I burst through the glass doors of Bryan Ice Center, an odd, musty smell engulfed me: sweat.

My older brother had made me very familiar with the smell, but rinks weren't supposed to be that way. All the ones I'd seen in movies sparkled, and everyone looked, well, clean. Then I saw the hockey players parading around in their gross uniforms, drenched in sweat.

I hadn't put it together that hockey and figure skating both took place in the ice rink. I never watched hockey. It had too much violence for me.

I followed my mom through the crowd to the front desk, overseen by a bored teenager. I didn't understand how anyone could be bored while working so close to such a magical place, but that didn't matter. I knew why we were here.

"Is this where I get my skates?" I asked.

"Yeah." The boy seemed annoyed. "What size?"

"Well, these shoes"—I picked up one foot to check the size on my sparkly sneakers—"are a five. And I want the pretty white ones. Black ones are for—"

"Yeah, whatever." He disappeared behind the counter and returned with the ugliest pair of skates I'd ever seen.

"Um, I don't think—those aren't—"

"Size five. Figure skates."

"But—"

"I can't move my toes!"

"If that's it, can you step aside?"

I shrank back and plopped on the cold bleachers.

Mom attached the tattered red and black atrocities to my feet, but when I stood up, I noticed two things. First, I'd suddenly grown to nearly my mom's height. Second, something felt wrong. "Mom, these are way too tight!"

"I talked to Bailey, and she said it was better to make them tight at first," she explained.

"But it hurts," I whined. "I can't move my toes!"

"Once you get out there and start having fun, you won't even notice."

I limped to the gate and took my first step onto the smooth surface.

Before I could take step two, my leg flew out from beneath me, and I crashed to the ice.

One moment, I was progressing toward my dream, and the next, I was lying flat on my back. My cheeks burned as I struggled to wrangle my feet back underneath me.

The stupid skates refused to obey. As soon as I stood up again, they started sliding, and I latched onto the wall to stay upright. These things seemed set on making me embarrass myself. I inched down the railing and balanced enough to face my coach.

The stupid skates refused to obey.

In front of the class, Bailey stood leisurely on her own white skates. She winked at me and coaxed the class away from the wall. I released and edged out over the white expanse. I flipped my long brown hair back over my shoulders and tried to mimic her posture: head high, shoulders back.

Then she gave us the weirdest directions. Bailey told us to sit on the ice. I didn't understand. I'd get all wet and cold. But then my coach surprised me even more. She sat on the ice.

I reconsidered. If the real skaters did this, it couldn't hurt to try. I eased myself onto the cold ground.

"Good job, everyone!"

I glanced up from my now-wet gloves to look at my coach. Was "falling" really viewed as an accomplishment? I'd already done that!

"Now we have to get back up!" instructed Bailey.

I huffed in frustration and tried mimicking her as she rose to her feet, but I just flopped back onto the ice. I started crawling toward the wall.

"Hey, Ella," Bailey called out. "Don't use the wall. You need to get up by yourself, or you won't learn."

"But I can't," I explained. How was I supposed to learn if I stayed on the ice? You have to be on your feet to skate.

She smiled. "Yes, you can. Just not yet. Here, follow me again." She lowered herself down and showed me step-by-step until I teetered upright again.

"There you go. I knew you could do it! Now, one more time for practice."

I did it way more than just one time.

Next, Bailey taught us to take tiny—pathetically tiny—steps to "skate" across the ice.

I spent most of the lesson coated in snow. I could only take a few small steps before falling again.

And again.

And again.

I felt a warm tear escape my eye. I quickly swiped it away. Real skaters didn't cry unless they won the Olympics.

Wet, cold, and bruised, I couldn't wait to get off the ice. I hadn't signed up for this. I wanted to be a beautiful skater. I didn't want to embarrass myself like that—falling every step and crawling across the ice like a baby. I told Bailey as much after our lesson.

"Oh, I hope you don't mean that." Her ever-present smile faded. "I know it's hard, but you can do it. I started out just like you. In fact, you started out even better than I did! You should've seen me at my first lesson! I don't even think I skated one time because I was crawling so much."

I couldn't imagine her as anything but graceful on the ice.

"Sorry." I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't think I'm gonna come back. It's not really my thing."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hate it when any of my students give up." She spun when someone called her name from across the rink. "I'll be right there!" She looked me in the eye. "I guess this is goodbye then, Miss Ella. I have my own lesson now. I hope you find something worth sticking with that makes you happy." Bailey gave me a quick hug and returned to the ice.

Give up? I wasn't giving up. I had just changed my mind. It definitely wasn't the same thing. I decided this wasn't my dream anymore. I gave it a chance, and it didn't work out.

I sulked over to the bleachers and tried to find Mom to help release my toes from their restraints.

A loud crack rang out across the ice. My head jerked around, and I searched for the source of the noise.

I saw Bailey—my coach and inspiration—on her knees. She'd fallen.

I watched to see what she would do.

Her cheeks blazed red when she glided back to her coach. They exchanged a few words before Bailey circled around the rink again at a dizzying speed. She barely slowed before launching her body into a jump I'd never seen her do before. I held my breath as she spun through the air. Her blade touched down, but her knee buckled, dropping her back to the unforgiving ice.

I waited for her to get mad or tell her coach she couldn't do the impossible jump. I watched for when she'd give up, but she didn't. Over and over again she threw herself into leap after leap, but again and again she crashed.

Gain speed. Jump. Fall.

The endless cycle mesmerized me.

I started getting frustrated for her. The strong skater I'd idolized was struggling, and I wanted her to succeed.

Her powerful legs built up speed on the same loop as before, but time slowed when her blade left the ground. I cringed in anticipation of the collapse. But this time, her toe-pick kissed the ice, and she straightened up to her usual strong posture.

She'd landed it!

Bailey turned her face heavenward as she lit up with pure joy. Her coach pumped a fist in the air. I jumped up and down in my skates as I cheered her on.

Startled by my yell, she and her coach spun toward the bleachers. I locked eyes with Bailey, and a huge grin spread across her face. She raced to the rink's gate and jumped onto the rubber mat. As I wobbled to meet her, she scooped me into a hug.

"You did it! I thought you wouldn't, but you did!" Her sweaty T-shirt muffled my voice.

She pulled back and looked me in the face. "See? I told you I know how it feels to fall. But you have to get back up, or you'll miss your chance to do something amazing."

"I know! I know! I just wanted to skate like you." I brushed my hair behind my ear. "Sorry I gave up."

"Does this mean you'll be back next week?"

"Yes!" I nodded. "I want to be just like you when I grow up! You're not afraid of anything!"

"All right, we'll definitely work on that, but I think your mom's ready to go, and my coach is waiting." She pulled me close one more time. Then I watched as my hero stepped back onto the ice.

"Hey, kiddo. Let's get those skates off. Then you can drink some of this hot chocolate." I turned as my mom approached. "I thought you could use a treat after your very first lesson. Your knees okay?"

I sheepishly plopped onto the bleacher to let her undo the tight laces. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"I saw Bailey talking to you. Everything all right?" She set the cup on the bleacher and pulled my foot onto her lap.

"Everything's great! I can't wait for next week!" I reached for the chocolatey drink.

"Really? I'm glad." Mom chuckled. "I saw you fall a lot. You're going to be sore tomorrow." She started undoing my second skate.

"That's okay." I shrugged and admired my ugly skates. "All of the real skaters fall down!"

Falling doesn't make someone weak. Staying down does. It's getting back up that turns the dreamers into champions.

Blessed by Social Anxiety

by Lauren Jacques

Sometimes God places struggles in His children's lives to make them stronger, not weaker.

Friends surrounded me on all sides. I knew my family sat somewhere in the crowd, proudly watching me. With all the lights shining on me, I couldn't stop my body from shaking as I walked across the platform to accept my diploma. That was normal enough; I was at my high school graduation in front of a big crowd. Walking across the Crowne Centre stage in front of thousands of people would make just about anyone nervous.

But the way I felt after the ceremony didn't seem to fit with others' reactions. I remained nervous after I received my diploma, after I shook Dr. Shoemaker's hand, after I hugged my parents. Graduates, parents, and friends eagerly buzzed around the building—but I felt sick to my stomach.

Several people had asked me why I was so nervous, why I wasn't enjoying this big milestone in my life. I couldn't explain it. I couldn't control it. My social anxiety had been a hindrance to me for most of my life. I couldn't stop worrying about every tiny interaction I had. I continued shaking until my family and I got back to the condo we were staying at.

Social anxiety disorder causes an intense fear of embarrassment in social situations. Most people believe that social anxiety is just shyness, but it goes beyond that. People told me that if I forced myself to interact with others, my anxiety would go away—but it didn't work like that. Even thinking about talking to people filled me with fear. The more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that loneliness was the best option.

According to Dewan's article in *Behavioral Health Advisor,* "Shy people may be uncomfortable in social situations, but it does not stop them from doing things. A person with social anxiety disorder is unable to work or take part in school or social activities because of the fear of doing something embarrassing."[1] Along with my high school graduation, my social anxiety kept me from enjoying many activities that should have been fun. My anxiety also affected me on a day-to-day basis. Almost every conversation I had led to me replaying the conversation in my head, worrying that I may have said the wrong thing. Even when I talked to my closest friends, that overwhelming fear in my head shouted louder than anything anyone said out loud.

Loneliness was the best option.

As a Christian, I worried that God wouldn't be able to use me. If I couldn't carry on a normal conversation with my friends, how could I ever witness to someone? How could I be a Christlike example when I struggled so badly with this fear?

I tried to hide my anxiety, but it showed in my chewed nails when I was nervous, the times I stopped mid-sentence when I thought no one was listening, and the way I wrung my hands when I had nothing else to do with them.

1. Naakesh A. Dewan, "Social Anxiety Disorder," CRS—*Behavioral Health Advisor* (October 2010): 1, accessed November 18, 2018, EBSCOhost.

My anxiety had also caused me health problems. As a child, I would get intense stomachaches regularly, go home from school early, and then ask my parents if I could stay home the next day. When I told doctors about this, they ran various tests but never found any medical problems. I visited dietary specialists and allergists to find a cause for my pain, but it wasn't until my junior year of high school that a doctor told me that anxiety could be causing my stomachaches. He was right. The anxiety in my head hurt my body. I was having high blood pressure, my hair was falling out, and my stomachaches were sending me to the emergency room on more than one occasion.

