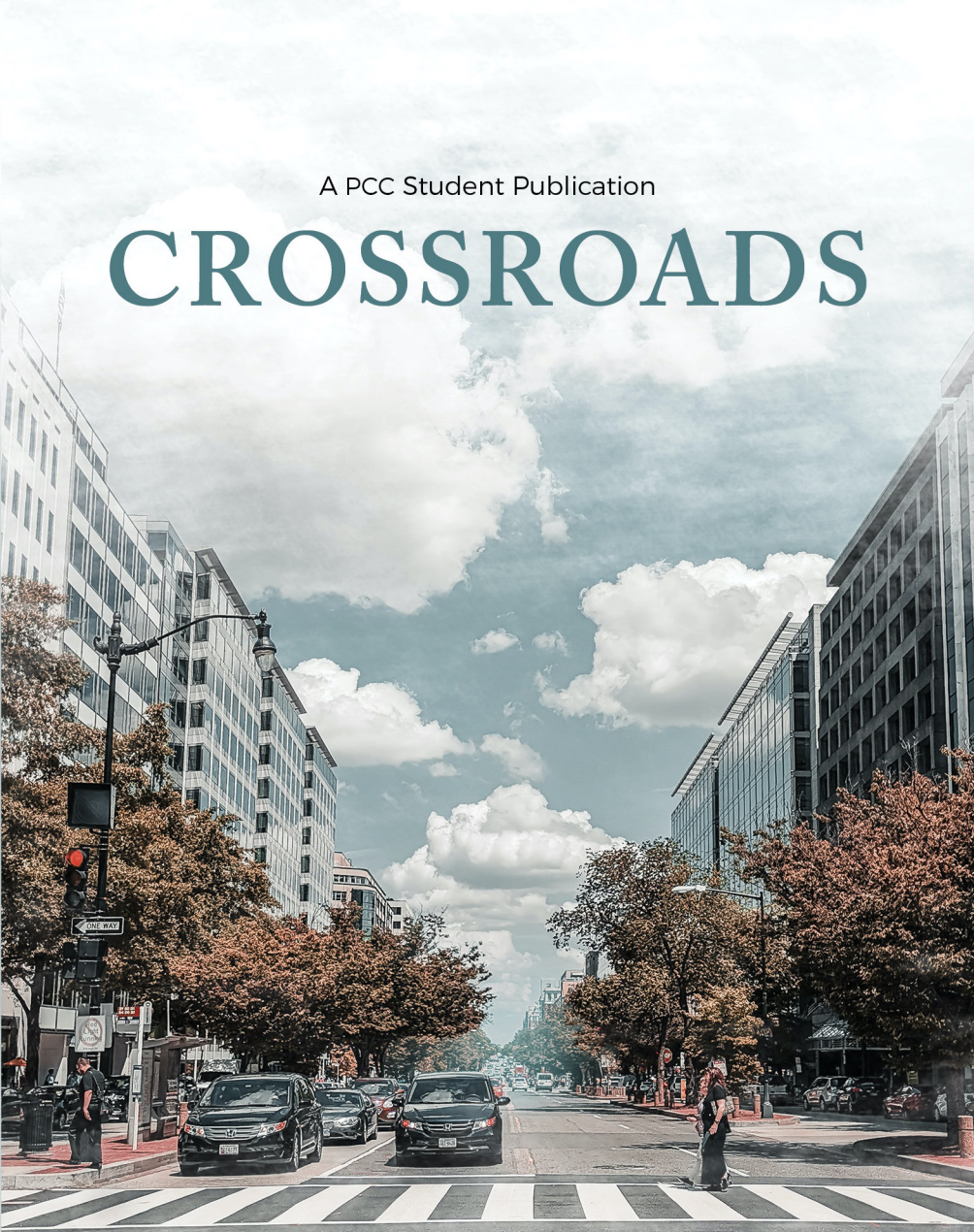
A PCC Student Publication

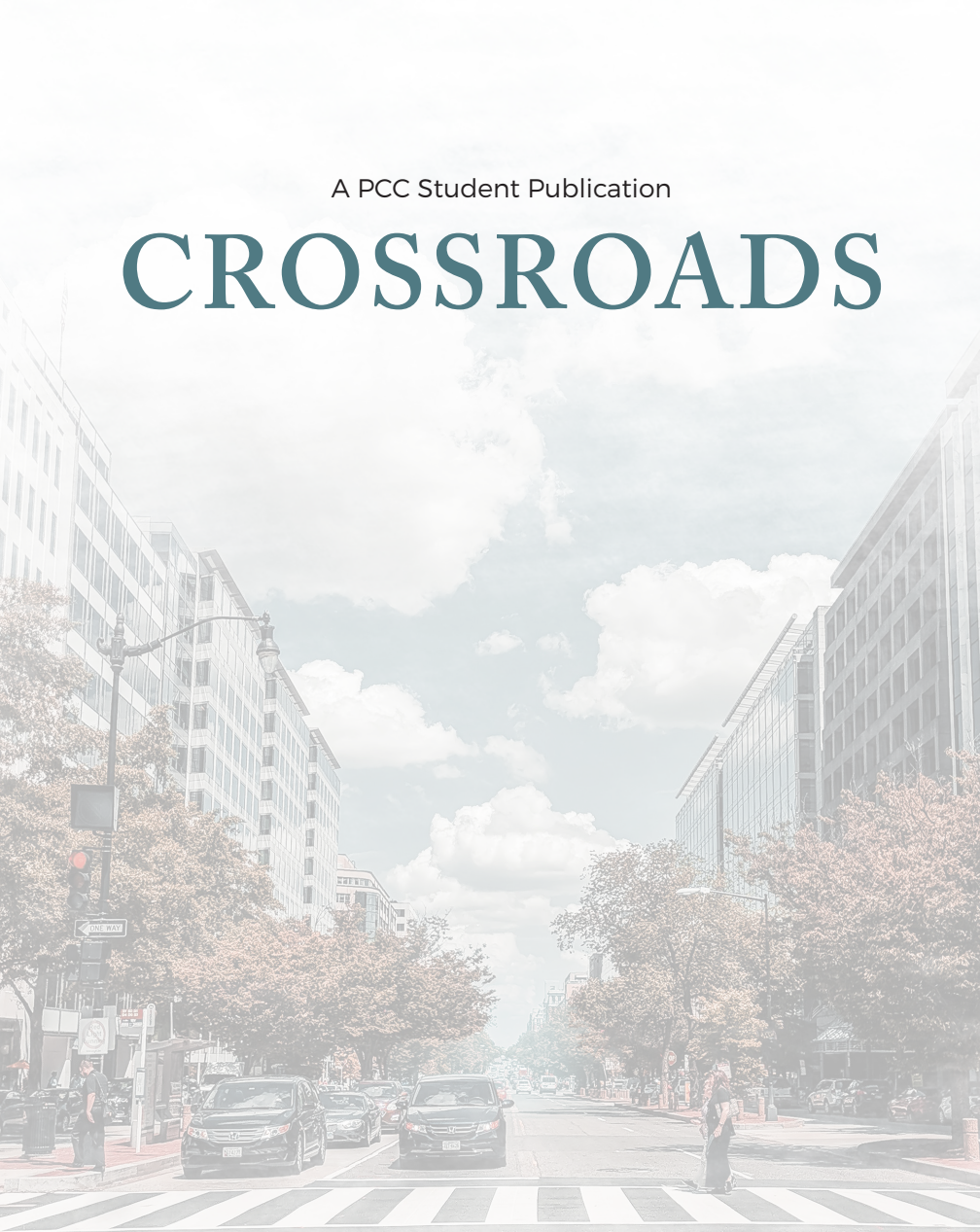
CROSSROADS



2021 | Fountains 32nd Edition

A PCC Student Publication

CROSSROADS



2021 | Fountains 32nd Edition

Introduction

Life is about choices—about the different roads we choose to travel every day and where they take us. Sometimes, we don't know where we will end up, but we all start somewhere and end somewhere. The greatest part of the journey is not always the ending, but the choices we make along the way—the different roads that bring us from point A to point B.

Just as with every road, our lives are sometimes lined with stop signs, potholes, and traffic, but not all of it is negative. Beyond the toil of travel, we move forward. We progress toward somewhere bigger, better, and more exciting.

These *Fountains* stories are about humble beginnings, transformative journeys, and surprising destinations. They help us realize that we are constantly in motion, that we have left one destination and are pursuing another. Why? Because we came to a crossroads and made a choice. And that choice affected everything.

This 32nd edition of *Fountains* brings you to a crossroads in your life, letting you decide how these stories will influence you and your journey. We hope that these stories and poems lead you down a road of inspiration, transformation, and joy.

Rebecca Ramsey

Zoey Arel

Contents

Street

Compelled 9
Ariel Kralina

When I First Saw You 17
Rebekah Gengarella

Gift or No Gift 19
Taylor Dipaola

Goodbye, Grandpa and Grandma's House 27
Zach Jewell

If Only for Today 29
Hannah Waldvogel

The Family at 158 Pulpit Road 38
Zoey Arel

No One Rises Earlier Than My Father 43
Sarah Leiford

Cold Hands, Cold Heart 44
Lauren Jacques

Avenue

No Greater Love 52
Stephanie Hansen

Plain and Worthy 61
Shannon Connolly

The Old Front Door 69
Rebecca Ramsey

Addicted to Gymnastics 74
Valentina Novak

The Fear of the Red Pen 83
Hannah Bryan
Grand 89
Valentina Novak
The Small Crab 94
Taylor DiPaola
The Unexpected Trip 96
Rebekah Gengarella

Boulevard

Mahogany, Like the Table 108
Sarah Leiford
Stars 117
Hannah Bryan
Two Nails 121
Lana Howell
Where You Need to Be 122
Taylor DiPaola
Offshoots 130
Hannah Bryan
What Does *Found* Mean? 135
Ian Mackay
Sunshine in the Dark 136
Siera Weber
The Man in the Cowboy Hat 144
Cainan Phillips
Trusting God through a Loss 153
Mary Legore
The Woods by Caribou Lake 154
Zach Jewell

STREET

Ariel Kralina

Compelled

Can you follow God blindly down an unfamiliar road?

Steam rose from the broken batter-fried lobster tail as the little flame under the butter container flittered when placed on the table. People filled the Potted Steer with mindless chatter speckled with chuckles and loud bellows. Customers piped in with their own stories, desperately wanting to show others that they were the most important with their own fancy stories of exotic travels and large yachts that took up too much space in Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri.

But Sheree drowned out these stories; she had heard them a million times over—not necessarily from the same individual, but in the same tone. Sheree gave more attention to her tables, making sure each customer had enough soda in his glass and enough bread in his basket.

The Potted Steer had been good to Sheree for the past four years, providing just enough money for the kids to attend the private Christian academy and just enough money to pay the bills to have a warm and full house. It was just another busy night with sweaty brows and aching feet; it was normal.

Sheree worked with another waitress, Valerie. Sheree and Valerie had been friends for over a decade, working

for the same boss in the same position. Most of their conversations were filled with advice about shoes that helped their feet after long hours or how their night went with customers and food orders.

That night though, after the long 3-11 p.m. shift, the conversation shifted. Sheree and Valerie walked outside to their cars together, keys ready in hand. Sheree fixed her red hair behind her ears, excited about heading back home to her husband and children.

Valerie broke the silence. "Do you and Jesse want another baby?"

Sheree laughed. "Yeah, I'll take it," she said jokingly, not hearing the weight of Valerie's question.

"The mother can't keep the baby."

"Really? Oh, thank goodness. I've been trying to find someone to take this woman's baby and—"

Sheree put up her hands. "Val, I was kind of joking," she said. "I don't even know what's going on. I would need to talk to Jesse and get his approval first. We've never adopted before."

"The mother can't keep the baby."

Sheree's heart broke. "What? Why not?" she asked.

"Are you really considering getting this baby?"

Sheree paused for just a moment before answering. As a mother of three, she knew all too well the sacrifices that go unnoticed by parents. She and her husband Jesse basically took shifts with the kids. Jesse worked mornings as a carpenter while Sheree stayed home with the kids. Evening time, they switched off, Sheree heading to Potted Steer for the night shift and Jesse staying home. The parents barely had enough time for a peck on the cheek before clocking in for their work shifts. But those were

sacrifices that she and Jesse were willing to make. The kids didn't have to attend daycare, and Sheree and Jesse each got to spend quality time with their children.

"I wanna know more," Sheree pleaded.

"All I know is this woman can't afford the pregnancy," Valerie explained. "I can't take it because I won't be able to support the baby either. She's looking for someone that will treat this baby like their own. She has had all her kids taken away by the state, and I know she isn't fit to take care of this one."

Sheree yearned to take this baby in already, but she knew she needed to talk to Jesse about finances, and whether he even *wanted* another child.

Because it was late when Sheree got home, she waited until the next morning to discuss the matter with Jesse. He had just poured the last bit of Reese's Puffs into the bowl, now reaching for the jug of milk on the table. She had prayed all night that her words would come out sincerely and fall on listening ears.

"There's a mom looking for a family to adopt her baby," Sheree said, clutching her coffee mug close to her chest, almost as a shield for whatever words would come out of her husband's mouth.

After finishing his first bite of cereal, Jesse said casually, "I'll take it."

Word for word.

That's exactly what she had said at the restaurant when Valerie first told her. Sheree couldn't say she was shocked because Jesse was her literal half. They thought and acted the same. She couldn't fight the smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"That's what I said."

Jesse and Sheree had always wanted to adopt. Even when they were eight months into dating, after realizing they were meant for each other, they had discussed

adoption. And even after having three kids of their own, they still felt compelled to adopt. They thought they were called to go to China to adopt because that's what their friends were doing at the time. But God, as always, had something better planned for the Thibodeau family.

Paula was twelve weeks pregnant when Sheree met her at a local McDonald's in small-town Camdenton, Missouri, where Sheree bought her lunch. Paula requested they meet there because she worked at the Taco Bell across the street. Sheree noticed she was a little skinny for someone who was twelve weeks pregnant, and she seemed a little twitchy.

"I lost my two younger kids to the state, and they went immediately into foster care," Paula told Sheree. "I wasn't able to take care of them. I had a little girl a few years ago, but her grandmother took her from me. I just don't feel equipped to have a baby right now." Paula looked at Sheree and smiled. "I would really like for you to have this baby."

It was all too easy, Sheree thought. Almost like it was supposed to happen.

Sheree went home and immediately started researching the process of adoption. Sheree found out during the adoption process that there is a need in America for adoption. Just in Kansas City, Missouri, there were nearly eight hundred kids waiting to be adopted but would most likely be in the system until they were eighteen. She made some calls with different adoption lawyers and found out that if she wanted to adopt the child, it would look good to the state if Sheree went with Paula to every doctor's appointment and helped her out with payments.

This woman was carrying her future child. Sheree would have done anything to help Paula out. So that's what she did.

Sheree began paying Paula's rent, helping her out with groceries, accompanying her to the doctor's appointments, calling doctors to set up future checkups, and everything in between.

Money was short for the Thibodeau family. Sheree and Jesse already had three children to feed, clothe, and school. Sheree had never budgeted more in her life than in that year of adoption, but it was all worth it. She knew this was what God had intended for her. She followed blindly.

Sheree hadn't taken any extra shifts at the restaurant, and Jesse hadn't taken any more business offers than he could do. They didn't know where the extra money was coming from, but they always had just enough to make ends meet for their family and take care of their new addition.

Legally, someone had to make sure that the person giving up the child for adoption was sure she wanted to go through with it. Pastor Nick Stutesman, a close friend of the Thibodeau family, volunteered. He was almost trying to dissuade Paula from letting Sheree adopt the baby.

"The baby needs to go home with Sheree and Jesse," Paula had calmly replied.

Everything just seemed to fall into place.

The due date couldn't come fast enough for Sheree. Jesse prepared the baby crib that would be placed next to their own bed, decorated with pink and purple bedding. Her baby blanket hung over the side of the crib railing. The other siblings buzzed and tittered around the house in excitement for their new baby sister.

On August 8, 2006, early in the morning, Sheree got a call from Paula.

"My water broke. I think it's time," Paula said.

The family gathered in Jesse's Ford truck and drove thirty minutes to Lake Regional Hospital in Osage Beach,

Missouri. Jesse and the kids had to stay in the waiting room, but Sheree was able to join Paula during labor.

"My boyfriend isn't here. No one was able to make it," Paula said to Sheree, seeming nervous. Paula's boyfriend at the time wanted nothing to do with the baby and didn't come with her to the hospital. Only Sheree, Paula, a nurse, and a doctor filled the small birthing room.

"All right. It's time to push, Paula. Are you ready?" the doctor asked.

Paula nodded, gripping Sheree's hand.

Sheree had never witnessed the miracle of birth. She had only performed the miracle under immense pain with an epidural in her back to numb the pain of childbirth. She heard the first cry from her baby girl, Jozzlyn, and knew those long months had been worth it. Every second

leading up to this point had been worth it. Sheree was even the one who cut the sinewy umbilical cord.

After the nurses cleaned Jozzlyn up, they brought her back to Paula and offered the newborn to be held by her biological mother first.

"Sheree should hold her first."

Sheree knew how huge that was for Paula to go against that motherly instinct of holding her baby and letting someone else hold her.

"She should have her first eye contact with the woman who is going to take care of her," Paula said.

Sheree held Jozzlyn for the first time and felt a buzz all throughout her body. *This is my child*, Sheree thought. *She's mine. I love her.*

It wasn't until Jozzlyn was born that Sheree found out Paula tested positive for cocaine use.

Sheree had suspected that, of course. From the beginning, Paula had all the signs and tendencies of a drug abuser: twitchiness, extreme loss of weight, and paranoia. Sheree knew enough about addiction that without God in someone's life, that person wouldn't be able to quit cold turkey, even while pregnant.

Paula denied doing anything, of course; but the test results proved her wrong. She abused drugs while being pregnant with Jozzlyn. Sheree knew enough about pregnancy from general knowledge that if the mother abused drugs while pregnant, then the child would almost undoubtedly come out addicted.

The doctors tested Jozzlyn, but there was no sign of drugs. Nothing. It was as if Paula hadn't taken anything. Jozzlyn was perfect. She had no withdrawals because it wasn't in her system.

Sheree almost broke down in the hospital. She knew God had protected her baby even when she had no idea

about the circumstances. Her God was already protecting this new addition to her family.

Legally, Jesse and Sheree couldn't adopt Jozzlyn until she was six months old. Those were the longest six months of Sheree's life. But in February of 2007, Jozzlyn Diamond Rose became a Thibodeau.

"She's been mine ever since. She's exactly where she's supposed to be," Sheree said. "She's a fireball, just like the rest of the Thibodeau family."

"God was already protecting this new addition to her family."

Because of all the doors that had been opened, Sheree knew God wanted her here for Jozzlyn. With her new daughter, Sheree felt all of the pieces of her little family puzzle come together. She never felt as though there were a missing piece to begin with, but everything felt more whole the moment Jozzlyn was placed in their family.

Sheree knew that if she had gone her own way, she and Jesse may have never adopted. They may have never been able to go to China; they may never have found a child to adopt if they broke away from God's will. This was the road God wanted her on.

This was the road she was compelled to take.

Rebekah Gengarella

When I First Saw You

When I first saw you,
It was five in the morning.
My eyes unsteadily stayed open,
Like curtains caught in the wind,
While you were fast asleep.

But as your tired eyes
Opened to the morning sun
Peeping through the hospital window,
You cried.

My siblings urged me to hold you,
But I shrank back.

You were so tiny,
So new to this big world. But
Once your swaddled body was placed
Into my trembling arms,
All my worries melted.
The wind stopped whistling on my eyelids.

Instantly,
A silence fell over the room.

The crying had stopped,
And your eyes
Began to drop
As you drifted
Back to sleep.

Soon,
The only noise in the room
Was your heavy, even breaths.

Seeing your features,
So tiny and new,
Instilled peace inside me.

And that's when I knew,
I would love being your aunt.

Taylor DiPaola

Gift or No Gift?

What is the most important thing to bring to a birthday party?

She should have brought a gift. She'd convinced herself that it didn't matter, but now that she had stepped into Alexander's vast house, she felt guilty. After all, who comes to a birthday party—a surprise one, at that—and doesn't bring a gift?

"Apparently, I do," Mia whispered to herself.

"Excuse me. What did you say?" Mrs. Benet stood in front of Mia with her head cocked slightly to the right.

Mia shook her head, allowing Mrs. Benet to continue. Olivia, Mia's friend who had forced her to come to the party, smirked in amusement.

"Who comes to a birthday party—a surprise one, at that—and doesn't bring a gift?"

"As I was saying," Mrs. Benet began, "thank you for coming today! Please wipe your shoes on the rug before walking around the house. Alexander should be home in another ten or fifteen minutes. Everyone else is currently in the kitchen."

Mia nodded at Mrs. Benet before scuffing her Sperrys across the coarse, decorative rug beneath her. Mrs. Benet's face tensed into a tight smile before she turned to walk away. The clack of her designer shoes echoed as she walked down the long hallway leading to the kitchen.

"Yes!" Olivia exclaimed, rushing across the cherry wood floors to jump onto the white carpeted stairs. "Wanna go see what they have up there?"

"We're not here to snoop—we're here for Alexander's party."

"Olivia!" Mia whispered as loudly and as forcefully as she could. Rushing over to pull Olivia off the stairs, she scanned the nearby living room for anyone who could have heard the rude comment. Only abandoned, yet artistically placed furniture met her gaze. "This isn't your house! We're not here to snoop—we're here for Alexander's party."

Olivia sighed. "Why not take advantage of the opportunity? Haven't you always wondered what rich people put in big houses like this?"

Mia gave Olivia a deadpan look, wondering what exactly Olivia hoped to find up there.

"Oh, that's right," Olivia said, "You used to be, like, best friends with Alexander."

"Yeah, years ago," Mia trailed off, taking a few steps toward the kitchen. "Let's just go see what everyone's up to."

Mia could practically feel Olivia roll her eyes before she stepped off the stairs and followed Mia's lead.

In lieu of talking, Mia observed the large geometric painting hung on the hallway wall and watched as the cherry floor switched into large white tiling. The voices

of twenty-five other teens reached full volume at the threshold of the kitchen. The party guests circled around the large island table, currently covered with fruit and cheese platters, chocolate-covered pretzels, chips in crystal dishes, and a bowl of raspberry punch. On the kitchen table to the right rested ten pizza boxes.

Mia felt Olivia rush around her, headed toward the pizza boxes. She noticed Mrs. Benet smoothly step around the corner to stop Olivia and to start ushering the teens into the living room.

"Alexander will be here soon! Everyone, hide, and once he walks in, jump up and surprise him," Mrs. Benet said.

Following Mrs. Benet's direction, Mia turned around and moved to the living room. She slipped behind a plush white chair in the corner of the room and watched the other guests as they moseyed in. One by one, they all managed to fit themselves behind various pieces of the living room furniture.

