

FOUNTAINS 35TH EDITION



MOMENTUM

2024

A PCC STUDENT PUBLICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Some of the hardest challenges in life are the long ones. Four years of college. Decades in the work force. A lifetime of living for Christ.

Life can feel like an endless race, our windshields blurring with rain, our engines burning full throttle as we take treacherous turns, and our fuel tanks emptying as we floor the gas pedal. We race with no end in sight.

All too easily, we can lose momentum. We coast. We drift. We forget to refuel. We lose sight of the finish line, forgetting our purpose and prize.

In a world full of challenges, we must not lose momentum. We cannot rely on our starting-line enthusiasm to help us finish strong.

To keep our momentum, we must take strategic breaks to rest and recharge. We must avoid distractions. We must focus on the next mile instead of the entire race. Most importantly, we must remember the God who gives us the endurance we need. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

This 35th edition of *Fountains* challenges you to keep your momentum. Through stories of triumph and transformation, you'll be challenged to keep going, one mile at a time, until you cross the finish line.

SENIOR EDITORS



Anastasia B. Villagomez



Justin Rickard

Table Of Contents

REVIVING UP 1

A Career of Character	8
<i>By Olivia Summers</i>	
Cloud Cat	18
<i>By Shae Jackson</i>	
Trash Talk(s)	19
<i>By Kayley Ocker</i>	
Consider Your Physical Limitations Before You Leap . . .	27
<i>By Justin Rickard</i>	
Purpose	30
<i>By Paige Romig</i>	
Spice Up Your Life	40
<i>By Naomi Helton</i>	
The Flight	42
<i>By Riley Kay</i>	
Appearances	51
<i>By Olivia Summers</i>	



2 MAKING THE TURN

The Plate	56
<i>By Siera Weber</i>	
Nanny School	65
<i>By Ryleigh Wood</i>	
Persistence	70
<i>By Paige Romig</i>	
Because He Forgives	72
<i>By Regina Massey</i>	
A Good Place to Break Down	80
<i>By Anastasia B. Villagomez</i>	
Up in the Air	90
<i>By Taylor Cartwright</i>	
Requiem for a Soul	98
<i>By Benjamin Bostwick</i>	
A Presidential Purpose	100
<i>By Felisha Hodge</i>	

3 GOING THE DISTANCE

Shotgun Side	114
<i>By Anastasia B. Villagomez</i>	
Seeing Past Pretty	115
<i>By Felisha Hodge</i>	
A Captive of the Keys.	124
<i>By Siera Weber</i>	
Song of the Clock that Ticks	130
<i>By Conrad Pruneau</i>	
Back to Sunnydale	131
<i>By Ryleigh Wood</i>	
Love Is a Floor-Ham Sandwich	141
<i>By Kayley Ocker</i>	
Acting Upward.	143
<i>By Danielle Kickbush</i>	
Windows	148
<i>By Shae Jackson</i>	



REVVING UP



A Career of Character

BY OLIVIA SUMMERS

*Marissa is confident in her career goals—
until her coworker asks her one question.*

Marissa pulled her hair into a messy bun as she joined the throng of students filing into the college auditorium. "Why are we going to this seminar?" she asked her friend Rebecca.

Rebecca shoved her glasses up her nose. "Didn't you listen to the announcement in class this morning? All criminal justice majors are required to attend. Besides, Dr. Sleet is speaking on career readiness. I've got to nail down my after-college plans. We only have a year and a half left before graduation."

Marissa blew a flyaway hair off her forehead. "At least they promised refreshments after the presentation. Besides, we already know what we're doing. CIA all the way, baby!" She led them to two open seats in the back and pulled out her phone, ready to ignore the entire presentation.

Rebecca, on the other hand, whisked out a yellow legal pad and a freshly sharpened No. 2 pencil.

"What is that for?" Marissa asked.

"To take notes, obviously." Rebecca rapped the pencil against the pad. "If I want to be in the CIA, I have to record everything."

"Oh, can I borrow that?" Marissa grabbed the pencil from Rebecca's hand and used it to clean underneath her fingernails. When she was satisfied with her work, Marissa flicked the gunk to the concrete floor, returned the pencil to a now disgusted Rebecca, and settled in. Marissa could never understand why anyone would take notes if there wouldn't be a test on the content. Out of habit, she

clapped politely when Dr. Sleet was introduced, then started scrolling through her phone.

"DO YOU HAVE WHAT
IT TAKES TO SURVIVE?"

But Dr. Sleet could not be ignored. A few minutes into his presentation, he got to the heart of his message. "What's on your résumé?" Dr. Sleet railed as he pounded the podium.

Marissa jerked, startled by the loud sound. "Do you have a résumé?" she whispered to Rebecca.

Rebecca shrugged but kept her eyes glued on the stage. "Who doesn't?"

Marissa certainly didn't. Her computer files were quite thin, aside from her class notes.

"Do you volunteer?" Dr. Sleet continued. "Make good grades? Lead a club?" He was going full steam ahead now. The harsh auditorium lights highlighted the spittle that flew from his mouth.

Marissa cringed but put her phone in her purse. She was too intrigued to look away even though she felt sorry for the goody-two-shoes students in the front rows. "He acts like a pitchman in an infomercial," she whispered, ignoring Rebecca's shushing.

"Because when employers receive your résumé," Dr. Sleet thundered, "they will review it for approximately seven seconds. And that's being generous! Then they will either throw your résumé in the trash—or give you a call. The key is standing out above everyone else. It's a mad world out there. Do you have what it takes to survive?"

Marissa scanned the students diligently scribbling away as they listened to Dr. Sleet's message as though it were gospel.

And suddenly, Dr. Sleet's presentation wasn't so funny.

A bead of sweat formed on Marissa's forehead while a pressure akin to panic bubbled inside her. In high school, God had called her to join the CIA. She wanted to protect

AFTER ALL, WASN'T THAT HOW GOD'S CALL WORKED?

others, and the CIA was her opportunity to protect them on a large scale. Marissa had assumed the CIA would hire her after graduation. After all, wasn't that how God's call worked? Now, mapping out the competition, she had doubts.

When Dr. Sleet ended thirty minutes later with a particularly rousing cry of "Network! Connect! Apply! Stand out—or sit down!" to deafening applause, Marissa's sense of impending doom had only increased.

"Rebecca, you've got to help me!" Marissa pleaded as they left the auditorium and headed to the refreshment table. "I have no life skills, and I'm going to be living homeless under a bridge after graduation." She grabbed a pack of Cheez-Its. "Plus, the only job experience I have is working in the dish room. And we both know dishwashing will look *amazing* on a résumé." She layered the sarcasm on thick.

Rebecca rolled her eyes and grabbed a pack of fruit snacks and a bottle of water. "Aren't you being a little dramatic?"

"No—think about it! While you've been going to forums and seminars and practicums—not to mention volunteering at the pregnancy resource center—I've been watching YouTube and drinking Red Bull. Why would the CIA hire me? Why would anyone hire me? I've never held any leadership positions, and my grades are average." Marissa ticked off the items on her fingers.

"Well . . . what if you tried to switch jobs to campus security?"

Marissa mulled the idea over as she pulled the Cheez-It pack open, crinkling the wrapper loudly in the process. "That would look good on a résumé." The more she thought about it, the more excited she got. "I'm going to apply to campus security right now!"

But her excitement was short lived. After pulling up the online application, Marissa realized the job had qualifications.

"I have to demonstrate my fitness by running a 5K before I apply?" she said, aghast. "Who do they expect me to be—Chuck Norris? Besides, applications for next semester close on December 15. That's only a month away!"

Rebecca peered over Marissa's shoulder. "I mean, it could be worse. It could be a 10K."

"Thanks?" Marissa asked around a Cheez-It, wiping the crumbs away with her hoodie sleeve. Did Rebecca always have to be so optimistic?

"Look, it's not that bad. There are plenty of running plans you can use to train. And while we're talking about ways you can improve, what about stepping up and being a leader in the dish room? Be a positive influence for Christ."

"I guess that could work. Maybe my supervisor will even write me a letter of recommendation to the security team!" Marissa poured the rest of the Cheez-Its into her mouth. She was going to need the energy.



"NEED A HAND?"

The next morning, Marissa walked into the dish room, as she did every morning. Yet she never got used to the scent of degrading food, dirty cleaning water, and one-too-many burst sauce packets.

She sighed, shaking her head. *How am I supposed to be a leader in this environment?*

A crash jolted her from her mental grumblings. Her coworker Dustin lay on the floor, jagged plate shards scattered around him. It was a wonder he hadn't dropped the plates sooner. The floor was slick with water, despite the early hour.

Even though Marissa worked with Dustin twice a week, she hadn't talked to him much. She did know he was a freshman who never remembered any of the directions she gave him on the best way to clean a cup or how to avoid getting sprayed by the sink water. Normal Marissa would have made a snippy remark about how Dustin should have paid more attention. But career-motivated Marissa spotted Mr. Trey, her supervisor, around the corner. And Mr. Trey could write her a letter of recommendation.

Biting her lip to keep any rude comments from escaping, Marissa navigated across the minefield of plate fragments to Dustin.

"Need a hand?" she asked. After helping him up, she grabbed the broom off the back wall and swept the plate fragments. Dustin grabbed the nearby dustpan and held it steady on the wet floor.

"Thanks," he mumbled when they were done.

"No problem," Marissa said. And she was surprised to find that she meant it.

They continued chatting while they competed to see who could clean the most dishes in a minute. (Dustin won with a record of twelve.)

Throughout the next week, Marissa continued to improve her qualifications. She wrote a résumé. She trained with Rebecca for the 5K. She pulled apart the plates stuck together by syrup. She took out the overflowing trash after her shift was finished. And when Dustin asked, she promised to pick up his shift the next month so he could go to his brother's wedding.

"Good job, Marissa," Mr. Trey commented one day. "You've been stepping up lately. I appreciate it!"

Marissa shrugged, claiming it was no problem. But after Mr. Trey left, she did a happy dance. If she kept it up, Mr. Trey would write her a letter of recommendation. *Maybe I could even add "manager" to my résumé before the semester ends*, she thought. *That would be another way to stand out for the security job.*

After their run that night, Rebecca and Marissa gathered around Marissa's laptop. "Let's do this one!" Marissa moved the cursor to the Holly Jolly 5K.

Rebecca leaned in and pressed her pointer finger against the date. "Are you sure? That's close to the application deadline. What if something prevents you from running that night? You won't be able to apply for the security job next semester."

Marissa swatted Rebecca's hand away. No way was Rebecca's sweaty finger going to smudge her laptop screen. "I have to run the Holly Jolly 5K," Marissa said. "All these other ones are too soon. If I'm going to run a 5K, I need a good time to stand out. We've only been training for two weeks, and I'm nowhere near where I should be."

Rebecca shrugged. "Suit yourself. How are things going at work by the way?"

"Good! Mr. Trey complimented me today. If I keep it up, he'll definitely write a recommendation when I apply for the security job."

"That's great!" Rebecca said, stuffing her workout clothes into her duffle bag. "But is that why you're working harder? Just to get a recommendation?"

"No! I mean, it's not the main reason." Marissa slid her laptop into its case. Rebecca's question hit a nerve, a nerve Marissa intended to ignore. "I'll see you later. I need my sleep before work tomorrow."

When Marissa clocked in the next morning, she joined Dustin at the conveyor belt. Per their new normal, they chatted about classes and life. Dustin mentioned his brother's upcoming wedding and how excited he was to be the best man. Marissa talked about her latest run.

Then, Dustin asked out of the blue, "Why have you been so nice lately? I thought you hated it here." Marissa grabbed a cup off the line. Admitting she wanted to get on Mr. Trey's good side and out of the dish room didn't sound like something career-motivated Marissa would say. But her faith was as good a reason as any.

"I'm a Christian, so I want to do everything with excellence." She pulled a wad of sticky paper towels out of the cup.



"A Christian, huh? You don't meet many of those around here." Dustin scraped food off a plate.

"What do you even believe?"

For the rest of their shift, Dustin and Marissa talked about their beliefs and their perspectives on faith.

"Well, thanks for talking with me," Dustin said when he clocked out. "I guess I can see why you care about your work. That's pretty cool."

Marissa tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's nothing." But she felt a twinge of guilt. She enjoyed talking to Dustin about her faith—but she felt uncomfortable with the conviction that followed. *Am I truly working to please God like I told Rebecca and Dustin, or am I serving my own interests?*

She dismissed the thought. *Does it even matter? Mr. Trey gets a good worker. Dustin gets the gospel. God gets the credit, and I get one step closer to joining the security team. Either way, everyone gets something good.*

A ping from her phone pushed the distracting thoughts away, and Marissa gladly forgot about her introspective crisis. The next two weeks were a blur of work, classes, and training with no time to philosophize about her inner motives.

The evening before the Holly Jolly 5K, Marissa checked her phone to see if Rebecca had sent a message. But to her surprise, she found a missed call from Dustin instead. Marissa clicked on his voicemail, wondering what he wanted.

"Hey, Marissa. This is Dustin," the recording started. "You're covering my shift tomorrow night, right? I'm still on the schedule, so something must have happened to the paperwork. Could you send it over to Mr. Trey as soon as possible? Okay, thanks. Bye."

DOES IT EVEN MATTER?

Marissa held the phone up to her ear and listened again. And again. And again.

No, God! Why this? She had completely forgotten she had promised to take Dustin's shift that weekend. She had also forgotten to turn in the paperwork he had mentioned.

Part of her was tempted to ignore his message. She technically wasn't responsible for his shift since she hadn't submitted the paperwork. *Dustin can find someone else*, Marissa rationalized. Besides, tomorrow was her last chance to run a 5K before the security team application deadline closed. She had been training every night and had even begrudgingly enjoyed her runs as her muscles strengthened and her breaths deepened.

Isn't working in the CIA what you've called me to do? she asked God. *And to get into the CIA, I need this security job. So why shouldn't I tell Dustin to find someone else?* But she knew there was a deeper issue at stake. *If I say no to Dustin*, she wondered, *do I lose my testimony?*

Desire and duty raged within her soul, pulling her heart back and forth in an epic tug-of-war contest. Hands shaking, she dialed Rebecca's number. Marissa rarely shared her feelings with others, but she needed help more than she needed her pride.

"Rebecca," she said after her friend picked up. "I have a big problem."

Marissa poured out her soul. As she talked, she steadied her hands by tearing a piece of scrap paper into shreds.

"What should I do?" she finished.

Several beats of silence followed. Marissa passed the time by ripping four more strips of paper and listening to the faint beeping of Rebecca's microwave.

Finally, Rebecca asked, "What's most important to you?"

"I would like to say taking Dustin's shift is most important, but that wouldn't be true." Marissa wrapped one of the paper strips around her finger. "I want to run tomorrow night. I've been working so hard for this chance."

"Sometimes actions are more important than feelings. True leadership is not getting the promotion or the award. It's about sticking to your word and leading by example."

It was Marissa's turn to pause. She unwound the paper from her finger and pushed the scraps into a neat pile.

"I think," she replied eventually, "you might be right. But do you mind running by yourself?" Even though she knew what Rebecca's response would be, Marissa still felt a bit guilty.

"Nah, it's not a problem. I'll be able to speed up without you," Rebecca teased.

Marissa laughed. "All right, I'll talk to you later. I have some paperwork to fill out."

The next evening, Marissa set aside her new tennis shoes for the dirty black galoshes she wore in the dish room. And as the first cereal bowl full of ranch dressing traveled down the line, Marissa felt different.

She would never love working in the dish room, she still wanted to join the security team, and she might not get a job in the CIA immediately after graduation as she had dreamed. But Rebecca was right.

True leaders didn't care about recognition. Leadership meant having character.

And that was worth making a career out of.

Cloud Cat

BY SHAE JACKSON

The storm cloud rests
Atop my bed
And rumbles softly,
Contented.

It's drifting near;
Gray fluff billows
As it gathers
By my pillows.

I'm unsure now
If I quite like
This looming cloud—
Lightning might strike!

I need not fear
This cloud so small:
It's only purring
After all.

Trash Talk(s)

BY KAYLEY OCKER

How far would you go to make the world smell better?

I personally believe that waking up in the morning is the worst part of the day. I love sleep. Sleep loves me. We're made for each other. The only thing I've found that gives me the strength, nay—the courage—to physically drag myself out of bed in the morning is the smell of coffee. So when I woke up to the smell of *rotting garbage*, I almost couldn't convince myself to leave my pillowy haven.

The stench permeated the entire house, acrid and overpowering. Nowhere was safe. I threw off my covers and grabbed the half-empty bottle of Febreze stationed on my bedside table, spraying the air in front of me as I walked downstairs.

"Mom?" I called out into the quiet house, making my way to the kitchen, one spray of Febreze at a time. The kitchen was empty, but a note lay on the counter.

Charlotte, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to escape. I left for the office at 5:30, and I won't be back until late. For dinner, there's stuff for tacos in the fridge. Don't wait for me. Have a good day! (Despite the dump outside.)

Love you! Mom

P.S. Look at this! It's never going to end, is it?

Today's newspaper sat underneath Mom's note. Red pen encircled the front-page article, like I could've missed it. "Garbage Strike Drags into Fifth Week, No End in Sight!" the headline screamed. According to the article, the county

still hadn't come to an agreement with the sanitation employees about safety measures. The workers had gone on strike after a worker was injured from a truck malfunction, an event that exposed several safety violations. When I walked outside to catch my bus, bags upon bags of trash filled the road, baking away in the May sunshine.

"Couldn't people at least try to stack it neatly?" I muttered, edging my way around the piles of trash currently liquefying all over the sidewalk while I diligently avoided eye contact with my neighbor, Old Man Phil. He sits in a chair on his porch every morning, and every morning, I avoid speaking to him. That's how my neighborhood works. We go about our business and stay out of each other's. We don't ask to borrow an egg, we don't ask for plumber recommendations, and we definitely don't ask for help moving. No eye contact, no waving, no nothing. And that's how we like it.



"THE WORLD STINKS."