I also dealt with other minor effects of social anxiety, like my legs shaking whenever I got nervous. I dealt with this since middle school, and I always thought it was just an insignificant quirk. But the minor annoyance of my shaking legs led to one of the first positive effects of my social anxiety that I can remember.

On the first day of seventh grade, I arrived at my nine o'clock history class and quickly found my assigned seat in the front. It was at a two-person desk that squeaked whenever you put any pressure on it. A girl I knew, but not well, sat in the seat next to me. Although I had gone to the same school since pre-K, I wasn't especially close to anyone in my class. A few minutes into the lecture, the teacher stopped in front of our desk and stood directly in front of me. I shrunk down into my seat.

"Sorry," he said. He looked between me and the girl next to me. "You were both just shaking your legs at exactly the same speed."

The class laughed a bit. I glanced at the girl on my right. Annalise sat with an embarrassed expression spread across her face. She had moved to the United States from New Zealand in third grade and everyone loved her accent.

I instantly crossed my legs, attempting to stop the shaking, but my foot still bopped steadily along. After class, I mustered up the courage to talk with Annalise. She told me her legs always shook when she got nervous.

"When I do it on purpose, I can't even get them to move so fast," she told me. I said I did the same thing. As we talked more, we realized we had a lot of similarities.

...not all struggles can be physically seen...

Annalise and I both considered ourselves shy—this probably explained why we didn't know each other very well, even after being in the same class for four years. I soon learned that Annalise's anxiety caused another problem for her that I had never dealt with. Before she moved to the United States, she stuttered when she spoke. She went to speech therapy in New Zealand and slowly improved. She had improved so much that I hadn't noticed the stutter before she told me. She didn't talk much, so I didn't notice when she occasionally tripped over her words.

Annalise switched schools after eighth grade, but we remained friends. Throughout our friendship, I watched Annalise's confidence grow. She started to excel in speech classes and develop a deep love for speech and performance. A few years later, she decided to follow a career in speech education. Annalise became such an inspiration to me as I watched her take something that she struggled with and turn it into something that she loved and wanted to help others with.

The most unexpected benefit of my social anxiety has been how it has helped me to make friends. As a child, I only saw my anxiety as a hindrance, but God showed me He could use my anxiety. When I realized that I wasn't the only person uncomfortable in social situations, I became better at relating to others.

Social anxiety disorder is one of the most common psychological disorders. According to the *Harvard Health Commentaries,* social anxiety disorder affects about 7% of adults in the US.[2] I've had coworkers, roommates, and classmates that I've grown closer to simply by admitting that I struggle with social anxiety. My anxiety has taught me that not all struggles can be physically seen, but that more times than not, people struggle to overcome a voice of doubt in their heads. Living with anxiety reminds me to be sympathetic to others struggling with things I cannot see.

Many of my friendships with those who also experience social anxiety began by simply having someone to accompany me in the back of the room. Eventually, that led to more people joining the conversation, more common interests found, and more friendships made. Several of my best friends consider themselves introverts, but together, we can be the loudest people in the room. Learning to accept that making friends would not be easy for me (but was possible) was a crucial step toward my making friends. I may have to work at it more than others, but I know that the friendships I make are worth every bit of that effort.

2. "Treating Social Anxiety Disorder," *Harvard Health Commentaries* (August 2016) accessed November 18, 2018, Health and Wellness Resource Center.

My anxiety probably won't ever completely go away, but that's okay. It has become less of a hindrance and more of a help by reaching out to others. God has used it to help me connect to people and be more compassionate. I have also learned that my anxiety does not need to be my only defining quality. I can have anxiety, but I can also be funny and friendly and kind.

The day I talked to Annalise in seventh grade, I began to accept that God could use my anxiety to bless my life. I am beyond grateful that He placed us next to each other that first day of seventh grade. Before befriending Annalise, I didn't think that any good could come out of the fear that I felt as I sat in hospital waiting rooms or alone at a lunch table. I didn't trust that God would use something that seemed to hinder me to make me a help to others.

God could use my anxiety to bless my life.

But He could, and He did.

It didn't make sense then—even now it doesn't. But as I have accepted help from God and others, I have experienced God's hand in my life despite my fears, and that alone has given me the desire to keep working at my anxiety and to do my best to help others with theirs.

The Huntress

by Carrie Cochran

When
the full moon
silently reveals the
murky woods
below,

the cry
Whoo! Whoo!
comes loud
and clear, desolately
low, echoing across the
woods, warning all that crawls,
making field mice dash away
and hide in
heaps of straw.
They burrow down deeper in fidgeting
fright. The huntress has woken with
the absence of light. She glides
stealthily. Her wings make
no noise as they catch
the wind currents, and she looks
for new toys. Her eyes glowing gold,
overwhelming in size, search deftly below to
spy her next prize. This owl misses nothing in the
forest beneath: each rat's hiding place, each terrified
squeak. They're easy to hunt, to hear, to stalk. She
swoops on them crouching by bushes and rocks,
clutching them fast in sharp iron claws. They
tremble in fear at her terrible maw. No
exit exists from her doom-sealing
grasp; their fate has been chosen. She
carries them back to her perch in the
trees where they all disappear,
nevermore to be seen, nevermore to know fear. The moon hanging high in the crisp midnight air,
shines down over-bright on her dark, deadly lair. No mouse is safe from her vicious gold
glare.

retake

A Double Life

by Hannah Bryan

What happens if you have a life sentence, but you've already served it?

The security door fell heavily back into place, sounding an echo through the prison hall. The thin, skittish man who had entered through the door jumped at the sound. A prison guard behind the desk raised an eyebrow at the man. "Can I help you?"

"Hm? I, um, yes. Well—yes, I think so," the man stuttered. "I'm here to see, well, I'm here because, the reason is, my client—"

"Name?"

"Antonio Fettuccini."

"Is that your name or the client's?" she asked while typing something into the computer.

"Oh, um, mine. That's mine. Client is Bartholomew Perry." Antonio set his briefcase on the desk and fumbled with the clasp before producing his papers.

The guard looked up from her computer. "You're who they got to cover the Perry case?"

"I, um, well," Antonio started to stutter, then pulled himself upright as tall as his five-foot-five-frame could stretch. "Yes, I am."

"We're talking about the one who stole a crop duster, right? The genius who decided that Idaho—the only state in the Union where you can get a life sentence for hijacking a plane—was a good place to hijack a plane?"

"He, well, yes. Yeah, that would be him."

"This ought to be good," the woman chuckled. She typed Antonio's information into the computer and checked his bar card and ID. Another guard showed him to a locker room for his bag, led him through a metal detector, and then directed him down the hall. Their shoes tapped out of sync down the tiled floors, and florescent lights buzzed in the silence.

The guard opened the door to a room split by a long glass window. Along the glass was a line of white booths with phones and wobbly metal chairs. A couple spots were already occupied by visiting family and loved ones.

"We're talking about the one who stole a crop duster, right?"

"He's at that middle one over there." The guard gestured to a booth with a large painted number four.

On the other side of the glass sat a mountain of a man, his shoulders barely squeezing into the booth. His pasty white skin was covered in faded tattoos, except for on his pointed bald head, which had a peculiar way of flashing in the fluorescent light.

Antonio settled his scrawny frame into the plastic chair and picked up the phone.

"Mr. Bartholomew Perry?"

"Barry is fine."

"Barry, I, uh, we, yes, we spoke on the phone the other, we spoke last week. I am—I'm Antonio Fettuccini."

"You named after a pasta?" Barry said in a deep voice that crackled across the line.

"Am I—well I am, not exactly. It's a name that runs, it's a family name." Antonio fidgeted, patting his gelled hair.

"Is it a family recipe?"

"Is it a—"

"Well, Cannelloni, you going to get me out of here?"

"Fettuccini. I'll attempt to, I'll try to do what I can. Why don't you, uh, tell me what happened?"

"It started last Tuesday, I think it was." Barry scratched at the patchy stubble on his chin. "Yeah, it was Tuesday. I was just going around my usual day, you know, with some of the guys, working

out, playing ball. All of a sudden, I started getting, like, this pinching in my chest, and I couldn't breathe, you know?

"After I fell down, one of the guards noticed me, and they ended up taking me to the hospital. I got there and they ran a bunch of tests and used a lot of big words I didn't know. Then they told me they had to cut me open. Well, I'm good with a longer stay, you know? It's like a little vacation from this place. I've got a life sentence on account of that whole plane incident.

"Anyway, they put me under and do some stuff with my heart. When I come to, there's a doc there, and he tells me they got all the heart stuff figured out. But then he tells me they had a little problem. My heart just straight-up quit—for two whole minutes. He said everything was okay now, and I shouldn't have any problems, but then I got to thinking—and I don't really know—but I was dead for two whole minutes. Doesn't that mean my life sentence is over?"

"You named after a pasta?"

Antonio didn't respond. He stared unseeingly just over Barry's left shoulder, tapping his right index finger on the table.

"Well?" Barry finally broke the silence, "Do you think we have a chance?"

"No."

"Am I paying you for this right now?"

"Are you? Well, no, I suppose—"

"Listen, Macaroni."

"Fettuccini."

"I died in there. On that operating table. Heart stopped. Not breathing. Could've been six feet under pushing up daisies. You ever done that before? I didn't think so. All I could think about as I'm laying there all dead was how I never got a pet parrot."

"I don't think you can think if you're—" Antonio fumbled.

"This is my story, okay?" Barry hit the table emphatically, making the whole booth shake. Antonio nearly dropped his phone. "I said, all I could think was how I always wanted a pet parrot. I never got one. Now I'm back in this place, and they won't let me have a parrot. The punishment for stealing that plane was supposed to be living here until I died, and I already did that. So, no that I paid up, I want out. And I want my parrot. Actually, now that I think about it, I could go for a cheesecake, too."

"Now I'm back in this place, and they won't let me have a parrot."

"Maybe I can, perhaps we can discuss, talk to someone about a pet program?" Antonio suggested, anxiously toying with the phone cord.

"That's not the issue, Tortellini."