In the silence, Mia heard the crunch of chips and pretzels from the guy hiding behind the couch next to her. When she heard a vehicle pull up in front of the house, she motioned for him to be quiet. Annoyed, he crunched one last chip and stopped.

The front door swung open. A six-foot-tall, about-to-be eighteen-year-old guy walked in.

"SURPRISE!" The crowd jumped from behind the furniture.

Alexander's eyes opened wide. "What?" he breathed out as he walked toward the guests.

Mia watched Olivia slip over to him, eager for his attention, as she always was. "Surprise, Alexander! Happy birthday!"

"Oh, um, thank you, Olivia."

Others passed him, repeating Olivia's sentiments, before moving back into the kitchen to finally eat the pizza Mrs. Benet had been so closely guarding.

Mia, realizing she was the last party-goer still in the living room, involuntarily made eye contact with Alexander. She nodded timidly at him before walking away into the kitchen. The guilt from earlier hit her again: she should have brought a gift.

As she walked away, Mia heard Alexander ask, "Mom, why did you invite all those people? I don't even know most of them."

* * *

The party moved slowly for Mia. The longer she sat on the living room couch listening to Olivia and Olivia's friends' gossip, the more ready she was to leave. And with every second, she felt guiltier for not getting Alexander a gift.

"This house is such a waste on Alexander," one of Olivia's friends said.

Confused, Mia looked up at the girl. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"He's too much of a loser for a house this cool," the girl said nonchalantly.

Trying to remain calm, Mia kept her face blank and asked another question. "If that's what you think of Alexander, why'd you come to his party?"

The girl laughed in disbelief and looked at Olivia briefly before looking back at Mia. "I came for the *party*, not for *him*."

Mia felt Olivia elbow her in the side before Olivia whispered, "Mia, stop ruining the fun."

"Okay, fine," Mia said, "but I'm not going to sit

here any longer listening to this garbage. I'm getting some food."

"I came for the party, not for him."

"I'm your ride home, you know," Olivia retorted.

Mia stood, bothered by Olivia's attitude and her gossiping friends, and started walking back to the kitchen. While Alexander was more of an acquaintance at this point, she still cared about him. She hadn't come to his party to listen to degrading comments about him.

While she scooped a glass of raspberry punch, one of the guests came over to grab a glass too. "Xavier's got a nice house, doesn't he?"

Wide-eyed, Mia looked up at him. "You mean Alexander?" she asked.

The guy blinked and said, "Oh, yeah, him."

Mia shook her head at the ridiculousness of the interaction. So far, all Alexander had gotten for his birthday—whether he knew it or not—were insults and a guest who didn't know his name. He deserved better than that. She was going to get him a gift. Since the downtown shops were only a few blocks away, the trip wouldn't take her long.

Mia set her glass down and rushed toward the front door, avoiding Olivia's curious eyes from the living room.

Stepping outside, Mia noticed Alexander's truck in the driveway. Its window was rolled down and sitting in it was—no, it couldn't be—

"Alexander?" Mia blurted, walking closer to the truck.

Holding a slice of pizza up to his mouth, Alexander looked over sheepishly. "Hey, Mia," he said. "How are you?"

Pausing, Mia tried to figure out why he was outside and not at his own party. After a moment, she replied, "I'm fine. You?"

"Not bad."

Mia nodded at him, the awkwardness of the encounter increasing with every moment.

"Are you—are you heading home already?" Alexander asked.

"I'll admit; I'm a little curious why you're out here and not at your party."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Not really."

"But you're heading out?"

Mia nodded, and Alexander looked down.

"Would you like some company?" Mia asked tentatively. "I'll admit; I'm a little curious why you're out here and not at your party."

Alexander smirked, and the awkwardness broke. "Yeah, that." He popped open his truck's passenger door and moved the pizza box from the passenger seat to his lap.

Mia hopped in, and he offered her a slice of pizza. She took one as she settled into her seat.

Within a few minutes, Alexander had explained that some of the popular kids from school had wanted to check out his house and his arcade. When he'd gotten home, his mom had told him that those kids convinced her to let them throw Alexander a surprise party since school started next week and his birthday was this weekend.

"It wasn't really about my birthday," Alexander said.

"And that's why you're out here," Mia added.

"Yeah, I mean—I don't want to be rude, but those kids aren't really here for me. I don't want to spend my birthday

with people who are more interested in my house than they are in me."

"I don't blame you," Mia said.

He continued. "I let my mom know I was going to chill out here for a bit, and she didn't mind."

Mia nodded in understanding. Wondering how to cheer Alexander up, she thought about their childhood. A memory from another birthday party years ago came to her mind. "Do you still like ice cream cake?"

Alexander scrunched his eyebrows. "Yeah, I do. How do you know that?"

"I went to your seventh birthday party, I think? We were friends then, you know."

"Wow, I guess you're right! But, wait, are we not friends anymore?"

"Well, I don't think I've even talked to you since, like, middle school. So . . ." she trailed off momentarily. "Tell you what. How 'bout we go to the ice cream shop, and I'll buy you an ice cream cake? Then maybe we'll be actual friends again."

Alexander laughed. "Seriously?"

"Yep, let's go! I'll even pay for gas. It's your birthday, after all."

Mia could tell that Alexander wasn't fully convinced of the idea, but her enthusiasm made him give in.

At the ice cream shop, he eagerly dug into the ice cream cake she bought him. "I forgot how good these cakes were!"

Scooping up a piece of cake, Mia looked up at Alexander and smiled. At the party—for the moments she'd seen him—he'd looked downcast. But now his eyes were lit up as he stuffed cake to his mouth. She knew Olivia would be mad at her later for disappearing from the party, but for the first time all day, Mia felt as if she'd done the right thing.

Helping himself to a third piece of ice cream cake, Alexander and Mia started talking about life and future plans. "I haven't decided on my major yet, but I'm going to apply to Wofford College soon," Alexander said.

"I'm applying there too!" Mia said.

He paused, a smile spreading on his face. "Wait, seriously? That's awesome!"

After a while, Alexander got quiet and looked up at Mia. "Thank you for today. I hadn't been expecting much out of my birthday because of that surprise party, but you made it something really special."

"Turns out, ice cream cake and friendship are better than gifts."

"Oh, of course! It's been a blast."

Mia and Alexander talked for a while longer before he drove her back to her house. They'd even made plans to meet up later that week to work on their college applications together.

Watching Alexander drive away, Mia smiled and thought about how the day had ended up. Turns out, ice cream cake and friendship are better than gifts.

Zach Jewell

Commencement Contest Winner,
Original Poetry

Goodbye, Grandpa and Grandma's House

Our three-hour car ride ended at the driveway
Beside Grandma and Grandpa's house.
As we spilled from our old Suburban,
Grandma met us with hugs and desserts,
And Grandpa rose from his chair,
Smiling and cracking his ageless jokes.
That's how it always was.

The days of visiting were always long,
But the weekend visits too short.
If only I could go back and enjoy those long days.
If only I could turn those weekends into weeks.

But I do still go back, yet only in the memories
I've stored in the safe of my heart,
Back to the house and our last goodbye in that happy place.

The whoosh of a freshwater breeze
Sweeping through the ancient oaks
Was interrupted by laughter from inside.

I walked up the wooden steps on the back porch to the door.
My fingers slid across the rough wood of the handrail,
Shoes squeaking from the morning dew
Like a wet cloth against a windowpane.
Clenching the metal door handle
I swung it open to see
Everyone I love in a place I love
One last time before the move.

That time in that place is now gone.
No more hellos there, just one last goodbye.

But I take comfort in my memories
When I go back and open my safe
And relive that time at Grandpa and Grandma's house.

Hannah Waldvogel

If Only for Today

Sometimes it's not about healing the pain but about holding the one whose heart is breaking.

Emma bent over the kitchen table, elbows planted on the wood surface and hand pressed to her forehead. Gray streaked her chestnut hair, and a premature crease lined her brow, making her appear older than her true age of twenty-five. Her cellphone sat on the table beside her, the screen still glowing from the call she'd just had with the caseworker assigned to her foster son, Ian.

Concern and uncertainty clouded Emma's mind as she thought about what the caseworker had told her. *Why must Ian repeatedly confront his past before he can escape it?* she thought. *Or, can he ever escape it?*

Just then, the front door clicked as it unlocked.

Emma rose and walked into the living room to greet her husband.

"Can he ever escape it?"

Michael strode through the door, wearing his T-shirt and thrift-store jeans and holding the hand of a little blond boy who skipped along beside him.

As the little boy galloped to the couch, Michael kissed Emma on the cheek and asked how her day was.

"All right," she began, "but I need to tell you something."

"What's up?"

Emma watched Michael scoop Ian off the couch, toss the giggling toddler into the air, and catch him in his arms. She wondered how he always had the energy to play with Ian after working all day.

"Ian's caseworker called. She said that the foster care unit supervisor insisted that Ian start visitations with his parents again," Emma said.

Michael set Ian down on the couch and monitored him as he bounced from cushion to cushion. "But he hasn't seen them in almost a year. Weren't the visits suspended because his parents weren't complying with the court orders?"

"Yes," Emma answered. "But the supervisor thinks it'll be more traumatic for Ian to go back home with his mom after the hearing if he hasn't seen her for a long time . . . which is true."

"We don't know that he'll go back," Michael said, taking Emma's hand as she sat down next to him.

Emma looked at the floor and attempted to smile, but her worry for Ian was still evident on her face. "I want whatever's right for him," she said, pulling a gray hair from her head and twirling it. "If visiting his parents will make things easier for him later, he should go. I just hope he isn't uncomfortable seeing them after this long."

When Ian had first come to live with Michael and Emma, they had done their best to support Ian's eventually being reunited with John and Rachel, his parents. But after a few months, John and Rachel had shown that they didn't have the persistence or coping skills needed to meet the court's requirements. They had both been abused as

children, and their pasts seemed to have caught up with them. They had both fallen back into bad habits, and neither had finished their court-mandated classes. Now Emma wondered if Ian's returning to his parents would really be best for any of them.

"Their pasts seemed to have caught up with them."

Emma watched Ian slide from the couch to run up and down the hall, fully displaying his dimples. He was completely unaware of their conversation. She ached to think of all that he had suffered. She knew that his home had caused much of that suffering, but he was too young to understand that his removal from that home was meant to protect him. Emma couldn't imagine how frightening it must have been for him to be taken from his parents at such a young age and placed with strangers. She had done all she could to help him feel safe and loved so that he could heal, and she worried that visiting his parents might be traumatic for him.

Emma knew that Ian's life would always be marked with the fingerprints of his past, but she still wished she could protect him from reliving his painful experiences.

The following weekend, Emma and Michael signed in at the front desk of the Department of Social Services and followed Ian's visitation supervisor to a dingy white room with fluorescent lights and a scuffed white tile floor. The supervisor permitted them to stay with Ian for the first fifteen minutes of his visit.

Ian clasped Emma's hand as they approached the doorway. Her heartbeat quickened, and she wondered if Ian's did the same. Inside the room, a black camera stared

from the ceiling. Beside the door stood a bookshelf, half full of picture books. Several frizzy-haired, marker-stained Barbies occupied a dollhouse against the opposite wall. A toy stove, rocking horse, and plastic easel also furnished the room.

On a gray sofa sat a thirty-year-old woman with dimpled cheeks. She sat alone. Seeing that John, Ian's father, had not come, Emma sighed. Relief and regret mingled in the sound. If Ian saw his father, buried memories and associations could resurface within his subconscious.

But doesn't John care enough to visit his own son?

Emma quickly reminded herself that she couldn't judge John's intent. Seeing Ian might bring back painful memories for John as well.

As Ian's mother rose from the sofa, Emma went to hug her. They exchanged polite greetings; then the woman's

attention shifted to Ian. He peeked from behind one of Michael's legs just enough to reveal one eye and dimple.

"Can you say, 'Hi,' to Mama Rachel?" Emma asked, stooping to address him.

The eye and dimple disappeared behind the pant leg, and Michael lifted Ian into his arms and repeated his wife's question. All three adults watched Ian, waiting for him to respond.

Ian blinked at Emma. Then he stared at his mother. Finally, hand in mouth, he said, "Hi, Mama Rachel."

Emma released her breath as he complied. She had not realized that she had been holding it. She worried that Ian might hurt Rachel by seeming indifferent toward her or that Rachel would think Emma and Michael had not taught him to listen. She knew this visit must already be hard for Rachel, and she didn't want anything to make it harder.

"All three adults watched Ian, waiting for him to respond."

Michael returned Ian to his feet, and the boy darted past his mother to the rocking horse. Rachel followed and lifted him onto its seat. As Ian rocked, Emma answered Rachel's questions, updated her on Ian's progress in learning to talk and play, and tried to prattle about his antics from the past months.

Then Michael asked a question that Emma had hoped he wouldn't.

"Is John coming today?"

Emma looked anxiously at Rachel to see if Michael had inadvertently upset her.

Rachel blushed and turned away, occupying herself with Ian and the rocking horse. "Oh, he wanted to, but other things came up. You know, he's not feeling too good."

"Oh, is he sick?" replied Michael, sympathy in his voice.

Emma touched his shoulder as if to say, "Maybe we'd better not ask about that."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he added, understanding Emma's gesture.

A few moments passed in silence while all eyes remained on Ian.

A knock at the door interrupted the silence, and the visitation supervisor entered to inform Emma and Michael that they must leave.

Emma's chest tightened as she stooped to hug Ian goodbye and said, "Papa and I have to go now. But we'll be back to get you in a little while. You're going to stay here and have fun with Mama Rachel."

"A knock at the door interrupted the silence."

Ian fluttered his eyelashes and furrowed his brow.

Emma hoped he understood that she would return for him, but as she turned to leave the room, Ian began to howl. Instinct compelled her to go to him, but when she looked back, she saw Rachel consoling him.

Rachel is his mother, Emma reminded herself, trying to correct the part of her that felt as if the situation were unfair—unfair because she had nurtured Ian for most of his life but could not call herself his mother. *None of this is about you*, she told herself. But as she forced herself to walk away, another voice in her replied, *But it's not fair to Ian either.*

Forty-five minutes later, Emma and Michael stepped back inside the visitation room to find Ian sitting on Rachel's lap, grinning at a dog in the picture book that she was reading to him. When Ian looked up and saw them, he clambered to the floor and rushed to Michael, arms upheld as a signal that he wanted Michael to hold him. The tightness in Emma's chest subsided for the first time since she had left the room. She felt relieved to have Ian back in her sight. At least now she could monitor his response to the visit.

Michael scooped Ian up and instructed him to say goodbye before leaving. Ian obeyed, and, after a kiss from his mother, left the room in Michael's arms.

Emma remained for her customary post-visit discussion with Rachel.

"Was everything okay?" Emma asked, expecting to hear a list of ways she should improve her parenting. But when Emma turned to Rachel, she saw that Ian's mother was dabbing her eyes.

"He's doing great." Rachel sniffled and stared at the floor. "You know, I—I think that you're doing a good job with him. And—things haven't changed with me and John." Rachel's tears began falling.

Emma's eyes filled with tears in response.

"I'm just saying," Rachel continued, "that I think you and Michael would be good for him. I know he would be better off . . ."

Rachel's words squeezed Emma's heart, and she wondered, *Should I want Ian to stay with us? Shouldn't I want Rachel and John to turn things around, for themselves and Ian?* She only wanted what was best for Ian and his parents, but how could she know what that was? She worried that Ian might suffer from not having a closer relationship with his parents. And she could only imagine how desperately Rachel must long to have her child home

again. But Emma also worried that if Ian returned home before his parents worked things out, they could all experience even more pain than before.

"Rachel's words squeezed Emma's heart."

These thoughts still swirled in Emma's mind as she stood in her kitchen that evening, measuring pasta into a plastic bowl for Ian's dinner. As she set the bowl on the counter, she noticed an unusual silence and turned to Ian.

Sitting in his highchair at the table, Ian stared at the salt and pepper shakers.

Emma noted his behavior as she opened the refrigerator.

"Ian, do you want to have an apple or an orange with dinner?"

Ian remained silent

"Ian? Do you want an apple?"

"No."

"Okay, then you want the orange?"

"No."

"You have to choose one."

"No," Ian whined, beginning to fidget and scowl at the fruit.

Emma selected the apple and began cutting it into slices, hoping that Ian's mood would pass. She placed the bowl and a plate with the apple slices in front of Ian.

Still squirming, he glared at the offensive offering.

When Emma sat down beside him and encouraged him to eat, he reverted to babyish methods of communication—whining, groaning, and smacking his hands on the table.

"Ian, please, eat your food," Emma said with concern.

At this final provocation, Ian grabbed an apple slice, threw it to the floor, and began to cry.

Emma pressed her lips together as she tried not to cry herself. She knew what Ian did not—that apples and oranges did not cause his tears.

"Ian, do you want me to hold you?"

Ian became silent. He nodded, and Emma lifted him into her arms. Then Ian surprised her. He gripped her shoulder and began to scream. His grasp tightened as his scream intensified. She felt his body grow tense as he put all his breath, pain, and confusion into that scream. Finally, he quieted, and his body relaxed. But Emma could still hear the frantic patter of his heart as he rested his head against her neck. Emma held Ian in her arms until his heartbeat slowed to a peaceful rhythm. The visit had been traumatic for him, just as she had worried it might.

"Apples and oranges did not cause his tears."

Emma finally realized that she needed to relinquish control over Ian's circumstances—a control she never really had from the start. She just had to do what she knew was best for him at that moment. Although she might not be able to take away all the pain that his past caused him, and although she might not be able to shield him from more pain in the future, she thanked God that she could provide a place of comfort for him—whether forever or only for today.

Zoey Arel

The Family at 158 Pulpit Road

How can the people around you become family?

To get to my house, you must make a left turn halfway down a steep hill on New Boston Road. Drive until you reach the fork in the road, and then make a right turn at the stop sign. The first house on the left is mine—158 Pulpit Road. It's a medium-sized house, not too big, not too small. The house, a gray Cape Cod, has a green door that matches the pine trees in the front yard. A rock wall separates that yard from the street. It's been this way since I was a kid. If you were to walk in the big green front door, you might be greeted by my dog, who'd jump on you and lick you until you were covered in slobber. Or you would be greeted by my mom, who would welcome you in and offer you some food and a nice long chat (assuming she knew you, of course).

If you came to my house during the summer, you probably wouldn't find any kids in the house. Summertime was when my cousins, brothers, neighbors, and I played on the rock walls. Sometimes, we pretended we were doctors and had our friends lay on the rocks as we treated them with stones and sticks.

When the rock wall didn't suit our playtime needs, we took to the trees that separated our neighbor's house from mine. We built forts and pretended we had our own little town. I'd make a house by the trees nearest to the street while my cousin might put one closer to my house. Our neighbors, Jessa and Kenneth, usually built one near the street by mine. Whenever someone had a problem building his fort, we would band together and help him, haphazardly nailing pieces of wood we found on the ground with nails stolen from our parent's garage. Looking back now, I think we were just mimicking something our parents modeled for us—a sense of community.

The house beside mine was where my mother grew up. When I was a kid, that house was always being rented out to different families. My grandfather, or Pepére as we called him, couldn't bear to part with it. When the Romanellos rented it, their kids played with us too. Sometimes, when we had all of us kids in the neighborhood (about eight to ten), we played town, and it stretched as far as across the street into my grandparents' yard.

"To Memére, every neighborhood kid was her grandchild."

When we were tired of our neighborhood games, we would walk across the street to my grandparents' house. Their house was a larger single-story gray house with peaked roofs that reminded me of a castle. We would make our way to the garage where Memére, my grandmother, kept the fridge and freezer fully stocked with soft drinks and ice cream. My usual was a vanilla ice cream cone topped with chocolate chips and a Capri Sun juice pouch—you can never go wrong with a Capri Sun and

an ice cream cone topped with chocolate chips. Memére always left the garage door open; my cousins and I could walk over to the garage and take as much as we liked. She never minded when the "grandkids" came over, even if some weren't her actual grandkids. To Memére, every neighborhood kid was her grandchild.

Memére's open fridge policy extended even to the adults in the neighborhood. Whenever my mother needed an ingredient, my Memére was the first person she'd call.

"Let me call Memére and see if she has it," she would say, usually because we were out of eggs. Memére always had whatever ingredient we needed. She could've run a grocery store from her pantry alone.

Because I was the kid, I was the designated errand-runner. When I got to Memére's, she'd meet me at the front door with a full carton of eggs instead of the two or three eggs my mother had asked for. I'd always object, but Memére never listened.

"No, no! It's okay! I have another carton," she'd reply to my objection. I always wondered if she went to the store with other families on the street in mind and bought multiples of each item on her list in preparation.

Wintertime in my neighborhood came with some of my favorite times as a child. We would ice skate and sled from dawn until dusk. The cold of winter had a way of bringing everyone closer together. Behind my grandparents' house lived my uncle, aunt, and cousins. My Uncle Tom's house was a big brown house with peaked roofs and a large garage where he parked his summer toys like four-wheelers and dirt bikes. After a long day of sledding and building snow forts, my cousins would walk through my grandparents' yard, down the hill, past the pond, and through the line of trees to get home. After the first few snowstorms, my uncle would pull out his plow truck and begin his winter route. In big snowstorms, the

town plow trucks would plow the roads; however, this caused people's driveways to become large snowbanks. My uncle would spend a day driving around the neighborhood, plowing out those that had been overrun with snow, whether they were family or not.

As we got older and became adults, our pretend forts in the woods turned into real houses on the street as my grandfather began giving away pieces of land to his grandkids. After the Romanellos moved out and a few more renters came and left, my cousin Tommy and his wife Sam moved into that house with their family. They currently live there with their three kids, who often play with my brother's kids.

My Pepére decided to carry on the tradition of keeping the family close by giving my brother and sister-in-law a plot of land for their home. They plotted the land and bought some plans for a house, and in the span of about two summers, we built their house. Some days, I would come home from work and walk next door to my brother's. There I would find my dad, my cousin, my uncle, and my brother either putting up the siding or laying down new shingles. About three years ago, my brother completed his house, adding on to the monopoly that the Brisson/Arel family had on Pulpit Road.

Though not everyone on that street was family by blood, we all most certainly acted like family. Across the street from my house was Mr. Dean, Ms. Carol, and their daughter Jessa. These people are as much of a part of the family as blood relatives. Often my father would call Mr. Dean if he needed help with something. Mr. Dean, a carpenter by trade, was always happy to help. When my father was building our front porch, Mr. Dean would walk across the street and inspect the work. My father would explain any problems, and Mr. Dean would offer his advice and sometimes bring some of his own supplies to help

with the construction. This was a common practice in our family. We helped each other with whatever skills we had.

"A true family is one that is always there to help."