After skirting by Old Man Phil, I trekked to my bus stop, trying to avoid stepping in someone else's garbage. It took me almost twice the time to make the two-minute walk, but I finally made it. My friend Reagan was already there, pinching his nose and waving at me.

"Hey. Did you hear?" he asked. The newspaper rustled as he shook it at me.

"Yeah. I'm so sick of this."

Reagan's mop of curls bounced as he nodded, but before he could say anything, salvation in the form of a dingy yellow school bus pulled up. School was officially outside of the strike radius, which brought it safely out of the smell radius.

When the door creaked open, the bus exploded in sound. All at once, people shouted:

"Eww, gross!"

"Shut the doors!"

"What *is* that?"

And my personal favorite, "What died out there?"

We made our way to the back of the bus, amidst the sea of judgmental looks and a pitying glance here and there. I sank down into my seat and glared at the trash filling the street.

"The world stinks," I muttered.

"Worse than garbage," Reagan agreed.



After school, I flung open my house's oak door in a race to escape the smell outside. "Welcome to my stinky home," I said. Sarcasm seeped from my voice as I swept my arm grandly in front of me. The house was dead silent, except for my dad's muffled voice coming from his home office. I knew my mom wasn't back yet.

"What a generous host you are," Reagan said, dropping his backpack onto the floor, plopping himself down onto my couch, and putting his feet onto the seat next to him.

"Please, make yourself at home." I pushed his feet out of my seat and sank down myself.

"No problem here." Reagan propped his feet on my coffee table instead and wrinkled his crooked nose. "It smells almost as bad in here as it does outside."

"Don't remind me." I groaned. "I just wish someone would do something about it! Seriously, how hard can it be to just not have junky garbage trucks? Or to make peace with the workers so they can get back to, you know, working?" I huffed and sank further into the couch. "And why can't people do the civilized thing? Just take your trash to the dump yourself instead of just letting it decompose in the road!"

Reagan shrugged, always supportive, even in silence.

"I don't get it!" I whined. "*Someone* needs to clean it up! *Someone* needs to get the smell out of my house! *Someone* needs to do something! *Someone*—" I stopped mid-sentence.

"What? Someone what?" Reagan asked. "Oh no. I know that face. I hate that face! It always means I'm going to get dragged into some harebrained scheme!"

I ignored him.

I pulled on my shoes and ran around the house looking for what we'd need. I found two pairs of old work gloves in the front closet, along with some of the huge black trash bags we used for yard work.

"Care to share what you're doing?" Reagan asked, looking at me cautiously, the way someone looks at a feral animal, as if he wasn't exactly scared, but he knows that this thing's agitated and unpredictable.

"We're someone, Reagan."
I continued my search,
throwing a pair of mom's old
work boots at Reagan.
He ducked out of the way.

"CARE TO SHARE WHAT
YOU'RE DOING?"

The shoes clattered to the floor in front of him. He looked
at the shoes, then at me, then back to the shoes.

"Yes, we are," he said, slowly. "These are boots, though."

"Astute observation. Put them on." I threw a pair of gloves
at him. He caught those. "The gloves too."

"Okay. Why?"

"We're someone, Reagan."

"You keep saying that." His normally steady voice rose
with agitation.

"I keep saying someone needs to do something about the
trash in this neighborhood. Well, I'm someone, so I'm going
to do something about it."

"You keep saying 'I'm,' so why do I get the feeling *I'm*
involved in this madness?"

I beamed at him.

He groaned, slouching back on the couch. "Chaaaarlotte,
how're we going to do this? We don't have equipment!"

The trash bags rustled as I shook them at him.

"That's not what I meant!" Reagan said. "Where's all the
trash going to go?"

"We'll drive it up to the dump on Birch Crossing Road.
That's only fifteen minutes away."

"What, you expect to load up your mom's Kia with five
weeks of garbage?" He crossed his arms, eyebrow raised.

"Does your dad still have the trailer that hooks up to
his truck?"

Reagan groaned, "I'm going to regret this."



"STAY. VERY. STILL."

"I REGRET THIS!" I shouted.

"We've been out here for less than an hour, Charlotte," Reagan reminded me.

"And we've gotten nothing done!" I gestured at the bags of trash sitting in my front yard. We'd managed to clear the trash from in front of four houses—*barely*. At this rate, it would take us all night to get just one side of the street clean.

"Maybe we should call it a night?" Reagan asked. The trash bag sloshed as he dropped it to the ground. "I mean, we're not going to get it all done anyway." He glanced around. "We cleared your house and my house and a couple extra. That's something."

"It's not enough. I wanted—" Before I could finish complaining, the screech of Old Man Phil's screen door echoed across the empty street.

"Oh no," I whispered.

"Stay. Very. Still." Reagan whispered back. "If we don't move, maybe he won't see us."

No such luck.

"What are you kids doing out here?" Old Man Phil's voice boomed across the yard. The man himself stalked over to where Reagan and I stood.

"We, uhm, I, uhm . . ." I stammered. I hadn't spoken to Old Man Phil since the summer before third grade, when I had to ask him to throw my Frisbee back over the fence.

"Do your parents know you two are out here?"

"No, I mean, yeah—but," I sputtered.

"Well?" Old Man Phil raised a bushy eyebrow.

"My dad knows we're out here," Reagan stepped in, saving me from my own inability to form a coherent sentence.

"What are you doing?" Old Man Phil stared at us.

"We're cleaning up," I mumbled, finally finding my voice.

Old Man Phil looked surprised, but he didn't say anything.

"It's just . . . it's just gotten really bad out here." I dropped the bag in my hand. "We figured that instead of waiting for the county to step in, we'd clean up the street. But you don't have to worry—we were about to go inside anyway."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because there's just too much for us to get it all cleaned up before morning." I shrugged. "We figured we'd better give up now."

Old Man Phil nodded. "Stay right there."

Reagan and I shared a nervous look but stayed where we were. A few minutes of tense silence later, Old Man Phil came back, carrying—more trash bags?

"My grandson's on his way. I sent him to round up some friends." He shook out a garbage bag. "Ok, Miss Charlotte, how can I help?"

I gawked at him. "Help?"

Old Man Phil nodded. "I may be an old man, but I can still be useful. It warms my heart to see young people out here trying to do some good. So, how can I help?"

I stood gaping at him, unsure how to respond. Then Old Man Phil's grandson—I think his name was Josh—rounded the corner. Behind him, a small crowd had gathered. I recognized a few people from school, Mr. and Mrs. Paulson from down the street, and the guy who was always chasing his kid around his front yard, but I didn't know most of them. All in all, fifteen people were standing on my lawn, staring at me.

"I found everyone I could, Grandpa. What do you need us to do?" Josh asked.

Old Man Phil just looked at me.

"Well, Miss Charlotte? What do we need to do?"

Wide-eyed and slightly panicked, I stared at Reagan, but he just smiled at me.

"Yeah, Charlotte." He grinned, shaking his bag of trash at me. "What do we need to do?"

Looking out at the crowd of familiar and unfamiliar faces, I could see everyone looking at me expectantly, as if I had all the answers.

The entire street seemed to be holding in a breath, waiting for the right time to let it out.

"All right!" I shouted, holding up the enormous roll of trash bags. "First, everybody grab a bag!"

What followed was easily the most amazing experience of my life. My neighbors, the same people who avoided eye contact on a good day, came together and cleaned up the street in less than three hours. We went up and down the street, laughing and talking as all the rottenness that had lived in our neighborhood for so long disappeared into the giant black trash bags.

We had nearly cleared the entire street by the time my mom came home from work.

"All right!" I shouted, raising a bag over my head. "This is the last bag! We did it!"

Cheers broke out as Reagan helped me heft the final bag into the trailer. People exchanged hugs and handshakes as Reagan's dad drove his trailer off to the dump.

That night, I crawled into bed, dead-tired and smelling like garbage, but with a smile on my face.

The next morning, the world still stunk. It would take a little while for the smell to clear out entirely, and the sanitation employees were still on strike. But as I ambled to my bus stop, I waved to Old Man Phil and Josh, exchanged "good mornings" with the Paulsons, and smiled at Mr. Kopf and his daughter, Joeey, as they ran around their front yard. After I'd joined Reagan, I looked around at the empty street with a smile on my face.

So yeah, the world still stunk. But today, at least in my neighborhood, it stunk a little less.

Consider Your Physical Limitations Before You Leap

BY JUSTIN RICKARD

Is failure worth the risk?

"Go for it, Justin," Thomas yelled from across the tennis court.

I eyed the tennis net. It looked as tall and stiff as the Hoover Dam. "Nah, I'm good."

"Aww, come on."

I shook my head. The net was at least a foot too high for my sixth-grade legs to hurdle. "Sorry, guys, not gonna do it. I'd kill myself."

Thomas snorted in disgust. He and his friends returned to their game, jumping the net and tossing footballs to each other in midair. From either end of the court, the girls watched, laughing and pointing at the antics. Me—I squatted on the sidelines, feeling like a loser. I'd just squandered an opportunity for glory. For all I knew, I'd never get another chance to look cool in front of the guys (and girls).

A minute later, a delicious smell wafted through Forest Park: the Labor Day cookout had commenced. Ever-hungry teens rushed to gobble down the free hamburgers and hotdogs. Meanwhile, I alone moped around the tennis court, regretting my decision.

But my decision had been prudent, hadn't it? I had done the right thing; I hadn't risked injury for something stupid, I reasoned with myself. Still, there's no torture like knowing you could have succeeded had you risked failure.

Then a thought occurred to me. I could redeem myself even now—at least in a small way—by jumping the net privately. Stepping up to the net, I gingerly felt its height and resistance. All at once, the male portion of my brain took over, and the impossible seemed reasonable. I could clear that net—but only if I gave the leap everything I had.

I breathed deep and broke into a full sprint, gathering all the momentum I could muster.

Then I launched, tucking my legs up tight under my body. To my surprise, my body sailed cleanly over the net and landed upright, just like a Blue Moon spacecraft.

I was elated—briefly. True, I'd demonstrated my coolness, but to whom? Myself? That would never do. My newfound confidence demanded an audience, an audience that would be impressed by my athletic prowess.

"Levi, wanna do something cool?" I called out across the park lawn.

"Umm, ok. What?" My friend Levi, also in the sixth grade, spoke in noncommittal fragments. He had learned long ago to be wary of my "cool ideas."

"See that net?" I put my arm around his neck and steered him in the right direction.

He nodded slowly. "Yes."

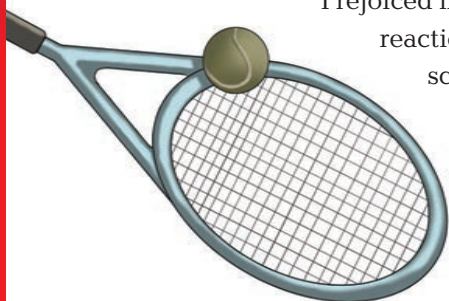
"We're going to run and jump it."

"No way." Levi viciously pushed me away.

"That'll never happen."

I rejoiced inwardly. This was exactly the reaction I'd hoped for. "Fine then, scaredy-cat. Watch me do it."

I followed the established formula: sprint, full leap, tuck legs. But this time, my right foot caught on the top of the net, and I plummeted to earth like a



human missile, landing with a thud. I groaned and clutched my arm. Excruciating pain shot through my right wrist.

It was broken.

Looking up, I saw Levi's curly head framed by the blue mid-afternoon sky. He was laughing hysterically.

"I told you so," he said, delighted at my misfortune.

"That's what you get for showing off."

When the cast finally came off six weeks later, I was a wiser man. Through my experience, I learned to take victories as they come, then quit while ahead. I learned to ignore people who urge you on to stupidity. And I learned that showing off is begging for catastrophe.

Purpose

BY PAIGE ROMIG

I need more than a window-seat life.

I have epilepsy. Meaning, I can't drive. I don't attend a normal high school. I avoid summer heat like it's the plague, and during winter, I hide inside. My seizures started at the age of seven, and now at seventeen, I live with their big and little life-effects.

One of my daily habits is to sit at my window seat and watch the world rush by. My window serves as my storybook, opening to reveal an age-old stage. The characters of my town interact in their storybook lives and work to perfect their storybook homes. Husbands and wives come home with tired, content smiles. Their days are crammed with due dates and laden with purpose.

And I *envy* them. I envy my neighbors and their purpose and the loving arms that pull them home.



Tiny pinpricks stabbed my legs and feet. I stood, shook my legs awake, and sank back down in my chair. From downstairs, Mom's concerned voice floated through the house and beneath my bedroom door: "Another seizure . . . overheated . . . quit her job . . . she had to."

My fingers toyed with the cover of my book as my eyes moved from page to glass, page to glass. Currents of snow gushed through my cul-de-sac as rebel sunbeams escaped the heavy clouds, traveling the cold distance from sky to earth. Stiff brick houses withstood the wintry gusts as my world spun on its everyday course toward nothing.

It was four o'clock on a Tuesday, so I shifted in my window seat to see Mr. Tony's house. Like clockwork, his

garage door growled open, revealing my neighbor's imposing six-foot frame and his less imposing leopard-print pajamas.

MY WORLD SPUN ON ITS EVERYDAY
COURSE TOWARD NOTHING.

With yellow shovel in hand, he began tossing heaps of white snow from the sidewalk and onto his lawn. The wind whipped the snow from his shovel, spreading glittering flakes through the air.

A school bus stopped at the house beside Mr. Tony's, and a child bounded free from the screeching mechanical doors. A nylon hood bobbed on her shoulders as she raced to the house with the Christmas garland on the door. Her mom appeared and whisked the child inside.

I shifted in my seat again, this time to see the dark, drab house across the street. The house had rightfully earned the title "neighborhood eyesore." Of all the homes and families I had come to envy from my window, this one remained a mystery to me.

Twin shutters slouched and sagged off the windows, and white columns supported the tired overhang with considerable effort. The owner had managed to find the ugliest shade of yellow and doused the door with it.

But there remained one pretty aspect to the house. In the arched window, the outline of a harp was visible. A lacy curtain blurred my view of the player, and despite the cold, I pried my window open—enough that the breath of winter chilled my fingers. I shut my eyes and bent into the icy breeze. There were times when all the world went silent, and the wind carried little strains of music to me where I sat, and I could hear the harp strumming—

"Diana!" Mom said as she pushed my door open. "Diana, did you hear me? I said I spoke to your father."

IT WASN'T THE JOB ITSELF THAT
I NEEDED. IT WAS A PURPOSE.

I caught a glimpse of my pale oval face in the window. The clock on my nightstand ticked stiffly.

"Good. That's good."

Mom drew a slow breath.

"He agrees with me, you know. It's not us against you, dear. You realize that working will only make your seizures worse. This isn't a matter of what you want anymore, and I know . . . I know that sounds harsh, but—"

"It's okay," I whispered. Emotions constricted my throat. It was not okay. My parents had finally allowed me to work at a nearby farmers' market, but only after I had begged for the position. When I had an intense seizure this morning, Mom snapped. She forced me to quit. But it wasn't the job itself that I needed. It was a *purpose*.

Mom continued. "You gave it a try, which we agreed to, but—" Her cinnamon eyes considered me carefully from the doorway, as if she expected me to have a seizure where I sat. "But . . . the try failed, dear."

Mom crossed the room, pressed a kiss to my forehead, and left with a comment about dinner. Alone again, I peered out at the mystery house. In the darkening cul-de-sac, the streetlight flashed on, streaking the blue snow like manufactured sunlight. Against the light, the ugly house positively scowled, and I no longer heard the harp.

I made a spur-of-the-moment decision, the kind that I was prone to make whenever life felt unimportant and purposeless. I whispered into the cold of my room, "You know what? *Tomorrow*—I am *going* to visit that house." My clock ticked a reply. It was decided. Pressing my book beneath my arm, I tugged the curtains across my window with one swift *flap*.





When tomorrow came, I had little to do. I sat at my window and trudged through schoolwork. I sat at my window and read a book. I sat at my window and contemplated the house and the harp until noon. Finally, I told Mom I needed some fresh air, and she consented—*slowly*. Mom knew as well as I did that I would not have a seizure the day following a particularly intense episode.

Before I could leave, I had to endure Mom's precautions. She wrapped me in a fleece jacket. She swung two red scarves around my neck, securing them under my nose. When my brown hair poked through the scarves and I looked as though I had walked through a lightning storm, I was ready.

Outside, the sun played hide-and-seek in the indigo heavens. I plunged into the twenty-degree weather, taking careful strides onto the sidewalk and pledging over my shoulder not to go far.

I passed Mr. Tony's house. I passed the house with the Christmas garland on the door and knew that come Saturday, I'd see the girl on the front lawn shaping a snowman with her gloved hands.

As I approached the mystery house, a storm of nerves churned in my chest. Crossing the short driveway, I stood on the cracked porch and knocked on the yellow door. The frowning door and snow-coated welcome mat made me wonder if I should turn back. Then, harp music swelled from inside. I knocked louder.

The music stopped, and I heard shuffling from deep inside the house. I realized I had nothing to say. What *could* I say? Hello, your house scares the living daylights out of me. Can I come inside? No, that wouldn't do. The shuffling stopped at the door as locks shifted and clicked on the opposite side.

"Hi, I—I umm, I'm so sorry. Wrong house," I stammered as the door creaked open.

An elderly woman considered me from the doorway. Her gray hands went to her lips, but she quickly dropped them, revealing a surprised smile as her faded eyes sparkled. "You're the girl in the window, three houses down."

I blinked. "I . . . am. Yes, ma'am."

A smile twisted her lips. "*Well*. What brought you here?" She clutched her green sweater, pulling it beneath her chin. "Oh, close your mouth and come in, dear. And take off those scarves. You look ridiculous. You *do* want to come in, don't you?" A gust of air ruffled her dyed strawberry-blond curls, and with a turn, she faded into the house.

My fingers fumbled at my neck. I loosened my scarves and slid out of my dripping shoes. After closing the door, I padded after the old woman as she tottered down a dim hallway. The ticking of her cane softened to a dull *tuk-tuk* as she turned into a carpeted room. I followed her, finding a quaint sitting room and the old woman lowering herself into a brown armchair. She nodded to the chair beside hers, and I sat.