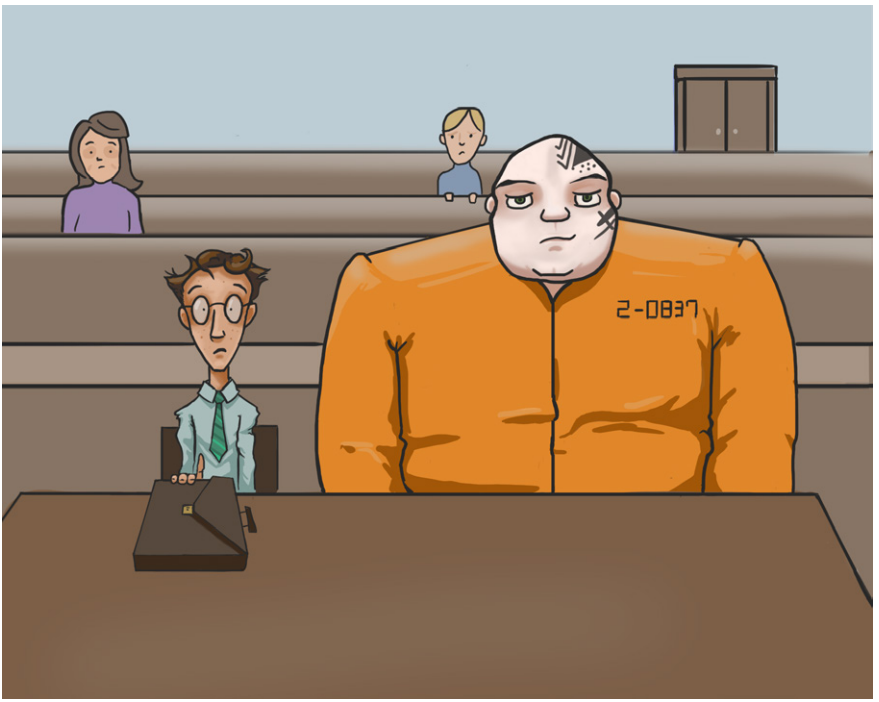
"Fettuccini—and I really don't know, I haven't ever considered—" Antonio stopped abruptly. "Did you say, can you repeat, at the end?"

"I want a parrot?"

"No, no it was—I think we, I think I may, there's something here." Antonio stood, still holding on to the phone. "It's been a pleasure to meet you." With that, Antonio dashed out the door, leaving the phone hanging by the cord.

After a month of scouring medical and legal dictionaries, the court date finally arrived. Antonio had searched every library and consulted with multiple medical professionals. His boss told him he was crazy, that he should just put the minimum effort in. But Antonio had a feeling about this one. Or at least he had earlier. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Antonio's feet tapped up and down erratically as he sat beside Barry in the courtroom. A few curious spectators and a bored reporter made up the audience.



"You going to wimp out on me, Linguine?" Barry leaned into Antonio, trying and failing to whisper.

"Fettuccini. Am I going to—I don't intend—no. I'm not." He definitely felt like it, though.

"Counting on you, Rigatoni."

"How do you know so many pastas?" Antonio was Italian, and he didn't even know half the types of pasta Barry mentioned.

"I like food."

The bailiff entered the courtroom. His voice carried across the small room, silencing the murmur of the crowd.

"All rise for the Honorable Judge George."

"How do you know so many pastas?"

Antonio stood, hands shaking, as the judge walked in. The judge was impossibly short, his robes billowing behind him as he climbed into his seat. Antonio suspected his feet didn't touch the ground.

The proceedings began with the regular introductions, first the state attorney, then Antonio. After reading his charges, the judge turned to Barry.

"You again?" The judge leaned over the bench, making his chair squealed like the rusty breaks on an old car. "Aren't you the crop duster guy that hijacked a plane?"

"Well, sir—" Barry began.

"We, he, I, yes, your honor. We believe we have a case," Antonio cut in.

"Very well," the judge said. He nodded for Antonio to begin.

"Now, your honor," Antonio began, "my defendant, no, my client, that is, Mr. Perry here, has a most unus—has a very odd—a different case—"

"My word, man, we haven't got all day. Can you talk or not?" The judge slumped down into his seat.

Antonio fidgeted worse than before.

"The, uh, well, the first, my witness, that is, I'd like to call, if I could draw your attention to—"

"I'm already tired of this." The judge pounded his gavel. "Five-minute recess and hopefully you can collect yourself. Or maybe you should find a new lawyer, Mr. Perry."

Antonio sat down, defeated.

"Maybe he doesn't like pasta," Barry said. "How about we change your name? You can keep the recipe."

"I don't know that—I'm sorry, Barry." Antonio put his head in his hands. "I'm not sure that, I don't think, I can't, this won't work."

"Listen, Spaghetti, there's always going to be hard stuff you don't think you can do. I didn't think I was going to die, but I did. Yeah, this is kinda scary and whatever. Sure my life hangs in the balance here. I've got a cheesecake and a parrot riding on this. But it's no big deal, right? You don't look too sure. Hey, you've got a good case, okay? You did all that lawyer stuff in school for a reason. You're going to be fine." Barry patted Antonio on the shoulder with his enormous hands.

Antonio still wasn't so sure. He stepped into the hall to drink from the water fountain and returned just in time to see the bailiff stand.

"The court will now return to session," the bailiff announced.

The judge glared over his glasses. "Are you ready this time, Mr. Fettuccini?"

"Yes, sir, I, um, I am." Antonio stood, looking down at his feet. He paused a moment before beginning. Briefly, he faltered. What did he think he was doing here? He couldn't be a real lawyer. He'd barely squeaked through law school. He still wasn't sure how he passed the bar. Then, he looked over at Barry. The giant gave him a thumbs up and flashed a cheesy grin. How could he let this guy down? There was a parrot involved.

"Your honor, I'd like to first draw—to point out to you the nature of my client's sentence. It was for—it was a life sentence. The criteria of which dictate that he remain in prison for the rest of his life and supposes a natural death. If one is to investi—to look into what death means, it is the actual stopping—the cessation of the heartbeat. So, in other words, Mr. Perry's sentence ends once his heart stops."

Antonio summoned one of Barry's surgeons—Dr. Marshal—to the stand. He testified that Barry's heart stopped and affirmed that the heart ceasing does, in fact, mean death.

Antonio rehearsed his months of research, spouting definitions and calling experts to give statements—all with hardly a stammer.

"According to the terms of Mr. Perry's conviction," Antonio said in his closing remarks, "he is to remain in prison until his death.

This point has passed, and I consequently request he be freed from wrongful imprisonment."

Antonio sat down, giving a slight nod to Barry. Now it was up to the judge.

"Mr. Fettuccini, you raise an interesting point. This is something that hasn't been brought to the court's attention before, and to be frank with you, I'm not sure how to handle it." The judge rested his chin on his hand. A hush fell over the courtroom as they waited. The color left Antonio's face as the pause went on. He forgot to breathe for a moment until Barry nudged him.

"However," the judge began again, "I'm compelled to side with your reasoning. Since Mr. Perry has begun to live a second time, I grant your petition. Mr. Perry, you may walk out of here a free man."

The handful of spectators gave a scattered applause.

The disinterested reporter pushed through the spectators, excited to be the first to get the scoop. "Mr. Perry! Mr. Fettuccini!" He came running up to them, recorder first. "May I ask you a few questions?"

Barry looked to Antonio who gave him an affirmative nod.

"What's next, Mr. Perry? What will you do with your freedom?" the reporter asked.

"You know, I could go for an ice cream."

A few weeks and a mountain of paperwork later, Antonio and Barry sat across from each other at a green picnic table outside an

ice cream shop. Barry licked a strawberry ice cream cone, trying to catch all the drips before they reached his massive hands. He seemed almost out of place in a t-shirt and shorts, rather than the orange jumpsuit Antonio was accustomed to. Antonio ate his vanilla ice cream from a paper bowl.

"What will you do now, Ravioli?" Barry asked between licks of the ice cream.

"I have people begging me to take their cases now," Antonio said, "I think I'll do okay. My boss offered me my own office."

"That'll be nice. Maybe you can get one with a window."

"I told him I quit. I'm getting my own practice." Antonio delicately scooped small bites of his ice cream.

"Really? That's a pretty big step for you, Penne."

"I figured I might as well. While I'm famous for a few months and all. What are you going to do now, Barry?"

"Me? I just bought a parrot. I named him Fettuccini."

"Barry, I'm touched—"

"Why? I just named him after a pasta, not you. Aren't you Tagliatelle or something?" Barry's ice cream slid from the cone and onto the table with a splat. His shoulders dropped. "I should get going. I've got a whole new life to live—in more ways than one."

Antonio shook Barry's sticky hand. "So long, Barry. Thanks for everything."

"No, thank you. You surprised me after all. I'll see you around... Fettuccini."

Barry lumbered off down the sidewalk, whistling a tune all his own. Antonio tossed the rest of his ice cream in the trash. Barry wasn't the only one with a second life starting up.

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
ORIGINAL FICTION

As Far as the East Is from the West

by Shannon Connolly

Amos knew he had to face his father some day and forgive him, but he knew he couldn't do it alone.

Parked in the driveway of his mother's house, Amos opened the back door of his black sedan.

"Come on, Maggie. Grandma's waiting," Amos said as he watched his niece Maggie struggle to shove her coloring book and stuffed giraffe into her sparkly yellow backpack. Squinting, Maggie tried with great effort to zip up the bag.

"Ready!" Maggie giggled as she slid out from the backseat of the car, unfazed that her bag was only half zipped.

"Wait a minute," Amos said, amused. Turning Maggie around, he directed her skinny arm through the strap, then zipped her backpack closed. Maggie dashed off toward the house, her bloated backpack bouncing against her back.

"Come on, Daddy!" Maggie yelled from the porch.

Amos smiled at her. He knew he wasn't her biological father, but joy swelled within him every time she called him that. He became Maggie's legal guardian after her mother—his sister—died when Maggie was only seven months old. Now, she was his six-year-old daughter. Where had the time gone?

Amos breathed in slowly. Fiddling with his fingers, he hesitated to follow Maggie to the porch. His mother came out to greet them.

"Grandma!" Maggie screamed in delight.

"Hello, sweetheart." His mother opened her arms to embrace her granddaughter. Giving Maggie kisses on the head, she looked up at him, then frowned.

"Mother," Amos said.

"Amos." She could see the anxiousness on his face as he walked up the porch steps. "I know you're nervous, sweetheart."

"You have no idea." He placed his hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"Would you like something to calm your nerves? Tea perhaps?" She rubbed his arm in a motherly gesture.

"You know I've never liked tea," Amos said, letting his mother enter the house first. The light smell of cinnamon and pine drifted through the house. Childhood memories returned, and he instantly felt at home.

"Well, what about coffee?"