To this day, people still give me weird looks when they hear my childhood stories or my childhood living situation. At times, I've even been ashamed of the ordeal, wishing to keep my strange family a secret. But I now realize that I wouldn't change the strangeness of it all for anything. Those summer weekends working at each other's houses, the snowstorm days, waiting for Uncle Tom to come and plow the driveway, walking to Memére's to get an ingredient for a recipe are all memories that have stuck with me, not because of the nostalgia, but because of the lessons they hold.

I know now that blood does not always make a family. The readiness to help makes a family. It doesn't matter if you're related. A true family is one that is always there to help. I don't think I would've known that had I not seen it time and time again. I have a sense of dependency on my family, related and unrelated. I know that if I ever need anything, I can ask, and someone will be there for me. And I, in turn, am eager to help others, whether or not I live at 158 Pulpit Road.

Sarah Leiford

No One Rises Earlier Than My Father

A pantoum is a series of quatrains in which the second and forth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the next stanza. Additionally, the last line of the poem is often repeated as the first line of the poem. This challenging poetic form requires creativity and ingenuity in developing tone, flow, and meaning.

No one rises earlier than my father.
He rises in the somber hours to coax the dying embers
And crumple newspapers to be burned.
His familiar footfalls stir the house.

He rises in the somber hours to coax the dying embers
Before he sweeps snow from the frosty walk.
His familiar footfalls stir the house
That cracks and creaks in the frightful air.

Before he sweeps snow from the frosty walk,
He brews bitter brown grounds from the pantry.
Through the cracks and creaks in the frightful air—
I listen in suspended stillness, knowing that

He brews bitter brown grounds from the pantry
And crumples newspapers to be burned.
I listen in suspended stillness, knowing that
No one rises earlier than my father.

Lauren Jacques

Cold Hands, Cold Heart

Reynaud's disease affects more than just the veins.

My circulation doesn't work quite right. I am like a cold-blooded creature. I do not adapt to the temperature; instead, I conform to it. When it's hot, I am hot. When it's cold, I am cold. I hate the feeling of being cold—the feeling that you can't seem to warm up.

Sometimes, when I try to fall asleep at night, I can't because I feel as if I am freezing. I put on layers of clothes; I use all the blankets I can find. I am still cold. My hands turn pale and blue with small red spots in the cold. When I rub them together, they gain white patches that fade slowly, like ink seeping into paper.

As I lay awake in bed, I wonder if I am still alive or just trapped in my own decaying body. I can't find a pulse. I must be dead. Oh, wait, no—there it is. I decide to get out of bed and take a hot shower.

I have Reynaud's Disease—something that has been passed down on my dad's side of the family for generations. It's a relatively harmless disorder that causes certain arteries to narrow and constrict in what is called a vasospasm. Reynaud's can be a sign of a more serious problem, or it can just be some weird disease that your great-grandfather had that makes you cold.

In Columbus, Ohio, it's cold enough to trigger my Reynaud's from October to April. For as long as I can remember, I have worn crinkly jackets from Halloween to spring break.

When I was in elementary school, my dad reached out to hold my hand so I wouldn't fall on the ice outside our church.

"Your hands are so cold. Cold hands, warm heart," he said. He smiled down at me, and it looked like a black and white picture—soft black curls against a snowy sky.

My heart didn't feel warm; it felt just as cold as my hands.

As I got older, I stayed cold and continued to complain about it. My brand-new coats were never warm enough. I would buy fancy, overpriced coffee to try to stop myself from shaking.

I would pass others on the streets.

They were cold too.

Cold hands, cold heart.

Each time that I got back to my house, I would sit on the wood floor next to the heater, and would soon forget the sunken faces downtown. I forgot their fingerless gloves furiously rubbing together. Many of those hands probably had white patches too.

Once I'm warm, I'll help others. That's what I told myself. But I didn't do anything.

"My heart didn't feel warm; it felt just as cold as my hands."

But what could I have done? I was one person facing a world of poverty. I was one girl with cold, empty hands. I gave away crumpled dollar bills now and then, but it was to alleviate some of the guilt I felt, not to help the person.

While in college, the weather started getting colder in Florida. I realized I needed to fill up my tires. I had been waiting too long to do it, and my front right tire was nearly flat. I had wanted to go during the day, but my schedule kept me from having time to go until the sun had long gone down. I decided to just go anyway one night. At dinner, my friend Lauren offered to come with me.

I drove up to the gas station, hit the curb, backed out, and slowly maneuvered in front of the tire pump. I grabbed my coins from an old gum container in the glove box along with my pressure checker and got out of the car. I tried to remember how my dad had taught me to use the instrument. The metal was cold—cold enough to cause the ends of my fingers to go numb. As I kneeled beside the first tire, I heard a male voice call out—gruff but quiet.

"Hey."

No, I thought. I knew this would be a bad idea. I reached into my pockets and gripped my pink can of

pepper spray in one hand and my keys in the other, tucking them tightly between my middle and ring fingers.

An older man approached us. He was dirty, and his narrow shoulders were draped with an oversized jacket covered in holes and stains.

"You need help?" the man asked.

"Um, I think we're okay," my friend answered.

The man approached anyway and used his palm to hit the tire I knelt in front of.

"Yep, you need a fill up," he said and nodded. "You have money?"

I thought he was asking for it, so I started to mumble something about being able to handle things by myself, but he turned around and pointed to the pump.

"Money," he repeated.

"I still clutched my pepper spray tightly."

Right—I still had to put my quarters in. I went over and put in the required dollar twenty-five. I cautiously walked back to the man, and he directed me to pull the cap off the tire. I went to use my pressure checker, but the man pushed it away.

"No, no," he said and proceeded to slap the tire again. He took the pump from my hands and starting filling it up. I still clutched my pepper spray tightly.

I became mesmerized by the buzzing lights above us, but my attention quickly refocused as the man stood up and walked around to the next tire. He asked me to take the cap off, but my hands had gone stiff and useless, fully white. He took the caps off himself and handed them to me.

My friend stood to the side. After several minutes of painful silence, all four tires were filled. We thanked the man for his help, and he hugged us each in turn. He then dug his hands into his pockets as he started asking us questions. I tried desperately to find an out in the conversation—there was none. The man's speech was broken, and he didn't seem to understand everything we were saying.

"Where are you from?" He looked to me as he asked the question.

"I'm from Ohio," I said and motioned to my friend. "Lauren is from the Bahamas."

The man started talking about Colombia, where he was from. As he talked about his home, he started switching between English and Spanish. Lauren responded in his language.

I knew some Spanish, but I have bad hearing, and I could not understand most of what the man was saying. My hearing faded as the buzzing noise slowly drew me back in. Suddenly, I caught the glint of tears in the man's eyes.

"Is this your daughter?" He asked me as he put his arm around Lauren's shoulders. She is several inches shorter than me, and in the dark, we could have looked alike. We had the same short, curly hair. I moved toward him to pull off his hand while I started explaining that we were just friends.

Then the man began sobbing.

"My daughter died yesterday," he kept repeating. Over and over, "My daughter died."

Lauren and I uttered our apologies. It must have been a strange sight—two college girls comforting a middle-aged man. We listened to him cry for a while, and my heart broke for him. I didn't know what to do. We didn't know if he was making the story up or not, but his emotion felt so real.

I still couldn't quite tell what he was saying, but I nodded along.

After he stopped crying, he asked if we had any money. I don't carry cash, but I told him I had some change. Lauren gave him a couple of dollars. He cried and hugged both of us, leaving scratchy kisses on our cheeks. I don't normally let strangers kiss me, but I couldn't bring myself to stop the man. Eventually, he let us go. He told us he would pray for us before tottering toward the gas station. I don't know what he bought. I don't even know his name; he never told us. Lauren referred to him as "Señor Colombiano."

"My daughter died yesterday," he kept repeating, "My daughter died."

We got back into the car to head back to campus. We were going to go to Walmart, but we had forgotten all about it at the moment. I turned the radio off. I didn't know what to say. I eventually felt tears roll down my face. I couldn't get the image of the man in tattered clothes crying before me out of my mind. His words "my daughter, my daughter" echoed in my ears, backed by low, constant buzzing. Lauren eventually filled in the parts of his story that I had not understood.

I still didn't know if he had been telling the truth, but I knew that his cheeks were cold, and his tears were hot. My heart was beating steadily; I was finally warm. When people with Reynaud's Disease warm up, their color returns with pinpricks. It hurts a bit, but it feels good to finally not be cold.

I knew that I had let my guard down at the gas station, and I knew that it could have gone much worse. I also

knew that the man from Colombia was a real person with real needs. He needed a new jacket, but we didn't give him enough money for that. He needed someone to talk to, and that was about all we had to offer. We all get cold sometimes—weird, hereditary diseases or not—but it's easier to warm up when you have someone to talk to.

AVENUE

Stephanie Hansen

Contest Winner, Original Nonfiction

No Greater Love

I thought that I knew what love was, but
I never realized how much it cost.

Thud. Thump. Thud.

Reluctantly, I mounted the ramp leading to the moving truck, shivering as the bitter chill of an early April day stung my crimson cheeks and stiff fingers. Another icy breeze swept around the dirty white sides of the truck that had found solace in our driveway after a sixteen-hour journey from sunny Pensacola.

I sighed, exhausted just from examining the piles of boxes that we still needed to transport to our basement. Behind me, my older brother Timothy scurried down the ramp, his lithe arms boasting a box of computer equipment, and his long jeans fraying at the foot, where he never failed to tramp upon them. He disappeared inside the garage door, entering the house that would be his family's new residence for most of the summer.

Why do I have to help them move? I complained, heaving another ungainly box in my frozen fingers. *Don't they realize that I have to work tonight?* I thought about the six-hour shift that lay before me and my warm bed that night.

And why is it so cold? I inwardly growled, taking the ramp

as quickly as I could safely manage without spilling my brother's things and myself onto the cracked black asphalt.

The sun had decided not to show itself that day, but had selfishly stayed behind gray clouds all afternoon. This bleakness was rather peculiar for an Easter Sunday, the one day of the year that I believed deserved a golden crown.

Shaking the thought aside, I swept through the open door that led to a barely warmer entry. Maneuvering downstairs, I surveyed the transformation that had taken place in around an hour. Dresser drawers marked a path winding through the disfigured room, colorful clothing creeping over their sides. How foreign they appeared to my eyes, accustomed to seeing a couch, a TV, and few bookcases occupying the basement space.

Yet I recognized the items: my sister-in-law Autumn's sparkling tops, Timothy's electronics and coin collection, and sections of my nephew Justice's crib. I just wasn't certain that they belonged here.

"I didn't love change."

Of course, I delighted to hear my nephew's laugh and to watch his rosy cheeks turn still pinker as he grinned and buried his face in his favorite panda stuffed animal, aptly dubbed "Po." I loved Justice. I loved Timothy and Autumn.

But I didn't love change.

Relieved to divest myself of the burden that I carried, I mounted the creaky steps leading to the kitchen. As the upstairs flashed into view, I noticed my parents and Timothy and Autumn standing motionless in an awkward circle amidst the cluttered entry. Autumn's head sank, her shoulder-length raven locks hugging her pale face. Quietly, I studied the solemn group, pensive.

Daddy spoke softly, using that same grave tone that still demands attention. "We just got a call from David. He took Anne to the emergency room this morning, and the doctors did some tests. She has cancer."

I made no reply, not because I was overcome with grief, but because I was confused. I had heard of the dreaded cancer. The disease plagued some people, but surely not my brother David's sweet wife. And not on Easter Sunday.

At seventeen years old, I could not fathom death, having only witnessed the deaths of grandparents and of people not related to me. Certainly, I had experienced the normal, childish phase of fearing death and of crawling into bed each night terrified that the house might catch on fire. But since then, I had developed a sensation akin to indifference. My greatest concerns centered on my job and on my writing. Besides, wouldn't God heal Anne?

A few days later, my parents asked me to travel with them to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to visit Anne in the hospital.

"You can always call off work," Mama suggested, capturing my hands within her own soft grasp. Her long, slender fingers clutched mine.

"But how long would we be gone?" I asked, lamenting how much time a trip would rob from my studies and from my job.

Daddy twirled his glasses between his thumb and index finger. "It's hard to say."

I debated for several moments, weighing the possibility of Anne's passing against my desire to remain within my comfortable home. I imagined the nauseating regret that I would endure should I forsake my last chance to see her. "I'll go," I at last informed them, hesitant.

For the remainder of the morning, an unusual bustle crowded our small gray house. Emptying the squeaky drawers of my grandfather's old, scarred desk, I collected

all of my twelfth-grade schoolbooks and stowed them inside a bag. My parents scrambled in all directions, gathering everything that we could possibly need for the eight-hour drive to Green Bay. Meanwhile, Timothy and Autumn once again packed some of their things inside their fern-green Ford Explorer. Not until we had piled into our vehicles and begun the caravan north did I comprehend the reality of the situation and the uncertainty of the future.

A few mornings later, we visited Anne for the first time. Slowly, we filed into her sterile hospital room, David leading the way. I gradually approached the bed, watching as the graceful form of a young woman took shape beneath the customary white sheets. Her face had changed since Christmas, now bearing the appearance of age, drawn and weary. Her hands, older and more uncertain, spread feebly upon the covers. Golden waves attempted to conceal her thin shoulders. When she recognized us, her lips slowly crinkled upward in a welcoming smile, her face softening as it always had.

"Slowly, we filed into her sterile hospital room."

While my parents described the trip and made trifling conversation, I stood at Anne's bedside, unable to breathe a word. Swallowing hard, I studied the room. In the faint light that broke through the covered window, I examined the IV as liquid dripped through the narrow tube.

I would never awake from this dream. Anne really had cancer.

Noticing my silence, Mama fixed her blue-green eyes upon me. "Why don't you tell Anne one of your stories

from work?" she suggested, hugging her arms beneath the sleeves of her pink jacket.

Work felt so distant at that moment.

"Well, the other day, I accidentally called a man a woman," I began, awkwardly shifting my feet. I continued to explain how I had mistaken a man for a woman because of his long hair and had made an utter fool of myself at the table before fleeing to tell the manager of my embarrassment.

As I related the details, Anne watched me intently. Her pale lips spread in a weak smile in spite of the story's insignificance. She spoke little and very softly.

A few minutes later, we padded out of the room so that Anne could rest. Sunshine streamed through the window at the end of the hall—a welcome greeting after the shadows.

In that bright hallway, David praised Anne's perseverance throughout the ordeal. "She is always kind to the nurses on the floor and never complains. Everyone loves her." Grief and pride flickered within his blue eyes.

Tears stung my own eyes as I remembered how he had hugged me so tightly when we had first arrived, his full beard scratching my cheek. I wondered at Anne's fortitude—how she remained content even as she suffered with the barest hope of survival. Although I enjoyed more blessings than I deserved, I had still debated if the trip would be worth the time that it distracted from my life.

That selfishness nearly kept me from experiencing Anne's sweet smile one last time. She lived to see just one more Sunday.

A week later found us sitting in the living room of David's rented house near the Michigan border. One of the most peculiar houses I had ever beheld, its foreboding walls brandished pieces of hideous modern art. Faceless figures with bulbous heads glared down at me.

David sank into the couch resting against the wall and heaved his foot, strangled in an enormous black cast, onto a footrest. Expressionless, he leaned his broad back against the cushions.

Dropping onto the other couch beside my parents, I tucked myself into the tiny space remaining. I played with my phone in a vain hope that the Wi-Fi would work. It didn't.

"Faceless figures with bulbous heads glared down at me."

Before long, David began to recount stories of Anne, recalling their sweet life together. As he spoke, his troubles seemed to diminish. While the wrinkles were ironed out from his brow, his face assumed a slightly faded version of that casual grin he frequently displayed. I marveled that he could content himself with mere memories.

"One time she didn't notice a bug in her drink, and she almost swallowed it," he mentioned, lost in the joy of recollection. "After she spit it out, she looked like she might throw up."

I smiled, amused, but I could not tear my eyes from the lonely couch, its only occupant far from reality. Anne, who should have been by his side, was gone.

Eventually tired of sitting squashed on the couch, I crawled behind it and plopped down on my stomach next to the bags that we had left tumbled along the corner of the living room after arriving. Reaching inside one of my bags, I retrieved a notebook barely dented with the start of a story. I flipped through the blue-lined pages until I found an empty one. Then, propping myself up on my elbows, I cradled my ballpoint pen in my hand and pressed the tip of the pen to the crisp paper.

The words did not flow as quickly as I had anticipated. I meant to write a grand essay on true love. In fact, I had been pondering the scheme for months, believing that I knew precisely what love entailed. Yet my epic endeavor failed. I simply could not summon the words.

That night, I struggled to sleep, stuffed inside a sleeping bag on the hard floor of my brother's weight room. Chills raced down my spine as cold air crept through the house, and my pants and shirt rumpled beneath me as I constantly exchanged sides. I thought of David, who was sleeping on the couch in the living room. I could hardly fathom how exhausted he must be, both physically and mentally. How would he handle the day to follow?

The morning of the funeral dawned cold and cloudy. My family and I huddled at the front of the auditorium at Redemption Hill, the church where David led worship and outreach. Lights illuminated the stage, shining on numerous bouquets arranged in a stairstep pattern on either side of the coffin at the foot of the steps. Elevated on a stand resembling an easel, a recent picture of David and Anne smiled over the gleaming white coffin.

"I love that picture," David commented, gazing at the beaming faces pressed cheek to cheek against the background of a flowering tree. He must have envisioned himself in front of that same tree right then, holding his darling Anne close to his heart.

"It's very nice," Mama agreed, wrapping one comforting arm around his wide shoulders.

My siblings battled tears, clinging to one another as I had never before seen. Faint sniffles startled the silence.

Meanwhile, I observed the closed coffin, pondering its separation from us. I wondered why it was not open, as had been the custom at other funerals I had attended.

Soon a line of friends and in-laws approached David,

offering encouraging words with faltering smiles. I was surprised when my brother began to reassure them instead. In my childish mind, I could only think to cry; yet David focused on the precious moments that he and Anne had shared and on the great God who had yearned to welcome her home.

As the funeral proceeded, Anne's mother commended her daughter's kindness and selflessness. I watched as her eyes turned glassy with unshed tears and as her hands trembled to open letters that Anne had written. I tried to imagine those dear parting words at my own funeral. Would people admire my family life, praise my fortitude in trials, or even mention my faith in God? Recognizing my flaws, I knew that they couldn't.

"David's unabashed faith astonished me."

The funeral concluded with David slowly mounting the blue-carpeted steps ascending to the stage. Perching on a tall-legged chair, he balanced his guitar on one big knee. As his strong, deft fingers strummed the guitar, his rich voice joined in, the two melodies harmonizing in a humble praise to God that permeated the silent sanctuary. His voice wavered with emotion.

While the other guitarists on stage continued to play, David cautiously lumbered down the stairs, gingerly placing his injured foot upon each step. As he drew near the coffin, his back facing his audience, he raised his brawny arms to heaven, palms uplifted. With bowed head, he silently surrendered Anne to his Lord.

David's unabashed faith astonished me. Standing with the rest of the congregation, tissues crumpled within my

cold hand and slathered with slimy mucus, I could not comprehend the sight. I had never attended a funeral so intent on glorifying God in spite of death and separation.

I watched as David stood before the coffin, his love for Anne mingled with his reverence for God. Above his muscular frame, fixed upon the stone wall behind the stage, hung a wooden cross.

In that crowded auditorium, soft worship music warming every heart, I witnessed truer love, for God and for man, than I could ever wish to pen.

Shannon Connolly

Plain and Worthy

Self-image should not be what is seen in a mirror but what is seen through God's eyes.

One Sunday in the fall of 2017, I sat in church with a small group of friends. The preacher—whose name and face I can't remember—stood up from the guest chair on stage and moseyed to the pulpit.

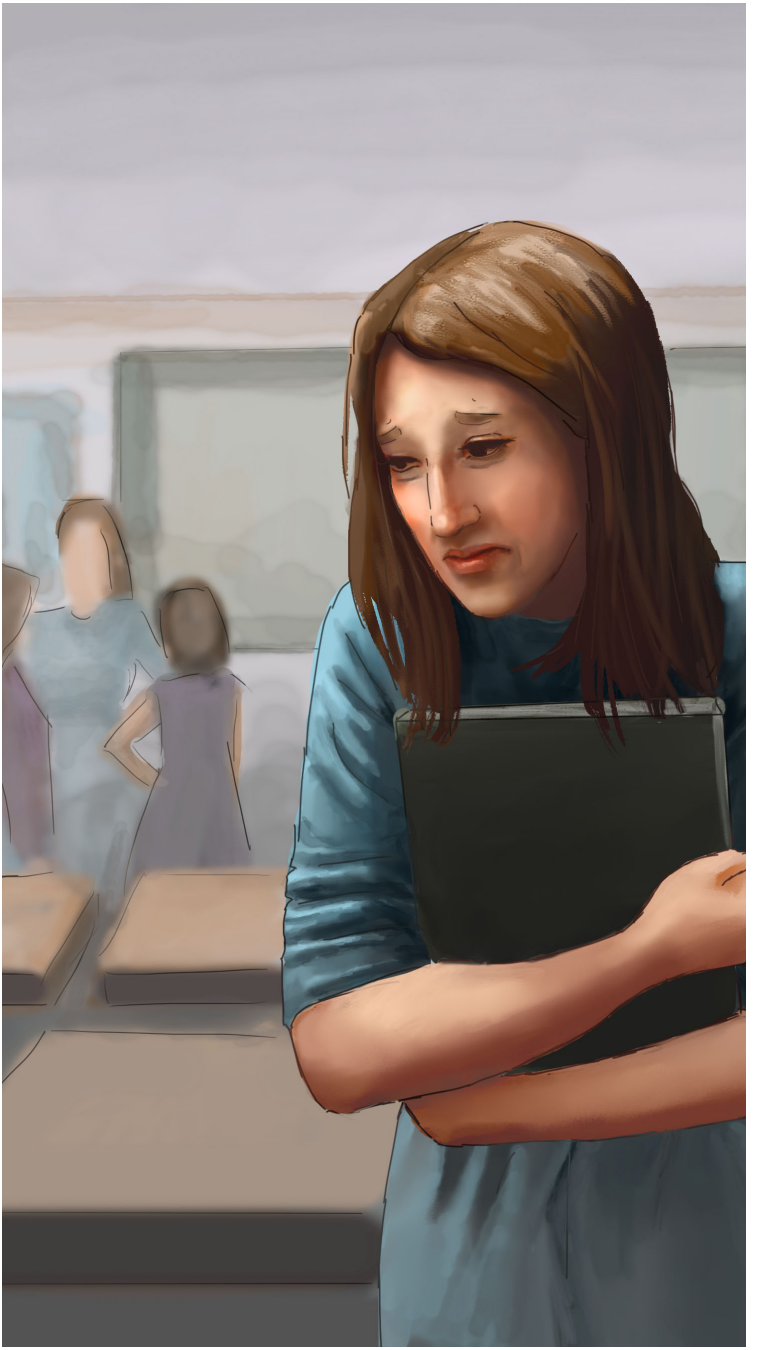
"Good morning," he said with a jolly, booming voice and a smile that lit up many faces in the auditorium.

