


OVERCOMING



FOUNTAINS 33RD EDITION
A PCC STUDENT PUBLICATION

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The background of the entire page is a deep teal color with horizontal, wavy, brush-stroke-like patterns. Scattered throughout the page are several small, clear, spherical bubbles of varying sizes, some of which have highlights on them, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

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OVERCOMING

FOUNTAINS

33rd Edition

2022



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Introduction

Life is easy on sunny days. You like when your coffee is the perfect temperature. You like when all your free throws go in. You like when nothing changes—when everything stays perfectly calm and predictable.

But life isn't always smooth sailing. Sometimes, rough waters rock your boat and throw your plans overboard. Sometimes, your joy turns into heartbreak, and you find yourself floundering in doubt. You begin wondering, "What am I supposed to do next?"

When those times come, you can batten down the hatches. You can take each wave of trials one day at a time. But to truly stand firm, you need to cling to the Rock of your salvation. The storms of life may rage around you, but His guiding light will always remain true and strong.

This 33rd edition of *Fountains* calls you to overcome. You may have to overcome the uncharted waters of diving into adulthood or overcome the crushing grief of losing a loved one. Yet, as you learn to overcome storms by relying on God, He will strengthen and direct you throughout your journey.

Editors:

Blair Lane Zach Tenell
Taylor Cartwright



DELUGE



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God's Viewfinder

by Emily Thompson

You don't realize what you have until it's gone.

"This picture is awful. I could get them a better one," I said as I stood nose-to-frame with the blurry, ill-proportioned shot of the Denver skyline that was hanging on the wall.

"Eliza," my mom said, glancing up from her phone with a frown, "don't criticize. Not everyone has the eye for color and such like you do. Besides, it may have been a gift."

"Think they'll take a replacement to pay the bill?" I teased.

"Eliza Jane," she said in a low, warning voice.

I couldn't help but snicker, and my mom rolled her eyes in return. "What?" I said. "I've been up on that hill before. It's a great view, and they still managed to pick a bad angle."

"Just sit down and leave things alone."

“But, Mom.” I drew my words out long and whiny. “They’ve been gone forever now. How long does it take? Are they putting my symptoms into WebMD or something?” I laughed at my own joke, but my mom didn’t seem quite so amused.

“Just sit in the chair and wait. Your messing around isn’t gonna make time go any faster.”

I meandered to the examination chair, muttering to myself. I knew that I was acting like a child even though I was a senior in high school. Whenever I got bored, I got a little whiny. Doctor offices of any kind weren’t exactly the peak of entertainment. I perched on the edge of the chair, still antsy and bored out of my mind.

With nothing to do, I pulled out my phone and shot a text to my best friend, Oliver. We’d been best friends since the day we were born, our parents having been college buddies. If anyone could kill my boredom, Oliver could.

Doctor’s offices are the worst. YAWN.

Ew. Checkup?

Oliver replied within seconds.

Eh. Kind of. I’m at the ophthalmologist’s lol. I think I stumped ’em. They’re taking forever.

Lol figures. You’re that difficult type. I’m headed to run some errands before work. Don’t let them steal your eyes. TTYL.

Lame. Leaving me to rot in boredom. Mokay, byeee.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and leaned back in the examination chair. So much for him bailing me out of boredom.

As I leaned back, my DSLR camera, which I carried everywhere, knocked against the chair's armrest. I slid it from my neck and slowly slipped it into my mom's purse. The action earned me a raised eyebrow but not much more. Not a moment after, the ophthalmologist strode in, a stiff smile on his face.

Ophthalmologist was an odd word that had taken me the entire car ride to master, and I was proud to have been able to stride up to the counter and say it accurately. Now, however, the look on Dr. Dechert's face made me not so proud of the word.

"I'm sorry about the wait," he said. "I needed to consult another doctor regarding your situation." He pulled a chair from the side and placed himself in front of my mom and me. As he adjusted himself on the seat, he tried to smile, but his eyes held a deep sorrow that put a bad taste in my mouth.

So much for
him bailing me
out of boredom.

I wasn't sure what to make of the look, but right at that moment, it was making me believe that I did not want

to hear what he had to say. Already prepped for an 'I'm-sorry-for-your-loss' speech, I held my breath and turned away, looking anywhere but those woe-begotten eyes.

"Mrs. James, have you had any history of eye diseases in your family? Any sight loss or degeneration?" Doctor Dechert's voice was tight and business-like.



Mom stammered, and I jolted, surprised by the question. Somehow she managed to work out a response. I, however, simply stared.

“Well, uh, actually, one of her uncles, my brother, had lost his vision long before he passed. I remember them saying something about his genetics. But he’s the only one of five siblings that lost his vision. I didn’t think—I should have considered it at least. Is this the same thing?”

“It could be. But you can’t blame yourself, Mrs. James. You brought her at the right time.”

He took a deep breath and pushed it out slowly from between pursed lips. He turned to me as I sat frozen, now gripping the chair firmly, the plastic squeaking between my pale fingers.

“Eliza—” he said.

I quickly turned away, fear already rising in my throat to take my mind captive, gripping at my thoughts and shattering them to pieces.

Dr. Dechert cleared his throat and tried again. "Eliza, I need you to understand what's going on here, okay? Can you look at me?"

Hesitantly, and using every ounce of courage left in my body, I turned my head toward him. I couldn't bring myself to look at his eyes, though. Instead, I found myself looking at his tie, a conglomeration of colorful paisleys swimming in linked formation.

He apparently found this satisfactory enough and continued talking. "Since there's no gentle way to put this, I'm going to get straight to the point, all right?" he said. "We've diagnosed you with Choroideremia, a degenerative eye disease which affects the retina and the choroid. Basically, you're going to slowly lose your eyesight, from your peripherals in. Chances are, you'll completely lose your eyesight later on in adulthood."

I gripped the chair harder, knuckles tight and eyes burning with unshed tears. My mom rose to stand behind me, hands resting gently on my shoulders. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. My mom, once again, was capable of asking for both of us.

"How did this happen?" she choked, grip tightening slightly on my shoulders.

"As you said, Mrs. James, it's genetics. Yours is a rare case, Eliza. Women are the carriers of the gene that causes this, but they rarely have the condition themselves. It usually passes on to their male children, as in the case with your uncle, and the gene may pass on to their female children. That is probably where this came from. Your mother probably received the abnormal X chromosome from your grandmother, and then it passed to you. For whatever reason, your body took it on and activated the disease."

A rare case? Was I supposed to be happy about that? Was I supposed to feel special? I fought with the lump in my throat, eager to get my words out, to ask questions, anything. Finally, the words emerged, and I managed to ask, “Is there a fix? Something we can do?”

There they were again—those sad, drooping eyes. They were glossy and disgustingly pitiful. They looked to me and then to my mom.

“Research is still being done, but as of yet—” he paused, but then his voice returned even softer than before, “I’m sorry, there’s nothing we can do.”

I stared at the crisp, tiled floor where my heart lay, dashed to pieces. I left it there, as my mom and I headed for the car. We didn’t say anything on the ride

It still didn’t feel
real, and I wasn’t
ready for it to.

home, even when my mom bought me my favorite raspberry slush. I believe she knew it wouldn’t help much, but she was doing her best. I appreciated her compassion.

We told my dad about the appointment when he got home from work. He just hugged me, said he loved me, and then moved on, asking me to help him with dinner. I was grateful to him for that. I didn’t want to talk about it more than I had to. It still didn’t feel real, and I wasn’t ready for it to.

For that reason, I ignored my phone all night, even when I went to bed. When I checked it the next morning, I had several messages from Oliver.

Ugh. Work was awful. Remind me why I work at a sticky arcade joint?

How did the appointment go?

Libby?

I came up with a great new story idea! I have to tell you about it. Can you call?

My favorite pen exploded :’(

You okay Libby? You’re worrying me.

Good morning! I have work off today! Wanna hang?

Are you still upset that I smashed the jaw breaker you had been working on? It was getting ridiculous, really.

I wanna respect your space but I’m boooorred. Can I come over?

Squinting at the screen now blurred through tears, I typed out a response.

Appointment not good.
Please come ASAP.

Oliver was at the house within twenty minutes. His hazel eyes were wide in concern and his blond hair still stuck up in bedhead fashion. He came with a backpack loaded with books, video games, and the squishy stuffed seal I always stole from him whenever I was at his house. Mom and I recounted the whole appointment to him and what that would mean for

me. When we finished, Oliver just sat silently, both of us at a loss for words.

“What are you thinking?” Oliver asked quietly.

“I’m thinking that I’m scared. I can’t imagine a world without color and beauty, and I don’t want to.” The tears came flooding forward again. “I don’t wanna talk about this anymore. Can we do something else?”

To avoid my thoughts, Oliver and I made a snack and then scrolled aimlessly through Netflix, looking

“I can’t imagine
a world without
color and
beauty, and I
don’t want to.”

for something—anything—to watch. I had been doing okay until we passed one of my favorite Disney movies which I loved chiefly for its spectacular art style and colors. It struck me then that, eventually, I would never see it again. I motioned for him to play it and did my

best to focus on the movie and not how much I would miss it. That was how we spent our day, watching my favorite movies, playing our favorite video games, and watching documentaries of the places I had always dreamed of visiting.

When my dad came home, we made dinner with my parents and climbed back onto the couch, ready to marathon our favorite movie series. We were about to press play on the first one when my mom walked into the living room, her hands behind her back.

“Eliza? This was in my purse. I thought you might want to hold on to it,” she said.

The aching feeling in my throat became worse, and my heart sank as she moved her hands to her front. I knew what it was before I even saw it. My DSLR camera. And that was it. That was what broke me.

I could live without my movies. I could live without television and social media and books and anything else that my eyesight helped me experience. But my photography? Photography was in my soul, in my heart. It spoke for me, screamed when I couldn't even whisper. It showed the world the beauty that still existed. Everything I'd ever experienced in life, everything I'd ever loved or enjoyed or even found frustratingly beautiful—it was all in that camera. And the idea that I would never again see the world in that square—the guide and viewfinder to my imagination—was enough to break me.

I'm not sure what motivation carried me there, but I soon found myself on the front porch, nestled into the pillows on the porch swing. Tears singed my skin, and my lungs heaved with the effort of keeping my breath flowing regularly. My chest hurt too, and I felt as if what was left of my heart—what I hadn't left in pieces on the ophthalmologist's floor—were now in the living room, throbbing at my mom's feet. It wasn't fair.

I was going to graduate in a few months, and I was supposed to go off to some nice art college with Oliver. I would improve my photography, and he would refine his writing. Together we would become travelers and record our adventures. And now I would never see the Colosseum or the Eiffel Tower. Now there was no reason for me to go to college.

I felt as if I were floating listlessly on a blackened lake with no direction, no guidance, and no comfort. Only emptiness and cold, bone-aching darkness surrounded me.

Mom and Dad tried to comfort me, but after they left, Oliver finally slipped onto the porch and seated himself on the opposite end of the swing. He didn't say anything for a moment, but simply studied the

mottled clouds that mocked me with their beauty. Then in the silence, I heard Oliver's notebook crackle as he opened it to a dog-eared page.

"I want to read you part of a poem by John Milton. It's called 'When I Consider How My Light is Spent.'

*When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker...*

John Milton was a poet who went blind. And here he is, vexed by the idea that God would take away the ability to fully use the talent that God gave him. He asks how he's supposed to serve God and how he's supposed to go about life without this gift that has been a part of him for so long."

I perked up. This was something I could understand. I was asking myself the same—albeit more selfish—questions.

Oliver swallowed hard and then continued. "At the end of the poem, Milton gets a response for his question, and it's that God doesn't need your works or your gifts. He doesn't need your constant service.

He appreciates it. He gave you gifts to use, but He also just wants us to stop sometimes. Sometimes, He is just asking us to stand still and listen. God's gonna use you some other way, Libby. You just gotta let Him do His work first."

I didn't like Oliver's answer or his use of my nickname to strike my heart, but I knew that he was right. I turned my face away, fighting tears.

“Hey,” he said, nudging my shoulder gently with his notebook so I would look him in the eyes. “I know it’s hard, but you’re not going through this alone. You’re never alone.”

Still holding the tears back, I tore myself away from his eyes to look forward. Beyond my porch’s roof, above neighboring houses, I caught a glimpse of the sunset. “Thank you. That helped a lot. It doesn’t make it less painful, but it makes me believe that maybe, by some miracle of God’s grace, I might be able to survive this thing.”

Oliver leaned back into the swing, smiling at me with his warm, sympathetic hazel eyes. “I know you will. You’re the bravest person I know.”

“I want you to record
the sunset for me.”

I let his words sink in. Then, after a few moments, I jumped up

and ran into the house, plowing straight ahead and up the stairs to my bedroom. Opening the wooden drawer of my side table, I retrieved my sought-after treasure and returned to my seat next to Oliver on the porch swing. I passed it to him, and he gave me a strange look.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s my dad’s old tape recorder. He gave me a bunch of his stuff from college when he cleaned out the attic. I want you to record the sunset for me. Tell me what it looks like, the way a writer would. The way you would.” I gestured to the scene in front of us, a colorful stretch of sun blanketing the neighborhood in warmth.

“Can I ask why?”

“I love this world. I want to remember it, even if it hurts me. God is taking away my sight, but He didn’t take away my love of His creation. You made me realize that there must be something else He has in store for me, even if it doesn’t make sense right now. The world is still out there, and if I can’t capture it in my camera, I want to capture it in my heart.”

Oliver gave me an approving smile. He leaned forward in the swing, placing his elbows on his knees, recorder cradled carefully in his hands. We sat silently for a moment, watching the sky, and then he pressed the button. The recorder whirled to a start, and he began to spin the words that brought my heart back to life and gave me hope when I thought there was none left.

Notes

1. John Milton, “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” in *Literature: A Pocket Anthology* (6th ed.), ed. R. S. Gwynn (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 363-364.

I Wish I Knew

by Alyssa Rodgers

The Rondeau is a French poetry form with fifteen lines separated into three stanzas. Each line, except the refrain of "I wish I knew," has eight syllables. This Rondeau is written from the perspective of a girl whose camp crush refuses to inquire the motives behind her incessant questioning.

I wish I knew what makes you cry,
What makes you break or hurt or sigh,
What makes you laugh, what makes you tick,
What I should bring when you get sick,
What colors hide within your eyes,

And what goes in your favorite pies.
What's in the music you despise?
What habits are too hard to kick?

I wish I knew

Your favorite clouds that fill the skies
(And to watch at sunset or rise),
Your favorite kind of flow'rs to pick,
And why God made your head so thick!
And why you will not ask me why

I wish I knew.



Ivan

by Samantha Allen

Will the morale of a community overcome disaster?

We can't be ready. Sean's initial thought rang inside his head.¹

Forecasts were starting to suggest that Hurricane Ivan was changing targets. It had begun favoring an easterly path toward the Alabama/Florida state line rather than centering on Mobile, Alabama. Sean and Elizabeth Vinaja lived in Cantonment—about thirty minutes from Pensacola Christian College where they worked as faculty—and now they were in the middle of Ivan's path.

Sean gazed out his window, admiring his neighborhood. To him, this busy little corner of Northwest Florida wasn't just a place: it was hearth and home, and only recently at that. After having graduated five years ago and having taught for two years, he and Elizabeth had finally bought their Bristol

Woods home the previous year. Regardless of the newness, his home was about to be tested.

Sean took a breath and let his worries settle. True to his curiosity as a science teacher, he wondered how the house would persevere. Elizabeth, a cautious English her, did not.² Sean had installed impact resistant windows and storm doors on the house some time ago, but still—

A similar sense of worry plagued other faculty members of Pensacola Christian College, although some were affected less than others. English faculty member Rob Achuff and his wife, Rochelle, didn't know what to expect from Hurricane Ivan.³ They lived on the first floor in the Rawson Lane apartments owned by the college. Rob knew that the apartments were built to withstand hurricane winds, but the forces of nature had been known to best even the most skilled architect.

Ivan was an organized category 3 hurricane.⁴ While its tour through the Caribbean had weakened the once category 5 storm, it still retained much of its devastating wind strength. The landmasses had also slowed its travel speed to a crawl, allowing the wind's gusts time to cause destruction.

On September 16, 2004, late in the night, the hurricane struck just west of Gulf Shores, Alabama, making it nearly impossible to see any damage to the area until morning.

Leading up to the hurricane's landing, Rochelle Achuff was more worried about the car they had just bought—a 2004 Honda Accord—than anything else. Rob parked the car away from the trees and overhanging branches but chose to leave his truck in its usual parking space. Though they hadn't experienced



a hurricane before, they were certainly aware of its destructive nature.

After their late night conversations with their neighbors subsided, they retreated into their apartments for the night, leaving a foreboding silence behind them. They had already set up a place to shelter in their laundry room, away from the outside doors and large windows.

Before turning in, Rob called his rightfully concerned mother and reassured her that, nervousness aside, they were ready to sit out the storm. Shortly after he hung up, the transformers on Rawson Lane exploded in a fit of sparks, a fanfare for a king's entrance, leaving him and Rochelle in the eerie dark.

Ivan had arrived.

Elizabeth Vinaja knew it first. Ivan's 120 mph winds blasted against the bare windowpanes.⁵ She shot up in her bed, her eyes finally focusing on a nearby window. The glass bent in and out, in and out from the pressure Ivan was exerting. Startled, she shook Sean awake and suggested they move to the hallway.

He wasn't difficult to persuade. Admittedly worried about the house's integrity, he saw how the storm pressed against the windows and helped her move the mattress into the hallway.

They could hardly hear anything. The rain beat heavily against the roof, thrumming as it swept across the house in waves. The rain hit the windows in sheets so thick that they appeared to have been replaced by opaque glass panes. Through the rain, they could hear Ivan ripping its way through nearby trees. Yet, to Elizabeth's bewilderment, Sean and their 2-year-old husky mix Aravis simply went back to sleep.

Ivan had arrived.

Doug Zila, a history faculty member at Pensacola Christian College, had experienced hurricanes, having gone through Hurricanes Erin and Opal in 1995.⁶ Despite his experience, he could feel the immense pressure Ivan was exerting. Doug along with Karen, his wife, and their children sat on the kitchen floor of their apartment. Since their apartment had been built to withstand most hurricanes, they had invited another family, the Campbells, to shelter with them. However, Doug's friend Don couldn't also fit in the apartment's narrow kitchen and chose to shelter in the bathroom instead.

It didn't take long for Ivan to make its presence clear. Wind blew forcibly against the front door, roaring as though a jet engine were parked right outside the breezeway, and the apartment was engulfed

in the low, threatening growl. Doug put his hand on the kitchen's interior wall. The whole building was shaking.

To both the experienced and novice residents, Ivan felt different. It felt stronger.

After its nocturnal visit, Ivan left the Panhandle in a rough way, showing its strength with downed trees, a

Ivan felt different.
It felt stronger.

collapsed bridge, and ruined roads.⁷ It killed 120 people and cost the United States \$27.7 billion.⁸ Roads by Pensacola Beach had been

covered by sand, some sections chewed away or swallowed whole by the ocean. Beach houses were twisted from their once-sturdy stilts, and whole walls were ripped off homes and buildings, exposing full closets and private office spaces. Boats that once floated proudly offshore lay mangled and drowned.

Back on Rawson Lane, Rob and Rochelle Achuff awoke to the mutterings of conversation from outside. Sometime in the night, they had moved to the couch after the storm had quieted. From the sound of it, the neighbors were already poking around the damage outside, checking their vehicles and sharing stories about the noisiest, windiest night of their lives.

Rain water, branches, and clumps of leaves covered the parking lot. To Rochelle's relief, the Honda Accord avoided damage. As he looked at his truck, Rob scratched his head in bewilderment. The car parked two spaces down had been crushed from a large tree branch, but his unmoved truck earned only a few new marks of character.

In Cantonment, Sean and Elizabeth Vinaja found themselves conserving power. With the help of a cellphone and a small radio, they assured family and friends that they were safe and occasionally tuned in



to the only radio station still broadcasting for updates. After feeling established in that pattern, Sean soon answered his cell expecting to hear from another family member but heard a colleague on the other end instead.

“A tornado was spotted headed your way,” he warned. Startled and still a little on edge, Sean and Elizabeth ducked in the hallway with Aravis. After nearly fifteen minutes of silence, Sean got up and poked his head out the back door. The sky looked plain and monochrome, no funnel in sight.

“I don’t think we’re in any danger here,” he assured Elizabeth.

Ivan was the type that didn’t do its dirty work alone. Looking around the neighborhood, Sean could clearly see the haphazard damage caused by the storm. Whole trees were stripped of their green leaves, while

the tops of others were only twisted and broken. After another sweep across the neighborhood, he noticed the nearby houses had received more damage than his had.

“I don’t think we’re in any danger here,” he assured Elizabeth.

The one across the street had lost nearly half of its shingles. He looked back at his own house. A few shingles were missing from the

corners, and the brick chimney had sustained minor damage, but that was it. The house had passed the test.

Midmorning activity at Rawson Lane was slowing. Doug Zila felt his energy steadily drop from the long, stressful night. By this time, the residents at the apartments would usually have had their cups of coffee. Maybe he could make some.

Doug took some loose coffee grounds and a saucepan, planning to boil the grounds, only to be stopped by his friend Mike Geary. After locating a stapler, Mike created a strange-looking tea bag—coffee filters stapled together. Soon the familiar, energizing scent of coffee filled the complex and seemingly pulled others out of their muggy apartments. The light clamor of small talk and updates on nearby friends and family brought a sense of normalcy—a welcome change in the midst of Ivan’s destruction.

Over the following weeks, the Pensacola community was friendlier as it worked together to recover from Ivan. Traffic wasn’t hectic or overrun with a me-before-you attitude. Drivers at four-way crossings allowed semi-trucks to go through first, knowing that those trucks carried supplies that needed to get out to the community.

While the power was out, many neighbors pulled out their grills and had grand cookouts, serving up whatever was left in their refrigerators. In spite of the blackout, others with generators shared a pot of coffee or two with a neighbor. On every scale, Sean Vinaja enjoyed both, the sense of community and shared kindnesses, but Rob Achuff almost felt guilty as he and his wife ate freshly cooked rice in their restored apartment. As the smell of sizzling steaks wafted in from the nearby neighborhoods, he started to wish he owned a grill himself.

The people of Pensacola were determined. Boarded-up businesses were spray-painted with “We will be back!” and they certainly were.

Ivan was strong, but Pensacola was stronger.

The familiar, energizing scent of coffee filled the complex.

Notes

1. Dr. Sean Vinaja, interviewed by author, Pensacola 2017.
2. Dr. Elizabeth Vinaja, interviewed by author, Pensacola 2017.
3. Dr. Rob Achuff, interviewed by author, Pensacola 2017.
4. Stacey Stewart, "Hurricane Ivan Tropical Cyclone Report," National Hurricane Center, last modified May 22, 2005, https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092004_Ivan.pdf.
5. G. Machos, "Hurricane Ivan Roars through the Caribbean and United States Gulf Coast," Hurricaneville, accessed 2021, <http://www.hurricaneville.com/ivan.html>.
6. Dr. Doug Zila, interviewed by author, Pensacola 2017.
7. "Hurricane Ivan-2004," Hurricanes: Science and Society, accessed 2017, <http://www.hurricanesociety.org/history/storms/2000s/hurricaneivan/>.
8. "Costliest U.S. tropical cyclones tables update," United States National Hurricane Center, last modified January 27, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180127083930/https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/news/UpdatedCostliest.pdf>.

Orange Days and Blue Days

by Danielle Vedrode

I knew 100 ways babysitting could go wrong, but I learned the 101st way that day.

“You need to watch the kids for me this weekend,” my sister said over the phone. In the background, I could hear people talking and something played on TV. An oven beeped.

“I’m busy,” I blurted out.

This was my standard answer when threatened with babysitting. Between us, my sister had always been the one better with children. People handed fussy babies to her so that she could sing to them and calm them down. People handed fussy babies to me while I protested, only to be surprised when their baby’s fussing turned into screams.



“What could you be busy doing?” my sister demanded. “You spend most of your life in a library somewhere.”

“I spend all my time in libraries because I have to do research for school,” I said. Because I was earning my master’s degree in English, I would spend hours looking for source material. “Ask Mom to come babysit.”

“Mom’s actually busy.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I really have a lot of projects I’m working on.”

“I know you’re busy, I know. But . . . please. I’ve asked everyone else. You’re it, Lynn,” she said. “Please.”

“Wow.” I was impressed. My sister didn’t ask for things politely. She *was* desperate.

“Eric booked us a trip for the weekend up in the mountains. Just us. I need . . . I just need to get out. I’ll owe you forever.”

I looked at my schedule that hung over my desk. I kept track of how important my appointments were by color-coding them. Blue equaled most important, while orange equaled least important. This weekend, I had scheduled nothing but orange-colored appointments. I had no other excuses left.

“Tell me what time you want me there,” I said reluctantly.

My sister shrieked with joy.

I drove to my sister’s house the next evening. Her house was an hour-long drive up into the

foothills. I drove my tiny car past large SUVs, ignoring glares from drivers when I refused to speed, and pulled into the cul-de-sac where my sister and her family lived.

The lengthy drive had been my main excuse to not visit my sister. But the real reason I didn’t want to visit was her children. They made her so happy, but they

I had scheduled
nothing but
orange-colored
appointments.

made me so anxious. Every time I was there, I couldn't stop thinking about what could go wrong.

My niece was still a baby the last time I saw her. She liked to cry in my ear and drink bottles and bottles of milk that only my sister could prepare properly. I stood awkwardly in the background with a scald mark on the inside of my wrist from a foiled temp-check of a bottle. My nephew, older by two years, had been playing in the corner. He seemed fine until he began to color and ended up with a crayon (that I handed him!) stuck up his nose.

