


Fountains 34th Edition

REFLECTION

A person stands on a rocky outcrop in the foreground, looking out over a vast, misty landscape. In the background, a large, dark silhouette of a human head is superimposed over the scene, with the interior of the head filled with a dense, green forest. The overall atmosphere is contemplative and surreal.

A PCC Student Publication
2023



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Introduction

In the busyness of life, we often become so intent on achieving “the next thing” that we forget to look back and see how far we’ve come. Focused on reaching the next milestone, we fail to notice the steps of faith that led us to each goal, the light that brightened our journey, and the growth that resulted from our experiences.

Reflection, the 34th edition of *Fountains*, invites you to pause in the midst of the mayhem. The stories and poems in each section reflect on the faith that strengthens us in adversity, the light that shines hope in the darkness, and the growth that results from bittersweet circumstances. Our desire is that, after reading, you will be refreshed and encouraged, and more importantly, ready to reflect these three qualities as you resume the journey to your next milestone.

Senior Editors



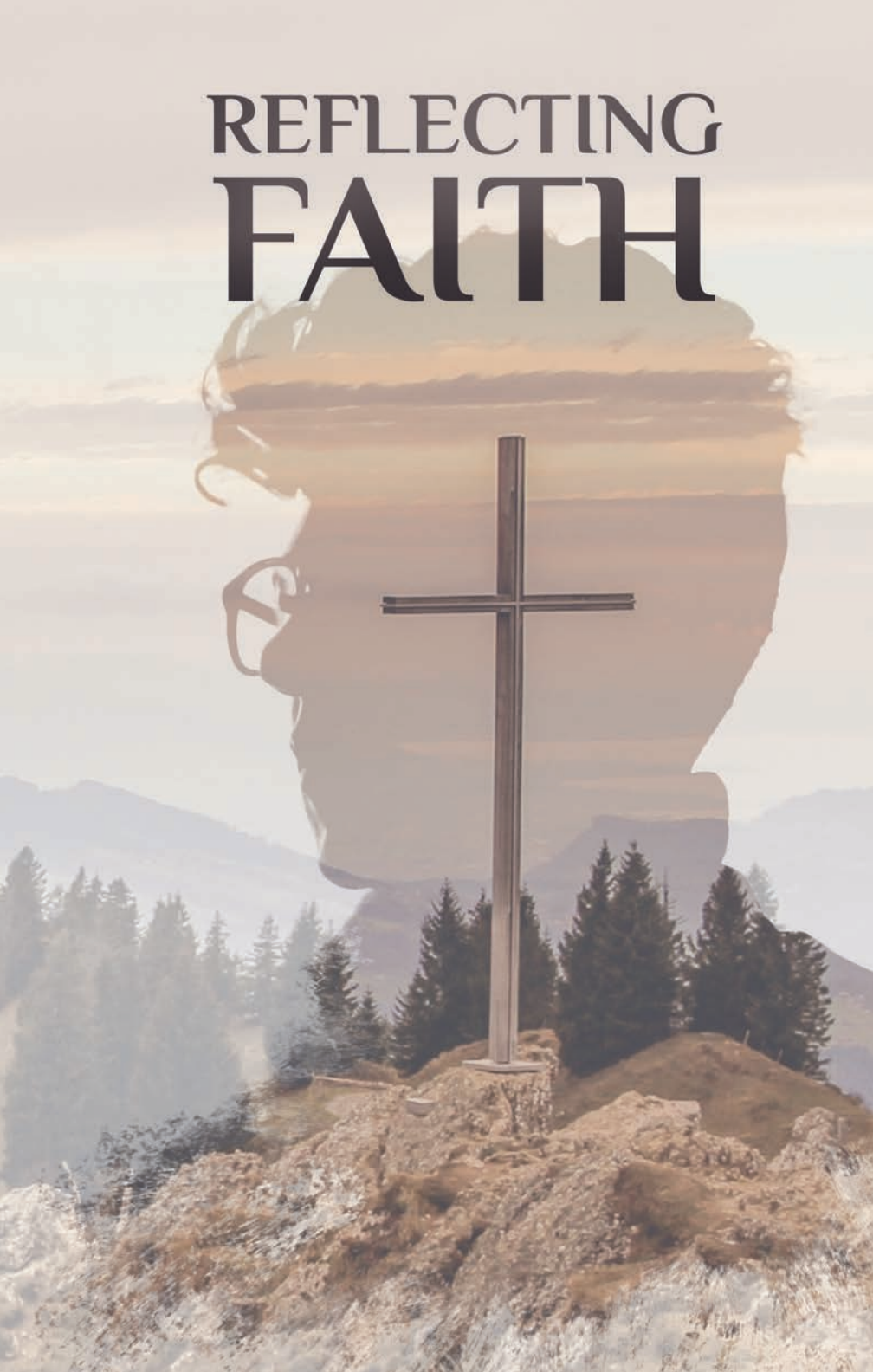
Naomi Pratt



Siera Weber



REFLECTING FAITH





So Long, John Somebody

by Danielle Vedrode

Infatuation was nothing compared to love.

Who is John Somebody?

That's not his name—John Somebody, I mean. It's a little bit like witness protection. The names must change. But in this story, he was everything to me.

John Somebody had more to offer than just physical appearance, although I'm not ashamed to admit I found plenty to admire in that area. His personality was what really sealed my fate. He listened to people and cared about what they said. Those who spoke with him felt as if they mattered.

I embarrassed myself in front of John Somebody in the most personal way possible—through a declaration of love.

Oh yeah. Strap in, folks. It's about to get bumpy.

During sophomore year, I was more adjusted to college life. Work was going well, and I had changed my major again (but that's a different story). The world around me felt full of possibility and promise. The only problem was that was on my own, and I was very tired of this.

There were plenty of friends around me—plenty of people who made me a better person. But I did not have *the* Person with a capital P. I didn't have someone who would always be there. No guys



wanted to call me. None of them wanted to get to know me, or to take the time to hack through the layers of weirdness hiding my squishy little heart. I wanted someone to look at me and choose me because they saw someone worth loving, but there was no one. Girls around me were chosen while I walked away alone.

Then there was John Somebody.

We worked in the same area around the same time, and he always made everyone on shift laugh. He engaged everyone around him in conversation on a topic he thought they'd like, and he goofed around like a little kid, especially when he worked with other guys. The way he made everyone feel so *seen* made me infatuated with him. My favorite part was when he talked about his family because he cared about them so much.

In my mind, each time we ran into each other was proof that we were supposed to end up together forever. The need to be seen by someone clawed the inside of my chest and made more room for loneliness.

Logic kept screaming at me, *Hey, maybe take a step back. Maybe wait on this. Please.*

I didn't wait.

When my parents heard my plans, they were . . . concerned.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait to be asked?" they said. "If he's interested, he'll approach you."

When my sister heard about my plans, she said, "You're just lonely."

Yes, I *was* lonely. Hence the desire for a *relationship*.



When my friends heard about my plans, they tried to be nice, but they were blunt, too.

“Usually guys will approach the girls,” they said. “It seems a little forward.”

I’m pretty sure I could have shared my plans with a random bird hopping around outside, and the bird would have just tweeted anxiously at me, as if to say, *You sure about this, human?*

I was sure.

Carefully, I rehearsed my declaration so that when the day came the words would be *meaningful*. These were words of love! I wanted to tell him how I felt, but I wanted to get it right.

One night, I finally had my chance. Our work shifts overlapped by one hour. I had spent the shift making up reasons to go to the kitchen where I could catch a glimpse of him, but now my shift was done and my





work area was almost clean. On a cart, a giant bag of trash waited to be taken out.

I wheeled the cart out to the dumpster and tried to get a grip on it. The bag wouldn't budge. I yanked on it again, trying to lift it, but the bag stayed in place.

Wait. What if this was a sign?

Of course! This was a sign from God that I needed to go get John Somebody and ask him to throw it out for me!

I went back into the kitchen and found John Somebody. He was helping scrub floors, probably eager to get off work; I waved my hand, catching his attention. When he looked up, I asked, "Could you please help me with something? I can't get the trash into the dumpster."

"Wait. What if this was a sign?"

"Sure!" John Somebody said, handing his scrub brush to another worker before following me outside to the dumpster.

He threw the giant bag of trash away with barely any effort. To soothe my pride, he said, "That was one of the heavier ones."

I nodded dumbly. Around us the night was still and sticky, humid enough to create fog around the streetlights. Students walked under the covered walkway and shouted at one another, laughing. A car pulled around the corner and drove behind a dorm to its parking space.

John Somebody made more conversation to fill the silence, but my mind was completely blank. I had rehearsed for this moment, but now that the time had come, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth and



my pulse made my hands tremble. John Somebody went inside to finish his work, and I went to the locker room to get changed. Pacing around, I faced my reflection in the giant mirror that hung on the wall next to the laundry hamper.

How could I have messed this up before saying anything at all? I felt like such a coward. This was important. I had to do this. Love was all about courage, right?

After I had finished changing, I quietly stepped back out into the kitchen and asked him, “When you get off work, would you come talk to me for a minute?” Realizing how ominous that sounded, I quickly added, “It’s nothing bad. I just need to tell you something.”

A little confused, John Somebody nodded, and I went outside to sit on a bench and wait, shaking more than I ever have in my life. He walked outside a while later, still wearing the confused expression.

After a pause, I asked, “Can we walk around a little?” “Sure.” He picked out the direction, and off we went.

Streetlights gleamed above us as we walked, throwing shadows made fuzzy by fog onto the pavement. John Somebody’s work shoes thumped on the pavement. I gathered my courage—the moment was here.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you this for a while,” I said. “I—I—I like you. A lot.”

His pace picked up noticeably. He was trying to hold himself in place to be polite, but the rest of him—possibly led by his common sense—wanted to run far, far away.

“I’ve liked you since last semester,” I continued. All my rehearsed words sounded jumbled and ineffective,



but it was more than just jumbled words. No, there was something about how the air had changed between us, how stiff John Somebody's shoulders had become. Something about this felt horribly wrong and not at all romantic.

He was quiet.

"I understand if you don't feel the same way," I said, trying to give him a way out of the situation. Here was proof of what everyone else except for me had noticed: this was a bad idea. Instead of being touched by my words or reciprocating my feelings, John Somebody was just uncomfortable.

"No," he said, interrupting me. "Let me tell you something. You're amazing."

"My head felt as if it were filled with static."

His words hurt more than a straightforward "no thanks." John Somebody was being exactly who I knew he was—kind, gentle, and a good listener. The trouble was that he had no feelings for me except for pity.

"It takes a lot of guts to do what you did," he said. "And someone will come along for you. But the thing that's going to get you through the waiting is God."

Stop being nice! I wanted to screech at him. *Laugh at me so I can take my wounded pride and run!*

He didn't laugh. Instead, he politely discussed the weather. Then, like a gentleman, he dropped me off in front of our work area's main entrance before walking into the night, again with a fast pace that meant he wanted to distance himself from what he had just experienced. My head felt as if it were filled with static. I couldn't do anything—I just watched John Somebody leave.



My brother Zac was still on campus then. He was waiting for me that night, standing on some steps just a little distance away from the work entrance. I had told him all about my plans beforehand. I walked to him, holding my face in a fixed expression until I was sure that John Somebody was out of sight. Then I cried into my brother's shoulder.

I also cried in my dorm room, scaring the daylighters out of my roommates.

"Are you okay?" they asked when I barged into the room, tears running down my face.

I yelled incoherent nonsense at them, and they retreated to the bathroom.

With my phone in hand, I stabbed at the screen, redialing my mom's number when I got her voicemail once, then twice.

"Pick up!" I wailed into the phone. "Please, please pick up!"

In the bathroom, my terrified roommates turned on the blow dryer, played music, and yelled conversation at each other as loudly as they could. It seemed that for one reason or another, everyone around me wanted to pretend to be somewhere else.

When my mom picked up, I screamed what had happened at her. My mom used a blunt voice that cut through some of my emotion and helped calm me down. I don't remember the exact conversation we had. I just remember that I felt so stupid, so small. My squishy little heart, behind all its layers of weirdness, was bruised and distraught.

For the next few days, I wore one particularly comfortable sweater over almost every outfit. It was



a soft fabric, pastel pink with a hood, and it took the place of a blanket or a stuffed animal whenever I had to go outside. I don't remember eating or even being able to feel anything.

It took me months to feel slightly normal and years to even slightly get over John Somebody. The saddest part about my misguided declaration was that underneath my selfishness, I really meant what I said to him. I really wanted him to be the Person, but sometimes that's just not how life or love works. Sometimes we just don't have the right words.

All these explanations—not how it works, not the right words—were logical. And because they were logical, I leaned into my illogical emotions. Instead of being rational, I went the opposite way, and fell into a downward spiral that sucked me in for a long time.

Something must be wrong with me, I thought.

Something about me isn't enough.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. My heart was obviously behind all those layers for a reason. Maybe it was best if I kept everyone and everything at a distance forever.

I drew even further back into myself than I had at the beginning of freshman year, which was saying something, since freshman me was nearly feral and had the social skills of a rock.

Classes became sessions to get through. Friends became last resorts. Food was just a shape I chewed on. I was so, so angry—not at anyone, not even at John Somebody. I was angry at *myself* for not being enough.

No one needed to approach me or see me. I wasn't worth seeing, anyway. As days passed, the layers



around my squishy little heart hardened into a substance invisible but as hard as bone.

I found myself growing angry at God. How could *He* know what I was going through? He had no right to do what He was doing to me. He didn't know what it was like to be passed over, to watch someone fall in love with someone else, to not be loved back! He didn't know what it was like to feel unseen!

Oh, wait. He did.

“My pedestal for John Somebody had to go.”

Every day, God looked down at the world and saw people who refused to believe that He was even real. He saw people He had made so carefully all hating each other and hating themselves. He saw many of His children wanting to know why they were even alive. He saw people who refused to love Him back take their own lives or try to build up their own idea of love, while all the time, no one, not one of them knew what love really was.

That included me. When I wanted someone to love me romantically, I turned away from Love itself and built my own love out of lies and misguided thinking.

God had shouted at me, *I love you! I see you! I want you to see Me!*

The thought made me sick, especially because I knew how it felt for someone to say no to me, although it was on a much lighter scale. And so, I decided that I would turn to God—really *look* at God—and see Him for who He was. To do that, I had to make room for Him, which meant my pedestal for John Somebody had to go.



In between classes the next day, I pulled out my phone to scroll through social media. John Somebody's name popped up. My thumb hovered over his name, but then slid down and found the word "block," and quickly tapped it.

A notification popped up on my phone screen.

Blocked.

There would be no more obsessing.

At work, when I knew he would be in the kitchen, I figured out a way around him and through to the other side. It wasn't because I didn't like him—it was because for weeks, I had made up reasons to find him in the kitchen, to squeak out a "hi" and then skitter away. No, this was just me making myself grow up. No more obsession, and no more mooning.

During my devotions, I made a point to reach out to God more. I wanted to make sure He got the same message He had sent me for years: *I love You, too. Thank You for seeing me and wanting all of me.*

As time passed, John Somebody's name hurt less as his pedestal crumbled away bit by bit. Some days were better than others, but on as many days as I could, I turned my attention to the One who had loved me all along.

I can't say that I'm no longer scarred by this experience. I can't say that my squishy little heart doesn't still ache at this memory when I'm out on a nighttime walk and talking to my family on the phone. But I can say this: John Somebody, the unendingly nice and gentlemanly John Somebody, was right. God was going to be the One to get me through my own mess. He just had to let me embarrass myself first.



Arches

by Benjamin Bostwick

“Arches” was written as an experiment with extended metaphor. The inspiration came from Arches National Park in the West.

In blasted deserts ruled by sun and sands,
An arch of rock endures. From two stone feet
Soar pillars joined above. Though cracked by heat,
Each arc aligned, the granite rainbow stands.

In evening arbors, deep in dusk submerged,
An ivy archway shaded bride and groom
From peeking sunset. In the gentle gloom,
Each soft voice vowed, and separate souls converged.

Harsh life then passed. Its forces all combined
To weather, wear, and crack that fragile tie;
But though worn thin and frail, the halves rely
Each on the other—arches, intertwined.

United, they endure through sand and sun,
A monument of two combined as one.





Stretchy Skin

by Miya Nakamura

My fear kept me from adapting and left a permanent reminder on my skin.

On my left knee, a crescent-shaped scar is embedded in my skin. It reminds me of a valuable lesson I learned as a teenager.

It all started on a clear summer night. My friend Chelsea and I decided to watch a movie under the stars on my family's trampoline. We put down sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows to make ourselves comfortable. I popped popcorn, baked cookies, and microwaved pizza rolls.

"Go ahead and start the movie. I'm gonna go get the snacks," I said.

"Don't take too long," Chelsea joked.

"I won't!" I called over my shoulder as I raced up the back porch steps.

I grabbed the popcorn, cookies, and pizza rolls and dashed to the backyard while Chelsea pulled up the movie on my laptop.

"My pain level shot up when I saw the gaping hole."

"Hurry up! It's about to start," she called impatiently.

After sliding the glass door shut, I tramped down the back steps with our movie treats in

hand. I handed her the snacks then hoisted myself onto the trampoline.



In my attempt to climb on, my knee scraped across a jagged piece of metal sticking out of the rusty trampoline frame. At first, the pain was no stronger than an ordinary paper cut, but as I looked down at my knee, my pain level shot up when I saw the gaping hole.

A hole the size of a dime was gashed into my skin. I could clearly see blood and tissue and even some white flesh. A flap of my skin was now bunched up on the left side of the opening. I immediately felt completely crippled and somewhat nauseated at the sight.

“Chelsea!” I shrieked. “I need you to take me inside—right now!”

“Why? We just got out here.”

“I just sliced a hole in my knee—it’s literally huge. I’ll probably have to go to the emergency room.”

“You’re being dramatic,” she said, getting up.

“No, I’m being so serious right now,” I argued with salty tears racing down my face.

As soon as she saw my gory battle wound, she understood my urgency. After hopping off the trampoline, she helped me down. Once inside my house, I hobbled to a kitchen chair.

When Dad heard my crying, he rushed in to help. First, he took a picture of my knee so I could get a clear view. Then he poured hydrogen peroxide over the wound to clean out the chasm in my flesh. A few minutes later, my mom came in to help calm me down.

After examining my knee, she said, “You should probably use a butterfly closure.”



"I have no idea what that is. Do we even have one in the house?" I asked.

Mom retrieved our first-aid kit from the linen closet and dug through it. After she found one, she gave it to Dad—my new surgeon.

Still unsure whether or not I trusted the butterfly closure, I asked to look at it. I studied the instructions carefully. To get a closer look, I peeled off the wrapper. The butterfly closure was slightly shorter than my pinky finger. The middle of the closure was as narrow as a single prong of a fork.

When I realized that they would have to stretch my skin to apply the butterfly closure, I really opposed the idea. The wound already hurt bad enough, and I knew that pulling the skin tight would produce excruciating pain.

"Uh—yeah, let's not do that," I objected.

"You'll have a huge scar if we don't put it on," Chelsea pleaded.

"And that's perfectly fine with me. I'm not gonna let you guys stretch my skin back. It hurts bad enough as it is." I slid the closure across the kitchen table.

Once Mom finally got me calmed down, she began researching tetanus.

"Oh good," she said, sighing with relief. "Tetanus vaccines last ten years, and yours is only seven years old."

Once again, Mom, Dad, and Chelsea attempted to convince me that I was in desperate need of a butterfly closure.



“No!” I insisted. “I’m not letting you guys come anywhere near me with that. The butterfly Band-Aid thing can’t actually help that much anyway.”

“You don’t know that. Just try it, please?” Mom urged.

“Nope, I’m not doing it.”

We finally agreed that a large Band-Aid would suffice for the time being. After Dad finished cleaning out the wound, he carefully applied a large bandage to my knee.

For several days, I removed the bandage to clean the wound and applied a new bandage to prevent infection. Every time I peeled it off, the new scab would rip off, reopening the nasty crater in my leg.

“Are you positive you don’t want me to put a butterfly on it?” Chelsea asked the next time I saw her.

“I’m good. It’s slowly healing by itself, just like I told y’all it would. What good would it do now anyway?” I retorted.

“I think it’d still help. The wound is pretty much all the way open still,” Chelsea said, observing my leg.

“I’m fine—seriously.”

“Okay, if that’s what you really want,” Chelsea replied, shrugging her shoulders. “I guess I can’t force you.”

My parents and Chelsea knew that my leg was going to scar, and they were right. They warned me and tried to make me see that the stretching of that small

flap of skin was for my benefit. However, I was too set in my own ways—too afraid of the temporary discomfort—to listen. If I had accepted their advice,

“Sometimes, I feel stretched—almost to the point of pain.”



I wouldn't have the scar. The stretching may have caused some discomfort or pain temporarily, but the outcome would look better than it does now. I would not be stuck with a constant reminder of my own stubbornness. Eventually, my knee did heal, but it now looks like a speedbump grafted onto my skin.

Sometimes, I feel stretched—almost to the point of pain. Not the same type of pain that I experienced in my leg, but the pain of anxiety, exhaustion, and confusion. College is hard. Tests, projects, and papers pile up. I just want all my responsibilities to go away because it's difficult. At times, I beg and plead for the stretching to stop. I take matters into my own hands to avoid painful things.

That hurts! I think to myself. I don't want to bend that way. I'm sure that I can figure out how to do it in a less painful way.

"Maybe I am being stretched to prepare for my future."

However, if I never allow myself to be stretched, I could be left with a larger scar than the one on my leg that could affect me in more ways than merely being

cosmetic. College has given me the opportunity to expand. All those difficult assignments push me to grow as I learn more about my classes and my career.

Maybe I am being stretched to prepare for my future. If I try to prevent stretching, maybe I will not be able to get the dream job that I am working toward or may miss out on some other opportunity. I have no idea what plans God has for my future. He might try to extend me further than I would like to go. However, if I try to resist Him, I may miss out on some incredible, unimaginable opportunities.



Flexibility is a quality that I must strive for in my own life. I must be easily bent without breaking. When seasons of stretching come into my life, I must learn to adapt to the new situation.