"Maybe." He followed her and Maggie into the living room. "When is he coming?"

"In a little bit," his mother said, bending down to help unpack Maggie's things on a craft table in the corner.

"Mom, do you really think she should be in the room when he comes?" Amos asked, almost begging her to move Maggie into the other room.

"It'll be fine for her to stay here," his mother tried to reassure him. Amos fiddled with his fingers. He hadn't seen his father since Jean's death, and he didn't care to see him anytime soon. The only reason he agreed to come was for his mother's sake. *For Mom,* he kept telling himself, but he knew this moment was coming. He knew he had to face his father some day and forgive him, but he knew he couldn't do it alone.

Lord, help me, he would pray. *I know I shouldn't continually blame him for what happened to Jean, but I do. Help me, Lord!* He now prayed that same prayer again standing in the middle of the living room. Maggie carefully colored in her princess book, oblivious to the events that were about to take place.

"When did he contact you?" Amos asked.

"As soon as he got out of prison a month ago," his mother said, her countenance fading at the mention of prison. Amos knew it wasn't because of embarrassment or disappointment, but because of grief. She grieved for her husband. It was almost as if she were willing to carry his burden.

"Have you seen him since?"

"Yes, I wanted him to come back home, but he said he couldn't until he talked with you."

"Is that the reason I'm here? Because he bribed you!" Amos felt his frustration slowly rising, but even worse, he saw the hurt in his mother's eyes.

"Amos," his mother began firmly, straightening her posture, "he's been blaming himself ever since the accident happened. Prison has been punishment enough for him."

Amos kept silent for a moment. "Maggie." He didn't move, but his eyes settled on his daughter. "Could you please take your things and move to the other room?"

Frowning, Maggie looked at him confused, but simply obeyed her father. She quickly began packing up, then wobbled along to the other room carrying all her things in her small arms.

"Was that necessary?" his mother asked.

"Yes. If I'm already getting angry, I don't want her in the room when I actually see him."

"I agree that your father wasn't the best dad before Jean died. I understand that." His mother slowly moved toward him and continued. "But he realized his mistake. For crying out loud, he turned himself in. If that's not the right thing to do, then I don't know what is. He changed; what happened to Jean brought him back to the Lord."

"I won't know that until he proves it," Amos said, stern and void of any kindness. His mother looked at him, clearly troubled. Amos breathed in heavily, knowing he needed to apologize.

"I'm sorry," Amos rubbed his eyes, guilt washing over him. He took a seat near the craft table where Maggie had previously been sitting. From there, he could see Maggie in the other room talking to her toy giraffe. He propped his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands, trying to calm his agitation. Why was he like this? Why did he have to target his mother? She did nothing

but give unconditional love to everyone she met. He didn't deserve her kindness.

"Sweetheart." She grabbed the stool from the craft table, swung it around, and sat down facing Amos. "I know this is going to be difficult to see your father again, but you need to give him a chance." She held his hands in hers. "Christ suffered beyond what we could ever experience, yet He repaid good for evil to those who tortured Him. You can't forgive him on your own Amos; only God can."

His mother's words made him uncomfortable because he knew she was right. He knew he shouldn't blame his father for what happened to Jean, but he did. Anger rose in him as he thought about the night of her death.

A gentle knock sounded on the front door, disrupting his thoughts. *Was it him?* Amos rose from the chair, tensing as he stood and watched his mom walk over to greet whoever it was.

"Come in," his mother gently said, her faint smile informing Amos the person at the door was indeed his father.

"Thank you," a husky voice answered back.

The voice was all too familiar. Emotions rose, and Amos tensed even more. Turning the corner, his father caught sight of him. How long had it been since he'd last seen his father? He'd forgotten how much he resembled him: in height, in stature, in face shape, even in their brown hair and blue eyes. He was a spitting image of his father, and that irritated him.

His father ambled into the living room, gazing at him. Amos could feel his father's discomfort radiating from across the room.

He hated being this uncomfortable in an awkward situation, and his father wasn't helping.

"Dad," Amos said, his tone void of emotion. His father seemed hesitant to respond but decided to anyway.

"Amos," his father answered back, trying to level out the tension.

"How was prison?" Amos's sarcasm dripped with bitterness.

"Harsh," his father said, clearly hurt by his son's unkindness. Amos could tell he was uncomfortable. "How are you?" his father asked, and Amos's pride suddenly took over his reason.

"Better then Jean." Amos could see the verbal blow he gave his father, and he regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth.

"Amos!" his mother exclaimed, horrified at his bitterness. Amos's anger rose, not against his mother's reprimand—not even against his father—but against himself. He knew he had to leave. Quickly, he walked toward the staircase. Climbing every other step to the top, he made a sharp left turn and entered the closest bathroom.

Slamming the door, Amos gripped both sides of the sink. Unable to keep the emotions in any longer, he cried. Why was he acting like a self-centered child? He was torn. Memories resurfaced and flooded his mind. He blamed his father for what he did. He killed her. *He was the reason she died.*

Amos hated his flesh; he hated how angry he could get.

All too quickly, guilt from his recent mistake washed over him. Amos hated his flesh, he hated how angry he could get, and he hated how he treated his father—even if he deserved it. Justice was for the Lord. Why couldn't Amos see that earlier? *Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.* The familiar passage came to him. *I'm sorry, Lord! I can't do this alone! Help me!* Amos wept. Agitated, he splashed water on his face, trying to clear his mind.

Amos shamefully walked back into the living room. His father now sat on a nearby chair. He noticed his mother wasn't there; she might be checking on Maggie.

"I'm sorry," Amos said, feeling defeated as he looked into his father's eyes.

"I know you're angry about what happened to Jean. I'm angry too," his father said, standing from the chair.

Amos caught sight of his mother as she slipped silently into the room and stood in the doorway.

"I know it's my fault that Jean died," his father admitted. "I regret that night every single second."

"Why did you do it?" Amos asked. "She was only trying to drive you back home."

"Because I was an awful father who got angry easily. My anger got the best of me." His father looked defeated more than ever, but he continued. "Because of me, I turned the wheel toward that oncoming truck. Because of me, Jean died."

Aggravated, Amos wanted to yell. *Lord,* his heart cried out, *shut my mouth before I say something I'll regret.*

Amos sighed. "When did you turn yourself in?"

"When she died at the hospital. I couldn't just stand there silently, realizing what I did."

Amos observed his father. He was so much like him. Amos could get just as angry as his father could, and he could regret just as fast as his father could. That was something he could sympathize with. Amos stood there contemplating, placing himself in his father's shoes. Amos knew how easily he could get angry, and it scared him. What if he turned the wheel onto oncoming traffic and killed Maggie? The thought terrified Amos, and for the first time in six years, he pitied his father.

Lord, forgive my pride.

"I'm sorry," Amos said with genuine compassion. He saw his dad's eyes lighten with a glimmer of hope. Was a small amount of kindness all it took to start taking the guilt away?

"How's the little one?" his father asked. His humble stance told Amos that he didn't intend to intrude on the family and take the role of a grandfather. Amos was caught off guard by his father's gesture.

“Maggie? She’s doing well.” Amos hesitated for a minute. Should he tell his father that she was in the other room? He simply smiled. “She’s actually here in the other room coloring.”

His father’s eyes widened.

“Really?” he asked as if unable to comprehend that Amos would let him under the same roof as Maggie. Amos could see the unspoken plea in his father’s eyes. He wanted to see his granddaughter.

“Do you want me to get her?” Amos asked.

His father could only nod with a faint smile.

Amos turned the corner a few minutes later, carrying Maggie on his hip. His father rose from the chair, a gentle smile surfacing on his face.

Maggie clutched her stuffed giraffe as she looked down at the ground, her head tucked into the curve of Amos’s neck. For the first time since becoming Maggie’s guardian, something swelled within Amos as he carried her across the room. He knew she was scared, but he wanted to protect and reassure her that she’d be safe with him. Each step Amos took toward his father, Maggie clung tighter to him.

“Maggie, do you trust me?” Amos whispered.

Seeming unsure, she snuggled closer to his chest once she glanced up at the older man.

“It’s okay, Maggie. I promise.” Amos murmured, trying to reassure her. He stopped in front of his father.

"You know how Grandma is my mom?" Amos asked, and Maggie bashfully nodded. "Well, this is my dad—your grandfather."

Maggie looked baffled for only a moment before a tiny smile spread across her face.

"She looks just like her," his father said, observing his granddaughter's sun-kissed blonde hair and her aquamarine eyes. "Jean had that same color."

Amos saw the sparkle in his father's eyes. Tears. Were they tears of joy, or tears of regret from the past? Amos didn't know.

"Hello, Maggie," his dad said in a fatherly manner, his smile comforting.

Maggie suddenly lifted her arms out for his dad to take her. Surprised, Amos let her slide into the arms of her grandfather. How could a little girl show so much love to a man she barely knew? She didn't hold anything against him because she didn't know about his past. She was just an innocent girl that had so much love to give.

Amos's heart broke.

He watched as his father looked for the best way to carry Maggie in his arms.

"Do you want to draw?" Maggie asked, barely uttering the words, yet Amos could tell his father understood.

"I would love to," his father said.

Maggie beamed and tried wobbling out of her grandfather's arms just as quickly as she slid into them. Her grandfather let her down, and she turned to grasp his hand.

Amos watched as Maggie placed her tiny hand in her grandfather's. He could only sigh. If there was anyone to blame in this moment, it was himself. Amos knew he had no right to blame his father for a mistake that he himself could have made. His father regretted what he did, and Amos now knew it. He had to forgive his father. He would have wanted his father to forgive him if they were in each other's shoes. Amos finally had to let go and let God take control. The only thing stopping Amos from moving forward was himself.

His father grasped Maggie's little hand and allowed her to lead the way to the coloring table.

"Dad," Amos quickly said before his father turned the corner. His father looked up with curiosity.

"I forgive you," Amos whispered, his faint smile growing into a side grin.

His father gently smiled back as small tears began to form in his eyes. He let go of Maggie, assuring her he'd be back in a minute. Amos stood barely two feet away from his father. Amos could sense his father wanted to hug him, yet he seemed scared to invade Amos's space. Amos, since coming to the house, had planned to keep a good distance away from his father. Now, he wanted to embrace his father to reassure him that everything was going to be different from now on. God forgave his father's mistakes and separated them as far as the east is from the west. So why look back on something that's no longer there?

Amos let go of the past and embraced his father.