That had been a few years and many excuses ago. Over time, my sister's invitations stopped coming. I was never available because of work, because of school, or just because I really didn't want to go. My sister had settled for the occasional phone call from me. I sent birthday cards to my niece and nephew to make up for my absence. Juliet, my niece, had just celebrated her ninth birthday. Connor, my nephew, was now eleven.

I got out of the car, got my bags out of the backseat, went up to the door, and rang the doorbell.

The door swung open.

"Hi, kids are inside. I love you. You're amazing. We have to get going. Bye!" My sister kissed me on the cheek and shouldered past me toward the van in the driveway. My sister had always handed her children off to people easily. Her parenting style reflected her way of life: just relax and have fun. It was mind-boggling to me.

Eric, my brother-in-law, stood in the doorway. He opened his hand in an awkward *hello*.

"The emergency numbers are on the fridge. Try not to stress, okay? You'll be fine." He smiled. I smiled back and stepped aside to let him pass.

I watched them drive away, then picked up my bags and went inside. I shut and locked the door, then stood in the silence of the living room. On the living room's coffee table, I noticed a picture of my sister and I, taken at my sister's wedding. She had clamped her hand on my arm to hold me in place while we took a photo. I remembered smiling as sincerely as I could, feeling self-conscious in my bridesmaid's dress.

I blinked myself back to the present.

"Hey, guys? It's your aunt!" I called.

Soft thumps came down the stairs. Juliet stepped down the last step. A pair of sparkly blue headphones hung around her neck. She paused the music and opened her hand in an awkward *hello*, mirroring her dad's gesture.

"Aunt Lynn?" she asked. She glanced at the picture of me and my sister as if to verify that she was right before she looked back at me.

I nodded.

"You're old," she said. She clapped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed.

"That's fair," I said, shrugging. Juliet looked relieved. "Where's your brother?"

"In his room upstairs."

"Did you guys have dinner?" I asked.

"Nuh-uh. Mom said to order pizza. She said you probably would anyway since you burn whatever you cook. Pizza Place magnet is on the fridge."

"Wow," I said, walking into the kitchen and grabbing the magnet. What else could I say? I couldn't get mad at Juliet for being so blunt. She was just repeating what she had heard.

"Was that mean?" Juliet asked. "Mom says I need to watch what I say more."

I was about to reassure her when we heard a loud *thump* from upstairs.

“What’s Connor doing up there?” I asked.

Juliet shrugged. “Maybe you should check on that.”

“Yep.” I held out my hand to her. She took it and led me up the stairs, flicking on the light switch over the stairs before I could.

We walked up to the second floor and past my sister’s disorganized office and cluttered desk. Juliet cocked her head, listening. She headed in the direction of the next loud crash.

“I think he’s in here.” Juliet stopped in front of a closed door. A sign that read *Game Room* hung on the doorknob.

I pushed open the door. Inside the game room, books and toys were scattered across the floor. One shelf had fallen over. In the center of the room, a pair of legs stuck out from beneath a navy blue recliner, puffy and old-fashioned.

“Connor?” Juliet said. “Did you get stuck again?”

Connor mumbled unintelligibly.

“Again? How many times does he do this?” I asked.

“A lot. Dad’s usually here to get him out.” Juliet looked up at me. “Can you do it?”

“I can try.” I did not say that whatever I tried might not work.

From what I could tell by my phone’s flashlight, Connor’s shirt had gotten caught on the part of the chair that folded out into a footrest. The shirt had twisted and gotten hooked firmly in place. Connor looked like he had tried to take off the shirt to escape but had gotten stuck inside the shirt too.

I swallowed. "Okay, so, Juliet? How about . . . you order us pizza while I . . . figure this out." I handed her the magnet.

Juliet left to go get the house phone. I stretched out on my back next to the recliner.

"How did you do this?" I asked Connor.

"I left somethin' under here," Connor replied.

"What was it?"

"My glasses. Found them," he said. He had to raise his voice so I could hear him from underneath the chair. "They were on my face the whole time."

I tilted the phone's flashlight so I could inspect just how badly Connor's shirt had gotten twisted. "Can you move your arm at all?"

"No. I tried to pull myself out, but I just knocked over the shelf." Connor sighed. "Mom's gonna kill me."

"Only if she finds out."

I thought about calling 911. Then, I imagined my sister laughing at me when I told her. My pride wouldn't allow this.

A pair of legs
stuck out from
beneath a navy
blue recliner.

Juliet came back into the room with the house phone pressed to her ear. "And could I please have a side order of cheesy bread?" Pulling the phone away slightly, Juliet whispered to me,

"Can we get root beer too? Mom lets us have it."

"Sure," I said, hardly even listening. "Finish ordering, okay? I need you to keep Connor calm."

Juliet gave the pizza place the house's address and finished the call. She sat down next to the chair and told Connor to relax.

"I'll be right back," I said. I could feel my hands shaking, but I knew I couldn't lose my nerve in front of the kids. I rummaged through the house in search

of something to pry open the recliner or maybe cut Tyler free, but had no luck. My sister had probably lost her scissors in a mess somewhere. I checked on Juliet and Connor. Juliet had challenged Connor to a game of *I, Spy*. All of Connor's suggestions were along the lines of, "I spy something black—because I can't see."

I yanked out my phone and dialed 911 but paused over the "call" button. My sister would never let me hear the end of this. That was fine, as long as Connor was okay.

There was a loud knock on the door. I jumped.

"That's probably the pizza," Juliet said.

Surprised at the quick delivery, I hurried down the stairs and opened the door.

"Lynn?" a male voice said.

Puzzled, I squinted through the dark. "Mike? From high school?"

"Yeah! How are you?" Mike said. He held our pizzas and a bottle of root beer. "You okay? Something I can help you with?"

All at once, I had an idea. "Listen. What I'm going to say is weird, but I need you to have an open mind."

"Sure," he said slowly.

"Can you help me unstick my nephew from underneath a recliner?"

"I mean, sure, but you'll have to tip extra," Mike said.

"I don't know if that's a joke," I said, leading him inside after shutting the door.

We went up to the game room, where Connor had managed to tip the recliner over on its side.

"Okay, let's take a look," Mike said. He placed the pizzas and root beer on a chair, then knelt by the recliner. "We're going to need to cut him out of here," he said. "It looks like he got scraped up by the chair too."

"I'll get the first aid kit," Juliet volunteered and left the room. She came back a few minutes later and put the first aid kit next to the pizzas.

Mike scanned the room, then stepped outside to my sister's messy desk. He picked up a skirt with a tag on it to move it aside, and a pair of scissors fell out and hit the desk. Scissors in hand, Mike came back in and cut away at Connor's shirt until he was finally loose.

He turned his face and sniffled while wiping away some tears.

Once freed, Connor lay sprawled on the floor. He turned his face and sniffled while wiping away some tears. Mike cleaned the cut on Connor's arm and smoothed out a large blue bandage over it.

"How did you even do this?" Mike asked him, holding a piece of Connor's shirt.

Connor shut his eyes. Another tear slipped out.

"Hey," I said, "things happen. Don't worry about it."

Connor looked up at me. "I wish I was more like my mom," he said. "She never messes anything up."

I bit the inside of my lip so my chin wouldn't start shaking. Juliet pulled out a slice of pizza and began munching on it. Mike poured himself a glass of well-earned root beer.

"Let me tell you something," I said. "I always wanted to be like your mom when we were little. I couldn't, and I thought that something was wrong with me. But there isn't. Your mom is different from me, and that's fine. Your mom is amazing, and she loves you so much." When Connor started to roll his eyes I added, "And she used to get her head stuck in things all the time."

Connor whipped his head around to face me. "Really?"

“Oh yeah. Once when we were little, she got her hair stuck in the garbage disposal. Your grandpa had to cut her free.”

As Connor started to laugh, I held out a paper plate for a slice of pizza. Mike plopped a piece down on the plate, which I then held out to Connor.

“You are an amazing kid,” I told him. “Always remember that.”

Down by the front door, I pulled out my wallet and gave Mike all the extra cash I had. “Thank you!”

“You could have called 911,” he said.

“My sister would have laughed at me.”

“She’s probably going to laugh when she hears you picked the pizza guy over . . . well, over anyone else.”

“Only if she finds out,” I said as I closed my wallet. “And the pizza guy did just fine.”

“Well, if you ever need someone to get your nephew unstuck from a recliner . . .” Mike made a “call me” gesture, holding his hand by his ear. “You have a good night.” He stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

Connor put on a new shirt while I cleaned up the game room. For the rest of the night, I kept Connor and Juliet downstairs where I could see them.

“And the pizza guy did just fine.”

We watched a movie and ate our weight in pizza and cheesy bread. I judged a burping contest—one that Juliet won.

On the day that my sister and Eric got back, I was sitting in the living room with Juliet and Connor, watching Juliet drag Connor through another game of *Candy Land*. Connor had only gotten his head stuck one more time—this time between the posts of the

stair railing. It was a simple twist-and-shove operation, and no pizza delivery men were called on to help.

The door opened, and my sister stepped inside. Connor shot up and ran to hug his mom, almost tackling her. Juliet followed, and the two of them wrapped themselves around my sister.

“Did you have a nice time with Aunt Lynn?” my sister asked Connor.

Connor nodded into her shoulder. My sister scanned the room, searching for anything out of place. She found nothing.

“See? Still standing,” she said to me. “I’m glad you came. We should do this again.”

“Yeah!” Connor said, pulling his head away from my sister’s shoulder. “She’s cool!”

“I am?” I said, bewildered.

Juliet nodded with a serious face.

I knew Juliet meant it. “Thanks.”

My sister only found out about Connor and the recliner when Connor let the secret slip out over dinner one night. She called me just to tease me about it, laughing the whole time. But her voice softened when she asked if I would have dinner with them sometime. I said yes and highlighted the date blue on my calendar.

The Rainbow Sweater

by Ariel Allen

*Something ugly can be the most beautiful thing
in the world.*

Mr. Gregson shuffled into the window-lit house. Yellow walls reflected light around the kitchen where he set down his duffle bag. He paused, breathing in the still and familiar air. His fingers rubbed at his shadowed eyes. It had been a long week.

Crumpled blankets and pillows lay strewn across the living room floor. On the coffee table, an open sleeve of cookies sat next to two water glasses. A picture frame lay on the carpet where it had fallen a few days before. A pile of assorted yarn sat on the kitchen table.

Feeling slightly dizzy, he forced himself to move. Tea might help. His shoes scuffed the cold wooden boards as he filled a kettle with water. His hands

shook—something they hadn't stopped doing for a week now.

He stirred a spoonful of honey into his tea, dull dings from metal against porcelain barely breaking the deafening silence. Mr. Gregson lowered himself onto one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table. It creaked beneath him as he set his cup down beside a skein of purple yarn.

Reaching forward, he picked up the ball of yarn and brought it to his face. He breathed in its familiar scent—it smelled like her—like fresh picked lavender. Marie had always loved her lavender.

The tea chilled slowly in the cup, untouched as Mr. Gregson wept into the ball of yarn.

As the sun set, the yellow walls had nothing left to reflect around the room. The grandfather clock chimed seven times, startling the now silent old man. Mr. Gregson put the yarn down and pushed himself up using the table's edge.

He dumped his cold tea down the sink, changed into his pajamas, and crawled into bed. Before flicking off the lamp, he smoothed his hand across the blanket to his right, where nothing but a cold empty space greeted him. Empty of

Mr. Gregson wept
into the ball of yarn.

tears and exhausted from his week of sleeping in the hospital, Mr. Gregson fell asleep feeling truly alone for the first time in forty-five years.

The next morning, Mr. Gregson rose with the sun. Sunlight warmed him through the open curtains—he'd have to remember to close them now.

His arm instinctively reached to the other side of the bed.

Cold.

Empty.

A dull ache stole the air from his chest.

They had to make funeral plans today, but he didn't feel up to it. He thought about just telling the kids to make plans without him, but knew he'd regret it later. He wanted to make sure it was special for her—for his Marie.



Struggling into a blue sweater that his wife had knitted for him the year before, Mr. Gregson hobbled to the kitchen. His hand kneaded at a sore back, and stiff muscles reminded him of the hard hospital chair that had been his companion for days.

As he entered the kitchen area, the old man froze. His youngest granddaughter, Molly, sat in front of the pile of yarn, wearing a similar sweater.

At the sight of her grandfather, the teenager smiled. "Hi, Gramps."

Her red hair hung in a crumpled mess around her shoulders—a finger-brush-through kind of day. The foundation she had bought that summer didn't quite match her hands or neck, but as always, her eyeliner was drawn on in perfect little wings.

"I couldn't sleep and figured I'd just come over early. Mom said I could," she explained. "I made you some tea." She lifted a cup from behind the pile of yarn and held it out to her grandfather.

They had to make
funeral plans today.

On any other day, Mr. Gregson would have told her she needed to be more careful. He didn't like his seventeen-year-old granddaughter driving alone in the snow. But the thought didn't seem to cross his mind today.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he said, taking the dainty, white teacup. He sat down and took a sip. "Nice sweater."

"Right back at you." She reached out and traced her fingers along the yarn. "Was this the yarn for this year's sweaters?"

"Sure was. She'd just started on this one, you see." He gently picked up the yarn he'd grieved over the night before. "Lovely color purple, isn't it?"

"Gorgeous. I'm honestly not sure what I'll do without—" she stopped, choking on the words. She looked past him at the messy living room and continued, "Well, without another sweater from Grandma." She lifted the tea to her lips and took a long sip, like it was the only thing in the world able to hold back tears.

"Well, you have a lot of them." He forced himself to laugh. He knew if one of them started crying, neither of them would stop any time soon. Molly wasn't like her older sister, Shirley, who could always maintain her composure. He tapped the handle of his teacup and looked from her to the pile of yarn. "Which one's your favorite—of the ones she made ya?" he asked.

Molly pressed her fingers to her lips for a moment before responding. "Probably the one she made me in third grade—the red one with yellow letters. I was so obsessed with *Winnie-the-Pooh*." She stood up and walked over to the living room. Busying herself, Molly picked up the pillows from the floor.

"Oh, yeah. She was real proud of that one," Mr. Gregson said. He glanced over at the mess in the living room, then immediately looked away. "You wore that everywhere. She had to take it away from you when summer came around."

Molly laughed. "I wanted to wear it as a cover up to the pool." She picked up the picture frame from the floor. After fixing the crooked side table, she placed the picture frame back on it. It was a picture of her grandparents on their wedding day. "What was your favorite?"

Without hesitation, he said, "The rainbow sweater."

"Which one was that?" she asked.

"She made it for me long before any of you kids were born. She also made me promise to never wear it in front of her." He chuckled lightly as he shuffled into the kitchen. "More tea?" He raised her empty teacup.

With money being tight, I didn't even mention a new sweater.

"Yes, please." After folding a blanket, she laid it across the back of the couch. Everything was back to the way it was before the heart attack. "Why couldn't you wear it?" She picked

up two empty water glasses from the coffee table and placed them in the sink.

"Well, when your grandma and I got married, money was tight. We had a little apartment and bought lots of our food on clearance."

"Food on clearance?" Molly asked as she leaned against the counter, reaching for her teacup.

"Yes ma'am, back then, you could get your food cheaper if it were just past the expiration date," he said.

“Interesting.” Suddenly, Molly jerked back from the tea that had barely touched her lips. “Hot. Hot.”

Her grandfather chuckled.

“Your grandma had already started the tradition of making sweaters for me every year—she had started that while we were dating. We were about your age.” He reached over and nudged her.

When she laughed, he smiled and went on with his story. “I had four already, and I thought that was plenty. So, with money being tight, I didn’t even mention a new sweater.”

He stirred a spoonful of honey into his tea, then slid the honey jar across the counter to her.

“Why was money so tight back then?” she asked.

“We both worked full-time jobs but could barely make ends meet. She worked at the restaurant below our apartment until almost ten o’clock every night, and I’d go to work at five o’clock the next morning.” The two made their way back to the table. Mr. Gregson used the table’s edge to ease himself down into the wooden chair. Molly held out a hand to help, but Mr. Gregson waved her away. “We usually didn’t see each other, except for a few hours on our lunch breaks when I’d stop by the diner.”

His granddaughter rested her chin on her hand and waited.

“Well, come to find out, she actually got off at nine and would spend that last hour every night knitting me a sweater. But, you see, she didn’t want to buy yarn when we needed the money for other things; so she took her own sweaters and unraveled them. She used that yarn to make one for me.” He could imagine Marie knitting away in the dim apartment, being careful not to disturb his sleep.



“Aw, that’s so sweet! But why wouldn’t she let you wear it?”

“As you know, I was quite a bit taller than your grandma, and because of that, she ended up using two of her sweaters, a scarf, and a knitted hat that had been left behind at the restaurant to make me that sweater. The yarn was all different colors and sizes, and she hated how it turned out.” Mr. Gregson looked fondly at the pile of colorful yarn on the table.

He felt the lump in his throat begin to grow, but he choked it down with another sip.

“When she gave it to me, I about melted. I was speechless. I couldn’t believe she’d made time to knit me another one. She was always so worn out with work.” He walked back over to the table and picked up a ball of yarn, pressing it to his lips. He closed his eyes. “That night, she thought I didn’t say anything

cause I hated it.” A tear escaped and ran down his cheek into the yarn.

Similar tears streaked down Molly’s chin into the neck of her sweater.

“She tried to take it back and say that she was sorry, but I just gave her a big kiss. I told her how much it meant to me—how much I loved her. Yet, despite how much I loved that ugly sweater—I’m not gonna lie, it was pretty ugly—” he chuckled, “she would never let me wear it.”

“Do you still have it?”

“I do. Hold on.” He set down the yarn and shuffled faster than Molly had seen her grandfather move in a long time. He traced his hands along the walls of the hallway as he went.

Mr. Gregson returned to the kitchen and with trembling hands laid the sweater on the table. Molly silently ran her fingers across the threads until a sob broke from her. Mr. Gregson inched closer and wrapped his arms around his granddaughter. She turned toward him and cried into his chest. Tears ran down his face and his body shook more than it usually did. His chest felt hollow and like someone was choking him. The silence was broken only by deep gasps for air.

After a few minutes, Molly swallowed down her pain and looked up at him. “What if—” she sniffed and took a few quick breaths, “what if we all wore our favorite sweaters to the funeral?”

He knew exactly which one he would choose. “I’d like that a lot.” He nodded. “I think she’d like that too.”

* * *

A week later, Mr. Gregson woke up alone in his bed. It was time—time to say his last goodbyes—but he knew he would have to say goodbye to her every morning for the rest of his life.

Mr. Gregson combed what little hair he had left and washed his face with cold water. He put on his dress pants, an undershirt, and then, gently pulled the rainbow sweater from a drawer. He struggled to slip it over his head, but eventually wiggled his arms into the sleeves. He looked at himself in the mirror.

“Anyone would think it’s the ugliest sweater they’d ever seen,” he said to Marie—even though she wasn’t there. “But I think it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever worn.” He patted the empty spot on the bed and made his way to the front door.

If You Give a Writer a Pen

by Valerie Principe

Many people have read the fun and creative children's book If You Give a Mouse a Cookie. The following parody uses a similar form to show just some of the possible (though exaggerated) struggles that writers can face.

If you give a writer a pen, he will probably want some paper to go with it—college ruled, of course, none of that blank, white, panic-inducing junk.

He will eliminate *all* distractions—which, of course, do not include, posting sixteen selfies of himself with a pen behind his ear (#writerslife), eating seven boxes of Cheez-Its while surfing the web for “research” (you never know when that article about Lord Byron taking a bear to college might prove useful), or taking the ever-refreshing trifecta of

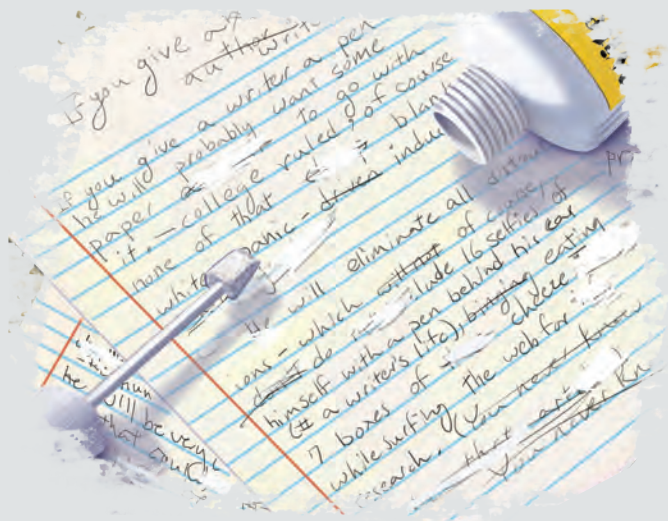
authorial naps (he may very well dream up the plot for the next *New York Times* bestselling novel).

As he finally begins to write, he will probably laugh so hard at his own wit that he will smear the ink. He will ask you for some Wite-Out to cover up the splotches.

Once he blots out the smeared ink, he may be horrified to notice that his manuscript has enough plot holes to sink the *Titanic*. After subsequently watching every existing documentary based on said cruise ship (for reference of course) and building his own scale model out of blueberry Pop Tarts, he will cover his entire manuscript in Wite-Out and decide that it would be better if he just rewrote the entire thing.

He will ask you to make him a cup of coffee so he can focus.

The coffee will make him so hyper that he will beg you to read his new story and tell him what you think. If you like it, he will want more paper. If you do not,



he will ask to borrow your paper shredder.

He will pace the room as you read, offering helpful commentary about the main character's backstory, indicating the places you should laugh (and those you most absolutely should NOT), and reminding you incessantly that the piece is *only* a rough draft.

As he paces, he will probably pass by his bookshelf and see his collection of books. He might flip through a few well-worn pages of a book by his favorite author and shed a tear or two at the philosophical thoughts within. Then swiping at his eyes, he will rush back to your side, eager to hear if he has earned his place among the greats or if he should send in his application to become a barista at the local coffee shop.

Despite your highest praise and support, he will snatch his amateur attempt at a story from your hands and feed it into the hungry, mechanical teeth of the paper shredder.

And after he has shredded his precious story into literary spaghetti, he will probably be very depressed. He will spend the next twenty-four hours in a state of creative despondency, binge-watching videos online about cats, food challenges, and literally *anything* else besides writing.

His eyes will burn, whether from excessive blue light exposure or tears caused by a broken heart, no one could say. But then through the flurry of images in



His manuscript
has enough
plot holes to
sink the *Titanic*.

his head, one concrete image will appear—an idea for the greatest novel that could ever be written!

He will quickly wake you from your sleep (creative genius is most active in the middle of the night) to beg you for some paper...

...and he will definitely need a pen to go with it.



Your Friend, Joy

by Blair Lane

Logan just wants to make it through senior year. He doesn't need friends. No one—not even a persistent girl in a yellow raincoat—will change his mind.

Gray clouds filled the sky. Logan trudged through the drizzling rain with his head low, eyes glued to the rippling puddles. The weather perfectly reflected Logan's dark mood.

Each step brought him closer to misery: another day of senior year. As the new kid.

He couldn't believe that his parents had insisted on moving right before his last year of high school. Never mind why. If they didn't care about messing up his life, it didn't matter if he cared about theirs.

Another day of
senior year. As
the new kid.

Distracted by the music
blasting in his ears and the anger
swirling in his mind, Logan
didn't see the girl until he'd run

right into her. He rolled his eyes and yanked off his headphones, ready to go off on whoever had gotten in his way.

"I'm so sorry!" a soft voice yelped as she jumped from where she had been crouching on the sidewalk.

Logan stepped back to take in the short girl in her yellow raincoat. She had curly brown hair, bright blue eyes, and appeared close to Logan's age—if she didn't dress so much like a child. "It's whatever," he grunted and ran a hand through his damp, dark hair. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

The girl laughed. "Neither was I." She pointed into a bush. "I was taking pictures of the raindrops sparkling on this spiderweb."

Logan shrugged, and muttered, "Cool." He kept walking.

Before he could put his headphones back on, he heard pounding footsteps.

"You're right," the girl said as she caught up to him. "We should be getting to school. That's where you're headed, right?"

"Yeah."

"You must be new. I know *everybody*," she rambled. "So, Mr. Dark and Brooding, what's your name?"

Taken aback by the nickname, all Logan could say was, "What?"

"Your *name*. Assuming you have one," she teased. "Here, I'll start. Hi," she mock-waved. "My name is Joy. I'm a senior. How about you?"

"Logan," was his curt reply.

Joy stared at him, waiting for him to continue. "And?"

Logan huffed. "I'm a senior."

"Really? That's awesome! Isn't it so weird? How close we are to being done? I'm going to miss everyone so much."



Logan snorted. “I can’t wait to graduate. Then I can make my own decisions, and I won’t be treated like a kid anymore—”

“Hi, Jasper!” Joy shouted and waved at a guy crossing the street in front of them.

“Come meet Logan! He’s new!”

The tall blond teenager paused on the sidewalk to let Logan and Joy catch up.

Joy chatted animatedly with “Jasper” as the trio walked

through the drizzle, pausing every few minutes to greet each person they met. Logan gave short answers to each of Joy’s attempts to engage him in the conversation.

Logan eventually just tuned them out and refused to slow down, occasionally forcing the girl to scurry to catch up again. It seemed odd to him how many people she knew. He definitely didn’t remember seeing her at school during his first week—not that he cared or had been paying attention.

They finally arrived at the high school and parted ways. Logan found his way to his locker and spun the combination lock until it clicked open. Inside, on top of his books, lay a neon green index card.

He sighed and picked it up.

The card said, “Have a great day,” in messy handwriting.