"Now, everyone knows about the story of Rachel and Jacob, but today I want to look at the story of Leah," he said.

My heart swelled with joy. Leah had been my favorite Bible character ever since I was seventeen, and now it was her time to shine. I couldn't wait for what the preacher had to say.

"You may think that the title of the sermon is offensive, but it's not supposed to be," the preacher stated, pausing as he scanned the audience for a reaction. "The title of my sermon is 'The Ugly Sister.'"

What? How on earth can this title not be offensive? I know that she isn't pretty, but calling her plain ugly—that's discouraging, I thought to myself. *How on earth is this sermon going to be good?* Little did I know, forty minutes later, he would prove that the title was absolutely fitting for the sermon and for my favorite Bible heroine.



Growing up, I had read about different characters in the Bible, but Leah captivated my interest more than any other. Many of my Christian friends chose characters like David or Ruth as their favorites, and as much as I respected those characters, I connected more with Leah. Like Leah, I felt unworthy, insecure, and ugly.

In high school, I felt as if I were the Leah among many Rachels. Leah most likely didn't feel beautiful compared to her sister Rachel, and I didn't feel beautiful compared to the other girls around me. Some of the girls at my school had cute sneakers, hairstyles, and backpacks. Their makeup emphasized their already beautiful features, and everything they did seemed to be flawless. They were funny, outgoing, and beautiful. They charmed the crowd, and even charmed the high school boys.

"Why can't I be like the other girls?"

Compared to the Rachels of my school, I was the ugly and insecure wannabe with greasy hair, clumps of off-tone foundation blended onto my face, and eyeliner smudges on my oily skin. I hated my split ends, gapped teeth, and large raven-like nose. I tried to do my makeup right, but I never knew the right techniques. I tried to wear the cute sneakers, but I couldn't find any that were cute enough. I tried to have straight hair, but humidity would turn it into ugly waves. I tried to have a cute backpack, but there were none that were cheap. I tried to be a Rachel like other girls, but whatever I did, I remained a Leah.

"Why can't I be like the other girls?" seventeen-year-old me asked one day after school. I sat on my bed, crying. Mom tried to console me, and even though I appreciated her efforts, it was no use. I had lost hope. There was nothing I could do to change. I often contemplated why

God made me this way: different from everybody else. Not only did I have a large nose and sharp features but also wasn't skinny like the other girls. I just had to accept that I was always going to be ugly and unworthy, just like Leah.

One day in eleventh grade, I rushed back into my classroom during recess to get a notebook that I had forgotten. Walking in, I saw someone I considered my friend. She talked and laughed with two popular girls. Since their backs were toward me, they didn't see me walk past. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, and I couldn't help but listen in on the conversation.

"Have you seen her shoes? They're so ugly," one of the girls said, all three of them laughing.

They're gossiping, I thought to myself. I thought about leaving, but curiosity made me stay. I continued to eavesdrop.

"She was asking me if I was going to camp, but she already knew that I wasn't. She's so weird," said the girl who I thought was my friend.

"She's stupid," the other popular girl added.

I looked down at my secondhand shoes and thick rolled-up white socks. My heart shattered. They were talking about me. *She was supposed to be my friend. We grew up together, and we went to the same church. Why was she laughing about a question that I asked?* I thought to myself. The only reason I asked her a question I already knew was because I was so nervous to talk to her. I missed talking to her, but—apparently—she didn't miss talking to me.

At that moment, whatever confidence and worth I thought I had went up in smoke. I didn't think such hurtful gossip would come from someone I considered a friend. If my "friend" found it necessary to pick on me, then there must have been a reason. I believed she said those things simply because I wasn't like her.

"Why did You make me like this?" I questioned God, as I—once again—cried in my room. I questioned Him not only about the way I looked, but also the way I carried myself. Why did I always mess up? Why was I always second-best? Why didn't anybody ever take the time to hear me out? I wasn't weird, and I wasn't stupid. I had a personality; it was just hidden behind my insecurity.

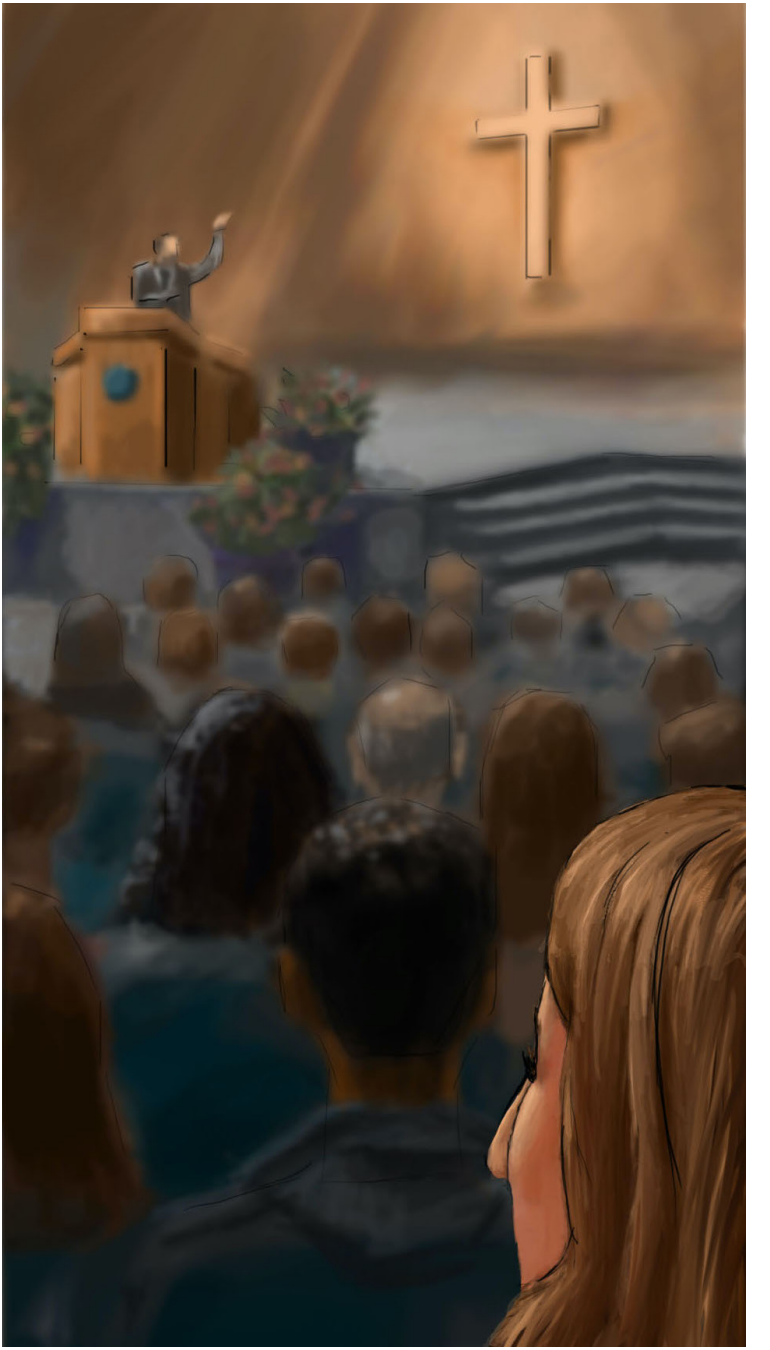
"Why did You make me like this?"

Throughout the rest of high school, and even after graduating, I believed the lie that my flaws—whether my plain features or something else—kept me from being liked, and even loved. I believed the lie that I wasn't beautiful like the other girls, and that I could never fit in. I wish I realized what the true meaning of beauty and worth was in high school, but I never did.

As the sermon concluded on that autumn Sunday, I sat in my seat, completely amazed by what I had just heard. I finally understood why the title "The Ugly Sister" was the perfect fit. Throughout the sermon, the preacher beautifully described Leah's story, and as she transformed, I did too.

I realized it was never Leah's outward appearance that made her ugly, but rather her outlook on life. Leah believed the lie that Jacob would finally love her if she gave him sons. She believed the lie that she had to work to feel beautiful and worthy. She tried to find her love and worth through the assurance of others, and so did I.

However, as Leah immersed herself in God's truth, she finally began to find her worth. Leah realized her husband would never love her as much as he would love Rachel; but Leah found that God loved her more in a single moment than anyone else could in a lifetime. The more Leah



looked to God for assurance, the more she began to walk confidently with Him, just as I did.

Throughout our trials, both Leah and I no longer saw ourselves as unworthy, insecure, or ugly. Through Christ, we are worthy, secure, and beautiful in His eyes. Both Leah and I finally found contentment in who God made us to be, when we found the true source of our worth.

Occasionally, I still fall into the trap and believe the lie that I'm not worthy or beautiful enough, just like Leah probably did multiple times. The difference is, I keep refocusing my heart on who I am in Christ, and dwelling on His truths instead of the lies that the world tells me. To the world, Leah and I may be plain women, but to God, we are worthy.

And that's what truly matters.

Rebecca Ramsey

The Old Front Door

When the old front door was replaced, I felt trapped in the house with no way out.

I remember the old front door. Before it got replaced several years ago, the front door of the little New England ranch I lived in all my life had been a sturdy slab of light brown wood, windowless and with an unusual golden handle—unusual because it sat in the very center of the door about stomach level. At the time, I never questioned the handle's peculiar placement. It was normal—when I needed a breath of sunshine—to reach toward the center, twist the golden metal to the side, and pull the heavy door inward.

Through that door, my family and I passed only on certain occasions—to take our Rottweiler for a walk, to check the mail, or to stand on the porch in the crisp of evening and trace Orion's belt with our eyes. Then we would once again retire back through the strange Hobbit door, giving the knob a rough tug to secure the latch and prevent the bugs from following us into our secret chamber.

The characteristics of that old door stand out in my memory vividly—the coolness of its golden knob, the heaviness of its movements, the creak of its rusty hinges. It was larger and tougher than other doors in the house. The side door was much less sturdy with its thin wood and

small silver handle. When the side door opened, it swung easily, gasping like a tunnel breeze. But when the front door opened, it careened on its hinges with an ancient sound that I can only compare to a mighty oak swaying when the wind is strong enough. The front door seemed so strong that I imagined a tornado as big and powerful as the one that swept Dorothy to Oz could enter our town and the door would not be disturbed. After the sky calmed, it would be stuck in the soil, still upright and unharmed.

"We would once again retire back through the strange Hobbit door."

Despite its feeble structure, the side door was used more often. Mom and I preferred to use it whenever our venture required a vehicle's assistance, as it led to the garage. It was through that door Dad went to work and Mom and I went shopping or visited a friend's house. It was through that door that we carried in our groceries from the car and Dad's hammers and screwdrivers from his toolbox. The side door was a place for action, the start of journeys beyond our half acre of land. Whenever we left through it, we were motivated by ambition, pulled from the safety of our house into the outside world of commerce, work, and toil. Feet that passed it wore church shoes and work boots.

But the front door—it was different. I passed it with bare feet. I had nowhere to go. Nowhere but outside—to stand in the broad daylight of a summer's afternoon, to take in the chill of an autumn's evening. It had a sense of simplicity to it.

We opened the front door to watch the rain pelt against the deck during a summer rainstorm and to

stand in amazement of the double rainbows that formed afterward in the distant sky across from us. We opened the front door to greet my grandmother when she visited, carrying armfuls of groceries for our family and a stuffed toy for our dog. We opened the door in the winter to measure the snow on our deck with Dad's measuring tape; and on the night of every Fourth of July, Dad opened the door carrying a lighter, and Mom followed with multicolored sparklers. I'd take one and watch it blink against the darkness and their smiling faces.

Sometime around my teen years, my family decided to replace the old front door. I remember my dad's yellow toolbox placed in the corner of the living room like a tombstone. Dad worked all day prying the hinge pins loose and working the door from its frame. In its place, he installed a fresh white door with a glass window in its center and its handle in the usual spot. Still, I found myself reaching toward the center of the door and unable to hold onto anything.

"I felt stuck in place with no exit."

It was also around that year that I began to change. I resigned myself to my bedroom more and more, and I fell out of touch with the outside world, trapped within myself and within the house. I could look through the front door window now; I didn't need to open the door.

I felt stuck in place with no exit, isolated from the thoughts and emotions I used to love. I went on fewer walks with the family; I hid my face behind the TV and computer screens. When I did leave the house, I left only through the side door, always on a mission—somewhere to go, someone to see, something to do.

The rainstorms pelted without my acknowledgement; the rainbows had no observer. Fourth of Julys were spent inside because I didn't want any mosquito bites. Life went on like a rolling tide of moments without pause, yet I didn't appear to move forward. The more I pushed, the more I felt restrained, as if a locked door stood between me and freedom to grow. Then, one day, my perspective changed.

I stood behind my chair at the kitchen table, clutching the curve of its wooden backrest. It was nearly dinnertime, but I didn't want to sit.

Mom creaked the old oven open, and the smell of cooked chicken escaped.

"Why are you so angry?" Mom asked, a potholder in her hand.

"The touch of the wood felt familiar."

My pride rose like a buoy in the water.

"Why shouldn't I be?" I sneered. "I do my best; I work all day, and I'm still treated like a child."

Mom wordlessly placed the browned chicken on the table, and her attention turned back to me. Her eyes—green as clovers—were as bright as ever.

"You're my child," she said softly. "And it never seemed to bother you before."

My frigid exterior broke, and I turned my face away. The white front door stood beyond, its window casting an oval of light onto the gray carpet in the living room. The room seemed so warm. I needed fresh air—an escape, freedom. I wandered to the front door, opened it, and stepped out onto the porch.

I leaned over the porch railing, still damp from recent rain. The touch of the wood felt familiar, like the old

carved semblance of a friend. The front yard gleamed in a sheen of water, a glow reflecting off every grass blade. The smell was nostalgia.

The door through which I had passed was different, and so was I, but the feeling was the same. I stood on the porch, lost in the quietness of a spring day, broken only by the distant rumble of a car's motor or the bark of the neighbor's dog, and I cried because I remembered. I remembered the smell of fresh rain, the squeak of sneakers on the wet wooden porch, the glow of the rainbow in the distant sky. I remembered how it felt to be a child, and I accepted that I wasn't one anymore.

That door had closed, but another one stood in its stead. Finally, after years of feeling stuck in place, I walked through the new door.

Valentina Novak

Addicted to Gymnastics

Possible symptoms of addiction: courage, determination, and—crippling pain?

I tried to shake the tension from my shoulders as I stepped onto the blue mat and up to the balance beam. *Chin up. Shoulders back. Feet together.* My coaches had drilled the instructions into me so deeply by now that hearing them repeating in my thoughts as I practiced was as natural—and nearly as necessary—as breathing.

I saluted the imaginary judges, signifying the start of my routine. Then I mounted, carefully swinging my leg over to straddle the beam. *Knees straight! Toes pointed! Chest up!* This was the fifth or sixth time I had repeated the routine in the last half hour, but every time was still a challenge.

I worked through the steps—*swing, squat, stand, remember to breathe, point, step, turn, stick-it, step, leap, pause, two steps, tiptoe and turn, one jump, tuck jum*—

Never mind.

I slipped on the second jump, and my foot slid off the smooth leather that covered the four-inch metal beam. I twisted, trying to catch my balance, but that only positioned my body to take more of the impact.

Whump.

My inner right thigh slammed into the beam during my body's clumsy descent to the blue mat four feet below. Lying on my back, I lifted my leg to get a better view of the wide bruise that began to develop.

"Miss Diana!" I called my coach.

A short but intimidating woman stopped speaking with my mother and came to see what was wrong.

"Valentina? Oh. You'll be okay," she said. "Stay there. I'll get you an ice pack. You can ice it for a few minutes, but then get back to work."

Despite her tone, it was a nice response. I usually would get a lecture about what I'd been doing wrong to cause my fall, but since I was the only one who came to class on one of the hottest, busiest days of the summer, she seemed to be going easy on me . . . if going easy consisted of making me work on my worst areas—the balance beam and bars—for all three hours of practice.

I lay beneath the beam, holding an ice pack to the aching bruise on my thigh and rehearsing my routine in my head.

"We were odd ones, I'll admit."

Competitive gymnastics was my life—*was*. I started when I was almost six years old. For eight years, gymnastics took up almost as much time in my life as school did. That is—until my body could no longer keep up.

Gymnastics was exhausting because of the long, grueling hours of practice, but it was also rewarding! Addicting! People outside the gymnastics club couldn't understand why we enjoyed working as hard as we did—all year round in the extreme heat of the summer and icy cold of the winter. We were odd ones, I'll admit.

Our bodies seemed to crave the exercise. I've heard that hormones or, more accurately, endorphins create a physical addiction to working out. That was definitely true for us. Our bodies created endorphins from our workouts that made us happy and satisfied. The burning muscles or aching lungs after a cardio exercise were signs—signs that we would soon be rewarded with healthier bodies that could do more, be more, and grow more!

"Gymnastics was especially addicting for me."

Pride also contributed to our addiction. Whenever we learned a new flip or perfected a routine, we felt satisfied.

I did it! we would scream inwardly as our coaches and teammates high-fived us and praised our hard work. We were proud to be gymnasts who could flex and tumble and roll and swing and twist in unique and challenging ways.

Gymnastics was especially addicting for me. My perfectionism and competitive spirit made it exhilarating to practice the same skill over and over and over and over. Each time, I'd get better, I'd learn more, and I'd get closer to achieving the ideal form.

Gymnastics also gave me a community. I belonged to a group of girls who were focused, hardworking, and fun-loving. Regardless of a girl's lifestyle, home life, background, or personality, if she loved gymnastics, she'd fit right in.

I had the privilege to be part of the highest class in our gymnastics club, which was simply called Team. Members of Team were usually the oldest, most dedicated, and most knowledgeable girls in the club. We were also the only class that competed against other gyms at competitions

called meets. Reaching this class was hard because it required three to four years of experience and a certain degree of talent. The members of Team were used as examples for the younger classes to look up to and learn from. I was often put in charge of younger classes when the coaches had to step out because the coaches knew that I was responsible and capable of teaching the younger girls.

One day, when I was about twelve years old, our head coach, Miss Diana, gathered all the members of Team. Miss Diana was always confident, strong, and in charge. That's why this meeting was so memorable; it was one of the first times I ever saw her look uncertain.

Miss Diana told us that a group of girls in our new batch of beginner's class gymnasts had shown a lot of potential. She wanted to create a trial class called Pre-team, which would enable the girls to improve their skills by learning more challenging routines. If the trial went well, Pre-team would become a permanent class.

"These girls will be joining your practices," said Miss Diana. "I'll need you to help me out by accepting them and looking after them because they'll be skipping ahead of the classes you had to take to join Team." Miss Diana looked at us, seeming to expect a negative reaction, but none came. We agreed easily, and if any members had hard feelings about it, they never expressed them.

"Those young girls helped shape who I am today."

The next week, five girls, ranging from ages four to six, started practicing alongside girls twice their age. They were taught advanced skills and pushed nearly as hard as we were. And the members of Team became mentors

even more than before. Those young girls helped shape who I am today—through them, I saw my strengths and weaknesses more clearly than any other time I can remember.

I was considered a leader of Pre-team because my joyful patience and natural affinity for kids attracted them to me. Miss Diana later told me that she had never met someone who had more patience to work with children than I did—one of the most meaningful compliments I've ever received and a trait I hope to never lose.

One particularly dedicated member of Pre-team was named Rina. She was more stoic, focused, shy, and graceful than any other five-year-old I've ever met. Rina always kept to herself, so I felt lucky and blessed when she immediately became comfortable with me after I invited her to play a game with the other Pre-team girls.

Miss Diana adored Rina and was always asking the shy girl questions, but Rina would only answer with a shake or nod of her head. When Miss Diana asked something more complicated than a yes or no question, Rina would simply purse her lips and refuse to answer, knowing that she was being teased.

One day, Rina finally answered Miss Diana, and our coach almost didn't notice. She was midway through her next sentence when she paused and sharply turned back to Rina.

"D—did you just talk to me, Rina?" she asked incredulously.

Rina blushed.

Miss Diana was so overwhelmed that she ran to Rina, picked her up in a hug, and spun her around until Rina pried herself out of Miss Diana's arms and scrambled away to hide behind me. Rina refused to speak to Miss Diana again for a couple of months after that, but they developed

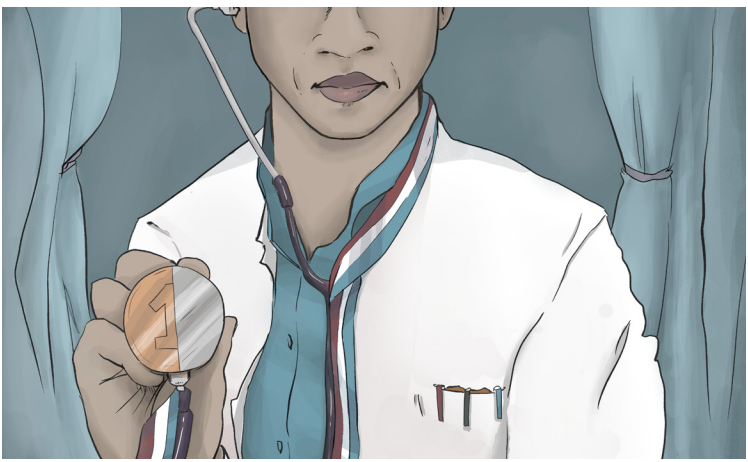
a relationship in that moment that would last throughout Rina's years in gymnastics club.

When I think of gymnastics, I think of these warm memories, not the pain, the soreness, or the difficulty. Our club developed our confidence, our willingness to try and to face failure, our nurturing and mentoring attitudes, and our pride in our accomplishments. But what I appreciate most from those years is the opportunity I had to be a part of a supportive community.

That's why I was so devastated when I had to give it all up.

In the last few years that I spent in gymnastics club, I began experiencing excruciating pain in my joints. Injuries are common in gymnastics. So when one day, my back gave out mid-handspring, I didn't feel too worried. My coaches laid me on a mat off to the side, and I just listened to the sounds of practice going on around me. It was calming, as though I were listening to the sounds of home. I didn't know I was about to lose that home forever.

When things didn't get better, I realized that this wasn't just another normal injury.



Over a year went by. I went to countless doctors, therapists, and specialists, but none of them had any answers—nothing to make me well enough to return to gymnastics. My parents did all they could, and I continued to search for answers—all while my back and knees gave me some of the worst pain I ever had in my life. Still, I didn't completely give up on returning to gymnastics club until I spoke with my family doctor, Doctor Kan.