The Second Adam

by Jessie Griggs

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."

–Galatians 3:13a

In a prison of flesh made filthy by sin,
I trembled in fear, for I knew that within,
Deeply engraved on my heart of stone,
Was Adam's curse. My life was not my own.

With the curse of thorns and a heart full of sorrow,
The promise of guilt, and each day borrowed
From death—for in dying I died—
I knelt in the dust and cried.

But there was One with a heart full of pity,
Off'ring joy for my anguish and peace for my mis'ry.
His righteousness shone, revealing my shame,
So I hid, unworthy to speak His name.

He spoke to me gently. When I looked on His face,
His gaze melted my heart, for I saw such sweet grace!
The Holy One willingly hung on a tree
Bearing the curse that was meant for me!

The thorns of my curse pierced through *His* holy brow,
And the blood promised me was as sweat flowing down
His face. I bowed down my face to the dust
As Jesus was made a curse for us.

This Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief,
Paid for my sins and shattered unbelief.
Separated from God as I should have been,
The Son of God bore the guilt of my sin!

Jesus has freed me from Adam's dark curse;
I've no place for sin. I just long to immerse
My heart in His light and serve at His throne,
For I'm bought with a price—my life's not my own!

Facing the Storm

by Anna Brooks

Mason's friend Tennyson, asks for help in finding his lost photos, but neither one expects to discover uncomfortable truths about their lives during the search.

An old tube television hung from the low ceiling of a small restaurant, commercials flickering on the screen until the afternoon news came on. A suited reporter folded his hands as he greeted the audience, while graphics of torrential rain and wind slid onto the screen beside him. Bold, red letters at the top of the screen flashed, "SEVERE THUNDERSTORM APPROACHING NEW YORK."

Mason, a wiry teenage waiter with wavy, dark hair, eyed the television as he served his customers. Fidgeting with his apron strap, he continuously peered through the rain-streaked windows, his brown eyes tracing the gray overcast misting across the sky and over Jordan's, a sandwich shop nestled between a brick bank and a shoddy apartment complex near the Manhattan bridge. The restaurant invited customers to dine at wobbly square tables draped with crinkled, checkered tablecloths. Despite Jordan's shifty interior, scents of fresh bread and savory meats beckoned new tourists and loyal regulars through the shop's glass doors.

Mason was thankful those glass doors were open to new employees three years ago. He dropped the apron strap, thinking of how he'd needed the job to help his mom pay the monthly rent after his father had left.

"Hey!" a customer at Mason's left snapped. "I asked for a refill five minutes ago!"

Mason flinched as he remembered a stern hand stinging his cheek, but he relaxed his posture when no strike followed the customer's harsh words. Knitting his brows, he scurried to the table with a flustered frown. "Sorry."

Three years and I still flinch when people raise their voices, he thought glumly. *No wonder my friendships don't last after any conflict.*

He handed a drink to the disgruntled businessman, who gulped down his bitter coffee and left. Mason sighed, whipping off his apron and clocking out. This storm helped him in one way—he could leave work early.

Then his phone buzzed, and when he fished it out of the pocket of his jeans, he saw large white letters on the incoming call screen. Mason huffed and quickly slid his thumb down to decline the call.

As he pushed through the glass-door exit, he breathed in the familiar smell of gasoline and car exhaust fumes. Silver skyscrapers soared high into the overcast sky, reflecting the dark clouds across their long windows. Below, suited men and women hustled to work across the cracked sidewalk.

Car breaks screeched to Mason's left, jolting him out of his thoughts. Turning around, Mason saw a speeding taxi jerk to a stop inches behind a semi-trailer truck as cars honked at a figure in front of them. Amid the chaos, an elderly man wearing a tweed suit shuffled through the asphalt lanes. He hugged a worn, blue book to his chest and stooped next to a large drain grate in the street's left lane.

"Tennyson!" Mason called, springing forward. "You're in the middle of the road!"

Tennyson smiled toothily at Mason as he waved. "Don't mind me! Just looking for my lost photos!"

"Your what?" Mason asked. He wrapped his fingers around Tennyson's lanky arm and motioned toward the sidewalk.

"My photos! I was on my apartment balcony when the wind flipped my box of photos, dropping them ten stories down." Tennyson yielded to Mason's guidance, but he fixed his eyes on the rusty grate. "One of 'em blew across the street."

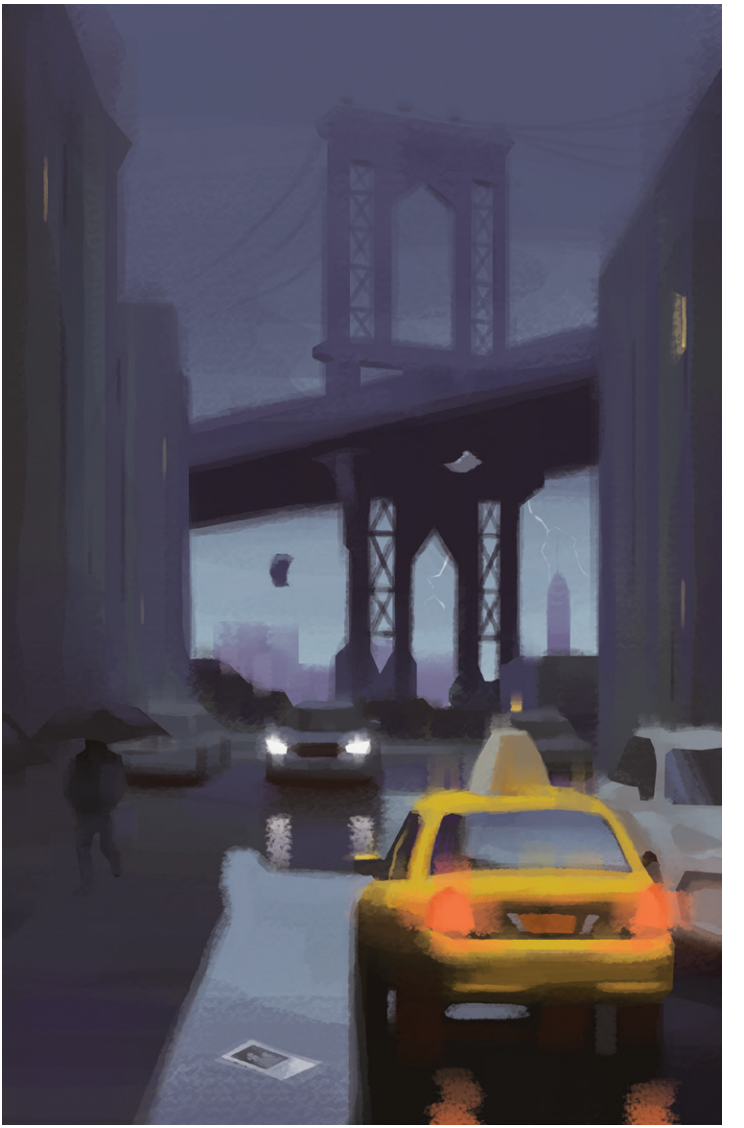
"Just make sure you use the crosswalks next time." Mason laughed nervously, glancing back at the traffic.

Tennyson's existence warranted a miracle. Because of his short attention span, the energetic old man often wandered into danger. He'd long stopped chasing news stories across the country as a professional photographer, but he still had his spontaneity.

"It's good to see you." Mason smiled, bringing Tennyson to the safety of the sidewalk.

"You see me all the time, boy!" Tennyson grinned, patting Mason's back. "We've only been neighbors for seven years."

Mason's smile waned as he looked at Tennyson. Behind the elder's giddy smiles were wisdom and comfort. After all, this elder was the only person who'd helped him and mom through his father's tyranny. When Mason's father was raging drunk, Tennyson made them cookies and conveniently stayed until the man either sobered up or passed out.



Tennyson stepped away from Mason to snatch a shiny piece of paper next to a lamppost. "Twelve down, thirty-seven more to go!" He tucked the paper into his worn, blue book and gave Mason a wrinkly smile.

"We can't stay outside," Mason said. He rubbed his hands together. "There's a storm coming. I know you want to find your pictures, but we need to go inside."

"Storm, shmorm!" Tennyson said. "I'll track down all my pictures before that rainstorm hits!"

Mason studied the wrinkled photo in its new home, wondering about the monochromatic portrait of a young woman in the center. *Who's that?* He raised an eyebrow.

Tennyson felt him prying. He snapped the book shut, holding it close with a guarded look. "I know the storm's coming. These photos—I need to find them. They're very important to me."

Mason checked the sky. The clouds continued to gray with the incoming storm. He looked down at Tennyson, who scanned the streets for his pictures. Perhaps he could help his old neighbor salvage some of his photos before the rain washed them away forever.

"I'll help you find your photos. We shouldn't feel any effects of the storm until—" Mason checked his phone. "At least an hour and a half."

"You're a great sport!" Tennyson sprang up. "Look, I saw one blow that way!"

"W—Wait!" Mason stuttered, following after him.

After chasing photos for half an hour, Tennyson slowed his search in Coleman Skate Park. Cracked concrete covered the park grounds as teenagers and children in neon gear flew by practicing kickflips on their skateboards. The Manhattan Bridge towered above, supported by thick, stone columns.

"These photos—I need to find them. They're very important."

Many of the rescued photos pictured a smiling woman, a girl with bouncy curls, or a combination of the two. But Tennyson had never mentioned a sister, wife, or family in his conversations. Questions stirred in Mason's head, but he forced himself to focus until he could convince his old friend to take shelter.

Raindrops started falling, pecking the two until Mason lifted his head. Soon, heavier drops sprinkled onto Mason's shirt, patterning the fabric with dark, scattered spots. Strong gusts swayed the trees, making the skating teenagers halt and look at the sky. One by one, they picked up their colorful skateboards and jogged to the park exit.

Tennyson watched them and bowed his head. He looked reluctant as he said, "I s'pose we should go."

"Yeah," Mason said, sighing at Tennyson' frown. He pulled out his phone to track the storm. An incoming call invaded his screen like an unwelcomed guest. Scowling, Mason slid down the decline button again.

Tennyson paused at Mason's reaction and stared at him with a cocked eyebrow.

Mason fidgeted with his phone, then shoved the troublesome device back into his pocket. He walked past Tennyson, shook his head, and said, "It's too late to find any more of your photos. Let's just go home."

Another half an hour passed. They sought refuge from the rain underneath the dim, cavernous East River Bikeway. White and red lights blinked in the darkness and reckless cars flew by with a *woosh*.