Every morning for the past week, Logan had discovered similar notes slipped inside his locker. Sometimes the 3x5 cards were green, others yellow or blue, and one had even been hot pink. Messages saying, “Good luck,” “Do your best,” or just, “Smile,” had been scrawled on them in the same handwriting.

This note, like all the ones before it, met a swift end in the trash can.



Not that he ever kept them. This note, like all the ones before it, met a swift end in the trash can on his way to class.

Joy pounced on Logan right after class and followed him down the hall. “You had English? Isn’t Miss Knight great? She’s my favorite teacher. She has two adorable cats named Poe and Shakespeare. Isn’t that so cute?” Her face practically glowed.

“I’m allergic to cats,” Logan spat.

She pouted, but her lips quickly broke into a smile again. “Do you have any pets?”

Logan’s face darkened. “Not anymore.” His parents had forced him to give his dog to a neighbor before the move.

“Oh! Well, you should come see my dog sometime. He’s a beautiful chocolate lab named Toby. He’s the most friendly—”

Logan managed to avoid his neon shadow for the rest of the morning.

“I’ve gotta go,” Logan muttered as he veered off in the direction of the biology lab.

“Okay! I’ll see you later.” She winked.

Logan managed to avoid his neon shadow for the rest of the morning, but Joy found him at lunch and plopped right down at his table with her floral-print lunch bag.

“So, Logan,” she began, “What brings you to town?”

He paused in picking at his sandwich and looked up at her eager face. “My dad got a new job or something, and we had to move, I guess.”

“Wow. And right before senior year. That’s rough.”

His fist clenched and voice filled with bitterness, “Tell me about it.” He was surprised when Joy’s ever-present smile softened a little.

"Do you miss your friends a lot?"

Logan shrugged. "Sometimes." His mind replayed memories of how his old friends had slowly stopped coming by as the summer drew to an end.

"Well, now that you're here, you can make all kinds of new friends." She grinned.

He cringed at the platitude his parents had forced down his throat since the move. "What's the point, though? I'll be out of here in less than a year anyway."

A shadow passed over Joy's face but was quickly replaced by another smile. "So? You've gotta make the most of what you've got and where you are. You never know what could happen."

"Yeah. Whatever." Logan swept the rest of his lunch into the brown paper bag and wadded it up. "I need to go," he said as he abruptly stood up.

"Oh. Okay. I'll see you later! Want to walk home together?"

He walked away, ignoring the question.

The sun had pushed away the dark clouds by the end of the day and nearly blinded Logan when he was finally released from school. He grimaced when he saw the girl in the familiar yellow raincoat waiting on a bench outside.

Joy jumped up and fell in step beside Logan.

"Doesn't the sun feel wonderful? It's like the sky is smiling." She turned her face heavenward and closed her eyes.

"Watch out—" Logan urged when she stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. He held out a hand to catch her.

She laughed. "At least I know you'd care enough to catch me."

"Doesn't the sun feel wonderful? It's like the sky is smiling."



Logan's face flushed. "You shouldn't be so clumsy."

"Look at these!" She stopped to photograph the daisies in someone's flowerbed. "I've been watching them grow all summer. I wish I could sit in the sun all day like a flower."

Logan rolled his eyes—but he waited for her to finish before continuing toward home.

Every day that followed was the same. Somehow Logan endured Joy's extremely bubbly personality on the way to school, at lunch, and between classes. Then, every afternoon, she'd be waiting for him on the bench outside before going home.

Despite his harshness, or even outright rudeness, she persisted.

After a whole week of this nonsense, Logan sat down at his "usual" table in the far back corner of the cafeteria. He devoted his focus to the sandwich in front of him when he heard the unfortunately-familiar sound of Joy's floral lunch bag plopping on the table—followed by the softer rustle of a paper bag.

Before he could even look up from his food, Joy announced, “Logan, remember Jasper? He’s a senior, too!”

Logan’s eyes shot to the unwelcome addition to the table. He recognized the guy lounging in the chair next to Joy as the one she’d flagged down on the street the day they met.

“You always seem to be listening to *something* through your earbuds, and I know Jasper here is obsessed with music!” Joy gushed.

Logan glanced at the giant red headphones around Jasper’s neck.

“Yeah, dude! What kind of music do you listen to?” Jasper asked with a grin.

Logan cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “Oh, uh, you know, this and that. Little bit of everything.”

Jasper nodded. “Yeah, dude. I totally get you. There’s so much music, it’s impossible for me to pick favorites! Here,” he unwrapped his headphones from around his neck and held them out to Logan. “I’ve been absolutely obsessed with this song lately. Give it a listen.”

Logan narrowed his eyes at Joy, who shot him a warning look. He grabbed the headphones from Jasper and placed them over his ears. He closed his eyes to focus on the music—and avoid the awkward stares of his spectators.

At the end of the chorus, Logan slowly opened his eyes. He saw an approving look on Jasper’s face. Joy just beamed.

Logan removed the headphones.

“Isn’t it epic?” Jasper asked.

“Yeah, it’s, uh, it’s really good,” Logan cleared his throat. “My friends back home—I mean, at my old school—got me into this same band, but I’ve never heard this song before. Is it new?”

"No way! This is some of their *really* old stuff," Jasper explained. "What other songs have you heard?"

Logan hesitated, but Jasper appeared legitimately interested, and Joy wouldn't stop smiling. *It's just music*, Logan thought. *It's not like we're friends or anything*. He answered the question and spent the rest of lunch debating with Jasper over the best bands and songs.

One morning a few weeks later, Logan pulled the daily note from his locker. Instead of the usual greeting or encouragement, someone had drawn a cartoony dog with a stupid grin saying, "You're paw-some!" He snorted and crumpled up the sketch.

"Was that a *laugh*?"

Joy's voice drifted over his shoulder.

He turned to see her comically rubbing her ears.

"Sounds like some insane person is trying to be your friend."

"My ears must be messed up. Logan never laughs." She raised an eyebrow. "What's that? Does someone have a secret admirer?"

"It's just a dumb doodle," he insisted while holding the note card out of her reach.

"Sounds like some insane person is trying to be your friend," she snickered. "Do you know who it's from?"

"No idea, and it doesn't matter. I don't need friends."

Pain flashed across Joy's face before she raised her hands in mock surrender. "Maybe. Or maybe you just don't want friends," she joked.

"So what? I'm not going to be here long enough for there to be a point."

Joy dropped her hands and turned around. "The length of time doesn't matter. You don't know what you have until it's gone," she said quietly as she walked away.

The rest of the day, Joy hardly said anything to Logan. Even Jasper seemed to pick up that something was wrong. They all sat together for lunch, but an awkward silence filled the air.

Joy quietly picked at her food, hardly eating anything.

The tension made Logan uncomfortable, but he was also grateful for the rare quiet.

When Joy finally stood, Logan noticed an uncharacteristic slowness in her movements.

He didn't see her after school and walked home alone. The flowers that excited Joy every day had begun to wilt. Logan shook his head. He didn't care about those measly flowers.

The next morning, Logan was running late and walked by himself to school. In his rush to grab things for class, he swept up the new yellow note and stuffed it into his textbook.

That day, Joy never stopped him in the halls. Or at lunch. And all day, Jasper seemed upset about something.

Logan trudged home in silence again. But the silence wasn't as nice as he thought it would be. His mind filled the silence with conflicting questions and bitter confirmations. This was proof he'd been right to avoid friends all along. Even *Joy* had abandoned him, and Jasper was acting weird.

After another day without a single sign of her or her relentless positivity, Logan decided she'd finally taken the hint. He comforted himself thinking that he

did the right thing in resisting her friendship, because she would only leave him, too. Just like everyone else.

"The joy of the Lord
is my strength."

While sitting in class the next day, a small piece of paper fluttered out of his textbook. He picked up a wrinkled yellow note. His brows furrowed. He'd forgotten about this one. Come to think of it, it was the last note that had appeared in his locker for several days.

Logan smoothed it open and read, "The joy of the Lord is my strength."

His confusion at the sudden change from the usual goofy notes persisted until the bell rang to announce lunch.

Like usual, Jasper sat across the table. Logan couldn't figure out why he'd stuck around when Joy had given up on him.

"You know, you don't have to sit with me, if you have friends you'd rather eat with," Logan blurted. "I know you only did it because of Joy, but she's not here."

Jasper looked shocked. And hurt. "What—"

"Where has she been anyway, found some other charity case?" Logan rolled his eyes.

"Stop. You don't know what you're talking about." Jasper looked Logan right in the eyes. "You don't get it, do you? Joy *wanted* to be your friend. *I* want to be your friend. But for some reason, you seem bent on pushing everyone away."

"Come on, Jasper—"

"No, you come on. Whatever it was that convinced you that you don't need friends, get over it, because, whether you like it or not, you have one—or, rather, two. For now."

"What do you mean?" Logan wasn't following.

"Here." Jasper pulled a bright yellow envelope out of his jacket and slid it across the table. "It's from her. Open it."

Logan tore open the envelope and pulled out a sheet of notebook paper and read,

Hey Logan!

You keep saying nothing matters because you're leaving soon. Well, all I wanted was to show you how to find joy in everything—no matter the circumstances.

In my last note (yes, I was your "secret admirer"), I wrote one of my favorite Bible verses, Nehemiah 8:10, which says, "Neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Don't be sad or bitter or whatever. Let God's joy give you new strength every day and spread that to everyone around you.

Life is rough sometimes, and I know I wouldn't have made it through without friends by my side.

*Your friend,
Joy*

"What is this? Why are you giving this to me?" Logan demanded.

"Logan, Joy has been sick for a long time."

"What do you mean? Why—Why are you telling me this? Why now?"

"Because, she's in the hospital right now and doesn't have much time left. She thought you deserved to know, so maybe you could understand before you lost another friend."

Logan practically whispered, "But, we weren't—we weren't even friends."

"She seemed to think otherwise."

* * *

Approximately six months, an unreasonable number of tests and projects, a dozen college

applications, and countless sleepless nights later, Logan Erik Marshall graduated from high school surrounded by his family and friends.

Yes, *friends*.

“Okay, Mom, that’s enough pictures,” Logan chuckled. He took a deep breath and looked at his parents standing side-by-side. “Thank you . . . for everything. I’m sorry for being so difficult about the move.”

Misty-eyed, Mrs. Marshall pulled her son into a warm hug. “We know change is hard, but we’re so proud of you.”

Logan squeezed her a little tighter. “Thanks, Mom.” He carefully released. “There’s something I need to do. I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Yeah. You go see your friends.” Mr. Marshall winked.

“Something like that,” Logan chuckled.

He wove his way through the crowd, stopping repeatedly for congratulatory hugs and well-wishes from all of the new friends he’d made. Jasper even dragged him into a photo-op with their “group.”

After taking about a thousand pictures with seemingly every member of the senior class, he finally made his way to the front of the school.

Logan studied the new plaque on the back of the bench he’d passed every single day which read, “In precious memory of Joy Blythe. ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength.’”

Joy hadn’t been lying, she really did know *everyone*. The decision to have the plaque installed had been unanimous.

He lowered himself gently onto the seat with a sad smile. Logan’s mind reeled with the happy memories of sports games, school events, and movie nights from the last year.

“You were right,” he sighed. “Thank you, Joy.”

Food Fear

By Glorianna Shidal

“Whatever you do, don’t touch your back!”

My mouth had never itched before. I stared at my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Why was my mouth itching? I scraped my tongue across my molars, hoping it would stop. It didn’t.

“Momma?” I whined.

I heard her hum in response from the kitchen. “Yes?”

“My mouth is itching.”

“What?” She walked over to the dining table.

“Your mouth is itching?”

I nodded.

Mom furrowed her eyebrows. “All right, well, don’t eat anything for a little bit, okay?

Tell me if the itching stops.”

I sighed and set the sandwich on my plate. I was starving from playing



all day, and now I couldn't even eat? But I listened to Mom and didn't eat anything for a couple minutes. Eventually, the itching stopped. After telling Mom, I started eating again—this time with some hesitance. I didn't want my mouth to start itching again. When I ate my corn, nothing happened, but when I ate my sandwich, the itching returned. Mom quickly replaced my sandwich with something else.



This was the first incident of my itchy mouth, and I didn't think about the weird sensation until it happened again. The second incident happened at my great-aunt and uncle's house while I chowed down on some popcorn shrimp. The itching started. I once again scratched my tongue against my teeth for some form of relief. With a sense of *déjà vu*, Mom told me to stop eating the shrimp and see if the itching would go away. It did. I crossed my arms as I sat in the chair. Were all the good foods being taken away from me?

Mom and Dad decided that we needed to figure out the cause of this mysterious itching, so they made an appointment with a pediatrician. I vividly remember the sunlight streaming through the windows of the doctor's office and looking out at the deep blue sky, wishing that I was outside playing in the backyard. I kicked my feet, and my heels thudded on the examination table. It was too nice a day to be sitting in a doctor's office.

A nurse bustled into the room. She took my blood pressure and asked me questions, but I glanced at Mom for the answers. A couple minutes later, a doctor came in and began to stick some type of needle into

my back. I couldn't see what they were doing. All I knew was that the needles hurt, and my knuckles were white from grasping onto Mom's hands.

After pricking my back like a pincushion, the doctor left me and my parents in the room.

"Whatever you do, *don't* touch your back!" he said.

That should be easy, I thought to myself. When did I ever touch my back anyway? At first, it *was* easy. But after ten minutes, my back started to itch. The itching started out dull and annoying but grew in intensity until it felt as if I had rolled in poison ivy. I cried and begged Mom to let me scratch just a little bit, but she softly refused and promised it would be over quickly.

By the time the doctor came back, I felt as if I had spent my entire life on that examination table. He checked the results slowly and deliberately, marking something on his clipboard. I wasn't paying attention. The itching was going to drive me insane if I didn't do something. Finally, the doctor gave me permission to scratch. I tried to claw at my back, but a nurse offered to help. She didn't scratch like I wanted her to.

"It's all right, Glori." The nurse rubbed gently so she wouldn't aggravate the welts, but it was agonizing. "The itching shouldn't last too much longer."

I didn't answer, too focused on my back. I could only sit on the bench and wiggle my fingers.

Mom told me afterwards that each welt on my back was a different food that they tested me for. The welts that itched more were foods like peanuts and shrimp, while the welts that itched less were things like sweet corn. The doctor had given me a skin prick test—a test used to determine what allergies a child



might have. My test revealed that I was allergic to peanuts, shrimp, and mangos.

As I grew older, I learned that people with allergies had different allergic reactions, depending on how severe those allergies were. Some allergies are so intense that they cause sudden flashes of itching, dizziness, labored breathing, and even fainting. Thankfully, my symptoms are very mild, but others have to seriously watch the food they eat to protect themselves from severe allergies.

One of my roommates during my freshman year of college had a sister who was severely allergic to nuts. I had heard her sister mention the allergy once or twice, but I wanted to know more so we met and chatted for several hours. Brooke Griggs said that any kind of tree nut would cause her eyes to swell, her skin to break out in hives, and her throat to close. She carries an EpiPen on her at all times, the danger of an allergic reaction always hanging over her head. “Any time I eat food that isn’t homemade, I take a risk,”¹ she remarked.

But Brooke doesn’t worry or stress over her allergy. Avoiding tree nuts has become a part of her life, and she has learned to live with her condition. She politely asks to see box labels at others’ homes and checks ingredients when she goes out to eat. When she was younger, Brooke would decline a slice of her friend’s cake if she couldn’t read the ingredient list under stern commandment of her mother. The friend’s worried mother would apologize to Brooke, but that would only make her uncomfortable. Just because she couldn’t enjoy cake didn’t mean she wasn’t having fun.

People without food allergies often don’t know how to react to those who do; they’re confused and react either in pity or in shock. Art class was the first time I felt shunned because of my allergy. As a homeschooled

six-year-old, going to art class outside my house was a huge deal. It was a chance to meet other kids my age beyond the walls of my church. We worked on several different projects, but one of the first ones was a fall-themed candle holder. My teacher let us gather leaves and pine straw freshly fallen from the trees outside the building. She also gave us acorns and nuts to use in our project. I looked at the bowl of nuts—walnuts, pecans, and hazelnuts rolled off each other as grimy kid hands snatched them out of the bowl.

“You know, I’m allergic to nuts,” I said, absentmindedly. Although somewhat true, I didn’t know that there was a difference between a peanut allergy and a tree nut allergy. Unlike Brooke, I was in no danger of my throat closing up. But that was enough to panic my young art teacher. She quickly pulled me to the other end side of the table and gave me a bowl of plain acorns, leaves, and pinecones.

“You should be fine over here, sweetie!” She left to check on the kids on the other side of the table.

I stared at her long ponytail and then back at the bowl. I was very confused, watching the other children balance large walnuts on top of their acorns and laughing at each other.

The teacher buzzed around each of their creations, but rarely came to check on mine. I felt very small and unimportant.



What I didn't realize was that I wouldn't react to a hazelnut gently grazing my skin or that the smell of a walnut wouldn't close my throat to the point where I was struggling for breath. The older I grew, however, the more paranoid I became. I checked ingredient lists and asked my friend's parents what kind of nuts they put into their chocolate chip cookies. There was even a point where I refused to eat M&Ms in fear that one of them would accidentally have a peanut in it. My fears were unfounded, but to my small brain I was saving my body being suffocated.

It's easier to know you shouldn't be scared than to actually not be scared.

The only thing that was suffocating me was the nagging worry I had put on myself. At one point, I had stressed myself out so much that my mouth would itch when I ate food that I wasn't allergic to. My mom finally pulled me aside and talked with me.

"If all you do is worry about something that won't happen, then how can you live a normal life?" she said. "God can keep you safe with or without your allergy."

It's easier to know you shouldn't be scared than to actually not be scared. But I was tired of letting my fear rule me. Mom was absolutely right: my God gave me this allergy, and my God could pull me through this allergy. I wish I could tell you it was an easy process and that one day I woke up free from worry, but I can't. Daily, I looked to God for strength and eventually realized that I had nothing to fear.

Food allergies should not be taken lightly, but they also shouldn't be feared. Like Brooke Griggs and many

others, I learned to deal with my allergy, and I chose to live my life without fear. Instead, I calmly tell others about my allergy so they are informed and can diligently look out for those foods which would trigger an allergic reaction. Over time, my food allergy really wasn't something to worry about at all.

Notes

1. Brooke Griggs, interview by author, Pensacola, FL, October 27, 2020.

Extraordinary

by Erin Parmelee

Could the key to middle school success be found in an everyday shirt?

My name is Mike Smith, and I am completely average. You don't believe me, do you? I understand. In almost every movie and book ever created, the main character claims to be ordinary and is always (spoiler alert) not. But I assure you that I am not special. Let's start with my name—Mike Smith. Literally two of the most ordinary and generic names put together.

If you're still not convinced, I can tell you everything else about me that's average. Average height, average weight, average brown hair and brown eyes. I'm not rich or poor. I have average grades for a fourteen-year-old boy. I'm not super intelligent, but I'm not stupid either. My normal parents, Kim and Bob Smith, are both accountants. I have an average amount of friends, and I'm average at sports. I'm on

the basketball team, but I never play. I usually just get water for the other players.

At this point, I can probably guess what you're thinking: "I'm sure you have a great personality, Mike!" Well, you are mistaken. I have the personality of a saltine cracker. I'm not particularly memorable, but people tolerate me. I'm not rude or polite. I'm not funny or serious.

I don't even get into trouble a lot, just the ordinary amount, and I'm no one's favorite student. I am literally not good at anything, just average. I'm not even good at breathing—I have asthma. I guess you could say that I am so average I'm boring.

I woke up this morning when my alarm went off at 7:00 a.m. sharp and reluctantly got out of bed. I went to my closet to put on my regular outfit—a faded blue shirt and worn out blue jeans. But, I had forgotten to place my dirty clothes in the laundry basket that weekend, so all the shirts that I usually

I'm not even
good at
breathing—I
have asthma.

wore were dirty. After scrambling around my room, I finally found a crumpled shirt I had gotten for Christmas that year. It was as green as a four leaf clover, and I had never worn it before. With a dramatic sigh, I pulled the shirt over my head

and went to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Hun! I made you breakfast," my mom said as she put a heaping plate of pancakes and bacon in front of me.

I blinked.

"Uhh, why?" I asked in surprise. I usually just ate ordinary Lucky Charms for breakfast.

"Today's your championship game!" my mom said before kissing me on the cheek. "All athletes need a good breakfast."

"Right. I'll really need to carbo-load before getting everyone water," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"You'll play this time! I just know it!" she beamed.

"Call it mother's intuition."

*It must be
my lucky day.*

I shrugged and started to eat my fill as my mom placed another plate of pancakes on the table for my dad. Dad looked up from the newspaper he was reading and glanced at me.

"Nice shirt. Need a ride to school?" he asked, taking a long gulp of black coffee.

"I was just gonna take the bus like I always do."

"Forget the bus. I'll give you a ride on my way to work."

I stopped devouring my food (which is hard to do for a fourteen-year-old boy). First breakfast and now a ride to school. *It must be my lucky day, but what are my parents up to?*

"Dad, your office is on the opposite side of town from my school."

"So? I can't even remember the last time I drove you to school. I'll even let you control the radio. You don't mind, do you? Or have you become too much of a moody teen to spend time with your old man?"

I eyed him suspiciously. "I guess not."

"Great! We'll have to leave now if I'm gonna make it to work on time," Dad said.

Still suspicious of his offer, I left the house with Dad after breakfast. I slumped down into the passenger seat, and he began backing out of our driveway.

"You can turn the radio on if you want," Dad said.

I paused, "Okay, thanks."

Music and radio commercials filled the awkward silence.

“You excited about today’s game?”

“I guess, but it’s not like I’m going to play.”

Dad slowed to a stop at a red light.

“When I was your age, I dreamed of being in the NBA, but the only position I got was water boy,” he said.

“I didn’t know you played.”

“Yeah, I did—barely. After sitting by the water for so long, I started thinking that maybe I could become water boy for the NBA,” he joked.

I chuckled. Maybe the car ride wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. With only a few minutes left of the drive, Dad kept telling me funny jokes about his basketball experience.

After a surprisingly fun ride to school, I went into the old building and headed for my locker. Instead of struggling to unlock it like normal, my locker opened on my first try, and I hastily started packing my backpack with books.

“Nice shirt, Mike!” said a voice, smooth as silk, from behind me. I whipped around and there stood Emily Brant, the cutest girl in eighth grade.

“Th—thanks,” I managed to answer before she walked off. I turned my head back into my locker to hide the heat creeping up my neck and into my face. “Thanks?” The cutest girl in school just complimented me, and I all I said was “thanks?” Resisting the urge to slam my head into my locker, I continued packing my books for math class.

“Howya, boyo! Was that Emily Brant?”

I closed my locker and glanced at the tall and lanky guy with hair as red as a fire truck and about a million and one freckles. Geoffrey had been my best friend since sixth grade. He’s also extremely



uncoordinated and not very bright, but the thing that makes him stand out the most at school is his Irish slang, which he likes to sprinkle into everyday conversation. He lived the first ten years of his life in Ireland and moved next door to me four years ago. His accent had since faded away, but it still comes up whenever he gets upset or excited.

“Maybe.” I shrugged.

“I didn’t know she knew you,” he said as we made our way down the hall to Mrs. Worthing’s math class. “Nice shirt by the way. Reminds me of home.”

Geoffrey bellowed the Irish national anthem down the school hallway until we entered the classroom.

I guess you should know, I really hate math. I've never been any good at it, and Mrs. Worthing is the pinnacle of boredom. The time in that class would go quicker if we watched paint dry, so I zoned out for most of the class period. Around halfway through the class, Mrs. Worthing said something that caught my attention.

"Can anyone multiply 350 and 9?" She wrote the numbers on the board. No one dared answer the impossible question. Mrs. Worthing waited expectantly.

These random numbers swirled around in my head. Then, I heard myself say, "3,150."



Every head in the class turned to look at me. I blinked in surprise, and in the corner of my eye I saw Geoffrey's mouth swing open like an unhinged door. Mrs. Worthing pushed up her ancient spectacles that made her eyes bug out.

"That's correct, Mr. Smith!" she said as she clapped.

I ducked my head, wondering why on earth I had blurted it out. The rest of my classes went just as strangely. I had a quiz in English that I aced and a test in history that went a lot better than I expected, especially considering I had barely studied.

It really is my lucky day. But why today? Why not yesterday or tomorrow? It's not like I changed anything.

"Nice shirt, Mike!" one of my classmates called.

I looked down at the bright green shirt and thought back to math, English, and history. *It's my shirt! It must be lucky!*

And then, just a few hours later, there I was sitting on the bench. If the lucky shirt helped me in class, I wondered if it'd help me with basketball. I looked down at the shamrock color peeking through the mesh jersey holes. The roar of the crowd caught my attention. I watched as my team struggled in the championship game. It was very physical, and my teammates kept fouling out and getting hurt. One by one, my teammates left the bench to contribute to the game, while I only left the bench to get water. Just as I was gathering the empty water bottles, Coach Streicher appeared in front of me.

I looked down
at the shamrock
color peeking
through the
mesh jersey holes.

"Smith, sub in! Gomez just rolled his ankle, and I need another player," he said with the sultry tones of a drill sergeant. He had a fun habit of yelling everything.

"Me?" I said lamely as I dropped the water bottles.

"Are you deaf?" Coach Streicher asked.

I hastily ran onto the court. Within the first minute of being out there, a miracle happened. I stole the ball from their point guard and raced down the court for a wide open lay-up. The crowd roared, and my teammates clapped me on the back. It was the first shot I had ever made in a game. Even though I was amongst giants, I was somehow making a lot of points. Basket after basket, I just couldn't seem to miss. But, despite the points we scored, it was still a close game and a battle to the very end.

What happened next is something I plan to tell my grandchildren about.