Because I thought that I knew what was best, I was left with an ugly reminder that my way is not the best way. The “I can do it on my own” mentality rarely works in my favor. In the instance of my knee, the course of my life was not altered, but I do have a lasting scar—a reminder to be flexible. I have learned to listen to the advice of others who know more and not to live in crippling fear of temporary discomfort.



The Wall of Life

by Austin Hadley

*A terza rima is a poetic form of interlocking stanzas.
In this terza rima, the author reflects on what God
was teaching him about his future.*

I cannot see beyond that wall—
It keeps my future from my view.
I wish that I could know it all.

No matter what I try or do,
Nothing gets me where I can see.
What lies ahead—I wish I knew.

I'll search and try to find a tree
Or else a gap in the divide—
A chance at last to be complete.

What will I do when I have tried
Each way to see beyond that wall,
And every way has been denied?

There is Someone who sees it all.
He knows each thing that lies beyond,
For there He sits upon life's wall.

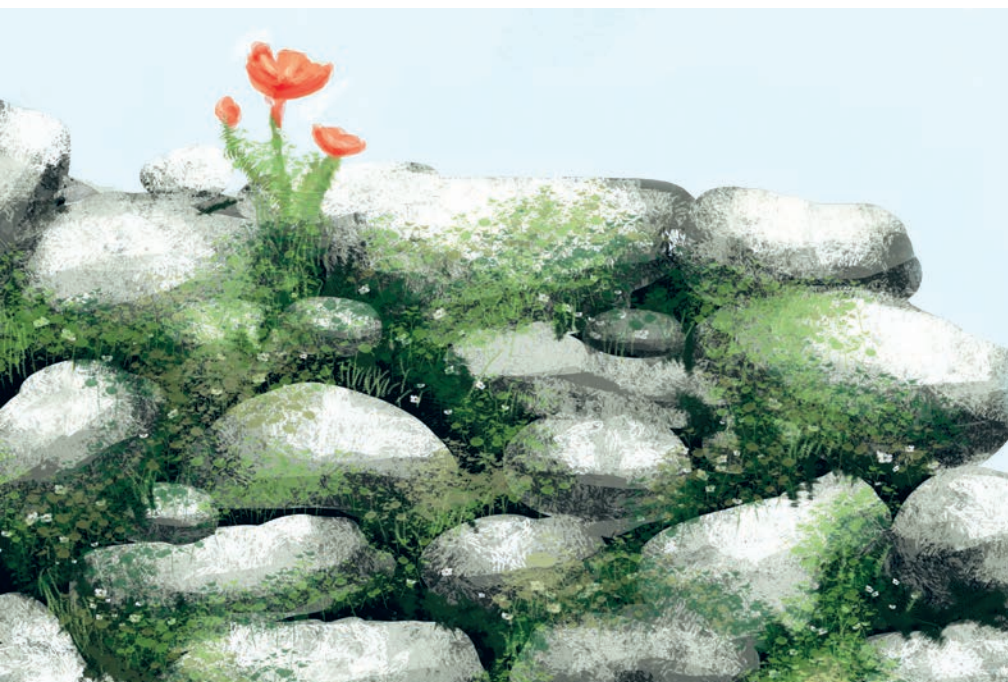


He's waiting for me to respond,
To realize the desires I chose
Are actually my cruelest bond.

He wants this life and all its lows
To bring me to the feet of Him,
Who guides me through each doubt and woe.

So when my situation's grim,
I'll calmly wait behind the wall.
I know the rest is up to Him.

He knows the things that lie ahead
And guides each step I have to tread.





End of Summer

by Jadon Burchwell

Each season brought with it something new.

My family's home in North Carolina lay nestled in nearly four acres of wooded property deep in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The front yard was the only patch with a few trees and a wider, open space, with the trees becoming denser toward the rear of the property. Across the narrow back driveway stood the actual woods, filled with layers of rotting leaves, swaths of twisted briar patches, and trees fighting each other to reach the blue sky.

Each year, spring brought explosions of daffodils that my siblings and I had carefully cross-pollinated and cultivated. Always the first harbingers of spring, their green leaves poked through the dead ground weeks before the robins arrived. After the daffodils grew the irises, blossoms robed in lacy, purple majesty that shook their heads condescendingly at the thousands of bright pink flowers adorning the azalea bushes.

Slowly, spring grew into summer. Summer was all thick, long grass; warm days of bright sun and cloudless blue skies; dandelions and violets sprinkling color around the yard; and thunderstorms as beautiful as they were violent. Summer was ease, bliss, and freedom.

But summer could never last forever. Although it held on with all its might, fall would replace summer as surely as the sun would rise each morning.

Fall never came subtly.



"I hate these ugly leaves," Mom said each year, staring out the kitchen window. "I wish, just once, the leaves would change color first and *then* fall off the trees." She would chuckle to herself, probably remembering the season as she had experienced it in Maryland as a child.

But here, in North Carolina, the onset of fall happened overnight. Green leaves, once so vibrant and full of life, were severed from their branches and discarded like trash thrust from a speeding car. Few leaves were given the privilege of gold or red hues as they clung valiantly to their trees.

"The onset of fall happened overnight."

Autumn was annoying. Not only did a new school year begin, but the yard would need to be raked—twice. One day the yard was clear, aside from a few clumps of fallen leaves here or there. The next, strong winds battered the leaves and nuts loose from the trees, sending them falling to the earth.

All too soon, the yard was layered thick with crusty shades of brown.

"I want you guys to start raking the yard today," Dad announced before leaving for work in the morning. "Start in the front yard."

"But Dad," I whined, along with my three brothers and two sisters. "Why can't we wait till tomorrow?"

"There's only going to be more leaves, and the longer you wait, the harder it will be to do."

And so, with much groaning and complaining, out we went after school to begin raking the yard. It was a hot, heavy task with slow progress. My siblings and I



would argue and fight. The rakes blistered our hands, sweat stung our eyes, and the wind constantly undid our work. The wind often blew the wrong direction, scattering neat piles back over the cleared sections of the yard. There was no greater frustration than having to do the same thing more than once.

I hated hauling the leaves away. Were it up to me, I would have burned them in giant heaping piles and danced on their ashes. Dad was more sensible—the woods became their final resting place instead, covered by a big blue scratchy tarp that required three people to haul it around. My siblings and I struggled blindly to dump tarp after tarp of leaves.

The yard never stayed cleared long after the first raking. Barely a week after I had exhausted myself slaving away alongside my siblings, our immense yard would be covered again, and the process would repeat itself.

But in the end, all would fall.

Winter came with a quiet hush, stilling the winds left over from autumn. Frost covered the ground each morning, lightening the color-muted world of fleshless trees and dead, matted grass. Winter lasted forever, longer than fall or summer—endless.

But all seasons must progress and, with the slow yet steady march of time, spring and summer would come. Every era must end so that a new one may begin.

The end of one summer marked a significant change in my life.

I couldn't sleep that night. My stomach felt as though it were on fire; the Tums I had swallowed refused



to affect my acid reflux. I tossed and turned in bed, burning under my covers yet freezing without them. My mind churned, refusing to stop for long enough to allow me to doze off. I stared into the dark, eyes wide.

A slice of orange light stabbed into the room as Mom opened my door. She was crying, softly calling my name.

“Yeah? What’s wrong?” I asked, sitting up.

“Mitch’s mom just called.”

My heart rate accelerated. Kyle and Ryan, my two older brothers, had gone on a hog hunting trip in Georgia with their best friend, Mitch. I had spoken with Kyle and Ryan on the phone that afternoon, and they had been fine.

Why is she crying? I thought. *Why did Mitch’s mom call?*

“There was an accident,” Mom continued, pausing to sniff and wipe her eyes. “It’s dark, so they can’t tell, but Mitch said Ryan was grazed in the head by a round. They’ve called the ambulance, and they’re waiting for the paramedics to find them in the woods.”

“Something didn’t sound right.”

I couldn’t speak. A little voice nagged at the back of my mind, whispering that something didn’t sound right.

“Please pray that he’s okay.”

I assured my mother I would, but once she left, I wanted to throw up. My stunned mind refused to operate, racing in circles around fragmented prayers.



You don't just get grazed by a rifle round to the head and be fine—not by something of that caliber.

In their bedroom at the end of the hall, Mom and Dad carried on a conversation I couldn't make out. I rolled over and checked the time on my phone; it was a few minutes past midnight.

Ten minutes flew by. My younger brother got home after being out with his friends and joined the discussion in my parents' bedroom. Dad's phone rang, and I got out of bed to see what was going on.

"Hello?" he answered as I walked down the hall. Aside from "goodbye," he didn't say anything else. The call was too short.

"Who was that? What is it?" Mom questioned.

Dad stared at his phone as I walked over. Both he and my brother, who was close enough to overhear the phone conversation, wore blank looks.

"That was the doctor. Ryan is dead," my father said lifelessly.

Those simple seven words were the ugly leaves falling from the trees, signaling that fall had won its silent war over summer in a devastating surprise attack. I could feel the leaves falling, falling, falling deep into the pit of my stomach along with my shattered heart.

A few agonizingly long days later, I walked into the funeral home's viewing room to see, for the first time, my brother's now lifeless body.

This imitation of him enraged me—it looked nothing like him. His sun-tanned skin, weathered from outdoor escapades and work, had been replaced with thick makeup. Brown eyes full of life were now closed forever. His hands lay folded on his chest, his body



starkly accented by the cold gray coffin's soft inner white. He appeared almost wooden, now that the life had been stripped away from him. As the fallen leaves bore little resemblance to the life they once enjoyed, so my brother now was foreign to me. Some stranger lay in his casket instead, a frail mockery of the impassioned, energetic brother I had known and loved.

Tears would not come, although I wished for them—wished for some way to relieve the pressure of grief building in my chest like a reservoir behind a dam. But there was no outlet; I stood quiet and stiff instead, watching the screen displaying pictures of a life well lived—vivid, bright, cheerful, adrenaline-packed years.

**“Like dead leaves,
they fell in my
memory.”**

But, just as the brilliant golds, pinks, and purples of spring and summer flowers fade during fall, those years were gone forever, diminished to nothing more than a series of still frames. Like dead leaves, they fell in my memory—one by one, their life strangled away by grief.

I don't remember much of the funeral. A few close friends and family took turns sharing memories of Ryan, but I couldn't look at anyone. I stared at the floor or a wall most of the time.

Days passed as grief made itself at home with my family. Weeks crawled by as we sorted out my brother's belongings. I labored away, raking up the dense matting of leaves composed of dark thoughts, trauma, grief, and loss, each one carefully bundled in a tarp and carried away to another part of my mind.



Slowly, winter settled in. It seemed endless as the months slogged by. I went to counseling and spent time with my family, reminiscing of the time we had spent with Ryan before his passing. I prayed a lot and thanked God for the period of vivid, bright summertime I had enjoyed with Ryan. I studied verses from Psalms about grief and loss and continued attending counseling. The Psalms, especially, did their part to water my soul.

Psalm 18:30—As for God, his way is perfect: the word of the Lord is tried: he is a buckler to all those that trust in him.

Psalm 147:3-4—He healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds. He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names.

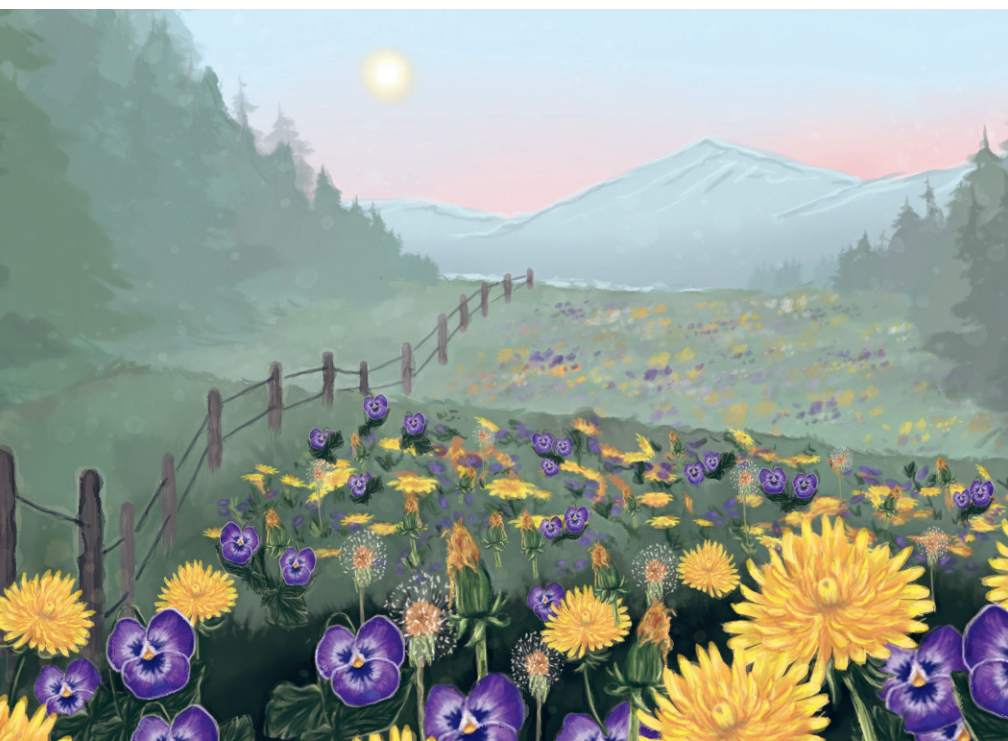
Ever so slowly, the pastel green of the daffodil leaves began to poke through the barren soil of my heart. Warm rain brushed away the brown of winter grass, making way for new, dark green to take its place. Blue and purple violets opened their buds beneath the unfurling glory of the azalea bushes overhead. Once bare and stiff, old oaks stretched their limbs and summoned new leaves more majestic than before. Spring was on its way again.

Somewhere Better

by Regina Massey

A pantoum is a series of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the next stanza. This pantoum was written to remember student J. R. Hill after his unexpected death. The purpose of this poem is to honor those whose lives have ended and to remind believers that even when their loved ones pass away, they will be reunited one day in heaven.

Gone before he could say goodbye,
On his way to somewhere better,
We know that he is welcomed there
Till one day we see him again.





On his way to somewhere better
Where no one ever has to leave,
One day we will see him again
Where no one sheds a single tear.

Where no one ever has to leave,
He'll make up for the time he lost.
Where no one sheds a single tear,
He is in the arms of Jesus.

He'll make up for the time he lost.
Gone before he could say goodbye.
He is in the arms of Jesus—
We know that he is welcomed there.



The Evidence of Things Not Seen

by Kayley Ocker

*God doesn't owe me an explanation.
I just need to trust Him.*

The worst part of my junior year of college wasn't lying on my back inside an MRI machine that rattled and clanked around me or an IV stuck in my hand while tears formed in my eyes. Neither was falling down the stone stairs and obliterating the cartilage in my left wrist. Neither was realizing I fell because I had actually briefly lost consciousness. Neither was continuing to pass out and hit the ground at inopportune times. Neither was the violent tremor that started in my left hand and traveled up my left shoulder.

No, the worst part of my junior year turned out to be the *waiting*. Waiting for answers, waiting to get better, and waiting on God to explain Himself to me.

"I'm no stranger to illness."

I'm no stranger to illness. At fifteen years old, I was diagnosed with an incurable chronic illness that would affect my mobility and quality of life. When I was twenty, that illness finally had a name: psoriatic arthritis with psoriatic spondyloarthritis. That's a lot of medical jargon for inflammatory arthritis in all the joints as well as the spine and neck. That's even more



medical jargon for my bones and joints don't work all that well.

But then I started having random spells of nausea and dizziness unrelated to my arthritis. Having already been through the parade of new symptoms and seemingly endless doctors' appointments, I knew this wasn't something I could brush off. That's not to say I didn't try to—I am the queen of avoiding anything that could potentially stand in my way.

I first noticed my influx of new symptoms while shopping at Sam's Club with my mom during Christmas break. One moment I was happily perusing the seemingly endless offerings of comically large bags of potato chips, the next second I had a death grip on the shopping cart to avoid falling over.

"Kayley?" My mother's voice was thin and high. "Are you all right? What's going on?"

"I'm ok," I said. "I just don't feel good all of a sudden."

The bright lights of the superstore felt blinding, and I suddenly felt sure my legs were going to give out on me. Other shoppers scuttled by, seemingly unaware of my impending death.

I looked up at my mom. Her face was pinched in what my siblings and I refer to as "mom concern," where she is trying not to freak out too obviously. "What?" Mom asked.

"What do you mean *what*?" I rasped, trying to center myself as the world of bargain prices and wholesale marketing began to blur together into something out of a well-priced yet garish nightmare.



“I can’t understand you,” she said. Her voice seemed small and far away, but that seemed unimportant as I tried not to expire in the middle of the store.

My mom later told me that my speech had begun to slur, to the point where she could no longer understand what I had been trying to say. After several somewhat horrifying moments, the dizziness abated, and I could unclench my bloodless fingers from the rungs of the shopping cart. All that remained of my symptoms was a pounding headache.

Unfortunately, my swoon by the potato chips wouldn’t be my last. Moments like these continued and worsened. Sometimes my speech slurred randomly, sometimes my eyesight went fuzzy, and sometimes my stomach twisted into knots. Soon, I began to momentarily black out while walking and come back to seconds later, confused, disoriented, and on the floor.

“The tremor appeared out of nowhere.”

The catalyst was the tremor. The tremor—like all my other shiny new symptoms—appeared out of nowhere. It traveled from my left hand, my dominant hand, up my arm and into my shoulder.

The tremor was the reason I finally went to my rheumatologist Dr. Jahlbert to see if he had any clue what was wrong with me. I began to pray that God would show me what had happened to cause my misery.

When I finally made an appointment with Dr. Jahlbert, he listened to my symptoms with a look of mild horror on his face (never a good expression to see on a medical professional), immediately



sent me for an MRI, and referred me to a neurologist, fearing I had multiple sclerosis or early onset Parkinson's disease.

Several weeks of symptoms and one referral later, I finally met my neurologist. The days seemed to drag by as I waited for my appointment to arrive. I quit praying for an answer as to *what* illness I had and began to pray to ask—no, demand that God show me *why* He had allowed me to go through yet another season of sickness and terrible symptoms so early on in life. I knew that He had to have a reason, and if God would show me why I had to suffer, I could begin to truly deal with the complex tangle of emotions that accompany life-changing illness. All I had to do was visit the neurologist, get answers, and begin to fight back against this mysterious illness that had taken hold of me. I sat in the uncomfortable waiting room chair and ran every possible outcome of my appointment through my mind until a nurse in fluorescent yellow scrubs told me it was time to go back to the exam room.

My neurologist was a bald man who wore horn-rimmed glasses and a bright button-up shirt.

"My name is Dr. Porter," he said, closing the door behind him. He held a clipboard in one hand and a gold pen in the other. He stared at me with eyes that seemed to be picking me apart before I even opened my mouth. He clicked his pen to a beat while he surveyed my patient form.

"It says you have a tremor?"

Click. Click. Click.

The question immediately irritated me, his clipped tone enough to set me on edge.



“Yes.”

“And dizziness, nausea, migraines,
and fainting spells?”

Click. Click. Click.

“Yes,” I huffed. This line of questioning seemed pointless. I had filled out the paperwork, so of course I knew what symptoms were listed on my patient chart. I’d been warned by my general practitioner that neurologists were famously skeptical and often felt the need to determine the truth of a patient’s illness before actually running any tests. I felt like the judgmental man in front of me didn’t believe a word I was saying.

“And this tremor, your normal doctor believes it could be multiple sclerosis or early onset Parkinson’s disease?”

“Yes.”

Click. Click. Click.

“Twenty-one is a little young for Parkinson’s, don’t you think?” he asked with a small, tight smile on his face. His eyes seemed to be trying to see through me.

“His eyes seemed to be trying to see through me.”

“Yes. That’s kind of why I’m here,” I said through gritted teeth.

Click. Click. Click.

“Could you describe this tremor for me?”

“I could, but I have a video if you’d rather see that.”

He held his hand out for my phone without saying a word.



I found the two videos I had taken during a milder episode of my tremors. “Here’s the first one. Swipe right to see the second one.”

Dr. Porter watched in rapt attention, clicking his pen the entire time.

Click. Click. Click.

Click. Click. Click,

Click. Cli—

A few seconds into the video, he suddenly stopped, putting his pen down while he watched my hand shake. He watched the second video in silence. When he was done, he handed me back my phone and took off his glasses.

“Well, that certainly is a tremor,” he said, the smile on his face seeming a bit more genuine. After that, Dr. Porter was much friendlier. He was still very matter of fact, but I finally felt as though he believed what I said to him. He told me I most likely didn’t have Parkinson’s since my tremor was “too violent,” but multiple sclerosis couldn’t be ruled out. He ordered a battery of tests and prescribed me three medications that would treat the symptoms, but not the cause.

The weight that had settled on my chest all those weeks ago lifted. While I wasn’t thrilled that I had to go through several rounds of testing, I knew as soon as we had a name for whatever disease was plaguing me, we could begin to treat it. I impatiently waited for my test results, desperate to know the name of my adversary. Was it multiple sclerosis after all? Could it be something I’d never even heard of before? Could it be a brain tumor? So many questions filled my mind. I shoved them all down with vengeance.



I felt confident as soon as I knew what was wrong with me, I could begin to fight it. I prayed and begged God to show me what was wrong, why He had allowed this illness to take hold of my body. I knew He must have a reason, and I knew as soon as He showed me His reasons, I would be able to accept it and use it for the good.

A couple weeks later, I got my results back.

MRI?

Inconclusive.

EEG?

Inconclusive.

EKG?

Inconclusive.

Bloodwork?