"Do you love gymnastics, Valentina?" Doctor Kan asked as I sat on the exam table.

The answer was obvious—*Yes!* I nodded.

"You can't do it anymore," he said in an emotionless, professional tone as he proceeded through the last formalities of our appointment, probably unaware that I didn't process anything else he said. At only thirteen years old, my body had worn out. Mentally, I was ready to train; but, physically, my body was too overwhelmed by pain to cooperate.

"My mind felt as though it were blank and racing at the same time."

After the appointment, I sat in the car with my mother. My mind felt as though it were blank and racing at the same time. I felt numb.

"Oh, Tina. I'm so sorry," my mother whispered.

I opened my mouth to reassure her, but nothing came out. I was so sad that I couldn't even bring myself to cry, so my mother cried for me.

Months later, I finally received a specific answer from a doctor. He said I had hyperextension of the joints, meaning that my joints are so flexible they can bend beyond their normal limits. The constant pressure that I

had been putting on my joints was finally catching up with me. The discovery of my condition gave me a sense of peace and closure, but it couldn't even begin to cure my restlessness.

It was a strange adjustment, switching from my busy schedule to returning home from school and having nothing to do. It was a withdrawal from an addictive lifestyle. For months, I was lost: I didn't know what to do with my time. My body was too worn to be athletic, but what was I supposed to do instead?

My time was slowly filled with new, less active hobbies, yet my appreciation for my years in gymnastics club continued to grow. I can never return to those years, but I often find myself seeking the warm companionship of the gymnastics club in new avenues.

One of these avenues is the community of passionate people I joined through online forums. In these forums, much like in gymnastics club, people are encouraged to give 100 percent to the things they are passionate about, to accept other passionate people, and to encourage others to do the same. I may not be able to push myself every day to learn a new gymnastic stunt, but I can still surround myself with people who encourage me to push myself to reach greater heights.

"I will never forget what I learned during my time in gymnastics."

I'm no longer addicted to gymnastics. The days and hours spent rehearsing routines that pushed me to my limits and beyond as I tried to reach the next level of proficiency have passed. The electric heat of the adrenaline rush that I felt when perfecting a new routine has been

replaced by a steady burning passion to excel in everything that I do. I no longer spend every moment training to become a better gymnast, but that training prepared me to handle every moment in a way that has helped me become a better person. I will never forget what I learned during my time in gymnastics club. Because of my training, I can face each day determined—unafraid to face unknown challenges—and proud of having been teammates with some of the most talented people I've ever known.

Hannah Bryan

The Fear of the Red Pen

I have a love-hate relationship with red pens.

I sat at my dining room table, feet swinging in midair, too short to touch the ground. A stack of wide-ruled paper and a freshly sharpened number two pencil were on the table in front of me.

I had been assigned my very first paper for a class—a one-page book report. My dad had emphasized to me the importance of making sure my handwriting was neat and clear. He told me to remember to indent my paragraphs and use commas. Determined, I clutched my pencil in my hand and slowly, carefully, carved out the words for my book report. I searched my brain for ideas, willing the words to come. I considered giving up halfway, but I kept pushing through. This report was impossible, but I kept persevering. Finally, I reached the end of the page. With a flourish, I punctuated the end of my last sentence and leaned back in my chair to survey my masterpiece.

I ran to my dad, excited to show him this testament to my best penmanship and greatest literary accomplishment.

"Good job," he said as he took the paper from me. Satisfied with my work, I ran off to play elsewhere, but it wasn't long until my dad called me back to the dining room.

"I have a few corrections for you," he said.

A little annoyed that anyone could find fault in my work, I reluctantly looked at the paper. What I saw horrified me. My dad's signature Pilot gel pen had left inky stains all over my pristine paper.

"I reluctantly looked at the paper. What I saw horrified me."

I cried.

Confused, my dad tried to console me.

"Every paper has several drafts," he explained. "You have to write a new one."

I cried harder. I thought the corrections should have been written in pencil so I could erase them. I didn't want to start writing all over again.

Eventually, I stopped crying and began the first rewrite of my first paper.

As my education continued, I was assigned many more papers. I learned the benefits of rewrites, but I cringed every time I got a rough draft back from a teacher. Red ink scratched out words and inserted commas. I despised the intruding color on my pristine black-and-white pages. My goal was to have as little red ink on the pages as possible. I didn't like someone telling me I was doing something wrong. To me, the red ink screamed, "You failed!"

I hated it, and every correction stung. Like a branding iron, the red ink burned itself into my vision. I worked to make sure my papers met the level of perfection I thought was necessary. When my papers still came back with a few red-inked suggestions, I brushed them off. *My teacher was just looking for something to write on there,* I thought. My papers were fine.

When I came to college, I had the same view. In high school, I had eventually reached the point where I had very little red pen on my pages, but the college teachers were not looking for high school quality. During freshman year, when the papers were short and the teachers lenient, I obtained, what I perceived to be, an acceptable level of red pen marks.

But then sophomore year. This was my first semester taking actual writing classes and not just general education courses. I walked into my creative writing class, nervous but ready to write. A short, dark-haired teacher with glasses and a red pen tucked behind his ear stood at the front of the classroom.

"Hey, guys. I'm Mr. Wainwright," he said enthusiastically. "And this is going to be a fun semester because you're my first class!" He ended most sentences with a laugh.

I eagerly listened to the lectures as we prepared to write our first papers. After a few drafts and peer reviews, we submitted our assignments. I was satisfied with my

story, although I was nervous to see how an upper-level writing teacher would grade it. Mr. Wainwright had told us that he had been an editor for eighteen years before becoming a teacher. I meticulously checked my work, secretly hoping that a teacher with so much experience would have no corrections for me. A few weeks later, we got our papers back.

"You guys really did great on this," Mr. Wainwright told us. "Now, don't freak out when you see these. I tend to write on papers a lot."

He handed back my paper. The first page dripped with red ink—and the second and the third. My eyes widened as I flipped through the pages and saw dozens of notes and corrections on every page. Mr. Wainwright's neat, rounded handwriting sprawled between each line of double-spaced text.

A part of me was crushed. Was my paper that bad? As I thumbed through the pages, I realized not all of the marks were corrections. Some were suggestions, and a few were even compliments. The suggestions were helpful—things I hadn't noticed or thought about, and he was right about all the corrections. Even though he had told us not to worry, I still felt a little like a failure. I had high expectations for myself, and I hadn't met them.

One day during class, Mr. Wainwright brought us the rough draft of one of his college projects.

"Go ahead! Take a look!" he handed it to a student in the front row. "Just don't read it too closely," he added with a laugh. "I want you guys to see how much editing I did. There's no such thing as a perfect draft."

When it was my turn to flip through the pages, I was shocked by the number of corrections. Whole sections were crossed out with "rewrite" sprawled next to them. Even Mr. Wainwright had massive amounts of corrections to make. If he needed that much correction, then surely I must need twice as much.

Every paper I got back oozed red, but Mr. Wainwright didn't hate my papers. I began to notice the red pen wasn't as terrifying. Compliments normally followed corrections, and the amount of writing didn't seem to affect my grade. I began to look forward to getting papers back with lots of writing—not just in Mr. Wainwright's classes, but in others. The red pen didn't mean failure. It meant help.

I had plenty of room for improvement—I knew that—but the only way I could improve was to receive those corrections. I had been afraid of correction for so long that I hadn't allowed it to help me grow and improve. My teachers didn't expect perfection from me—they expected me to learn.

Now, I am disappointed by papers with hardly a mark. When I edit my papers, I cover them in pen. I still can't bring myself to use a red pen, though—I find it too jarring. My classmates and I exchange papers, asking one another to look things over. We've learned the value of an extra set of eyes with a red pen in hand.

My fear of correction hasn't disappeared entirely, but I have learned that correction is not malicious. My dad didn't mean to make me cry when he corrected my paper—he was trying to help me. The teachers who came

after him weren't trying to tell me what a failure I was. They were trying to help me grow.

"Correction is not malicious."

I don't think anyone likes correction naturally, but all of us need it from time to time, whether it's writing or in any other area of life. I'm still learning to accept correction gracefully, but at least I no longer burst into tears at the sight of red ink on my paper.

Valentina Novak

Grand

Sometimes I feel small in the grandness of a big world, but its vastness reminds me of my great journeys.

My parents weren't watching. They were too caught up admiring the view to overly regulate my sister's and my behavior—it was vacation after all. I thought this was odd, since I remembered seeing signs depicting danger and warnings as we approached the boardwalk.

Yet my sister and I crouched as close to the edge of the wooden planks as we could, staring into the overwhelming colors of acidic waters beneath us. My mind was on edge as well, ready for my mother to scold us for practically lying on the ground and getting so close to the waters. But no scolding came. I was left to enjoy the swirling colors as long as I liked, only moving to catch up when I noticed my parents were farther away than I felt comfortable with.

I have yet to see colors that have surpassed those vivid waters. The light and dark blues, deep orange, vivid red, green, and yellow—all dwelling together without getting muddled. A painter would struggle to capture every shade and depth of the colors that shimmered and changed as one walked among the acid pools.

Mother probably told us not to touch the waters, but perhaps she had not even needed to. As tempting as it was, I remembered that those bright colors should not be touched. Even if I didn't know the consequences of the action, an innate fear and awe bubbled up within me.

We were visiting Yellowstone National Park. The views were memorable to even the hard-to-impress child that I was. I've seen many great sights. My parents took advantage of our homeschool years to take my sister and me to national parks with whatever transportation they had—van, car, and even motorhome at one point.

When my father received around three weeks of vacation, we visited whatever national park or campground we wanted on our way to Seattle to see my great-grandmother Olga. We visited places like Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Fern Canyon, and the Redwoods.

Yet when I try to remember more details about these fantastic journeys that my parents dragged us on, I am disappointed in my childish inability to appreciate the wonders we encountered.

The world is grand.

No. Grand is an understatement.

I may not have a great memory, but in the muddled memories of those trips, I can see little glimpses of this grand world. And those glimpses make me feel incredibly . . . well . . . not grand.

On a trip to the Grand Canyon. I learned how grandness can sometimes be frightening.

During a severe thunderstorm, I became cold and wet. Because my little body was too thin and small to hold much heat, I bundled up in my dad's jacket and my mom's embrace. I huddled beside her on a crowded bench while we waited.

My breath caught in my throat with each thunderous growl of the storm. The thunder scratched and pounded

above the overhang that poorly sheltered us from the rain and winds ripping through the tour bus stop. I couldn't see very well because of the crowd crammed in that small space. We hoped that a tour bus would pick us up soon.

But when I did see—I was in awe. I felt that I should be terrified at the flashes of lightning cracking the sky like intricate branches of coral fans. The bolts sometimes dipped deep below out of view. If one followed the lightning down, one could see an even more astounding sight.

"But when I did see—I was in awe."

Thunderstorms at the Grand Canyon are very dangerous.

Dangerous enough that in response to the storm we were packed tightly on tour buses and dropped off at a large tourist shop until further notice. People still felt uneasy even while safely tucked away at the stop at the end of the tour line. We were far from our way home, our cars, our hotels, and we felt cold. The storm still crackled in the distance, many of the larger flashes out of view. The parking lot looked like a river.

We heard reports that a couple of people died in that thunderstorm, but that may have been just fearful gossip because of the awful intensity of that storm. Tour guides testify that many had died in the past from underestimating the power of thunderstorms in the Grand Canyon.

I remember my parents bought each of us a large sweatshirt with a picture of the Grand Canyon splayed across the front. Those dull blue sweatshirts still hang in our coat closets to this day, and every time we see them, we laugh about the trip to the Grand Canyon that mostly

consisted of huddling in a bus stop or tourist shop until it was safe enough to leave.

Another grand sight on our trip was Fern Canyon. To this day, more than a decade after that trip, the canyon still retains its magic qualities in my memories.

"Go on ahead," my mother shooed us toward the mouth of the lush canyon. My sister and I cast nervous glances behind us, unsure of what exactly she meant. We were going *alone*?

I didn't understand. Where were we going? And why weren't they coming? They must have told us, but maybe I was too busy playing with my stuffed toy in the back of the van when they explained.

"We were going alone?"

"Keep together," my dad suggested, "we'll meet you on the other side."

The other side of what?

Despite my hesitancy, I followed my older sister toward the canyon's direction. The walls of the canyon began to rise on both sides of us. The canyon quickly worked its magic on me. I didn't even notice my parents return to the car to meet us on the other side.

Fern Canyon is narrow, but not so tall that it blocks out the sun—just tall enough that you arch your neck up in awe. The canyon is covered in lush, bright ferns that move gently with the breeze. Large pebbled rocks big enough to walk on cover the ground. A creek crosses from one side of the canyon, trickling down the stone walls and cutting across the ground in relaxing little rivers. These rivers were perfect for an eight-year-old like me to jump over. The only thing the canyon lacks is fairies bobbing about the place—Fern Canyon feels so refreshing and

comforting that it's not hard to imagine them dashing from leaf to leaf.

I don't know how long my sister and I walked, but it didn't matter. We knew that we were free to meander. Comfortable with only each other for company, we wandered the canyon, taking in its views and sounds. We played lighthearted games as we walked or broke away from one other to inspect an odd stream or smooth log that caught our eye.

We eventually arrived at the end of the canyon trail to find our parents waiting at the car for us. We clambered into the van and left to continue our trip to Seattle. Although my parents just needed a quick break from driving, this experience gave me one of my favorite memories. My journey through the canyon had been so odd, enchanting, and sudden that I wasn't sure if I had dreamed it up until I asked my mother about the trip years after.

These adventures showed me that the world is truly grander than grand.

I have seen so much, but I have so much more to see. I could spend every moment of my time and every ounce of my ability traveling to see sights and never come close to seeing them all. But I think that is the greatest part of the world being so grand—it holds tremendous possibilities.

Taylor DiPaola

The Small Crab

I went to The Bahamas for the first time this past summer, and the wildlife there fascinated me, the crabs that live in rocky ledges by the shore. Watching them inspired me to write a terza rima about the sensorial experience of interacting with a crab.

I've left the shore of Treasure Cay,
And while the ocean 'round me flows,
Rocks rest by the edge of the sea.

The water rushes toward my nose
And splashes so that I do eat
And breathe the burning, salty hose.

A *clinky-clink* of teeny feet
Moves around the barrier rock
And halts, trying to be discreet.

Upon the creature, my eyes lock.
I study him in complete awe—
The leaping one with sideways walk.

As I reach out, his tiny claw
Upon my poor finger clinches.
His pincer's like a bitty saw.

With his continual pinches,
I learn my painful lesson well.
My curiosity quenches.

Thus, creatures of the sea may tell,
"We'd rather you not touch our shell."

Rebekah Gengarella

The Unexpected Trip

Peru was going to be the adventure of a lifetime and nothing could stop it, or so I thought.

I sat in a crammed airplane seat by the window. The plane seemed to gracefully glide across the sky as majestic sun rays shone through the distant wispy clouds. I still couldn't believe I was on a plane to Peru. No longer stuck in my little town, Peru was going to be the adventure of a lifetime and nothing could stop it.

The intercom overhead crackled as a voice began to speak.

"We have now reached our maximum altitude on this nonstop flight to Jorge Chávez International Airport," the flight attendant's cheery voice announced. "Feel free to walk around the cabin and, as always, thank you for flying with Southwest today."

"Janie, are you excited?" my friend Danielle exclaimed as she twisted in her small seat to face me.

"Yes," I replied with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. "I can hardly wait until we land in Peru!"

"Same! Although this flight is going to be the longest four hours of my life," I said. Turning, I glanced out the window. "At least the view is pretty."

"And just think, soon we're going to see all the beautiful houses and meet the people," Danielle said. Her

excitement erupted, and she turned back around to babble about the trip to the person sitting next to her.

As we flew past the light, airy clouds to our destination across the sea, I continued to sit and gaze out the window, letting my mind wander. Putting my hand subconsciously in my hoodie pocket, I felt the crisp corner of a folded-up paper. Pulling it out, I realized it was the note my mom had given to me before I left for the airport that morning. I unfolded it and silently read the words.

Praying for safe travels and a life-changing missions trip! Remember, God is with you always. Love you lots, Mom.

After glancing at the note a few more times, I shoved it back into my hoodie pocket. I looked back out the window, and my mind drifted to the adventures I'd have in Peru.

"My stomach dropped; something was wrong."

Lost in thought, I hadn't noticed that the plane had begun to shake until my elbow bounced up and smacked down on the armrest. Checking my watch for the time, I saw that it was only thirty minutes into the flight. One of the flight attendants rushed past my row, unfazed that she had bumped into the back of aisle chairs.

My stomach dropped; something was wrong.

She spoke in hushed tones with the other coworkers toward the front of the plane. I couldn't figure out what they were saying to each other, but it wasn't good. Suddenly, the plane shook again, and a passenger's cup of water spilt.

"It seems we are experiencing a bit of turbulence at this point," the pilot, a man with a deep and authoritative voice,

said over the intercom. "The seatbelt light is now turned on. Please return to your seats and put your trays and chairs back in the upright position until we've passed this bumpy patch. Thank you."

Clipping my tray to the back of the chair in front of me, I looked out my small box-sized window. Blue sky stretched for miles.

After a few minutes, the turbulence continued, and—if anything—the shaking seemed to be getting worse. Heart pounding, I scrambled to find my seatbelt as the pilot's voice came over the intercom again.

"So," he began, pausing before he continued. "It seems as if the turbulence we've encountered is more of an internal problem with the plane. Due to this, we will be landing much sooner than anticipated to ensure everyone's safety. We will begin our descent shortly."

The flight attendants disappeared behind the curtain in the front of the plane, and within seconds, we began our rapid descent to the ground.

The plane kept bouncing and shaking, making it impossible for anything to stay put. Makeup supplies rolled down the aisle, and items bounced off their owner's seats. The plane jolted violently, and multiple overhead lockers suddenly unlatched, and random bags flew out. The plane bounced up and down again, and I was forcefully lifted from my chair. Grasping the armchair, I shut my eyes. Screams and cries became white noise, and I could only hear the pounding of my heart.

When is this going to end?

Within minutes, the wheels hit the ground with a thud followed by a screeching sound. The airplane soon came to a sudden stop. An eerie quietness crept over the cabin for a long time before the seatbelt sign turned off. I didn't realize how much I was shaking until my fingers fumbled over the belt. I carefully unbuckled my seatbelt

and rose from the seat. Looking around, I saw that some of my friends sat in their seats unable to move, while others began searching the airplane for their items.

"I didn't realize how much I was shaking until my fingers fumbled over the belt."

Pastor Rick, a sturdy man with a thick beard, stood up and faced all of us. He was never one to be taken off guard easily and was always quick to action. Now, I barely recognized him as he stood shaking in front of me.

"All right, guys," he stammered for a moment before regaining his normal composure. "Is everyone okay?" His eyes darted across the plane, trying to locate all seventeen kids.

A faint cry came from the middle of the plane.

Pastor Rick, trying to calm himself, made his way to the center and found one of the younger girls sitting between two rows of seats.

Cradling her knees, the girl quietly cried, trying to avert the attention away from herself.

"Ellen, are you hurt?" Pastor Rick asked as he crouched down beside her.

"Um," she mumbled. Ellen lifted her head to wipe away fallen tears. "I fell out of my seat and hit my elbow." She motioned toward her elbow where there were various shades of purple and blue bruising.

"I'm scared. What's going to happen to us?" Ellen said, looking back at Pastor Rick with glistening eyes.

"I'm not sure," Pastor Rick confessed. "But I know God's going to take care of us." As he stood back up, Pastor Rick seemed to regain the confidence that the

emergency landing had temporarily stolen from him. Walking around the rest of the plane, he made sure all the teenagers were accounted for.

I looked around the cabin. Someone held a napkin to a kid's bleeding nose. Other than a couple bruised elbows and knees, everyone was okay.

"All right, everyone, remain in your seats until the pilot gives us further instructions," Pastor Rick said as he scanned the crowd.

As we waited, other passengers started talking amongst themselves. Danielle turned to face me through the head rests.

"You okay?" Danielle said out of breath. She still trembled from the shock of it all.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What about you?" I seemed to have calmed down a bit, and I was thankful for it.

"I'm fine. Do you realize we might have to head back home?" Danielle said, her concern evident.

Fear gripped me. *No, we can't go back home. I've waited so long for this trip!* I looked out the window where a field stretched out for miles. *If we weren't going back home, we would be stuck in this field for who knows how long. No, we can't stay here. We have to be in Peru.* I forced a smile for Danielle, hoping she would turn back around. Thankfully, she did.

Pulling out my phone, I scrolled aimlessly through old photos trying to make the time go by faster.

Thirty minutes later, the pilot, followed by two flight attendants, came out one by one and stood in front of us in a row. These people who, hours before, had looked so put together and in control, now came out with disheveled hair and hopeless faces.

The pilot glanced at the passengers. Clearing his throat, he put on a forced half-smile. "Fortunately, no one was badly injured during the landing, which is good. In addition to that, we were able to get in contact with

the nearby police department, and they are sending help. Until then, we ask that everyone exit the plane so we can thoroughly check for any other issues."

Great! I thought to myself. My blood began to boil as I gritted my teeth. *Out of all the times for this to happen, it had to happen when we're on our way to Peru.*

Sinking down into my seat and with my eyes glued to the headrest in front of me, I isolated myself from everyone else. I felt my eyes welling up with tears as I began to take in this whole situation. *I was supposed to be going to Peru today, but now I'm stuck here.* Anger laced my thoughts. *Why would You let something like this happen to us, God? We're supposed to be helping missionaries this week, but we'll probably never even make it there.*

I couldn't understand why all this happened, and even more than that, I couldn't understand why no one else seemed upset. As I looked around, I couldn't see anyone angrily mumbling to themselves or making snide remarks.

"Why would You let something like this happen to us, God?"

Instead, passengers were gathering their belongings and exiting the plane in good spirits.

I grudgingly got up to grab my backpack from the overhead storage, which was surprisingly still locked. Glancing around again, I noticed Pastor Rick still sitting in his seat.

He was bent over praying. It seemed unbelievable that he could be praying at a time like this.

There's nothing to thank God about in this situation. Our missions trip is ruined, and now we're stuck just waiting helplessly. How could anyone possibly be happy about this?

I grabbed my backpack and followed the passengers when Kaylee, the pastor's daughter, stood in front of my row.

"Scary plane ride, huh?" Kaylee said.

"Yeah . . . it was scary all right," I mumbled in return.

"I'm just glad everyone's okay!"

"How are you not more upset about this? You know this means we probably can't even go on our missions trip now."

"Well," Kaylee started, "I guess it's just because I know God's in control." With that, Kaylee flashed a smile and hurried along to catch up with the rest of the group.

I decided to take my time getting off the plane.