With thirty seconds left on the clock, our team was losing by two points. We had the ball and were dribbling up the court, but the other team's defense was fast and intense. My team passed the ball all around the court, but no one had an open shot.

Ten seconds left.

I moved to the far corner of the court behind the three point line. Suddenly, the ball appeared in my hands. *Come on lucky shirt. Don't fail me now*, I thought. I heard the crowd count, "Five! Four! Three! Two!" I threw the ball at the basket, over the hands of a player much taller than me. I didn't even see if the ball made it before I was knocked to the ground by the player trying to block my shot.

The crowd went silent. The referee went silent. The bench full of injured teammates went silent.

And then I heard it. The most glorious sound an athlete could ever hear.

Swoosh.

The crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. In a second, my teammates were pulling me up and carrying me to the bench. The whole gymnasium started chanting, "Mike! Mike!" The second my feet hit the ground, the jug full of Gatorade showered on top of me.

And that's how I won my first basketball game. To me, completely average me, this was the most important event in my life, even outranking my birth. When everything calmed down, I was finally able to go back into the locker room. The Gatorade had made me sticky, so I grabbed the extra pair of clothes in my locker and quickly changed.

Geoffrey marched in.

"Oye! I didn't know you were so grand at basketball, Mike!"

“Neither did I,” I laughed. “But I’ve been thinking. Don’t you think it’s weird how I can suddenly do all this stuff—the grades, the sports, the popularity?”

“Who cares?” Geoffrey threw his hands up in exasperation, his accent coming to the surface. “This is middle school! The most important time of our lives! And yer on yer way to ruling the school! Just live in the moment. Why are you questioning it?”

“Because I have a theory. All this started today, and the only thing I did differently was put on this shirt.” I shook the shirt in front of Geoffrey’s face. I could almost see the rusty gears turning in his head.

Finally he said, “I’m not following.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think this is a lucky shirt.”

Geoffrey’s eyes widened in realization. “Of course! It makes sense!”

It didn’t really make sense, but I let it slide. It was the best theory we had for the time being.

Overexcited, Geoffrey continued, “Well, green is a lucky color. Oye! You don’t suppose it’s made out of four leaf clovers, do you?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that that was the dumbest thing I had ever heard, but the proud expression of Geoffrey’s face stopped me. I nodded, and Geoffrey beamed.

“Smith, my office!” bellowed Coach Streicher’s voice from the front of the locker room. I quickly stuffed my dripping clothes into my locker and followed Coach Streicher.

To me, completely average me, this was the most important event in my life, even outranking my birth.

"I'll tell my mom we'll give you a lift home," Geoffrey said as he left the locker room.

I entered the office and stood in front of the coach, my knees shaking from either nervousness or exhaustion.

"You had a good game," he hollered.

"Thank you, sir," I said hesitantly.

"You have a starting spot on the team if you want it. Gomez can't play for a while."

I swallowed hard. "I would like that very much, sir."

"Good. Practice tomorrow at 5:00 p.m. sharp. If you're late, you run."

Now that I have a starting spot, I'm definitely going to wear my lucky shirt for every practice and game. I went back to the locker room, a smile spread wide across my face. How could one day, let alone a shirt, completely change my life?

When I got to my locker, Geoffrey was waiting for me. I opened my locker to grab my sticky clothes. And lo and behold, the now-sticky lucky green shirt was missing.

"Geoffrey, did you take my shirt?" I asked.

"What? No, I didn't take it," he said. Geoffrey is a terrible liar, so I knew he was telling the truth. "You acting the maggot?" he asked, using Irish slang I didn't understand.

"No, it's not in my locker," I pointed out.

"Mike, this is brutal! Some dosser must have taken it! Now all yer luck is gone! There's gotta be a way we can get it back," he said, his accent becoming more prominent.

Time seemed to stop as I thought about the chances of that shirt being lucky. Maybe I didn't need the shirt after all. Besides, I would've hated to wear it for every practice and game. I shrugged. "Ehh, leave it be. Whoever stole it obviously needs it more than I do."

“Are you coddling me? No more sports, popularity, or grades. Yer going to go back to being ordinary, Mike,” he said in exasperation.

“Sure, the shirt might be gone, but I can be extraordinary on my own.” I paused. “I think the way to stop being ordinary is to actually try. I’m going to study more, practice basketball more, and reach out to more people at school. I think that’s the only way to escape being average.” I chuckled at my own words of wisdom.

“I guess,” said Geoffrey solemnly, “but a lucky shirt wouldn’t hurt.”

“It can’t be that lucky,” I said with a laugh. “What kind of lucky shirt gets stolen?”





TEMPEST



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The Dream Bouquet

by Victoria Simmons

“The Dream Bouquet” is dedicated to my Grandma Shirley. It melds the dream that she had of getting a bouquet of yellow flowers from God and the scene I imagine when she is welcomed into His eternal kingdom.

The dream bouquet dressed in yellow
Waits in that perfect and mellow
Place where there is no more decay.
Grandma gets closer every day
To that eternal vast meadow.

I picture ribbons and golden rods
That wait where the redeemed have trod.
Not rushing the goodbyes, God holds
The dream bouquet.

Grandma will be there soon, I know,
But I don't want to let her go.
She crosses to the other side.
In God's loving embrace, she hides.
He wipes her tears dry and bestows
The dream bouquet.



Worth the Pain

by Zach Jewell

*Sometimes when life seems to be completely against us,
it's easy to forget that God always has a purpose.*

July 2020

Zach Lewis didn't want to go home. Not yet. But what could he do about it? COVID-19 had wreaked havoc on most of the world. Who was going to stop it from shutting down a Christian camp in North Carolina and ending Zach's summer job as a counselor?

He sat in a room where the camp director had just announced to the staff that the camp would be closing. Everyone was speechless. Zach wondered why God would end a summer ministry that saw kids come to Christ. He wondered if he had wasted time here when he could have spent more time with his dad who had battled cancer.

March 2020

March came as another innocent month to the unsuspecting campus of Pensacola Christian College. Most students' minds were focused on exams and projects.

That would change.

After COVID-19 traveled to the US, colleges and universities across the nation decided to end in-person learning.

Zach heard rumors on Thursday, March 12, about his own college campus possibly shutting down and sending students home. The rumors continued to Friday until the students received a message to meet on Saturday at 9 a.m. for an important meeting.

"This is it," Zach thought. He had a good idea the campus would be closing, so he began packing his belongings. All of a sudden, he heard a knock at his door. Dr. Troy Shoemaker, the president of the college, stood outside with the school's vice president, Dr. Jon Lands. They told Zach that the next morning they would be announcing the campus closure and asked him to lead the students in a song to close out the meeting. Zach was known around the campus for his talented voice, and he often sang specials in church and chapel.

"What song should we sing?" Dr. Shoemaker asked him.

Zach had no trouble coming up with an answer: "Behold Our God."

Just a year before at the college's annual Bible Conference, Zach's dad, Pastor Shane Lewis, had asked the choir to give an encore of this song before his message. The auditorium that night had been filled with praising voices and worshipful tears. To Zach,

“Behold Our God” was a reminder that, no matter what, God was in control.

“That’s pretty much the end of my college career,” Zach thought after the president and vice-president left. He called his dad to tell him the news. Zach was heartbroken, but he didn’t want to seem too upset while talking with his dad.

“How are you doing?” his dad finally asked.

God was in control—even of his dad’s cancer.

Zach’s wall crumbled down, and his emotions opened up on the phone. “It was a good three-and-a-half years, and it was just the end. I was heartbroken,” he said reflecting back on the situation.

His dad comforted him. He reminded him that God was in control, and even if life was painful in the moment, the pain would be worth it in the end.

As most students left campus to return home, Zach chose to stay on campus with some of his good friends and work while doing online classes from his dorm room. His normal college career had ended; the world of abnormal was about to unravel.

May 2020

Zach was a week and a half away from graduation when his phone rang. It was his mom. He heard concern in her voice.

“Dad’s cancer came back,” she said. “Come home when you need to.”

Zach was baffled. His dad’s cancer had supposedly been removed during his bone marrow transplant in January. How could it have come back? In the next couple of days, Zach packed up and left college. He needed to be home. His family needed him.

The Lewis family celebrated Zach's graduation from their couch, watching the virtual ceremony via livestream. Zach could tell his dad was tired, but he enjoyed the celebration as much as his body would allow before he needed to rest.

Before the end of the day, Zach's dad went into his room to get something. "I had a pretty good idea of what it was going to be," Zach said. His dad owned a 2008 Dodge truck, and Zach had been hoping it would possibly be a graduation present for him.

"He holds onto it because he wants to give it to you," his mom would tell him.

Zach's dad walked back out and handed him a key. "Congrats on graduating," he said. "Here's your new truck."

Zach smiled as he took the keys. The truck had always been special to him. He had grown up riding in it with his dad when he traveled to preach. And now, it was his.

Around a week later, Zach's dad returned home from a doctor's appointment. Zach's four siblings were gone, so he was home alone when his parents got back. His dad looked discouraged. His mom was crying. He prepared himself for bad news.

Later that evening, Zach and his dad were watching TV together when his dad reached for the remote and turned the screen off. He looked at his son. It was just the two of them—Zach seated on the couch, his dad on the recliner.

"Zach, I'm not going to make it."

The words struck like lightning in a dream—intense but unreal. This couldn't be true.

The words struck like lightning in a dream—intense but unreal.

His dad explained there was only one more thing the doctors could try to save him from his cancer. “This last thing the doctors can try gives me a four percent chance to live.” Tears welled up in his dad’s eyes. “Promise me you’ll take care of your mom and siblings.”

Questions swirled in Zach’s mind. “I promise,” he managed to get out.

His dad stood up, grabbed Zach’s arm, and pulled him in for a hug. They embraced—no words needed to speak the pain of their tears.

June 2020

Zach got ready to go to The Wilds Christian Camp in North Carolina. The camp had postponed their original May start date due to COVID-19 but had finally decided to start on June 13. On his way out the door, Zach said goodbye to his family and hugged his dad. He felt the weakness in his dad’s embrace.

A few days later, Zach called his dad after getting settled in and trained at The Wilds. The two chatted about what was going on at the camp and other small talk.

“I love you, and I’m proud of you,” Zach’s dad said before they finished the call.

“Love you too. I’ll talk to you later.” Zach hung up the phone.

Two days later Zach’s mom texted him. “Dad is getting weaker.”

The next morning was Father’s Day. Zach planned on calling his dad when he got up. An incoming call changed his plans. His buzzing phone woke him in the early morning—the screen displayed *Mom*. Two other guys were asleep in the cabin, so Zach threw

on a sweatshirt and stepped out into the morning mountain air. It was peaceful and still. He swiped up and answered the call.

His mom's voice was the same tone as the voice that had told Zach his dad had cancer—serious but peaceful. “Zach, Dad passed away in the night.”

Within a few hours, Zach found a flight back home. His youth pastor Steve picked him up at the airport. “I didn’t want to be crying in the airport with my family,” he said. “I ended up crying in the airport with Steve.”

They drove to the Lewis home where Pastor Shane had passed away just hours before. His mom was the first to meet him when he got out of the car. They hugged, and Zach felt her peace. “Dad’s in a better place,” she reassured him.

He felt the weakness of his dad’s embrace.

Zach’s youngest brother, Reagan, walked out, tears in his eyes. “I miss him.” They embraced.

His sister Autumn came out next, crying.

Zach embraced her. “You doing okay?”

“How can I be doing okay?” Tears welled up as she looked at Zach.

“Well, if you’re not doing okay, how can any of us be all right?” Zach replied, trying to make his usually cheerful sister smile.

The family hugged again and cried some more. Then they sat down for a discussion they all knew would come, but none of them knew would come so soon.

“What day do y’all want to have the funeral?” Zach’s mom got straight to the point.

The family decided on Thursday. They wanted to honor their dad and husband with something

special, and that would give them enough time to get things prepared.

Zach had one more important thing to do the day before the funeral. “Shined shoes were always a big deal for Dad,” he said. “Before we left for church, he would always ask if our shoes were shined.” The night before the funeral, Zach shined his dad’s shoes. “He had double monk strap shoes that I had got for him on Father’s Day. It was a big deal for me.”



Thursday came, and people flooded into the Lewis’s church. People who had grown up with Shane Lewis, people who had gone to college with Shane Lewis, people who had been under the ministry of Shane Lewis, people who were loved by Shane Lewis.

Zach made a final adjustment for his dad before the service began. His life verse had been Galatians 6:14—*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.* His life had been one that gloried in Christ—his death would be the same. His dad’s wrist had a watch strapped around it. Zach set the time to 6:14.

Before the service began, Zach’s mom gathered the family together in a circle. They held hands and prayed. “He would want us to be strong and be a good testimony,” she said. “So let’s do that.” The Lewis family continued to hold hands as they walked down the aisle. The swollen eyes of the attendants locked on them. Even though he was a regular soloist in church

and at college, Zach didn't enjoy attention. Walking down the aisle at his father's funeral felt different than any attention he had received before.

The tears stayed around for the burial. Zach led the mourners in "How Great Thou Art" before they said their last goodbyes to the worldly body of a man who had changed their world. The tears wouldn't stop as Zach approached the stand that held his dad's casket above the four-foot hole in the ground. He leaned over and kissed the smooth wood encasement. "Bye, Dad. See you soon. Love you."

July 2020

Summer camp at The Wilds was in full swing again, and Zach was back to being a camp counselor. He had questioned with his mom whether or not he should go back to The Wilds this summer. It was something he had wanted to do for a long time, and his mom reminded him, "Your dad would want you to."

Almost all the kids in Zach's cabin seemed to be from strong Christian families.

Malachi was not. He had a rough background. He didn't go to church much and told Zach that he didn't even believe in God.

One night for cabin devotions, Zach had all the boys in his cabin close their eyes. He told anyone who wasn't sure of their salvation to raise a hand. Zach scanned the room, but no one had their hand raised. But then he saw Malachi's hand creep above his head. Zach knew the Lord was working on Malachi's heart.

Later in the week, Zach and Malachi sat down—just the two of them. Zach talked with him about God again, and Malachi opened up. "I've been doubting

many things in my life. I don't know how all these bad things could happen."

Zach looked at him. "Malachi, my dad just died two weeks ago. God still has a purpose for your life. You just have to allow Him to use you. You have to accept Him into your heart."

Malachi listened intently.

"Would you like to accept Christ into your heart?" Zach asked.

"Yes."

* * *

Zach remained silent after hearing the camp's announcement, the same one that was made just four months earlier at college. He was angry. *I had missed my dad's last week on earth training for something that didn't even happen, Zach thought. God, why did you take camp away? Why did you take my dad away?*

These thoughts permeated Zach's mind. He was sad, angry, but most of all, discouraged. Then he got a text from Malachi. Zach's former camper said he was reading his Bible and thanked Zach for leading him to Christ at camp.

Zach thought about camp—about Malachi—about his dad. Even though he didn't get to use all the training he went through—even though all the time he missed with his dad seemed wasted—Malachi was saved because God used Zach and his story.

Zach thought about the trials of the last six months. From the end of college to the end of camp to his dad's last breath. He thought about all the heartache. The tears. The pain. But through it all, he remembered his dad's insight on the trials of life. It was worth it.

Homecoming

by Valencia

How could Kianna's family accept these changes so easily? She certainly couldn't.

"Who was that?" Kianna asked her mother while staring at the back of the man walking away.

"Uncle Will," her mom answered without looking up from the pot of stew on the stove.

"Uncle Will?" Kianna had never heard of this "uncle" before.

"Yes. He's the one—" Kianna's mom stopped for a moment then fell into a whisper, "Your *Ah Gong* disowned him. Now that *Ah Gong* has passed away, he comes often to visit *Ah Ma*. I'll tell you more when we get home." She continued stirring the contents of the pot.

Kianna squinted her eyes in suspicion. *Why is he suddenly coming here?*

The voices of her dad, uncles, and aunts filled the living room. Their tone sounded as though they were arguing, but every few minutes they would roar in laughter over something someone had said. Her forehead wrinkled in confusion every time the mood changed so abruptly. She shook her head to snap out of her daze and wiped the sweat trickling down the side of her face with the back of her hand. The heat of Jakarta and her grandmother's insistence that no air conditioners or fans be turned on in her kitchen or living room made Kianna's sweat glands work harder than ever. She eyed the dishes her mom prepared for the dinner.

"Will *Ah Ma* really not cook today?" Kianna emptied the glass of water in her hands in one gulp.

"No. It's not easy for her to cook so much anymore. Besides, she's not even up from her nap yet."

Kianna frowned in disappointment. She had hoped to eat some of her grandmother's cooking. Images of the braised pork belly and clam curry that her grandmother used to cook every Lunar New Year's Eve filled her head. She was getting hungry at the thought, but dinner was not ready yet. Looking for a distraction from the hunger pangs, she thought of her cousins.

"Where are Lia and the rest?" Kianna placed her empty glass on the kitchen counter.

"I haven't seen them. Probably running late. Or you can try checking upstairs. See if they are napping like *Ah Ma*," her mom said while washing her hands.

Kianna decided to try her luck upstairs. She had not seen her cousins since she left for college five years ago—five years of Lunar New Year lost. Memories flooded her mind as she walked up the stairs to the second floor of her grandmother's house. The steps

of green granite reminded her of the times when she and her cousins would run down after being called for dinner. They would rush down the stairs together like a stampede, eager to eat dinner and receive *ang paus*, the red packets of money usually distributed during Lunar New Year. For a moment, she could not hear the loud chatter downstairs or smell the dishes in the kitchen. Her memories drowned out the noise around her and transported her back to the Lunar New Year she was more familiar with.

Kianna broke from her reverie when she reached the top of the stairs and came face to face with her grandmother's portrait. Her grandmother, seated with her hands folded on her lap, looked straight at her through the portrait placed directly across from the stairs. That portrait had scared her as a child; her grandmother's eyes looked as if she were watching Kianna's every move. Now, however, she found comfort in it after so many years of being away from home. Her grandmother's eyes and smile were filled with warmth, welcoming her back home.

As she reached the bedroom door to the left of the stairs, Kianna lifted her hand to knock on the door but stopped herself. Her heart thumped in her chest. She had not realized how nervous she was just to see her cousins.

Calm down. You've known them all your life. She breathed out and willed her nervousness to go away. But she realized then that she could not hear a single sound coming from the room. *Is anyone in there?* She turned the doorknob and peered inside. The room was dark, silent, and empty.

"Hello?" Kianna flipped the light switch on.

The room had a queen-sized bed at the center where she and her cousins used to lie together, excitedly discussing how they would spend their *ang pau* money. As an only child, Kianna relished every moment she spent with her cousins. She was about to sit on the bed to wait for her cousins when she heard noises from the first floor.

“Finally, you guys are here. We’ve been waiting forever!” Her Uncle Xing’s voice thundered through the house.

“Hello, Uncles and Aunts,” someone mumbled in greeting to the elders sitting in the downstairs living room.

She stood frozen at the foot of the stairs. Another stranger?

Kianna turned off the lights in the room and ran down the stairs. She smiled at the thought of meeting her cousins. But her smile vanished when she saw the scene in the living room. Gina and Selina had just arrived. But next to Selina, the oldest of her cousins, stood a man Kianna had never met before, talking comfortably with her aunts and uncles. She stood frozen at the foot of the stairs. *Another stranger?*

Kianna walked to the kitchen, looking for an explanation from her mom.

“Who is that? The guy that just came in, standing next to Selina,” Kianna asked her mom.

“Her boyfriend. He comes here often. You should go and introduce yourself.”

Kianna widened her eyes at what she felt was a ridiculous idea. She did not like strangers or having to introduce herself to them. Every cell of her introverted personality fought against interactions like that, and her mom knew it.

“Don’t be shy. Selina and Gina are there, too. Besides, he’s like family to us.”

Her mom finished plating her dishes and handed a bowl of noodles and a plate of braised pork to Kianna.

“But he’s—” not family to me.

“But he’s—” *not family to me*, Kianna wanted to argue, but did not think it was a nice thing to say.

“Take these to the table and tell everyone it’s time to eat.”

Kianna gave up the thought and took the dishes with her. She placed the two dishes on the large dining table already filled with other dishes and announced to her family that dinner was ready.

Her parents, uncles, and aunts seated themselves at the round dining table with just enough seats for twelve elders. The younger generation filled up their plates and sat around a smaller round table a few feet away. While the dining table was filled with uproarious laughter and discussion, the other side of the living room was filled only with the sound of metal spoons clanking against the ceramic plates and whispers of quiet conversation.

Kianna hesitated to approach the smaller table with her full plate in hand. She looked at her cousins, Selina and Gina, sitting with their backs to her and talking with Selina’s boyfriend. *There is no way I’m actually talking to him.* She hesitantly approached her younger cousin, Ava, who sat alone across from them. However, before she could escape her cousins’ notice, Selina called to her.

“Kianna! Come here. Let me introduce you to Theo,” Selina said, wagging her hand in a beckoning motion.

Kianna groaned internally, but she smiled and walked closer to Selina's seat with her plate in hand.

"Hi!" Kianna thought she sounded excited enough.

"Theo," Selina's boyfriend said with a slight smile.

"Kianna," she said with a grin and a nervous laugh.

"Why don't you take a seat here? Eat with us,"

Gina said, patting the seat beside her.

"Oh, no, no. That's fine. I want to, um, catch up with Ava, so I will just sit there. You guys enjoy your dinner," Kianna said and walked away without giving them a chance to persuade her further.

"Hey!" Kianna said, moving to the seat next to Ava.

"Oh. Hey." Ava gave Kianna a glance before turning her eyes back to her phone.

"How are you?" Kianna asked to break the awkward silence.

"Fine."

"So, what are you up to these days?" Kianna scooped rice with her spoon.

"Not much."

"How's college? Keeping you busy?"

"I'm not in college." Ava's eyes did not leave her phone screen for even a second.

At that moment, Kianna wished the ground would swallow her whole. Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment. *How could I not know that?* She kept her silence as she finished her plateful of rice and sides quickly. Embarrassed and ashamed of her cluelessness, Kianna walked to the dining table and approached her mom.

At that moment,
Kianna wished
the ground would
swallow her whole.

"Help me. I think I just offended Ava. I think I should just go home," Kianna whispered in her mom's ear.

"Don't be silly. We just started. You haven't even seen *Ah Ma*."

"But—"

"Just eat first. *Ah Ma* should be getting up soon. Then you can go home."

Kianna hoped it would be soon. Feeling lost, she made her way back to her seat at the other table and sat in silence, afraid of saying something wrong again. Kianna thought of Alya and Natalie, her two closest cousins. *Where are they?* She craned her neck to look at the tightly shut main door of the house. It didn't open. Kianna took out her phone and browsed through some news. She switched over to her messaging app and asked the two girls where they were. No response.

Kianna picked up her empty plate and walked to the kitchen to place it in the sink. Just as she finished washing her hands, the front door clicked open. She turned to see who had entered and grinned when she recognized Alya. Quickly, she dried her hands on the towel beside the sink and rushed to the living room.

"Good evening, Aunts. Uncles. Sorry for being late. The traffic is just unbelievable," Alya greeted the elders before placing her bag beside the sofa and walking toward the dining table.

"Lia!" Kianna rushed to Alya's side. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Let me get some food first," Alya laughed. She reached for a new plate on the dining table and scooped some rice and sweet and sour pork onto it.

With her plate full, Alya walked toward the smaller dining table where her other cousins sat, but Kianna pulled her toward the sofa.

“Eat here.” Kianna patted on the empty cushion beside her on the sofa. “I have a lot of things to ask. Why didn’t you tell me that Ava isn’t going to college?”

Alya ate a spoonful of rice before responding to Kianna. “She is. Just not right now. She’s taking a year off.”

“Would’ve been nice to know that before I brought it up with her. I felt like such a bad cousin for not knowing.”

“Don’t worry about it. She understands that you’ve been busy.”

Kianna nodded, but was not convinced. But she had more pressing matters at hand.

“Since when do we bring nonfamily members here?” she whispered.

“Who? Theo? He’s just like family now. He comes here all the time and to all of the family events.”

Kianna was baffled by her family’s behavior. *How could they accept a stranger so easily?* She glanced at the other side of the room where the men, including Theo and Uncle Will, were all talking by the dining table. She turned her attention back to Alya.

“They’ve been dating for nearly three years now. He gets along well with everyone. Practically family,” Alya repeated.

“You have a lot to catch up on, but don’t worry. Take it slow.”

“So much has changed. Like the boyfriend thing. And *Ah Ma*’s not cooking anymore. And you guys don’t even hang out upstairs anymore,” Kianna muttered, her words heavy with sadness.

“Well, we got busy. *Ah Ma* is getting older. We’ve gone through a lot while you were gone. You have a lot to catch up on, but don’t worry. Take it slow.”

Kianna nodded, but her heart tightened at such thoughts. She had never expected so much change to happen in the time she was away from home. She missed the times when it was just the six of them gathered in the afternoon before the Lunar New Year’s Eve dinner. She remembered the smell of *Ah Ma*’s cooking. She recalled the games they would play to decide who got to line up first to receive the *ang paus*. Year after year, she had longed for the day she would be able to relive the memories, but it seemed as though they would remain as memories.

It’s gonna be okay. Things will get better, Kianna tried to convince herself.

“*Ah Ma!* Happy New Year’s Eve!”

Gina’s shout distracted Kianna from her thoughts. She looked to see her grandma walking out of her bedroom, cousin Natalie leading her by the arm. *So that’s where Natalie had been.* Kianna grinned as a greeting to Natalie and approached her grandma.

“*Ah Ma!* Did you miss me?” Kianna hugged her grandma.

“Anna! You’re here!” *Ah Ma* hugged her back, and the warmth melted Kianna’s worries away.

“I missed you so much, *Ah Ma*. I missed your cooking, too.” Kianna spoke lightly, overcome with wistfulness.