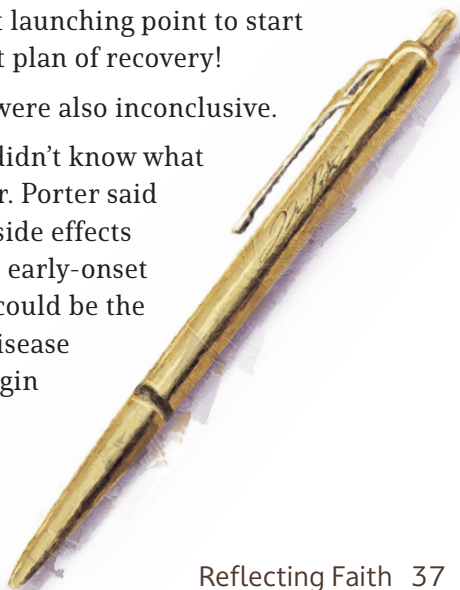
Inconclusive.

X-rays?

My x-rays actually showed the exact problem and gave my doctor a perfect launching point to start formulating an excellent plan of recovery!

I'm kidding. The x-rays were also inconclusive.

After everything, I still didn't know what was "wrong" with me. Dr. Porter said my symptoms could be side effects of migraines, it could be early-onset multiple sclerosis, or it could be the beginnings of another disease that we couldn't even begin to detect yet.





The short and the long story is that he didn't know, so I don't know, and I don't know if I ever will. In a lot of ways, making peace with that knowledge was more difficult than navigating through the battle zone of symptoms. It's one thing to fight a monster you know; it's another to take a wild swing in the dark, hoping beyond hope that your aim is true, even when walking blindly.

After the results of my tests came back inconclusive, Dr. Porter prescribed me several new medications. One for the tremor, one for the headache that had permanently settled behind my eyes, one for the migraine, and one for the constant nausea. These pills—added to the handful of medication and two weekly injections I already took to control my arthritis—looked like defeat and tasted even worse.

“The pills looked like defeat and tasted even worse.”

I dragged myself through the rest of junior year and the summer before senior year. Never had I been so defeated. Never had I been so tempted to lie down on the ground and scream until

God answered me. The only thing I could think was, *Why me? Why does it have to be me, Lord? Have I not been faithful?*

I let my self-pity and my pain consume me. I didn't blame God for my symptoms, but I did begin to feel bitter that He wouldn't show me His plan. I just knew if I could see what sort of trial I was facing, if my disease had a name, I could fully trust in God and begin to use this situation for His glory.

A few months later, I sat in Wednesday night church half-listening to Pastor Redlin preach. My hand was



shaking, and my head was pounding, and I couldn't wait for him to wrap up his sermon so that I could go crawl into bed and sleep for the rest of the evening.

I'll admit, I don't fully remember what the sermon was about. All I remember is Pastor Redlin, arms spread wide, saying, "We all know how Job responded to his trials."

The sentence wasn't even fully relevant to his sermon; he'd been trying to reference a portion of Scripture and acknowledge the deeper theme of the passage before moving on. But the seeming *non sequitur* sent me back in time to my Bible class from the previous semester. I remember listening as my teacher Mr. Twigg spoke about Job's situation:

"In all this—in all the talk from Job's friends, in all his loss, in all his pain and suffering—Job never knew why this was happening to him," Mr. Twigg said. "Even though he could not see what God was doing, he kept his faith."

While my classmates' pens scratched out the information on the PowerPoint into their notes, glassy-eyed and sluggish in the typical fashion for a late afternoon lecture, I felt as though my heart would beat out of my chest. Mr. Twigg made a connection that I had never made before. I grew up in church and had heard the story of Job for what felt like a million times. I'd heard about his attitude, his faith, his wife, and his friends, but I'd never heard Job's trials spoken about like that.

Wow, Job never found out why he suffered, and yet he still praised God. I hope my faith is as strong as Job's.

My mind felt like a machine groaning and creaking as long-rusted gears finally began to move again. The



preacher's offhand sentence reminded me of that lecture, and I could feel my eyes begin to burn as they filled with tears.

In the Bible, Job is known for his trials and his loss. He lost his health. He lost his friends and family. He lost his reputation. Everything Job held dear was taken away, and even though he struggled, he still remained faithful. Job's situation was a million times worse than mine, and there I was, struggling to remain faithful. That night, I prayed and thanked God for confronting me with the reality of my faith. I wasn't trusting God because of His goodness alone. Without realizing it, I had added conditions to my service. My faith had become rooted in what I could see, not what I knew of my Creator.

After realizing my lack of faith and trust in God, I can't say my symptoms magically got better—life





just doesn't work that way. I'm still sick. I still have a tremor. I still get migraines. I still struggle to keep up with things that the average healthy person wouldn't think twice about. My outlook is what has changed. I no longer feel as though God owes me an explanation, and I know I can use this for good without being able to label exactly what's wrong with me.

Knowing that God is working even when I can't see His hands move helps me get through every new challenge and every bad day. I'm not saying I have the patience of Job—I know myself too well to say that. I still get frustrated when my health keeps me from doing things I want to do. What I am saying is that I've had to get comfortable with the fact that God does not need to tell me anything in order for me to trust Him. I don't need to see God's reasons to know that He is working.



REFLECTING LIGHT





A Fine Sunny Day

by Siera Weber



Commencement Contest Winner
Original Nonfiction

*In the darkness of Nazi Germany, Sophie Scholl
decided to look for a light.*

The Judgment


Sunday, February 21, 1943

At twenty-one years old, her life was over—a rosebud plucked just as it was ready to bloom. A young plant snatched from the sunlight and shoved underground to wilt away. Would it all be for nothing? Or would her death awaken the German people from their self-induced slumber? Would they realize that the Reich would stop at nothing to silence all opposition?

Sophie Scholl didn't know the answer. But she did know that she would die. The paper in her hands told her so. Her eyes scanned the indictment listing the German Reich's grievances against her, her brother Hans, and their friend Christoph Probst. They had all been deemed enemies of the state for printing and distributing the leaflets that denounced Hitler and his National Socialist party.

"God be thanked," she breathed.

God be thanked, no one else was named. God be thanked, the Gestapo seemed to have believed



them. God be thanked, they had successfully borne the blame.

Sophie stretched out on her cot and mused, “Such a fine, sunny day—and I have to go. But how many are dying on the battlefield in these days, how many young promising lives? What does my death matter if through us thousands of people will be stirred to action and awakened?”

Three lives. That meant nothing to Hitler’s regime. The Reich had already stolen hundreds of thousands of lives. But perhaps, just perhaps, three lives could make a difference to the Germans. Perhaps three lives could convince the other students at the University of Munich to abandon National Socialism. Perhaps three lives lost—three fallen petals—could spare the rest of the White Rose.

But that was not for Sophie Scholl to know. All she could do was wait.

Monday, February 22, 1943

The next morning, guards escorted Sophie to the austere courtroom of the Wittelsbacher Palais. She left her indictment in her cell with the word *freedom* scrawled on the back. The February sunshine streamed through the Palais’s many windows as Sophie joined the other defendants, Hans and Christoph, before judges dressed in blood-red robes. Behind the defendants, Nazi guests waited for the spectacle. In front, on the center of the platform, loomed Roland Freisler, Hitler’s hammer, the president of the People’s Court. He would be their ultimate judge and jury.

Freisler did most of the talking. He thundered from his vantage point like a storm cloud, spewing



lightning on the three university students before him. They did not get many chances to speak, but Sophie did tell the indignant judge, “What we said and wrote is what many people are thinking. Only they don’t dare to say it.”

The storm raged from the front of the courtroom. When at last the thunder subsided, the defendants were allowed to give their closing statements. Christoph pleaded for release so that he might look after his wife and three little ones. Hans supported Christoph’s plea. “If you have nothing to say on your own behalf, please say nothing,” Freisler reprimanded.

Sophie said nothing.

Hans and Sophie’s parents arrived at the trial just in time to hear the final verdict. They watched as

**“Yet outside, the sun
was still shining.”**

Nazi guards carted off their children as criminals, enemies of the state. The shadow of death, dispatched by the judges in their blood-red garb, had latched onto the shoulders of the three young Germans.

The defendants, convicted by the People’s Court for treason against Germany, were transported immediately to Stadelheim prison. From there, they would be promptly transferred to Perlacher Cemetery by way of the guillotine.

Yet outside, the sun was still shining.



The Crimes

May 1942–January 1943

Death's shadow had long been lingering over Germany, and it affected every aspect of life. It halted many young Germans' plans, including Sophie Scholl's. All German youth were expected to participate in the Reichsarbeitsdienst, the State's labor force which supported the Reich's armies. At first, Sophie had been able to avoid the Reichsarbeitsdienst, but she was assigned to war service work at the Krauchenweis camp, where the days trudged by in menial labor that turned young women into complacent cattle. Sophie's chief comforts during this time were cold showers, frequent letters from her friends and family, and her contraband books. Books of any kind, even Bibles, were forbidden at Krauchenweis. Yet for reasons that Sophie never knew, the supervisor allowed her to keep her Bible and her copy of St. Augustine.

The regimented life at Krauchenweis quickly lulled the young women into mental apathy, as the Reich seemed to have done to all of Germany. If every aspect of life belonged to the State, why bother with thinking? If intellectual and spiritual darkness was enshrouding the whole land, why not just embrace the darkness and sleep? At times, Sophie found herself slipping into this mental lethargy, even though she hated Hitler's regime and all it stood for. So she clung to her faith and her books, her stray rays of sunlight in the ever-growing darkness.

In 1941, she transferred to a kindergarten in Blumberg, which she much preferred to bleak Krauchenweis. Here at least, the opportunity to invest



in her students kept the darkness at bay. In a letter to a friend, Sophie recalled, “It was almost as if I’d been privileged to play a carefree role in a pleasant, heartwarming, sunny little episode. Or so it seems now, at least. The reality was somewhat different, no doubt, but I felt at home there.”

Finally, in May of 1942, just after her twenty-first birthday, she reunited with her brother Hans at the University of Munich. No longer would she have to submit mind and body to the Reich’s demands. She could revel in philosophy and discussion without fear of retaliation.

Or so it seemed.

Hans soon introduced his sister to his circle of like-minded friends. Like the Scholl siblings, these friends, mostly medical students, enjoyed discussing philosophy, music, and religion. They were not afraid to discuss anything, including the Führer. The group had heard various reports of the regime’s devastation in Germany and other countries—the annihilation of the Jews, the trafficking of Polish youths, the unjust arrests of dissenting intellectuals. They knew that National Socialism was an empty promise of prosperity for a war-torn country. It could only bring death and destruction, not the restoration Hitler had promised.

But what could they do against the darkness engulfing Germany? They were just students. During school breaks, the young men were forced to serve in the military, and Sophie was forced to work in a factory to aid the war effort. No matter what they did, they were under the Führer’s thumb, forced to further his



false vision of Germany. They were like fragile flowers struggling to grow in a state of constant night.

They decided to look for a light.

Five of these friends—Hans and Sophie Scholl, Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, and Willi Graf—and Sophie's philosophy professor, Kurt Huber, formed the White Rose. According to Alexander Schmorell, the White Rose symbolized purity in a world corrupted by the Reich. The White Rose wrote, printed, and distributed six leaflets denouncing Hitler's regime and calling for the German people to resist the Reich by any means they could. The leaflets lambasted Hitler, exposing his cruelty and dishonesty.

"They decided to look for a light."

But the leaflets did not merely target Hitler. The third leaflet also placed the blame for Nazi atrocities on the German people: "Do not hide your cowardice behind a cloak of expediency, for with every new day that you hesitate, failing to oppose this offspring of Hell, your guilt, as in a parabolic curve, grows higher and higher."

As the group expanded, the students distributed the leaflets first in Munich and then in other German cities. Gradually, the rays of hope spread from Munich throughout Berlin, Freiburg, and Hamburg. Students in these cities organized into resistance groups and began copying and distributing the leaflets. The White Rose's influence spread, and just as its members had hoped, some of the German people were claiming the responsibility of overcoming the Reich from within.

In January of 1943, the Russians decimated the German armies at Stalingrad. The news shocked



all of Germany. Not even the Führer's propaganda could hide the truth. The war had taken a turn for the worse. Seizing this opportunity, the White Rose published its sixth pamphlet. In it, they rallied their fellow students to fight the regime that had tarnished their childhoods and stolen their futures: "The name of Germany is dishonored for all time if the German youth does not finally rise, take revenge, and atone, smash its tormentors, and set up a new Europe of the spirit. Students! The German people look to us."

For ten years, Hitler had cast his shadow over Germany. But at last, the sun was beginning to shine.

The Discovery

Thursday, February 18, 1943

Sophie pinned her short brown hair away from her face, leaving the hair in the back hanging. As she buttoned her blouse and slid on her shoes, she replayed the previous night's dream in her mind. In it, the Gestapo had arrested two members of the White Rose. Perhaps it was an omen. Or perhaps it was just her subconscious reminding her of the constant danger they faced. After all, unknown sources had recently contacted Hans with vague warnings, urging him to stop the work.

But Hans would not stop. So neither would she.

She joined her brother, who had combed his short dark hair and donned his vest and suitcoat. The pair looked like normal university students, ready for an ordinary day of classes. But there were no textbooks in their suitcases—just copies of the White



Rose's sixth leaflet. Inside Hans's pocket rested the unfinished draft of the seventh leaflet.

That leaflet never made it into print.

Shortly after the Scholls left their apartment, a young man hurried to the door and rang the bell. He waited, likely trying to maintain a blank expression lest hostile eyes should be watching him. Just his luck. The Scholls were gone, and of course they had not told anyone of their plans. He looked around him, scanning the street for any sign of Hans's tall profile or Sophie's dark hair. Nothing. He sighed. How could he warn them if he didn't know where they were? He decided to wait and hope for their quick return.

But the tenants of Franz-Joseph-Strasse 13 did not return.

As professors droned on in their lecture halls and students dozed off in their seats, Hans and Sophie distributed stacks of leaflets in the empty halls of the University of Munich. Morning light streamed through the front windows and bounced off the white ceiling arches as the siblings hurried up the dull gray steps to floor after floor. They had to finish emptying their suitcases before the morning classes ended and hundreds of curious eyes entered the hallways.

And then, from the top floor of the university, Sophie opened her suitcase and dumped the remaining leaflets into the empty atrium below. No one knows the reason. Perhaps it was because they were out of time. Perhaps it was because she wanted the satisfaction of seeing their leaflets drifting through the air, like paper petals falling off a rose's stem. No matter the reason, Sophie leaned over and sent the papers flying, her face clearly visible. But that didn't



matter—no students or professors stood down below. No one could see her. The halls were empty.

Except for the lone maintenance man.

Down below, in the shadows of the empty atrium, Jakob Schmid heard the rustling of papers and saw the leaflets floating through the air. What represented light and hope to the young students represented wildfires of rebellion to the loyal Nazi. Immediately, Schmid alerted his superiors, who locked the university doors.

And then they came—the Gestapo, their boots thudding on the ground like an erratic pulse. No one knows if Hans and Sophie tried to conceal themselves in the many rooms of the university, or if they remained out in the open for all eyes to see them. Hans crumpled up the unfinished leaflet in his pocket and shoved it into his mouth, trying to swallow it. But he couldn't manage it, and both the leaflet and the siblings were taken into custody.

Yet outside, the sun was still shining.

The Sentence

Monday, February 22, 1943

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the sun still shone outside the drab walls of Stadelheim prison as Sophie followed a guard down the hallway. Sophie had been allowed to remain in her regular clothes, a glimpse of normalcy, for this final meeting with her parents. Her poor parents—about to lose two children in one day.

Guard and prisoner approached the meeting place. Sophie smiled. Whether her smile was real or false



did not matter. In her parents' final moments with her, she kept smiling.

They offered her a piece of candy.

"Oh, yes. Of course, I didn't have any lunch," she said brightly.

What could they say in such a short time?

Sadness shone out of her mother's eyes. "So you will never again set foot in our house."

"Oh, what do these few short years matter?"

Her mother had no answer, only the lingering sadness in her eyes.

"We took all the blame, for everything. That is bound to have its effect in time," Sophie added. Although she and her brother Hans had not been able to communicate before the Gestapo interrogated them, they had each decided to shoulder the blame for the White Rose's leaflets. A few petals would fall, but the White Rose as a whole would remain intact. For now.

All too soon, their time ended. The guard escorted a smiling Sophie out of the room. Her parents remained, staring after her.

The warden brought Sophie to one more meeting—a few stolen minutes with Hans and Christoph before their execution. Normally, prisoners were not allowed to talk to each other. But the prison guards had been so impressed by the students' quiet grace and composure that they risked a secret reunion. As the three had started the work, so they would end it—together.

"I didn't know that dying can be so easy," Christoph said. "In a few minutes we will meet in eternity." The



three stood together, looking into each other's eyes, studying the last familiar faces they would see on this earth.

Sophie went first. At five o'clock, two male prison officials escorted her to the execution chambers.

"The jaws snapped shut."

Through the doorway of death, a small group of prison officials and personnel lined the dull walls surrounding the death machine. A black curtain hung like a burial shroud around the guillotine, which stood there with open jaws.

First, the Reich's attorney examined Sophie and declared that she was the condemned. Then the executioner's assistant led Sophie to the yawning maw of death. He helped her lean forward against the machine, positioning her neck beneath the looming blade.

The execution records later stated, *The condemned was calm and collected.*


Johann Reichhart, the executioner, walked up to Sophie. His bright blue eyes shone in sharp contrast to the black shroud surrounding the guillotine. He raised his arm and gripped the release handle.

The jaws snapped shut.

The Aftermath

April 1943

Although Sophie, Hans, and Christoph refused to expose their friends, the Nazis were not content with three insignificant petals. They continued to hunt for the rest of the White Rose. The remaining original members—Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, and



Professor Kurt Huber—were eventually arrested, interrogated, and executed. All of them refused to betray their accomplices. However, the Nazis tracked down and killed eleven more Germans who had partnered with the White Rose.

More of the petals had fallen.

July 1943

Although the Allies were overpowering Hitler's armies in Europe, in his own country, the Führer had won. The shadow of Hitler's Reich swallowed Germany, dimming any light. The people lived in constant fear of cruel leaders within and the angry world without. The country that had been known for its blitzkriegs, or lightning battles, over London now cowered in fear whenever they heard the whirring engines of the Allied planes. The time of reckoning had come.

**"More of the petals
had fallen."**

When the warning sirens blared before an air raid, the people ran for the bomb shelters, buildings with secure basements that could withstand a blast. Friends, families, and neighbors huddled together to wait out the storm. They did not know what destruction they would find when they emerged.

But one day, as the sirens blared and the droning whir of the Allied planes filled the air, no bombs fell. The Allied planes swooped down over Germany's towns and cities. The hatches opened, and out dropped millions of petals.

No, not petals. Leaflets. Millions of leaflets, flurrying through the air like the cascade Sophie Scholl had sent over the university banister just months



before. Millions of tiny rays of light piercing the Reich's darkness.

The Allied planes buzzed over the country and back into the clouds. Down below, people began to emerge from bomb shelters. Millions of fallen petals littered the streets. People scooped them up and stared at them. It was the sixth leaflet of the White Rose, the one that had caused the arrest of Hans and Sophie Scholl. Only now, it had a new title: "The Manifesto of the Students of Munich."

Although the rose had been trampled under the Führer's foot, the sun still shone in Germany.



The Last Hour

by Justin Rickard

Last night I watched an evening die

In blue and purple shrouds

As all the soft and gentle sky

Became a battleground.

A perfect, painted cavalry,

A hundred thousand horsemen strong—

Their somber tread a reverie,

Their steps a dusky song—

Made war upon a copper sun,

Made war upon the sun.

Then down an airy ocean swell,

There flew a many-masted fleet:

A silver navy, silver-sailed,

With silver wings for feet

To war upon the copper sun,

To war upon the sun.

Then went through heaven's thunder hall

A wordless tremor uttering

A summons, calling one and all

Unto the mustering.



But oh, the sun in fury turned
Each rank an awful saffron hue.
Each ruby ship in splinters burned;
Each horse lay stricken through.
The purple soldiers writhed and choked—
They coughed a ruddy smoke.

And facing certain bloody death,
The sun flamed up as bright as dawn
And burnt the sky with crimson breath.
And then as I looked on,
All heaven fled before the sun,
Before the scarlet sun.

Until a ghost, a shadow man,
The silhouette of Father Time,
Arose and with an iron hand
No fire could defy
Caught and slew the scarlet sun—
Slew the scarlet sun.

Then as it sank, the battle done,
The torn and twisted clouds
Bent and wrapped the tattered sun
In blue and purple shrouds.



All It Takes Is a Little Patience

by Valencia

*How could Nayara connect with someone
who didn't want her around?*

Nayara slumped in her seat, exhausted from presenting a thousand reasons why she should not be the one living with her grandmother for the summer. Unfortunately, nothing she said changed her mother's decision. Her mother had argued that as a senior nursing student, Nayara should be up to the task of caring for her grandmother. Besides, Aunt Nancy, who usually stayed with Grandma, was looking forward to going on a mission trip this summer. Nayara groaned as she buried her head in her knees.

Nayara's grandmother had an unfortunate tendency to turn everything she touched, saw, or said sour. She had a biting reply to every praise and an unwarranted criticism to every attempted act of kindness. Growing up, Nayara never liked spending time with her grandmother. Now, she had to spend a whole summer alone with her. *Maybe, she thought, it won't be that bad.*

It was that bad.

Nayara's arrival at her grandmother's house was only the beginning. In Bandung, Indonesia, it had been raining for two days, and gray clouds engulfed the skies, obstructing all attempts by the sun to shine. It was as if the sky knew exactly how Nayara



felt and refused to make things better for her. The wind bellowed through the trees in competition with the thunder.

As Nayara looked out the car window, she saw her grandmother's house at the end of the street. Unlike the other brightly lit houses nestled on the street, Nayara's grandmother's house stood cold and alone. People passing by might have thought it was uninhabited until they noticed a soft glow through a crack in the curtains. *It's going to be fine. I can do this.* She whispered a prayer in her heart—for strength, for patience, and for a way to get out of the situation. However, the car slowed to a stop in front of the house, and Nayara could only heave a reluctant sigh and step out of the car with an umbrella in one hand and her bag in the other.