There's no use rushing. We're probably going to be here for a couple more hours at least.

After we had all exited the plane, Pastor Rick called us over into what he liked to call the "youth group huddle." He did another head count and then stood to face the rest of us. Eyes sparkling, he appeared completely calm and collected.

"All right guys. So, this trip hasn't gone how we thought it would. We do know, however, that God is still good, and He's still taking care of us. So, like how Paul and Silas sang hymns when they were stuck in a jail cell, we're going to sing praises to God as we stand here in this field," he paused for a moment. "Any requests?"

Multiple hands popped up immediately, and Pastor Rick called on Riley who stood toward the back.

"How about 'How Deep the Father's Love for Us'?" Riley shouted over the crowd.

"Great choice!" Pastor Rick exclaimed.

I stood back with arms crossed and watched as the youth group started pouring their hearts out to God with songs of praise. They all seemed too occupied with their own singing to notice me anymore.

The longer I stood there, the more distant I began to feel from the happy, singing group. No matter how much

I wanted to be as joyful as everyone else, I couldn't get the thought of our ruined missions trip out of my mind. As their singing grew louder with every repeated chorus, bitterness flowed through me like poison.

I can't do this.

My thoughts clouded by all the noise, I had to escape. As I weaved my way out of the crowd, I stuck my hands in my hoodie pocket and ducked my head down, trying to remain invisible. Once I managed to get a safe distance away from the group, I felt the crisp paper of my mom's note. Pulling it out, I unfolded it and glanced over it again. I kept repeating the familiar words in my head, *Remember, God is with you always.*

The words suddenly struck my heart, and tears began to form. I glanced back over at the group. I still saw the broken plane and empty field we had been dumped on, but now I saw the group of smiling people pouring their hearts out to God, something my bitter heart had not let me do. I saw a group of people that, despite their current circumstances, continued to praise God.

"Something much more important changed in that moment—my heart."

How could I have been so blind? I came on this missions trip to be a witness to others, and yet I wasn't even being a good witness now. I was so focused on serving in Peru, I neglected serving the ones who were looking out for me.

Despite the plane crash, God was still with me here. Tears cascaded down my cheeks as I gripped the precious letter from my mother.

As I strolled back toward the group, the familiar chorus resounded across the field, "I will not boast in anything, No gifts, no power, no wisdom."

With tear-stained cheeks and a heart full of thankfulness, I raised my voice to sing with the rest of my youth group.

Even though the circumstances hadn't changed, something much more important changed in that moment—my heart. The emergency plane crash and that simple note taught me more in one day than I could have ever expected. It was never about arriving at a destination; it was always about the people whom God put in my life to serve both now and in the future.

BOULEVARD

Sarah Leiford

Mahogany, Like the Table

If only she had known what she was getting herself into when she agreed to cat-sit that afternoon.

Althea Mack lived in the cul-de-sac's historical house that frightened everyone in town with its graveyard-gray exterior. Already regretting my agreement to cat-sit for this spectral stranger on a summer day in Wilkes, Pennsylvania, I faltered at the whitewashed picket fence. I fought with my unruly chestnut hair, trying to make it resemble something other than a bird's nest after a hard winter. As I ascended the stained oak steps, I didn't get a chance to knock.

"Come in!" a voice commanded, sounding like my mother when she's on the phone and I need to ask her a question.

I fumbled with the knob. "Miss Mack?" I pushed the door inward, determined to deflect her wrath and gain the upper hand. "My name is Mahogany Jones—"

"Late!" A leathery prune pushed herself up from her seat at a polished oak tea table in the entryway. "Late!" she cried again, glaring at me through mustard-yellow lenses. "For goodness' sake, I have an *appointment*, young lady!" In her arms, she carried a white fur muff that appeared to be about half her weight. She must have liked fur accessories because two bearskin rugs sprawled across the living room

floor, lying in wait for cold, sockless feet. Shuffling around the chair, she said, "What was your name again?"

I pulled my denim shorts down subconsciously as I stared at her tightly buttoned lace collar. "Er, Mahogany Jones." My lanky legs caused me to tower over her.

"Mahogany?" Her lips downturned in severe judgment. "Like the table?"

Sighing, I prepared to launch into my usual defense for my eccentric name. "Well, my mother likes to collect odd things, and my name is apparently one of them. She—"

"Wonderful. Let's get on with it." Her sharp tone indicated that she did not think my name was wonderful. "This is Hercules. He's a Persian cat of the *highest* breeding. And he costs more than your life, so keep that in mind."

"Mahogany?" Her lips downturned in severe judgment. "Like the table?"

Blinking, I took a closer look at the muff and gasped when it shifted lazily. It *was* a cat! Two obsidian marbles eyed me suspiciously from within Miss Mack's gnarly arms. The cat must have weighed fifty pounds—every time it moved Miss Mack let out a little huff of air between her piglet-pink lips.

"Hercules requires intensive care," Miss Mack explained, leading me around her house. "Every other hour, you must let him out onto the veranda to watch the birds. For lunch, he must eat his tuna salad over a bed of zucchinis and spinach. If you see him licking his fur, grab the hairbrush and fix any stray fur . . ."

I half listened to her speech. The entire house was stocked with distracting, expensive décor: fireplaces, Kenyan pottery, stained glass lampstands. I marveled at

two katanas with hand-woven sheaths placed on a wooden mount. Past the katanas, the hallway was lined with white wolf pelts. We moved into the kitchen, which housed a display of Italian countryside paintings characterized by a lot of grapes and earthy tones.

Miss Mack wasted no time. "I must be going." She dumped Hercules into my arms and swooped up her car keys. "I'll be back by five. See if you can keep him safe 'til then."

Upon realizing his demotion into the arms of a scraggly, sweaty teenager with namesake issues, Hercules began yowling in righteous anger. "*Mrrrrroooow*!" The persnickety Persian stabbed his talons into my arm's exposed skin.

Yelping, I released the squirming mass of fur. "Stupid cat!" I shouted as it disappeared into the next room. *That's it*, I told myself. *I'm going to take a nap on her expensive couch and never touch that thing.* I marched to the living room and stretched out on a deliciously plush sofa. Hercules could let himself out onto the veranda.

Two hours later, I awoke to the sound of frantic knocking at the front door. Groggily, I raised my head. Was the cat bouncing a tennis ball against the wall?

"Open up!" A man's voice boomed. "This is officer Bill O'Brien, Wilkes County police!"

The police! Terror gripped my chest, and I sprang off the couch. *Does he think I'm intruding?* Throwing open the front door, I breathlessly spoke. "My name is Mahogany Jones, and I'm just cat-sitting, officer!"

A stout man in his early forties politely adjusted his velvety cap. He looked like a jovial uncle who took his nieces and nephews to baseball games on the weekends. "So," he asked hesitantly, "you're the owner of the wild animal?"

I paused. "Wild animal? I don't know about that. I *am* watching a mean cat, though."

"Yes!" His chubby finger stabbed the air around me. He leaned forward, eyes widening as if I were a twenty-pound turkey on Christmas morning. "That's the one! We've received reports of a vicious white beast terrorizing the early morning joggers."

"I don't think so," I said. "Hercules is in the house."

He shook his head firmly. "No, it's her cat, all right. A mean, nasty thing that attacked poor Mrs. Keegan."

I glanced into the kitchen and gasped at the open window above the sink. "Oh no! Guess I should have closed that before I fell asleep on her couch," I mumbled under my breath. "Officer," I grabbed his arm, "you have to help me. That cat costs more than our lives combined!" *If Miss Mack finds out, I'll be the next thing she hangs in her hallway!*

Officer O'Brien's moment had come—this was the most action this town had gotten in months. Red blotches spattered across his face and his chest puffed in excitement. He waved his fist, calling for a search party on his radio. "Attention all units! We've got a 10-15! Cat on the loose. Do not engage without backup!"

"EEEK!" From down the street, Mrs. Keegan, returning from her five-mile jog, hobbled beside her husband. She sported a nasty cut on her right shin.

"Mrs. Keegan, as a witness of the crime, you should come with us." Officer O'Brien opened the front door to his cop car. "Get in! We've got to find that cat!"

I crawled into the leather backseat as the married folks squeezed into the front seats beside the officer. "How are we going to find him?" I asked.

"Not to worry," Officer O'Brien assured me, "I have my best men on the streets. We've been dying for some action

out here!" The officer flipped on the sirens atop the vehicle and drove madly down the blacktop.

Wind ripped through the open windows, blurring my vision into swatches of blues and greens and boxy cars. From the front seat, Mrs. Keegan bemoaned her injuries and declared, "When we find this thing, I demand justice! Officer O'Brien, it needs to be contained!"

My mind filled with nightmares of standing before the magistrate and defending my honor against a sentence of criminal negligence. I couldn't go to prison—I was only sixteen! My dreams of becoming Advocate for Children Whose Parents Give Them Socially Destructive Names fizzled with every accusation that Mrs. Keegan made.

"I couldn't go to prison—
I was only sixteen!"

Just as we turned down Sixth Street, a middle-aged pudgy woman came barreling down the sidewalk, flagging us over like an air traffic conductor. Officer O'Brien muttered about his ill luck. "It's the Community Park Patrol. She's no doubt trying to tell us about her newest plan to protect her parks." Sticking his face out the open window, he hollered, "There's no time, Donna! Your three-point plan to save the parks will have to wait—we've got a dangerous animal on the loose."

Donna frowned briefly at his assumption and then noticed me in the backseat. "Madeline?" Her face bunched up in confusion. "Aren't you supposed to be with Hercules?"

"First, it's *Mahogany*, like the table." I pushed my head out between the officer's seat and the car's shoulder. "But yeah, I am. How did you know?"

She pointed back to the park's entrance where an orange and white 1960s Chevrolet Z series sat. "Miss Mack helps out on community days. She just told us how nice it is now that's she doesn't have to worry about Hercules."

"Really?" My eyebrows popped upward momentarily. She was *happy* about me watching Hercules?

Suddenly, a white flash darted out from behind a hedge along the road. Hercules! If Miss Mack thought I was helpful, I *had* to get that cat now. I threw a shoulder against the door and tumbled out onto the asphalt.

I sprinted around the car. Hercules was now slinking through the grass, but his pearlescent coat rendered him a target for my line drive. "Got you!" I brayed, leaping over the sidewalk to tackle the hissing feline.

Wrestling the monster in the park, I fought the greatest battle of my life that day. Mothers shooed their children away, running from our terrific tumble. Shrieks and yowls filled the air from both parties involved. Clumps of grass and dirt scattered upward in waves. The cat attempted to barrel-roll me by throwing himself over my left side. I refused to let go, wrapping my hands around his lumpy body.

As Officer O'Brien drove the Keegans back home, I dragged a roaring cat back to Miss Mack's. After twenty minutes of hauling the stubborn cat through the streets, I stumbled through the door at exactly 4:55, just as the Chevy Z pulled into the driveway. I pushed back my knotted locks; if I already looked bad three hours ago, I surely looked like the plague personified now.

Miss Mack entered the house, humming, and stopped short upon seeing my tattered clothes. "Mahogany! What on *earth*?"

"Your cat is safe and sound." I presented the mangled mess in my arms, which hissed and swatted at her. "He

and I had an exciting afternoon." A small smile played on my lips as she warily turned to set down her keys. I was victorious—Hercules hadn't won this round.

She turned and peered at the white lump, drawing her mustard-colored glasses to the bridge of her pasty nose. "That's not my Hercules."

"What?" I stared down at the creature in my arms. "Of course, it is." I couldn't possibly tell her how he had terrorized the neighborhood, but it *had* to be Hercules. How many other fat white cats the size of a small child lived in Wilkes County?

"My Hercules has *both* eyes, dearie," she said, the corners of her mouth twitching upward.

I raised the animal to eye level. It spat at me, showing rows of yellow fangs that had not seen the veterinarian for all nine lives. "Then . . . whose cat *is* this?"

"I nearly lost my life for the wrong cat?"

Before Miss Mack could get out a witty reply, another pristine, fluffy cat emerged from the living room and arched its back upon seeing the lump that I held. "*Kssssssh*!" The well-groomed cat bared its fangs.

"Oh, there's Hercules!" Miss Mack bent down and ran her fingers through his glossy coat. "Look how handsome you are." The real Hercules seemed annoyed but allowed it.

Baffled, I slowly lowered the struggling stray. I nearly lost my life for the *wrong* cat?

"Well, Mahogany," Miss Mack said, "you'd better put that stray creature outside. He might have rabies."

"Rabies," I repeated. "Of course." I had completely failed this job; she'd never ask me to cat-sit again. I could already see my summer becoming a repeat of last year's—mowing lawns in the sweltering humidity. As I carried the mangy

stray cat toward the back door, deep in my self-loathing thoughts, I heard Miss Mack call out to me.

"By the way," she called, with a bit of hesitation in her voice, "if you could come by next Saturday, I would be quite grateful." There was a bit of a pause, and then she continued quietly, "Having you watch my Hercules today was a great help to me."

That was all she said—no complaints, no questions about the strange cat I had wrestled into her home. Maybe Miss Mack wasn't so bad after all. A little snooty at times, like Hercules, but she remembered my name, and she thought I was helpful.

"You know what . . ." I smiled as I dumped the intruding stray unceremoniously onto the front step. "I wouldn't mind that. But you really need to keep that kitchen window closed."

Hannah Bryan

Commencement Contest Winner,
Extemporaneous Essay

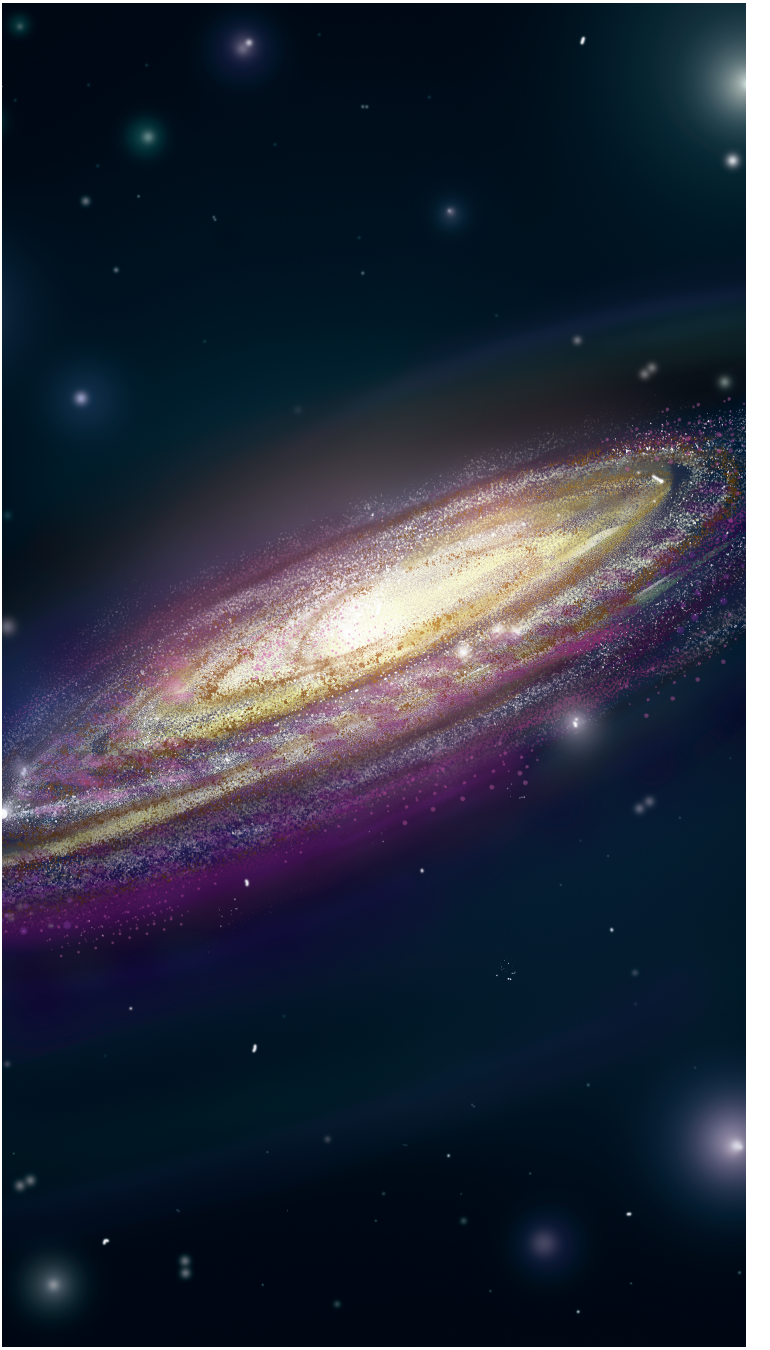
Stars

Every time I look to the stars . . . I feel swallowed by the vastness of creation.

On the cool, dark evenings that my family would get home late from church, I remember stepping out of our red Dodge Grand Caravan and looking up into the mesmerizing darkness of the sky. In that little New England town, I could faintly see the outline of the Milky Way. The fuzzy stream of stars flowed across the night sky above our yellow house in the woods. I would gaze at the pinpricks of light in wonder. There were so many of them, and only one of me. I loved to look at them and feel the magnitude of their presence.

When I was older, my family lived near Washington, DC. For a little while I worked in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. One day my mom brought my brother and his friend to see the museum. I led the eight-year-old boys around, pointing at the cool rockets and the moon rock on display.

"Landon," I said to my brother's friend, "I want to show you one of my favorite displays." I walked him over to a six- or seven-foot tall monitor near the entrance to the space displays. On the monitor, a flaming orange and red



orb swirled and turned against a black background. "That's a video of the sun," I explained. Landon looked in awe at the massive display. His short eight-year-old self was dwarfed by the screen.

"Now look." I pointed to the bottom corner of the screen. A miniature green and blue sphere was tucked into the corner, barely noticeable.

"Is that Earth?" Landon asked incredulously.

"Yup. Now, think for a minute—do you see how small Earth is compared to the sun? Now think about how small you are compared to Earth." Landon's mouth hung open as he gazed at the image of Earth's favorite star again.

When we moved to Virginia, I missed seeing the stars. The stars in Pensacola weren't much better. However, two summers ago, my family went with some of our cousins to a lake house on Lake Huron. After running and playing in the sun all day, most of the household had gone to bed. My mom called me out onto the back porch. "Look at the sky," she said. I looked up and saw the Milky Way, more clearly than I had ever seen it before.

"God knows the stars and He knows us."

I was blinded by a sudden, bright light. My younger cousin had heard us talking and come to investigate with a flashlight. "Turn it off!" I instructed. "Come and look." She waited while her eyes adjusted to the dark and then looked at the sky. "What's the fuzzy part?" she asked. "It's the Milky Way, an arm of our galaxy," I told her.

Every time I look to the stars, I feel small. When I saw the display of the sun in the museum, I was reminded how small I really am. When I look at the Milky Way with its

spiraling arms spilling out across the sky, I feel swallowed by the vastness of creation. Yet, when the Bible mentions the stars, there seems to always be a connection to God's love for us, as well as His glory. This immense expanse of space is immeasurable, yet God knows the stars and He knows us.

Even though I feel tiny and insignificant compared to the zillions of stars above me, I'm not insignificant to God. He knows my struggles and difficulties—the monumental ones and the small ones. And even though I feel lost on this green and blue orb spinning amongst innumerable burning stars, God still knows right where I am.

Lana Howell

Two Nails

A Petrarchan sonnet written to express
God's undeserving love toward us.

A picture hung askew upon the wall.
I saw it and attempted to adjust
The wooden frame. The little nail with rust
Had bent. "I'll just replace it; that is all."

A priceless painting ruined should it fall,
I doubted why I had placed so much trust
In such a worthless nail. "Such beauty must
Not rest upon an ugly nail so small."

And yet my conscience would not let me take
The nail out of its place. "I was a nail
That held my priceless Lord upon the tree.
That nail was hammered with so much at stake."
I left the nail alone; my face grew pale.
"And why?" you ask. I left that nail for me.

Taylor DiPaola

Where You Need to Be

Circumstances can lead to situations that turn out to be better than what we expected.

"You're always over here staring out the window," Emelia said to the blue and white parakeet on the windowsill. Max's small black eyes followed the birds flitting from tree to tree outside.

At the sound of her voice, the fluffy bird smoothed his feathers and stopped quietly singing. He squawked as he tilted his head to look at her.

"I know. I interrupted you. Sorry." Emelia shrugged her shoulders at him.

No longer startled, Max puffed out his feathers to preen himself. He pulled out a loose feather, twirled it in his beak, and dropped it onto the windowsill.

Emelia shook her head at Max. "I'm going to clean soon—I can't have you dropping feathers everywhere. Come here." She placed her hand beside Max and extended her finger toward him.

After a moment's pause, Max stopped preening himself, walked carefully toward her finger, and hopped onto it. Emelia moved her hand up, letting him jump onto her shoulder. She felt his small dinosaur-like feet run from her shoulder to her neck in pursuit of a strand of hair.

Emelia wandered over to the couch, brushing her hand through her hair. She wanted to check Instagram, but she didn't want to think about what would be there.

"This is stupid, Emelia. Just check it," she muttered to herself as she opened the app.

As she scrolled, pictures of dogs, nature shots, and selfies rolled by. She relaxed. Nothing new to remind her of—oh, there it was. Josephine had posted a picture of herself. Grinning wildly, she stood on a mountain top with her Nikon camera hanging around her neck.

"I'm so blessed, you guys! This photography internship is incredible!" Josephine's post read.

Emelia closed Instagram. She rested her elbows on her knees and placed her chin in her hand. She felt sick—sick because she couldn't be happy for Josephine and sick because she couldn't make a post like Josephine's. She closed her eyes, remembering an email she received last semester.

"Dear Emelia, while we appreciate your interest in the Virginia Zoo Zoological Internship Program, we regret to inform you that—"

That was all she remembered reading from the email. All she could recall now—and still felt—was disappointment because she didn't get the internship. Frustration settled on her like a dark cloud. Her friends had gotten their dream internships while she hadn't. She knew she should be happy for them, but how could she be? All of her summer plans had fallen through. Even her backup plan to intern at home hadn't worked out. Her college bill was high—especially now that her parents could no longer support her. Fortunately, she had found summer housing when Bonnie, a widow who lived in Lynchburg, had put an announcement in her church's bulletin, offering summer housing to a female college student in exchange for housecleaning.

Movement near her neck brought her back to the present, and she opened her eyes. Max had lost his balance momentarily. Looking at the brown leather sofa chair across the room from her, she noticed a thin dust layer on top of the chair.

"Looks like it's time for me to clean," she said.

Thinking about the internship burdened Emelia. Cleaning was a way to distract her mind before Bonnie came inside from gardening.

Bonnie had been the only good thing that happened to her that summer.

"Thinking about the internship burdened Emelia."

Emelia's thoughts were cut short by sudden voice, "Penny for your thoughts, dear?"