"You miss my cooking? Come here. I have something for you." *Ah Ma* made her way to the kitchen and uncovered the lid of a pot on her kitchen counter.

"Your favorite," *Ah Ma* announced proudly.

Kianna gasped at the contents of the pot. *Ah Ma* had made a potful of clam cooked in spicy curry sauce. The smell of chili and cumin coming from the dish permeated the air. The yellow sauce, sprinkled with chopped red chili, reminded her of the days when she would finish a whole plate of the dish all on her own, leaving nothing for her cousins to eat. She hugged her grandmother once again, tighter than ever before.

"Thank you, *Ah Ma*! I love it."

"Eat a lot. I cooked a lot so you can bring some home too."

Kianna nodded as tears of joy threatened to spill from her eyes. She could still eat her grandmother's food after all.

"That's not fair, *Ah Ma*. Aren't you showing too much favoritism? I want some too," Gina said as she tiptoed to look above all the cousins gathered around the pot.

"Don't worry. I cooked enough for all of you." *Ah Ma* chuckled at Gina's whiny comment.

"I don't think you'll want to eat those, Gina. We're still going out for grilled skewers after this. Remember?" Selina reminded her.

"That's right. I almost forgot. So everyone's coming, right?" Gina looked around at everyone, and her eyes lingered on Kianna.

"Theo reserved a table for seven already," Selina said.

“Kianna, you have to come. You haven’t joined us in forever. This is going to be so much fun with all seven of us going together,” Natalie said.

Kianna looked at each of her cousins, their eyes pleading with her to agree. She pondered for a moment. She looked at her grandmother, then her cousins. She would much rather be home and spend time with people she actually knew, keeping traditions she was familiar with.

But if not now, then when? I guess it won’t be “the six of us” anymore. It’s gonna be seven.

“Of course I’m coming,” Kianna said, “I don’t want to miss out on these things anymore.”

Kianna looked at the excited smiles around her.
Time to make new memories.



Commencement
Contest Winner

POETRY

The Words of the Prophet

by Justin Rickard

“But the house of Israel will not hearken to thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks . . .”

—Ezekiel 3:7, 9a

Come, burn my body, burn it whole
With bitter, biting, cutting speech!
Come, cause the heat to lick my soul
And sear the human underneath!
Exact your painful scorching toll;
I cannot do but Teach.

Come, martyr me with sticks and mud;
Come, sling your simpleminded stones!
Fire hath long since burned the bud
Of youth: that part that weeps and moans—
I'm mind and muscle, icy blood.
The Truth will break your bones.

This Voice no violence can consume;
Though vicious envy, bloody lust
Would seal me in a liquid tomb,
In dungeons of the deep to rust,
I'll grind this walled saltwater room,
My ocean bonds, to dust.

Flame, earth, and flood will never bend
Or break me to your wicked way.
Yahweh, He my Father, Friend,
Commands my withered lip obey;
Else would the witching winter wind
Whisk all my whispered Words away.



Commencement
Contest Winner

NONFICTION

Suppose You Are Busy

by Maegann Mansfield

Sometimes, we get so focused on the end goal that we fail to see the importance of the present.

“Pretty then and now. Suppose you are busy.” I quickly read Grandma’s text, smiling at the cringy and badly cropped picture she had sent of me at eight years old, tilting my head sideways in the family Christmas photo. Smiling, I pressed the lock button on the side of my phone then slipped it into the inside pocket of my jean jacket. I’d respond to that message later. Right now, if I didn’t hurry, I’d miss class.

I took the steps two at a time, reaching the second floor at exactly 7:59:32 according to my wristwatch.

Sweet. I’d make it just in time.

I scurried to my classroom and slipped into my seat as the bell rang. Class began, and I focused on the lecture and learning more about photography. We were learning about the most common photography mistakes—exposure, white balance, and tangents. The idea of tangents interested me the most because I thought it was interesting that the human eye could so blatantly disregard such obvious factors in the photo that distracted from the subject.

“You see, tangents happen when photographers don’t pay attention to the picture they are actually taking. When they look through the viewfinder, they tend to only focus on the subject in front of them, missing all of the elements around the subject—good or bad,” Mr. Morehead explained as he clicked through the sample pictures on the screen overhead.

The class laughed at a few of the pictures, marveling at how photographers could miss such obvious tangents, such as a tree sprouting out of someone’s head.

“The best way to avoid tangents in your photography is to trace your eyes around the edges of the photo. This trains your eye to focus on what is actually in the photo instead of what your brain thinks the photo should look like.”

Makes sense, I thought. *Purposefully focus on the edges to see what is actually there instead of just what I think is there.* I nodded to myself, mentally tucking away the idea for later when I would attempt my next photography project.

I left class that day thinking about tangents and photography. Wherever I went, I saw snapshots of could-be pictures, challenging my brain to see the one element that would ruin the photo and keeping a mental score of how many times I succeeded.

As the thought embedded itself into my thought process, I found myself applying the idea to other aspects of my life. I began to see a figurative tangent in the way the chapel speaker presented his message, in the way I wrote my papers, and in the way I interacted with the people in my life.

College had a way of narrowing my focus, blurring all but the most pressing and demanding in my life, similar to the way the auto-focus on my camera would blur all but my subject when I half pressed the shutter button. In a way, I had become the photographer who focused on what I wanted the photo to be, instead of what it really was. School became my subject, and everything else became less important. Pressing deadlines breathed down my neck, and stress dominated my emotions, deepening my drive to focus on the looming pile of work in front of me. My subject in focus became my schoolwork, my projects at work, and the people closest to me—my roommates, my parents, and my fiancé.

Outside of that, I didn't have time for much else. My life revolved around papers and projects, schedules and deadlines, topics and word counts. I forgot about my grandma's text until it was already two weeks later when my mom texted me with an update about my grandparents: "Tried to call you last night. You didn't call me back either. Grandma and Grandpa went to the hospital this morning. Oxygen levels low. Pray for them."

I just stared at the text. My grandparents had tested positive for COVID-19 just the week before and had been experiencing some symptoms, but as far as I knew, they had been doing okay. The last time I'd heard an update on their cases, I had been reassuring my mom that everything would be fine, but for them to be in the hospital now, their cases had to have gotten worse.

I paused for a moment, wondering how to respond. What do you say to something like that? Too many emotions flooded me in the moment, ranging from fear that they may not survive to forced rationality that I couldn't assume anything yet. Feeling uncomfortable with the possibility that my grandparents might not win the battle with COVID, I opted for my usual response in uncomfortable emotional situations—pushing the problem out of focus. Positivity and rationality had to be the key. If I manually forced the situation to re-focus, everything would work itself out—right?

I slowly typed my response, “Oh my! They're doing that badly? I'll be praying for them!”

I read my response several times, worried that the emotion was off. Finally convincing myself that this response was appropriate, I sent the message and immediately locked my phone, looking for a distraction. And I found one. That same weekend, my fiancé had come into town for a visit. I shifted my focus to enjoying time with him, all the while actively trying to keep my mind off the situation with my grandparents.

But my mind had other ideas.

Throughout the day, my thoughts repeatedly wandered back to my grandparents, and snapshot memories kept appearing randomly in my mind. In

one shot, I saw my grandpa sitting in his overstuffed recliner with seven-year-old me on his lap, indulging my desire to read every children's book they owned. I could still feel the rumble of his deep voice on my small back as I snuggled against his chest. In another, I saw my grandma in her seat in the kitchen, slowly dozing off as she watched TV. I could still see her head slightly bobbing, and hear her surprised, "What happened?" when she would wake up periodically. I smiled as I remembered how the corner of her mouth would lift in a sly half-smile when she'd see my brother and I chuckling at her and how she'd scold us, "Stop laughing at your old grandma."

Throughout the day, I tried to keep in contact with my mom, asking her for updates and checking on how she was holding up with the news about her parents. When she didn't respond, I began texting my younger brother and received a steady stream of information: "Grandma took a turn for the worse, and the doctors are doing CPR on her. She is not breathing. If they can get her to breathe, they will take her to Sioux Falls."

The next few
hours passed
in a paradox.

My mental auto-focus sharpened, zooming in on only one piece of information—she's not breathing. The news hit me hard.

She's not going to make it.

The next few hours passed in a paradox, at times flying by and at others only crawling. Every so often, I'd receive a new update. Grandpa was doing fine. He was receiving oxygen and a plasma treatment. Grandma was not doing as well. She'd stopped responding.

The hours passed by in a blur, reminding me of the motion blur my camera experiences when its shutter speed is too slow to properly freeze the action.

But the hours that passed didn't do much for me or for my grandma. After having her heart restarted, she still wasn't responding.

As my family waited for the doctor to call with the news that he couldn't do anything more for my grandma, my brain began to rationalize what was happening—I was losing her. There would be no more cringy pictures and sweet text messages.

On Sunday night, I sat on a cold stone bench under a tree to call my mom. She updated me on my grandparents, and I tried to comfort her in the midst of losing her mother. I'd been holding it together fine until I heard my mom's broken voice: "I have to make the call to move her to comfort care. That means she'll die. I just didn't expect this."

As we sat on the phone weeping together, she in Texas and me in Florida, I thought of all the good memories of my grandmother. We hadn't always gotten along, but I'd still loved her dearly. What would life be like without her?

The next morning, on my way to work, my brother texted me to say that my grandma had died: "Just wanted to let you know that about ten to twenty minutes ago, Grandma's heart rate shot up, and her blood pressure dropped. She went to heaven this morning."

I wished for the comfort of my camera.

As tears clouded my eyes, I wished for the comfort of my camera. Looking through its viewfinder always seemed to calm me—to give me a new perspective on life. When my thoughts were blurry, its lens provided clarity. When I couldn't see my way, its viewfinder directed my focus.

The painful thing about cameras, though, is that they always show you what is there—even if you don't want to see it. Several days later, I sat at the desk in my room, looking through the texts my grandma had sent me before she died. I realized that I hadn't made my grandma much of a priority while I was at school.

I'd missed involving my grandma in my life until it was too late.

Just like a photographer doesn't place much importance on the peripheral of his shot, I hadn't placed much importance on my grandma's small texts. Just like the photographer misses the tangent in his shot until it's too late, I'd missed involving my grandma in my life until it was too late. But most importantly, just like the photographer can't redo a shot after an event, I couldn't answer my grandma's text after she'd already passed.

On the day of her funeral, I retreated to my room to watch the livestream of the service. A couple hours later, long after her memorial service had ended, I still sat at the desk in my room, lost in thought.

She was gone.

Squeezing the damp tissues in my left hand, I picked up my phone and began scrolling through the text messages my grandma had sent me over the last month. Most of them were about the weather, but others had been about missing me and looking forward to Christmas. With tears in my eyes, I read the last text.

"Pretty then and now. Suppose you are busy."

The Unexpected Friend

by Taylor Cartwright

Life always moves on to the next chapter. Sometimes, it's hard to move with it.

The hot air blanketed the competitors and spectators at the Camp Perry National Rifle Match. We could do little to fan away the burning rays, especially when the heat index inside our thick canvas shooting suits rose to 105°. Fortunately, we had been prepared for the intense heat. It is well-known in the competitive rifle community that Camp Perry is one of the hottest matches in the eastern United States.

However, it is also one of the most unpredictable. Lake Erie, less than a mile away, causes thunderstorms to form over the range and disappear within minutes. Olympians occasionally stroll around offering helpful tips and posing for photos. Cars sometimes crash on slicks made from too many dead mayflies on the roads.

Dream equipment deals appear on decrepit bulletin boards eaten away by the wind. No one ever knows what might happen at Camp Perry.

Sweat pouring down my face, I unbuttoned my heavy canvas jacket after finishing a shooting relay.

One of my competitor's fathers rushed over to me as I picked up a bottle of water.

"You have to tell your dad that there's a rifle for sale. The same type he's looking at for you," he said to me in a rush.

Ah, the specialty Anschütz rifle.

I hadn't thought too much about getting a new rifle before the competition. In my family, my brother had been the serious rifle shooter, and he had just started competing for a college team. I was still the little sister who didn't care too much about my scores or my equipment. I just wanted to make good memories.

Yet, the thought of a new rifle piqued my interest—even though I knew it would cost a lot.

I didn't think
we'd manage to
find one so soon.

Just as the world is dominated by right-handed people, it is also dominated by right-eye-dominant people. Because of this, my left-eye dominance demanded that I purchase a unique rifle, one that came with a several hundred dollar upcharge just for it to have lefty parts. I knew if we ever purchased a rifle, it would have to be worth that upcharge, but I didn't know any that were worth it.

My dad, however, had done his research and set his eyes on a special lefty rifle—one made from parts of two different Anschütz models. I didn't think we'd manage to find one so soon.

My dad rushed over to me a few minutes later as I munched on a banana. “Taylor, there’s an Anschütz for sale. It’s the same 1907 model in the 1914 stock. Come on! We need to go see it.”

I unlaced my black and gray shooting boots and slid on my Under Armour athletic slides as fast as I could. The sand and gravel crunched beneath our feet as we sped to the Camp Perry shops to meet the couple selling the rifle.

A ring came from my dad’s hip. He popped his cell phone from its holder. “Kirk?” he asked, talking to one of my teammate’s fathers.

“Yes, we’re actually on our way there now. Thanks for telling us though!”

I looked up at him, eyes wide in curiosity. He laughed, “Kirk just called to tell me about the rifle. That’s the third person to tell us in an hour.”

I smiled as I started to accept that I might be finding my dream rifle. Camp Perry really was full of more surprises than I realized.

The rifle was a beautiful caramel brown with black etching along the side. The glossy wooden stock wasn’t without a few scuffs and gouges, but it had strength and personality. It had been places before me. It had seen many competitions.

“My son loves this rifle,” the owner said to me. “He’s been competing in college with it for a few years, but he wants a rifle upgrade like the rest of his team. They’ve all got those metal-stock Anschütz and Feinwerkbaus now.”

The rifle was a beautiful caramel brown with black etching along the side.

I frowned at the thought of giving up such a gorgeous wooden rifle for a shiny hunk of metal, but I didn't say anything. Picking up the rifle, I stepped into my shooting stance. Feet shoulder-width apart. One foot back an inch for stability and alignment. I raised the rifle in the air and settled it into the pocket of my shoulder. Its gentle weight rested on my right fist, and the fingers of my trigger hand curved perfectly around the handgrip. My cheek nestled onto the smooth cheek rest. It was perfect.

After my parents agreed to buy it, the owner looked at me with a smile on his face and said, "We'll be watching for your name on the scoreboard. I'm sure you'll take this rifle far."

Joy welled up inside me. This rifle was mine. I didn't understand it yet, but I wasn't just getting an equipment upgrade. It would be the chance to learn and love this rifle as my companion, to take it with me to every competition, and to write the next chapter of its life.

Despite my joy, the next few practices proved difficult as I learned to make new adjustments on my rifle. Nearly every part of it, from the barrel to the butt plate, could be adjusted to fit me better. Hours hooking and unhooking my sling from my rifle, bad shots from poor adjustments, and soreness came along with every practice.

Slowly, my rifle and I became acquainted with each other. Sharpie tick marks started to appear on its cheek rest and butt plate, noting adjustments for each competition stage. I started to adorn it with strange new equipment such as a bloop tube (a sight extender), hand rest, and riser blocks (to raise the sights to my eye). I was proud of my rifle, and as my teammates started buying fancier upgrades, I still liked mine best.

My team and I started going to more competitions to get exposed to college coaches and tougher competitors. We went to competitions up and down the eastern United States from Maryland to Pennsylvania then Georgia to Ohio and back again. My rifle faithfully tagged along to each one. After a while, it graduated from being an acquaintance to being a friend.

Two years after purchasing it, I started to notice how much attention my teammates paid to the new rifle models for sale at the various competitions.

One day, one of my teammates came up to me and said, “Did you see that new Bleiker smallbore rifle?” Thinly veiled excitement rolled off him as he listed who he had seen shooting the new gun.

“You want to own one?” I asked with a smirk, knowing about the rifle’s \$10,000 price tag.

He grinned sheepishly at me. “Better rifle, better shooting.”

In each stressful competition moment, it proved to be my constant.

I shook my head and turned back to my rifle without another thought. Some part of me couldn’t picture ever using a different rifle. It had proved to be my companion through each and every practice and competition. As I nestled into the kneeling position, my rifle heard my mutters and mumblings. When I shot poorly, it supported me as I rested my head on it and worked to reset my mind. In each stressful competition moment, it proved to be my constant. It didn’t know what it did for me, but it helped me grow every time I picked it up.

When my last junior competition came, I was somber as I slid my final round into my rifle and closed the bolt. I knew that I'd never compete the same way with my rifle—if I ever shot it again. My junior shooting career was almost over, and I decided that I wouldn't seek out more competitions. I knew that once I went to college, my life would be vastly different, and my skills would swiftly decline with lack of practice.

"Thanks for being such a good rifle," I whispered to it while I remembered each moment of competition with it.

Then, I took the shot.

Packing up my rifle that day, sliding the sights off, and unscrewing the butt plate, seemed so final, as though a chapter had not only concluded in my life but also in the life of my rifle.

I suppose that it's not every day a rifle gets to have a last competition with its owner.

I ran my hand against its stock and shut its case, unsure of the next time it would see the sun.

* * *

Three years later, I wrestled with my parents over selling it. How could I just give up something that had been with me for so many precious competitions and had become like a friend to me?

"Can we wait a little longer before we sell it, Dad?" I asked during Christmas break. My rifle rested in its case, and a part of me felt bad for keeping it trapped inside that foam and plastic shell for so long.

"We'll need to sell it some time," he said.

"Just a little longer, please?"

He nodded his head. "We can wait a little longer."

I ran my hand across the caramel wooden stock and the black etching.

Such a beautiful rifle.

A few months later, I got a call as I walked to my dorm room at college. “Hey, Mom,” I said, answering the call.

“Hey, Tay, we’re on our way back home from the competition in Annapolis today.”

“Oh, that’s good!”

“We—uh—we sold your rifle!”

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “What?”

“We met a really nice family today. Their son is fifteen. He’s really excited about shooting, and they loved the gun. We made them promise to take care of it for you.”

Part of me couldn’t believe my ears. Part of me burned with frustration. Then, the guilt I’d had for keeping my poor rifle stuck in that case for three years released. A few tears sprang into my eyes, but they didn’t fall. Although I’d never see my rifle again, it was moving on to its next chapter. Someone would love it as I did. Someone would take it to every competition and take joy in every shot. Now, it could become a friend to a new shooter as it had once been to me.

That scorching summer day at the national rifle match at Camp Perry flashed through my mind. I thought about how unexpectedly my rifle had come into my life and how unexpectedly it probably came to the new shooter who bought it. I smiled, blinking back the tears as I wondered where my rifle would take that new shooter next.

That Fateful Tuesday

by Grace Ingles

It is in the darkest of times that we find our way back to those who love us the most.

Her dad emerged from the hallway and carefully claimed the seat next to hers—his breath still hitched into a cough whenever he made any sudden movement. Victoria shifted away to maintain a semblance of her personal bubble, perfectly content to attempt finishing her weekend history homework. But her eyes caught sight of his hands resting together on his chest.

His fingers tapped a steady rhythm—*his one tell*, she knew—and while the unconscious movement never meant much, Victoria knew her father well enough to know that something had happened.

We already knew about the pneumonia. What else could have possibly happened?

She tucked her pen and highlighter back into her bag and placed the packet on top. “What did the doctor say?”

“There’s a murmur,” her dad replied. “There’s something off with my heartbeat. The doctor thinks that I could also have a hole in my heart, so he wants to perform an x-ray.” He nodded at the phone resting next to her bag. “Text your mom. It’s her lunch hour and she’ll want to know.”

A retort quickly formed on her tongue, but she dialed back. She didn’t want to be the one to disrupt the fragile peace that they had worked to reach. It was only when the doctors called for her father that she finally allowed herself a frustrated huff before tapping out a quick update to her mom and returning to her homework.

Two pages left to go.

* * *

“Victoria, there you are!”

Huh?

It was almost alarming to hear her name coming from Mrs. Lee, the dean of academics. Had she done

something wrong? Was her history teacher calling her back to class? He better not have. Victoria usually asked if she could go to the library for the remainder of the period, firm in her belief she could only learn so much more about the topic elsewhere. Plus, the librarian never minded her as long as she helped around.

Mrs. Lee marched into the small space and urged her toward the door. Victoria quickly re-shelved the book in her hands and tossed a goodbye to the librarian while Mrs. Lee, with a firm hand on her back, led her outside.

His finger tapped
a steady rhythm—
his one tell.

“Grab your stuff, honey. I’m taking you to the hospital.”

Victoria blinked. “What—”

“Didn’t your mom tell you to be ready just in case she called?” Mrs. Lee was already halfway to her office when she momentarily stopped to scold a kid for not tucking in his uniform. “I’ll meet you at the front office in five minutes.”

Not wanting to be on the receiving end of Mrs.

“Grab your stuff,
honey. I’m taking
you to the hospital.”

Lee’s impatient wrath,
Victoria hurried to her
locker on the other side
of the school. She didn’t
bother to arrange her
supplies in their usual,

neat order—pencil case, planner, notebooks, folders, lunch bag. Taking a brief moment to inform her teacher that she was being pulled for the day, she exchanged an eye-roll with her friend Zaina as her teacher waved her off with an indifferent flick of his wrist, muttering something about the reading due next Thursday.

The front office was filled with the sounds of furious typing and chatter, the latter being Mrs. Lee informing the workers that Mrs. Rahmanovic would be covering her for the day. Victoria exchanged polite nods with the secretaries before being herded, once again, out the front door, Mrs. Lee’s footsteps a determined *click, clack* on the weathered pavement.

* * *

“Mom, what’s going on?”

Her mother's skinny arms tried to wrap around her shoulders but Victoria flinched to deter them, purposefully ignoring the crestfallen look sent her way. She placed her backpack next to an empty chair and sat, hands deep in her pockets. "I thought you said that Dad was okay?"

The surgery to fix the murmur and hole in his heart had taken place the day before. Victoria and her little brother, Santiago, had stayed home from school—despite her protests, as Monday was always a busy day for her—and she vaguely recalled her mother saying they would go back to classes the next day, but to be prepared in case she picked them up. It was another reason why Victoria was startled when Mrs. Lee had announced that she would be driving her to the hospital. Her mother's coworker had hardly ever spared her a second glance or greeting before today, and never before could she have imagined their first exchange being en route to a hospital.

"There's been a bit of a complication with his breathing," her mother explained. Mrs. Lee, who promised to stay for a while, chorused an *oh, no*. "The doctor says that it's fine, but I had you brought here because I wouldn't have time to pick you up."

"What about Santi?"

"He's in an after-school program. He'll be fine for the time being."

Mrs. Lee redirected her mother's attention, fretting and assuring her that her students would be fine and to take as long as she needed. Victoria leaned back in the chair, gritting her teeth in frustration.

Was that all? Dad was fine? I put up with the most awkward car ride ever for this?

She took a quick glance at her watch and sighed, knowing that she was missing a government test for this rendezvous. She would have to redo her entire schedule when she got home just to fit in another study session for it.

Victoria rifled through her bag for something homework-related, turning away from the conversation. When she located the folder dedicated to her senior project, she dove right in, intent on getting ahead.

* * *

“His heart and breathing stopped twice. We lost him for a bit, but one of the nurses was able to perform CPR. We have him hooked to the ECMO machine—”

The doctor’s words sounded garbled to Victoria, as though her ears had been stuffed with cotton. She

“His heart and
breathing stopped
twice. We lost him
for a bit.”

hardly registered her mother’s strangled cry and a hasty retreat to a restroom. There was a bout of shuffling to her right—her pastor as he stood to thank the doctor in their

stead. A cold chill settled in her body and traveled slowly down her veins, freezing her in place as she watched the doctor walk away.

“Victoria?”

Her pastor’s voice might as well have been miles away. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him move to a chair closer to hers. His Bible lay open on his lap; and he repeated her name, placing a hand on her shoulder. All her attention focused on the weight;

but her arm, rigid against her side, didn't feel as though it was attached to her body.

"Did you hear what the doctor said? Your dad's going to be just fine."

Her vision blurred, eyes burning as she blinked once, twice, three times. She needed eye drops. Staring at the same thing for two hours straight always dried out her eyes.

"What's the ECMO machine?"

"It's—it's a machine that helps a person whose heart and lungs aren't able to work properly—"

Life support. She knew how to read between the lines.

Lips pressed together in a thin line, Victoria felt her grip on her pen tighten and then loosen as she started to fidget it back and forth in her fingers. The tapping sound it made against her folder filled the heavy air, matching pace with her heartbeat and drowning out her pastor's words.

Tap.

Everything was fine.

Tap.

What went wrong?

Tap.

What did you say to him yesterday, before he left?

Tap.

Nothing. You were asleep.

Tap.

But would you have said something? "Goodbye, love you."

Tap.

Tap.

When did you last say, "I love you?"

* * *



Victoria and her mother shuffled into the ICU. Even with the knowledge of her father's critical condition, Victoria still felt a twinge of guilt thinking of her unfinished assignment sitting in her backpack.

We know he's not doing okay. What's seeing him going to change?

Victoria shook her head, stiffening her jaw.

No, stop that. It'll be good to see him for yourself.

A nurse prattled around her dad's room, expertly maneuvering around the numerous machines that took residence in the room and connected to her dad's body. Her soft purple scrubs flashed in Victoria's line of sight, a momentary distraction before Victoria's eyes drifted to the bed.

There's a—there's a—

The hole was roughly the size of a piece of notebook paper. Victoria's knees locked and her mind went numb, her eyes frozen on the dark hole that spanned and swallowed her father's chest. Fear flooded

her veins with an icy severity as the gaping hole seemed to envelop the whole room.