I had entered the perfect storybook. The air carried the sharp, musty odor of old novels. A host of ancient volumes, caked with dust, crowded the chestnut bookshelf behind me. The room was complete with a ray of afternoon sun, oozing slowly like honey down the white walls. Cover to cover, wall to wall, the room was intensely pleasant.

"I'm sorry for barging in," I blurted, feeling her curious eyes shifting over me. "I hope I'm not keeping you from something important. But—I love your books, they're so—*atmospheric*. You must have read them all. Which one is your favorite—" I stopped talking when I saw her smile fade.

"YOU'RE THE GIRL IN
THE WINDOW, THREE
HOUSES DOWN."

WAS SHE CALLING FOR SOMEONE?

"Don't stop." She waved her hand delicately. The sunbeam traced her smile and illuminated a ring on her left hand. "Talk all you want, child."

But I couldn't. Standing in the arched window across the room was the *harp*.

A coarse lace curtain framed it where it stood. Sunlight flickered through the lace and draped the instrument with a tranquil glow, illuminating the snowy wood. Bright strings spread white-hot prisms of light around the room.

"Let's not be strangers," the old woman said. "My name is Caroline."

"Diana . . ." I breathed.

She laughed. "Oh, go on, child—*Diana*. Yes, you may touch my harp. And close your mouth or you'll drool."

"Can I?" I floated to the instrument. "I never imagined I'd see this up close." I plucked a string, and a warm tone hummed around me and trailed out the window. The lace curtain puffed out, brushing my legs, and I noticed that the window in front of me was open a crack. It seemed as though the old woman sent out her little strains of music every day like a beacon. Was she calling for someone?

"And what do *you* do all day?" Caroline's voice came from the chair.

"I had to quit my job, so not much," I said. My fingers trembled uncertainly over the strings. "I have epilepsy, so Mom worries. I don't go many places. Actually, I don't do much at all." I chuckled. "You can imagine I get bored, so I read. When you see me in my window, I'm reading."

Caroline mumbled something in her chair.

I asked, "Did you say something?"

"Sorry, yes. I said we are very different, you and I."

"Oh?" I plucked a set of strings, but the notes soured the air.

"Well, for one thing, you can't play that harp for your life, and I can't read a blessed word." Her eyes glistened over me. "Not a word."

I moved from the harp and back to the chair, blushing till I matched my drooping scarves. I asked her to explain, and Caroline reclined, fixing her bright eyes on the ceiling. She began by telling me that as a child she had learned enough letters to write her name: Caroline Lavinia Veil.

Frowning, she said, "My mother thought I should learn how to clean and cook and raise children. All important things, dear, very important things. But I received a poor education and married young. He was a good man, and while he was alive, *he* taught me to read *music*." Her eyes shimmered over the harp. "But I can't read these old books. I could make out a word, maybe. Maybe if I tried. But I don't try." Outside the arched window, the sun had shifted in its golden perch in the sky. "Now, do me a favor, Diana, and run home. If I know anything about mothers, yours is fretting right now. Go on home and read your books."

I rose and took her outstretched hand. My eyes traveled from Caroline to her books, Caroline to books.

"I'll go home," I consented slowly, "but if you let me come back tomorrow, I can read to you. It's no fun reading to an empty room."

A look of relief passed over Caroline's wizened face, and she whispered, "Please do."

Back at home, I found Mom nearing a mental breakdown. I told her about poor lonely Caroline sitting at her window with her solitary harp and with no one to visit her (I embellished her life only a little). Mom insisted on visiting Caroline herself, and when she seemed satisfied with the old woman and her cozy sitting room, I was free to take my daily pilgrimage to the old house to read to her.

In the days that followed, Mom wrapped me in a fleece jacket each time I left. She wound scarves around my neck

CAROLINE DIDN'T NEED TO
SEND OUT HER STRAINS OF
MUSIC ANYMORE.

until my hair poked out in every direction. But as my visits continued, Mom let me dress myself on my way out the door.

I read to Caroline, and she played the harp for me. We weren't good teachers, but

we did not try to be. I noticed one day when padding into Caroline's sitting room that she had pulled the lace curtain open and cinched it to a metal ring on the wall, allowing wells of light to pour over the harp and over her gray fingers. When my daily visits started, she shut the arched window. She never told me why, but I knew: Caroline didn't need to send out her strains of music anymore. Not now that she had a companion.

One day, that chapter of my life closed, and old Caroline became a memory.

When she passed away, a new chapter opened for me, and winter turned into spring. The world began to dress in green and gold again. Reluctant to read at my window, I journeyed downstairs to the rocking chair on my front porch. And for the first time in months, I sat alone.

At four o'clock, Mr. Tony's garage door growled open. Later, the school bus chugged by. Pages of my book turned beneath my slow fingers, and there was no harp music for me to listen to as I read.

I heard a door screech open. The girl next door raced through the midday sunlight and plopped down on the sidewalk in front of her house. She fumbled with a piece of chalk and scratched at the long concrete canvas. Her brown eyes swept up to me, and she waved.

Dropping my book into my lap, I waved back.

I made a spur-of-the-moment decision, the kind that I was prone to make whenever life felt unimportant and purposeless. I rose from my chair and ambled over to her.

"Hello!" she chirped, squinting up at me. She pointed at the colorful sidewalk. "Wanna draw with me? Just don't draw on my side, okay?" She dumped the box of chalk out beside her.

"Thank you." Brilliant pastels poured out and spun around my feet. I blinked. I was always clumsy with chalk, but . . . that didn't matter to her, did it? I stooped down beside my little neighbor.



"Um . . . let's not be strangers. My name is Diana." I picked up a piece of chalk.

I have epilepsy. Meaning, I can't drive. I don't go to a normal school. I don't have a job. But I have learned that purpose is not found in what I can or cannot do. I am loved, and I love others. And I think—no, I *know*—I have purpose in that.

Spice Up Your Life

BY NAOMI HELTON

Your taste buds are in for a wake-up call.

Let's face it. Sometimes, American food can be bland. So come wander with me for an hour and try some Indian street food. We won't be gone long, and it won't cost much. Grab a bottle of water. We're not getting water from the vendors—that's how people die.

You haven't lived until you've skittered through a narrow alley and stopped to have six *gol gappa* for ten rupees at the Mini Market in my hometown. There's just something about stuffing your mouth with an entire hollow fried puff packed with mashed potato, chickpeas, chopped onion, and spices and dipped in spicy, sweet water. (That water is safe.) As soon as you devour the stuffed globe of happiness, brace yourself for a slap-across-the-face explosion of flavor. Take your time. We've got all day.

Let's stroll down the winding pavement around Sukhna Lake. Is it a naturally-occurring lake? Not in the slightest. See that guy with his hands full of paper cones? We're going to buy some of what he has. *Namkeen*—fried and seasoned bits of crunchy heaven. It's like American Chex Mix, just spicier. Here, pour some *namkeen* in your palm and pop it into your mouth. None of this pinch-and-place-in-the-mouth business.

And we can't leave until we wind our way through the shaded corridors of the Sector 15 Market to get a plate of steamed *momos* and a bowl of *thupa*—steamed pork or chicken dumplings and soup with noodles. The steam rising from the blue bowl carries the scent of an unnamed mix of spices waiting to be savored. I promise none of this food is

spicy. We can also try a plate of fried *momos* if you'd like—just don't burn your tongue.

One more thing as we head back—warm, sugar-glazed *jalebi*. Swirly orange rings of fried sticky sweetness. You could call it a sweet pretzel. Don't you love the way it melts in your mouth?

Which was your favorite today? Can't decide? Neither can I. Each is a little different; each is part of my Indian home.

The Flight

BY RILEY KAY

Maybe dogs aren't always a "man's best friend."

Paul Davis did *not* like the look on the flight attendant's face as she began her trek through the jungle of human legs. Her smile was too wide, too plastic. It stood in stark contrast to her eyes, which were pleading, "Don't hate me, I'm just the messenger." And those pleading, helpless eyes were fixed on him.

"This can't be good," Paul muttered, turning to his wife, Rebecca.

She glanced up briefly from her book and nudged him with her elbow. "Paul, it could be nothing at all. What even makes you think she's coming for you?"

"Because she stopped right here," Paul whispered, shooting furtive glances over his shoulder at the flight attendant.

The flight attendant, missing these secret glances, leaned down. "Excuse me, sir, but would you be willing to change your seat? One of the passengers didn't quite realize all the responsibilities that come with flying by an emergency exit."

Paul twisted in his seat. Sure enough, a gentleman in the prime of his eighties was sitting in the emergency exit aisle, trembling like one who has foreknowledge of imminent disaster. Paul could barely see a dog's snout resting on the old man's lap. He righted himself and glanced at his wife.

"You know you want to, Paul," she said. "You always want to help people."

"Maybe, but it always backfires! You remember the last family reunion we had? I pulled Mikey out of a tree, and he bit me!"

"Paul, your nephew was three at the time. Toddlers do things like that."

"How about the time I found that woman's wedding ring and tried to return it? She thought I had stolen it and tased me!"

"She apologized. Paul, you're good to people. They'll be good to you, too. You just need to give them a chance."

Paul shook his head. His history had yielded far different results than his wife's had.

She gave him a gentle nudge. "Go ahead, hon. The flight is only three hours long. I'll see you in Orlando."

With an air of partial resignation, Paul rose from his seat. He would have preferred to sit with his wife, but if he could help that frightened old man, he would do so.

The flight attendant radiated relief. After listening to the couple, it was obvious she had expected Paul to say no. She led Paul down the walkway, reminding a few passengers as they went that the seat belt sign was still on. Finally, she turned and faced the old man. "All right, we have another seat for you."

But to Paul's surprise, the shaking elder didn't move an inch. Instead, the young woman in the window seat (a teenager, Paul guessed) rose and gingerly escaped to the walkway. Maybe it was just Paul's imagination, but he thought he heard her say "good luck" as she passed him.

As Paul settled in, the old man fixed a wary eye on him. "So, you're my new neighbor, eh?"

Paul squirmed in his seat, searching for his seat belt. "I suppose so."

The old man shifted the dog, which appeared to be some sort of chihuahua mix, into a more comfortable position. "This is Chichi, my emotional support dog. She is very protective of me and will probably attack you if you get too

"YOU'D BETTER BE ABLE
TO HANDLE THAT."

"I, FOR ONE, COULD NOT
BEAR TO WATCH A FELLOW
PASSENGER GET MAULED."

close. You'd better be able to handle that."

The emotional support animal in question didn't look particularly vicious. She was black with small tan spots on her face. She trembled

constantly, in perfect sync with her owner. But her eyes never wandered from Paul. She stared him down as though he were plotting something diabolical.

A quick *psst* from behind distracted Paul from the dog. Turning, Paul saw a gray-eyed man in his mid-forties, wearing a crisp black suit. "Excuse me," he whispered, "but I couldn't help but overhear what that—gentleman—was telling you."

"About the dog?" Paul asked.

The stranger nodded vigorously. "He happened to say the same thing to the young lady earlier. Before I could offer her what I'm about to offer you, she left."

"What offer? Who are you, and what are you selling?"

The man dramatically smacked his forehead. "Pardon me for forgetting. My name is Dodgeson and I'm not selling anything. I'm a personal injury lawyer from Dodgeson and Clyde."

"Why would I need a personal injury lawyer?"

Dodgeson's hand shot between the seats and clasped Paul's elbow firmly. "Why would you? I'll tell you why! Dogs are a horrible cause of injury in America!" Dodgeson feverishly wiped sweat off his brow with his free hand. "I, for one, could not bear to watch a fellow passenger get mauled without—"

"Thank you for your concern, but I'll be fine," Paul interrupted.

Dodgeson carried on, "—without knowing that he had a decent chance of getting fair compensation for his injuries.

My partners and I have won many cases, and we will win yours!" Dodgeson's volume nearly rose to a manic shriek with this assertion. Then he tried to hand Paul his business card.

Paul declined. "Again, thank you, but I don't have a case. I think I'll be fine."

Dodgeson fell silent, and the business card retreated.

The old man (who Paul was sure had heard everything) snorted. "Please. That girl you swapped seats with couldn't handle 'er. Can't say I think you can either."

Paul looked down at himself and searched for what gave the old man that impression. Paul's button-up shirt wasn't wrinkled, and his jeans weren't dirty. He knew his graying hair was neatly combed. Deciding there was nothing about his appearance to suggest incompetence, Paul changed the subject. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Paul."

"I didn't ask," the old man said. He scratched Chichi behind the ears. "But mine is Rodney."

"What are you doing in Orlando?"

"Staying there for a bit."

"Business?"

Rodney and Chichi both eyed Paul suspiciously. "What's it to you?"

"I was just wondering—"

"You sure ask a lot of questions for a stranger." Chichi sat upright in Rodney's lap and growled. "In fact, you remind me of another person who asked too many questions." Rodney absentmindedly patted Chichi's head as he stared off into the distance. "Old Fredrick. Kept asking me if he could borrow my pruning shears. You know what happened to him?"

A thousand possibilities, each more horrific than the last, flashed through Paul's mind. Nervously, he eyed the "call assistance" button. A familiar business card inched its way between the seats. "I don't. What happened to him?"

THIS WAS AN ATTACK: A
DECLARATION OF WAR!

"I never let him borrow my pruning shears. His hedges were ugly for a whole week until he bought his own pair." Rodney cackled, and Chichi accompanied

him with a piercing howl.

Paul closed his eyes. "Thank goodness," he prayed. At least what had happened to "poor" Fredrick wasn't too terrible. The business card retreated again. "I'm sure that's one lesson he never forgot," Paul said.

"He did not. That was over twenty years ago, and he hasn't bothered me since." Rodney's shaking seemed to accelerate with his excitement for his story. "And he may have been the worst to disturb me. But he wasn't the first, rest assured. There have been twenty-four people who bothered me and received their just reward. The first was Maggie Winters in elementary school . . ."

Rodney began to tell Paul, in excruciating detail, about his past encounters with "obnoxious" people. Paul only half listened, grieved that he wouldn't get a nap. Every time Paul started to doze off, Rodney would bark, "Chichi!" and the dog would nip Paul into consciousness.

Paul slouched and stared out the window. The ground was far below now and completely obscured by clouds—a thick, billowing veil that encased the entirety of the earth. Paul wished that thick veil were between him and his neighbors, especially Rodney. If only there were a way to get some space!

Suddenly, an idea came to him. He checked, and sure enough, the seat belt light was off! There was one sacred place on the airplane! One refuge for the soul trying to escape torment. "Excuse me, but I need to go to the restroom for a moment."

"Well, you'll have to step over me. I don't move for anybody."

Paul didn't care, though; he needed some peace, if only for a moment. He stood and began to step over Rodney carefully.

Instantly, Chichi reacted. A foot raised aloft could only mean her beloved master was in danger. This was an attack: a declaration of war! Chichi, mustering her courage, responded to this act of aggression as best she could.

"AAAAAAAGH!" Paul bellowed as Chichi latched on to his ankle. Her needle-like teeth penetrated his jeans and began to shred his pants leg.

No one helped him.

The flight attendant handed out water cups, ignoring the disturbance. The young woman who had switched seats with Paul shook her head and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

Dodgeson nearly clambered over the seats to assess the damage. "How bad is it? Still think you don't need my card? How much can we sue for?"

Rebecca—dear, sweet, loving Rebecca—looked up from her book and turned. When she saw Paul's predicament, she bit her lip and returned to her reading. Paul couldn't tell for certain, but he was confident that she found this whole situation amusing.

Rodney chortled as he patted Chichi on the head. "Atta girl, Chichi."

At the sound of her beloved master's voice, Chichi released Paul's jeans and licked Rodney's hand. She kept staring at Paul, though.

"Why would you let her do that?" Paul fell back into his seat and tried to see if there were any way to salvage his favorite pair of pants.

"That's entirely your fault. You got too close to me, and Chichi here was just doing her job. But I'll bet you learned something today, didn't you?" He leaned down and whispered loudly to Chichi, "That makes twenty-five now."

Paul rubbed his sore ankle. He had a sneaking suspicion that the next person Rodney regaled with his tales of vengeance would hear about this incident. "Is she your guard dog or your emotional support animal?"

"I'll have you know that Chichi is an amazing emotional support animal. For example, what just happened helped my mood immensely. Up until now, this trip has been really dull." Rodney leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He chuckled while patting Chichi.

Paul wished he could have had a dull flight. Compared to this nightmare, dull sounded blissful.

The flight attendant finally arrived at Paul and Rodney's aisle. "Would either of you like something to drink?" She refused to meet Paul's accusing eyes.

"Just give me some water," Rodney said.

"I'll take one, too."

The flight attendant poured out two cups of water and handed one to Rodney. When she tried to hand Paul his, however, Chichi growled. In a brilliant move of self-preservation, the flight attendant pivoted and handed the second cup to Rodney. "If you could hand this cup to your neighbor, that would be wonderful," she said.

Rodney didn't wait for her to turn around. He took Paul's cup of water and held it down to Chichi. "Unfortunately, he won't want his. See, he tried to use the restroom earlier, but was unable to." Rodney shot Paul a look of deepest spite. "Besides, Chichi's more important than this guy."

Neither Paul nor the flight attendant challenged this assertion. She hastened down the aisle to the next passenger. Paul scowled at Chichi, who (Paul was convinced) was smirking.

He was at his wits' end. This agonizing flight couldn't finish soon enough! *How much longer?* Paul asked himself. Then, as though someone had heard Paul's plea, the intercom crackled to life, and the pilot spoke.

"Good afternoon, passengers. We'll begin our descent into Orlando in a few minutes. Thank you for choosing Affordable Airlines." Paul had never been happier to hear a captain's voice. Rodney looked as if he wanted to charge up to the cockpit and make the pilot his next victim.

"THERE'S NO DOUBT WE COULD WIN YOU A DECENT PAYOUT."

"Well, I guess this is where we part ways."

"And good riddance to you." Rodney tossed the empty cups at the flight attendant, who was passing by with a trash bag.