After talking with her grandmother about plans to visit over the summer, Nayara's mother hugged her sulking daughter and ruffled her hair, whispering last-minute reminders of behaving herself. After her mother broke away from their hug, Nayara stood motionless, moving only to wave her mother goodbye as she drove off.

"Take your shoes off outside and wear these slippers in the house," her grandmother commanded the moment Nayara's mother drove away.

Her voice was harsher to Nayara than the roaring thunder outside. Nayara took off her shoes and followed her grandmother. She looked around the house—same old teak furniture, same dim lighting. The curtains were drawn, as always, and only one light in the living room was turned on. Her grandmother liked her house to be

as dark as possible. Nayara loathed the eerie mood her grandmother's antique furniture and dim lighting created.

Walking up the stairs to the guest bedroom, Nayara's grandmother outlined the house rules: no loud noises, no running, and always wear slippers to avoid making noise when walking around. Grandmother left Nayara to unpack alone, telling her to be ready for dinner at six. Nayara began to mumble an affirmation when the door slammed shut behind her. She sighed—her grandmother was still as distant as she remembered. She unpacked her clothes and books, then threw herself onto the bed.

"It's okay. Three months isn't that long," Nayara said as she stared at the ceiling.

When it was nearly time for dinner, Nayara forced herself up from the bed and took a deep breath. She tied up her long black hair and straightened her crumpled shirt. Checking her appearance in front of





the mirror, Nayara nodded to herself as if to say, *You can do this.*

She could hear the clanking of pots, followed by the clinks of ceramic bowls and metal spoons, as she walked down the stairs. As she entered the kitchen, she saw her grandmother scooping vegetable soup into two ceramic bowls.

“What are you standing there for? Take these,” her grandmother scolded Nayara.

“Yes, Grandma,” Nayara replied as she approached her grandmother.

Nayara could hear her grandmother mumble something about “youngsters” and “lazy” as Nayara brought the two bowls to the dining table. While she placed the two bowls across from each other, her grandmother walked into the dining room with a big bowl of rice. Nayara quickly took the bowl from her grandmother’s hands and placed it on the table. Her grandmother’s frowning face turned expressionless. *At least she’s not that unhappy.*

“Let’s eat!” Nayara took the seat that faced the window.

Her grandmother scowled at her action. “Your seat is on the other side.”

“Oh, sorry,” Nayara said as she bowed her head and moved to the other side of the table.

The pair ate their meal in silence. Nayara opened her mouth, but she did not know what to say. She offered to get rice for her grandmother only to receive criticism for not helping out in the kitchen. Nayara apologized and promised to help out next



time. When they finished eating, Nayara offered to wash the dishes.

“Are you sure you can do it?” Her grandmother gave her a side-eye as Nayara piled the dishes unevenly on top of one another.

Nayara’s smile faltered, but she composed herself and nodded. She took her grandmother’s bowl from her hands, stacked it on top of her own, and walked into the kitchen.

“Isn’t she belittling me a little too much?” Nayara whispered under her breath while scrubbing the dishes in the sink.

She walked past the living room on her way to her room. Seated on the sofa, her grandmother silently knit a white scarf. Nayara didn’t know her grandmother could knit. *Who is it for?* For a moment, her grandmother looked like the kind bespectacled, gray-haired grandmothers she used to see in children’s storybooks. All traces of her commands and ever-present scowl were gone. *Looking like that, Grandma doesn’t look that scary.* Nayara tiptoed back to her room.

The next morning, Nayara skipped down to the kitchen in her pajamas. She was resolved to make her grandmother look at her the same way she looked at the scarf.

“Good morning, Grandma!” Nayara grinned at her grandmother, who was stirring the contents of the pot on the stove.

“It’s this late, and you are still in pajamas? Kids these days,” her grandmother muttered.



Nayara's eyes widened at the comment. *It's only seven, and I'm not going anywhere. Why can't I dress comfortably? I'll change after breakfast.* Nayara wanted to defend herself with all those words but stopped herself. She hesitated, then left to set the table. Once again, they ate the meal in silence, the way her grandmother liked it. When they were done, Nayara stacked their bowls and washed the dishes in the kitchen.

“Once again, they ate the meal in silence, the way her grandmother liked it.”

Nayara returned to her room and went through the notifications on her phone, answering messages and browsing through social media. *Ding!* Her mother had sent her a picture. She knew

what it would be before she even opened it—a Bible verse with a blue, cloudy sky and a lake in the background—her mother's version of a good morning text. *1 Timothy 4:12, “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers . . .”*

“In word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity,” Nayara whispered to herself. Her mother had ingrained those words into her mind since she was a child. She had memorized them by heart, but putting the verse into practice was harder than she thought. As she mulled over the words, she thought about what her mother meant by reminding her of this verse today of all days. *Is this why she sent me here? To show Grandma how nice I am? For what?*

“I’ll take it as a challenge,” she whispered to herself. After changing out of her pajamas, Nayara walked down into the living room to find her grandmother, but the room was empty. She peeked into her grandmother's room but found it empty as well.



She looked around the house until she found her grandmother standing over some potted plants in her garden.

“Hi, Grandma! Would you like some help?” Nayara asked as she stood next to her grandmother.

“Just go to your room. Don’t bother me.” Her grandmother did not even glance at her.

“Can I just watch you? I promise I won’t bother you,” Nayara suggested, refusing to leave so easily.

Her grandmother hesitated, then shrugged before carrying the potted plant to the soil in the garden. Nayara watched her grandmother pat the plant into place and sprinkle water over it. If only . . . Nayara looked at the plant, then her grandmother. Suddenly, her grandmother rose from her position, and Nayara followed her back into the house.

“Go, play somewhere else. I’m cooking lunch,” her grandmother said, taking off her sandals before entering the house.

Nayara looked at her grandmother in disbelief. *Play?* Her grandmother’s words seemed to imply that she was a toddler who only knew how to play, not a college senior.

“Why don’t I help you cook lunch, Grandma?” Nayara asked as she remembered her promise at dinner.

Again, her grandmother hesitated. “Just don’t mess up my kitchen.”

Nayara’s grandmother shuffled back to her room to change while Nayara entered the kitchen. She was looking through the fridge when her grandmother walked in. She handed Nayara a cutting board, a knife, and some vegetables. Nayara took them to an



empty section of the counter and started working. Every few minutes, her grandmother came over to look at her, complaining that she was taking too much time or that she was not cutting vegetables properly. Nayara only giggled in response as those were the same complaints her mother had when cooking with her.

Once she had finished cutting the vegetables, her grandmother took them, telling her to set the table. She placed the plates across from each other and set a spoon and fork beside each one along with a glass of water. She glanced at the kitchen and watched her grandmother sauté the vegetables.

“Thank you for the meal, Grandma! These look really good,” she said after a prayer.

“Just eat,” her grandmother replied with the edges of her lips turned slightly upward.

Nayara smiled at her grandmother’s reaction and ate the food they had prepared together.

And that was their routine every day. They ate all three meals together, and Nayara followed her grandmother around for the rest of the day, offering help or watching her grandmother work. Slowly, her grandmother’s gaze seemed softer and her words did not sound as biting.

“Nara,” her grandmother called out one evening when they were sitting together in the living room. The lights were all on—the main light, the table lamp, even the chandelier.

Nayara looked up and smiled. Her grandmother still could not pronounce her name.



“It’s Nayara, Grandma,” she reminded her grandmother.

“You children have such difficult names,” her grandmother grumbled.

Nayara chuckled at her grandmother’s comment.

“Can you get that for me?” Her grandmother pointed to a thick, leather-bound photo album under the coffee table.

“This?” Nayara asked, pulling out the album.

Her grandmother nodded, her right hand reaching out for the album. Nayara’s eyes fixed on her grandmother’s. Her grandmother patted the empty spot next to her, and Nayara sat down, leaning on her grandmother’s side. Her grandmother opened the album and pointed out pictures, telling the stories behind each one. Finally, she pointed at a picture of herself with Nayara’s grandfather and their children.

“You children have such difficult names.”

“When your Uncle Lucas died, I thought that I would be okay—he’s in a better place now. Then, your Uncle Chris died, too,” her grandmother said with a sniffle, “and I told myself that it was for the best. But when your grandfather died, I believed God did not love me anymore.”

Her grandmother cried with the album in her hand while Nayara sat stiff on the sofa, stunned into silence. Her mother had told her how cancer had taken away the uncles and grandfather she never met, and she knew that Grandma did not like the family mentioning anything about God or going to church. However, she never knew that heartbreak was the



reason why. Nayara stroked her grandmother's back, listening to her ragged breaths.

"I thought He didn't love me . . . until He sent you to me," her grandmother said as she turned to look at Nayara. "Do you remember when you first came here?"

Nayara nodded. *How could I not remember?*

"I did not like your coming here, you know. And I know you didn't either," her grandmother said with a smile.

Nayara's cheeks turned red as her grandmother exposed her true thoughts. She grinned at her grandmother before looking away.

"I thought you would just bring trouble here, but I was wrong. You proved me wrong by being so patient. No matter what I did or said, you would stay by my side, eagerly watching and helping. I hope that you keep doing that. For me. For others," her grandmother said while patting her arm.



"I will," Nayara promised with tears in her eyes.

"When you become a nurse, I'm sure that you will change the lives of so many people."

Nayara nodded, but did not make a sound. If she did, she would have sobbed. Instead, she leaned over and hugged her grandmother. And for the first time, she felt Grandma really hug her back.

Her last day came like a wave crashing onto the beach—she knew it was coming, but there was nothing she could do but to stand still and let it come.



She had her bag packed, leaving the room empty. She trudged down the stairs and into the living room where her mother spoke with her grandmother.

"You ready?" her mother asked when she noticed Nayara standing at the foot of the stairs.

Nayara nodded, glancing at her grandmother. Seeing Nayara's red eyes, her mother offered to take her bag to the car, giving her time to say goodbye to her grandmother alone.

"I'm going to miss you so much," Nayara said as she hugged her grandmother, "but I'll be back for Christmas."

"And I will wait here for you," her grandmother said with a smile. "Here, a little gift."

Nayara looked at the white scarf in her hands. She held the soft yarn tightly and blinked back the tears welling up in her eyes. Nayara smiled at her grandmother as she walked toward the door, holding the scarf to her chest. She climbed into the car and waved at her grandmother until she could no longer see her. She looked at the scarf in her hands, noticing the small Nayara embroidered in a corner. Nayara held onto the scarf, the proof of how a little patience could go a long way. She wrapped it around her neck and chuckled to herself. *Well, at least she can spell it right.*



Memory Loss

by Lillian Hakel

I watch him forget me
And all his loved ones.
I realize he's forgetting
This last day, last week, last year, last decade.

I see the pain on his face
When he can't remember my name.
That same pain twists my heart
As I realize his memories are disappearing.

He forgets our summers spent together
Under the hot Oklahoma sunshine.
He forgets the time we spent
Reading, playing, talking.

On the good days, he remembers
The lessons he learned at his father's side
And the bedtime stories his mother told him
As he slipped into sleep's embrace.

On the bad days he forgets
His brothers, his sister, his children;
And he sees his son, my father,
As a stranger.

It breaks my heart to know that
He doesn't know who he is, where he is, when he is.

Because I know that one day soon,
His memories will leave with him.

It aches to have all the memories that
He's lost, but I'm thankful for them
Nevertheless. Because I will hold his
Memory until I can pass it on.





A Little Bit of Spice

by Naomi Pratt

*Sometimes a little unpredictability
is just what we need.*

Not everyone's engagement story can involve a flopping fish on a line, a sky gray with an impending hurricane, and homeless guys sleeping in a gazebo. But that's God's sense of humor and Isaiah's ingenuity for you.

My life in India was a riot of color, and college life—unfamiliar as it was—paled in comparison. My time as a missionary kid made me friendly but introverted. I was a quiet freshman who did my homework and promptly went to bed each night. Navigating the dizzying pace of college with my planner in hand, I became quite dependent on my structure and routine. The Lord must've known I needed a little bit of spice in my life.

That's when the missionary kid to Spain crashed into my life about three years ago. Over Thanksgiving break, my friends forsook me for the comfort of their own homes, and I was forced to hang out with my vivacious sister's equally vivacious group of friends. Isaiah, with gray-green eyes and black hair already flecked with gray, was a witty addition to this rowdy bunch. The nineteen-year-old was always the first to insert a sarcastic remark, go ice skating in an inflatable T-rex costume, or spontaneously whip out his best dance move—jello arms. He asked me to play checkers, and I said yes.



“Heart shapes, moon shapes, roses, and balloons,” he announced in a thick Irish accent.

Did this guy seriously recite a line of gibberish in a terrible accent?

I looked up from my red checker and scrunched my eyebrows quizzically.

“Top o’ the morning to ya, lass,” he said, smiling at my expression.

Never one to be deterred, I tossed back a comment I don’t remember in my best Scottish brogue, relying heavily on Pixar’s *Brave* for my pronunciation. Isaiah picked up on this switch, and we continued to butcher the accents together.

A week later, during another checkers game, I invited Isaiah to accompany my friend group and me to watch a dramatic production that was coming up. He agreed. Then I completely forgot to buy tickets.

“That’s okay,” he assured me. “How about we get dinner at Palms Grille on Friday night instead to make up for it?”

You might think this is where I realized that he was asking me out.

Wrong.

Later that evening, my sister Alyssa graciously beat into my oblivious mind that this was, in fact, a date.

Yes, that was just like me—oblivious ole Naomi. Oblivious to the fact that Isaiah let me win all our checkers games. Oblivious to the fact that the Indian flag he bought me to match his Spanish one was the first of many gifts. On its heels followed my very own set of checkers, a Starbucks gift card that I “won” in



a bet, a tiny Christmas tree, too many Arizona peach teas—you get the idea.

During the last weekend of the fall semester, I finally pulled my head out of the proverbial sand. We were sitting upstairs in our college's social area, the Commons, swapping songs with each other. Isaiah paused a song and said, "Hey, I have a question for you."

"Yeah, go ahead," I said.

"What would you say if I asked you to go out with me next semester?"

"Go out, like dating?"

"Yes, with your dad's permission, of course."

I waited a nervous beat, then said, "I'd have to say no."

My hands were clasped in my lap, white-knuckled and fidgety. He waited for me to finish.

"I'd already decided I don't want to date anyone freshman year. Plus, we've only been hanging out since Thanksgiving break. I don't exactly know you well enough yet. We can still be friends next semester, though."

"That sounds great. Can we text over Christmas break, if that's okay with you?"

"Yep, that sounds good. You have to send me pictures of your bird," I replied.

He laughed. "I hope that dumb bird dies soon. But sure, I'll send you pictures."

That's how it's done, ladies and gentlemen. Turn them down flat the first time around. I was served a little spice in my life, only to turn it down. Christmas break quickly arrived. As a gift from our grandparents,



Alyssa and I flew home to India, and I spent five weeks doing all my favorite things with my family. Isaiah and I had traded books to read over Christmas. Somehow, two hefty philosophy books were a fair trade for one slim novel. I found *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius palatable, but Plato's *Republic* was the stuff nightmares were made of—I made a point of telling Isaiah so. Apparently L. M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* wasn't his cup of tea, and he hurled humorous insults at "sappy romance novels" from the comfort of his tenth-floor apartment in Spain.

Christmas break and spring semester flew past in a blur, and we parted for summer break the best of friends with an unspoken understanding that we'd eventually start dating. I like to consider myself a deliberate creature—never one to jump in feet first without dipping in a toe to test the waters. It took me time to warm up to the idea of having a boyfriend, to allow that large intrusion into my steady life.

"It took me time to warm up to the idea of having a boyfriend."

Cut to August 24, 2019, just before the start of our sophomore year. Enjoying time with my parents before the semester started, Isaiah and I walked along Navarre Beach as the first rose-hued rays of sunrise peeked out from behind the clouds. We stopped to build a tiny sandcastle. I handled decorating it with bits of pearly seashells, and Isaiah supervised the engineering of the castle's moat.

"Hey, Naomi," he said. "You already know what I'm asking. Will you be my girlfriend?" I looked up and smiled, my eyes crinkling at the corners, partly from sleep-deprivation, partly from excitement. "What do I get out of this?" I teased.



“What do you want?” he asked, playing along.

“How about an Americano with caramel?”

He nodded, proud of the fact that he’d gotten me into drinking “good” coffee (ah, those European coffee-snobs). “I can do that.”

“Then yes, I’ll be your girlfriend.” His smile grew wider, and we walked along white sands, back to my parents’ spot on the beach.

After the semester began, life wasn’t always easy. Sometimes Isaiah and I didn’t like the spice we were served. Stressful issues with our families tugged at our time as schoolwork piled up. As soon as we conquered our friends’ arguments or a miscommunication with a teacher, another problem waltzed along. My sister left college, and Isaiah sat beside me quietly as I shed tears over her decision. I listened as he expressed his frustration about his new work supervisor. The one constant we shared, the structure amid the mayhem, was each other. We laughed, prayed, and walked together. I’ve lost count of the precious memories we’ve made, each one unique and colorful.

Throughout the year that COVID-19 turned the world upside down, the pandemonium seemed far away from us. Because my regular job at my grandparents’ house in Maine had closed, I stayed to work on my college’s campus. Isaiah had already planned to stay at college to work. For once, we spent our summer break together. Summer work was busy, stressful, and filled to the brim with long hours at work and drama in our friend group. It seemed like the only peace we found was in our relationship with God and with each other.



Fast forward to August 24, 2020. Two freshmen with shared experiences and different personalities had grown into two juniors, even-keeled, confident, and relaxed. The weekend before another semester started had been filled with the hassle of moving from summer worker rooms to our semester rooms. Many of our friends trickled back in, fresh from their time at home, eager to get the school year started. Isaiah and I were tired but glad that the summer was over and that we were finally upperclassmen.

Since that Tuesday was our dating anniversary, I requested to work a half day so we could spend the rest of the day together. His grandparents were in Pensacola to drop off his sister from her week of vacation at their house, and we were going out to dinner with them that evening.

Or so I thought.

I called my mom while my friend Emma curled my stubbornly frizzy hair.

"I feel like I'm overdressed," I fretted. "This dress is way too much. And why am I putting on a full face of makeup?"

"You look great," Emma reassured me. "You're going out, and you should look fancy." Mom concurred with Emma and told me to call her back after my date.

Pause. Mom never asks me to call her later the same day.

"Okay, I will. Love you, Mom."

I grabbed my wallet and phone, and Emma walked down with me to meet Isaiah's grandparents for the first time. Feeling ridiculous in my pink lace dress



and curled hair that was already starting to fall flat, I shook hands with them and exchanged small talk.

"I feel overdressed." I laughed, linking arms with his sister Abbey.

"You're done up really nice," his grandfather replied. "He'll be taking out a pretty lady." My heart melted a little at this compliment.

Instead of going straight to the restaurant, we pulled into a deserted parking lot near the pier overlooking the bay, and I turned a quizzical look toward Abbey. She just shrugged, smiling, and pointed toward the white Volvo that Isaiah liked to call Snowflake. I rolled my eyes and hopped out to meet Isaiah, who was resplendent in his beloved brown leather jacket.

"Hey, there. I thought we could do a bit of fishing before we go out to eat."

Pause. I was in a dress and heels, and the skies looked like they were about to pour buckets of rain thanks to a hurricane advancing near the area.

"Fishing?"

"You said you wanted to go fishing with me some time," he replied.

"Well, I—I suppose," I sputtered. I had never been fishing before and was nervous at the thought.

"Hey, you might want to turn around for this."

We walked over to an iron bench where a glass vase of a dozen roses sat next to a stereo playing our oldies playlist.

Two fishing poles leaned against the railing.

"I got you started, and I think there might be something on your line already." Isaiah showed me



how to reel in; and I, determined to prove I could be an adventurer, concentrated on reeling in the weight I felt on the end of the line.

“Hey, you might want to turn around for this,” I heard behind me.

I turned to see Isaiah down on one knee, his eyes shining and his face unusually pale.

“I had a speech ready, and I’ve forgotten every word. Will you marry me?”

That moment slowed down and completely stopped.

The gray sky above us began to sprinkle a warm rain. Louis Armstrong began to sing “La Vie en Rose.”

I stood stupidly, clutching to that fishing pole and staring at Isaiah.

“Well?”

“I—I, yes,” I whispered.

He stood, tugged the fishing rod out of my hand, and slipped a silver sparkle onto my finger. The rain fell in earnest now and mixed with my tear-filled eyes.

Eventually, we reeled in that poor gray fish and tossed it back. Isaiah laughed as he described how he was planning on proposing. “See that white gazebo over there? I rented that, but when I went to set up the string lights I got, two homeless guys were sleeping there. I didn’t want to wake them up, so I improvised with the fish.”

Life isn’t always picture perfect. Two missionary kids who grew up continents away won’t always enjoy a classic love song in the rain of an oncoming hurricane. But that’s my story. God knows just where to sprinkle in a little spice.



Juliet & Juliet

by Lillian Hakel



Commencement Contest Winner
Original Fiction

*What happens when what you love
becomes what you hate?*

Juliet rushed into room 114 at four o'clock sharp and plopped down into her desk. Her jagged breaths were a testament to her panicked run not to be late to her high school's Drama Club. The room was full of noise as everyone waited for Mr. Richards. Today was the most important announcement of the spring semester—Mr. Richards, the Drama Club's advisory teacher, was going to announce the spring production and cast list.

Blind auditions had been held last week, as Mr. Richards felt that that was the purest way to see an actor's true potential. The only hint had been *Shakespeare*.

Juliet loved Shakespeare's plays.

"Hey, Juliet!" Rosie, a loud sophomore with sharp cheekbones, called. "Have you talked to Oliver yet? Do you know what he saw in Mr. Richards's office?"

"No, I haven't seen him today. What did he see?"

"The scripts for *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet* were all on Mr. Richards's desk. I really, really hope he chooses *As You Like It*!" Rosie didn't wait for Juliet's reply but rushed to the next club member to share Oliver's findings.



Juliet loved Shakespeare's plays. Most of them, anyway. The only play she didn't like was *Romeo and Juliet*, which contained the character she was named after. Her parents had gone to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* on their twelfth date—the night her father realized he was in love.