Another nurse approached them, a clipboard in hand. Victoria listened to his rapid words, but it all escaped out the other ear, mind clouding with thoughts that seemed to tangle together in a knotted mess. Her eyes ping-ponged between her dad's still body—bloated and hardly recognizable if not for the mop of hair on his head—and the flickering line of the heart-rate monitor.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

Victoria tried not to think about the staccato beeps meshing into a longer one, of his heart-rate flattening—twice.

He's all right; he's okay; don't worry.

Her chest tightened. Her jaw stiffened. And she couldn't look away.

* * *

Victoria could feel their eyes on her the moment she knelt by her locker. Trying to ignore their uninvited stares, her fingers spun the dial in the correct combination and lifted the latch. Though her classmates remained in their groups, it was obvious that their muttered words were about her.

She didn't blame them. After all, she had abruptly disappeared on Tuesday, only to return today, a Friday. Rumors always spread like wildfire in her school.

Footsteps approached from her right. Victoria's mechanical movements halted for a split second as a pair of maroon shoes stopped next to her, followed quickly by a figure pressing against the lockers and sliding down to sit on the ground.

"Hey."

Victoria's jaw twitched as Zaina peered at her, eyes swimming with concern. Unable to meet her eyes, Victoria began to anxiously tap her finger against her locker door.

"We missed you this week. If you need anything, I'm, um, here for you."

Bang!

Zaina flinched as Victoria slammed her locker shut and shot to her feet, marching in the direction of her first class. Her head ached as she slumped into the plastic chair. She wanted to blame it on the fluorescent lighting, but she knew that she was kidding herself. She hadn't cried since Tuesday, *that was it*, and she had read enough books to know that withholding tears wasn't healthy.

But she just *couldn't*. She didn't deserve to cry, especially not when she hadn't—

Spit it out. Do it.

How many years had it been since she last told her dad, "I love you?"

It was pathetic, she knew, the way she had thrown herself into her academics the moment conflict arose. Every bit of her energy went into worrying about college applications and the next big assignment; any distractions—including her parents—were not welcomed in the slightest. Some days, the only time that she saw her dad was during dinner and family devotions, and both times were always marked with little conversation.

It was one of the many traits that Victoria had inherited from him, but *little conversation* didn't mean *no conversation*.

How many years
had it been since
she last told her
dad, "I love you?"

Her first class of the day was the same as that fateful Tuesday's, and Victoria prepared to tune out of whatever rant her teacher would chase for the day. She was half-tempted to ask if she could go to the library again, but a nervous pull at her gut stopped her.

She could use this time to do something else. To say the things, she would have said before that fateful Tuesday.

While she wasn't good with the spoken word, maybe writing it down would be better?

You've got nothing to lose, and maybe something to gain?

Don't chicken out.

When the bell rang, signifying the beginning of class, Victoria's pen was already halfway down a sheet of paper. Victoria clutched the folded paper as she hurried to her mother's classroom, pausing briefly to stumble through an apology for Zaina.

Urgency propelled Victoria's feet toward her mother, eager to shove the letter into her hands and rush to her own second period before she could see her reaction.

But maybe before that, Victoria contemplated, she could reciprocate a hug.

Because when was the last time she had hugged her mother?

Postal Combat

by Valerie Principe

On a Monday morning, Jacob Gardner fights an intense battle for his life (and his dignity).

Monday morning, in the small town of Mt. Morris, Illinois, Jacob Gardner sped down the sunny street in his mail truck, humming a lighthearted tune. Today was his first day as a full-time letter carrier, and he was already an hour ahead of schedule.

Jacob pulled his truck up to the curb at his third park point on Rush Lane. Then he sprang out onto the dewy grass, pushing a piece of his bushy black hair back into his navy cap and smoothing out the embroidered eagle on the chest pocket of his blue oxford. Slinging his mailbag over his shoulder, he hopped up three concrete steps to the porch of a one-story house with ivory siding and sparkling windows.

He dropped a handful of mail into the yellow mailbox that was nailed to the wall and spun back

toward the sidewalk. He froze mid-step when he heard a chain clanging and something snorting like an angry pig. The snorting grew louder as a dog no bigger than a house cat skittered across the grass toward him. The dog had gargantuan, gleaming eyes, a squashed nose, and an explosion of sandy fur that nearly obscured the shape of its body.

It can't hurt me if it's on a chain, Jacob reassured himself, striding toward his truck. But instinctively, he reached for the pepper spray that he kept clipped to his mailbag. His fingers grasped at air, and he groaned, realizing that he had left the can at the office.

Just then, the last link of the dog's chain shot around the corner of the house, dragging a dirt-caked plastic spike. The dog skidded to a stop in front of Jacob, wildly wagging its tufty tail.

See, there's nothing to worry about. It just wants to play—that's all.

Jacob smiled nervously, reaching down to pet the dog. The dog, after snuffling around Jacob's pant leg with its piglike nose, suddenly seemed to become possessed with a demonic fury. Jacob snatched his hand back, saving it from the tiny fangs that, instead, began tearing at his ankle.

Jacob shook his leg to dislodge the ravenous dog but only succeeded in dragging its needlelike teeth across his leg. Finally, he took his mailbag and swung it at the beast, accidentally flinging mail across the lawn like confetti. The dog bounced onto its tail a few feet away, and Jacob dashed for his truck. Yanking the

He froze mid-step when he heard a chain clanging and something snorting like an angry pig.

truck's steel door shut, he sped to his next park point, leaving the purgatorial puffball frothing, snorting, and stamping its feet.

He took his mailbag and swung it at the beast, flinging mail across the lawn like certified confetti.

Once parked, he pulled up his pant leg to examine his ankle. Tiny holes climbed halfway up his calf, and scratches connected them like a gruesome connect-the-

dot picture. He groaned. If he went to the hospital, he wouldn't be able to finish his route. So, he gritted his teeth, climbed into the back of the truck, pulled out a first aid kit, and cleaned and wrapped his ankle himself, all while griping, "Neither snow nor rain nor demonic dog."

He managed to finish his route on time and hobbled home. Limping through the front door into the kitchen, he sloshed fresh water for his cats into three empty metal dishes on the kitchen floor, before collapsing into bed.

That night, Jacob dreamed that thirteen giant puffballs were tearing at his uniform as if it were dollar day at Bowser's All-You-Can-Eat Mailman Buffet.

"Aughh!" he yelled, jumping out of his bed and flinging his blankets onto the floor. Three furry projectiles shot from the bed, meowing frantically as they landed on their feet and scurried away. He sent an apologetic look at his fleeing pets and forced himself to breathe.

That's it! I have to do something. I didn't take this job to become some sadistic dog's smorgasbord!

Jacob snatched his laptop off the table beside his bed, typed "evil, snorting dog breeds" into the Google search bar, and clicked on a picture that looked like

the dog on his route. The description beneath read “Pekingese: protective, strong-willed, and prone to endearing snuffling and snorting.”

Endearing? Not likely.

He scrolled down the page, looking for an article titled “Weaknesses” or “How to Kill a Possessed Pekingese in Three Simple Steps,” but all he found were recipes for gluten-free dog biscuits and organic flea remover.

I’ll have to come up with my own plan then.

The next day, Jacob strode down the sidewalk to the Mt. Morris Post Office, armed with a backpack full of WCCA (Weapons of Canine Correction or Annihilation) and an imagination brimming with deliciously inhumane thoughts. He didn’t intend to let any animal ruin his career.



He lifted his thermos to his mouth absentmindedly, envisioning himself setting a dish of rat-poison-laced dog food on the beast’s front lawn. He chuckled as the imaginary dog gobbled up the food, froze, and fell backward into the grass with a thud. As Jacob laughed, his hand shook just enough to slosh warm coffee out of his thermos and down the front of his uniform, startling him back to reality. But it didn’t matter that his shirt was soaked or that he didn’t have rat poison, because he had everything he needed to make that four-legged torture instrument wish it were poisoned.

Before starting his route, Jacob quickly changed from his coffee-drenched clothes into the spare uniform that he kept in his truck at the post office.

An hour later, he pulled up to the curb in front of his enemy’s lair. After strapping fiberglass shin guards over his ankles and grimacing as his wounded ankle



sharply protested, he sneaked from his truck. Creeping across the lawn toward the porch, he reached into his backpack for the aluminum extendable grabber that he had bought from Dollar General, placed the mail in its claw, and then pulled out an ultrasonic air horn with his free hand. He left a bag of dog treats (regrettably stuffed with bacon and not rat poison) and a can of police-grade pepper spray (which he secretly wished the dog would give him a reason to use) at the bottom of his backpack. He almost felt ridiculous employing such an advanced arsenal against a little puffball, but his throbbing ankle spurred him on.

He didn't see the dog or its chain anywhere, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He slowly inched his way to the edge of the porch, used his grabber to drop the mail into the box, and charged for his truck.

When Jacob reached the truck, he furtively glanced back toward the house.

But right there, standing at his feet, was the devil. Only, it didn't look like a devil today. The dog was snuffling and wagging its tail happily as if receiving a visit from its best friend.

Does this dog
have an evil twin?

Jacob pressed his back against his truck and waited for the dog's transformation with his air horn ready to blast the pooch's eardrums to the highest heavens.

But instead of attacking, the Pekingese gazed up at Jacob innocently and flopped onto its back in the grass for Jacob to rub its belly.

Jacob glanced from his ankle to the dog.

Does this dog have an evil twin?

He scanned the yard, partially expecting a second dog to race around the corner of the house and feast on his good ankle. He shook his head. Evil twin or no, he had to finish delivering the mail for this relay. He cautiously rubbed the dog's belly, winced as he received several slobbery kisses, and then continued his route.

The dog followed Jacob to each mailbox, frolicking in the grass beside him to the surreal music of its jingling chain.

When Jacob climbed into his truck at the end of the relay, he had to scatter a handful of dog treats from his backpack onto the lawn to keep the eager pooch from jumping into his lap. Whatever had transformed the demon dog into an angel had just saved Jacob's career.

Jacob woke the next morning and smiled at the sunshine streaming through the window and spilling onto his bed. No ravenous puffballs had attacked him in his dreams the night before.

After hopping out of bed, he got dressed and then ambled into the kitchen to make his coffee, filling the three metal dishes on the kitchen floor with fresh water and another three with Fancy Feast.

His cats—Mittens, Puss, and George—purred and rubbed against him affectionately as he put the food into their bowls. When he was done, he scooped Mittens into his arms to give her a hug. Then he kissed her furry head, set her down so she could eat her breakfast, and left for work, grinning giddily.

A few hours and two relays later, he dropped the day's mail into the yellow mailbox of

the house on Rush Lane and ambled away from the porch, secretly hoping that the Pekingese would come and join him on his route. He paused at the end of

The dog leapt up
and latched onto
Jacob's hand.

the sidewalk and looked back, smiling as he heard the jingle of the dog's chain.

The dog raced around the side of the house toward Jacob. But when it reached him, it wasn't wagging its

He looked down at
his trembling hand
and grimaced.

tail, and it was snorting
louder than ever before. It
leapt up and latched onto
Jacob's hand that he had
extended to pet its head
and hung on stubbornly as

Jacob yelled and tried to shake it off. The Pekinese's fangs only sank deeper into Jacob's hand as he shook the dog as hard as he could. Not knowing what else to do, he ran to his truck with the dog still clinging to his hand and used his other hand to rummage through his backpack for the can of pepper spray. Finally, he pulled out the can and aimed it at the dog's blazing eyes.

He pressed the button and yelled when a stream of fiery liquid fired out, not at the dog, but into his own face. He imagined that if the dog's mouth weren't otherwise occupied, it would be laughing at him.

He spun the aerosol can around and sprayed at the blurry blob dangling from his hand. The dog unlatched and rolled onto the grass, barking and shaking its head violently. Now Jacob was the one laughing—and crying—hysterically as he jumped into his truck and slammed the door. He looked down at his trembling hand and grimaced. Even with tear-filled eyes, he could tell the damage was much worse than that of his ankle. In his blurry vision, he could hardly tell the difference between his hand and a raw steak. He clumsily wrapped some gauze from the first aid kit around his hand and pulled out his phone to call 911. He couldn't drive if he couldn't see, and he wouldn't

get out of the truck without police protection or a poisonous-dart gun.

* * *

There goes my job, Jacob thought as he lay on the stiff hospital bed in the emergency room, clutching his mangled hand. What could have turned the friendly furball from yesterday into such a ferocious fiend?

He replayed the last two days in his mind. The only thing that had changed was his uniform. A uniform couldn't make a dog go crazy. Unless there was something on the uniform—something like—

Cat fur!

Yesterday he had changed into a new uniform at the post office, but today he had started his route reeking of cats and covered in fur.

Jacob squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly regretting all the decisions that had led him into such a pathetic situation.

The dog wasn't possessed. It just hated cats!

Jacob was released from the hospital three hours later with a few stitches, potent painkillers, and a free pass from work for at least a week. The thick bandage on his right hand made it impossible for him to deliver mail, but he didn't intend to stay home pouting.

He quickly changed into the paint-covered work clothes that he kept in the bottom drawer of his dresser—which were his only clothes not contaminated by cats—and then strode down the sidewalk toward Rush Lane.

His whole body trembled as he approached the dog's yard. His ankle throbbed beneath his wrinkled jeans, and his hand pulsed with stabbing pain.

Hearing the dog's chain clanging behind the house, he braced himself for the worst. Behind his back, in his good hand, he clutched the can of pepper spray as an added precaution.

The dog launched from the grass as if propelled from the underworld and sank its claws into Jacob's clothes. It bared its fangs and snorted sadistically.

This is it, Jacob thought. Taken down by a ferocious Furby during my first week of work. He squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly regretting all the decisions that had led him into such a pathetic situation. *Dad always told me I should've been a librarian. The most vicious creatures I'd have to deal with there are the toddlers in the reading circle,* he thought. *Now I'm nothing more than a life-size chew toy.*

Slurp! The demon dog brought him back to reality with a slobbery kiss.

Jacob's heart nearly stopped as the dog began soaking him with slobbery kisses and snuffling sweetly like a sinus-congested sonneteer.

He let the can of pepper spray fall from his hand into the grass and cautiously scratched the dog behind its ear. Then the dog snuffled up against his arm in a way that he could almost—just almost—consider endearing.

The peace made that day was a peace forged of necessity, a peace resulting from a gross misunderstanding set right, and a peace that would likely last—just until Jacob forgot to do his laundry the next day.

Not a House, but a Home

by Valencia

A house is nothing but a place to stay
Away from sun and rain. It is a dull
Abode that I don't miss when I'm away.

My house is built with white, high walls, so grand
And strong. But it is not the home I seek
To weather storms, for home is not on land.

My home is Mother's touch against my cheeks,
Tear-stained from cries. It's Father's hugs and sweet,
Warm smiles that make me strong when I feel weak.

It's laughter brought by Brother's jokes that greet
Me every day. It's Sister's counsel, best
When life seems hard, and I have faced defeat.

They make a house a home, a place to rest
In comfort of those whom I love—I'm blessed.

A Level of Comfort

by Grace Ingles

Dealing with loss isn't easy to do alone.

“You weren’t there when I woke up.”

Arley looked up from her paperwork on the lobby desk. The warmth curling from the coffee cup that he handed her was a welcome distraction from the October chill, and yet her blood ran cold at the jarring sound of his voice. Steve didn’t mean to catch her off guard—he never did—but the words still crashed against the walls she had wrapped around her heart, threatening to break through.

With a small shake of her head, Arley took a sip and pressed her lips together.

“Had to get up early for the first day of busy season,” she pointed out as she glanced around the visitor’s entrance. “Like we always do.”

“I know. That’s why I made you the coffee.” Steve wiggled a pen in his fingers, and it struck against the clipboard in an uneven rhythm. “We’re running low

on it, among other things.” His gentle eyes peered into hers, and she looked down at her open Bible. “Do you wanna make this grocery run or should I?”

Bitter bile clawed up her throat, her jaw ticking with the effort of maintaining a straight face. Out of habit, her eyes flickered to the open foyer door, waiting for the small voice that never failed to ground her heart, and her mouth twisted into a grimace when her mind caught up to her emotions. With a hurried gulp, Arley downed half of the cup and ignored the burns that formed on her tongue.

“Can you do it, please? I promise that I’ll handle next week’s run.”

The soft smile that pulled at Steve’s mouth was only an echo of the boyish grin that she had fallen in love with—disarming and coupled with the understanding that, next week, she would ask him to make the run again.

“Sure,” Steve said, eliciting a thin smile from her. “Whatever you want, sweetheart.”

* * *

Fall season always brought their small farm attraction the most traffic of the year; there was something about the season’s moderate temperatures and vivid color harmonies that drew crowds like no other.

Arley made sure to greet the guests with the usual smile and light conversation, but more often than not she spent the morning keeping an eye on the new workers, helping when questions arose. There wasn’t a set routine for the day, but the constant distraction ensured that her mind forgot all about the heavy weight that pressed down at her from all angles, the



phantom presence that her heart knew she couldn't pick up, but that her arms yearned to.

She needed to get through the day, hopefully, without any distractions.

*For just one second,
please God—*

Unease rolled in her stomach. Arley took a moment to squeeze her eyes shut, fists clenching as she tried to shake away the

feeling. With measured breaths, she tried to bring to mind her pastor's advice, focusing until the tightness in her chest loosened.

One of the new workers called her name. Wordlessly, Arley made her way over. She needed to get through the day, *hopefully*, without any distractions other than the usual.

"I just think it's so cool that my parents and I used to come here *all* the time before we moved," the new worker prattled once they got into a rhythm. Arley tried her best to nod in acknowledgement, knowing that trying to get a word in with Elena wasn't going to happen until she calmed around lunch time. "I mean,

I was so sad when they said we were going to move across the state, which is why I jumped to apply here once I moved back—”

Arley gestured for Elena to help lift one of the barrels that would section off the area.

“And I was even more excited when I got the job!” Elena’s bright grin stretched across her face as she placed the barrel on the X chalked into the ground. Her excited chatter transitioned to a contented hum, and Arley took the brief reprieve to take in what parts of the property she could see.

The wind had been particularly strong early that morning, and while the red and orange leaves were always beautiful to look at, too much in one place tended to turn customers away. She eyed the small group that trailed in from the entrance and made a mental note to ask Steve where they stored the rakes.

“Is Steve with Jacob?”

Arley’s eyes snapped to Elena, but the young girl merely met her alarmed gaze with a head tilt and a smile.

“Um, are you okay? You’re looking kinda pale.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Steve’s our go-to guy for us newbies, isn’t he?” Elena asked. “And I remember my mom saying that Jacob was in the hospital for a bit, so I’m just wondering.”

The smell of antiseptic flooded her nose. Arley’s throat tightened as nausea threatened to rise, and she tucked her thumbs into her fists, squeezing them tightly in an attempt to stave it off.

“Is he okay?” Elena’s eyes were wide, unblinking. “There wasn’t an update about his condition—”

Elena’s questions were innocent and lacked malice, Arley knew, but she couldn’t help the rush of dizziness

that punched through her mind, grasping at her heart in a tight hold that showed no signs of loosening.

“Ja—Jacob’s—I’m sorry.” Arley pushed herself off the barrel, feet pointing in the direction of the nearest storage shed. The haze in her mind cleared for a moment, enough for her to acknowledge Elena with “continue moving the barrels. If you need help, the workers near the duck pond should be available in a couple of minutes.”

“Oh, all right. Um, are you okay? You’re looking kinda pale.”

Arley’s lips tightened in a brief, apologetic smile before speed-walking away, mind screaming at her to run. With a loud *creak* and *rattle*, she stepped into the storage shed and shut the door behind her. The lack of light engulfed her shaking figure, and when combined with the heavy heat of the shed, the pressure in her chest only worsened.

Tears trickled down her cheeks, and a sob tore out of her throat as Elena’s words replayed themselves in her mind. With a loud *thud* she pressed her back against the wall and slid down it, shoving the back of her hand against her mouth in an attempt to keep quiet.

It wouldn’t do well if a guest heard her breaking down, but there was no holding back her sobs echoing in the small space, the hand pressed against her mouth still squeezing the thumb she had tucked under her fingers in useless repetition. Her other hand massaged the area over her heart.

In, out. In, out.

Flashes of a little blond boy danced across her eyes. A strangled noise escaped her, and Arley bit the inside of her cheek.

“Arley?”

The door creaked open, and pale sunlight broke through the darkened space, casting the figure that stood in the doorway into shadow.

Steve.

Hurriedly, she scrubbed at her tears. “I’m—I’m okay—”

“Hey, hey.” There was a small shuffle as he knelt in front of her. “No, you’re not. C’mon, put your head between your knees and breathe.”

His rough hand cupped the back of her head, guiding it down between her drawn-up knees. Once he was satisfied with her position, he slid his other hand down to rub soothing circles on her back. Arley’s cries grew softer as the minutes ticked by, giving way to shuddering breaths, the airy sounds piercing the silence between them.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I should have known this would happen.”

Steve tucked a finger under her chin and raised her head to meet his gaze. “It’s okay. Can you tell me what triggered it this time?”

She hoped that Steve could hear how truly sorry she was.

Arley closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall.

“Take your time. I’ve got someone covering for us.”

With glassy eyes she peered up at the barely visible ceiling, wishing that it would swallow her whole. “One of the newer workers that I was helping. She—she asked if there was an update on—”

“Jacob.” The name elicited another snuffle, and Arley hastily wiped at her eyes with her sleeve.

"Yeah. And I, um, I shouldn't have come to work today." She hoped that Steve could hear how truly sorry she was. "I should have listened when you said that it would be too soon, that you had it under control."

Arley could see the faint movement of Steve moving closer, and she only had a split second to prepare for his hug. His arms drew her close to his chest, and instinctively she buried her face into his shoulder, relishing in the solid weight of his body, letting it ground her mind.

"Do you remember what Pastor Eric said?"

Her sweater muffled his voice, but Arley nodded.

"I think it'll help if we say it out loud. Remind us of it."

Arley closed her eyes for a moment to recall what their pastor had counseled them with, fighting through the haze of grief that clouded her days after that last, fateful hospital visit.

"There needs to be a grieving process," she whispered. Steve nodded against her urging her to continue. "And, um, the Lord carries us through it."

"Not—"

"Not ourselves, or our friends, or each other. Even if they can stay by our side."

"And healing takes time. It's not a straight line,

"Some people just
grieve differently
from others."

but in the end, we can discover a level of comfort in God that we wouldn't have known otherwise."

Arley breathed a small, shaky chuckle and pulled back to gaze at him. The nausea had lessened somewhat, but her chest still ached a bit. "How is it that you're more levelheaded than me?"

“Some people just grieve differently from others.” He shrugged. “I’m . . . not grieving in the way that you are.”

Arley blinked slowly, brow knitting in confusion, before recalling all the nights that she had gone to bed staring at the light in Steve’s study flickering well into the night. His movements never seemed to pause for more than five minutes, focus directed onto the next big project that they needed to tackle. He had taken up charge over the business without hesitation when she couldn’t, and while she knew that he did so because he loved her, perhaps there was another reason why? One that she hadn’t taken the time to consider?

“Oh, Steve,” she murmured, stomach sinking. “I’m sorry. I’ve been so selfish—”

“No, you have not,” he sternly said. “You were grieving, sweetheart. You were in pain, still are, and we *chose* just to tell very few people.”

“I know, but—”

“Um, Arley?”

Elena’s voice floated through the crack in the door, followed quickly by a series of rapid knocks. Arley and Steve exchanged a look before standing, brushing away the dried grass and dirt from their clothes before opening the door. Arley frowned slightly at the sight of a panicked Elena clutching onto the hand of an inconsolable toddler.

“I found her wandering around by herself,” Elena explained, breathless. “I—I didn’t know what to do.”

“You did well, Elena,” Arley assured, ignoring the dry scratch in her own voice. “We’ll stay with her right here, and you radio the other workers to be on the lookout, all right?”

Elena left with a hurried nod, and Steve crouched so that he was level with the girl. “Hi, little one. What’s your name?”

“Mabel,” she said around the thumb in her mouth.

“All right then, Mabel,” Steve said, moving to sit on the ground. “Do you like games?”

There was a moment of pause when Mabel merely stood there, face pinched in a cry, before she took her thumb out of her mouth and nodded shyly. She sat in

Jacob had been
his one chance.

front of Steve, little legs crossed under her dress, and soon the sniffles turned into delighted peals of laughter.

Arley watched as Steve wiped away the little girl’s tears and distracted her with a game of *I Spy*. Her heart squeezed with fondness and a dull ache, and for a moment she imagined that it was a little boy sitting between them, one with a boyish grin and blonde curls that she loved running her hands through. He would shriek with a delighted laugh at playing his favorite game, chubby hands grabbing the flower from Steve’s hand, little legs running toward her and pitching himself into her lap.

Mama, flower! Look! I guess it and win!

It was more than obvious to her that Steve was meant to be a father—kids gravitated toward him like a magnet, charmed by his gentle disposition, and it only made the guilt that he could never be one deepen.

Jacob had been his one chance. Their little boy had been a miracle pregnancy, a rainbow baby after the dreary storm. Arley could clearly remember Steve holding him for the first time, laughing at how Jacob looked like an angry little loaf of bread in his hands. Even with his face screwed up in a cry, though, the resemblance between father and son had been clear.

It hadn't been right that her first and last memories of her boy were in a hospital.

With a hurried thunder of footsteps, Mabel's mother ran over to sweep her daughter into a tight hug. Arley felt Steve's hand wrap around hers at the sight, squeezing softly as though he could sense her emotional tangle.

"You okay?" he muttered after Mabel's mom thanked them, hurrying away. His gentle, probing eyes had returned, but this time she didn't shy away from them.