"You've done nothing but bother me this entire time."

Paul clenched his jaw as he buckled his seat belt. A myriad of retorts sprang into his mind. He was going to tell Rodney that this had been the most unpleasant trip of his life. Paul wanted to tell the old man that he had been cranky and selfish, and that Chichi was pure evil.

No, I can't do that, Paul thought. At least four of his previous victims all tried to tell him off and look how much of an effect that had. Then, looking at his shredded jeans, Paul had an idea.

He turned to the seats behind him. "Dodgeson . . ."

Dodgeson didn't miss a beat. He instantly searched his jacket pocket for a business card. "Yes? How bad is the injury? There's no doubt we could win you a decent payout . . ."

Dodgeson kept rambling, but Paul began to think. *Is this really the way I should react? Is it my job to seek revenge?* He sighed. "Nothing. Forget I said anything." Paul turned back around in his seat and tried to ignore Dodgeson's urgent pleas.

"You aren't going to sue me?" Rodney was slowly stroking Chichi's head. He refused to make eye contact with Paul. "You aren't going to try to ruin my life? Get even? Anything?"

"WELL, I STILL CAN'T WAIT
TO BE RID OF YOU."

Paul shook his head. "No, I guess not."

The two sat in contemplative silence. Even Chichi seemed to be deep in thought as she ceased to scratch herself with her foot

in favor of glancing from Paul to Rodney and back to Paul again.

"Well, that's really decent of you," Rodney mumbled. "And, well, I suppose I might have been a bit harsh this trip." Paul sat, shocked, as Rodney then mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like an apology.

"They're just jeans. I've got other pairs at home."

Rodney nodded. Then, in an effort to maintain some of his earlier crankiness, he said: "Well, I still can't wait to be rid of you." Chichi snarled to emphasize her master's statement, but even that seemed a bit softer than it had been before.

Paul chuckled. "The feeling is mutual." He meant every word.

Then the captain spoke again. "Folks, this is your captain speaking, uh . . . we won't be able to land for now due to runway congestion. We'll have to circle the airport for a little bit longer, so please stay in your seats. Thank you for your patience."

Appearances

BY OLIVIA SUMMERS

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
EXTEMPORANEOUS ESSAY



*Many Christians value appearances over authenticity.
But what happens when the storms of life break loose?*

Every Sunday as a kid, I read the cartoons section of the local newspaper religiously. Often, papers would depict the cartoonist's version of heaven, with angels walking on clouds or sitting in cloud chairs. I imagined what it would be like to walk on a cloud and feel the puffy, cotton candy-like fluff under my feet. But my science classes taught me a different lesson. I learned that no matter how solid and thick a cloud appears, no one can walk on it. The clouds do not stop the airplane from gliding through the sky, even if the plane experiences turbulence. The clouds do not prevent a parachuter from freefalling. Clouds look solid. But appearances can be deceiving.

This concept of false appearances rings true in virtually all of life. That flash sale offered by your favorite retailer? Scam. That American flag flying outside your window? Made in China. That chocolate chip cookie you spotted on the table? Raisin. (No wonder it was left out!) But Christians can play the same game. The outside seems solid and dependable. But what lies inside? For many, fluff.

Why do Christians play the game of make-believe? Why do we deceive others (and maybe even ourselves) that our devotional life is sound, our prayer life is strong, and that

IN A CURATED CULTURE
OF THE HIGHLIGHT REEL,
WE AVOID THE MESS.

our walk with the Lord is solid? All is good if our Instagram story highlights our morning devotions complete with the Bible and our favorite brew. But inside, we slowly disintegrate as the fairy-tale

picture of the perfect Christian life melts away.

Often, Christians hide their struggles because opening yourself up is risky business. In a curated culture of the highlight reel, we avoid the mess. Everyone hides his struggles because everyone else does the same. We fear that others will walk away if they see what lies beyond our appearances. We sugarcoat the hard. We exchange true accountability for shallow encouragement and hollow victories.

But like that fluffy cloud you could easily fall through, a storm starts to swirl inside. This storm threatens to erupt at any moment's notice. This storm is brought on by a thousand times of saying, "I'm fine," when we're not. This storm is brought on by fears and failure and disappointments. Over and over and over again we try to cover up our storms and push them away. We ignore the dark edges leaking into the horizon. We ignore the barometers of friends who raise the alarm. We pretend that all is fine until no pretending can wish away reality.

A storm breaks loose. We spew what has been bubbling beneath the surface and let it rain on all around us until there is no escape from the wet, drippy truth.

At this point, no safety net exists. Our appearances have been shown for what they really are—deception. We fall through the things intended to support. Quick fixes cannot restore us. You could choose to start the process of deception over again. Or you could choose the truth. You could choose to authentically open yourself to others and move forward.

There is beauty in this process. There is also danger. Healing requires true vulnerability. It involves letting others into the dark deep places you have scarcely acknowledged even to yourself. But if you have reached the stage where there is nothing left to hide, no clouds can penetrate the light of truth. When the Son pierces through it all, everything is open to the light.

No pit is too deep for His rescue. No sea is so stormy He cannot divide the waters to reach you. No sky is too turbulent He cannot calm the wind. When the heavens break through the clouds, it is glorious.

So, open yourselves up. Forget to hide what is beneath. Seek the help you need. Admit when you're struggling. And accept the answers with grace, humility, and strength. Appearances are deceiving. But they don't have to be.





MAKING THE TURN

The Plate

BY SIERA WEBER

*While most families bond together during the holidays,
Tasha's family remained in fragments.*

Maneuvering through the kitchen, Tasha inhaled the different aromas dancing through the air. The sweetened tang of cranberry sauce mixed with the savory scent of turkey and the sleepy smell of gravy draped itself over the room like a cozy blanket.

Exhaling, she examined her surroundings. Her tiny kitchen was spotless, as was the rest of her apartment. Festive autumn garlands brightened the cabinets and door frames, and fun fall pillows rested on the navy couch in the living room. A pumpkin spice candle flickered on the round dining table against the wall. The whole space felt warm, inviting, and calm, exactly as Tasha hoped it would.

Everything has to be perfect.

Tasha glanced at the clock as she walked to the dinner table. She was ahead of schedule. Smiling, she reached out and traced the tiny blue florals on the china plate in front of her. The three plates on the table were the final remnants of Mom's china set. The royal blue china, a hallmark of family holidays, had passed from Great-Gran to Grandma to Mom. Over the years, the collection had slowly chipped, cracked, and shattered—but these three plates had survived. The day Tasha turned eighteen, Mom passed the plates to her.

The day after Tasha turned eighteen, a drunk driver crashed into Mom's car, killing her instantly and sending Tasha's fourteen-year-old brother, Lee, to the hospital. Lee's body healed quickly, but his spirit never fully recovered.

After the crash, Tasha locked the plates away in a cabinet. For five years, she didn't use them. Sometimes, she'd pull

one out and cradle it in her lap, letting the swirling pattern transport her to her childhood. Holding Mom's china eased the ache in her heart, even when she couldn't hold Mom's hand. The smooth, cold glass wasn't as comforting as one of Mom's warm hugs, but it helped somehow.

Now, Tasha stared at the chair across from her, wishing that Mom would magically appear. Mom would know how to fix things—she always did. She'd talk some sense into Lee with just a few gentle words. But no matter how long Tasha stared at the empty chair, Mom didn't appear. She was on her own. Sighing, Tasha let her finger travel around the plate's rim one more time before she stood. She hoped that the sight of these plates would remind Lee that family bonds went deeper than disagreement and disappointment.

Squaring her shoulders, Tasha marched back to the kitchen to set out potholders and serving spoons for the buffet line. The chill of the cold linoleum floor seeped into her bare feet, reminding her of last year's Thanksgiving, when all the trouble had started. Lee had called her to let her know he wouldn't make it to dinner:

"Dad found out that Chloe and I have been messing around. He's mad. Said he can't condone an 'immoral lifestyle.' I told him that he doesn't have to, but I don't live by his rules. He told me, 'You do while you live in my house.' So, Chloe and I are moving in with her great-aunt until we can get our own place."

Tasha had been shocked by Lee's news, but what had shocked her more was his tone—devoid of emotion and as cold as the linoleum under her feet. "Lee, think about this. Do you even love Chloe?" she had asked him.

"Maybe. I don't know. But it's not just about Chloe. I'm tired of pretending to go along with something I'm not even sure I believe anymore. I've wanted to do this for a while. This was just the push I needed."

Although Tasha had watched her brother struggle with bitterness in the years following Mom's death, she had never imagined that he would walk out on his faith and his family. Throughout his whole childhood he had insisted that he was going to be a pastor, "just like Dad." He had always been Dad's little shadow, mimicking his every move. He used to be on fire for the Lord. When had the fire gone out? And how had she never noticed?

Lee's decision caused a rift in their church. Several vocal members called for Dad to step down from the pulpit. "If he can't keep his house in order, how can he keep a church in order?" many murmured. Not wanting to cause further discord, Dad resigned.

As Dad grappled with grief and anger over what he had lost, Lee wrestled with doubts he had never before admitted to his family. Over time, Dad's anger faded, but his sadness deepened. He tried to contact his son, but with no success. Lee kept in touch with Tasha, but he refused to speak to his father. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Lee's nineteenth birthday passed without any move toward reconciliation.

Finally, Tasha decided that enough was enough. They were a family, and it was time they acted like it. Dad didn't want to force a conversation, and Lee was too stubborn to make the first move. But maybe if *she* made the first move, he would relent.

That's why she had planned this Thanksgiving dinner. Today, they would work things out. A knock on the door jerked her out of her reverie. "It's open," she called.

The door swung open, and Dad walked in with one of his famous pumpkin pies. "Hey, sweetie," he said with a smile. His smile never reached his eyes anymore; it just hovered on his face. Tasha noticed the extra gray in his hair as well as the tired drop of his shoulders.

"Hey." She came over and hugged him. "Thanks for bringing the pie!"

"My pleasure." He slipped his jacket off and draped it over the couch. Looking up, he noticed the three place settings on the table. "Who else is coming?"

Tasha opened the oven and started pulling out the food. "Lee," she said nonchalantly as she arranged the dishes on the counter.

Dad's eyes lit up and his shoulders straightened. "Lee's coming?"

"Yes." Tasha hesitated, not wanting to crush his hopes. But she needed to prepare him. "I didn't tell him you'd be here."

"Oh." Dad's shoulders sagged, and the light in his eyes vanished. "I don't think that's a good idea."

She had predicted he would say that. "Dad, we can't keep this up. You guys haven't talked for a whole year. We need to deal with this."



"THE FOOD'S READY,
SO LET'S EAT."

"I don't think Lee's ready for that. He still hasn't returned any of my calls."

"Have you tried going to his house?"

"I'm not going to force him to talk to me until he's ready."

"I know, but it's *Lee*. He'll never be 'ready' to admit he was wrong."

Dad rubbed his temple. "You don't know that." A knock on the door cut Tasha off before she could reply. Her eyes flitted from the door to Dad, but he made no move to answer. Sighing, Tasha hurried over and opened the door. "Hey, Lee."

Lee stood there in a button-up shirt, jeans, and his old church shoes. "Here." He shoved a tinfoil-covered pie plate into her hands. "Chloe's Aunt Ruth has a great apple pie recipe. I figured I should bring something."

"Thanks! Come on in."

Lee stepped inside and shrugged his jacket off. Glancing up, he saw Dad and froze mid-shrug. The color drained from his face, and he backed up, one foot over the threshold. Dad didn't say anything, but Tasha thought she saw his shoulders droop a little more. "What are you doing here?" Lee asked.

"I invited him," Tasha said. "I wanted us to have a nice meal together as a family." She lifted her chin and stared her brother down. Lee's whole body tensed. His eyes flitted to the hallway. "I won't stay if that makes you uncomfortable, Son," Dad finally said. Lee blushed and looked down at the floor. One, two, three seconds stretched into an eternity.

"Just stay for half an hour?" Tasha pleaded. "You're already here. Might as well eat something."

Lee glared at her and then glanced at his dad, dropping his gaze as soon as they made eye contact. With a sigh, he stepped back inside.

"Okay then," Tasha clapped her hands and plastered a big smile on her face. "The food's ready, so let's eat. Buffet style—just grab a plate and go down the counter."

Only the scraping of serving spoons filled the silence as the family went down the line. Both Dad and Lee kept their eyes on the food in front of them. Tasha wilted inside. She had expected some awkwardness and maybe even an outburst from Lee, but not this rigid quiet.

"Will Chloe be joining us?" Dad asked.

"She had work," Lee mumbled. "Why do you care?"

"I was just wondering." Dad scooped up some mashed potatoes. "How have you two been doing?"

"Great." Lee stabbed pieces of turkey with the serving fork.

Dad slowly drizzled gravy over his potatoes. Finally, he asked, "Do you need anything?"

Lee's knuckles tightened on the serving spoon. "Nope. We're doing just fine." He plopped some green beans on his plate.

Dad nodded. More scraping. Dad cleared his throat. "I've missed hearing from you, Son. It's been a long time—way too long."

For a moment, Lee's face lost its defiant expression. He glanced at his dad, his eyes showing a hint of something—longing, sadness, maybe even regret. But then he realized he was letting his guard down, and his mouth tightened. "This is pointless." He slid his plate onto the counter and started for the door.

"Lee, wait!" Tasha called after him. She looked pleadingly at Dad.

"Son, could you stay for just a little longer?"

"Why?" Lee whirled around. "What good will it do?"

"We need to talk things over as a family," Tasha insisted.

Lee scoffed. "We haven't been a family since Mom died."

Dad winced, and Tasha gasped, "How can you say that?" "It's true." Lee marched back into the kitchen and stood toe-to-toe with Dad. "She died, and you *left*. You were always working. You got so busy with 'ministry' that you quit caring about your real family!"

Dad's jaw dropped, and the gravy ladle slipped out of his fingers. Tasha sucked in her breath, staring at Lee.

"Son . . ." Dad's voice trailed off. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you felt that way." He looked down at the gravy, searching for words. Then he looked at Lee. "I've done grief counseling for so many people, but when I lost your mom, I—I just didn't know how to handle it. I let work numb the pain, but—I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me."

One, two, three seconds stretched into an eternity.

Finally, Lee said, "It's a little late for that."

"Lee! That is not fair!" Tasha interjected.

Angry sparks flew out of Lee's eyes. "Shut up, Tasha. You've helped enough." He turned on his heel and headed for the door.

"Son, wait." Dad set his plate down and hurried after him.

Tasha's eyes widened in horror. Dad didn't realize that he had missed the counter. The plate seemed to fall in slow motion. Gravy and green bean juice rained onto the floor, and bits of stuffing plunged after them. The plop of sweet potato casserole was followed by the resounding crash of the china.



Hot tears burned her eyes as Tasha knelt to pick up the pieces. Each floral-printed shard pierced her heart with memories. She stared at the pieces, hoping that she could put them back together, that she could salvage one thing from this failed reunion. The jagged edges of each fragment sliced through her delusional hopes for reconciliation. Only a

few minutes passed as she cradled the china, but those minutes crawled by like hours. Snatches of Dad and Lee's conversation drifted to her like echoes down a long, dark tunnel. Eventually, a door slammed. All Tasha could feel was the cold seeping through the floor and into her spirit.

"SWEETIE, YOU CAN'T FIX IT.
LOOK AT ALL THE TINY PIECES."

Gentle footsteps sounded on the floor behind her.

"Oh, no. Tasha, I'm so sorry." Dad pulled the trashcan out from under the sink and started to throw away the broken glass."

"No!" Tasha exclaimed.

Dad's hand hovered over the trashcan. "Sweetie, you can't fix it. Look at all the tiny pieces." He pointed to little flecks of blue and white strewn among the green beans. "There's no way you can get all of those back together."

A fat tear rolled down Tasha's cheek.

Sighing, Dad dropped the fragments into her hands. "You can try if you want." He started scooping mashed potatoes off the floor.

Tasha took the big pieces and set them on the counter. Then she stared at the tinier fragments. Heart sinking, she realized that Dad was right. She couldn't fix them.

Her kitchen faucet squeaked as Dad turned on the water to wash his hands.

"I just wanted us to have a nice Thanksgiving," Tasha whispered, annoyed by the quiver in her voice.

"No," Dad wrapped her in a hug. "You wanted to fix us. But no matter how hard you try, you can't fix everything." He kissed her forehead. "I need to go for a walk and clear my head. I'll be back in a little bit."

As Dad headed out the door, Tasha picked up the remaining pieces, tears blurring her vision. She felt as if she

were holding her family in the pile of fragments, with no idea how to put them back together. *I've been such an idiot. I can't fix this.* An empty feeling settled in her chest as she watched the pieces fall into the trash.

Discouraged, she wandered into the living room and sank into the couch cushions. She rubbed her temples, attempting to soothe the headache her crying had summoned. *Everything was supposed to be perfect. Now it's even worse.* She sighed to herself. *I wish you were here, Mom.* A few more tears trickled down Tasha's cheeks. She sat there for a while—not really noticing how much time had passed. Lee's angry eyes kept flashing through her mind. She would have given anything to see him smile again, to see him laugh with Dad like he used to.

Suddenly, she remembered the leftover food and returned to the kitchen. As she reached for containers, she noticed one broken plate piece remaining on the counter. Tasha picked it up and almost tossed it into the trash, but then reconsidered. She rotated the piece to stare at the flower, gazing at it for a long moment. Then she set it by the sink.

Maybe I can't fix it, but I don't need to give it up.

Glancing at the food, Tasha pulled out a few extra containers and began scooping out portions for Chloe and Lee. *I might as well put these leftovers to good use.* She'd take them to Lee and apologize for trying to force a reunion. She wasn't sure what would happen after that, but the outcome was out of her hands.

After putting away the food, Tasha picked up the broken plate piece and traced the flower. She was unsure how or when Lee would come around, but that was between him and the Lord. All she could do was be patient and continue to pray for both Lee and Dad. They were fragments, but they were still a family.

Nanny School

BY RYLEIGH WOOD

Every job has its limits.