Mason and Tennyson trudged along silently in their soaked clothes. Mason's umbrella had folded under pressure, and he bunched the broken pieces in a tight fist and wound the strap around the rusted, bent prongs to salvage what he could.

A buzz sounded in Mason's pocket. He stiffened, fixing his eyes forward.

Tennyson turned to Mason as his phone returned to its annoying routine. "Is everything all right? Your phone's been ringin' off the hook today."

"Telemarketers," Mason grumbled, placing the useless umbrella under his left arm. He reached for his phone again, squinting at the screen lighting up his face.

Tennyson stretched his neck to glance at the screen. "I don't think telemarketers use D-a-d as their caller IDs."

Mason's eyes widened, and he shielded his phone to his shoulder.

"Can't you—can't you give him another chance?" Tennyson suggested.

"He doesn't deserve it!" Mason shouted, recoiling. But he took a breath, and said a bit more calmly, "Not after what he did. You don't understand what it's like."

Mason paused as a shiny square paper blew across the walkway and veered to the grated railing to their left. Bending down, he caught the photo before it fluttered away. Squinting at the image, he saw a couple and a child with faded faces. The man wore a suit and the two beside him wore vintage dresses.

"Oh, you found my favorite!" Tennyson received the photo, but when he held it up, he saw that rain had faded the faces in the photo. His countenance fell. "Oh."

"Tennyson?" Mason whispered.

Tennyson's finger ran over the ruined photo.

"Why are these photos so important to you?"

"I've told you 'bout my photography job," Tennyson said. "During my career, I married a wonderful gal named Shannon. But I wasted her. I mistreated her because I loved my job too much. One day she left and took our little girl Bonnie with her. Shannon never let me reconcile because I acted like such a tyrant."

Mason put a hand on Tennyson's shoulder.

"This was the only picture I had left of the three of us. I'd throw every photo I've ever taken from the Manhattan Bridge to have my family back." Tennyson gingerly closed the book's moist pages. His sad eyes met Mason's. "You're right—I don't know what it's like to have a father like yours. He doesn't deserve forgiveness, but I've taken the step to talk to him. He's far from perfect, but he has a new heart and support from others to help him improve."

"I can't." Mason flinched as his phone buzzed again. He blinked away tears. "He won't change."

"I know you're not religious Mason, but Jesus Christ changed me from an obsessed old fool to someone who can care for others," Tennyson said. "I realize that forgiveness seems like a risk. I'm not telling you to trust your dad to change himself. I'm asking you to trust the only One who can truly change people."

Mason turned away to grit his teeth. He ran a hand through his dark hair, and as he did, his phone vibrated, begging him to pick it up. With shaking hands, he reached for his phone.

The screen displayed a familiar contact in white letters: "Dad." A red bar and a green bar ran across his screen, leaving him with two choices.

Accept.

Decline.

Submitting to muscle memory, Mason's thumb hovered over the red bar. Memories of his father's shouts and beatings clouded his mind. Mason clenched his teeth. *I've wished so many times for him to change, but he never did. I should've just blocked his number when he left. He doesn't deserve my forgiveness anymore. He hurt me. He'll just do it again.*

Mason turned to Tennyson. The elder hunched over his book, pawing through the flimsy, damaged pages with careful hands.

Through the surge of fear, something—or, dare he assume, Someone—touched Mason's heart. He remembered long conversations with his mom and Tennyson over the past few months where they begged him to reconcile with his father. *Could his father be like Tennyson, truly willing to change despite his past mistakes? I can't control what my father's true motives are, but I can't live with resentment forever.*

Mason pressed his finger over the green and swiped up. He raised the phone to his ear as he bit his lip. "Hello?"

"Hey, buddy," his dad said over the phone. A foreign tenderness softened his father's rough voice. "I saw the storm on the news. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm with Tennyson. We're on the East River Bikeway. We just—" Mason paused. He noticed that the heavy torrents outside had lightened, replaced by softer rain. He turned to Tennyson with a warm smile. "We just had to face some stormy weather."

The Finest Rose

by C. J. Murray

Show me the roses that grow among the thorns,
Painting the beauty that comes in many forms,
Showing the good in life that overcomes the pricks,
Revealing the hope throughout the rugged sticks.

Show me the roses that grow through any storm,
Cherishing the drench, whether freezing or warm,
Showing the joy in life that overcomes the pain,
Teaching me to dance beneath torrential rain.

Thorns feel most severe when I'm reaching for a rose,
Cutting deep, showing flaws, and leaving me to woes.
But as I grasp, I cry out and find that by my call,
I find Jesus, the finest rose of all.

The Promise of a Ring

by Carrie Cochran

Some promises are worth risking your life for.

August 3

Craig Christensen stood solemn and alone amid the fire-devoured ashes of his once-beautiful home. His tanned hands and arms bled from his efforts to sweep away shattered glass, and a dusting of ashes had settled onto his clothes and short brown hair.

The two-story white house with its crisp black shutters and bright green lawn was now reduced to a sodden pile of charred belongings, twisted metal, and melted glass. Everything lay in a dismal heap surrounded by a ring of blackened grass.

And the smell—it was horrendous. The worst kind of burnt odor Craig could imagine. Despite three weeks of summer rain, the reek of smoke and burnt wires remained, mingling with the water-soaked rubble to create a stomach-turning stench.

While struggling to avoid the dangerous shards, broken metal, and collapsed beams, Craig had picked his way through the rubble to this spot. As he searched, he wished for a hammer, a rake, gloves—anything to make his progress a little easier. But he no longer owned tools. His workshop, where he had lovingly created countless treasures for his home and children, was burnt and buried beneath the charred wreckage. His only option was to rummage through the ruins in hopes of finding the treasure, but he quickly discovered that would be impossible.

When the house collapsed and the windows exploded from the pressure of the flames and boiling air, glass coated everything with a layer of crystalline shards. Craig's attempts to move this glass and reveal what was underneath had caused his arms to bleed. He couldn't do this without tools. Yet he had to. He had to find the ring—the ring he'd worked so hard to buy during his senior year of college for his girlfriend, Jami.

For months, Craig had diligently saved all his extra money to buy the perfect ring. Then, on Christmas Eve, he had proposed. The ring featured a large, round-cut center diamond, framed on either side by a triangle of three smaller stones. Jami loved it.

Several months later on their wedding day, Craig added one curved wedding band of six diamonds to the original ring and promised to finish the set on their tenth anniversary. But that anniversary had passed two weeks after the fire without the means to complete that promise.

Now, more than three weeks after the fire, Craig found himself back at the house, standing in the rubble. His duties as a youth pastor had called him to a ten-day missions trip in Key West just two days after the incident. This was followed by a week of summer camp.

During that time, the charred husk of the house was supposed to be demolished entirely and cleared; but it wasn't. The insurance was slow, and the demolition crew hadn't come. Craig returned to the property and found it almost exactly as he'd left it. And that lack of change is what put a crazy idea into Craig Christensen's head.

August 4

The following day, Craig found an excuse to sneak away from his family and bought a pair of gloves and a small gardening rake. Now better prepared, he returned to the property and reassessed the damage, picturing where the ring might be.

The fire department had looked . . . but not for long. As the volunteer firefighters quenched the last tongues of fire and the dawn of July 8 turned into morning, the fire chief and his crew looked for the ring in the rubble but soon came back with a negative result. "We couldn't find it," the chief had said. "It's basically going to be impossible."

But as Craig stood in front of the house now with his gloves and rake, determined to find their most treasured possession, he knew he had a better chance of finding the ring than the fire department did.

In their bedroom at the back-left corner of the second floor, the ring had been on Jami's armoire as it was every night. Assuming that the heavy armoire dropped straight down when the floor collapsed, Craig knew exactly where to look.

"It's one in a million," the fire chief had cautioned Craig after the crews failed to find the ring. "You'll never find it." Craig knew it was a warning for him not to do precisely what he was resolved to.

Treading carefully among the splinters and shards, Craig maneuvered his way to the most dangerous section of the destruction. Here stood the only remaining wall, charred and black, leaning precariously against the stability of a lone beam.

Craig knew that one wrong move would unbalance the beam, bringing the wall down and crushing him. It was at that moment

that he understood why the chief had repeatedly emphasized the impossibility of finding the ring: he didn't want him returning to his home to risk his life for an accessory.

But Craig would not be deterred. He prayed for guidance and searched the area for ten minutes before stepping back to reassess the site once again. As he straightened, Craig realized that he had hope; he had every expectation of finding the ring that day. *This is an odd confidence to have, considering the unfeasibility of the situation*, he thought. And then he remembered: he wasn't there doing this alone. He had the Lord's help.

Embracing the full scope of that confidence, Craig once again gazed at the wreckage. He pictured the fire's path, the floor plan, the way the second story had fallen. His keen, hazel eyes evaluated the angle of the treacherous wall, and he finally realized his error. The upper floor hadn't collapsed straight down; it had fallen at an angle that could have carried the armoire and the ring twenty feet from their original location.

"We couldn't find it," the chief said.

Gauging the approximate landing zone, Craig strode through the rubble once again, this time toward the back of the kitchen. In this area, he noticed giant blobs of melted appliances and glass that formed encapsulations across the ground. He prayed that the ring hadn't fallen into one.

Viewing these blobs and their fine coating of glass, Craig had another realization: he wasn't looking for something shiny at all. The way that everything else had cooled within blackened shells of debris told him what he was looking for now: something small, circular,and charred almost beyond recognition.

Craig picked a random pile in the new vicinity and began digging once again. Almost immediately, he found a set of hinges; they belonged to the armoire.

This has potential! he thought eagerly as he realized that the ring must be close.

Moments later, he began finding a variety of items from Jami's jewelry collection: a charred blob of a ring, an almost unrecognizable, melted chain, and another marred ring.

Craig hardly dared to breathe as he took the first ring and began chipping away with his fingernail at the rubbish clinging to the twisted metal. Small black flakes drifted to the ground as he scraped and scrubbed to reveal the ring's features. After a couple of heart-racing minutes, a large, round center stone appeared amidst the dark debris. *Her wedding ring?*

Positive that Jami only owned one ring with a stone like that, Craig stuffed the scorched mess into his pocket and eagerly headed home.

August 8

Unable to confirm the ring's true form on his own without Jami's finding out, Craig enlisted the help of his pastor's wife, Hope Godfrey, to secretly assist him in cleaning the ring. Three days later, she called him with a report.