Emelia whipped her head around to the sound, the action causing Max to squawk.

"Oh, dear me! I didn't mean to startle you both!" Bonnie chuckled, standing in the doorway to the backyard.

Bonnie's soft brown eyes crinkled in joy, and her silver hair shook with each chuckle. Her hands were lined with soil from gardening.

Bonnie continued, "You remind me so much of my son, William. He used to sit on that couch, staring out that window, thinking about life. You seem to do that a good deal."

Emelia flushed. "I guess I do—I love staying here with you—don't get me wrong. I'm so grateful for you. It's just that my original summer plans didn't turn out, and I've been struggling with accepting that they didn't."

"That's life sometimes. You're making the best of it, though. Maybe God has you here for a reason." Bonnie smiled and walked out of the living room. The soft tan carpet padded her footsteps as she walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

"Maybe God has you here for a reason."

Emelia stood up and placed Max back into his cage. Then she went into the dining room and kitchen.

Emelia opened the kitchen closet door to grab the broom. As she swept the kitchen floor, a crashing sound came from Bonnie's bedroom. Emelia's eyes opened wide.

"Bonnie?" she yelled. Hearing no response, she yelled again. Emelia dropped the broom and rushed toward Bonnie's bedroom.

She saw Bonnie sprawled on the carpeted floor at the foot of the bed. Heart pounding, Emelia knelt and turned Bonnie onto her back to check for injuries.

"Are you okay?" Emelia asked frantically. "What happened?"

Bonnie looked at Emelia, unfocused.

"I tripped on something," she murmured.

Emelia noticed a gash on Bonnie's forehead. "You're bleeding!"

"Oh, it's just a scratch, I'm sure. No need to panic," Bonnie felt for the gash on her forehead.

"I'll help you sit up," Emelia leaned Bonnie up against the hope chest beside the bed. "I'll be right back—just stay right there," Emelia rushed to the bathroom."

Her hands shook as she grabbed a washcloth from under the sink and wet it. Opening the medicine cabinet, she grabbed the medical tape, some cotton pads, and a bottle of isopropyl alcohol.

Arms laden with the supplies, Emelia hurried back to the bedroom.

"How are you feeling, Bonnie?" she asked.

Bonnie rubbed her head and replied, "I have a bit of a headache—that fall was a doozy!"

Pressing the washcloth against the wound, she considered whether Bonnie had gotten a concussion from the fall.

"Can you walk?"

"I think so. I'm just a little unsteady at the moment."

"I think we should go to the emergency room to make sure you don't have a concussion."

Bonnie protested momentarily, but then agreed. "Let me call William to let him know. He should be able to meet us there."

Emelia grabbed her wallet and phone as well as Bonnie's purse while Bonnie called.

"He said he'll meet us soon," Bonnie said. Emelia helped her walk to the car.

* * *

The emergency room was surprisingly empty. A nurse helped Bonnie into a wheelchair and then escorted her to an examination room. Afterward, Emelia relaxed slightly. She felt better now that Bonnie could be taken care of properly.

After sitting in the waiting room for about thirty minutes praying and people-watching, Emelia noticed a thirty-year-old man talking to a nurse. He looked like William from the pictures Bonnie had shown her.

After the nurse walked away, the man scanned the room, smiling with relief. Emelia walked up to him.

"You're William, right?" she asked. He nodded.

"You're Emelia?" Emelia nodded, eager to know how Bonnie was doing but too afraid to ask.

"Thank you so much for bringing Mom in," William said after a moment. "I don't know how you convinced her to come with you—she isn't usually so agreeable when it comes to doctor visits."

"I'm just glad I was there. What did the nurse say?" Emelia asked gaining confidence.

"Thank you so much for bringing Mom in."

"The nurse said that she might have a mild concussion but nothing too serious. We'll probably just need to keep an eye on her in the coming weeks to make sure she's doing all right. They're going to run some more tests before they release her."

"Thank God! That's great! Well, not the concussion and tests, but the fact that it's not worse." Emelia's shoulders relaxed.

William looked down at his watch. "They're probably going to be awhile longer. Why don't you head back to Mom's house? I think I'll take her home with me for the night to keep an eye on her."

"No, I can stay. It's not a problem."

"Emelia, you've done a lot already. And I know it's been stressful. I've got it from here."

Emelia wanted to stay, but she knew that William would know how to take care of his mother. "Please let me know if anything changes."

"I will."

That night, Emelia sat on Bonnie's couch, alone in the house with Max and her thoughts.

"You know, Max, today was so stressful."

He chirped in response.

"I wasn't sure if Bonnie was going to be okay. I was so scared."

She looked over at Max as he crunched on some millet seeds. "I keep thinking what would have happened if I hadn't been there. What if it had been worse?"

Emelia walked to Max's cage. "I've spent so much time this summer thinking about my career, or, rather, my failure to have one." She laughed. "But, today—wow, today really made me question myself. Why am I spending so much time thinking about my career? It doesn't even matter that much. Life—life's important. Bonnie's all right—that's important."

Emelia pondered on Bonnie's words from earlier that day and how she had said that God had her there for a reason.

"God didn't put me here so that I could worry about internships. He put me here to grow me and to help one of His own when she needed it."

"Emelia took a breath of relief."

Emelia hadn't gotten the internship, but she had been there for Bonnie. She didn't go home for the summer, but she was paid a good salary that would help her with her college bill for the fall. Emelia looked over at Max roaming around his perches—She had even gotten experience caring for an animal that summer.

She groaned, thinking about her behavior and the attitude she'd had about her summer. "I'm so sorry for my attitude this summer, God. You know what's best, and You deserve so much better from me. Thank You for putting

me exactly where I was needed—and for providing for me along the way."

Emelia took a breath of relief. Yes, it still hurt that her plans hadn't worked out the way she had wanted, but God was working things out the way He wanted them.

Hannah Bryan

Offshoots

The people in our lives influence us more than we think.

"These ones are called pansies." My mom nestled the colorful purple and yellow flowers into the flower box filled with soil. I watched with fascination, too young to be of much help, as she gently covered the roots and arranged the flowers' neighbors next to them in the wooden box. She soaked them with water, telling me how important it is for the flowers to have extra water when they're transferred.

"If they don't get enough extra water during the transition time, they'll go into shock," she explained. She often narrated her actions to me, patiently explaining her decisions.

My mom liked to have flowers all around our house. Pansies winked from the window boxes at the front of our yellow house, and pink azalea bushes nearly overpowered the front entrance. I used to catch bumblebees on their flowers. In the middle of the front yard, Mom planted a dogwood tree—which produced white flowers in the spring—surrounded by irises and hostas. A long, straight line of bright orange daylilies divided the front and backyards. These were always my favorite. I liked to go

with Mom to cut the flowers for decorations, or just to look at them.

When we took the flowers inside, I watched her cut the stems with a pair of white Pampered Chef kitchen scissors while she held the bouquet over the kitchen sink.

"If you cut them at an angle they'll last longer." She showed me, then let me try. The scissors were clumsy in my hands, and I cut jagged edges through the stems.

"Good. Now we put them in the vase with water," Mom said as she gently placed the flowers.

"The scissors were clumsy in my hands."

Whenever we drove past clusters of wildflowers beside the highway, I would ask my mom to identify them. She would point them out to me easily and correct me as I tried to guess which flowers were which I've learned to recognize Queen Anne's lace, lilacs, black-eyed Susans, forget-me-nots, wisteria, and many others. Somehow, the bouquets that grow naturally have always seemed more striking to me than the ones arranged in the store.

Often, when I think of my mom, I imagine her doing something outside, covered in dirt. More often than not, I find her with a Weedwacker or a power drill in hand,

doing yard work or fixing something in the house. Often, the Weedwacker was as tall as she was. I'd always teased my mom about her height—she's five feet on the dot—but she's always seemed so much larger than that.

My mom always had some yard work for us to work on, too. We hated pulling weeds and raking mulch while sticky sweat clung to our necks, and we complained frequently. Mom never whined about any of it, though. Long after we had given up on clearing the flower beds, she would be out there, hands buried in the dirt, finishing what we'd completed halfway.

When we moved to a new house, Mom wanted to landscape the whole yard. She dug up old flowers and plants from where the previous owner had planted them at random.

"You have to know which plant needs extra sun and which ones prefer the shade," she said with a shake of the head. She jumped on the metal shovel to push it into the earth a safe distance from the plant's roots. The original gardener hadn't put much thought into the arrangement of the plants. They were sickly and small, with little to no flowers.

I've recently taken up my mom's plant obsession. It started with a simple spider plant. As a little girl, I remember we had a massive spider plant hanging in a giant wicker basket in our kitchen. Dozens and dozens of long, thin leaves sprouted from a central location and drooped over the edge of the basket. The unique thing about spider plants is that they reproduce by shooting out little babies, as my mom would call them. Long stems grow out from the main plant, sprouting miniature versions—little offshoots—of the parent. Like a frozen green waterfall, the plant spills out into the air. The small spider plants can be easily plucked from the stem and replanted in a new pot. Remembering how my mom would give these baby plants

as gifts, I asked her for one. After that, I was obsessed. At first, it was just a couple half-priced flowers from Walmart. They were nearly dead and fifty percent off, so I decided to save them. Then I got another, and another, and another.

Now in my room, I have two succulents, a purple plant I don't actually know the name of, bamboo, a plant I dug up from my yard, and a spider plant seedling. I want more, but my roommates told me no. My first couple spider plants didn't survive. One was eaten by my cat, and the other was crushed while I traveled with it to school. I'm determined to make the third one survive.

"We tend to dream bigger than what we'll be able to accomplish."

I send my mom updated pictures of the spider plant every few weeks. When we FaceTime, I take her on a quick tour of my plants. My mom taught me a lot of things about plants, but because there's still a lot I don't know, I ask her for help.

There's a lot left in this life I don't know. I had to call my mom the other week to ask how to deposit a check. But that's the great thing: my mom is always right there with a helping hand. She doesn't just love to take care of plants: she loves to take care of people. I've borrowed many traits from my mom. We both love to laugh and drink too

much coffee. We're both stubborn, sometimes to a fault. I get my debilitating perfectionism from her, too. We tend to dream bigger than what we'll be able to accomplish with the time and resources available. My mom's tendency to obsess over things got passed on to me as well, as seen in the miniature garden on my dorm room dresser.

My mom's ability to take care of people is one I'm still learning to emulate. I often find myself acting like my mom when my friends come to me for advice. My sophomore year, I had freshmen in my prayer group even calling me "mom." I can thank my dad for my height, my introverted nature, and everything else that makes me like him; but I thank my mom for teaching me how to care for plants and people.

My baby spider plant is sitting in a mostly full water bottle until its roots grow strong enough to be planted in its own pot. Like the spider plant, I'm an offshoot of my mom, ready to be replanted in my own spot. Unlike the spider plant, however, I still get help from my mom, and thank goodness I do.

Ian Mackay

What Does *Found* Mean?

Nothing we place our affections on will satisfy.
People were created by and for the Lord Jesus and will only feel whole when they have been born again and are walking and talking with Him.

What does *found* mean?
Not habits, hobbies, not fashion, not games;
Not marriage, family, not homes, jobs, nor fame;
A content heart's not found in this earth's lusts.
Both good things and idols all turn to dust.

Found means to see Him Who does all things well;
The One of Whom hist'ry the half could not tell.
Found means all hope and all faith lost in sight
Of God's glorious light and untold delights.
Found is a Person. Friend, hear this today:
To love and serve Christ is why you were made.

But what does *found* mean?
Found means the Good Shepherd leads His lost sheep
Each day by His voice in vale or on steep.
Found means "I turned from my sinful, lost way
And trusted in Christ: I yield Him all sway."

Siera Weber

Commencement Contest Winner,
Original Fiction

Sunshine in the Dark

Where do you turn when the world goes dark?

"Honey, where are the keys?" Sadie asked as she walked into the kitchen.

Liam ignored his wife and rustled the pages of his giant print Bible that was resting on the kitchen table.

"Honey?"

Liam sipped his coffee and stared straight ahead. Sadie came up beside him and rested her hand on his shoulder. "Liam, I'm driving today. Where are the keys?"

Liam jerked his thumb toward the counter. "Top drawer, under the phone."

"Thank you." As Sadie picked up the keys, she noticed the plastic frames with thick lenses resting on the counter. "Don't forget your glasses," she said, glancing at him.

Liam continued rustling pages.

Sadie slammed the drawer shut. "You may be going blind, but you're not going deaf!"

He ignored her.

Sadie sighed and checked her watch. "It's 7:35. I need to make sure Lucy's ready. We'll leave in ten." She turned to leave but paused in the doorway. Frustration and a trace

of guilt lined her face. "Listen, I'm sorry," she whispered. She cleared her throat and shifted uneasily. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You're fine." Liam's tone was chilled, even as the sunlight warmed the room around him.

"No, I mean it."

"You may be going blind, but you're not going deaf!"

Liam just stared at the wall, jaw tight.

Sadie sighed and left. Liam listened to her gentle footsteps as she trudged to Lucy's bedroom. Once Sadie was out of sight, Liam slouched over and rested his head in his hands. He listened to the ticks of the clock on the wall and to the hum of the dishwasher. He massaged his temples and exhaled, listening to the air escaping his lungs.

Lucy's laughter drifted down the hall, reminding Liam of his own childhood. He had been so carefree as a child, even after the doctors diagnosed him with Type I diabetes. Because his parents taught him how to manage his insulin intake, diet, and exercise, he never experienced any frightening diabetic emergencies. He maintained a healthy lifestyle through college, but after he graduated, he lowered his standards. Although he consistently took insulin, he loosened his diet restrictions and exercised less consistently. Sadie nagged him about the consequences of his negligence, but he wasn't worried. If he consistently took insulin and remained in decent shape, surely he would be fine, just as he'd always been.

For several years, Liam was fine. Then, a few days before his daughter Lucy's sixth birthday, Liam woke up with blurry vision that didn't clear. At first, he attributed

the blurriness to tiredness; but as his vision worsened during the week, he decided that something else might be wrong. Sadie urged him to see an ophthalmologist. Finally, Liam scheduled an appointment.

At the appointment, Liam was shocked by Dr. Gray's solemn conclusion: "You needed to come in sooner. We'll do what we can, but you need to prepare yourself. You'll most likely lose your sight."

"Liam's condition was advanced."

Seeing Liam's confusion, Dr. Gray explained that as a diabetic, Liam had developed diabetic retinopathy, a disease in which high blood glucose had blocked the vessels in his eyes. Although the condition could be treated, successful treatment depended on early recognition. Liam's condition was advanced.

After his diagnosis in November, Liam tried to make up for lost time by going to all of his appointments, wearing the glasses Dr. Gray gave him, and getting laser eye surgery. In December, Liam noticed dark spots clouding his vision. By January, he quit his job, and Sadie began working full-time at a local grocery store. In March, Liam began anti-VEGF therapy, in which doctors injected medicine into the sclera of his eyes. In September, Dr. Gray handed Liam a business card with the name and number of Celia Locke. "She's a low-vision specialist," Dr. Gray explained. "She helps patients with the transition." Liam didn't have to ask what transition Dr. Gray was referring to.

Liam hadn't told Sadie the news yet. He wasn't sure how to tell her. She had put so much hope in the treatments, especially since God kept providing for them. Although their insurance had covered the cost of the

surgery and part of the anti-VEGF treatments, it didn't cover the full cost. Just when it seemed as if they would have to give up the treatments, God provided the funds. Their church took a love offering for them; Sadie's parents chipped in—even their neighbors contributed. Sadie had exulted that the windows of heaven had opened. Why now, at the end of all the treatments and the prayers, did those windows slam shut?

Lucy burst into the kitchen, interrupting his dark reverie like a ray of sunshine. "Can we go to the park and ride bikes after school?" she pleaded, running up to hug him.

"Good morning to you too." Liam grinned and mussed her hair. "Sure, we can." He felt Sadie's gaze and answered her question before it came. "I don't have an appointment today. I forgot to schedule one."

Sadie frowned but only said, "Time to go."

On the way to school, Sadie's agitation showed itself through her driving. She whipped around corners and screeched to a halt at stop signs. Liam knew better than to tell her to slow down—she would only speed up. Liam could only imagine what Sadie's poor parents endured when teaching her how to drive. With a pang, he thought of his little girl in the back seat. She didn't even know how to ride her bike yet. He could teach her that before he lost his vision. But driving—Sadie would have to teach her that. Liam winced as he thought of all his daughter's special moments that he would never see.

As soon as Sadie pulled up to the drop-off lane, Lucy scrambled from the car to go see her friends. Liam watched her bright red dress flutter and the red ribbons in her hair bounce as she skipped away to class. She was only seven. He imagined how she would look at the Evergreen High School's father-daughter dinner in several years. He would still take her, but he wouldn't be able to tell if

she looked like her mother or what color of dress she was wearing. He had noticed that she was wearing red more often. He suspected that Sadie had been purposefully dressing Lucy in red because that was the color that he could see best.

Liam looked over at his wife. He couldn't read her expression, but he could feel her agitation. Although she drove more calmly, she refused to say anything. "What's up?" he finally asked.

"You don't have an appointment today. Is that because you forgot to schedule one with Dr. Gray, or because you just didn't want to see Celia Locke?" She waited for an answer. When none came, she explained, "I ran into Dr. Gray and his wife yesterday, and he asked if you had gone to see Miss Locke yet. He was surprised I didn't know anything about it."

Liam drummed his fingers on the dashboard. "I'm going to schedule another appointment with Dr. Gray."

Sadie sighed. "Liam, some things can't be fixed. We knew it was a long shot. Maybe it's time to just accept God's will and take the next step."

Liam huffed with annoyance. "Next step? To where? And where was this attitude before the surgery? Why couldn't you have accepted this as God's will *then*?"

"Next step? To where?"

"Because there was still a chance. I really thought . . ." she trailed off. After a few minutes, she whispered, "It doesn't matter. I don't know what to think anymore."

"Me neither."

They rode in silence the rest of the way home.

Later that afternoon, Liam and Lucy were in Evergreen Park by the bike trail. Lucy, dressed in a bright

red romper and matching helmet, skipped through the grass as she waited on her father. Sadie hovered at a nearby park bench, watching nervously as Liam unscrewed the training wheels on the princess bike.

"Today's the day, Little Lady," he announced cheerfully, tossing the wheels to the side.

"Are you sure, Daddy?" Lucy asked, shifting nervously.

"Of course!" He held the bike upright while she swung her leg over the seat. "I'll hold it for you the first time. Ready, set, go!"

"Today's the day, Little Lady."

Father and daughter took off together, with Lucy's little feet pedaling as fast as they could go. As Liam jogged to keep up with his daughter, he compared her biking style with her mother's driving. He was glad that Sadie would be the one teaching Lucy how to drive. When they reached the end of the trail, Liam helped Lucy stop the bike and turn it around. He could hear the grin in Lucy's voice as she exclaimed, "I like this!"

"Try it without me."

That dampened Lucy's excitement, but only briefly. Liam gave her a gentle push, and she pedaled towards Sadie. "I'm doing it!" she yelled—just before the bike tipped. With a little shriek, she hit the pavement. Liam ran to her but didn't pick her up. "Nice try, Sweetie. Get up and try it again."

Grimacing, Lucy folded her arms.

"Try pedaling a little faster to keep your balance," Liam suggested.

Realizing she had no option, Lucy sighed and picked up her bike. Again, they repeated the process. Liam gave a shove, and Lucy pedaled more quickly this time. She

almost made it to Sadie, but then she veered to the right and tipped over. Again, Liam stood nearby as Lucy picked herself up. "You're doing great, Sweetie. Try again."

Lucy huffed, but obeyed. The third time, and the fourth, the same thing happened. The fifth time, Lucy slammed against the pavement with more force than before. Liam ran up to her, and Sadie abandoned her park bench to check on them.

"You're doing great. Try again," Liam encouraged.

"No!" Lucy replied indignantly, arms folded, eyes glaring. "I did what you told me to, and it didn't work."

"Sweetheart, this takes time. Trust me. It will hurt a few times, but once you learn you'll love it."

"It hurts!"

"Sometimes things that hurt end up teaching us something valuable." As soon as the words left Liam's mouth, he could feel Sadie's gaze.

"I don't want to do it," Lucy insisted.

"I know, but I'm your dad and I'm telling you to do it because I know this will help you." Liam paused and stared at the sidewalk. Then he sat on the ground beside Lucy and pulled her onto his lap. He wrapped her up in his arms and rested his cheek on her head. They sat there for a few minutes, not saying anything.

"Can we go home now?" Lucy asked.

"Not yet." Liam sniffed and rubbed his eyes. "We're going to try the bike again, and then we'll head home." He glanced at Sadie. "I have to make a phone call."

Liam stood and lifted Lucy up, planting a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Two more times, Trooper."

As Lucy picked up her bike, Sadie walked to Liam and slipped her arm around his waist, resting her head on his shoulder. "My dad always said that God uses kids to help parents grow up," she said.

"I guess so. He gives us a lot of things to help us grow up. I just don't always like what He sends."

Sadie sighed. "Me neither. But I would rather trust Him with that than anyone else."

"God uses kids to help parents grow up."

Liam wrapped his arm around Sadie and gave her a little squeeze. Then he walked over to Lucy, who was staring down the trail uncertainly. "I'm right here, Sweetie. I'll be here the whole time."

Sniffling, Lucy finished her last two attempts, tipping over each time. After the second attempt, Liam scooped Lucy up and gave her a gentle squeeze. Together, they walked back to Sadie, who was sitting on the park bench with her eyes closed and a sweet smile on her face. She stirred as they approached. "Join me," she invited, patting the empty space beside her.

Liam sat beside Sadie, and Lucy sat beside him. Liam wrapped his arms around their shoulders and asked, "What are we doing?"

Sadie smiled. "Just enjoying the sunshine for a minute."

Liam closed his eyes and leaned his head back, soaking in the sunlight. "It's nice," he smiled. For the first time in months, he felt warm inside.

Cainan Phillips

The Man in the Cowboy Hat

How can an ordinary man be a hero?

April 15, 2013—Patriots' Day

Carlos Arredondo and his wife, Victoria, rose early to prepare for the Boston Marathon. Patriots' Day, or Marathon Monday, is always an exciting day. The day is set aside for fun and family and is centered on an atmosphere of unity. Although not a runner, Carlos often participated in the race by handing out small American flags to support active U.S. military personnel. He did this in memory of his two sons—Alexander and Brian. In 2004, Alexander, a member of the United States Marine Corps, was killed in combat at only twenty years old. The shock and pain took a toll on the family, but none took the death harder than Brian, Alexander's younger brother. He developed PTSD and committed suicide in 2011. Unable to bring his sons back, Carlos handed out American flags every year to runners to honor one son who was killed in a war overseas and another son who was killed in the war in his own mind.