Arley nodded, watching as Mabel tucked her face into her mother's neck, her excited babble filling the air before melding with the other voices in the farm attraction. Her heart yearned for another chance to hold her little boy, to tell him that she loved him one last time, but as she pressed herself into another hug with her husband, she knew that she could count on him to be there when another spike of panic would threaten to overwhelm her, to direct her to the One who could truly comfort her heart.

A vertical poster featuring a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a bright white circle in the upper center, surrounded by a large, glowing orange and yellow sky. The ocean below is depicted with dark blue and teal waves, rendered in a painterly style. The word "SUNBREAK" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image, partially overlapping the horizon and the waves.

SUNBREAK



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My Coffee and My Tea

by Valencia

I like my coffee in the mornings when life disrupts
My sweet, serene dreams. When the alarm
Rings and beeps, I know it's time to make my coffee.

It must be sweet, with milk and sugar—
A spoonful or maybe two—to balance the bitterness
Of what is to come.



I gulp a cup of coffee while rushing
Across the room, grabbing books and bags
And pens and papers, before running out
(Almost!) late for class.

I like my tea in the afternoons when life
Dies down and I feel drowsy. When I want
To relax and enjoy peace, I know it's time to make my tea.

It must be warm and pure
Without milk or sugar or garnishes
To relish nature's original taste.

I sip a mug of calming tea while reading
A book or watching the sunset. The sky
Of pink and orange accompanies
My hopeful heart for better mornings.

My coffee grants me strength for the day,
But my tea reminds me of hope for tomorrow.

The Twin Sister I Always Wanted

by Valerie Principe

*Dolls were fun to play with, but a little sister
was better.*

When I wished for a baby sister seventeen years ago, I had no idea how much responsibility I was taking on. To five-year-old me, a little sister meant I had a best friend who could never move away or stop coming over to my house to play—a sort of captive companion. To adult me, a little sister is someone I would break the limbs off an entire Mongol army to protect from a stubbed toe (come at me, Genghis). Though I wouldn't trade having a younger sister for anything, it took a lot of time and an unfortunate incident with a wire fence for me to fully comprehend my role as a big sister.



Having your Barbie dolls repeatedly blown up by G. I. Joe grenades can be unspeakably irritating to a five-year-old girl. But if I wanted to have anyone to play with, I had to put up with the torture my older brothers always wove into our games. I was the youngest of seven children, and the four siblings closest to my age were boys. I tried for a long time to befriend the monsters my mom had doomed me to live with. But after my poor Barbie dolls got blown across the room for the hundredth time and I spent a solid five minutes zipped up inside a G. I. Joe tent, I gave up and retreated into my own solitary hobbies.

But as I played pretend with my dolls and made banquets with the plastic food in my play kitchen, I wished I had someone to play with who was like me.

I didn't just want a sister. I wanted one of those sisters who looked just like you and liked all the same things as you. I had friends who had that kind of sister—a twin sister. So I started praying. I don't know how much I grasped of what I was doing, but I figured since God was the one who made babies, He'd be the one taking the orders for them.

It took a while for my order to be processed. After all, I figured heaven must have quite a few more customers than Amazon Prime. But eventually my mom announced that she was pregnant—with a girl.

The new baby wouldn't technically be my twin since she was five years younger than I was. But that was close enough to satisfy me. Even a non-twin sister was WAY better than stinky brothers. Besides, I had heard that little kids were pretty impressionable—which, as I understood, meant I could brainwash her into doing anything, liking anything, and being an

all-around perfect mini-me. I was so excited about her being born that I even picked out the perfect name for her off the back of a shampoo bottle while I was taking a bubble bath—"KD." The name may or may not have actually been part of a manufacturer's coding system, but I was positive it was the perfect name for my twin.

My mom wasn't as convinced. She named the baby Esther instead but gave her the middle name Katrina. "You can call her Katie for short," Mom said, trying to appease me.

"It's not supposed to be *Katie*," I said in a tone as long-suffering as a five-year-old could muster. "It's *KD*. Like the letters."

My mom didn't seem to realize the brilliance of the name I had come up with. So my little sister was spared the stigma of living her life as the namesake of a Suave Kids shampoo bottle.

As soon as *Esther*—whom I have never once called Katie—became old enough to play with me, we became inseparable. We watched every Barbie movie ever made, spent entire days covering our driveway

with sidewalk chalk "masterpieces," and created dozens of elaborate plots for our Polly Pocket games that took us months to complete. We also spent hours playing "life," as we called it. While people always thought we were talking about the board game, we were always more than happy to explain that it was something much better.



“Life” was basically the most immersive game of pretend you could imagine. We would spend whole days or even weeks in character. The couch was our train; the living room was our schoolhouse; the snowy backyard was our frozen wasteland. More than once, my poor, dear sister—whom I had buried waist-deep in the snow for probably the fifth time that day—“lost her limbs to frostbite.” And more often than not, our knees were skinned from jumping from a “crashing airplane” (the basement couch) or sliding across the carpet on our “bobsled” (the couch pillows).

In our imaginary adventures, we were orphaned royalty, brilliant professors, brain surgeons, hotel owners, and even customer service agents. Our older brothers would call us crazy when they would come home to find us waltzing around in our homemade superhero outfits (tights and capes thrown on over our old swimsuits), but we didn’t care. Every day was like a sleepover at a best friend’s house. Having a sister was more fun than I could have even imagined.

Because we were so close, Esther and I never felt as if there were a five-year age difference between us.

She was very mature for her age, and I—well—wasn’t so much. My mom always gave us the same rules, the same bedtimes, and the same chores. Over time, I felt as if I had gotten my twin sister after all.

However, one day when I was about eleven and Esther was almost six, I realized that I was wrong.

It was one of those invigorating fall days with sharp, spicy air and brisk, chilly wind that makes you feel absolutely giddy. And Esther and I were taking full advantage of it.

The same rules, the
same bedtimes, and
the same chores.

We were jumping in a particularly magnificent pile of fallen leaves at the edge of our yard where an old metal fence used to be when our mom, who was working outside, quickly told us to go play somewhere else.

“Girls, your dad wasn’t able to get all the metal out of the ground when he ripped out that fence so there might still be some sharp pieces sticking out under there. I don’t want you getting hurt. There are plenty of other piles of leaves for you to play in,” she said as she waved toward the rest of the yard where orange and yellow mounds of leaves sat untouched on top of the dead grass.

Somehow, they weren’t as appealing as the pile we were already standing knee-deep in.

Mom moved to the other side of the house to finish her work while I inspected the leaves at my feet. I didn’t see any metal. So I stepped a bit farther away from where the fence had been, sent a mischievous grin to Esther, and started jumping again.

Esther giggled as the crunchy leaves flew up around her face and tangled in her curly hair. But when she landed from her next jump, she froze. Her face turned blank except for the panicked look in her eyes.

“I can’t move!” she said shakily.

I looked down at her legs and cringed as I saw a thick, dirt-smudged metal wire sticking out of the pile of leaves. Esther’s leg was skewered on top of it like an olive on a toothpick.

I was going to be sick.

I was going to be dead.

Mom was going to kill me!

My heart raced so fast that I thought I would pass out as I kept repeating, “It’s okay. It’ll be fine,” in a very unconvincing way.

Esther just looked at me. She wasn't even crying. She kept whispering "Help" and "Mommy" in an almost emotionless tone that made my blood run cold.

I ran around the yard looking for my mom. When I didn't find her, I threw the back door of the house open, almost crashing into her as she made her way outside while holding a bucket of gardening supplies.

"Mom!" I exclaimed. "I—um—we—we were jumping in that pile of leaves—and Esther—she—she's stuck! One of the wires went through her leg." I braced myself to be screamed at for turning the baby of the family into a shish kebab.

But my mom didn't take the time to scold me. She ran around the garage to the pile of leaves where Esther still stood on one leg like a miserable lawn flamingo.

"Oh, honey!" Mom said as she wrapped her arms around Esther and gently lifted her off the piece of wire fence.

I grimaced as I watched Esther's skin peel back from the wire. But then I noticed that she wasn't bleeding. "That's good!" I said with relief. "It must not have gone very deep."

I confess, I had a double motive for looking on the bright side. I *was* concerned for Esther, but I was *also* concerned for myself. Last time I called Esther a mean name, I had gotten sent to bed three hours early—I couldn't imagine where I'd be sent for getting one of her appendages skewered. I shuddered as I imagined myself stranded on some remote island in Antarctica, spilling out my sob story to a bunch of indifferent penguins.

"No, it's not good," Mom said, instantly melting away my melodramatic imaginings with the urgency in her voice. "The blood brings the dirt out so the wound won't get infected," she added as she scurried back toward the house with Esther in her arms.

When we got in the house, my mom immediately started soaking Esther's leg in warm water, attempting to force the dirt out. "That wire was old and rusty," Mom said. "If we don't get this cleaned up, she could get tetanus."

Esther finally recovered from her shock and started wailing in panic. She didn't know what tetanus was. But if Mom was scared of it, she knew it must be terrible.

My stomach twisted. All I knew about tetanus was that everyone who got it in movies had to get a limb cut off.

Esther was going to lose a leg because of me!

I followed uselessly behind my mom as she dried Esther off and put her in the car to take her to the doctor. Then I sat off to the side of the examination room during her appointment, wringing my hands and frantically praying as I waited for the doctor to get out a saw and a catalog for prosthetic legs.

Instead, he just gave Esther a shot and sewed her up. "She should be fine," he said. "But you'll need to bring her back in about two weeks to get the stitches taken out."

Mom thanked him, and the three of us went home, all deathly silent from a mixture of intense relief and leftover shock.

I treated Esther like a queen for about twelve hours, trying to make up for putting her in danger. All the while, I was constantly looking over my shoulder, half expecting to see my mom handing me a one-way ticket for a flight to the South Pole Penitentiary for Insidious Siblings.

Fortunately, I was spared the hassle of binge-watching YouTube to teach myself Penguinese or figuring out how to crawl into the carcass of a whale to stay warm—without vomiting or fainting (all the good

survival books say that's the only way to survive in icy temperatures).

Surprisingly, Mom wasn't furious with me. She didn't even send me to my room. She just looked sternly at both Esther and me and said, "I have a reason for the rules I give you. If you had listened, nobody would have gotten hurt."

The implication of her words stung so much that I almost started wishing for some form of punishment just to distract me from the guilt I felt.

Esther and I both carried something lasting away from that experience. She has a scar on her leg slightly smaller than a dime. And I have a new awareness of my position as an older sister. If I had obeyed my mom and stopped jumping in the leaves, Esther would have followed—after all, she followed me everywhere else. I realized that day that I couldn't just be Esther's best friend. I needed to be her older sister. I needed to set a good example and protect her, not goof off and lead her into trouble.

Eleven years later, Esther joined me at college, and it was like being transported back to our childhood days of sleepovers and playing "life." She's my roommate again after all this time. Even though I'm a senior and she's a freshman, in a lot of ways, she really is the twin I always wanted. We have identical laughs, we tell the exact same jokes—sometimes in sync—we are both super socially awkward, and neither of us can do algebra to save our lives. And whether we are staying up until one in the morning composing a song about a beaver or sitting on the counter having deep life discussions until one of us nods off, we always know that we have each other's backs.



People still sometimes look at Esther in her heels and makeup and me in my silly socks and think that we're the same age or that she's the older one. But what matters is that *my* perspective has changed. Esther is still my very best friend.

But, as similar as we are, she isn't truly my twin sister—she's my little sister. She still has five years of life

There are a lot more dangerous things in life than wire fences.

experiences to go through

that I have already lived out. And—something that took me a long time to realize—she looks up to me. Oh, she definitely knows that I'm not perfect—she's seen more proof of that than anyone. But because she is my little sister, there's a part of her that naturally wants to follow my example.

That's a huge responsibility that I didn't know I was signing up for when I prayed for a sister about seventeen years ago. But I am determined to live up to it. After all, there are a lot more dangerous things in life than wire fences.

I may not have fully figured life out yet, but I can help her get through those first crushes, college stresses, and teenage insecurities. Just like when we played "life" when we were younger, we can conquer any danger together—frostbite not excluded. But I'm going to take the lead and make sure she packs a pair of gloves.

Changes for Charlotte

by Rebekah Gordon

When a new experience threatens Charlotte's comfort zone, she must learn to accept simple acts of kindness.

At a quarter past three in the afternoon on a crisp September day, ten-year-old Charlotte's first day of school came to an end. The sun was shining, birds were singing, and Charlotte was happily skipping to her mom's minivan where it sat in the after-school pickup line. She couldn't wait to tell her mom all about her day.

Today had been Charlotte's first time at a local school instead of being homeschooled, and she had hardly slept a wink the previous night because of how nervous she was. As the day started, Charlotte had not known what to expect. She had never been comfortable with meeting people or making friends, so going to a school where she didn't know anyone would be a difficult change. As she made her way to the minivan, she reflected on how her day had gone.

Charlotte's morning had not started out well. Immediately after arriving at school, she had felt overwhelmed by the number of kids in one room. To make matters worse, they all seemed to know each other and chatted wildly about their summer adventures with one another. Charlotte, not knowing anyone in the class, stood uneasily toward the edge of the room, watching the seconds tick by on the clock as she waited for class to begin.

She wished she could be back home where she felt comfortable.

Charlotte began to regret coming to school. She wished she could be back home where she felt comfortable. Instead, she was in a room surrounded by people she didn't know and didn't know how to approach. Her parents had encouraged her to use school to make new friends and meet new people, but she just didn't know how to go about it. The kids in her class seemed friendly, but Charlotte had never been the type of person that could walk up to a group of people and instantly make friends. The longer Charlotte stood there, the more nervously she rubbed her hands together.

The fifth-grade teacher noticed Charlotte standing alone and joined her on the classroom sidelines.

"Hi, you're Charlotte, right?"

"Oh—yeah," Charlotte replied timidly.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Williams, and I'm so glad you're in my class! How was your summer vacation?"

"Fun," Charlotte began. "We went to the beach a lot, and we got a dog!" Her voice grew more excited as she began to describe her new family pet.

"Wow, you got a dog!" Mrs. Williams clapped her hands together. "I love dogs. I have one named Pluto, and

he's the cutest little pug." She took out her phone and showed Charlotte several pictures of her precious puppy.

"He's so cute!" Charlotte squealed, admiring her teacher's adorable, squish-faced dog.

After a couple more minutes of talking about dogs with Charlotte, Mrs. Williams excused herself to the front of the classroom. "All right, students, the school day is now beginning. Start making your way to your assigned seat, and welcome to fifth grade!"

Charlotte found a desk decorated with a pencil-shaped nametag that displayed her name. She sat down and noticed the girl to her right. The girl seemed friendly as she casually chatted with the girl sitting in front of her. Charlotte knew she should introduce herself and act friendly, but she felt too timid and awkward. Instead, she sat quietly and observed all the other students talking with each other. She told herself that she would introduce herself to the girl the next chance she got.

When the morning bell rang, Mrs. Williams introduced herself, talked for a few minutes about some things that she would be teaching during the year, and then allowed each student to introduce himself.

A common theme for the students, Charlotte realized, was to give a funny, unique, or crazy fact about themselves. So, as it started getting closer to her turn, she frantically tried to think of something interesting to say.

But her mind went blank.

She could not remember or even think of anything slightly fascinating to tell the class. When the time came to introduce herself, she stood up and blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

"Hi, my name is Charlotte, and I can, uhh, say the alphabet backward."

She dropped back into her seat and felt her face turn bright red. Just when she thought she had made a complete fool of herself on her very first day of school, a boy in the back of the classroom called out, “No way! Can you really?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled back. Slowly standing up, she began with *z* and, without skipping a beat, rattled off every letter until she got to *a*, and then sat down.

The classroom remained silent for a few seconds, and she thought for sure she had made a fool of herself this time. But all of a sudden, a different boy a few rows behind her said, “That was so cool!”

Other kids chimed in too, saying how awesome her hidden talent was. Charlotte looked over to see that the girl next to her was smiling at her. She started to realize then that maybe she didn’t have so much to worry about after all.

The rest of the students went on to introduce themselves, but in Charlotte’s opinion, no one beat her “backward alphabet” recitation.

A few hours later, it was lunchtime, and Charlotte began to feel anxious again, realizing that she had no idea who she would eat lunch with, or even where. When she went to get her lunchbox from her cubby, a girl approached her. It was the girl she sat next to in class.

“Hey, you’re Charlotte, right?”

“Yeah,” Charlotte replied, startled by her forwardness.

“Hi, my name’s Lydia!”

She chirped back, “Do you have anyone to eat lunch with?”

“This is my first day here. I don’t really know anyone.”



“No, not really,” Charlotte confessed, looking down at the ground, “This is my first day here. I don’t really know anyone.”

“Well, now you do! Come on. You can eat with me and my friends.” Lydia bounced away energetically and motioned for Charlotte to follow.

Lydia led her to the lunchroom. They arrived at a table filled with five or six other kids from their class. Lydia cleared her throat and announced, “Hey, guys, this is Charlotte. She’s gonna eat lunch with us today.”

Lydia’s friends greeted Charlotte with warm smiles and cheerful hellos. Charlotte then took the seat next to Lydia and began to eat lunch with her newfound friends.

Charlotte could not have been happier with her new friends. They were fun and made her feel genuinely included. When the bell rang, at the end of lunch, she hoped they would invite her to eat with them again tomorrow.

The rest of the day continued uneventfully. They worked through the rest of their classes, and as the

school day came to a close, Mrs. Williams announced that there would be no homework for that night.

Charlotte was surprised. She had always been under the impression that teachers loved to assign hours of homework each night. But assuming Mrs. Williams was simply too nice of a teacher to do that, she pushed the thought out of her head and began to pack her bag.

A couple minutes later, the dismissal bell rang. Charlotte stood and followed her classmates toward the door. Once outside the building, she paused and looked for Lydia. "Thanks for letting me eat with you." Then she took a big breath before asking, "Mind if I join you again tomorrow?"

"Definitely," Lydia said, then headed to her car.

Charlotte smiled and waved to her new friend. As she walked to her own car, she realized that, overall, the day had gone much better than she could have ever imagined. She was looking forward to going back the next day. Thinking back to the beginning of the day, she felt so silly for thinking that she would not make friends. What Charlotte thought would be a scary experience ended up being a really great day. She left school that day happy she had stepped out of her comfort zone.

When Charlotte saw her mom's minivan pull up in the pick-up lane, her heart beat faster with excitement. She scurried over to the van, pulled open the side door, and flashed her mom a smile that washed away any doubts her mom might have had about Charlotte's first day.

"Hi, sweetie! How did your first day of school go?"

Charlotte plopped her backpack onto the seat next to her and reached for the seatbelt. She grinned at her mom. "Great! I have so much to tell you."

The Veil

by Marcy Adams

Once we were separated from God, divided by a waiting veil.

“Weave Me a veil,” God said to Moses. “Weave Me a veil, beautiful and impenetrable. Weave it of finely twined purple, blue, and scarlet linen, lined with golden cherubim. Drape it between Me and you; between My presence and the worship of man. Anyone who comes before Me, except the high priest seeking atonement of sin, by blood, will die.”

Therefore, they wove the veil and made it beautiful and impenetrable, because nothing could come near God without being beautiful. They hung it between the Ark of the Covenant and the worship in the

tabernacle, only to be opened once a year by the high priest seeking atonement. The veil hung beautiful and impenetrable, a division between God and man.

And the people waited outside the veil.

And the veil waited to fulfill its purpose.

* * *

“Your son will make Me a temple,” God said to the king, “built along the lines of the old tabernacle. Hang a veil there to divide My presence from your worship. Only the high priest can come before Me bearing blood to make atonement.”

Therefore, the king’s son made a temple for the Lord and made it along the lines of the old tabernacle. They made strong wooden doors to place before the veil, with delicate gold plates, carved palm trees, flowers, and cherubim to adorn them. But nothing was as beautiful as the impenetrable veil that hung behind the doors. For nothing could come near God without being beautiful. And the only way through the doors and through the veil was through the high priest, once a year, bringing the blood of atonement.

And the people waited outside the veil.

And the veil waited to fulfill its purpose.

* * *

“Make Me a temple,” God told the people. “A temple to replace the one destroyed. Weave Me a veil beautiful and impenetrable. Hang it to divide My presence from your worship, for only the high priest on the day of atonement may enter into My presence.”

Therefore, they rebuilt a temple to the Lord, on the ruins of the old, seeking to honor God. Perhaps they could not make it as beautiful as the old temple,

but they made it as beautiful as they could. For nothing could come near God without being beautiful. And the veil hung, beautiful and impenetrable, between God and man, able to be pushed aside once a year on the Day of Atonement.

And the people waited outside the veil.

And the veil waited to fulfill its purpose.

* * *

“Go to the earth,” God said to His Son, “and become a man. Shed Your blood for My people. You will become an atonement for all, and through Your blood, make a way for all to enter into My presence unafraid. Though it breaks My heart, let Your body be beaten, broken, and torn that their worship may be in My presence.”

Therefore, He came to earth, seeking to honor His Father. He breathed our air and walked our sod. He shed His precious blood—torn, broken, and beaten—He died in a way that had nothing beautiful about it. His death penetrated the veil, and His blood made a way once and for all, for man to come boldly and unafraid past the veil into the presence of God. The people waited outside no longer; for now it was safe for the broken, the wounded, the foolish, the weak, the base, and the despised—everything that was not beautiful—to come into God’s presence.

And the veil was torn from top to bottom, its purpose fulfilled.

And the people came to worship in the presence of the Lord.

Not Just a Game

by Zach Jewell

The future swept away the dreams of my past.

The horn sounded, and the officials blew their whistles. I looked up at the scoreboard that showed us down fifteen points heading into the final quarter.

We—the FAITH Falcons—weren't playing well, and our opponent moved the ball and defended better than we did. Coach Ervin told us what we needed to do to have a better quarter, but he didn't seem as nervous or upset as he usually did.

"We just gotta play hard on defense and get some shots to fall," said Coach, who knew, as well as I, that we weren't going to win this game.

After breaking from the huddle, I decided to go out and enjoy the last eight minutes of the game. I'd made a few good defensive plays and hit a couple three pointers throughout the quarter and determined to play as hard as I could. As the minutes ticked by, I

feared looking up at the clock—that monster on the wall that drained the life out of every game. I had dreaded this moment for a week now.

The monster ticked on—four minutes—three minutes. I played harder. The monster kept ticking—two minutes—one minute. I kept playing, not wanting to think of the end.

* * *

Basketball had become one of my most intense passions since the time I watched my older brother Peter play in high school. He was the best player on the FAITH Falcons, our homeschool basketball team. They weren't very good. Other than my brother, only a couple of guys could consistently score, and only one other guy could dribble up the court without turning it over.



I knew that I played better than half the guys on the team, even though I wasn't even ten yet. I played for hours every day on my five-foot mini hoop in our basement. Sometimes, I pretended to play for FAITH. Other times, I pretended to play for Michigan State or the Detroit Pistons. Every time I pretended, I was the best player on the court—dribbling through entire defenses, making clutch free throws, and nailing game-winning buzzer-beaters. Soon, my pretending turned into dreaming.

What if, someday, I could play for the NBA?

Whenever we got home from one of my brother's games, I would run downstairs and play on my hoop for as long as I could before Mom called me up for bed. The clock was a monster back then too.

During basketball season, the sport became a vicious cycle. The more I watched my brother play, the more I played on my hoop. Waiting. Longing. Dreaming.

"When will I be able to play for a team?" I'd constantly asked my parents.

"When you're in seventh grade. It'll be here before you know it," they'd always reply.

The years went by, and seventh grade finally came, making me eligible to play junior high basketball for my homeschool group. I burned with anticipation for the first practice.

Since my brother first started playing, FAITH had grown tremendously. Eighteen guys were on the junior high team that year, and many of them were talented. Many of the guys on the team were my close friends, but once the first whistle blew in practice, they became my competition.

Only five guys could be in the starting rotation—that left thirteen guys on the bench. But I never pretended to sit on the bench in my basement.

The first game came, and I found myself seated next to my coaches for the tip-off. While I never wanted to be there, we had a good team, and I was one of the first bench players to check into every game. We had a great year and finished with many more wins than losses.

The next season came, and most of the starters from the last year moved up to the junior varsity team, while I stayed back on junior high. I missed playing with some of my best friends who moved up, but I wasn't too sad. I became the starting point guard, and from then on, I played almost every minute of every game.

My coaches, Coach Roehl and my dad, trusted me to make plays and involve my teammates. I probably wasn't the best player on the team yet—Coach Roehl's son Solomon was a great scorer—but I gained confidence that season. I began dreaming again.

What if I actually made the NBA?

We finished with another winning season, and I received awards for the most assists and steals on the team. Solomon beat me out for the most points, but the season wasn't quite over.

Coach Roehl asked me if I wanted to go to the National Homeschool Basketball Tournament in Springfield, Missouri. He was combining the best players from the JV and junior high team who were eligible to play in the junior high tournament.

I didn't hesitate to tell him I wanted to come, and my parents agreed to let me go and to help pay the cost. Coming from a good confidence-building season, I couldn't wait to go to a big tournament and show the world my skill.

When the national tournament came, I grew closer to my friends on the team. We stayed together all week—playing, watching, and talking basketball.

We won a few games, and I was happy we did, but I struggled to score the entire time.

Finally, our last game came—the championship game for our division. I sat

on the bench, cheering on my teammates. One quarter ended—I remained in my seat. Two quarters ended—I stayed on the bench, preparing to check in at any time. The fourth quarter came—my seat was as warm as the frustration boiling inside me.

Why didn't Coach put me in the game? He trusted me all season to make plays in close games like this.