"Please don't be *Romeo and Juliet*," Juliet whispered.
"Please don't be *Romeo and Juliet*. Please don't b—"

"What are you going on about?" Oliver asked as he dropped into his desk next to Juliet.

"Oh! Uhm, nothing." Juliet's cheeks tinted red; she hadn't thought that anyone could hear her. "Rosie told me what plays you saw, so I was wondering which one we'll do."

Mr. Richards strode in, cutting off Oliver's reply. "Good afternoon, my thespians." He stopped at his desk and swung his left arm above his head, a folder in his hand.

"Today! Today shall be most exciting, as I am sure you all know." He slowly brought his arm down till it was straight in front of him, pointing at the students. "In this very folder, I have the script and cast list for this spring's dramatic production."

Mr. Richards stood silent, letting the ticking seconds drag out the announcement.

"Juliet will be played by, well, Juliet."

"Mr. Richards?" Rosie, who was bouncing in her seat, finally broke the silence. "What play are we doing?"

With a flourish, Mr. Richards opened the folder and pulled a sheet of paper out. "*Romeo and Juliet*!" he announced in his booming stage voice.



Chatter filled the room as seventeen Drama Club members started talking, smiles on their faces. One person, however, wasn't talking. One person was missing a smile. Juliet sat silent amidst the noise, horrified that Mr. Richards had chosen *Romeo and Juliet*. Why couldn't it have been either of the other plays?

"Quiet down, quiet down," Mr. Richards called. "Don't you want me to read the cast list?"

Silence cut through the room as eighteen faces turned toward Mr. Richards.

"Romeo will be played by Oliver." That was no surprise—he was the best actor in the club. "Juliet will be played by, well, Juliet."

Juliet pasted a smile on her face as her friends congratulated her. But she couldn't focus on the rest of the cast list and ended up staring at the blackboard.

All she could think about was her mom.

* * *

"Congrats again, Juliet!" Rosie yelled as she walked out of the classroom.

Juliet had been waiting for the room to empty so that she could talk to Mr. Richards alone. She didn't want anyone to overhear her asking to change roles, or her friends would try to talk her out of it.

"Mr. Richards," Juliet called as she walked up to his desk. "I was wondering—Well, I know it's an honor to get a lead role like Juliet, but I was wondering if I could switch with someone? Maybe Rosie? She was amazing as Cleopatra in the fall production and—"



"Juliet, stop."

"What?"

"You're a senior; this is the last high school play you'll get to be in. Why do you want to give up the lead?"

"I just—" Juliet didn't know how to tell him that she hated the play, hated every happy memory it dragged up. "I just don't like *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Remind me where you're going to college in August."

"UC San Diego."

"And what are you majoring in?"

"Performing arts and stage design."

"So why do you want to give up the lead in your last high school production when you're going to one of the best theater programs in the country this fall?"

Mr. Richards glared at her. "You're not giving up the lead unless you have a good reason."

"I don't really have a reason," Juliet said. *At least, not one I can tell you*, she thought.

"Then I expect you in rehearsal on Monday."

Juliet mumbled goodbye and walked out.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Juliet pulled into the garage and parked her Jeep. She leaned into the back seat to grab her backpack but froze as tears blurred her vision. She swiped at her eyes with the rough sleeve of her sweatshirt. *How am I going to tell Dad I'm playing Juliet?*

Her dad could barely say Juliet's name on a bad day. How would he cope with seeing his daughter act in his wife's favorite Shakespearean play—the play they had



been watching when he realized he had met the love of his life?

Dad had been having more bad days than good since the funeral. It had been two months, one week, and four days; and she could really remember only one or two okay days since her mom's funeral.

Juliet drew in a breath and got out of her Jeep—there was no use putting off the inevitable.

“Dad?” she called as she walked into the kitchen.

The kitchen was cold and empty; only faint sunlight peeked through the curtains. Juliet hated it. She used to walk into an oven-warmed kitchen, the counters full of bread and cookies, with the scent of dinner sneaking out of the oven. Now Juliet sat at the kitchen table alone.

Juliet could still feel her mother's hands in hers—she and Mom used to sing along to the radio at the top of their lungs as they twirled each other around the kitchen. Dad would laugh at them, teasing their clumsy, dizzy steps and off-key voices.

Then everything changed.

It was a typical Thursday after school—Juliet and her mother were spinning around the kitchen. Dad was leaning on the counter eating cookie dough.

“Nick!” Mom laughed. “Stop eating that! That's for tomorrow's school bake sale.”

Dad pointed a cookie dough covered finger at Mom and opened his mouth to sass her back, but the smile slipped from his face.

Mom had stopped; stopped moving, stopped talking, stopped singing, stopped smiling, stopped holding



Juliet's hands. She was staring into the corner of the room, her eyes unfocused and cloudy. Her left arm was jerking erratically.

"Sylvia!" Dad leaped forward, arms reaching out to Mom.

She had started to sway again, but not to the rhythm of the music. Dad grabbed her shoulders just as her knees buckled and sent her careening to the hard linoleum floor.

"Juliet, call 911!" he yelled.

His shout startled Juliet from where she stood frozen and sent her running to the counter to grab her cellphone. As she dialed, she dropped onto the floor by her parents.

"911, what's your emergency?" a calm voice asked.

Juliet remembered answering question after question, sitting on the cold tile until ambulance sirens echoed down the street. Dad went in the ambulance with Mom, and Juliet followed behind in her Jeep. The doctors ran test after test to figure out what had caused the seizure. Juliet and her father were left in the waiting room, their worries and prayers bouncing off the sterile white walls that enclosed them.

Finally, a doctor came out and sat down with them. Juliet couldn't remember everything, just words that hung in the room—words like "complex focal seizure," "brain cancer," "aggressive," and "only days left."

That was two months, two weeks, and one day ago.

* * *



“Juliet?” Dad’s voice broke into her memories as he walked into the kitchen. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”

Juliet pulled her knees up to her chest and held herself. Tears finally slipped down her cheeks, leaving mascara stains in their wake. “I miss Mom. I miss talking about her. And I miss you.”

Dad opened his mouth, but no words fell out. He walked farther into the kitchen and held his arms out, stretched open for a hug.

“Come here, sweetie.”

Juliet stood up and walked into her dad’s arms for the first time in over two months. As he pulled her close, she let go of pretending to be strong, let go of

pretending to be okay, and let herself cry for the first time since the funeral. She felt her father’s shoulders shake as he let go too.

The pair pulled each other close as the sun slipped behind the

horizon and left the kitchen dark.

“What brought this on?” he asked, his voice scratchy from crying.

“The spring production was announced today. It’s *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Instead of pulling away and going silent again, he smiled. It was a fragile smile, almost as if her very breath would shatter it and cut them both with the shards. But he was smiling.

“Sylvia’s favorite,” he whispered.

“It was a fragile smile, almost as if her very breath would shatter the silence.”



"My part is Juliet, but I can't play her, not without Mom here," she said. "I don't want to hurt you."

Dad crumpled like a ball of paper before it was tossed into the trash. He seemed to shrink before Juliet's eyes. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I never wanted you to think that remembering your mom and what she loved hurts me. I don't want it to hurt you."

"We never talk about her. Sometimes you barely look at me. I thought—" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I thought maybe I remind you too much of her, that you don't want me around."

"No, that's not true. I know I haven't been here for you like you need. I'm so sorry about that." A sob shook him. "But I'm so proud of you, and I know your mom would be too."

"Really?"

"Really. You know, your spirit, the way you love so deeply, it's just like Mom. And just like Juliet."

"Like Juliet?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's why you were named Juliet. You see, Mom wanted you to love fiercely and never give up on what you wanted."

"I don't want to give up on playing Juliet. But I don't think I can get up on the stage without you and Mom there."

"It's your choice, Juliet." Dad pulled her close for another hug. "But if you take the part, I'll be there every night where your mom and I always sat."

* * *

On Monday, Juliet met with Mr. Richards before Drama Club and explained why she didn't want to be



in the play. He immediately offered to recast the lead, but because Juliet wasn't sure what she wanted, he offered her the week to think.

Nine weeks slipped off the calendar, leaving everyone at opening night for *Romeo and Juliet*.

The play's first act went quickly, and then the curtain was drawn for Act II, Scene II.

"Juliet," Rosie whispered. "you're up."

Juliet sucked in a deep breath and moved through the dark onto the stage. She leaned against the balcony railing as the spotlight found her in the dark, illuminating her with an ethereal glow.

"O Romeo, Romeo!" she lamented. "Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

Before she knew it, the curtains fell and ended the magic of the theater. With eyes shaded scarlet from crying over her beloved's death, Juliet changed out of her costume and headed back out to the stage.

The last time she had been on stage, Mom was in the second row, three seats in from the center aisle, with Dad right next to her. Tonight, a photo of her beautiful mother and a bouquet of her favorite violets filled the seat.

"You did amazing; Mom would have loved that," Dad said. "She would be so proud. I know I am."

Juliet felt a tear run down her cheek but smiled at her mother's photo. "Thanks. And thank you for being here."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." He picked up the photo and violets in one hand and held the other out to his Juliet. "Let's go home."



The Big Picture

by Danielle Vedrode

Sometimes it's hard to see the big picture.

Kaylie had just finished coloring a new picture for her mother. She sat on the floor next to her worktable covered in art supplies. Today she wore her favorite jeans, the ones she had colored on one time with a red marker she found. Hearts and butterflies crawled up her legs and around her pockets—small and precise, just like her. Her mother had gotten a sad look in her eyes for a moment when she saw the ruined jeans, but then she shrugged and smiled, the way she did when she pretended that she wasn't angry and that things were okay.

On her worktable, a stack of blank printing paper waited for her stories and pictures. She liked to draw what she saw around her and what she wished to see around her. Her mom and dad weren't happy again. They got angry a lot, but sometimes, sometimes she could fix it.

Sometimes if Kaylie shared her happiness, her parents got happy again.

Kaylie began drawing another picture. As her subject, she chose the happiest thing she could think of: a party. Her mother's favorite color was purple, so she colored some of the balloons purple. Her daddy didn't really have a favorite color; she would have to pick one for him—yellow. Her daddy wore his sweatpants in the picture because he liked to be comfortable, and her mother's hair was wavy and down around



her shoulders, instead of tied back in a braid or up in a bun.


When she heard a noise in the kitchen, Kaylie's shoulders tightened. Her crayon stopped moving, poised over the paper. Were they okay? Or was it starting again?

"I was going to tell you," her mom said in what she thought was a quiet voice.

"When? After you got the job?" Kaylie's daddy asked. He sounded as if he had caught her mom lying.

"You know what, honey? Probably."

Kaylie knew what they were talking about: her mom had come back from the bank with a job application.



Earlier, Kaylie had gone out to the kitchen where her mother had been looking over the bills with her checkbook open next to it. The job application lay off to the side. The logo at the top of the application wasn't for the bank, but instead for a fast-food restaurant that was in the same parking lot as the bank. Kaylie pictured her mother in an ugly polo shirt, wearing a headset. She went back to coloring, thinking that her mother looked better in dresses.

"I can take care of us. Don't worry about it."

"Why not?" her mother demanded.

"I've told you before, I can handle this, so just let me!"

Kaylie's fingers tightened around the crayon.

"Don't raise your voice at me." Her mother's voice shook.

"Am I not doing enough for you?" her daddy said accusingly.

"That's not what I said. Please. Just . . . let me help."

"I told you to stop worrying about it. Don't make me feel guilty."

"Don't make me your enemy," her mama retorted.

Kaylie shook her head at the paper and quietly kept on coloring. She made sure to stay in the lines. Maybe this picture would help.

"Why do you have to be like this?" her daddy said.

Kaylie got up and pushed the door to her room partly closed. She never shut her door all the way because that meant she couldn't see a way out of where she was, and she didn't like that. Her mama said that Kaylie had been like that since birth, and Kaylie believed her. Not having anywhere to go and hide was scary.

Her mama's voice would shake the next time she spoke. It always did. Kaylie heard it every time. She wondered why people who said they loved each other fought so much.

"I am not wrong for worrying. Shame on you for making me feel like I am."

"Don't talk to me like that."





"Shame on you," her mother repeated, putting emphasis into each word.

At her table, Kaylie colored faster. But she didn't have enough colors, she didn't have enough space, and she didn't know what else to draw. Around her room, she had everything in its place: stuffed animals arranged on the bed like a group of friends, a bed with a smoothed-out comforter and throw pillows with sequins on them, a bookshelf with the books arranged by the ones she liked best to least. Her clothes were in the hamper if they were dirty, put away if they were not. She had finished all her chores today. She had eaten her vitamins and didn't complain today. She wasn't noisy, and she wasn't disrespectful. But her colors weren't happy enough, and her picture wasn't good enough, not yet—she had to keep trying. She bit the inside of her lip and stopped when she remembered that her mother didn't like it when she did that. There were no tears in her eyes, she told herself—she was just coloring.

"Her mama said that they had a pile of debt."

Maybe if she did enough, they would stop being angry. Maybe if she was a better girl, they wouldn't have to worry so

much. She had to keep trying.

"I can't do any more than I'm doing, and you act like I'm not enough!" her daddy said. His voice was so, so mean.

"I never said any of that!" her mama answered. Why were they being so loud? Why were they so angry? A tear rose in Kaylie's left eye, and then another rose in her right.

"I'm doing as much as I can."



"No, you're doing too much. Let me help. I can do this."

"No." Her daddy's voice was flat.

"David!"

"I. Said. No."

There was a silence.

When her mother next spoke, her voice was cold.

"Okay, well, don't act like you're a martyr. You're working yourself to death, and you want me to watch. Shame on you," she said again.

Kaylie pulled another piece of paper out of the stack and drew her daddy and mama with stacks and stacks of money, and huge smiles on their faces. She drew a heap of rectangles off to the side to represent the bills. Her mama said that they had a pile of debt. With that in mind, Kaylie also drew a match in her daddy's hand, and fire over the rectangles.

"I don't need help!" her daddy shouted.

"Do not yell at me!" her mother shouted back.

Kaylie flinched and the tears slipped down her face. Her chin crumpled. She put her hand over it, trying to smooth it out like she did her bedsheets each morning. "No, no, no," she said under her breath. Good girls did not make noise.

Out in the kitchen, her parents' voices grew louder.

"I can do whatever I want—"

"Then do it, but you're not doing it here," her mama said.

"This is my house."

"Mine too. I pay for it too. My savings went toward the last two payments on this house, remember?"



Billis





“So you’re holding that over my head?” her daddy shouted. “Shame on you! Shame on you!”

Kaylie’s daddy slammed his fist down on the counter. She heard something made of glass fall over and break. She sucked in a breath and a small cry slipped out of her mouth, and then she couldn’t stop. She snapped her crayon in half because she didn’t know what else to do. The two halves fell on the carpet, and she put her hands over her mouth, bending over into a ball. She shut her eyes and cried into her jeans. She couldn’t fix anything, and she felt as if she were just in the way. She couldn’t be quiet enough or even make her parents smile. They were always so angry, and there was nothing she could do. Her cries slipped through her fingers and filled the room.

The noise had stopped in the kitchen. Kaylie tried to muffle her tears, but she couldn’t quiet herself down. Now Mommy would come into her room and be sad, and Daddy would go away angry, and then Mommy would get angry, and it would all be Kaylie’s fault. Her bedroom door squeaked open.

Her daddy had heard her.

Kaylie’s daddy lifted her up into a sitting position. Her face was red and blotchy, stained with tears and snot. She hiccuped and said, “I’m sorry I was loud. I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” She didn’t want them to be angry at her. She just wanted to quiet down and stop bothering everybody.

Her mama stepped around Kaylie and her father and lifted up one of the pictures. It was the one with Kaylie’s daddy and the pile of debt. Next to it was the picture of the three of them at the party. Kaylie’s parents looked at each other, stricken, listening to



their baby girl cry about things she shouldn't have had to hear.

Her daddy held her by the back of her arms until she stilled. His hands were warm and gentle, and they didn't let Kaylie go. For the first time, Kaylie saw her daddy cry. His chin crumpled, and he took a hand away to cover it for a moment before he spoke.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry I scared you. Daddy loves you." He nestled her against his side and rocked her back and forth, his chin on the top of her head.

For a while Kaylie's parents sat on her bedroom floor. Kaylie lay over the two of them now, half-asleep, worn out from crying and coloring. Her mother's fingers slowly rubbed their way through the hair behind Kaylie's ear.

"Babe," her daddy said, in a quiet voice. "You shouldn't have to pick up my slack. I should be able to take care of you."


"You take care of us every day. You never shirk. It's amazing," her mother answered. When her daddy snorted, her mama said, "Don't laugh. I'm serious about this."

"Sorry."

"I just want to help you. Please?"

Her daddy let out a sigh that came from a long way inside him.

"If things aren't better by the end of the month," her mother said, "I'll get a job. Deal?"



Another long silence, as the sunlight changed the white paint in Kaylie's room honey-gold. Kaylie pressed her head into her mother's hand.

The last thing she heard before she finally fell asleep in her mama's lap was her daddy saying, in the quietest voice she had ever heard him use, "Deal."



Deep Breath In, Deep Breath Out

by Gretchen Meyer

*Sometimes, a patient does more for the nurse
than the nurse for the patient.*

Red and blue flashed outside; sirens blared all around the hospital. I could almost drown it out as if it were my white noise machine at home. Almost. For some reason, the sirens and the noise and the lights were all too much. I stole away to my favorite broom closet so I could clear my head before seeing my next patient.

*Deep breath in—hold, hold, hold—deep
breath out. Repeat.*

The intercom's beeping interrupted my deep breathing and alerted me to a call happening on the floor. I walked to the nurses' station, praying the call wasn't for one of my patients.

"Edna. Room 506," the receptionist said lazily, handing me Edna's patient chart.

Deep breath in. Edna, the sixty-five-year-old fall risk, had a habit of making everything an emergency. The only thing she didn't treat as an emergency was the heart attack that had put her on my cardiac floor. I mentally prepared myself as I walked into her room.

"Hi, Edna. How can I help?" I muttered as I leaned against the door frame.



“You brought room temperature water, and I wanted cold water,” she informed me. “Back when I was a stewardess, if I brought a patron room temperature water, it would be thrown back on me. Now, Aisling, say thank you for not throwing this water on you.”

“Thank you, Edna,” I sneered in the politest way possible. “I’ll be right back with cold water.” I hurried from her room to the closest accommodation cart.

I glanced at my watch after dumping ice into the cup—the watchface glared 18:00 at me.

Maggie, my six-year-old niece, would be stepping onto the soccer field soon and playing yet another soccer game I couldn’t go to. Seeing her face fall at breakfast when I told her once again that I couldn’t go made me wonder if this nursing thing was worth it.

Just four more hours until I can try to sleep. These twelve-hour shifts were draining, but I had prepared for these long days because of my clinicals from nursing school the previous year.

What was more draining than twelve-hour shifts, though, was not getting any sleep at night as images of my cardiac patients flooded my brain. When I tried to sleep, patient after patient—hooked up to a ventilator, rushed from my cardiac floor, never to be seen again—clouded my brain and entirely drowned out the white noise

**“Just four more hours
until I can try to sleep.”**

that was supposed to quiet my mind. I would toss from one side of the bed to the other until I would eventually give up and watch reality TV. My mom doesn’t think that is the best strategy to occupy my brain, but watching a rich person get upset over



nothing is better than thinking about what more I could have done for those patients.

Water trickled onto my hand. I had overfilled the cup. *Great. This is marvelous.* After wiping my hands, I trudged back to Edna's room.

"Here you go, Edna." I gently placed the cup on her bedside tray. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"My hair hasn't been brushed in a while. Could you brush my hair?"

"Of course," I replied. "Just give me one moment, and I'll be back with a brush."

I walked to the nurses' station to get a hair brush. In nursing school, we studied how hair grows, the vitamins needed for hair growth, and the different diseases that the hair clues us into, but we weren't given labs or clinicals on brushing hair. Yet here I was. I moped back to Edna's room. *I didn't even brush the hair of Barbies growing up.* As I began brushing Edna's hair, the silence grew too loud for her.

"Back when I was a stewardess," she began with her favorite conversation starter, "we would blow dry our hair and curl our ends."

"Mhm," I replied, pulling the brush through a tangle.

"I got pretty good at using a hair brush, but after that heart attack, I just can't raise my arm high enough to brush it." Her fingers played with each other. The heart monitor made a longer beep than normal, and I focused on the line bumping up and down.

"Aisling." My name snapped my attention back to Edna. "What do you do when you're not at the hospital?"

Try not to think about my patients. Dream about being a naive college student again. Wish I had a boyfriend.

“Um—” I started.

“No verbal clutter, dear. That makes a person look dumb. You’re not dumb, Aisling.”

“Actually, I was thinking,” I corrected her. “Since I’m not married, I work a lot because they think that I can take extra shifts. So in my fake spare time, I try to hang out with my niece. I try to go to church or get coffee with friends, but they all have their own lives.” I found myself confiding in her, despite my previous inhibitions.

“You have a niece?” Edna’s face softened.

“Yes, her name’s Maggie. She’s six and full of spunk. I love her to death, but I’m usually too busy to spend time with her or go to her soccer games.”

“I remember when I was that busy—”





Back when I was a stewardess. I already knew where this was going.

“Back when I was a stewardess. I had just had twins, and my husband told me it was time to go back to work.”

Edna has kids? Why don't they visit?

“I was a different kind of busy,” she continued. “I had to fly so much, and it wasn't just across the United—ouch!” She croaked as the hairbrush came upon a nasty knot. I had almost forgotten I was brushing her hair.

“Edna, I'm sorry. I didn't realize.”

“It's okay. Where was I?” Edna asked, taking a deep breath.

“Traveling and being busy.”

“Oh, right. I delighted in being busy, but being up in the clouds made me miss my babies more. And because Gilbert couldn't stay home with the twins, he put them in a boarding school when they got to kindergarten.” Her eyes started to well on the sides, and she dabbed at them with her ring finger.