"It's a beautiful day outside," said Victoria. "Such a perfect blue sky."

"It's much better than it was last year," replied Carlos in his native Costa Rican accent.

The air was chilly but refreshing. The forecast called for a high in the low 50s in stark contrast to race-day conditions the previous year. In 2012, temperatures reached a high 89 degrees—almost a record high. The conditions were so poor that several runners dropped out because of the scorching heat. Today, conditions were much more suitable for a marathon.

After finishing preparations for the day at the race, Carlos and Victoria stepped outside their Roslindale, Massachusetts, home. Carlos hefted his box of flags up as he locked the house door. They headed toward the subway that was bound for the race's finish line at Copley Square, Boston.

"That's a lot of flags. How many are there?"

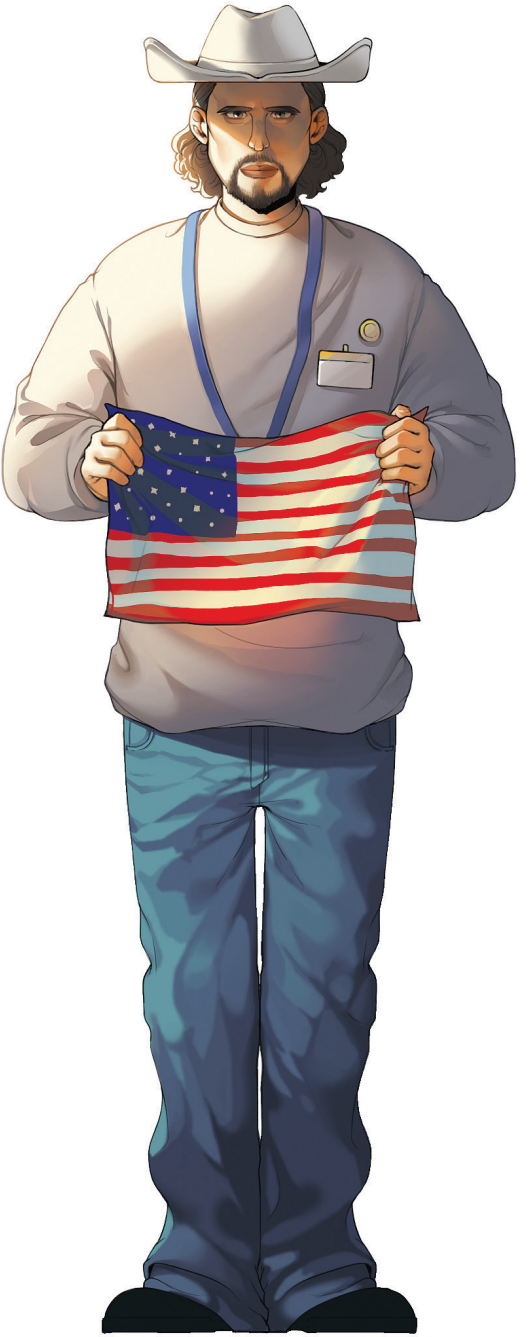
While on the subway, someone may have noticed Carlos and Victoria carrying their flag boxes and asked, "Going to the race today?"

"Yes, we are," Carlos would have replied.

"That's a lot of flags. How many are there?"

Carlos would look down at the flags and then over to his wife beside him. "Four hundred," he would say, touching the bronze-painted wooden tips of the little flagpoles. "We are going to hand them out at the finish line, so the finish line is full of American flags to support the National Guard when they finish."

"Well, that's very good of you. Enjoy the race." Their conversation would end, and the rhythmic rumbling and jostling of the train would lull the passengers into silence, each passenger lost in his own thoughts.



Undoubtedly, in the silence, Carlos's thoughts would return to his lost sons.

Eventually the train came to a stop. Carlos and Victoria, like so many others, piled off the train and began walking toward the finish line. They then began handing out the U.S. flags in preparation for the race's conclusion.

By 2:45 p.m., the race began to wind down. Carlos held the last remaining flag that he planned to use as a prop for a picture with members of the National Guard. He took off his white, perforated cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair. He looked up at the opposite side of the road at the assorted collection of world flags. Little did he know that those flags would be gone in a matter of minutes.

While Carlos was cheering the finishers, a huge blast exploded in the middle of the crowd across the street from Carlos. Glass storefront windows shattered. People screamed in terror. Some looked confused, the realization of what had happened not yet resonating with them.

Fearing the worst yet ignoring it, Carlos sprang into action. After making sure that his wife was safe, he pushed his way toward the front of the frenzied crowd. He vaulted over the metal barricade separating him from the racetrack. He took the scene in at a glance. Pools of blood filled the sidewalk. Severed limbs were strewn about in a jumble. People everywhere lay on the ground screaming in physical and emotional agony.

Carlos ran across the street, weaving between confused marathoners. He began grabbing and pulling the barricades away to give ambulances an access point. A second bomb exploded only fifty yards to the left. Carlos ducked, clutching his hat to his head. He looked around at the carnage from the first bomb and spotted a pile of debris strewn over a woman. He raced over to her and pulled the wreckage off her mangled body. She didn't

move, nor did she make a sound. Her unseeing blue eyes stared up at Carlos. This was Krystle Campbell, one of the three people murdered on-site at the Boston Marathon Bombing.

Carlos staggered back in shock. His eyes fell upon a man who also lay on the ground at the epicenter of the first explosion. Running to the bloody scene, Carlos shouted, "No! No! Stay down! Don't try to move!" The wounded man was trying to stand—only—he was virtually legless. One leg had been shattered and torn off in the blast; the other, although still attached, would never walk again. Allen Panter, a surgeon from Georgia, was tying a tourniquet around one of the wounded legs. Carlos tore the sleeve off a nearby, disregarded sweater and tied a tourniquet around the second grisly stump.

"Stay with me! Stay with me!" said Carlos, trying to keep the man awake. He feared that if the man closed his eyes, he would die from shock and loss of blood. "What's your name?"

"Jeff Bauman," said the man. His voice was drowned out by the flood of noise and confusion that swirled around him. His brown, curly hair was covered in white dust. His face was deathly pale. His eyes were dark rimmed and sunken.

"He feared that if the man closed his eyes, he would die from shock and loss of blood."

"Jeff, stay with me! We're going to get you help! Just stay with me!"

Dr. Panter looked up at Carlos. "We need to get him out of here. He won't make it unless we can get him help now!"

Carlos nodded. He raised his eyes while still applying pressure to Jeff's tourniquet-bound stumps. "We need a wheelchair."

Emergency workers and first responders were piling into the bombing sites, bringing emergency supplies with them.

Carlos spotted one with a wheelchair, "Hey! We need a wheelchair over here!" Carlos looked down at Jeff. "We're going to lift you up and get you out of here. Stay with me!"

Carlos and the emergency responder lifted Jeff amidst screams of pain and placed him in the wheelchair. The group began to run past the finish line toward the open street ahead. "Stay with me! You've got to stay with me! Stay with me, Jeff!" said Carlos amidst cries for help. Bandages, stretchers, and wheelchairs filled the scene.

Carlos, the emergency responder, and a marathon official rushed Jeff to an ambulance. The medical personnel took charge quickly, hoisting Jeff into the ambulance. In mere moments, the ambulance doors closed, and the vehicle sped away to the nearest hospital.

Carlos Arredondo, not truly aware of what was happening, slowly followed the ambulance on foot. He looked down. His gray, long-sleeved race shirt was bloodstained. He looked at his hands—also bloodstained. His hands began to tremble and shake with shock. *What just happened?* He reached behind him and pulled something out of his pocket. It was the last American flag, now covered in Jeff Bauman's blood.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, three people had been killed on site at the Boston Marathon Bombing: Krystal Campbell, Lu Lingzi, and eight-year-old Martin Richard. Two hundred and sixty-four people were injured, and twelve people required emergency amputations.

The perpetrators were two radical Islamic Chechnians named Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. Three

days after the initial bombings, the Tsarnaev brothers killed twenty-seven-year-old Sean Collier, police officer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Later that night Tamerlan was killed in a shootout with Boston police while Dzhokhar was taken into custody the next day. He was found guilty of thirty federal crimes including conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction. He is now incarcerated in the Supermax prison in Florence, Colorado.

May 28, 2013

Forty-five days after the bombing, all New England eyes were focused on the jewel of Boston: Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. Every seat was filled. All standing room was taken.

The Red Sox and all of Boston would honor Carlos Arredondo and Jeff Bauman, two of many notable heroes of the Boston Marathon Bombings.

The two men were down on the field, surrounded by Red Sox players. Jeff sat in a wheelchair, and Carlos gripped the handles on the back, ready to push Jeff forward.

A voice over the sound system quieted the murmuring crowd. The PA announcer introduced Carlos and told the story of Arredondo's two lost sons. The voice continued, "On Marathon Monday, this heartbroken dad was cheering on runners amid an atmosphere of life, vibrance, and vitality. When explosions shattered that atmosphere, he immediately rushed to the aid of the injured and started saving lives."[1] A picture of Carlos hurrying Jeff Bauman away from the scene of the bombs was displayed from the JumboTron.

[1] "2013/05/28 Marathon Heroes' First Pitch," YouTube video, Fenway Park First, Boston, Mass., May 28, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVh55IbTWo8.

The voice continued, "Including the life of a young man here tonight. Just before the explosion, he noticed the first suspect. For a moment, they even stared at each other. Then, just a few moments later, his world exploded. He hadn't yet grasped the magnitude of his injuries, when the Man in the Cowboy Hat spotted him on the ground, lifted him by his t-shirt, and placed him in a wheelchair. When he awoke from surgery, FBI agents and a sketch artist listened to his description—everything from the clothes on the suspect to the deadly black bag he held and then placed on the ground. He helped law enforcement officers identify the suspect, and he helped prevent further devastation and tragedy. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in the presence of two men whose courage and historic instincts make it our honor to welcome them on this day—the first night they could be with us together. Won't you please welcome Mr. Carlos Arredondo and Mr. Jeff Bauman." [2]

"He tipped his now-famous cowboy hat to the crowd."

Raucous cheering erupted throughout the stadium. All hands were clapping. Everyone recognized the heroic acts of these two men and how they had influenced those around them for good.

Carlos began wheeling Jeff to the pitcher's mound. He tipped his now-famous cowboy hat to the crowd, acknowledging their cheers. Jeff gave the crowd a huge grin and a thumbs up. Red Sox catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia and Red Sox legend David Ortiz squatted on either side of home plate. All the fans had risen to their feet and continued clapping as the two heroes arrived at the mound.

[2] Ibid.

Jeff threw to Saltalamacchia on the right side, and Carlos threw to Ortiz on the left. The cheering grew louder as both men tossed in strikes for the ceremonial first pitches. The respective Red Sox players trotted out to the mound to congratulate and thank both Jeff and Carlos. After a moment, the honorees were escorted off the field with the noise of clapping, whistles, and cheers filling their ears.

In the years after the Boston Marathon Bombing, Carlos Arredondo has remained a popular figure. He serves in local charities and has been invited many times as a special speaker for a variety of organizations. He has used his fame to spread a message of peace and hope to all who will listen.

Mary Legore

Trusting God through a Loss

Dad called that day—his voice grieving and pained.
My heart began to race as he spoke more.
He said we lost the one that Heaven gained.

Moments of loss that made my heart wrench sore
Returned renewed with dreadful thoughts of doubt.
I grieved. All through the coming days, tears poured.

I questioned God, "Why did this come about?"
And He sent comfort from His steadfast Word.
I thought about the one I was without;

My heart still hurt, but clinging to my Lord,
I trusted Him when all my soul felt spent.
Through faith, my grieving heart gained peace restored.

When clouding doubts had seemed to not relent,
I clung to God and felt my soul content.

Zach Jewell

The Woods by Caribou Lake

My memories drowned in my responsibilities as I grew older, but somebody held onto those memories for me.

Six years. That's how long it had been since I'd seen my grandparents. I missed them even though they hadn't been on my mind until Gran called to ask me to visit that weekend.

Her call surprised me. I remembered talking to her only a couple of times on the phone since I had seen her last. For once, I had the weekend off work. Although I wanted to spend my free time doing something else, I decided to go see them.

Along the way, raindrops began to sprinkle on the windshield of my new Mercedes. After I felt a few wandering drops hit my neck, I reached down and tapped the switch to roll up the windows. My phone rang over the Bluetooth system—it was Mom. I pushed the button on the steering wheel to pick up. "Hey, Mom."

"You almost there?"

I looked down at my GPS. "About twenty more minutes."

Mom paused. "Well, I just wanted to remind you that Grandpa won't be like what you remembered. His mind is failing."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure we'll have a good time. Besides, Gran will be there."

"I know; you'll be fine. Just wanted to make sure you knew."

"Grandpa won't be like what you remembered."

"Okay, thanks. I'll talk to you in a few days and let you know how it went."

We hung up, and I began to think about Gran and Grandpa. Although I used to be close with them, I began to worry that they would be distant during the visit.

As I neared their house, my mind wandered to memories of my childhood. When Gran would take me to the store on my birthday, she would let me pick out any toy I wanted, as long as it wasn't too expensive. She cooked so well, making everyone's mouth water with desserts like chocolate cake, cherry pie, and peanut butter cookies.

We had a great relationship with them until the move. After Mom and I moved to the city when I was in high school, we didn't see much of Gran and Grandpa. The four-hour drive to their house in upstate New York was always too much for Mom since she worked full time. Because of the distance, we just stopped seeing each other.

I enjoyed seeing Gran and Grandpa when I was little, but life just got so busy. And now, as an adult, I didn't have time to see them anymore. My life was just beginning—a great job, a new house, new friends. I didn't have time to worry about my family anymore.

This visit was important. Who knows? It could be the last time I saw them.

Half an hour later, I pulled into Gran and Grandpa's long rocky driveway. The road curved through some trees before an opening revealed their ranch-style home. Everything looked just as I remembered. The tall oak tree in the front yard with its branches still stretched out over the driveway, the front porch swing with its white paint still chipped and revealing the old wood underneath, the big picture window on the front of the house—nothing had changed.

I stepped out of my car and threw my lone duffel bag over my shoulder. Before I even reached the front door, it swung open. A smiling face greeted me.

"Allen, oh my goodness, it's so good to see you!" Gran wrapped her shaky arms around me.

I leaned in and put my chin over her shoulder as we hugged. "It's great to see you too."

"Come in. I've got your room ready for you! It's the same one you always used to stay in."

"I know. It's been too long."

I stepped inside to the familiar scent of the house—a bit of mustiness mixed with Gran's favorite cinnamon candles—and slipped off my shoes. Grandpa rose from his rocking chair in the living room, and I walked over to greet him with a handshake.

"Good to see ya again," he said with a grin. "Almost forgot what ya looked like."

I smiled sadly, knowing Gran probably needed to show him pictures of me to help him remember. "I know. It's been too long."

"It has, but we're glad you could come."

"Come on, Allen." Gran grabbed my arm. "I'll take you to your room."

I followed her down the creaky hallway that led to three bedrooms.

"Here." She walked into the room on the right. "I just bought these nice sheets for the bed."

I smiled. The room hadn't changed since I slept in it six years ago, other than maybe the burnt orange carpet felt slightly rougher under my toes than how I'd remembered.

"Make yourself comfortable." Gran waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, of course you know that. You're our grandson after all."

"Thanks."

Gran smiled and then left the room. I tossed my duffel bag onto the bed, which creaked as if it were complaining. I walked to the small window on the far wall and peered out at their backyard. The neatly mowed grass went back a couple hundred feet before it stopped by a wall of trees. The woods brought back memories of my childhood—times when I would go out and explore—when my imagination was my world. I remembered Mom and Gran didn't like me playing back there, but Grandpa convinced them it was all right. He even went back and explored with me sometimes.

"You remember playing out there?" Grandpa's raspy voice startled me. He walked over and stood beside me, looking out at the woods.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about how I loved going in the woods."

"The lake should still be good for fishin'. Bring your pole?"

I had completely forgotten about the lake at the end of the path through the woods. The lake was more like a large pond. We called that place Caribou Lake because Grandpa said that he once saw a herd of caribou drinking from it.

"No, I forgot to," I said.

"That's all right. We'll get you one of my old ones."

"You still fish?"

Grandpa shook his head. "I still walk back there and look in the water. It's got lots of interesting secrets in there."

"Secrets?" I looked over at him, confused.

He didn't hear my question. "But Gran don't come with me on my walks no more, but that's all right—I just talk with the trees."

"Do they talk back?" I asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Sure do. They tell me stories about the old knights that used to fight in these very woods."

"Secrets?" I looked over at him, confused.

I smirked, but Grandpa kept a straight face with his arms crossed and gazed out the window.

"Birds sing to me too. The other day, two sparrows were singing about the relaxing life here," said Grandpa.

My heart sank. He seriously meant everything that he told me. His mind really was fading.

"You should go out and listen sometime."

I smiled and nodded. "Well, I'm going to unpack and settle in."

Grandpa smiled back, but didn't say a word as he turned and walked slowly out of the room.

After settling into my room, I found Gran rolling homemade dough in the kitchen.

"What are you making?" I asked.

"Just some cherry pie. It's your grandpa's favorite. Hope you like it too."

"I love it! Any dessert you make is meant for heaven."

"Oh, stop that," Gran chuckled. Then she put her hand up to her forehead. "Doggone headache. I'm gonna have to sit down for a little bit." She walked over to rest in a wooden chair at the dining room table.

"You all right?" I asked with a worried look.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just get these headaches every once in a while."

I sat down in a chair next to her.

She grabbed a water bottle and took a big gulp. "So, tell me about everything that's been happening with you."

I smiled hesitantly. "Well, there's nothing much to tell."

"Oh, c'mon. It's been so long since I saw you last. There's a lot I don't know."

I told her about my high-paying online business, the nice house I had bought, and the business trips I had taken.

After we caught up, my thoughts wandered to Grandpa. "Gran?"

"Yes, dear?" She took another sip from her water.

"Grandpa was telling me that trees talk to him and animals sing to him when he walks in the woods. Has he ever said that to you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

I took a deep breath. "It just surprised me. I didn't think his mind was that far gone."

"Gone?" Gran laughed. "It's not gone, dear."

"So, you believe him?"

"Of course." Gran leaned over and peeked around a corner into the living room where Grandpa sat. She lowered her voice. "He may not be the man he once was, but he remembers what's important to him. He misses his family. He misses you—you're his only grandchild, you know."

I looked down, ashamed of the neglect I'd shown my grandparents. "I know, and I'm sorry for not seeing you more often."

"He remembers what's important to him."

Gran held my hand. "It's just as much our fault as it is yours. Don't beat yourself up. And go take a walk in the woods. Maybe you'll see Grandpa's not so crazy after all."

I agreed, and we finished talking about family and old memories before she continued making the cherry pie. We spent the rest of the evening talking, eating, and laughing. Grandpa stayed quiet most of the time, simply smiling and nodding along with our conversation.

The next morning, I woke up without an alarm to my routine of 6:30 a.m. I looked out the window to the woods. Even during July, the sunrise painted the trees and grass an autumn-like orange. I put on a light jacket and strolled outside, quickly finding the opening to the trail. Surprisingly, Grandpa kept up with the trimming pretty well.

Unimpeded by branches or thistles, I wandered through the woods. The trail led to an opening where two large trees

stood parallel to one another. I recognized this place in the woods. Grandpa had built forts in these trees—I think the one on the left was a chestnut and the one to the right a maple. Even though I saw no evidence of the tree forts, the memories still came flooding back to me.

I was a little boy again, hearing Grandpa's voice behind me. Carrying my favorite plastic sword, I scurried up the ladder into the tree fort.

"I recognized this place in the woods."

Grandpa climbed up to the other tree fort. "I'm gonna get you. You can't get away from me," he teased, pointing a toy bow and arrow at me.

"You'll never catch up to me!" I laughed, my squeaky voice echoing through the woods. We played knights and castles in the woods until the sun started to set.

My mind drifted back to the present, but more memories came to me—memories of these trees, memories of these woods, memories of Grandpa.

I heard rustling in the leaves above me. Two sparrows hopped from branch to branch, singing happily. Maybe they were the birds Grandpa had told me about. They continued to climb up the tree, stopping to look at one another every other branch. Although they had no goal in their exercise, the birds sang a happy song, content to be together.

The trail moved on before turning onto a wooden dock that stretched out across a small body of water—Caribou Lake. I tested the rotting boards before stepping out onto the wobbly dock. The structure still supported me, and I walked to the edge to look down into the clear water.

I smiled when I saw old fishing lures and hooks on the bottom of the lake. I remembered how many times I'd

accidentally dropped them into the water when I was tying them to my line. I wondered why Grandpa would never let me go retrieve them. But then I understood.

Yesterday, Grandpa told me the water held secrets. These lures and hooks were the water's secrets—the waters held my memories.

I thought back to the sparrows and how they sang the same song today as they had when I was a child. They sang of memories.

And the trees. They told Grandpa the same story they had just told me. They spoke of my memories playing imaginary knights with him.

In that moment, I realized that I owed Gran and Grandpa an apology. The past six years had been difficult for them, and Grandpa was doing everything he could to hold onto the memories of the ones he loved. I was the one who had forgotten.

After a few quiet moments by the lake, I turned around and walked back to the house, knowing Gran and Grandpa would be awake by now.

Editorial Staff

Faculty Editor

Mr. Mark Wainwright

Production Manager

Mrs. Jennifer Miller

Senior Editors

Zoey Arel
Rebecca Ramsey

Editors

Anna Brooks
Shannon Connolly
Rebekah Gengarella
Lauren Jacques
Kylee Kosoff
Ariel Kralina
Astrid Mendieta
Cainan Phillips
Valerie Principe
Holly Titus
Shay Whyms

Fact Checkers

Kylee Kosoff
Ariel Kralina

Production Staff

Faculty Project Supervisor

Miss Abigail Emtage

Design Director

Dustin Ziemer (cover designer)

Layout Consultant

Andrew Hurtado

Designers

Lydeah Sheng
Addie Freeman

Illustration Director

Clara Reinagel

Illustration Consultant

Ben Swanson

Illustrators

Trista Allen
Lydia Collier
Meta Duante
Becky Fair
Eva Helwig
Ha-Eun Kim
Rebecca Lemoine
Rebekah Webb

Just as a journey is filled with twists and turns, so are our lives filled with choices and decisions. Each choice that we make alters our course and sets us on a new path. In the 32nd edition of *Fountains*, we explore those pivotal decisions. The stories in this collection share those crossroads that each one of us has encountered—the point where we are presented with a problem or idea and decide which path to take. Through these stories, essays, and illustrations, we see people from all walks of life stopping, taking hold of a crucial decision, and letting it take them on a journey that they never thought possible.

Each journey begins and ends with a choice. How will the experiences you read about in this *Fountains* edition inspire your own journey?

"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life."

Proverbs 14:27a