For the past three days, Hope had continuously soaked the ring in jewelry cleaner and scrubbed it almost every hour to rid it of

its blackened exterior. Slowly, the features of the ring surfaced through the hardened casing of ash. First, a dull, twisted band, bent and burnt so badly that the precious white gold was hardly recognizable. Then diamonds—all cloudy, some missing, some barely clinging to the band by their broken prongs. The ring was mangled and marred, but it was the right ring!

The next chance he had, Craig took the ring to the local jewelry store for repairs.

After hearing his explanation for the ring's devastating condition, the associate helping Craig began to cry and call other workers over.

"Oh, come here!" she cried as she fanned her tearing eyes. "You have to hear this story!"

Craig retold his adventure to the group of *ooh*-ing associates, then left them with a picture of the original ring and a special request for one slight addition. Once it was repaired, he could move on with the next step of his plan.

August 31

Three weeks later, Craig received the call he'd been waiting for: the ring was ready. He immediately headed to the jewelers; however, when he arrived at the store, he realized that he had a problem. In his excitement to pick up the ring, Craig had forgotten that his young daughter Jessa was with him. Because she was only six years old, he couldn't leave her in the car. But could she keep the secret he'd worked so hard to pull off?

Maybe she won't know what's going on.

Praying for her obliviousness, Craig took Jessa with him into the store and hoped that she would be distracted by the shiny jewelry on display while he paid for the ring.

"Look at all this stuff!" Jessa exclaimed as they headed to the counter. "You should buy Mommy a new ring!"

He knew then that he wouldn't be able to hide the secret from her. He'd have to let her in on his surprise. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked, putting a hand on her tiny shoulder.

She nodded solemnly, blue eyes wide behind the plastic frames of her oversized glasses.

"If you keep a secret, there's a huge reward in this for you; but you can't tell Mom! I found her ring, and I got it fixed, and we're here to pick it up."

Her face lit up, excitement brimming from ear to ear.

"You promise?" Craig prodded.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, eager to be a part of this wonderful surprise.

Together, they went to the counter and paid for the ring. The workers had restored it to its original glory, melting down and reshaping the band with new metal, cleaning the surviving stones, and replacing the gems that were lost. Once again, the ring shone as brightly as it had when Craig first bought it all those years ago.

September 21

Another three weeks passed before Craig was able to execute the final stage of his master plan. He was eager to give Jami this precious gift, but his duties at the Christian school and church

where he worked kept him busy for most of September. So he hid the ring and waited patiently for an opportunity to create the perfect evening.

Finally, on September 21, he cleared his schedule, found a babysitter, and asked Jami out on a date.

They drove an hour down the coast and across the Wright Memorial Bridge to Duck, North Carolina, to enjoy a quiet evening along the pebble-strewn beaches. The September sunset flowed across the ocean-framed skyline in the distance as they drove. Once in Duck, a brisk breeze followed them as they traversed the boardwalks by the Currituck Sound in search of local seafood and a slight reprieve from the weeks of chaos that had followed the fire.

Jami gasped, bending closer.

After dinner, they took a walk along the now-moonlit beach, enjoying the romantic atmosphere and the sound of the waves, despite the sharp wind that wrapped around them. Eventually, Craig found a spot where the light from the local shops helped to illuminate the beach and led Jami over to stand in the light.

He faced her, bent down on one knee, and pulled a ring box from his pocket as he spoke: "Jami, will you stay married to me?"

Jami gasped, bending closer to see the ring in the poor light.

Craig pulled his phone from his pocket and used the flashlight to reveal the ring more clearly.

"You—did you—you tried to make it just like the old ring?"

Jami asked as she looked up at her husband, overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness and attention to detail.

Craig just shook his head and smiled.

Jami took in how serious he was before the reality began to sink in. "No!" she exclaimed in disbelief.

"That's it."

Jami began to cry, overwhelmed with happy emotions. She wouldn't fully believe him until he told her the whole story: his searches, the restoration, the secret shared with Jessa. All this time, she had thought that her precious ring was lost forever. This surprise was something that she hadn't thought was possible since the house was demolished, and the ring had obviously disappeared with the rubble.

But Craig had other plans—he had a decade-long promise to fulfill. After two months of painstaking preparation, Craig finally reached the moment he'd worked so hard for. He took the ring and tenderly placed it on Jami's left ring finger where it sparkled in the dim oceanside light, framed on both sides by a completed set of wedding bands.

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
ORIGINAL NONFICTION

Along the Way

by Brittany Weaver

Loneliness brings heartbreak, but something else proves even stronger.

Some say that moving is as painful as losing a loved one. If that's the case, I've lost a whole side of my family.

I grew up in southern Illinois, in the middle of corn and soybean country. Our nearest "big" city was at least half an hour away. We had a lake, thick woods, and a treacherously steep hill called Killer Hill. In our little corner of the world, I had a great childhood. My room was a soft green called Aloe Vera. Every piece of furniture was white and the walls and bookshelves were filled with dolls and books. The scariest thing I experienced then was the fat, round spiders that would need to be cleaned out of my window during our annual spring cleaning.

Spring felt like driving home from school with the windows down, my hand riding the wind. Summer days tasted of cold raspberry ice and too much pool water. The fall smelled like bonfires, burned marshmallows, and crunchy oak leaves, and the winter? The winter tasted like cinnamon hot chocolate.

During the holidays, every Weaver in Illinois would gather to our beautiful house on a hill. Novembers and Decembers melted together in a blur of hot yeast rolls, Butterball turkey, bananas with peanut butter sauce, and my Nana's prized sweet potato casserole. Family games and family food and family laughter lit up my childhood. Those years were calm and beautiful.

Then we moved.

Our dog was given to a neighbor. All my books were packed away, and our house was sold to a couple that didn't like the bathroom light fixture.

For the next three years, I lived in a travel trailer that took me from Maine to Alabama to Texas and back to Maine, traveling from church to church. Most people called it deputation for the mission field; I just called it my life.

The beige papered walls of my trailer bunk were childishly covered in pink and (almost) Aloe Vera green stickers my mom helped me find at the dollar store. I used the pink bedspread from my childhood room, and we tried to keep everything the same as it had been. But now I had far fewer books, and I don't know what happened to all my dolls.

In those years, I experienced a world completely different from our little corner of southern Illinois. We saw a lake called Elephant Butte, a city called China, little no-name restaurants with the best pancakes I've ever eaten, and miles and miles and miles of wide, empty road.

Every morning, before pulling out of our nighttime place of residence, we would work together to make sure the trailer survived the road until we stopped for the night. That home was always right behind us. If we were too far from a restaurant for a meal, we would pull over on the side of the road, sit at our dining

room table, and feel the house sway as tractor-trailers flew by us. We would eat cold sandwiches and drink warm soda, breathe in the scent of home and comfort, before piling back into the truck and pulling back down the road. Amidst all the adventures, I hadn't noticed that the ties to my childhood started to strain and were growing weaker with every mile.

Both Mom and Dad tried to make the most of those years. Holding my mom's hand,my Dad navigated thousands of miles of road. If we left before sunrise, he'd make sure we could sleep in the back seat, and if we traveled late into the night, he'd stop and let us each pick a Redbox movie to watch on our personal DVD players. He always picked good places for us to take rest breaks too. Cracker Barrels were my favorite. I would walk around, get a ten-cent candy stick, and sample my favorite vanilla lotion before we got back in the truck. My dad knew all my favorite things and never forgot. From the passenger seat, my mom kept up with our schooling. Three high schoolers, dozens of textbooks, and hundreds of homeschool DVDs—the task was overwhelming. But if it ever phased my mom, she didn't show it. We met families who traveled like us but did not make school a priority. From the first day of our travels, my mom was determined that we were not going to be *that family*. Her kids were going to graduate high school on time and with high grades. Spoiler alert—we did.

Each day was a tiring combination of traveling and schooling. During the sunlight hours, we would drive. But once the sun set, we were ready to put down our nightly roots. When we parked in our temporary spot, hooked up the water and electricity, and were given the all-clear that we could use the bathrooms, we were settled.

"Breakfast for dinner?" Mom asked.

We all cheered in response. Dad smiled at Mom as he pulled on his gloves.

"I'll get the heat turned on in a few minutes," he promised, kissing Mom before he and my brother headed out into the darkness.

"Let's get some food cooking!" Mom announced.

Still bundled in the frosty trailer, we awkwardly waddled about the micro-kitchen, laughing as we bumped into each other.

Mom called to us, "Brianna, you make the hot chocolate. Brittany, you set the table, then help me scramble these eggs. Let's have dinner done by the time the guys come back in."

I settled 3,945 miles from my childhood home.

In those moments, I saw no difference between our travel trailer and the beautiful house we left on that hill. Our trailer experienced several blown tires, freezing conditions, late nights, early mornings, but most importantly, it experienced a family. My mom decorated our temporary home with inspirational quotes and her favorite cinnamon candle. Curtains separated room from room, but sometimes, there wasn't even a curtain. The end of my brother's bed in the living room hit the stove where my mom would make the morning bacon. In that tiny space, my family grew closer than ever.

After three years of living everywhere, my family and I settled 3,945 miles from my childhood home.

2 Alice Bank
Polbeth
West Calder
West Lothian
Scotland, UK
EH55 8QH

That was our full address. Our little street was occupied by two Englishmen, two Irishmen, and an American. Our cul-de-sac sounded like the beginning of a bad joke, but it was no joke. In a dark little town in the middle of Scotland, five foreign families put down roots. Well, four families put down roots; my family only moved into a house.

My new room was not Aloe Vera green. Its pale white walls faced the road that led out of town. Every day, teenagers would flood that street, laughing on their way to school, to lunch, and then home. Each time they passed Alice Bank, my elbows were propped up on my window sill. I was fascinated, hopeful, and terrified all at the same time. Soon, I could recognize faces and friend groups, and I rarely missed a chance to see them. But that window was as close as I ever got to another teenager in those years. Not fully Scottish, not fully American—neither country accepted me as their own. So, I sat at my window and waited.

After first moving to Alice Bank, I would get an email almost every week from friends. Those emails would swear that we would "have to Skype! Or call! We have to catch up!" But sometimes, promises are just small words on a bright screen. Through social media, I saw pictures of parties, BFFs, and smiling faces that I used to smile with, but they smiled without me now.