When police officer candidates go through their training at the academy, they get pepper sprayed, a torture few appreciate. The burning sensation gives them the confidence to know they can look pain in the face. Literally.

While I'm no police officer, I've had the privilege of experiencing one of their most effective teaching regimens. And believe me, I should have earned a medal for the training I went through.

My training started when I reluctantly agreed to be a nanny for the Sharps—a family that lived just down the street from me. Because Mr. and Mrs. Sharp worked full time, the family needed someone to watch their two boys from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. Perfect.

Naturally, I love kids. I really do.

However, those sticky little bundles of joy also drool and scream when they don't get their way. I've had more than three of my fingers bitten because a kid "wanted to know what it tasted like." I've had plates flung at my head because I cut the pancakes into square pieces instead of triangles. When it comes to kids, what's not to love?

On my first day of nannying, I felt thrilled. I couldn't wait to build blanket forts and LEGO towers, to read books and color pictures. I felt like Mary Poppins as I pulled up to the driveway. I was about to change these two boys' lives forever.

I should have known.

When I got inside, Mrs. Sharp, one of my mom's friends, had a yellow checklist on the counter for me.

"Miss Ryleigh!" six-year-old Levi yelled as I walked through the door. Well, stumbled is more like it. Their 70-pound golden doodle had forced himself behind me and given me a helpful push forward.

The four-year-old, Samuel, lounged on the couch in the living room. Red marker stained his blue t-shirt, and his striped socks did not match. He looked up from his iPad only long enough to say "hey."

Mrs. Sharp grabbed the dog by the collar. "Sorry about Lucy," she said. "Here's the emergency contact information and a list of things to do today!"

Lists are my best friend. This is perfect.

After Mrs. Sharp left, I fed the boys chocolate chip pancakes, read them a story, and tidied the house. Because school hadn't let out for the year, Levi filled out worksheets and practiced his reading. I made sure everything got done. And it was easy.

On the first day.

By the second day, Levi had decided that he didn't like school. He would much rather go outside or play with the dog. My authoritative voice turned to pleading.

Now, I would normally consider myself a patient person. I don't mind waiting, and it takes a lot to make me upset. However, everyone has limits, and the boys' favorite pastime was trying to find mine. Not doing their schoolwork, they discovered, quickly exacerbated me. If they couldn't reach an item on the counter, they would start screaming instead of asking for it. They could quickly decide what they wanted for lunch. Then, after I finished cooking the food and setting the table, they realized they never liked what I had made.

In the middle of June, Samuel needed to attend an event at his Christian school. And of course, I had to drive. I nestled the boys' booster seats into the back of my car and buckled their seat belts tightly. For the next eight minutes,

arguments filled the air. The boys fought over everything: who was the strongest, who had the best teddy bear, and who got to hold the iPad. Just when I thought the car ride couldn't get any worse, the noise stopped.

If you know anything about little boys, you know silence is the worst sound they can possibly make.

At that moment, a flashing warning light appeared on my dashboard. I glanced back to see that Samuel had opened the passenger side door and was trying to escape the car. The problem was, we were driving. On the highway.

I could picture the headline: "Four-year-old flies out of moving vehicle."

Yeah, not happening.

I flicked on my blinker and jerked to a stop. I hopped out and walked to where Samuel sat, his hands innocently folded in his lap.

"Samuel," I fumed. "You can't open the door while I'm driving."

His mischievous eyes danced. "But I just really like buttons."

I pressed every child safety lock I could find and shut the door. *No more buttons.*

Over the next few weeks, the boys worked hard to make my life harder, reminding me of the Navy Seals motto: "The only easy day was yesterday." I learned to anticipate what they would do. Like a soldier strategizing against the enemy, I watched their movements and planned out my reactions in advance. They were smart, but I was smarter.

Until one day.

At 6 a.m., I wanted nothing less than to go to work. As I mounted the front porch steps and groggily opened the door, I mentally prepared myself for another day of torture. A whiff of spiciness greeted me at the door. Not the spicy

smell of Texas Pete's hot sauce, not even the spicy scent of the ghost peppers hidden in Panda Express's Kung Pao chicken. This spiciness had reached a whole new level.

Instantly, my throat started burning. My eyes watered. My nose tingled. Coughing, I made my way into the living room to find Mrs. Sharp, frantically dashing around and opening windows. Samuel sat on the couch crying.

"Oh, hi!" Mrs. Sharp waved at me. "Samuel sprayed room freshener in the room because he knows he isn't allowed to." She wiped a bead of sweat off her forehead. "But turns out it was pepper spray." She shook the little black bottle. "I guess he emptied the whole thing. I'm sure it'll air out soon." She scooped up her purse and headed to the door.



Yeah, if I don't suffocate first.

I led the way out to the back yard. We spent the morning outside but by noon, my throat stung. That afternoon, I officially decided my nannying days were coming to an end.

Finally, my last day of watching the boys came, feeling like a dream come true.

I was eager to move on to a different job and felt sure the boys were tired of me too. After all, their favorite activity all summer was to do whatever I told them not to. As I sat on the couch turning the pages of a picture book, Samuel asked, "Are you not going to visit us anymore?"

I shook my head, half expecting to hear him shout with joy. Instead, his lower lip contorted into a scowl, and he twirled a piece of my hair between his thumb and index finger. "I'm going to miss you." A little tear welled up in his eye.

I didn't know what to say. This wasn't the reaction I expected. Maybe those mischievous brown eyes hid a sweet little boy, one who didn't always scream or throw toys.

"I'll miss you too," I finally said.

A playful grin lit up the corners of his mouth. "And you'll come back to visit?"

"Of course."

I mean, it's not like anything could possibly go wrong.

Persistence

BY PAIGE ROMIG

The day slumped by in mournful black and gray,
And tongs and sticks stabbed hearth fires into ash.
Worn down, rust-brown trees frayed and swayed away.
With dusk's descent, the moon began to flash
A frosty gleam upon the cobbled ground.
The sky aligned thin stars like spider's threads
As fleeting, day-worn feet rushed homeward bound,
And sleepy heads drooped down on moon-lit beds.
A clock struck midnight tones across the night
While inside dark, dim windows, people slept.
But in one high window there streamed a light
That warmly lit a pupil's book, well-kept.
So, while the world drowns tears in happy dreams,
Persistence is a light which all night, beams.



Because He Forgives

BY REGINA MASSEY

After years of being out of church, can Will feel comfortable in Roland's college group?

The moment the assembler placed the cheese ravioli in the kitchen window, Will reached for the hot plate. "Ouch!" he yelled. He jerked his hand away and rubbed it against his apron, cursing under his breath. Just then, his friend Roland rushed over and offered him a potholder.

"Thanks, buddy," Will said. He took the potholder, grabbed the ravioli, and set it on his tray with ease. "What would I do without you?"

Roland shrugged. "I guess you'd have to remember to get your own potholder."

Will waved his hand dismissively and stared at the screen to see what other dishes he would need to complete his table's order.

"What are you doing tonight?" Roland asked.

Every Saturday, Roland tried to convince Will to come to his church's young adults' group with him. Will always came up with an excuse not to go. It was a game the two played every week, and every week, Will won. Church just didn't interest him anymore. He had gone to church with his parents when they were still together. But now he was twenty years old. He had so much to do now—work, college classes, parties on the weekends. He didn't want to give up those things just for some church group.

Those people would probably just judge him anyway. He had never seen people in church with tattoos and piercings. *There must be a reason for that*, he thought.

"Not this week, buddy," Will said as he grabbed the other entrées his table had ordered: chicken parmesan, shrimp alfredo with broccoli on the side, and giant cheese-stuffed shells. His stomach rumbled at the sight. He wished he could use his tips to buy a meal at the end of his shift, but he needed to save his money to pay his school bill.

Roland crossed his arms and leaned against the counter. "Are you sure?"

"Maybe next week."

"Well," Roland said, "just so you know, my pastor is buying pizza this week."

Will's stomach practically answered for him. "You know what?" He smirked. "I think I can make it."

After work, Will drove home and showered. He didn't have long until Roland would arrive to pick him up. He put on his ripped jeans and a striped t-shirt, then stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He studied the tattoos that covered his arms and scrutinized the stud in the side of his nose.

He worried that these church people would judge him. But he told himself that he wasn't trying to become friends with them anyway. In fact, he hoped that no one would talk to him or ask him any questions about him or his past.

I'm only going for the pizza, he told himself.

His phone buzzed against the bathroom counter. *I'm here*, Roland had texted him. Will inhaled sharply and left the bathroom. He shuffled silently through the living room, taking care to avoid trampling the garbage strewn across the floor. He passed his dad who lay dozing on the sofa. Will assumed he had been asleep there for hours.

Outside, he found Roland's car parked near the mailbox. Roland grinned as Will threw open the door and plopped down in the passenger seat.

"I'm still surprised you're actually coming," Roland said as he put the car in drive. The car began to beep. "Oh, can you put on your seat belt?"

"Seriously, Roland?" Will laughed. "Are we five years old right now?"

Roland just stared at him, unblinking.

Will grabbed the door handle. "Is it too late for me to ditch you?"

"Yes." Roland turned the corner at the stop sign. "I drove all the way across town to get you."

"Fine." Will buckled his seat belt. He usually just waited for that annoying alarm to give up. He didn't like to give it the satisfaction of forcing him to buckle his seat belt. And he hated the way the material rubbed against his skin.

Will's foot accidentally kicked something on the floormat. He looked down to see a brown Bible with Roland James Connolly inscribed in gold letters on the cover. Under the Bible was a notebook. He picked up the Bible and ran his finger over Roland's name. "Was I supposed to bring one of these?" he said. "I think I might have one somewhere in my house—or maybe I left it at Mom's."

"Nah, you'll be fine." Roland activated his blinker before turning right onto the highway. "I'm sure Pastor Mark has extras."

Will wasn't even sure that he remembered how to use a Bible. He flipped through the pages. Each page was tattered from use, with highlighted verses, circled words, underlined sentences, and hundreds of notes hastily scribbled into the margins. So many *thee's* and *thou's*, *hither's* and *thither's*—how did anyone read this thing?

When they arrived at the house, almost a dozen cars were already parked along the street and in the driveway. Will's hands began to sweat as he followed Roland to the door. Roland knocked, then opened the door himself. A balding

man and a blond-haired woman stood at the kitchen island, laughing and talking with several young adults.

"Hey, Roland!" The man who Will assumed was Pastor Mark lumbered over to shake Roland's hand. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Will." Roland clamped a hand on Will's shoulder. "He works with me."

Pastor Mark grabbed Will's hand and shook it before hastily introducing himself, his wife Debby, and the eight other students in the room. Will knew that he would remember none of their names. He tried not to notice the way they looked at him. Were they staring at the tattoos? Or were they just curious to see the guy Roland had brought with him? Will couldn't be sure, so he avoided their gazes.

He glanced around the kitchen and dining room. The large dining room table had a dozen chairs around it—plenty of space for everyone. Family photos and Bible verses decorated every wall. The living room contained several



large couches and recliners, all arranged around a fluffy rug and a warm fireplace.

"Who's ready for some pizza?" Debby said with a big smile. She insisted that Will go first because he was the guest, and his face burned

with awkwardness. He grabbed only two slices even though he felt as though he could eat five or six. Roland grabbed a Coke for Will and one for himself, and they sat at the dining room table. Soon the others joined them.

MAYBE I SHOULD JUST LEAVE.

Will had already finished eating his first slice and was about to start on his second when Pastor Mark said,

"Who wants to bless the food tonight?"

"Oh." Will dropped the pizza back onto his plate. "I'm so sorry." His face reddened with humiliation and fear. What if they made him pray in front of everyone because he had already started eating? He only remembered part of the prayer he used to say before meals at the dinner table with Mom and Dad. *God is good, God is great*—that was all he remembered. No, he couldn't do it. He slumped in his chair, wishing he could hide under the table.

Maybe I should just leave. Why did I let Roland drive me here? Now I can't escape. That sneaky little—

"That's okay, Will. I'm hungry too," Pastor Mark said, laughing. "Roland, why don't you bless the food for us?"

"Sure," Roland said, bowing his head and closing his eyes. Will did the same as he saw everyone else copy Roland.

After the prayer ended, Will waited for the others to start eating before he took another bite. He listened to their conversations but stayed quiet unless someone asked him a question.

"I feel like I've definitely seen you before," a girl said, pointing at him with a pizza crust from across the table. "Did you go to Mosley?"

"Yeah," he said, surprised, "did you?"

She nodded and took a sip of her Sprite. "And you were on the basketball team, weren't you?"

"Until I sprained my ankle senior year. Then I decided it wasn't worth it anymore."

The two of them launched into a long conversation about the high school basketball teams in the area, which led to a discussion about Florida's college basketball teams and a long debate about why the Gators were better than the

Seminoles. Will enjoyed every second of it. He had thought that the night would be filled only with discussions about the Bible and church followed by prayer and confessions of sins.

After everyone had finished eating and Will had eaten two more slices of pizza at Debby's insistence, the group tossed their paper plates into the trash can and made their way into the living room. The couches filled up quickly, so Will and Roland sat on the fluffy white rug. Roland opened his notebook and set it on the carpet in front of him. His Bible lay closed on his lap.

Pastor Mark sat by the fireplace under the TV so that everyone could see him. "Tonight, we're going to be reading from Acts 7," he said, turning the pages in his Bible. It took him only two seconds to find his place—Will counted.

Roland nudged Will, showing him which verses they would be reading. Will once again marveled at the number of notes and highlights in his friend's Bible. It reminded Will of the way he marked his college textbooks before a big exam. Expecting that there would be a quiz once they finished reading, Will listened intently as Pastor Mark read the passage.

The group read about a man who was stoned to death and about the man responsible, a guy named Saul. Pastor Mark then told them to look at Acts 9. Just two chapters later, this Saul—this murderer—became a believer in God. "He lived for God for the rest of his life," Pastor Mark explained. "God forgave him of his sins. And if He can forgive a man who killed so many Christians, He can forgive us too. Don't you think?"

The others nodded and muttered their agreement. Will sat up a little straighter and focused his eyes on the pastor as he continued.

"Some of you might assume that a pastor has always lived for God and never done anything wrong," Pastor Mark said. "Well, my wife can tell you that's not true." Everyone laughed, and Debby blushed and shook her head. "I did a lot of things that I'm not proud of when I was in my teens and twenties, even thirties. But God has still used me, and He can use you too. You just have to let Him."

As Pastor Mark continued, Will's mind wandered back to all the things that he had done. All the times he had skipped church, all the partying, all the people he had hurt over the years—could God really forgive him? Could God really still *love* him?

"That's my encouragement for you tonight," Pastor Mark said, clasping his hands together. "I'll go ahead and pray us out."

After he finished, Pastor Mark said goodbye to the students who were leaving before making his way over to Will. "We're glad you were able to come tonight. I hope we didn't scare you away."

"No, definitely not. I'm already friends with this guy." He punched Roland's shoulder. "So, nothing scares me."

"Hey!" Roland said, shoving him away. "Don't insult your ride home."

Pastor Mark chuckled. "Well, I hope you'll be able to come back."

He held out his hand, and Will shook it. Will noticed a tattoo peeking out from under the pastor's sleeve. Surprised, his eyes darted to the man's face. He spotted the scars of earring holes in the pastor's earlobes and couldn't help but stare.

"Is something wrong?" the pastor asked.

"Oh," Will sputtered. "It's nothing. Thank you for having me."

After saying goodbye to Pastor Mark, Will and Roland walked out to the car. "Be honest," Roland said when they were both in their seats. "What did you think?"

"It wasn't that bad," Will said as he buckled his seat belt.

"Would you ever want to come back?"

Will pretended to think for a moment, stroking his chin. He couldn't make things *too* easy for Roland. "Let's say if I don't work, and if I don't have a party or any other plans, you might be able to talk me into going."

"All right." Roland laughed as he started the car. "That's better than what I expected."

Will jutted a finger at Roland. "As long as they don't make me pray."

A Good Place to Break Down

BY ANASTASIA B. VILLAGOMEZ

Sometimes what seems like a difficulty is just an opportunity.

Dad's blue and gray argyle sweater signaled the official end of summer. He waited, hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, as Cassidy dumped her suitcase and backpack into the trunk of the car. Summer camp had smeared mud and grass stains on the bags, on her sneakers, and all over her faded blue jeans.

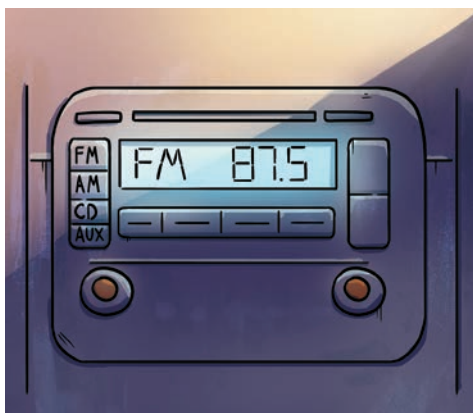
"Ready?" Dad asked as Cassidy slid into the passenger side and shut the door.

"Yeah," she said, glancing back at the squat brown cabins nestled into the woods. Gold was beginning to fringe the green foliage as

August blurred into September. Dad pulled out of the gravel drive.

The five-hour drive home felt so familiar, like a ritual. Every year was the same. The same green pines whipping by like looming canyon

walls. The same black cherry car freshener Dad always bought at the hardware store. The same hum of the car engine and whirr of the air conditioner.



But this time felt different. Maybe because it was the end of Cassidy's last summer before she left for college.

"That's what marriage is—a perfect picture of God's union with the church," the radio crackled. The pastor's tenor voice wavered in the bad mountain reception.

Cassidy shifted in her seat, vinyl squeaking. She glanced at Dad, looking for a reaction.

He was relaxed, eyes on the road, the same slight furrow between his brows. He looked perfectly professional, not as if he had been driving here since six in the morning with only a brief stop for lunch. The same scholarly blue and gray argyle sweater, the same silver watch clicking the time away on his wrist, the same crisply parted blond hair that had started going a little gray at the temples.