“I didn't get to go to their Sunday school events,” she continued, “and I missed their high school graduation on a layover in Dubai.”

“What I'm trying to say, Aisling,” she motioned for me to stop and tenderly grabbed my hands, “is you need to—”

BEEEEEEEEEP! The heart rate monitor screamed at me, and Edna's hand went limp.

Wait—what?



Quickly, I slammed my hand on the blue button on the wall and pushed the bed flat.

“One. Two. Three.” I started to count out loud to thirty for chest compressions. *Is she responding? Am I pressing too hard?* Suddenly the nurses were inside with a crash cart, and they talked too quickly for my ears to pick up on anything.

“Get out of the way, Aisling!” the surge nurse shouted at me as she rubbed the two metal paddles together.

It was far too crowded near Edna, and I didn’t have a job in the room. I stepped out into the hallway and sat with my back against the wall and my knees up to my chest. I had just been holding onto Edna’s hand! I tried to clear my head and process what I had just witnessed—my first heart attack.

“What happened?” the charge nurse asked, jogging toward the room.

“One minute Edna was talking to me, holding my hand, giving me advice, and the next minute the vital monitor was screaming at me. I tried chest compressions, and then the surge nurses came in with the crash cart and—”

I heard “up the charge” yelled from the other room, and all the memories came flooding back of all the other patients that I couldn’t help. *Not Edna too.*

My whole body tensed. I took a deep breath and just prayed.

I prayed for the thoughts to go away.

For Edna to be okay.

For the other nurses to know what to do.



I faintly heard the surge nurses call me back inside to add notes to Edna's chart. I hesitated before I entered. *Deep breath in—hold, hold, hold—deep breath out.*

"Okay, I'm ready," I said as I grabbed my pen.

"Edna's heart went into AFib. We shocked her with two hundred volts, after not responding we shocked her with three hundred volts, and now she's once again stable." The beeping monitor confirmed his statements.

Edna lay there still and quiet. Her hair was messed up. She would hate to see it. The charge nurse told me to check on my other patients, but it was hard to focus on anyone else. Every time I heard the intercom go

**"Her hair was messed up.
She would hate to see it."**

off, my pulse quickened, fearing it would be another code about Edna. I found myself walking past Room

506 constantly in the last two hours of my shift, but she was still resting.

The end of my shift came, and I had to leave her overnight. That night I tossed and turned, hearing the faint noise of a heart monitor flatlining. The sounds of the tropical jungle once again could not drown out my thoughts, so on went the TV. I awoke in a cold sweat the next morning at 10:00. I decided to drive to the hospital—on my day off—to see Edna.

I peeked into Room 506 and was delighted to see Edna sitting up in the chair next to her bed, trying to paint her nails.

"Edna, what are you doing?" I asked as I strolled inside.



“My nail polish chipped during whatever happened yesterday. Can you believe that? A fresh top coat, yet the sides still chipped. Oh, Aisling, that was frustrating.” She reached her hand forward. “My hands are a little shaky, so I’m flooding my cuticles. Could you help me?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, grabbing the little black lid. I heard the steady rhythm of the heart machine as I focused on not getting the emerald green paint onto her skin—that would not make her happy. After the final top coat was applied, Edna looked at me fondly.

“Why did you come in on your day off? You know I have other nurses, right?” Edna asked me.

“Yeah, I know. But before everything happened yesterday, you were trying to tell me something, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it. What was the advice you were trying to give me?” I finally asked.

Her face scrunched as she thought about it. Her eyes lit up with the epiphany.

“Aisling,” she said with the warmth of a summer day, “you need to invest in Maggie. Work will come and go. Money is made to be spent. Spend it on Maggie, and make those memories.”

We talked for a while, and then she fell asleep. I sat there and pondered what she had to say. With Edna sleeping there, I knew that I would have more time for her to give me sage advice—many more days of hair brushing, and who knows, maybe even more nail painting. I left the hospital determined to make it to Maggie’s next soccer game. Maybe my life did not need to constantly focus on the people I couldn’t help, but on the people I could.

REFLECTING GROWTH





Three-Foot-Eight

by Benjamin Bostwick

There was no way I would let my little sister beat me.

I was three feet, eight inches tall. I don't remember how old I was. It's unimportant anyway. What is very important is that I was a three-foot-eighter—willful, boyish, and ever-so-slightly competitive.

I would count how many branches high I could climb on trees to make sure my siblings did not climb higher. I would make up board games with so many rules that only I could play them correctly. I would smother my infant relatives in stuffed animals because I wanted to contribute more love than my other siblings. This spirit brought me to unstable heights and solitary gametimes. And though my infant relatives were frequently relocated beyond my loving reach, my spirit of competition stayed with me everywhere—the backyard, the schoolyard, the grocery store. The venue did not matter. In one particular instance, it accompanied me to a large public pool.

To my three-foot-eight self, the pool epitomized excitement and challenge. It was like a giant bowl of cyan Jello—wiggling on top, flat on the bottom, and transparent all the way through. It was an upgrade from the ocean, as it presented no danger from marine animals, rip currents, or spring breakers. The pool quickly became the centerpiece of my summer.

Which was ironic, since I couldn't swim.



But I was at the pool to fix that problem—to take swim lessons. Ostensibly, at least. My mom had decided that her human offspring needed to obtain this fishlike quality. Living in Florida emphasized the great need for such a skill and offered plenty of opportunities to practice it. To teach us how to swim, my mom connived with several other moms to form a swim lesson conglomerate. The entire mom community brought their small children to the large pool. By common consent, someone else’s mom served as “swim teacher.”

However, “swim teacher” proved incapable of restraining twenty hyperactive three-foot-eighters for any purpose, let alone for swim lessons. And we three-foot-eighters knew it. To us, “swim lessons” meant splashing each other, blowing foamy bubbles, and paddling around on our squeaky plastic inner tubes, which we called floaties. Whether patterned with pink petunias or

featuring flamboyant frogs, these floaties were our ocean liners to bear us across the great depths of the pool. The universal verdict of three-

foot-eighters was that the most formidable ocean to cross was the dreaded four-foot-deep section. But the few who crossed that water would achieve the ultimate distinction—they would touch The Line.

To our moms, The Line was simply a string of buoys that marked off a swim lane in the four-foot section. But in the eyes of a three-foot-eighter—especially one who could not swim—The Line was a great new frontier. Each day, I would board my galleon floatie and sail like Columbus across the fearsome four-

“My mom had decided that her human offspring needed to obtain this fishlike quality.”



foot Atlantic to reach my New World of bobbing plastic pontoons. And upon my return, what praise was heaped upon me by my countrymen, my fellow three-foot-eighters! The voyage to The Line quickly became a contest to see who could soonest and most readily brave the seas. Being quite competitive, I aimed to lead.

Soon, however, entire convoys were traveling overseas with such regularity that the once-great adventure of touching The Line became commonplace. A passing glance, a nod—these became the only rewards for risking the peril of the four-foot sea. Competition became pointless, and I promptly abandoned the venture. All my mind's imaginary awards had been won (by me, of course). I was content to leave The Line for others to enjoy.

Until one fateful day.

It began as usual. I took to the three-foot seas to roam. My little sister Catherine was also treading those waters. She was three feet, four inches tall. Three-foot-four.

During an afternoon of aquatic activity, I overheard Catherine as she talked to her friends on the other side of the pool. She made a statement that would change my life:

“I touched The Line.”

The cynic inside me immediately scoffed. *She touched The Line? So have we all! There's no accomplishment there. She probably just scooted out there on a floatie. That earns no boasting rights.* Yes, she must have used a floatie. I turned to confirm my suspicion.

She was not wearing a floatie.



I was stunned. Somehow, she must have touched The Line without using a floatie! Impossible, and yet—I looked again. There was still no floatie.

My mind whirled. She had touched The Line without a floatie! History had been made that day. Victory had been won—not by me, but by my little sister. My three-foot-four sister had braved the four-foot ocean to touch The Line, without using the floatie vital to such an endeavor. She had beaten me to a milestone of progress.

But I determined not to be outdone. My three-foot-eighter logic came to my aid: *If she's only three-foot-four, and she can touch The Line without a floatie . . . Well, I am three-foot-eight! I am taller. I can do it too.* I nodded in approval, firmly planting both my feet on the three-foot floor and readying myself for the trek into more dangerous waters.

Then a different voice echoed from the back halls of my brain: *You may be taller than your sister, but you*





are still only three-foot-eight. That water is four feet deep. You will still drown in it.

The first voice rapidly replied, *But if I could drown, being three-foot-eight, Catherine would have drowned in her attempt. She obviously did not drown: look at her standing there, without a floatie. I just need to do the same thing, and I'll be fine. I don't even need to swim; I just need to walk out and touch The Line. Without a floatie! I have to take the opportunity, or she'll get all the glory. If I can't be the first, at least I'll be the second. What an accomplishment that would be!* I peered at my floatie as it rested on the poolside. I could be free from that crutch at last!

The second voice answered. *Think! Why is it an accomplishment to touch The Line without a floatie? Because you'll die if you try. You know you can't swim.*

I looked out toward The Line, then turned back to see my clearly alive sister splashing happily in the three-foot section. *Catherine can't swim either, and she made it just fine.*

"The first voice said nothing. I think he must have drowned. I know my pride had."

Let's not talk about Catherine right now—let's talk about you. No matter what you think she did, you can't do it.

Oh, yes I can!

The voice's persistent discouragement only further entrenched my resolve. I prepared to cross the four-foot ocean without my traditional inflatable seamount. The second voice kept talking, but I ignored him. He was getting in the way of my victory. Besides, he was quite unreasonable. I had an example of perfect success set before me, and he refused to see it.



The voyage began. Settling my bare feet on the gritty ceramic floor, I stared out toward my goal. There lay The Line, bobbing above the four-foot depths. A new glory surrounded it. I puffed out my chest and marched toward it. My floatie remained behind me on the edge of the pool—The Line lay ahead in the four-foot section.

I pumped my arms heroically through the water as I strode to the edge of the safe, well-traveled three-foot section. On the slick tiled wall, a stark black marker indicated the beginning of the transition zone, a full three-and-a-half feet deep. Being a three-foot-eighter, I was confident that I could survive in that sea. Even the tiny second voice agreed. *But don't go any further*, it warned. *You know you are too short. You are only three-foot-eight.*

The first voice spoke louder, though. *Look! You are already halfway there. Nothing can stand between you and the great achievement now. You will touch The Line without a floatie!* Truly spoken—in just fifteen more feet, The Line would be in my grasp.

My face shone like sunshine on water as I traversed the three-foot-six section. The water became warmer and more vibrant as it rippled around my chin. My feet plodded on the gradually sloping floor, pushing me on to destiny—to victory! Ten feet away now.

One step pressed against the pool floor, launching me upward. I floated downward again, extending my other foot. Nothing met that foot. Nothing stopped my fall.

I went underwater!

I, the three-foot-eighter, was in the four-foot section. Without a floatie.



And I could not swim.

Water entombed me. I swung my arms, kicked my legs, tried to get to the surface. Upward I went, and I felt air on my face again. I opened my mouth to let out a scream, but I let in water instead. Gravity dragged me back down into the ocean. I flailed about, hoping to rise. My lungs burned, both from absence of oxygen and presence of chlorine. But none of my gyrations could raise me high enough to gasp, to cough. Forget The Line—where was the waterline? My hands were in the air; if only I could get my head there. But all of me was falling. I dipped under—

Powerful arms grasped me, hoisting me with colossal strength far above the water. My herculean mother had rescued me. By herself. The lifeguard had not even left his chair.

After an adequate reunion with breathable substance, I sputtered my profuse thanks, staring through waterlogged eyes at the wonderful airy world.

**“Dying is, in fact,
bad for your health.”**

From my raised perch on my mother’s arms, I peeked over at The Line floating placidly a mere foot away. I tapped it timidly. Whoopee. Victory.

Mom bore me back to the three-foot section and sat me on the edge of the pool. For the rest of the afternoon, I huddled there coughing, burping, and wheezing. I noted that water can make beautiful music when channeled through a waterfall or riverbed, but it cannot play the windpipe in any pleasant fashion. Once my lungs had returned enough water to the pool for me to speak, the maternal interrogation began.



“Benjamin, what were you thinking?” The question was accompanied by a certain shake of the head. Clearly, Mom was sure I had *not* been thinking.

But I *had* been thinking. I explained my reasoning. “I heard Catherine say she touched The Line. She wasn’t wearing a floatie, and I thought since I was taller, I could do it too.” The goal seemed justified, the logic impenetrable.

My mom sighed deeply. She shook her head again. “Benjamin, Catherine used a floatie.”

Oh.

That was how she did it. Now it all made sense.

And I felt like an idiot.

I told you that it couldn’t be done! proclaimed the second voice in my head. The first voice said nothing. I think he must have drowned. I know my pride had.

Ten years passed before Catherine finally found out about her role in my life-threatening venture. She remembered none of it herself. Hearing me tell the story, she still cannot understand how I interpreted her casual conversation as a challenge.

Now, as I stand a full two feet higher than I did when I nearly drowned, I wish I could say that I have never again taken a challenge too readily or too far. Unfortunately, to make that claim would be like . . . well, like trying to touch The Line without a floatie. But that near-death experience did teach three precious lessons to my youthful self. First: dying is, in fact, bad for your health. I used to believe this truth merely academically; now, I believe it from experience. Second: a deadly experience can be quite educational, especially to unusually dull



pupils. Call us dense, if you like; the term is doubly appropriate, as we also tend to sink underwater. And third: competitiveness must be bounded by reason. Otherwise, it can be fatal—especially if you're three-foot-eight.



A Bowl of Chili

by Lillian Hakel

*For our family, fall meant many things,
especially a warm bowl of chili.*

When I could see my breath hang in the air, when the trees were the color of the bonfires that lit up the night, and when the last of the pumpkins and squashes were picked from the garden, I knew it was fall. Fall meant many things to me, from the start of school to a bowl full of chili.

Mom cooked for the season, a tradition which meant summer was full of cold pasta salads, sandwiches, and grilled hamburgers. Meals were eaten between weeding the garden and feeding the chickens instead of at a set time. Often, Mom, Dad, my brothers Greg and Andy, my sister Shanna, and I would all eat at different times—whenever we had a free moment to run inside. But fall was different.

When the cold weather rolled in, our family schedule changed. It was now focused on school and work. The frosted air meant an end to gardening and mowing the lawn. Outside chores changed from an all-day list to the bare minimum, like taking out the trash and feeding the chickens. For us kids, school became the monster that gobbled up the hours of our day. Mom was inside more, helping us struggle through long division and book reports.

The house was now warmed by whatever Mom was cooking. Loaves of bread, batches of biscuits, and pot roasts with carrots and cabbage filled the oven. Pots



of thick stews and goulashes would simmer on the stovetop all day long. The house filled with delicious smells that tortured us as our stomachs started to grumble. But my favorite days were when the Crockpot was full of chili.

The recipe was a little different every time Mom mixed it together. Some days the Crockpot would be full of black beans and hamburger meat. Other days it would be pinto beans and corn or red beans and ground turkey. But no matter what ingredients Mom would toss in and let bubble all day, it was always delicious.

**“Sometimes a job
would keep him until
ten or eleven at night”**

After school and chores were finished for the day, it was often my job to set the table for dinner. I cleared the table, swept the floor, and then grabbed a

worn red dishrag from the bottom cupboard to wipe down the table. The table was the center of our home, and its scarred wood kept a record of over a decade’s worth of science experiments, cookie making, and art projects. Once the wood was clean, I grabbed placemats from the linen shelf. For nights when there was a bubbling Crockpot of chili, I added a placemat, bowl, spoon, cup, and napkin to each spot.

Once the table was set, I was free to read until dinner time. Dinner varied on when Dad got home—if he made it to dinner. He ran his own heating and air business, and he was kept busy when the Wisconsin winter made it too cold for furnaces to keep up. Sometimes he would come home from work around five—sometimes a job would keep him until ten or eleven at night. On those nights, Mom always filled a bowl for him first and set it on the stove to cool



down during dinner so she could warm it up when Dad got home.

The nights when Dad made it home early were my favorite. He would walk in the door and pull Mom into a hug—unless he was dusty from work and Mom sent him to the shower first. Then he'd wash up, change into clean clothes, and relax until dinner.

Once dinner was ready, Mom called us all into the kitchen, where we sat down around the scarred table and prayed. Then we took turns getting up for chili. Mom would stand at the counter and help Andy and me fill our bowls and then her own. Shanna and Greg went next. Finally, Dad went last—he was always content to sit and wait for us to, as he would say, “clear our rowdy selves away from the food.” Plates were filled with thick slices of cornbread, and cups were filled with steaming coffee or chilled water.

Once we all sat, the talking began. Dad told us about his jobs that day—about odd clients, weird houses, and adorable pets. Mom would catch him up on the happenings of our day and what we all had accomplished.

Slowly the bowls of chili emptied as bites were stolen between sentences. As the conversation dwindled, chairs were shoved back and emptied. Mom and Dad would steal a few minutes alone in their room to talk as we kids started to clean up. I helped clear the table, Andy swept, Shanna washed the dishes, and Greg dried the dripping stack of bowls. Snippets of Mom and Dad's conversation would wind their way through the thin walls and join us in the kitchen.

As I grew older, things started to change.



My grandfather came to live with us for several years bringing our number from six to seven, but, eventually, he had to move into a care facility when it became dangerous for him to be alone. Shanna went off to college. Greg enlisted in the Navy. And now that Andy and I were older, Mom went back to work.

I took over a lot of the household chores, including cooking.

I still set the table, but for four now instead of seven. And it was my turn to fill the Crockpot with red or black or pinto beans, hamburger meat or turkey, corn, tomatoes, jalapeños, spices, and all the other ingredients. The first few batches didn't turn out quite as good as Mom's, but, slowly, my chili became tastier.

Years have come and gone; the ingredients that fill the Crockpot are ever changing, and the number of chairs around the table vary day by day. But when my breath hangs in the air, when the trees are the colors of bonfires, the Crockpot is pulled out, ready to cook another delicious dinner. And whoever is home will still be drawn to the table with the promise of a bowl of chili.





Phantom Pain

by Justin Rickard

Would past achievements, safety vests, and grandpa visits help Austin discover his new dreams?

The sun had not yet risen when Austin scanned his card at the turnstiles. A cup of Folgers coffee in one hand and a half-gallon water jug in the other, he shouldered through the revolving metal doors.

Another day, another dime. Another ten hours to smell the smells of old-school American industry: dust, diesel fuel, propane, axle grease, and burnt metal. Another ten hours to wait for the next truck frame, the next break, and eventually—the final whistle.

Another ten hours until freedom. Honestly, it was worse than high school.

His station was the first on Final Line. On his way there, he walked by Cabs and Sub-Assembly. He passed dozens of people, but he ignored them—just like he ignored the pain in his leg: the persistent, dull ache that wouldn't go away. Nobody spoke to him. Either they knew better, or they didn't care.

The first whistle blew. The trucks moved down the line, jolting and lethargic.

Austin rammed little foam earplugs deep into his ear canals and motioned to the guys at frame build. "Let's go, y'all! Sunny, Carl, we're ready!"

Carl gave him a thumbs-up and grabbed the hoist remote. Overhead, a large, box-like steel truck frame



hung from a hook and chain. Slowly it descended, coming to rest on the two axles already carefully placed in the station. Austin chose an impact driver and went to work. Through his hearing protection, he could still hear the driver impacting like a machine gun. On and on it pounded, blurring the rest of the world like a lens out of focus.

“He worked efficiently and mindlessly.”

He worked efficiently and mindlessly; that was the only way to do the job. He found nuts and bolts tedious to

concentrate on, and he sought relief in imagination. Instead of power tools, he held a football; instead of steel-toed boots, he wore cleats; instead of Folgers, he drank Gatorade.

A red, slanting light fell across his workstation. The sun was up, shining through the giant warehouse entrance. He was halfway to his first break—only nine hours left in the day.

Then he would make his way home from this place, this giant beast, that chewed up the minds and bodies of men and spit out awkward, ugly hunks of stinking steel. He would shower, eat, and go to bed. He couldn't wait.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. “They want you at the management office.”

He had been expecting this. It was his ninetieth day.

After a meeting with his supervisor, lunch came soon enough. He washed the grease and dirt off his arms at the community sink in the restroom. As he was leaving, old Lonny shuffled in.



Lonny worked “down the line,” and had the distinction of being the only worker Austin liked. With an incredulous expression, a pot belly, and teeth that stuck out the front of his mouth, he seemed a humorous version of deranged.

“Well, Austin, there are bad days in this place, and there are worse days,” Lonny said in his typical squeaky voice. He made a face that was neither a grin nor a grimace but a combination of the two. His shoulders, hands, and chin sagged collectively.

“Is this a bad day or a worse day?” Austin asked.

“This is one of the worse ones.”

Austin grabbed a paper towel. “Why?”

“I’m sixty-seven today.”

Austin waited, thinking there must be more coming, but there wasn’t. After a few seconds, he tossed his paper towel into the trash. “Happy birthday and I’m sorry,” he said as he turned to the door.

Suddenly, a sharp, electric pain shot up his left calf. Austin jolted spasmodically and then half leaned, half fell against the wall. He bent over double, rubbing his leg vigorously.

“You okay?” Lonny asked, eyes wide.

“M’okay!” Austin snapped through ground teeth.

“Well, ya look like you’re having an episode.”

Lonny thrust his hands into the sink up to his elbows. “Sports injury?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Lonny chuckled, and his face wrinkled from ear to ear. “Just wait till you’re sixty-seven. After thirty years of the same old thing, everything starts falling apart.



You have to accessorize just to come to work—knee pads under your pants, inserts in your shoes, and baby powder in your—”

“I think I get the idea,” Austin hastily interrupted. “Thanks for the upside.” He grinned a little in spite of himself as he limped off. But the good humor didn’t last long. In minutes, his expression was as sour as ever. The fact was that Austin hated the factory, probably more than he’d ever hated anything. Deep down he knew no amount of quirky jokes would change his life circumstances.