I remember sitting in my dad's office one night in Alice Bank, his computer sitting open on the dark desk in front of me. Its lit screen was the only light in the office, for when I sat down, it was still bright out. Over and over and over again, I clicked the "call" button on my dad's Skype account. The spinning circle in the middle of the screen assured me that my best friend was being called but over and over and over again, the call timed out. I sat there for three hours. As the light slipped out of the room, so did my hope. I sat there, begging God—*someone pick up, anyone*—as the dial circle spun and spun and spun.

"You doing okay?" My dad's shadow cut through the light from the hall.

I couldn't say anything. The lump in my throat hurt too much.

"Did she forget again?"

I nodded.

Now my dad could say nothing. Pulling me up, he wrapped his strong arms around me. We stood together in the darkness. After a few moments, he hoarsely whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Two years passed and more calls were forgotten, but on the hardest nights, my dad just held me in the darkness and let me cry.

Thankfully, that time came to an end, and my family moved back to Illinois. For financial reasons, we needed to spend one year back where we started. I was seventeen, about to finish high school, and determined to do everything I had missed thus far. I was going to join the volleyball team, learn how to drive, get a job to save money for college, and maybe, just maybe, I would get a boyfriend.

Our trip back to the States was charged with hope. I had said my goodbyes to Scotland and secretly, had no plans to ever go back. I said goodbye to the plain white walls and lonely street-facing windows of my Alice Bank room, and truly believed I would never again feel the way I had those past two years. I would store that time in my memory vault and never look at it again. But loneliness is not a memory to be locked up. Loneliness is a tattoo, a scar. It will not be forgotten.

That year, we moved into a borrowed house at the corner of a trailer park. Our old trailer was parked fifty feet from where we slept, and every so often, we would go back inside, but it didn't smell like home anymore. Then again, nothing did.

The room I stayed in had brown, shag carpet. The one window that faced the trailer park claimed to be a storm window, and maybe it once had been, but now it was just a stubborn window that refused to open.

I attended our church's private school, joined the volleyball team and the youth group, and tried to pretend that I had not been gone for two years. But reality doesn't like pretenders. My old best friend had a new best friend. I wore a jersey but wasn't truly part of the team. I took driver's education but almost got in a car wreck twice. The loneliness from Alice Bank seeped out of the box I had locked it in and would reappear in sleepless nights, rowdy classrooms, and empty volleyball courts. No matter how I tried, nothing I did was good enough for my peers, my teachers, or my coaches. *Nothing* was as I dreamed it would be. Only a few weeks into my senior year, I dropped out of school.

My mom came to pick me up that day. When we arrived home, my mom sat with me in the car. I was numb. I hadn't moved or spoken the whole ride home—I couldn't.

"I guess I'm giving up."

"So. What are we going to do?" She asked. We both stared straight ahead, right at the garage door.

"I don't know," I finally admitted in a small voice. "But I'm not going back."

"Of course not." My mom's voice was stronger than mine. "I wouldn't let you go back. You are too precious to be treated like that."

"I guess—" I started to cry. "I guess I'm giving up."

"You can't!" She started to cry now too, and that made me cry harder. "You can't give up. You have too much potential—too much *good life* left. I will not let you give up! I will not let you fail!"

At that moment, I knew I was not alone. From the scary spiders in my childhood room to the times I wept with loneliness in

Scotland to the moment I chose the opposite of everything I had dreamed—my family had always been there for me. My family had refused to lose me.

Taking in a deep breath, my mom opened the car door and held out her hand. "Come on, kiddo," she said, wiping her eyes. "We've gotta graduate."

Six months later, I would meet her on a stage, and that same hand would hold out my hard-earned high school diploma—we cried both times.

During those in-between months, my dad and I stayed up late together. We sat in that brown kitchen at that brown tilted table, and step-by-step, we worked out problems— college applications, Advanced Algebra homework, job résumés, essays, and visa application. With mom's cinnamon candle burning on a shelf near our workspace, that borrowed house somehow became less borrowed. I don't remember all the problems we came to peace with (and I certainly don't remember all the answers); I just remember that I didn't have to work them out on my own.

Along the way, I lost my Aloe Vera green room, my childhood friends, and my private high school graduation, but I was never alone. Along the way, I had company.

Some say that moving is just as painful as losing a loved one, and if that's the case, I'm lucky to still be related to anyone. I lost friends, houses, my "American dream," and that camera that was stolen out of my suitcase in the Charlotte airport. I've lost much, but

found *so much more*. Along the way, I found my family. And with them, no matter what the house looks like, I am home.

Editorial Staff

Faculty Editor
Mr. Mark Wainwright

Production Manager
Mrs. Jennifer Miller

Senior Editors
Janise Anderson
Jenneth Dyck

Editors
Kaitlin Alfaro
Sarah Bertram
Hannah Bryan
Pamela Collazos
Kayla Jessup
McKenna Lay
Amber Thomas
Celeste Warner
Zachariah Wilhelm

Fact Checkers
Sarah Bertram
Amber Thomas

Production Staff

Faculty Project Supervisors
Mrs. April Brady
Mr. Stephen Kozel

Design Director
Melody Manning

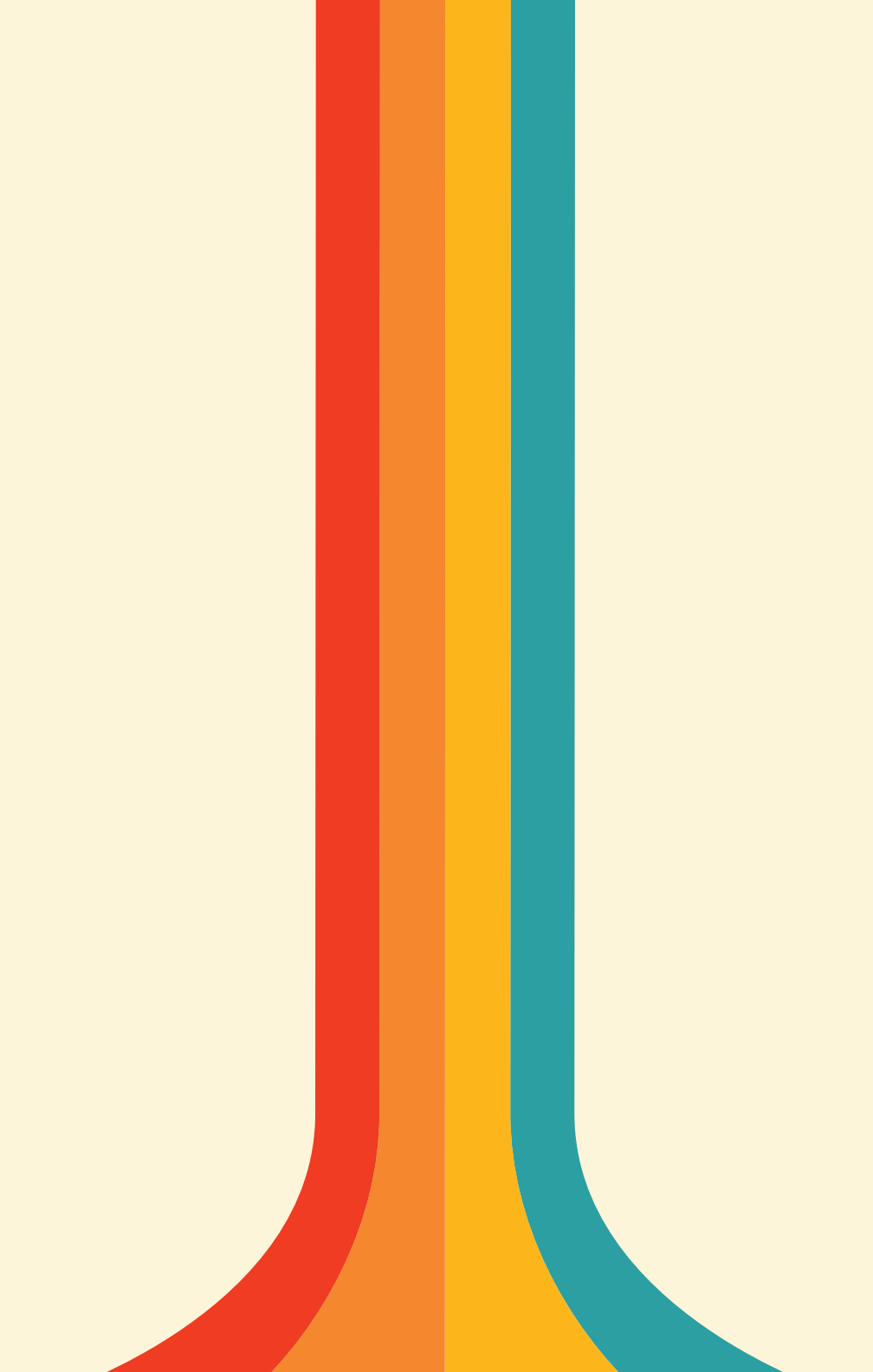
Assistant Design Director / Consultant
Jolyn Pickinpaugh

Designers
Bethany Church
Kaylie Dickson
Randi Laundre
Victoria Rolfe
Atticus Van De Brake

Illustration Director
Patrick Farley (page 18, 86 & 88)

Assistant Illustration Director / Consultant
Camden Jones (page 126)

Illustrators
Maridyn Bennett (page 33, 35, 38, 112, 115 & 119)
Tori Kulish (page 25, 26, 27, 41 & 133)
Taryn Prisk (page 60, 62, 64, 66, 69, 73 & 80)
Daniel Smith (page 100, 103, 145, 149 & 152)
Kolton Young (page 2, 4, 10, 43, 45, 90, 92 & 94)
Renee Zhong (page 55, 57, 135, 138 & 142)



“The fear of the Lord” is a fountain of life.

Proverbs 14:27a

Looking through the lens of a camera can sometimes help us see life through a different perspective. We may like what we see and, in a spurt of discovery, choose to focus on the subject, take the shot, and keep the newly acquired memory.

But in our crazy busy life, it’s easy to lose focus on what’s important. We take our eyes off Christ and worry about our circumstances. We let tragedy overcome us and difficulties distract us.

Instead, we need to develop from these negatives, focus our spiritual lens on Christ, and take another shot.

In the 31st edition of ***Fountains***, we meet characters who are looking for a new perspective. They struggle through tragedies, illnesses, and loss as they gain understanding, discovery, and faith. We hope the stories and poems within these pages will help you gain a new perspective on your own life.