He always looked perfectly put together, no matter what. Even in his worst fights with Mom, when the threats and insults had sickened Cassidy, Dad still looked ready for a meeting with his dissertation committee.

That was his advantage over Mom. Mom was louder than Dad, but Dad was a glacier. Ships break themselves against glaciers.

"A marriage is a covenant, a promise," the pastor's tenor voice crackled unevenly. "One man, one woman, for life."

Some of Mom and Dad's arguments were so searingly vicious that Cassidy could recall them word for word, play by play.

What kind of father are you? Mom had said. *You're never there. I'm practically a single parent.*

You said you liked my ambition, Dad had said. *The most attractive thing about a man is the zeroes on his paycheck— isn't that what you always say?*

You're a failure as a father.

There's the door. No one is forcing you to stay.

I'm the one with a law degree. I know how to get a better settlement in a divorce, and you know it.

If the kids chose to stay with you.

"Husbands, love your wives," the radio crackled. "Even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it." Cassidy reached out and tapped the knob to silence the radio. Static made her feel as if her brain were being electrocuted.

The car was silent for a few moments.

Then Dad spoke from the driver's side. "Can you get my phone and turn on a podcast?" His tranquil blue eyes never left the stretch of winding road ahead. "Twenty Minute Bio Sound Bites should be open."

Dad didn't like silence. He called silence a "thousand lost opportunities." Cassidy's memories of him were filled with endless white noise: podcasts, audiobooks, radio stations, TV documentaries. He was always listening to something highly informative and mentally enriching.

Just as Cassidy was about to press play on Twenty Minute Bio Sound Bites, the screen lit up with Mom's face. Cassidy accepted the call and put it on speaker, cupping the cool phone in her palm.

"Hi, honey," Dad said, eyes never leaving the road. He always spoke very carefully, very gently with Mom now.

Ever since marriage counseling, they both spoke oddly around each other, as if they were clumsy teenagers on a first date, still trying to come off as perfect. Like they were starting all over again. Which, strangely enough, they were.

"Hi, Rich," Mom's voice came over the line. "Have you picked up Cassidy yet?"

"We're driving back now," Dad said. He and Mom tended to talk about Cassidy in her presence, as if she couldn't speak for herself.

"Remember that Levi's recital is at four o'clock," Mom said. "In the youth group building."

"We'll make it," Dad said, and Cassidy believed him. Dad was the most punctual person she knew.

They talked for a few more minutes before saying goodbye. It was strange hearing them say "I love you" to each other before the call ended.

HOW COULD PEOPLE FORGIVE,
IF THEY STILL REMEMBERED?

Cassidy still couldn't understand. How could they forgive each other so easily after all that? As if nothing had happened.

Maybe it was easy for them. They could turn a blind eye on the past as if their fights were just between the two of them. As if their fights hadn't kept Cassidy up at night and made her dread coming downstairs to endure their icy silence at breakfast.

Maybe they had forgiven each other. But Cassidy couldn't forget. She looked at them, listened to their careful conversations, and remembered. She remembered the yelling and the slamming doors, the jingling keys and the puttering car engine late at night as someone drove away to circle the neighborhood and calm down. The threats and the silent dinners and the tense car rides. The arguments right before church. The arguments right after.

How could people forgive, if they still remembered?

She certainly couldn't. She had tried when they came back from marriage counseling the first few times. Forgiveness was the right thing to do, wasn't it? But she had given up after a while. Sometimes she felt like a clock that hadn't changed after daylight savings. Still holding on to the past when everything else had moved on. Still remembering what everyone else forgot.

How could people forgive, if they still remembered?

Silence filled the car again. Cassidy was about to play Twenty Minute Bio Sound Bites when Dad spoke.

"So," he said, as if he were beginning an extemporaneous speech for an audience he didn't understand. "You'll be

IT DIDN'T LOOK EASY, BEING
KIND OR FORGIVING.

starting college soon. In just a few weeks."

Cassidy nodded. "Yeah," she said. Most of her conversations with Dad were

like this. Awkward questions and monosyllabic responses. She hadn't had a proper conversation with him in years.

"Still planning to study pre-law?"

Cassidy shifted in her seat, vinyl squeaking again. "Yeah," she said.

Her major had been a topic for fights in the past. Mom had pushed Cassidy to follow in her footsteps—study law, pass the bar exam, get on the partner track. Dad had pushed Cassidy to follow in his footsteps—study biology and get a PhD. Each was convinced that the other was exerting "undue influence" over Cassidy, to use Mom's legal term.

"I'm glad you've made the best decision for yourself," Dad said. "You take after your mom. I'm sure law will be a great fit for you."

Cassidy just nodded. Dad talked so carefully about Mom even when she wasn't there.

The car was silent again.

Put-put-put-choof. The engine coughed violently. The interior filled with a smoky, burnt plastic smell.

Dad spun the wheel, easing the car off the road. The car was beginning to slow down, jerking and sputtering when Dad applied the brakes.

"What's wrong?" Cassidy asked, glancing at him as he unbuckled his seat belt.

"I have no idea," he said, sighing.

"Do you want to pop the hood?" she asked.

He gave her a dry look. "I studied human metabolisms, not internal combustion engines. I'm afraid opening the hood wouldn't tell me anything."

He slid out of the car, shutting the door behind him. She got out of the car, squinting and tucking her hair back as the wind tore past. They were on a wide gravel strip beside the road. A sleek gray guardrail separated them from a steep drop off to an ocean of trees below.

Near the rail, Dad marched in circles, phone clamped to his ear. His brows were furrowed as he talked with the person on the other end.

When the call was done, he lowered the phone and glanced at her. "They'll be sending a tow truck for us as soon as they can," he said, rubbing his forehead. "But there might be a delay. It's a busy weekend for them. I'll call your mom to let her know."

He walked away to make the call, but remained close enough for Cassidy to hear him explain the situation.

He paced back and forth, back and forth, his gray suede shoes crunching on the packed gravel. He paused, one hand resting on the guardrail, his eyes closed.

"I'm so sorry, Naomi," he said. He said it so quietly, so carefully. "I'm sure that you must feel very frustrated right now."

I'm sure you must feel fill-in-the-blank right now. That was something the marriage counselor had recommended that Mom and Dad say to "validate emotions" and "defuse tension."

Dad paused, nodding, his eyes still closed. "I'm sorry, honey. Yes, I'll give you updates as soon as I can."

On this side of the phone, she could see the effort. It didn't look easy, being kind or forgiving. It was hard. Dad's brows were furrowed, and his words were placed carefully, like footsteps on thin ice. She could see him trying.

After a few more exchanged words, he hung up and walked back to where Cassidy leaned against the car. He stood next to her, looking out at the Quabbin Reservoir.

Trees stretched out below them, miles and miles of green touched with red and gold. At the very edge of the horizon, a blue gleam marked where the giant reservoir began.

Cassidy closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. She was tired. So tired. Soon she would be packing for college. She would be leaving home. She would have to be brave. And everyone would assume she was all right. No one would ask if she was feeling afraid.

A tear leaked out of her eye. She swiped it away angrily. She didn't have any excuse to feel sorry for herself. It was her little brother Levi who had a reason to be sad right now.

Dad glanced at her, then away. He shifted, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry, Cas," he said. "I know you're tired. I'm sure you feel frustrated right now."

"It's okay," she said, wiping under her eyes in case she had smeared her mascara. "You know I'll be fine, Dad. You know how much I can handle."

More silence. A low, solemn *onk-onk* echoed down the road as a v-formation of geese flew overhead, gliding toward the horizon.

Dad leaned back against the car, his blue eyes fixed on the horizon. "I know you're strong," he said. "You've always been strong, like your mother. I think that's why we always assumed that nothing would affect you. That our anger wouldn't affect you. But of course, it did. And I'm sorry for that."

His words were so careful and precise. As careful and precise as if he were speaking to Mom. As if Cassidy's feelings mattered as much as Mom's. As if he had changed for both of them.

"I feel bad for Levi," Dad said, raising his voice as the wind whistled around them, rustling the maple branches. "He's been practicing for weeks and was so excited for us to hear him. Now we're going to miss his performance and our dinner reservation."

He rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at Cassidy. "Do you think an ice cream drive would make him feel better?"

Cassidy smiled. "It's Levi," she said. "Ice cream always does the trick."

He grinned. "I did get a doctorate in human metabolisms, after all."

They both laughed. It was a little awkward, but it wasn't monosyllabic. That was progress.

She looked at Dad as he leaned against the side of the car, just smiling at the sunset, enjoying the thousand lost opportunities of silence. He didn't look like Professor Rich Goddard just then. He just looked like Dad.

And in that silence, in those thousand lost opportunities, she made a decision.

If Dad could make an effort, she could make an effort.

Maybe forgiveness wasn't effortless and pretty, an erasing of anger. Maybe it was messy and stumbling, falling and stubbornly getting back up again. Maybe you could look



someone in the face, remember everything they did, and still choose to forgive them.

Dad nodded out at the view, at the ocean of trees sprawling out to the hazy purple hills. "Well," he said. "The car picked a good place to break down. Very scenic."

Cassidy nodded, staring out over the valley. "It is," she said. "It's beautiful."

And for the next few hours, they leaned against the side of the car, shoulder to shoulder. Sometimes they talked. But mostly they listened. To the chirp of evening crickets, the twittering of birds, and the rattling of leaves blowing across the pavement.

And all around them, the world changed color as the sun sank below the horizon, painting the sky red and gold and lilac.

Up in the Air

BY TAYLOR CARTWRIGHT

No matter how far you go, one step is all it takes.

The shopping cart's wheel skidded outward, making the cart bump lightly into Sammie.

"Sorry, honey. I think this cart has seen better days," her mom said, straightening the cart.

Sammie looked up into her mom's warm brown eyes and reached out to stabilize the cart as they walked. "I keep thinking about that pastor and his family."

"The family with the little boy that the church is sponsoring for Christmas?"

Sammie nodded.

"Did Mrs. Natalia talk about it during Sunday school?"

"Mhmm, she taught us the importance of giving. And she said that we should each be willing to give what God asks of us."

Sammie's mom nodded. "Yes, it's important to follow God's leading in every aspect of our lives. He has our futures planned. I'm glad your heart is tender toward these things."

Sammie bit her lip in concentration as they walked down the aisles and picked up household goods. She held her breath when she noticed a certain aisle ahead of them. A glow of white light poured out toward them. The floor sparkled and danced as they stepped closer.

Sammie looked back at her mom who was nodding for her to go ahead. She rushed forward, eyes wide as she took in the ten gleaming glass cases that filled the left side of the aisle.

Each case was locked tight like a treasure chest and filled with row after row of magic. She pressed her hands against

the finger-smudged glass and searched for the label "Nintendo DS."

SHE KNEW WHAT SHE'D REALLY BEEN SAVING UP FOR.

"Mom, do you think that pastor's son would like video games, too?" she asked.

Her mom smiled and said, "I'm pretty sure he does. He's about your age. I think maybe eleven."

Sammie pressed herself against the glowing case where all the magic rested. She breathed against the glass, fogging it up. She'd been saving since last Christmas so she could have a taste of those games inside the case. But now, she knew what she'd really been saving up for.

I don't really need my own DS. I'm okay with the quiet and my books. She turned and asked her mom, "Can I get him the red one?"

Ten Years Later

"Sweetie, it's time to put your Switch away!" a frazzled mom said in the first-class section.

Sammie took a deep breath as her eyes refocused. While the frazzled mom continued trying to get her son to listen to her, Sammie realized the aisle had partially cleared. Walking ahead while checking the row numbers, she stopped just short of a tall guy blocking her path while he stowed his carry-on in the overhead compartment.

Seeing her right after he got his bag shoved in, he locked his blue eyes on hers. "Oh, hey, would you like me to put your bag up here?" he asked.

Sammie half smiled. "Yeah, thanks, if you can fit it," she said, handing the suitcase to him.

She earned a cheeky grin in response once the bag slid perfectly inside.

"Easy as pie!" he exclaimed, sitting down in seat 15A. "Is your seat near here?"

Sammie peeked at her ticket. "It's, um, 15B."

"We're seat buddies then! Are you good with the aisle or would you want the window?" he asked.

"This seat's good for me," she said, settling into her aisle seat and squishing her backpack under the seat ahead of her. "I appreciate your asking though."

The conversation lulled, and Sammie returned to people watching, wondering if that boy from first class had ever put away his game. As far as she could see, the other passengers either had headphones on or earbuds in, blocking out the world's noise as they flipped through the airplane's movie selections. Her own airplane screen flashed with an advertisement and a map of Dulles International Airport. She tried to turn the screen off, but it flashed itself back on, saying, "Announcement in Progress."

The flight attendant stepped forward and began to give his safety instructions and demonstration.



His eyes drooped as he struggled to get the attention of the passengers.

"WE'RE JUST ONE STEP CLOSER TO HAVING TO GO HOME."

Sammie watched dutifully, noting the different areas of the plane. She sighed and closed her eyes after the attendant returned to first class. When the airplane started to speed up on the runway, she opened her eyes and saw her seat buddy's hand clenched to the arm rest between them.

Though Sammie had planned to take a nap, she couldn't ignore his fear.

"You doing okay?" she asked.

He looked up with slight panic. "It's been a while since I've flown," he admitted. "It used to not bother me, but . . ."

"I always have to look straight ahead during takeoff to avoid being nervous," she offered in consolation.

He started to speak but seemed to think better of it as the airplane sped up and its wheels retracted off the ground. Gravity settled over Sammie when the plane lifted. For a few moments, she felt every movement of the plane—the wheels settling into place and the jolt of acceleration—and heard what sounded like bags shifting around. Her seat buddy let out a tense breath when the plane leveled out.

"We're through part one," he said.

"I suppose so. But now, we're just one step closer to having to go home."

"Ah, I'm guessing home's not a good thing for you right now?" he asked.

Sammie squinted when she turned to look at him. His hair shone golden as the sun's afternoon rays poured through the small airplane window.

Her leg muscles tensed, and she sighed. *Why did I tell him that?*

"I JUST MIGHT THINK
YOU'RE A STALKER"

"*Home* is fine. I'm just not looking forward to the quiet."

The red rushed back into his hand as his white grip loosened. "You don't like quiet?"

She scanned him. *Gray hoodie. Adidas pants. Yellow runners.* "You know, before I say anything else, I think you look pretty normal, but the way you're asking questions—I just might think you're a stalker," she joked.

He laughed. "Hey, now, I'm in college studying to be a pastor; stalking isn't part of the curriculum."

"Wow, that's . . . impressive." She paused, rubbing her tense legs. "I don't know. I have a lot of things on my mind. The quiet just seems to make my thoughts so loud."

"How do you deal with the quiet?"

Sammie bit her lip. Why had she gotten herself into this conversation?

"How about this?" he offered, spreading his hands in front of him. "You tell me your secret for avoiding quiet, and I'll tell you how I actually did on my church history final."

She laughed, and her legs finally relaxed. "What?"

"Okay, but look, you asked for this: I got a 68. It was so bad."

"Did you still pass the class?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "I think so, but you've gotta admit it's pretty bad."

"No comment." She shook her head. "My own finals weren't amazing either," she quickly added when the flight attendant stopped beside their row.

"Pretzels or cookies?" he droned, as if he had asked this question too many times.

"Cookies," her seat buddy piped up.

"I'll take the same," she said, grabbing the snacks. The flight attendant also handed her two mini water bottles and continued down the aisle.

Before she could hand her seat buddy his water, he already had one of the rectangular cookies in his mouth. Seeing her surprise, he quickly swallowed it.

"So, what about your secret? How do you stave off the quiet?" he asked with his head cocked toward her. He fumbled with the second cookie.

Sammie looked past him out the window in thought. It was getting dark outside now.

"Sometimes with this," she said and twirled her phone in front of her. "Or maybe a gaming system."

"Maybe. But you know those things don't prevent the quiet."

"No," Sammie replied, "but I don't dread the future when I play."

"You know you don't have to dread the future?"

"Don't go getting pious on me now, Preacher Boy. I was just starting to like you," she quipped, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

He raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry, not trying to preach at you. It just seems like you could use someone to talk to."

She quirked her eyebrow. "And you're that someone?"

He shook his head. "Eh, no, probably not, but I know a great lady back at my church you could talk to. She's a Sunday school teacher and even has a counseling license. It's pretty cool."

Sammie's mind flashed back to deep conversations with Mrs. Natalia from Sunday school.

She gently shook her head and playfully rolled her eyes. "I'm not convinced, but thanks for that subtle invite."

"Nah, I don't make church invites subtle. That was just my being excited to go see my church fam on Wednesday. But this—" He reached down into his tan canvas bag under the seat in front of him. After a few seconds of digging,

"I DON'T KNOW. HAVEN'T BEEN THERE FOR A LONG TIME."

he pulled out a slightly wrinkled paper and handed it to her. "This is an invite!"

"Why do you even have that in your bag?" she asked, smirking.

He shrugged. "Always gotta be prepared!"

As she looked down at the flyer for a Christmas program, her eyes widened.

"What?" her seat buddy asked in confusion.

"This is at my old church."

"Oh," he exclaimed. "Um, that's unexpected. When did you attend?"

She glanced up at him. His blue eyes caught her hazel ones. "I don't know. Haven't been there for a long time," she admitted.

Her seat buddy stilled. "Do you go anywhere now?"

She shook her head. "I know you're gonna be a pastor, so I shouldn't tell you this, but God and I aren't close anymore. When I was a kid, I enjoyed my quiet time with God, but as I got older, quiet time was less appealing than technology."

He nodded his head. "I understand. Most of us have a season like that, but I think you'll find that God's closer than you realize. Also, if you attend our Bible study this week, it might just stave off that quiet you're dreading."

Sammie chuckled. "Thanks for the suggestion. You know me so well already."

The seat belt sign dinged and glowed orange after the plane jerked slightly from turbulence. Her seat buddy latched his hands back onto the armrests.

"Maybe I'll think about coming," she said to distract him.

"Really?" he grinned.

She shrugged. "We'll see."

Sammie settled into her seat, surprised she enjoyed the conversation she had never planned to have.