I began questioning myself. *Why hadn't I played well this whole tournament? Maybe Coach is right for not putting me in.*

The buzzer sounded. We lost in a close finish. After the game, we met up as a team and Coach told us how proud he was of us and how much fun he had in this tournament. We broke from our huddle, and Coach Roehl approached me, putting his arm around me.

"Sorry that I didn't get you in the game," he said.

I forced a smile to show him it was all right—even though it wasn't.

"I kept looking for an opportunity, but the game was just so close, and the guys in the game were playing well," he said.

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "I understand."

But I was upset. More upset with myself than with my coach. I hadn't performed to the level I had during

I forced a smile to show him it was all right—even though it wasn't.

the season. He had every right to keep me on the bench that game.

As we traveled home, different thoughts started to swirl through my mind. *What if the NBA is just a crazy dream after all?*

Basketball seasons came and went. I moved up to the JV team for two years and then to Varsity. My hopes for an NBA career had blown away in the winds of reality. But I held onto a little hope that maybe some college would recognize me, and then, at least, I could continue my basketball career past high school.

One obstacle that stood in my way was my height. After I hit my growth spurt, I was still only five-foot-eight—and a stick. Most college teams don't even bother with guys who are under six feet. But I didn't give up.

Our team in my final season lacked the overall talent I was used to playing with. The bulk of the scoring fell on me and our best shooter, Caleb. We had some quality wins, but we struggled most of the season and ended with a losing record. I finished the year, averaging 18 points per game and scoring over 25 points in multiple games. Still, no college coaches reached out to me.

We played in our state and regional tournaments and then headed to Springfield, Missouri, for the national tournament. These games would be the last five of my high school basketball career. That fact lingered in the back of my mind.

Heading into our last game, we had three losses and only one win under our belts. Despite our losses, it had been a fun tournament. We grew even closer as a team and enjoyed more than just basketball.

We got to the gym for our last game and prepared by stretching and putting our shoes on.



“Have fun out there,” Coach Ervin told us as we got ready to walk into the gym to begin warm-ups.

Man, am I going
to miss this!

I wanted to win. I wanted one more chance to display my talent, so maybe—just maybe—some college scout would talk with me.

The referee threw the ball up in the air, and the game began. At the start of the game, we played well, but the further in we got, the clearer it became that our opponent was the better team.

As we came back on the floor from timeout, I took a deep breath and looked around. I looked at my teammates by my side—the guys whom I’d become so close with over the season. I looked at my coaches on the sideline—those who’d done so much for me. I looked at the fans in the bleachers—the people who’d faithfully cheered for me.

Man, am I going to miss this!

* * *

The monster growled for the fourth and final time. The officials blew their whistles. The clock read 0:00. It was over—and not just the game, but my passion for the last six years of my life. Basketball was over.

I had already been accepted into Pensacola Christian College to study writing and journalism. Finally, I put basketball behind me as I looked forward to entering college.

I still had a love for the game and would play pickup at almost any opportunity, but I left my passion for it and prepped for the new life ahead of me.

Though basketball had been a huge part of my life for most of my childhood, it wasn't my life. Sure, I would miss everything about the game. I would miss buzzing with gameday hype, running out of the locker room to our warm-up music, and hearing the fans cheer as we came down the stretch in a nail-biter. Most of all, I would miss the people and the experiences—my teammates and coaches, road trips and tournaments.

The NBA and college basketball dreams of my younger self turned out to be just that—dreams, whisked away by the sunlight of a new day. I often wonder what could've been if I'd worked harder and dedicated more time to my passion. But then, I remember that my childhood dream of basketball glory was so special because it *was* a dream. It took me to a place outside the ordinary.

It took me to a place
outside the ordinary.

Even though I didn't find success in basketball beyond high school, it motivated me to strive for greatness. It was more than just a game. Basketball was a dream that gave me a chance to ask *What if?*

Truly Something Special

by Taylor Cartwright

In the simple but noteworthy lives of our grandparents, we can learn the valuable lesson of belonging.

My grandmother's soft, wrinkled hand delicately set a card on the middle of the picnic table. The gleam of her light pink nail polish added elegance to the simple action.

It was my turn. I fanned through my cards, deciding which to play next. Pinching one between my fingers, I placed it on top of her card.

She looked at me with pride dancing in her eyes. "You won, sweetheart! Do you want to play again?"

The thrill of winning Old Maid surged through me. I thought of nothing other than playing cards with my grandmother.

Of course I wanted to play again!

I nodded at her before glancing at the cartoon figures on the cards and then looked down to study the weathered picnic table where

we were sitting. Whether it had been used often or had simply been forgotten about, I could not tell. The wood had

Of course I wanted to play again!

splintered over the many seasons and temperature changes it had lived through. Its original honey color had faded into a smoky gray, and the bolts had turned from reflective silver to dark rust.

“Be careful not to get a splinter,” my grandmother said as I splayed my hands on the uneven tabletop.

Her words caused my attention to turn to her. Her cropped silver hair gently framed her face. Her thick blue sweater and fleece-lined jacket protected her from the chilled September breeze, and her gold necklace glistened in the early daylight.

I smiled, thinking about her necklace. It was Alaskan gold, a token of her trip with my grandfather two years ago. They had gone to see the polar bears and to experience endless day. I didn’t think about it then, but that trip was the farthest that either one had ever been from home—from the family farm where my grandfather had worked for most of his life, from the town that they had both grown up in.

My grandfather walked up to the table. “Jordan’s match is starting soon. We should head over there,” he said, speaking of my brother’s muzzleloading competition.

I scooped up the card box and held it open so that my grandmother could slide the cards inside. Once they’d all settled into the box, she closed the lid and

popped it into her Vera Bradley purse. I picked up my small backpack and started the trek across the 4-H grounds to the black powder range. My grandparents followed close behind me, chatting with each other. When we had finally arrived, I nestled in between them on a bench to watch my brother compete.

Turning to me, my grandfather handed me his binoculars. "Want to see how he's doing?"

I grinned and peered through the strange lens contraption. My brother's once far away target now seemed so close that I could see the bullet holes in it. I watched for a few minutes before handing the binoculars back to my grandfather.

As I grew older, I had confidence that my grandparents would be seated on that bench at nearly

I had a home, and
it was with them.

every competition. And when I took my brother's place and competed, I knew that, if I looked behind me, I'd see my grandfather with

his binoculars, smiling at me. My grandmother would be holding her tiny camera, ready to take photographs of me to add to her fridge back home.

Back then, how little I knew of the world and the people around me! But, day by day, my grandparents taught me life lessons that words might have failed to teach. Each time they came to one of my competitions, they showed me what belonging, importance, and love meant. I understood that I had a place; I had a home, and it was with them.

That lesson of belonging wasn't flashy, but it held such value to me, mirroring the simple yet noteworthy lives that my grandparents had lived. They didn't come from a significant background. They had married in

their late teens, and my grandfather had taken on full-time work at the family farm. I never knew much about the following years of their lives other than that they had raised two children during that time—one of those children being my mother. Eventually, their grandparents and parents who had started the farm

All at once, I realized
what it meant to know
where I came from.

passed—as did the farm itself. By the time I was born, only a few fields and pieces of farm equipment were left.

But the memories and knowledge had yet to fade away, and those things, too, became educational tools for me.

“Now remember, Tay, John Deeres are the best tractors,” my grandfather taught me when I was young.

I didn’t know a thing about tractors, but I trusted my grandfather’s words wholeheartedly.

“Nothing Runs Like a Deere,” I quoted the slogan that he had once told me. On my tiny wrist, I proudly sported a John Deere hair scrunchie, a hand-me-down from my older cousin.

He laughed and agreed with my silly response.

Something in that moment sealed my connection of John Deere tractors to the soil that I had grown up on. Seeing them made me think of lush raspberry bushes weighed down with juicy red berries, broad pastures speckled with new-born calves nestled near their mothers’ legs, and rusty, old farm trucks carrying the sweet, delicate smell of hay. All at once, I realized what it meant to know where I came from.

Such lessons from my grandparents compounded as the years went by. As my understanding grew, sitting with and listening to my grandparents became invaluable to me. Through their words, I could capture a glimpse of what their lives had been like and of the lessons that time and experience had taught them.

For example, when my grandmother made gravy, she didn't measure everything exactly. She'd done the process too many times to need instructions. She'd learned the ways of cooking over more years than I had been alive.

One Thanksgiving, a year or two before I left for college, she let me help her make gravy. She poured the turkey broth into a large pan on the stove and sifted in a few cups of brilliant white flour. The tinted, translucent broth turned into an opaque cream as the powder hit the surface and swirled in.

"Tay, you can stir now," she said as she reached for the spices in the wooden cabinet beside the stove.

"All right, Granny," I said as I grabbed a spoon and watched her actions.

To me, it seemed as though she poured indiscriminate amounts of salt and pepper into the creamy mix, but at the same time, I trusted that she knew what she was doing. She examined the smooth mixture that I was continuously stirring.

"It needs more flour," she muttered.

She sifted in more flour and scooped up a sample from the pot before adding another splash of salt and dash of pepper to the gravy.

Several minutes into stirring, my arm felt heavy. The thickening gravy had become a delicious-smelling mire that I had to push through. As my arm's strength

failed, I looked at my grandmother who picked up a new spoon to sample the gravy, and my respect for her grew. She had made gravy by herself countless times. How many family dinners had she brought gravy to—in my lifetime alone? How many miry-gravy pots had she stirred to culinary perfection for all of us? Amazed, I smiled at her as I realized that her actions were what true family devotion looked like.

What a woman.

Over time, competition days, farm knowledge, and family dinners passed by, finding themselves seated in my memory banks when I went off to college.

As I nestled into her hug, my confidence grew.

Fields full of corn rows no longer rested outside my bedroom window, and my grandparents never showed up at various times of the day to talk or to drop off extra tenderloin and slices of homemade pie.

And yet, they still had lessons to teach me about having faith in someone and about staying connected to loved ones.

When I completed my first semester at college and went home at Christmas, my grandmother met me with tears in her eyes.

“You did it, sweetheart!” she exclaimed as she hugged me.

I realized then that she and my grandfather had never stopped believing in me, even though others never thought I would make it. As I nestled into her hug, my confidence grew, and I knew that I could complete another semester.

A few months later, my grandparents adopted technology to keep in touch with me and all of my older cousins who were starting to have children and

move away. My grandmother had already purchased an iPhone years before, but one day during a semester break, I went to their house to find that my grandfather had also gotten one.

He'd made rules for us with his iPhone. It was for two things: to make phone calls and to save pictures, specifically of his grandchildren. That way, while he was on lunch break at his job at the Kraft factory, he could show his co-workers the newest pictures of all of us, but he wouldn't have to worry about reading text messages.

"If you text me, I'll just delete it," he told me, scratching his white beard and sliding his shiny black iPhone into his pocket.

"Well, Gramps, what if I text you a picture?" I asked.

"Well..."

"Just send me the pictures," my grandmother said. "I'll get them to him."

I laughed. "Okay, but I make no promises to not send you a picture on occasion."

He gave me a mildly-disgruntled look, and I smiled.

Feelings of belonging, importance, and love filled my heart as I looked at my amazing grandparents. When they had first met me, I knew nothing about life, and yet, they held me in their arms and determined to love me and teach me all that they could despite any failures, challenges, or inabilities that I faced.

Maybe my grandfather would delete my texts, but I still knew that he loved to hear from me. Maybe my cooking knowledge lacked immensely in comparison to my grandmother's, but I knew that she would always be excited to show me a new recipe.

Grandparents are truly
something special.

Tears filled my eyes as I hugged them. Memories of all that they had taught me flashed in my mind. In that moment, I learned one of the most valuable lessons: grandparents are truly something special, something like nothing else in the world. And these two were the best a granddaughter could ever ask for.

Willow, Dear Willow

by Molly Jones

“Willow, dear Willow,
Why do you weep?
Why do your tears fall
Till dawning of sleep?”

The long tresses of Willow
Trembled and parted.
“Listen, and I’ll tell you
Why I’m brokenhearted.

“For years now I’ve sat,
And watched through my leaves.
I’ve pondered my meaning
Eve after eve.

“I’ve seen many a tree here
Blossom and bloom
And produce so much fruit
Till they drop to make room.

“Lovers have picnics;
And children make garlands,
And fill up their arms
With fruits to feed dozens.





“When they see those trees
They light up with glee,
But no one has use
For a tree that’s like me.”

Little did Willow know
Her bark was much needed.
Destined for a much greater plan,
Willow was designedly seeded.

Much healing and use
Was there to be found
Within branches and limbs
That stretched to the ground.

When you need something
To heal wounds or soothe pain
Look inside dear Willow
And a balm you will gain.

I, like the Willow,
Have pondered my purpose
And so many times have I
Felt so worthless.

No one is useless.
We’re all part of a plan.
We all have our talents
To use as much as we can.

“So Willow, dear Willow,
Please do not weep.
You are so valuable,
A treasure to keep.”



Commencement
Contest Winner

EXTEMPORANEOUS
ESSAY

Fire

by Zach Jewell

Strange how something so deadly and destructive can be so comforting when it's controlled.

The world was quiet—at least at that moment. Our dark basement glowed slightly orange from dancing flames held captive by a small woodstove. No one spoke. Dad had opened the door of the woodstove to allow for its precious heat to escape with full force into our cold house. Outside, the wind whipped drifts of snow back and forth. If I concentrated, I could hear the hum of generators in our neighborhood, keeping houses warm enough from the winter storm that had killed our electricity.

Left with no TV, no phone, no internet, and not enough light to read, I was left to stare into the flames. Strangely, they comforted me. Their dance lulled me to the edge of sleep as their invisible heat stroked my face. Strange how something so deadly and destructive can be so comforting when it's controlled.

When power was restored and we returned to our normal Western way of living, the flames in our woodstove got pushed to the back of my mind. That is, until we took a summer camping trip to Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Intense, dangerous,
destructive beauty.

Campfires are a traditional part of any camping trip, and growing up camping every summer, campfires were nothing new. But as I stared into the flames once again, I was reminded of fire's beauty—its intense, dangerous, destructive beauty. As I watched the flames with my family, my brother threw a candy wrapper into the fire pit. It twisted and crumpled until the flame consumed it.

Enthralled, I threw another wrapper into the fire—its destruction displayed the flames' glory. I looked around at other campsites around us. Almost everyone had their chairs in a circle around a glowing pit. The world was quiet. Fires crackled—danger contained and beauty showcased.

I've witnessed ugly fires too. One evening, all of my family was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

We were making eggrolls. A few of us placed toppings on the roll, someone else rolled it up, and my dad stuck them in the pan of oil. Dinner preparations were going well and my stomach began rumbling. The eggrolls were frying in the oil until—a flame shot up from the pan. It reached a few feet into the air. My dad grabbed the pan and tried to put it into the oven to keep the flame from latching onto something else. It didn't work. The flame was too big. It seemed to have a green tint to it, but maybe that was my imagination. The flame grew taller, almost reaching the ceiling. My mom yelled to me and my little brother to run outside.



I saw the panic on her face and heard it in her voice. I dashed outside. It was going to catch on fire. Our house was going to burn.

Thankfully, I was wrong and my dad was able to get the flaming pan outside before it caught anything else on fire. That fire was not beautiful. It did not comfort or lull me to sleep. It caused an opposite reaction within me—panic, fear, dread. All because the flame was not contained.

The bad experiences with fire have not affected my love for a warm fireplace in the winter or a campfire in the summer. I wish I could sit around a fire with friends and family every night. But the ugly fires have caused me to think about something else—something similar to fire—my passion.

My passion becomes ugly when its flames stretch beyond my control. It turns deadly when I fail to contain it and let it rule my life. The world tells me about this fire burning inside me. It tells me it's a big, beautiful fire that needs to be set free. The world is right that my fire is big and that it can be beautiful, but it's desperately wrong when it tells me to set my fire free.

My passion is beautiful, but only when it is contained. Just like the fireplace. Just like the campfire. When the fire escapes its containment or when it seeks for something more than it was created for, it destroys, it ruins, and it kills. And its beauty becomes ugliness.

Fire must be contained to keep its comfort, its joy, and most of all, its purpose. Others should be able to look at it and appreciate its purpose. Fire should always be beautiful.

Value

by Lauri Lou Jones

The belief that you do not matter, that you are insignificant, can play out in many ways. Perhaps as a result, you could live recklessly. Or on the other end of the spectrum, you could sink into depression, and the emotional pain transfers into physical suffering. Because belief about personal value has such far-reaching and powerful influence, it is vital to believe this: that in an awfully big and busy world, God cherishes you.

When God created humans,
He didn't ever say,
 "This one matters half as much,
 And this one matters whole."
So what an awfully big mistake
It is to rate the soul!

But if your soul has value
No matter what you do,
If God made you so special,
Please treat you special too.



How to Keep a Plant Dry

by Ariel Allen

*Nothing is going to stop me from delivering this
plant today.*

The rain outside the sliding glass doors pounded the cement with such force that a river gushed down the street. Luna pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders, careful not to crush the tiny succulent plant she held gently inside.

This delivery has to be made today, she thought. Taking a deep breath, she charged out into the pouring rain. The raindrops tapped on her raincoat, as if a thousand tiny visitors wished to pay a visit.

To make money outside of her day job, she grew plants and sold them to office workers. It was cheaper to hand-deliver in the city than it was to ship them. Today, she had to deliver a flapjack succulent—which she had affectionately named Jack—to his new owner, a man

named Luke Castile, who surprisingly did not have a profile picture. Of course, this delivery was on the other side of the city, and the forecast showed heavy rain for the foreseeable future.

This delivery has
to be made today.

Luna ran around the corner of Winthrop Avenue and slowed down, careful not to slip on the stairs. While scurrying toward the underground station, she checked on Jack in her pocket, then pulled her dark curly hair up into a massive bun—wet curls flicking water onto the floor with every twist. Luna's hair was probably her favorite physical feature. Her mother had moved to America from the Pacific to go to college. When she had Luna, she passed along her gorgeous curly hair. During the summer months, Luna's hair was only slightly darker than her skin. Her father used to tell her that she was the prettiest girl in the whole world. While Luna doubted that, she tried to keep her father's words in her head whenever she felt less than the pretty girls who always had boys lining up to date them.

She made it to the train with just enough time to squeeze in next to a red-haired guy who was so tall that the top of Luna's head barely made it past his elbows. The guy's arms and legs stuck out the ends of a suit that was obviously too small for him. Because they made eye contact, she smiled at him before grabbing onto the metal pole between them.

"Wet out there," he mumbled.

"Yeah, it is," she agreed, wiping water from her forehead. When the train lurched forward, she stumbled to the side, bumping into him. "Sorry."

“It’s all right.” He pulled out his phone and scrolled through it so fast there was no way he was looking at anything. He looked about her age, maybe older. Maybe his bright red hair made him look younger than he really was.

The train made a few stops before pulling into Juniper Station. As she stepped off the train, the guy stepped off with her. She walked faster than he did, despite his long legs, and was soon making her way up the series of steps and escalators, pausing at the bottom of the set leading up to the sidewalk. The rain trickled down the steps and into the station below, a large puddle spreading at the bottom. She pulled out her phone.

Twenty more minutes to walk. As others trudged up the steps past her, she peeked inside her jacket and checked the leaves of the tiny plant. Jack was very

Suddenly, a
hand appeared
in front of her.

water-sensitive, and too much water would kill him. In this rain, the water was bound to soak through her jacket. She knew that she had to walk fast. She charged up the stairs, the

freezing rain pelting her face.

As she reached the top step, her foot slid out from underneath her. Her hands hit the wet pavement as her knee hit the corner of the step. The tiny plant jostled in her coat, and she immediately checked to see if it was okay. Water soaked through her jeans, and her hair fell out of the bun she had tucked it into. *Well, this is a great start.*

Suddenly, a hand appeared in front of her.

“You okay?”

She looked up to see the tall man from the train. She took his hand. "Yeah, just slipped on the step."

"Don't you have an umbrella?"

"I couldn't find it this morning." She wiped her hands on her jacket, failing to dry them.

"Well, which direction are you walking? I can share mine with you. I'm running a bit early anyway."

"I'm headed to 181 Madison Street."

"Me too! Well, that's convenient! Here," he said holding his umbrella out for her to step under. "I can walk you there!"

She stepped under it, though it didn't help much as the rain was now coming at them sideways. At least their faces would stay dry. She huddled close to him, but not too close—he was a stranger after all.

They walked in silence for a few minutes before reaching a crosswalk. He pressed the button, and they waited for the sign to turn green. A large bus drove by, sending a wave from a puddle crashing toward them. Luna covered her chest with her arms and turned away, the water splashing across her back. She heard him laughing and turned back around.

The water had soaked his tie to his chest, but because of his height and the level of the umbrella, his face and perfectly combed red hair had managed to stay dry.

"You can use the umbrella."

"So much for staying dry!" she shouted over the sound of the passing cars.

"Guess this isn't doing much good, is it?" he said.

"At least I think my clothes under my coat are staying dry!"

"Here then." He held out the umbrella. "I've got an extra change of clothes at work. You can use the umbrella."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah!"

She took the umbrella from him as he stepped out from underneath it. His face wrinkled as he squinted through the rain.

"I'm Luna, by the way," she said, extending a hand out to him. His cold, wet hand met hers as he said his name. A loud car passing by muffled the sound.

"What?" she asked. Someone laid on their horn. "I'm sorry, I still can't hear you!" He said his name again, but she still couldn't hear him. *I can't ask again.* "It's nice to meet you!" she said instead.

"Nice to meet you too, Luna. That's quite a lovely name." The light turned green. "So, are you originally from around here?" he asked.

"No, I moved here for college three years ago. I used to live in Nashville."

"Oh, cool."

"What about you?"

"I moved here from Fox Lake three weeks ago."

"Why'd you move to Chicago?"

"I graduated last year and wanted to try it out in the big city," he said. His foot hit the curb on the other side of the crosswalk, and he stumbled forward a few steps.

"Careful!" she said, reaching out as if she could actually catch him.

"I didn't fall." He chuckled. "Unlike you!"

"Hey!" She kicked water at him. His wet red hair clung to his forehead like a paper straw wrapper stuck to the side of a cup. He seemed surprised but didn't hesitate to kick water back at her.

The water barely made it to her knees. "Hey!" She laughed.



“What? You started it!” He let out a loud, soulful laugh. Using the umbrella as a shield, she kicked water back at him. They came to a truce and began walking again.

They passed empty restaurants that usually boasted the best outdoor seating areas and weaved around groups of people crowded underneath store awnings waiting for the rain to settle down. The lights of the passing cars reflected off a layer of water that coated everything in sight.

“You sure do fall
an awful lot.”

The tall man hunched forward as he walked so he could see Luna peeking out from under his umbrella. Every

time their eyes met, Luna felt herself blush. She was so caught up in everything he was saying and doing that she didn’t notice the dip in the road. She fell forward, once again crashing to the ground.

He bent down to see if she was all right. “You okay?”

She only laughed in response.

“You sure do fall an awful lot,” he said while helping her to her feet.

She tried to wipe the water from her hands onto her wet jacket. Once again, it didn’t work. She took a deep breath and looked up at him smiling. They stood for a moment, locking eyes.

“You have really pretty hair,” he said. He pulled back his hand quickly, as if startled by his own words. Luna couldn’t tell if she had said thanks out loud or not.

She opened her jacket just enough to see the plant inside. Jack sat upright in her pocket, seemingly unaffected by the fall.

"We just have to go around that corner, and we'll be there," he said.

"Has it really been twenty minutes since the train station?"

"It's actually been thirty-five." He scratched the back of his neck.

"Wait, I never asked why you were going to Madison Street," she said.

"I work there," he said. "Do you?"

"No, just dropping something off."

"Ah, okay, cool." He nodded and began to walk again.

They turned the corner, and even though it was still pouring, she wished that they had longer to walk. *He was easy to be with. Fun, cute, sweet. He probably has a girlfriend. I mean, who wouldn't date this guy? I could try to find him online, but I still don't know his name, and it's way too awkward to ask now.*

"Here we are," he muttered. He pulled open the door and let her walk in first.

"I—uh—I have to stop here at the information desk," she said.

"Oh, okay. I should probably get to work," he shivered. He looked as if he might say something else, but he let out a sigh instead. "It was nice to meet you, Luna."

"It was nice to meet you too," she said. Neither of them moved for a few seconds. He nodded and smiled, making eye contact one last time. Then he turned and walked away toward the elevator. She turned and walked to the front desk. "I'm here to make a delivery to Luke Castile in Cornerstone Research," she said to the lady at the desk. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably as she turned to look back at the elevators. He was gone.

“Forty-third floor, the lady at the desk there will be able to help you,” the receptionist said.

“Okay, thank you.”

Luna turned away from the desk and opened her jacket. She pulled the tiny plant out of her pocket and checked

She caught a glimpse of fiery red hair through the movements.

each of Jack’s leaves. He had survived both of the falls quite well, and his soil wasn’t too wet. She held him carefully and pressed the elevator button.

It chimed loudly upon reaching the forty-third floor. The lady at the desk led her back to a room of cubicles while Luna left a trail of water droplets on the floor behind her. “That one there,” the woman said, pointing left. Luna saw a figure standing there, drying his hair with a dress shirt. She caught a glimpse of fiery red hair through the movements.

“Luke?” she said quietly, holding the tiny plant in her hands. He stopped drying his hair and his eyes met hers. He laughed and walked quickly toward her.

“Luna?”

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"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life."
Proverbs 14:27a

What do you need to overcome?
Is it something small like that quiz
you didn't have time to study for?
Is it something intimidating like an
interview with a potential employer?
Or is it something heartbreaking like
losing a loved one?

The stories and poems within these
pages will challenge your thinking,
comfort your heart, and inspire
your actions. Whatever you need
to overcome, *Fountains 2022* is here
to encourage you to hold tightly to
God while you face life's storms.