Austin got home at five o’clock. There was a pizza in the oven; the aroma met him at the door. A sitcom played on the TV with the volume turned down. His

“Deep down he knew no amount of quirky jokes would change his life circumstances.”

mother was relaxing on the couch after a hard day at her job. She smiled as he walked in.

“How was work?” she asked.

“I put axles on truck frames.”

Austin set his empty water

jug on the coffee table and sat down on the love seat. “Thrilling.”

“Come on, there had to be something interesting that happened today. Think real hard.”

“Nope—well, finished my probationary period. Not a temp anymore.”

“Oh. So, you’re full-time now.” She drew her eyebrows together in a look of general disappointment. “I guess that means college is off the table for another year?”

“Yep.” Austin closed his eyes and put his hands behind his head, hoping his mother would just let the conversation stop there. It was a vain hope.



“Three generations of engineers and you take a lousy factory job!”

“It’s honest work!” Austin threw his arms in the air, indignant. She had done it now.

“But you could do so much better! You’re way too smart to just do the same thing over and over again all day long! How do you not get bored to death?”

“I think about football.”

She sighed—a mixture of pity and frustration.

“Football is not everything.”

“It was to me.”

“That was two whole years ago, Austin. It’s time you moved on. Just listen to me! I was looking at KU’s website today, and they’re offering academic scholarships through the—”

“Mom!” Austin cut her off. “Forget about it. I’m not going to college. It’s just not worth it!”

The oven beeped and startled them both.

Austin jumped up. “I’ll get it.” Anything to end this conversation.

Austin was a pizza addict; he gobbled up the pizza, licking his fingers in pure delight. When the last slice was gone, he leaned back on the love seat and sighed in content. Across the room, his mother nibbled away at a chicken patty wrapped in a lettuce leaf. She watched him closely. It was obvious from the devious tilt of her chin and the sparkle in her eyes that she was formulating some motherly, last-ditch strategy to make him see things her way. Then something occurred to her and she smiled mischievously.



The sitcom came to an end and Austin's mom flipped off the screen. "When was the last time you visited Grandpa?" she asked.

"I don't know, Christmas maybe. Or New Year's. About that time."

"You should probably go visit him again."

"Yeah, probably." Austin yawned and settled deeper into the love seat.

"I mean tonight."

"What? Are you kidding?" Austin sat up straight, fully awake. "It's six o'clock and I have work tomorrow."

"Then you better hurry. And take a jacket. It's still a little chilly out these nights."

Austin groaned and muttered under his breath, but he didn't want to start another argument. "Yeah, okay, whatever." He hauled his unwilling body off the love seat and grabbed his leather jacket from the coat closet.

Austin hated the nursing home. The place was kept warm so the residents didn't freeze from bad circulation. The moist heat made him feel sticky. It always smelled bad, too, like the smell of death.

He knew where to go. He'd been there a couple times before. He knocked on the door of Room 402 and let himself in. Grandpa sat in his recliner with his back to the door, watching TV with a dull, expressionless face. No pleasure, no sadness, nothing. He hadn't heard the knock, but Austin had come to expect that.

Austin set his leather jacket down on the back of a chair. "Hello, Grandpa, it's me!" He almost shouted at the old man.



For a minute, Grandpa didn't move, as if the sound waves took a long time to reach him. Then, weighed down by an immeasurable gravity, Grandpa turned, one degree at a time, until he was looking Austin straight in the face. He squinted through his bifocals. Then his face lit up.

"Is that you, Austin?" he exclaimed, his words tumbling out in slow motion.

"Yes, Grandpa, it's me." Austin sat on a small sofa next to the recliner.

"It's so nice to see you! I feel like I never see you anymore. You're off doing so many exciting things you don't have the time to visit your boring old grandpa."

"You can't afford to be left behind."

"Nah, how could I be too busy to visit you? I love visiting you. You're the best!"

"Oh, that's nice of you to say, but I know how it goes." The old man chuckled in his throat. "You blow them all away on the field, and then they never leave you alone. The girls all love you, the boys all worship you, the colleges are all calling your phone, trying to sign you onto their football teams. But it's your life, and I'm happy for you. Just make sure when you do finally choose a college you choose a good one. Have you got one picked out?"

Austin looked at the floor and unconsciously felt his left calf. "No—no, I haven't," he said.

"You haven't?" The old man was shocked. "I know I wouldn't be able to think of anything but college ball! Just think about it, Austin! A full ride! Campus stardom! Even a possible draft spot! You better get moving, Grandson. You can't afford to get left behind."



"No, I can't let that happen," Austin whispered.

"Not if you want to do anything with your life!"

Grandpa hadn't heard him. He just continued with his speech, slowly and sincerely shaking his head. Then he noticed Austin's leather jacket. "I hope you're not still riding that thing."

"Huh?" Austin looked up from the floor. "Oh, no, I gave that up a long time ago."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I can't tell you how upset I was when your parents let you buy a motorcycle. I thought to myself, 'This kid's gonna hurt himself, I just know it,' but here you are, safe and sound."

Austin turned a little red, but Grandpa failed to notice. The old man gabbed on and on about high school football, the dangers of motorcycles, the advantages of a college degree. Most of what he said was repetitive. Many things he said five or six times. Austin just nodded to the ebb and flow of the conversation, not really engaged.

"It was a big world to face alone."

Finally, Austin looked at his watch. It was quarter past seven. He had stayed long enough to satisfy his mom. Ignoring Grandpa's protests, Austin gave the man a hug and unceremoniously left the room. Grandpa followed him with his eyes as the door swung shut, hands hanging limply at his sides.

Austin was halfway to the car before he realized he had forgotten his jacket. He returned to find Grandpa still staring at the door, confused, as if he were looking for something but couldn't remember what.

Then Grandpa's face lit up. "Is that you, Austin?" he exclaimed, his words tumbling out in slow motion.



“Yes, Grandpa, it’s me.” Austin snatched up the jacket.
“I just came back for the jacket.”

“It’s so nice to see you! I feel like I never see you anymore. You’re off doing so many exciting things you don’t have the time to visit your boring old grandpa.”

“Well, I can’t stay. Visiting hours are over, Grandpa. Goodbye.”

“So when—”

Austin slammed the door shut. Something deeply selfish, bitter, and unfeeling was welling up within him, infuriating him.

It wasn’t fair.

It wasn’t fair for Mom to make him listen to an old, senile man’s babblings. It was painful enough to be reminded each day at work how his life could have been different—should have been different.

It wasn’t until Austin reached his car that his breathing slowed to a normal rate. For a long, long time he sat in the driver’s seat with the key in the ignition and a foot on the brake.

Yes, it was dementia. Grandpa was still dreaming of a football scholarship that would never come, still fearing a motorcycle wreck that was now an all-too-painful memory, still talking of football and girls. The old man was living in the past—Austin’s past.

But so was Austin.

He understood now why Mom had made him visit tonight. He rolled up the left leg of his jeans and gently stroked his shin with his fingertips. He felt no flesh there, no bones, no muscles. Just the titanium and carbon fiber of his prosthetic limb.



The cool touch of the metal always took him back to that night. It was dark, but he knew the roads. He had every inch of dirt and gravel in the county memorized. He flung the dust out behind him, expertly perched between control and disaster. No one was ever on these roads after ten o'clock at night. He blasted through an intersection. Then there was a chrome grille, a squealing, and a jarring impact. Every joint in his body came apart. There was a crushing weight—and pain, terrible pain—and then everything went dark.

Austin winced. Little burning impulses ran up and down his missing calf: phantom pain caused by permanent nerve damage. His nervous system hadn't quite let go of his lower leg, just as he hadn't let go of his old dreams.

And in that dark parking lot, Austin realized how miserable he was. Unwilling to accept his limitations, he had given up entirely. He had sacrificed his life to his own bitterness and condemned himself to victimhood. His suffering was self-inflicted; he saw that now. It was all phantom pain.

Austin imagined his future at the factory. After forty years of truck building, he would be falling apart. Like Lonny, he would spend his whole life performing the same sequence of actions. Was that the life he wanted: the life of a robot? It was the life he surely would have if he didn't change something.

But he could change. He would! He would take responsibility for his life. He would pull himself up, and he would do it without football. He had other skills. He was smart and a quick learner. He would



become a mechanical engineer like Dad had been, and Grandpa, and Granddaddy before him.

The first step was college. It was a big world to face alone, and he shrank from the thought of it. Not that he was alone; he never had been. Mom was back home, probably praying at this very moment for him to make the right choice.

Austin picked up his cell phone and dialed his mom's number. His heart pounded in his temples as he waited for her to pick up. "Hey, Mom, how long did you say KU's accepting applications?"



A Cultural Chameleon: Growing Up Biracial

by Miya Nakamura

How can someone act a color?

“Where did you adopt your Chinese twins from?” a woman in the grocery store checkout line asked my mother bluntly.

“Actually, they’re two years apart, and they’re both my biological children. Their dad is from Japan,” Mom replied, loading our items on the conveyor belt.

“Wow! I would have never known. They don’t resemble you at all.”

This was the first time that I realized that I didn’t look like my mom. I was only five years old, and that new information was difficult for me to comprehend. Although I am fifty percent white, I look like my dad’s side of the family. Both my brother and I have predominantly Japanese features and do not take much after my mother physically. My mom has blue eyes, fair skin, and brown curly hair. I have brown, squinty eyes, tan skin, and stick-straight brown hair.

In 2000 (the year that I was born), the national census revealed that over 4.5 million couples in America were biracial. My parents, who were married in 1998, were included in this group. In that census, 6.8 million people identified as biracial.¹ As a matter



of fact, this census in 2000 was the first time that individuals were allowed to choose biracial or multiracial on the census.² In the last twenty years, the biracial population has grown dramatically. Although these statistics prove that many people identified as biracial, I felt as if I were the only one.

When I was in middle school, students often made Asian jokes. Usually, they did not intend to be unkind. They thought it was funny, and I never told them that it hurt my feelings. A common joke I heard was that I was a banana—yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Although I learned to laugh, jokes like these left me confused. “You look Japanese, but you act white.” I am still not sure how someone can act a color, but statements like that hurt me. I loved my Japanese culture, and I felt like I was not honoring my heritage if I didn’t “act Asian.” I often wondered how I could be more Japanese.

“Although I looked different, I desperately desired to fit in.”

During those years, I was a cultural chameleon. I tried to adapt to whichever group I was with at the time. When I was with my white friends, I was considered the Asian of the group; however, when I was with my Asian friends, I was the white girl. Although I looked different, I desperately desired to fit in. Rather than choosing to be myself, I would change my personality to meet the expectations of those around me. I had no idea who I really was.

One specific aspect of being biracial that bothered me was standardized tests. Standardized tests made me choose an ethnicity. I never knew which circle to pick. Was I Asian? No, because I also fell into the Caucasian category. I hated the idea of having to “pick” one over



the other. I felt as though I was forced to choose one parent over the other. During achievement tests in the seventh grade, I sat in my seat contemplating the predicament of the ethnicity demographic.

"What circle do I fill in?" I asked
my homeroom teacher.

"Well, I guess you'll have to fill in the 'other' circle."

Devastated, I clenched my pencil, then darkened the "other" circle. *Why don't I fit in any of these categories?* I wanted to be able to easily fill in a regular circle like everyone else.

In middle school, my definition of identity was shallow. I was overly concerned with how I should identify myself. According to Hud-Aleem and Countryman, authors of "Biracial Identity Development and Recommendations in Therapy," biracial children often feel pressured to pick one of the racial identities over the other.³ In reality, the demographic portion of the standardized test is not as important as the academic performance, but at the time, it was a big deal to me. I defined myself based strictly on my ethnicity. According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, identity is the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. Both of my Japanese and American cultures were equally beautiful, but they did not define me. I should have been focused on my character and beliefs rather than my ethnicity.

For nearly three years, I assumed that my ethnicity was the only facet of my identity. Because I was a cultural chameleon, I never truly acted like myself; I acted how everyone assumed I should. I adjusted my identity based on whom I was hanging out with. I was




embarrassed that I was not fully either ethnicity. I was proud of being Japanese and American—just not at the same time.

When I was growing up, my family visited Japan several times to see my dad's family who lived in Tokyo. America is a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures, but Japan really does not have that many cultures represented unless they are tourists. According to the Japanese census in 2018, over 98 percent of the population is Japanese. Because of the lack of diversity, the Japanese people are fascinated with half-Japanese people. They even have a word for it—*hafu*.

I distinctly remember lugging our suitcases through the metro station. People stared at us. I could not figure out why people were watching us, but I later realized it was because we were noticeably biracial. My brother and I looked Asian, but we were speaking English. Throughout our three-week trip, we were stopped and asked if we were *hafu*. Their positive reactions to being biracial encouraged me. I realized that being biracial set me apart.

When I returned from Japan for my sophomore year of high school, I realized that I had put so much unnecessary pressure on myself to identify as a single ethnicity. When I understood that most people did not care as much about my ethnicity as they did about my personality and character, I began to embrace being biracial. Being surrounded by more than one culture introduced me to a variety of experiences. I was exposed to Japanese food, language, and customs. My experiences with both cultures brought me so much more appreciation for my heritage.



My real acceptance of myself, however, occurred when I recognized my identity in Christ. My heritage does not compare to God's design and purpose for my life. Once I accepted that I was created in God's image, I saw myself as a reflection of Him rather than just a mixed kid. Yes, I am a *hafu*, but more important, I am a loved creation of God.





God created me, and He does not make mistakes. He did not give me two different ethnicities by accident. I am reminded of His purposeful creation in Psalm 139:14: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” Rather than being concerned with my cultures, I can identify as God’s creation because my identity is so much deeper than my ethnicity. It doesn’t even scratch the surface of God’s design for my life. My Creator designed me on purpose for a purpose.

“God created me,
and He does not
make mistakes.”

Focusing only on my ethnicity hinders me from fulfilling all that He has for me. Growing up biracial was a unique opportunity, and learning to embrace that was important to connecting with family and culture. I have learned many lessons through my biracial upbringing, but most important, I learned that God designed me to be so much more than a cultural chameleon.

Notes

¹ Raushanah Hud-Aleem and Jacqueline Countryman, “Biracial Identity Development and Recommendations in Therapy,” *Psychiatry (Edgmont)* 5, no. 11 (2008): 37-44.

² Sarah S. M. Townsend, et al., “Being Mixed: Who Claims a Biracial Identity?” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2012): 91.

³ Emiko Jozuka and Vivien Jones, “Japan’s Hafu Stars Are Celebrated. But Some Mixed-Race People Say They Feel Like Foreigners in Their Own Country,” CNN World, last modified September 23, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/22/asia/japan-mixed-roots-hafu-dst-hnk-intl/index.html>.



A Heart Divided

by Naomi Pratt



Commencement Contest Winner
Original Poetry

This poem shows my heart, the heart of a missionary kid. I never want to forget where I am from and what my home is like. But I don't want my homesickness to consume me. I've learned to rest where God has planted me.

If I think back on hazy nights like those
I spent in lands graced by the Taj Mahal,
Deep in my heart a twinge of pain could grow
And left unchecked, could rise and strangle all

The sounds of languages I love and know.
The feel of gritty wind, soft Kashmir shawls,
The music with its soft then swirling flow—
I flew away, now live within these walls

And wish somehow to blend both worlds I know.
One is the world where I reside, am called
A citizen. That other world? I'd slow
Down time for one more day till darkness falls.

The missionary's heart, divided still,
Has learned to wander when and where God wills.



A Costly Reminder

by Grace Ingles

A fine gold necklace can be a heavy burden.

I came home to Mom on a video call.

The sky outside was already an inky black, with the faintest twinkle of stars behind the thin, wispy clouds. Inside the house was dark, too, as dinner was already put away and my brothers were turned in for the night. My dad, who had stayed up late to pick me up from the Neighborhood Bible Time workers meeting, simply threw his keys into the drawer before shuffling upstairs.

But the light in the guest room, where Mom made her lesson plans and did her sewing, was still bright and warm.

Her strong voice, followed by one scratchier and garbled, floated throughout the first floor of the house. I peeked my head into the room, wondering who she could be calling at such a late hour.

On the other side of the laptop screen, my grandmother Imi lay in bed. Her face, normally pale from the whitening soap that she liked to use, appeared ashen in the early Philippine sunlight that streamed through the windows behind her head. The light only made her wrinkles more prominent, casting shadows over the dark circles under her eyes.

“The light in the guest room was still bright and warm.”



She did not look well.

“Here’s Grace!” Mom said, pushing her rolling chair to the side so that Imi could get a better look at me.

I lifted my hand in a wave and smiled awkwardly, not knowing what to say and restraining the urge to leave. Mom’s stern expression, complete with a raised eyebrow and pinched mouth, almost *dared* me to go through with it.

Something impressed on me to choose the wiser route and stay for a little while longer. I perched myself on the edge of the bed behind Mom’s chair, hands moving to tug at the golden chain and matching flower pendant around my neck, fingers carefully running over the stone at the center. The metal made a bumpy, grating sound as it slid over each link. I wondered if Imi could see me wearing it.

Probably not.

“Iyan ba si Grace?” Imi asked. *Is that Grace?*

“Mukhang mas matanda siya.” She looks older.

“Do you see her hair?” Mom asked, lifting up the end of one curl to the camera. “It looks like mine when I was little, remember? Right before we cut it short.”

Imi gave a noncommittal hum before going back to how much older I looked, and for a brief moment it seemed like her eyes were tracing back and forth across my face. It was almost as if she were trying to memorize what I looked like, comparing it to the last time she had seen me. With a sickening feeling, I realized that this *was* the first time she had seen me since I had last visited the Philippines six years ago.

Six years of just glimpses of me running away from video calls, fueled by my uncertain nerves and not



knowing how to act around her. Six years of knowing that each time I ran, it would only get more and more awkward to address my avoidance.

But I wouldn't have to worry about what would happen the next time she video called. Just a few days later, on July 24 at 6:29 p.m., Imi passed away in a hospital, hooked to a ventilator and all alone. She hadn't sounded good on the video call, her coughs stronger than the rasp of her voice, but I didn't expect whatever was ailing her to take her so quickly.

The necklace around my throat suddenly felt like a weight around my neck.

After Mom broke the news to my brothers and me, all I could think about were the moments where Imi and I didn't get along. And there were a lot of them.

When I was ten, she came to live with us for a couple of years as Mom was the only one of her children that didn't live in the Philippines. At first, we got along as well as one would imagine a grandmother and granddaughter getting along. She taught me how to make *almondigas*, a Filipino meatball and noodle soup, and told me stories about Granddy, my grandfather, who passed away when I was two. I wanted her to live with us forever. I wanted her to teach me more recipes and to tell me more stories.

But at ten, I was also starting to shed the "shy girl" persona that had defined me for most of my elementary years. Puberty started to knock at my door—new emotions manifested that I didn't know how to handle, and because Imi was home all the time, she received the brunt of my adolescent angst.



“*Aye nako*,” she would sniff, tightening her shawl around her shoulders. “Texas is so *boring*. There is nothing to do here like in the Philippines.”

I lifted my head from where it bent over my homework, my brow pinched and mouth twisting into a scowl. “You always say that,” I accused. “You just don’t look hard enough. Do you even *like* living here?”

After I would hop off the school bus ready for a peaceful evening, my little brother would waddle up to me and babble about the toys that he saw on TV and in the grocery store. He would say Imi promised him that she would get them for him, then would cry when I told him that we couldn’t afford them.

This led to a screaming match that would have to be broken up by Mom. She would force me to sit in my room while she talked to Imi, before giving me the reprimand of a lifetime. It didn’t matter if the situation was or was not caused by me.

“That’s not the right way to respond, Grace,” Mom would say. “You know better.”

“Yeah, but so does she,” I would huff, my big toe digging into the carpet as I refused to meet her eyes.

“Which one of you is the Christian?” Mom asked.

“... Me.”

“Act like one.”

As I stared at the picture Mom and her siblings chose for the obituary, I realized that I couldn’t recall a moment where I actually apologized for my part in our arguments. Of course, time had done its part to smooth over our relationship, but had I done mine? Did I do what a Christian was supposed to do in situations like that?



The golden necklace grew heavier around my neck. I wanted to rip it off and shove it back into the box it came from, back with the other pieces in its set.

The set, and two others, were designed by Imi the moment she found out that Mom was due with me in July. Mom had kept it all safe in her closet, tucked inside a pink plastic box with the scratchiest pink-and-purple-cheetah-print fur. I had known about the jewelry sets for the longest time, and on every birthday I would sneak into the closet to try them on.

“The gold, rubies, and coral would flash in the yellow light.”

As the gold, rubies, and coral would flash in the yellow light, I would dream about the day Mom would finally deem me responsible enough to take care of the priceless pieces.

Apparently, that day was my twenty-first birthday, July 10—just two weeks before Imi would pass away. But Mom might have regretted that decision once she stepped into my room to transfer the pieces into my possession.

As I stared at the box, the childlike wonder that it once held for me was quickly replaced with horror.

“Do I *look* responsible enough for this?” I flailed one arm around to gesture at my room. Clothes were scattered all over the floor in piles that were supposed to mean “keep,” “maybe,” and “donate.” Only they quickly started to mean nostalgia, played-dress-up-with-to-procrastinate, and ew, absolutely atrocious. Bottles and containers of perfume, hair product, and makeup that were in different stages of use and most likely expired covered the dresser. The only things remotely organized in my room were





the small, sentimental trinkets in a cardstock box on my desk, but even then those were threatening to spill everywhere. A stack of books that I had *promised* to put back in their proper places fell with perfect comedic timing.

To her credit, Mom didn't flinch, but I did catch a sigh.

The necklace had been the only piece from the three sets Imi made for me that I felt even remotely all right with wearing. It looked nice paired with a gold layering chain, but the heavy weight that had settled on it quickly soured everything with guilt.

How could I wear a piece that Imi designed with delicate love and care, knowing that I had been a terrible granddaughter to her?

How could I wear it, knowing that I had avoided doing better by her, to the point where the first time she had seen me in six years was also her last?