Three Days Later

Sammie wasn't sure what led her through the front doors of her old church a few days later. Something about that conversation with her seat buddy and her memory of a red DS wouldn't leave her alone. The wooden smell of the oak pews and walls reminded her of her childhood. *Maybe God didn't stop being close to me. I stopped being close to Him.*

"Sammie, goodness, is that you?" A voice cut off Sammie's staring at the stained-glass window.

Releasing her clasped hands, Sammie looked over to see a vaguely familiar face.

"Mrs. Natalia?" she asked in disbelief.

"My, it's been a long time! Welcome. Welcome! I'm so glad I was on greeting duty today!" Mrs. Natalia smiled brightly. "Did you come for the children's program? Oh, I remember how you loved to sing your best for God."

Sammie felt a church bulletin get slipped into her fingers. She opened her mouth to say something to her former Sunday school teacher but realized the woman had gotten distracted.

"Oh, there's Matthew Turner!" Mrs. Natalia said as she looked back at Sammie. "You'd love to meet hi—"

Mrs. Natalia's eyes suddenly went wide, wider than Sammie thought possible.

"I can't believe it!" the woman exclaimed while locking eyes with Sammie. "Matthew's the boy you got that game system for all those years ago! Do you remember? I don't think you ever met him."

Sammie sucked in a breath at Mrs. Natalia's words. The woman kept speaking, but Sammie no longer heard her. *The DS? Not possible.*

"Hey, Mrs. Natalia," a vaguely familiar voice called as Sammie turned around and looked into the blue eyes of her seat buddy from the airplane.

Requiem for a Soul

BY BENJAMIN BOSTWICK

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
ORIGINAL POETRY



I began this sonnet the night after Carolyn Soule suffered a paralyzing aneurism. I wanted to recognize and reckon with the feelings that I saw around me. Then the sonnet became a requiem: Carolyn passed away. Others followed her into eternity. Each left behind a circle of mourners. I dedicate this sonnet to those mourners—for every requiem, though it speaks of the dead, speaks to the living. May comfort one day seed the hearts that grief has churned and tilled.

Upon a scale, a soul that I hold dear
Hangs swinging, restless. Will the balance dive
Down to the Left, and mark her final year—
Or to the Right, and draw her back, alive?

I, living, plead for life and love—for Right.
The kind and cunning agonize and pray
To gain an hour more before the night
With her who was their fellow in the day.

But to the Left I watch the plates descend:
I strive in tearful, mute debate to find
A purpose or a Providential end.
Her soul has left a weight of grief behind.

Yet need I know the end to yield control
To Him who keeps my heart—and keeps her soul?



A Presidential Purpose

BY FELISHA HODGE

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
ORIGINAL NONFICTION



Will tragedy steal her purpose?

1924

She clutched Woodrow's frail, limp hand. If only she could share her own racing pulse with her beloved who lay motionless on the replica of the very bed that President Lincoln had once slept in.

Live, my love and life, Edith silently begged as Dr. Grayson leaned over Woodrow's still body. With a nod, the dear family friend once again assured Edith that life yet flowed through her husband's veins.

Edith drew in a shaky breath and bit her lip. For now, Woodrow—her purpose for life itself—was alive.

How could he be so frail? Not so long ago, Woodrow's complexion had been ruddy, now his face was wan. He had once been a tall, stately figure. Now, his intellect was trapped in this shrinking, feeble frame. This was not the same man Edith had met nine years ago.

Edith's smile was melancholy as she recalled the first time Woodrow Wilson, the twenty-eighth president of the United States, had laid eyes on her.

1915

THAT PARTICULAR MARCH
DAY HAD BEEN KISSED BY
A SMILING SUN.

That particular March day had been kissed by a smiling sun.

Helen Bones, Woodrow Wilson's cousin acting as White House hostess since the death of Mrs. Wilson, was Edith's jovial companion. The two middle-aged friends had just taken another of their customary afternoon walks.

Typical of early spring in Washington D.C., the rain had visited yesterday, leaving its muddy marks all over the walking paths.

Squish. Squish.

Edith glanced down at her and Helen's stylish walking boots. The leather shoes were smeared with mud.

Edith frowned. "I'll have your boots cleaned when we get back to my house so you won't have to arrive at the White House this afternoon with such muddy ones."

Helen met Edith's offer with a mischievous grin. "We are not going to your house. I have ordered tea at the White House this afternoon, and you are to go back with me."

Edith's blue eyes widened. "Oh, I couldn't do that; my shoes are a sight, and I should be taken for a tramp." She had never been to the White House before, and, even if she had, there was no way that Edith Galt, widow of a wealthy jeweler, could enter such a historic building looking as if she had been frolicking through mud puddles like a five-year-old child.

"Yes, you can," Helen answered. "For there is not a soul there. Cousin Woodrow is playing golf with Dr. Grayson, and we will go right upstairs in the elevator. You shall see no one."

Smoothing out the pleats of her tailored-in-Paris walking skirt, Edith pretended not to hear.

HER LAUGHTER DISSOLVED
INTO AN EMBARRASSED GASP.

Helen linked arms with Edith. "I have had tea with you every time," Helen reasoned.

"Cousin Woodrow asked me the other day why I never brought my friends back there. He really wishes I would have someone in that lonely old house."

The poor little lady is starving for companionship, Edith. The words of her longtime friend Dr. Grayson echoed through Edith's conscience. He had encouraged Edith to befriend Helen a few weeks ago.

Edith had been hesitant. She didn't want to be thrust into the spotlight with government officials.

"She's surrounded by stuffy politicians all the time. Helen needs a fun-loving, female companion like yourself," Dr. Grayson had said.

Edith soon acquiesced. She, too, knew the difficulty of having loneliness as a sole friend.

She decided to offer Helen Bones friendship.

Edith glanced at her friend's pleading expression. Why shouldn't she give Helen the pleasure of hosting tea for once?

Trying to pat sweaty strands of black hair back into her updo, Edith agreed. "Well . . . only if you are positive that no one will see my soiled shoes and untidy hair."

Pleased with herself, Helen led Edith up Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House.

Muddy boots and water-soaked hemlines tramped into the state-of-the-art electric elevator. The two forty-year-old women were giggling like little girls when the doors opened to the second floor.

Edith covered her mouth with her slender, gloved hand. Her laughter dissolved into an embarrassed gasp.

There, at the end of the hall stood none other than President Woodrow Wilson and Dr. Grayson. Sporting

golfing clubs over their shoulders, the lanky politician and bushy-eyebrowed physician approached Edith and Helen.

The president of the United States of America was wearing a cheap, ill-fitted sports uniform. The glass of his spectacles was spattered with muddy water droplets.

This is Woodrow Wilson—the austere, scholarly politician?

Edith couldn't keep her laughter from bubbling behind her gloved hand. *So this is how White House visitors dress.*

Helen and the two men joined in with Edith's laughter until their sides ached.

"Will you gentlemen join us muddy creatures for tea?" Helen asked, wiping tears of laughter from her face.

"How could we decline such an invitation? Allow us to make ourselves more presentable for such lovely company though, will you?" Wilson bowed slightly, making eye contact with Edith.

After wiping away the traces of offending mud from their shoes and faces, the four convened in the Oval Room and chatted for an hour. Woodrow Wilson, former president of Princeton University, proved to be knowledgeable on subjects ranging from history to classic literature. And the passion he displayed for finding peace in these times of war—well, this man certainly was not the static character that Edith had previously imagined him to be.

Edith left the White House feeling far more interested in politics than she ever had been before in her life.

That day was the first of Edith's many interactions with the president. He began regularly inviting her to social activities at the White House. Edith enjoyed the days of afternoon teas, reading sessions, and walks with the intellectual leader.

Woodrow, as the president had insisted Edith call him, was more than passively interested in her company. His sincere interest in all that she had to say and his charming compliments indicated that Woodrow wanted more than

mere friendship. How different this man was from Edith's deceased husband, Norman Galt.

Norman had lavished Edith with expensive trinkets and even an electric automobile. As the owner of Washington D.C.'s most prominent jewelry store, Norman could afford to spoil his wife with luxurious clothing designed by Parisian designer Maison Worth. Yet, the costly gifts did not make Edith feel romanced. She and Norman had had a good marriage. They were the best of friends, but they were only friends. Whereas, Woodrow was proving to be more than just a friend.

Woodrow was a hopeless romantic. He called Edith on the telephone every day and took time out of his hectic schedule to write the most endearing notes. Such sweet, sweet memories.

1924

Woodrow stirred, pulling Edith from her reverie. His eyes, as though their lids were weighted down by burdensome years, struggled to open. His trembling right hand reached for Edith. He needed her strength.

Dropping to her knees beside the rosewood bed, Edith clasped and kissed Woodrow's feeble hand. Moaning, he whispered her name.

"Edith."

Woodrow drifted back out of consciousness. Somehow, Edith knew that she would never hear his voice again. Edith fought to keep her anguished tears quiet.

Hadn't she lost enough loved ones in her forty years of life? Wasn't it enough that she had lost her father, a brother, her baby, and Norman to the clutches of eternity? Must she also lose her dear Woodrow?

Death was cruelly unsympathetic. Edith could feel its familiar icy breath chilling the room. She had sensed death's hovering presence over Woodrow five years ago.

Edith and Woodrow had become engaged after just four months of courtship. Advisors and the press criticized Wilson's interest in Edith. After all, his wife had died less than a year ago. Surely the American public would not appreciate their president's apparent lack of devotion to his former First Lady.

Edith had debated the wisdom of them announcing their engagement as well, but Woodrow's endearing words and gallant gestures quickly masked any doubts she had.

Edith Boling Galt, the widow of a jewelry store owner, wed Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States, in December of 1915. Despite Edith's fears of disapproval, the American people rejoiced in the happy couple's union.

Edith and Woodrow spent a blissful honeymoon in Hot Springs, Virginia. However, the aftermath of World War I cast a dark shadow over their marriage. America was confused and angry. Woodrow poured every bit of his mental and physical being into creating peace for his people. The president's mission became Edith's purpose. She traveled via train across the United States with him, rallying to gain support for the League of Nations.

The journey was taxing on Woodrow's health. A bout with influenza a few months before had weakened him, and Edith couldn't help but worry.

"Please take the evening off, dearest!" Edith begged. "You need rest!"

But her president would not be deterred from his mission. His mission required a price, a price that Woodrow and Edith would both pay.

The presidential team had stopped in Pueblo, Colorado. Woodrow gave a vibrant, rousing speech before a crowd of three thousand that afternoon and was completely spent by the evening.

SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT.

"My head is pounding," Woodrow complained as he rubbed a hand over his drawn face.

Edith insisted that he go to bed early. Woodrow complied. He needed strength for his next rally.

Edith went to bed a few hours later but slept fitfully.

Something isn't right.

She awoke in the wee hours of the morning to find Woodrow sitting up on the edge of the bed. He was trying to grasp a water glass from the nightstand, but his left hand didn't seem to be cooperating.

"I have no feeling in that hand." His drooping blue-gray eyes displayed confusion. "Will you rub it? But first help me to the bathroom," Woodrow said, rubbing his right hand over his head. Edith could see his temples throbbing.

Gripping his shaking elbow, Edith struggled to help Woodrow rise from his sitting position. He seemed too weak to carry his own weight. Woodrow's entire body shuddered, and Edith was quick to wrap a steadying arm around his waist. With shuffling steps, she helped her stumbling husband reach the bathroom entrance.

"You aren't well." Edith's voice shook. "Will you be fine long enough for me to phone Dr. Grayson?"

Woodrow's face was beginning to twitch, but the left side of his mouth looked oddly loose. Leaning heavily against the bathroom door frame, he gave a slight nod.

Barefoot, Edith rushed to her room phone and rang for Ike Hoover, the White House chief usher. "Mr. Hoover, the president is very sick. I need Dr. Grayson up here immediately."

The words had barely escaped her lips when Edith heard a sickening *thud*.

"Woodrow?"

Edith dropped the telephone and bolted toward the bathroom.

"Woodrow!"

The president was lying in an unconscious heap on the tiled floor.

Much later that evening, Edith conferred with Dr. Grayson and Dr. Dercum, a Pennsylvanian neurologist who had examined the president. In the West Sitting Room hallway leading to the sleeping president's bedroom, the trio used low tones to discuss Woodrow's condition.

"Please be frank with me, Dr. Dercum," Edith implored, somehow managing to maintain her calm façade.

The doctor clasped his hands together. "There is hope for recovery," Dr. Dercum encouraged.

"But recovery cannot be hoped for unless the president is released from every disturbing problem during these days. It's the only way to repair the damage done," Dr. Grayson added.

Panic rose in Edith's throat. "But how can that be when everything that comes to an executive is a problem? How can I protect him from problems when the country looks to the president as the leader?"

Dr. Dercum leaned forward. "Madam, it is a grave situation, but I think you can solve it.

Have everything come to you; weigh the importance of each matter and see if it is possible by consultations with the respective heads of the Departments to solve them without the guidance of your husband."

Edith thought through the doctor's words. *Could this plan save my Woodrow?*

"But always keep in mind that every time you take him a new anxiety or problem to excite him, you are turning a knife in an open wound. His nerves are crying out for rest, and any excitement is torture to him," Dr. Dercum finished.

Edith's eyes darted toward the closed door of her husband's chambers. "Had he better not resign and let Mr. Marshall the vice president succeed to the presidency?"

That way Woodrow may get the complete rest that is so vital to his life?" She wanted to get Woodrow as far away from politics as possible. The dreadful government was sapping the life out of her husband.

Dr. Dercum raised an eyebrow. "For Mr. Wilson to resign would have a bad effect on the country and a serious effect on our patient. He has staked his life and made his promise to the world to do all in his power to get the Treaty of Versailles ratified and make the League of Nations complete. If he resigns, the greatest incentive to recovery is gone."

Nodding, Dr. Grayson agreed with Dr. Dercum's words. "He has the utmost confidence in you, Edith. He's always discussed public affairs with you, so you will not come to them uninformed."

Edith's concerned gaze again fell on her husband's closed bedroom door. She had a weighty decision to make.

1920

Setting aside yet another document concerning public affairs, Edith rubbed her throbbing temples. *So this is what it feels like to be president of the United States of America.*

It had been about a year since Woodrow's stroke had left him paralyzed on his left side and blind in his right eye, a year since doctors had given Edith the diagnosis.

Heeding Dr. Dercum's advice, Edith became Woodrow's steward. She ensured he encountered no political problem that could further jeopardize his fragile health. Edith now had the power to decide what would or would not pass before the president's eyes. Her purpose was to keep him alive and well.

She studied each of the decisions passed from secretaries or senators. Death would not kidnap her joy and purpose like it had so many other times in the past, but it would surely try.

1924

WOODROW'S SPIRIT
HAD LEFT HER WORLD.

Edith had always felt as if her home on 2340 S Street in Washington was the most serene, cozy place in the world. She and Woodrow had lived there since their presidency had ended in 1921. Within the walls of this brick, two-story home, Edith and Woodrow had closed themselves off from the realm of politics. No longer shouldering the burdens of the nation, they were able to enjoy the quiet company of each other and their closest friends.

Edith and Woodrow's home, though not as grand as the White House, was full of rugs, artwork, and flowers. It was a haven from the hectic world they had lived in for so long.

Today, however, their haven would be invaded.

Woodrow hadn't spoken anything since whispering Edith's name yesterday. Though Dr. Grayson had not told her so, Edith knew that Woodrow would die on this frosty February morning.

As Woodrow's breathing grew dangerously shallow, Dr. Grayson approached the bed to check the former president's pulse.

The comfortably furnished room did little to ease the tension that Edith felt in her whole body as Dr. Grayson placed his index and middle finger against Woodrow's bony neck. She gasped as Dr. Grayson's professional stare crumpled into regret.

The good doctor slowly lifted his fingers from Woodrow's neck and gave Edith an empathetic, regretful shake of the head.

Woodrow's spirit had left her world.

Edith screamed an agonized cry. "Woodrow! I need you! You cannot leave me!" she begged, still clutching his lifeless hand. Death had yet again stolen her purpose.

HIS PURPOSE HAD NOT
DIED WITH HIM.

Her husband's body made no response to Edith's tearful entreaties.

His soul was no longer in this room.

How long Edith remained a heap of body-wrenching sobs, she didn't know. As darkness invaded the room, it stole the light from Edith's spirit.

She had never felt this alone before. The deaths of her father, her baby, and Norman had left her pained and uncertain, but never had she been so overwhelmed by loss, the loss of love, the loss of purpose. Woodrow had become her everything in their short nine-year marriage. And now, her everything was gone.

Finally releasing Woodrow's limp hand, Edith numbly stood. Something fluttered to the floor.

The moon's pale light crept through a crack in the curtains and illuminated a piece of paper. Sniffling, Edith bent to retrieve the newspaper article.

"President Wilson's List of Fourteen Requirements for World Peace," the title read.

Edith blinked away the tears that blurred her vision. This paper summarized Woodrow's purpose—to find peace for a troubled nation. His purpose had not died with him.

She dabbed her stinging eyes with one of Woodrow's handkerchiefs. Edith allowed hope's light to penetrate her loss. Her purpose had not died. She would fight for Woodrow's Fourteen Points. She would travel the world, memorializing Woodrow and advocating for his cause.

Edith Wilson would live, for she yet had a purpose—a presidential purpose.



The background is a dark blue with a wavy, marbled texture. In the bottom left corner, there is a stylized city skyline with several buildings in shades of orange, yellow, and red. Two sets of curved lines, one white and one red, sweep across the upper and lower portions of the image, framing the central text.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Shotgun Side

BY ANASTASIA B. VILLAGOMEZ

The night is black and wet with pelting rain.
I squint through gold-blurred streaks across the glass.
My windshield wipers squeak and thump in vain:
They only smear the light of cars that pass.

When I was young, the misty dark meant peace.
I loved the hum of storms, the fairy gleam
Of passing cars and lights from parked police.
The shotgun side gave me a place to dream.