She had taken the rubies that decorated the jewelry sets from her own personal collection, excited to finally be given the excuse to make more jewelry with them. Jewelry making and collecting gems had been her favorite hobby, passed down to her children and grandchildren throughout the years. The delicate jewelry should have been a reminder of Imi's love and care for us—for me.

My younger self had dreamt of what it would be like to finally hold what she made for me in the palms of my hands. I would have to be delicate, I knew. I would have to be careful.

But as delicate as the jewelry remains, the weight of the stones pressing down when I wear them is a good reminder.



Mom was right, I did know better, and part of knowing better is taking ownership for my actions. There is nothing that I can do to change how I acted toward Imi in the past. I can't go to her grave and apologize for not apologizing sooner because though her body remains, her soul is no longer here on earth.

I was too late, and that will forever stay with me.

I can only do better with how I treat others now, and make sure that when I do know better, that I actually *do* better. Even if the weight of Imi's delicate necklace doesn't lessen in the following years, the only way I can deal with my guilt is to make sure that my actions line up with what I learn.



Fences

by Kayley Ocker



Commencement Contest Winner
Extemporaneous Essay

*Sometimes, God builds fences where we
would put an open door.*

The fence in my parents' backyard is green. Don't ask me why. I certainly can't tell you. All I know is when a brutal thunderstorm finally carried away parts of the rusty old silver fence, the company my parents hired saw fit to ignore our request for a shiny *new* silver fence and constructed the deep green monstrosity that still borders the house today.

My family hated the fence—the awkward shade of green didn't suit the pale yellow of our house or the peeling green shutters. My siblings thought the fence was too green, my mother thought it wasn't green enough to match the shutters, and my father thought it wasn't what he'd paid for.

No matter how much we hated the fence, no one hated it as much as Maggie did. Maggie was a curious little beast given the form of our over-exuberant blue tick beagle. She hated the fence with a passion, doing everything she could to escape from its ugly green confines.

I can't count how many times we'd let Maggie outside for two minutes, just to find that she'd wiggled her way out from under the chain links and was running down the street.





The fence stood as Maggie's one adversary against her freedom. I used to sit in the backyard and watch Maggie try to escape, chuckling when she would finally be forced to give up and cease her endless attempts to escape.

"I don't know why you try," I would say, settling down in the grass beside her, scratching her belly while her tail wagged lazily side to side. "You like being in the house with us, so why do you try to escape the fence?" At the time, I truly didn't understand her desire to push against the fence. Looking back, I realize that Maggie and I were more alike than I thought.

When I decided to go to college, I knew where God was calling me to go. It felt as though some little voice in my head was telling me, "Go there," whenever I would look at Pensacola Christian College. I could tell that was where God was leading me, that the long and winding road to Florida was the one He wanted me to walk.

Despite feeling certain that PCC would be where I would go, I continued to stubbornly look for other colleges. I—in no way, shape, or form—wanted to go to Florida for college. It was hot, humid, and (if news reports were to be believed) full of crazy people. So I told myself I wouldn't go to PCC. I looked for different schools, drifting away from my original plan to attend a Christian college. I looked into schools around my home state and further beyond, but none of them fit. They either cost too much, didn't offer the degree I was sure God wanted me to pursue, or just weren't a good fit.

After I graduated from high school, I would sit in my backyard and desperately try to reason with God,



saying things like, “Maybe I got it wrong. Maybe I’m not supposed to go to college at all.” Or “I already gave you my major, God. Can’t I at least pick the school?”

It was during one of these futile bargaining sessions that I found my eyes wandering over to the fence. The fence was no longer new, years of bad weather having shaken the ugly and poorly installed thing, but with Maggie no longer around to attempt to escape, the fence still stood. I thought back to when I would watch Maggie try and wiggle out and laugh when she would find she couldn’t squeeze herself through where she had wanted to.

Staring at the fence, I had a realization. “Oh my word,” I groaned, flopping back onto the grass, college pamphlets around me like a glowing halo of my own fool-hearted stubbornness. “I’m going to go to PCC.”

“I already gave you my major, God.”

The memory of my dog reminded me that sometimes pushing against fences will get you nowhere. Trying to defy

God’s plan for my life had left me exactly where trying to escape the fence had left Maggie all those years ago—tired, defeated, and lying on my back in the grass. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that God’s plans were the best plans for my future. Even if I could not see His purpose for sending me to PCC, I knew I could trust God’s path for me and that His love and care would never fail me.

Sometimes God puts fences in your way because He knows what’s best for you. It’s comforting to know that even when my foolish heart tries to escape the safety of His plan, my God’s fence will hold.



Integration

by Benjamin Bostwick

Which reality is worth belonging to?

Octane thumped through half a ton of pipes and pistons, launching the sleek supercar across the speedway. Tom Martle gripped his steering wheel, feeling the transmission thump as he chased down his last competitor. He pounded the gas pedal, but the finish line closed in. Tom steered inward, his bumper clipping the lead car's back corner. The leader lost grip, swerved, and shot sideways off the track—but not before it crossed the finish line. A bright flashing “2nd” showed in Tom's left eye, with a race roster below. And a clock reading 8:06 p.m.

“Oh, man!” Tom yanked off his virtual immersion helmet, letting it rise automatically on the wall mount. He unstrapped himself from his Vivicore integration system, a chair-like object full of sensors and switches. He massaged his sleeping legs and lurched out onto the porch.

It was empty. Tom jerked out his phone, fingers shaking. Then he relaxed. No notifications. The Package had not been stolen; it simply had not been delivered yet.

The phone started ringing. “Tom, where are ya?” shouted the shrill voice of Daryl Misk.

“I was—waiting for my Package. Sorry, I lost track of time.”

“This had better not be that Vivicore stuff again!”



Tom bristled. “As a matter of fact, it is—the Inte-GR8 system. It’s the *most* realistic virtual immersion system on the market. And I need to be here when it comes, or someone will steal it off my porch. Vivicore fetches a hefty price.” He paused. “And rightly so. They’re the best.”

“Just get out here and stock, ya bum. Your night shift started at eight.”

“Yes sir,” Tom mumbled. He began trudging toward his driveway.

“Reality is a wonderful place, Tom,” Daryl snarled. “Ya should visit sometime.”

Ages later, the 4:00 a.m. bell sounded in Greymer’s Supermarket. Tom staggered out of the stockroom

“Reality is a wonderful place, Tom.”

and into the parking lot’s predawn air. He trudged through the sludgy mist lying across the ground to where his

car—his real car—sat sweating its paint off under the candid illumination of a lot light. Wiggling through the passenger door (the driver’s door was jammed closed), Tom wormed his way to the driver’s seat and eventually started the decrepit vehicle.

But in his mind, Tom was awakening a Bugatti on the Autobahn. He built up speed and drifted through the first curve, tasting premium gas and burnt rubber. No cars ahead, none behind—a perfect world! Except there *was* a car, far ahead. Tom was second place. Again.

“Not this time.” He floored the gas pedal, rapidly gaining on his opponent. He slipped to the side of the bumper, ready to clip the car off-track just like



before. This time, it would work. He would make sure it worked. He edged closer.

But wait—this was a real road. That was a real truck, and now—it was really swerving off road, straight into the very real trees! The truck became one with nature. Loudly.

Tom screeched to a stop on the road's shoulder. He stumbled out of his car, toward the crash that no amount of regret could undo. He trembled as the driver's door creaked open. A figure dropped out. Tom stalled. Illuminated by the broken amber flashers was a vibrant, livid girl.

"Idiot!" she shouted. "I should have known!" Then she saw Tom and snapped upright. "Can I help you?"

"The truck became one with nature."

"Your—your car. I'm sorry—that I crashed. That the car—crashed."

The girl raised an eyebrow. Tom took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm sorry I crashed your car." His every urge said to leave. He tried. The sound of tittering laughter turned him back.

"*You* crashed it?" The girl laughed again, tension draining ever so slightly. "No, *I* crashed it. My tire blew out. See?" She whacked the scraped wheel rim, empty of rubber. "It went flat last week, and I tried to plug it myself. I guess I was asking for this." She kicked the bumper. "Looks like the fender's all jammed up on my wheel well. That'll take some fixing."

"Is there anything I can do?" Tom blubbered.

"If you've got a free bike, sure."

Tom shook his head.



She shrugged. “Then, no. Sorry.” She slipped her phone out and dialed. “Hey, Daryl.”

Wait . . . Daryl? Daryl Misk? The hissing on the phone certainly sounded like Misk. The girl huffed. “No, it’s—I just got in an accident and—no—but it was an accident!” The phone was yelling back in a timbre well above the tenor range. Definitely Daryl Misk.

“You work at Greymer’s?” Tom asked the girl.

“Looks like I *used* to,” she snapped, shaking the phone. “Second week on the job, too.”

“If—if you want, I can drive you there.” Tom patted his Greymer’s vest.

“So what’s your name, driver?”

“Hmm.” She studied his uniform. “Daryl, if I get a ride in time, can I keep the job? Yes? Then I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

The girl hung up and peered at Tom. “Okay, let’s go. But I’m warning you, I have a 9-mil. Just in case. So don’t go trying anything you’d regret.”

“Uh—okay then.” Tom started his car. Its puttering motor matched his sputtering heart. He forced his thoughts to retreat and regroup; inconveniently, his contingency plans for the day had failed to include playing taxi to armed coworkers.

The girl scrutinized the car’s interior for half a minute before she gave a satisfied hum and stepped inside. “So what’s your name, driver?”

Tom thumbed his name tag. “Uh—Tom. Tom Martle.”

“Well, hi, Tom. I guess we’re coworkers.” She sat, rocking the car. “I’m Rae Manns.”

* * *



Later that day, Tom woke up inside his Vivicore immersion helmet to a pause menu. The clock read 11:27 a.m. Tom heaved the helmet up and off, squinting in the midday sunlight filtering through his windows. He stretched for his phone and read the screen. Still no delivery notification. But there was a voicemail. Weird. Tom jumped when he heard it.

“Hi, Tom, it’s Rae. I realize that was probably the worst first impression for both of us, but all that aside, could you do another favor? I need a ride home. Everyone else left at eleven, but Daryl’s keeping me on shift until noon. Oh, and just in case you don’t get this message in time, no hard feelings. Daryl gave me your number, but he did warn me that you probably won’t answer it. Bye.”

Tom slouched thoughtfully in his integration system. Why him? Then again, why did it matter? He could spare a few minutes. He texted a quick yes and started to stand up. But he stopped. From above, the helmet’s pause menu flashed a two. Second place. Again.

Tom reattached the restraints and pulled the helmet down. He should have enough time to finish this course before he had to leave. With a roar, the races began again.

When they ended, the clock read 11:56. “Late again!” Tom hurried outside, started his car, and careened onto the street. It was past noon when he got to Greymer’s, rehearsing and rejecting countless apologies. He swerved into the lot and peered at the stockroom door.

No one. Where was Rae? Tom’s phone buzzed with a text; he dug it out.

It was Rae. *Running late. Be there soon.*



Tom wiped his forehead, took his key out of the ignition, and waited. And kept waiting. Evidently “soon” was relative. At 12:14, his phone buzzed again. Sighing in relief, he eyed the screen. Then he jolted.

Order Delivered. It was from Vivicore. The Package was here—or rather, at home.

And Tom was not. Cranking the ignition, he yanked himself upright. He had almost released the parking brake to launch away when another text disturbed him.

Really sorry. Coming now.

Tom twisted in his seat. His phone seemed to burn in his hand. But he waited. Finally, the back doors parted. Rae walked out, looked around, then came over to Tom’s car. In slow motion.

“Sorry I’m so late: Daryl was lecturing. Loudly. Said I’m his second late employee today, and he’s tired of it all.” She slumped in the seat. “Thanks again for the ride. I got my truck towed home, but obviously haven’t been able to work on it yet. It’s just the fender, though, so I should get it fixed tomorrow. Anyway, my house is a little off the beaten path, so I’ll just tell you where to go. I have yet to meet the GPS that can find it.”

Tom nodded slowly and accelerated quickly. Rae’s directions took the car farther and farther from city limits. Half a mile down a sun-bleached backwoods road, Tom’s engine began to sputter. Rae squinted. “Sounds like you’re outta gas.” Then the engine cut out completely, and Tom steered to the shoulder for the second time that day.



Rae climbed out and stretched. “Well, I guess we’re walking to the gas station. It should be over there.” Tom squeezed out of the passenger seat and bolted in the direction Rae was pointing. The Package—he had to get gas and get back home to the Package!

Rae jogged behind. “Y’know, most people would just walk.”

“I need to finish this; I need to get home. I need to make sure the Package isn’t stolen.”

“What could be so expensive that it can’t sit half an hour on a suburban sidewalk?”

Tom answered in puffing breaths. “Inte-GR8. Virtual immersion. *Very* valuable.”

“You’re freaking out over a video game?” Her tone strongly hinted that an eyebrow raise had accompanied the statement.

“Uh—sure.” It was technically an immersive media system, but he did use it for gaming.

“Well, nothing you can do about it now. You’re not gonna run all the way to and from the gas station. Especially carrying gas.” Tom slowed; she had a point. He was way out of shape, and even this short sprint had left him panting.

“Besides,” Rae continued, “you have no idea where you’re going. You might as well enjoy the sunshine. And the exercise. Looks like you might need ‘em.”

Tom slowed down—externally—and pushed his matted hair away from his forehead. Reflected sunlight blazed from every waxy leaf on the innumerable trees lining the road. Heavy hot air pressed itself against all available surfaces, sending shimmery false rivers across the pavement ahead.



The rivers running from Tom's sweat glands, however, were all too real. This was going to be a long walk. Especially with the Package waiting unprotected at home.

"You got any hobbies?" Rae asked.

Tom decided against saying video games. "Auto racing."

"Really?" She grinned. "Kind of ironic that you ran out of gas. Stock or custom?"

Tom snorted. "Stock is just fancy plastic wrap on buffed market engines. No variety, no thrill—not even any right turns. I like the makes and models to compete along with the drivers."

"I see," she hummed. "What tracks do you do?"

"Well, I've—never actually worked with the real thing. Most of the time I do . . . virtual immersion." So he had let it out after all. "But it's just like actually driving the car."

"You still haven't gone anywhere."

"Yeah—it's *like* driving the car," Rae said. "But in the end, you still haven't gone anywhere. Then you get problems like this."

"Problems like this? Tom rubbed his irritated eyes. As if it weren't enough that the sun was trying to melt him with its sheer glare, hordes of tiny insects had started competing with the perspiration for real estate on his face. "Problems like what?"

Rae chuckled. "Like having a fleet of filled-up virtual cars when your real tank is empty."

By the time the two got back and refueled Tom's car, it was 3:02 p.m. Tom crawled through the passenger's



door as usual. Rae cocked her head at him. "Other one's still broken," he explained.

"You know, I bet I can fix that. My dad did body and engine repair, and he taught me a lot. Hence my attempt to plug my own tire." She snickered. "Which turned out so well. But don't worry—I do a lot better when I fix other people's cars."

"How much do you charge?" Tom asked.

"For acquaintances, fifty bucks; for friends, it's free."

"Do I count as a friend?"

Rae smirked. "Why not drop by tomorrow and find out?"

She got out at the end of a gravel driveway and waved goodbye. Tom waved back. Then he remembered the Package. He turned around and launched homeward as quickly as the potholed trail would allow. At last, the tires squealed with joy to find good city asphalt within their grip again. Tom's mind jockeyed Maseratis, McLarens, and Porches; he defied the Shanghai Circuit, the Road America, and the Interlagos; he endured oil-rich fumes, sun-raked tarmac, and street-shredded tire. He roared through the finish line into his driveway, leaping out to take his trophy—his Package—from the porch.

The porch was empty.

Tom stood. Staring. Then he bolted around the house—once, twice—still nothing, nothing at all! Knees shaking, he stepped inside and supported his trembling body on the Vivicore frame. But his heart fell straight to the floor. He sagged into the Vivicore's seat and dragged the helmet over his empty eyes.



The races began as usual. But it all seemed distant, dimmer. And he knew why: this wasn't the Inte-GR8, and it should have been. Or maybe the problem was that another image shone more vividly in his mind than the screen did; that her voice rang more clearly through his thoughts than the speakers did; and that both reminded him in a settled yet unsettling tone, "You still haven't gone anywhere." Whatever the reason, Tom pushed off the helmet, got up, and drove to work. He got there on time.

He was also on time to Rae's house the next afternoon, despite having to endure a moderate hurricane on the way there. By the time he had jolted through the

"Hi, friend. You want your car fixed?"

rally course of roads leading to her driveway, the storm had caught up to him again, committed to an even fiercer downpour than

before. As Tom inched up the gravel driveway, the garage door stuttered open and Rae leaned out, dressed in oily overalls and carrying a toolbox. Tom saw her wave him toward a concrete slab under the carport between the garage and house. He rolled in and stopped. Rae pulled open his passenger door and leaned inside. "Hi, friend. You want your car fixed?"

While Rae hammered and hacked at the stubborn metal of the driver's side door, the rain played its own music on the aluminum roof overhead. Tom stood by a pile of tarps, distributing them across the various items that the carport no longer cared to keep dry. And he was busy: sprawled across the cracked concrete slab were countless worktables littered with jugs and cans and carburetors. Tom whistled as he set up an impromptu shelter over a diverse collection of pistons. "Wow. You've got a lot of parts in here."



“Yeah, I’m still moving in. Not that it’ll look much different when I’m done. I like to work on stuff,” she grunted, twisting out a bent pin. “Got that from my dad. A lot of the junk here is from him too.”

“Does any of it still run?”

“Not really. Usually, once I get something working, I sell it. The exceptions would be my truck, and those ’21 ACEs over there. Those are my babies.” She waved her pliers toward two nearly finished motorcycles sheltered in the one dry corner of the enclosure.

Tom’s eyes bulged. “Two ’21 ACEs? Where on earth did you find that? Plenty of people would pay a fortune to get their hands on just one!”

“And they can get their hands on a different one. Believe me, there’s nothing I’d take for those bikes.” Rae leaned back from Tom’s car. “I found ’em falling apart on my dad’s scrap pile a year ago when I went to visit. He’d just been in a bad bike accident—really bad—and I was staying with Mom until we knew how he would turn out. Most days the news wasn’t good. But whenever the world got too heavy, I went out and worked on the bikes. They kept me grounded.

“When Dad got out of the hospital, he let me take them back with me. I’ve put them together little by little, always hoping that we’d be able to ride together when he got better. But we all eventually realized that he’d never bike again. Since then, I just can’t find a reason to finish. The only parts still missing are the drive chains, but a ’21 ACE anything is an expensive piece of equipment, and I can’t justify spending that sort of money. Not for two bikes that’ll just sit there.” She sat quietly for a moment, then once again applied an Allen wrench to the car door.



"You don't know anyone else who rides bikes?" Tom asked.

She shrugged. "I dunno. Not really any car crazies or diesel weasels around here. Closest thing I've found would be you." She looked at him. "Do you ride?"

"Yeah, actually, I do."

"For real?" A single eyebrow arched. "Not just in virtual reality?"

"Growing up, I had a custom dirt bike. I even took it to tournaments."

"Eh, not really a motorcycle. But better than a Vivicore, for sure. Did you win anything?"

"A couple races."

"Hmm." Rae raised both eyebrows and went back to work. Tom's eyes continued to roam through the junk piles until he noticed a familiar shape half-concealed by a dripping tarp. It couldn't be—he tore back the dark, dusty cover. It was! A Vivicore.

**"Things get
done in reality."**

And not just any Vivicore. Tom's jaw dropped. "You have an Inte-GR8?"

"Yeah, it came with the house. I tore it apart. Used some of the bolts for my bikes."

He stared at her. "You really don't like virtual immersion, do you?"

"Don't get me wrong; it can do great things. But when I take the helmet off, I'm still where I was when I put it on." She stood up, wiping her hands. "I prefer reality. Things get done in reality. Like this." Grinning, she opened and closed the car door. "Well, I think I'm done. You'd better head out soon if you want to stop



by your house before work tonight. Sounds like the rain has stopped too—perfect timing.”

After finishing the quiet drive home, Tom got out of his newly fixed car door and walked to his porch. He looked west to watch the sun dive into a pool of melting gold, splashing color across the sky. In the east, a faint rainbow shone its iridescent halo against the deep blue wall of approaching night. Tom breathed the damp, clean smell of the spent rainstorm, then turned toward his door to go inside. Suddenly, something snagged his foot and tripped him into the doorpost. He swung his head down. There lounged the culprit, a hefty box dressed all in black—except where a lenticular Vivicore logo flickered back the flaming sky.

Tom sat down opposite . . . the Package. Yes, it really was the Package! A “wrong-address” note lay scribbled on its shipping label. No one had stolen it. It was here; it was real.

But was it?

The sun set; the rainbow disappeared; the moon rose. Tom still sat facing the Package, so full, so empty. Abruptly, he stood, whipped out his phone, and speed-dialed. “Hey, Daryl, it’s Tom. I know this may seem random, but would you be interested in buying a tech department showpiece? You would? Okay.” He swallowed. “How about a brand new Inte-GR8?”

Several days later, the four a.m. bell sounded once again in Greymer’s Supermarket. Tom hurried into the dim parking lot, found his car, and peered through the driver’s seat window. There lay the Package. Not the Inte-GR8—that was sold and gone. From its profits, and in its place, came this



new Package. It held two original 1921 ACE drive trains. Rae was right: they were expensive. And in a few minutes, they would be hers. Tom himself would deliver them.

"I still don't get it, Tom." Daryl Misk approached the car and squinted. "Why'd ya sell off ya super-best-ever Inte-GR8 for a showpiece? Did it not fit in ya house or something?"

"It might have fit," Tom said. "I didn't check. I needed the money for something else." Headlights appeared at the lot's edge, followed by an old truck with a new fender. Tom stood up straighter. Daryl looked from Tom to the truck, and back again. He snorted and shook his head.

But he smiled. "Welcome to reality, Tom. Hope ya decide ta park here."

"I think I will." Tom opened his new car door and pulled out the new Package. He watched as the truck door opened and Rae stepped out, glowing amber under the early morning lot lights.

He started to walk over.

She smiled.

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