But now I'm in the driver's seat. The nights
Have lost their peace. The pounding rain turns streets
To deadly webs of horns and brakes and lights.
Sometimes I miss those days of shotgun seats.

But when I glance at Mom, I'm satisfied.
She's sleeping now. She needs the shotgun side.

Seeing Past Pretty

BY FELISHA HODGE

Is change really such a bad thing?

The South Carolina rays pierced my vision. Too bright. So blinding. The pounding behind my temples increased to a faster tempo as I shuffled in line behind my classmates.

"All right, kiddos. Forty-five minutes for recess today!" my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Steen, said in an all-too resonant voice as we reached the edge of the playground.

My classmates cheered as they raced toward the swing set and merry-go-round.

I winced. Their shouts of "Yay!" and "Woohoo!" felt like shards of glass stabbing my forehead. Pain oozed deeper inside my head.

Squinting, I looked for a quiet place to sit on my school's small playground. The unoccupied monkey bars stood in the far corner of North Walterboro Christian Academy's yard.

I stumbled toward the shaded, vacant spot.

Leaning my throbbing forehead against the silver bar, I found some relief. The cool steel coaxed my pounding ache to ease its intensity. I closed my eyes and prayed that God would make the hammering pain behind my eyes disappear. I'd been having a lot of these headaches lately.

My parents had noticed about a week ago.

"Your hair is probably causing the headaches," Momma diagnosed. "Maybe you shouldn't wear it up in ponytails anymore."

"Poor butterbean," Daddy soothed, massaging my head. "I guess you have the curse of thick Hodge hair."

I responded with a fake smile.

THIS PAIN HAD TO DISAPPEAR
BEFORE MY PARENTS
DISCOVERED THE REAL CAUSE
OF MY HEADACHES.

True, I did have thick hair like my dad's family members, but I knew that my long locks weren't to blame for the frequent headaches. My headaches

were caused by something much more serious than wearing my hair in updos.

This pain had to disappear before my parents discovered the *real* cause of my headaches.

If they found out before I stopped the problem, my world would be turned upside down.

All too soon, recess ended. Mrs. Steen lined up my class of twelve and marched us back to our cramped, stuffy classroom. Once we were all settled at our desks, Mrs. Steen began to write history notes on the dry erase board that spanned an entire wall at the front of the room.

Why does she have to write so tiny? I thought. *Does it say 1884 or 1861?* I squinted at the black scribbles and tried to make my vision focus. My eyes refused to show me intelligible words. My heart began to race. *I need these notes for the history exam next week!*

"Lindsey?" I whispered to the not-so-fond-of-me classmate. She was jotting down the information into her notebook that had graphics of a snooty poodle on each page.

Lifting her head, she raised her eyebrow.

"Can I get the notes from you?" I whispered desperately.

Lindsey gave me a withering look that made me feel three-feet tall. "Uh, no. They're on the board right now, dummy."

"Please, I can't see the notes." I regretted my words as they left my mouth.

Lindsey's eyes widened in understanding, then settled into a menacing glint.

Smiling devilishly, she raised her freckled hand. "Mrs. Steen?" Lindsey called.

"Yes?" Mrs. Steen answered, turning from the whiteboard.

"Felisha can't see the notes on the board." Lindsey's voice oozed with mock concern.

Mrs. Steen turned to face me. "Why didn't you just say so? Here, switch seats with Morgan."

Unhappy about having to move, she huffed and bumped into me as I passed by to take her seat.

Great. I've made Morgan mad, and worse yet, Mrs. Steen knows I can't see far away now. Oh well. At least maybe I can read the notes now.

But I still couldn't clearly read the notes. Mrs. Steen caught me squinting at the board.

Her sympathetic look terrified me. I knew she was going to tell Momma about this.

I wasn't wrong.

Mrs. Steen walked me to my family's gray Impala at dismissal that afternoon. "So, Mrs. Hodge," she began as I sank into the back seat of the car. "Felisha seems to be having trouble seeing the whiteboard in class. I moved her to the front of the room, but she still can't seem to see. I think she may need glasses."

My heart dropped. My secret was out. Momma knew I needed glasses. Now my parents would make me wear awful frames, and I was going to look ugly. People at church wouldn't tell me I was pretty anymore. Lindsey would probably tease me about how awful I looked too.

"Why didn't you tell me you were having trouble seeing?" Momma asked.

Tears began to well up in my eyes. "I don't want glasses. I don't wanna be ugly," I said, choking out my biggest fear.

"You can't walk around blind. Besides, you would look very cute in glasses," Momma replied as she turned the car right at a stop sign.

But Becca doesn't look cute in glasses. I ignored my mother's encouraging words. My friend Becca had started wearing glasses a few months before. I didn't like how different the frames made her look. Never mind that Becca had also begun wearing her hair parted down the middle and slicking her bangs back against her head. The glasses had changed her appearance. I didn't want the same thing to happen to me.

"I'll call the eye doctor tonight to book an appointment," Momma said, sealing my fate.

When arrived home, Momma booked an appointment for the next day.

Lying in my white canopy bed that night, I sobbed into my pink stuffed unicorn. When I heard knocking on the door, I dropped my unicorn and snatched the edge of my purple and white-checked bedspread to dry my tears.

Momma softly entered my room and sat on the edge of my bed. "Glasses aren't the end of the world, you know." Her voice was gentle.



Tears came gushing back and soaked my face. "Why do things have to change?" I wailed. "I'm going to be ugly! Why can't things just stay the same?"

Momma wrapped her arms around my shaking shoulders. She let me cry for a moment, then sat back and took something out of her dress pocket.

She held a flat piece of wood carved into a butterfly silhouette. The wooden butterflies were a craft for Momma's Sunday school class. The kids had doodled their own designs on them.

Because Momma had decorated this one herself, the butterfly was pretty, unlike the messy ones the little kids had designed.

"Life is always changing, butterbean," Momma said, running her fingers through my hair.

"It's like this butterfly, see?" She held it close so that I could see the design. The butterfly had blue wings decorated with purple hearts.

"It's pretty," I sniffled. Next to pink, blue was my favorite color.

"Life is pretty too," Momma continued. "But then, things change. The change can be scary because you're not sure if it'll be as good as things were before."

She flipped the butterfly to its other side—it looked completely different. Hot pink wings with bright yellow dots covered this new side.

The pink side is even prettier than the blue one!

"But see? Change makes life more beautiful than it was before," Momma explained, flipping the butterfly once more to show me both



MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, THIS
CHANGE COULD BE BETTER
THAN I HAD EVER IMAGINED.

sides. "If there was never any change, you'd never experience what God has in store for you.

"You might not have to get glasses at all. Maybe the eye doctor will let you wear contacts instead," she added and gave me the butterfly.

I studied the pattern of the bright polka dots. Maybe Momma was right. Maybe, just maybe, this change could be better than I had ever imagined. Even if I did look awful in glasses, even if Lindsey did tease me for wearing frames, being able to see the whiteboard and enjoying recess would be nice.

The next morning, Momma and I made the trip to the eye doctor.

All too soon, we arrived at Dr. David Bang's eye practice. I was ushered into a room full of bulky equipment that the doctor used to assess my vision.

"I don't want glasses," I told Dr. Bang after he completed my eye examination. *Please, please give me contacts instead!* I silently begged.

The fifty-year-old doctor's mouth stretched into a grin. Seeing my serious expression, however, his wrinkled face settled back into a professional façade.

"Well, Felisha. Most eleven-year-olds aren't responsible enough to take care of contacts," Dr. Bang began. "But, I'm told that you're an A student who takes her responsibilities very seriously."

So I don't have to wear glasses!

Leaning forward in his chair, Dr. Bang raised his bushy, brown eyebrows. "I'll make a deal with you, hmm? If you can get the contacts into your eyes by yourself before leaving the office today, you can have a trial week with contacts.

At the end of the week—if you don't have any major issues—we'll order you a supply of contacts, and you won't have to wear glasses at school."

Biting my lip in excitement, I nodded. How hard could it be to get plastic lenses to stay in my eyes?

One of Dr. Bang's assistants led me back into the sunshine-filled office entry.

She had me wash my hands at a cleaning station, then led me to a white table close to a floor-to-ceiling window.

She's really pretty even though she's got glasses on, I noticed. And she's really nice too.

Waiting for her to retrieve my trial contacts, I sat down and looked out of the window to see a blurry mass of green grass and a row of palm trees.

The assistant returned quickly and sat down in the chair across from me.





"All righty, Felisha. Dr. Bang tells me you want contacts instead of glasses." The middle-aged assistant smiled as she peeled the foil cover off the contact lens packaging. "So I'm going to

teach you how to get these things into your eyes, okay?"

I leaned forward, eager to prove that putting the lenses in my eyes wouldn't be a problem.

Unfortunately, it was harder than I thought it would be.

"It's all right," the assistant encouraged after my failed attempts. "We're just gonna keep trying until you get these pesky things in your eyes. I can sit here all day if need be." She winked.

After several more tries, I *finally* got the lenses to stick to my eyes. Blinking, I looked outside the giant window.

I gasped.

The grass that had been a blob of green just an hour ago was now defined. I could see the individual blades of grass. Who knew that grassy lawns were made of single stalks? And the palm trees! The palm leaves had texture—I could see the seams where wood grew into leaves.

The world wasn't made up of simple coloring book lines anymore. Everything had definition.

Once I had both contacts in my eyes, Dr. Bang walked over to the table. "You did it! I'm impressed, Miss Hodge. I'll go get those contacts ordered for you. In the meantime, you can go pick out frames with your mom." He walked away before I could say a word.

Butterflies of disappointment and dread fluttered in the pit of my stomach. *I thought I didn't need glasses!*

Standing, I shuffled over to Momma and the dreaded row of illuminated frames.

"What kind do you want to try, butterbean?" Momma asked as she perused the shelves.

None of them.

"I thought I didn't need glasses if I could get the contacts in my eye," I moaned, glancing at a pair of men's bulky spectacles.

"You still need them for the times when you can't wear contacts," Momma explained.

"Like whenever you're reading before bed at night." She picked up a square pair of pinky-purple frames, the same color as her butterfly, and handed them to me. If change made the butterfly that Momma had painted prettier, then maybe it wouldn't be too bad for me either.

Biting my lip, I gingerly placed the glasses on my face and peeked into the mirror.

I don't look like a monster with glasses after all!

While Momma prattled about the different frame styles, I glanced over at the sweet assistant who was cleaning up the saline solution splatters I had made while trying to put the contacts in my eyes.

I thought about the differences between Lindsey and the assistant.

I guess glasses aren't what make a person nice or mean. How I treat people is what will make me pretty or ugly.

Turning back to the mirror, I smiled at my reflection. "I think I like these glasses, Momma."

I DON'T LOOK LIKE A MONSTER
WITH GLASSES AFTER ALL!

A Captive of the Keys

BY SIERA WEBER

My woes endured as a would-not-be musician.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that every American homeschooler is born to play the piano. At least, it feels that way. As far as my mom is concerned, it's a household truth fervently believed and devotedly upheld. The odds were set against me from the beginning: not only was I a homeschooler, but I was also a pastor's daughter in a small Baptist church. The piano may not have been my forte, but it was my fate.

My career as a musical prodigy began at the ripe age of seven. On the first day of lessons, I traipsed up the steps to Mrs. Hoffman's front door, clutching my bright orange Alfred books. I didn't harbor any expectations of becoming a Beethoven or Bach; I didn't even know who Bach and Beethoven were. I just wanted to see the inside of Mrs. Hoffman's house. In her roles as church secretary, pianist, and Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Hoffman practically lived at the church. I had never seen her in another setting.

"Helloooo," Mrs. Hoffman called out in her singsong voice as she opened the door. She looked the same as she did at church. I entered the room, staring at my surroundings—the fluffy couch against the wall, the tall bookshelves, and the brown piano.

I couldn't believe that Mrs. Hoffman had a brown piano. At church, she played a black Kawai that took up far more space than this miniscule piece of furniture. But the size and color of the piano didn't seem to matter to Mrs. Hoffman.

She ushered me over, and we started with the basics: note recognition and counting. I don't remember much else from my first lesson, except wanting to play much faster through

the material than Mrs. Hoffman did. As long as I hit the right notes in the right order, I considered a piece finished, no matter how choppy. But Mrs. Hoffman wanted me to smooth out my pieces and to practice—a lot!

WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO EXPECT.

Even though she made me practice a lot, I enjoyed the extra time I spent with Mrs. Hoffman. Her contagious enthusiasm and cheerful spirit made our lessons enjoyable. The piano, Mrs. Hoffman, and I spent a few happy years together. Before long, I graduated from the orange Alfred books to the yellow. Although I loved my teacher, I didn't fall in love with the piano. We were casual acquaintances—classmate buddies, but not best friends.

When I turned ten, my mom sent me to Mrs. Bowman, another piano teacher, who would expand my repertoire. Mrs. Hoffman had started me on my journey, and now—Mom hoped—Mrs. Bowman would really stretch me.

And stretch me, she did.

My nerves tied my stomach in knots on the way to my first lesson with the new teacher.

Trees stood along both sides of her long driveway like sentinels, guarding her house. Dad pulled to a stop in front of the porch and looked at me and my sister Tori. "All right, do well! I'll be back to get you two at 3:15."

I hesitated before opening the car door. I had enjoyed piano lessons with Mrs. Hoffman because I knew her, but Tori and I had never met Mrs. Bowman. We had no idea what to expect. Not wanting to face a stranger alone, I turned pleading eyes on my dad. But he just waved us out of the car.

Clutching our piano bags, Tori and I reluctantly slid out of the car and stepped onto the porch. Dad backed the car down the driveway, turned around, and abandoned us. We

turned to face the door. As the oldest, I accepted my duty and rang the doorbell. I glanced through the window beside the door and glimpsed an ominous figure approaching.

I backed up. The door swung open, revealing a tall, thin lady with the curliest black hair I had ever seen. "Hi, ladies," she beamed.

Tori and I said nothing as we stepped inside.

"I said hi," she repeated, tone warm albeit insistent.

"Hi," we mumbled as we slipped off our shoes and placed them on the mat.

"We'll have to work on that." She ushered us into her living room.

Directly in front of us, Mrs. Bowman's brown piano leaned against the back wall. I couldn't understand why all piano teachers owned brown pianos.

Since Tori was younger, Mrs. Bowman taught her first while I worked on homework.

Forty-five minutes later, my turn came. I crept up to the bench and sat down as if I were on pins and needles.

"Hi, Siera."

I stared at the shiny keys in front of me.

"Siera, I said hi."

"Hi," I murmured without looking up.

We launched into the lesson. I quickly learned that Mrs. Bowman planned to push me toward excellence. She didn't want me to just hit the notes, she wanted me to *know* them. She also emphasized counting, even though counting hampered my artistic creativity. And she loved scales! I showed her my five-finger scales, but those weren't good enough. She wanted me to learn full octave scales—and to use both hands at the same time.

After the first lesson, I wasn't sure what to think of my new teacher. Mrs. Bowman seemed nice, but she had a lot of unreasonable expectations.

For the next seven years, I continued lessons with Mrs. Bowman. At first, our routine passed much as it did on the first day; but over time, Tori and I grew to love Mrs. Bowman.

"WE'LL HAVE TO WORK ON THAT." SHE USHERED US INTO HER LIVING ROOM.

Eventually, we became so comfortable with her that we chattered nonstop as soon as the door opened, talking over each other to share funny stories from the week. Our lessons turned into a time of fellowship as well as a time of learning.

Although I became attached to Mrs. Bowman, I was never seized by musical inspiration. I learned to sight-read, but I lacked a musical ear. During each lesson, I caught a touch of Mrs. Bowman's contagious enthusiasm; but during the week, music turned into another task on my to-do list.

I enjoyed music, but playing the piano never set my soul on fire.

When I was fifteen, Mom made the dreaded announcement: it was time that I learned to play congregational music. Mrs. Bowman was thrilled—I, not so much.

I had played special music for my church multiple times, and I hated how much my hands shook during each special. The thought of accompanying the congregation filled me with even greater fear.

Mrs. Bowman and I practiced hymns for weeks leading up to the big night, but worries still plagued my mind: *what if I lost my spot? What if I started to play the wrong song? What if I forgot which verse we were on?*

On my first Sunday night as accompanist, I crept up to the imposing black Kawai and settled myself on the cushioned bench. I felt the eyes of the congregation on me. My cheeks lit on fire before my shaking hands even touched the slick keys.

I waited, heart pounding.

Our song leader called out the first hymn number.

Bracing myself, I lowered my hands and struck the first chord. It rang out clearly, but the notes seemed lonely and weak in that wide auditorium. Mind whirling, I raced through the introduction and plunged into the first verse.

Then, the congregation joined in. As their voices blended with the melody, I gained new confidence. My hands, though shaky, knew where to go. Adrenaline urged my fingers to race ahead, but the singers' voices guided my pace. No longer was I the lonely sound-maker plunking away on the platform. I was part of a group, working with them to create music. We were teammates making joyful noise together.

When the final song ended, I scuttled to my pew, and collapsed against the burgundy cushion. It was over! I never wanted to do that again.

But I did do it again. Many times.

Eventually, I graduated from being the evening service accompanist to the Sunday morning service pianist on occasion. When I made mistakes, the congregation just sang on. Often, people approached me afterward to say, "It's so nice to see you up there. Keep up the good work." They didn't care about my wrong notes, shaky hands, or irregular rhythms. They were just glad that I was playing. Over time, I realized that my accompaniment was about more than making music—it was a way for me to connect with my church family.

But I still didn't love playing the piano.

In college, I placed music on the backburner, even though Mom encouraged me to continue music lessons. By the end of my first semester, the piano had drifted to the back of my mind, lost amid papers and tests and projects.

Truth be told, it has yet to resurface.

And yet, I haven't abandoned music entirely. Whenever I'm home, I play for at least one church service. At school, I occasionally plunk around on the pianos in the practice rooms. I still enjoy listening to classical music, and I'm excited whenever I recognize a composer that Mrs. Bowman and I talked about.

Looking back now, I realize that music itself was never my favorite part of piano lessons. What I appreciate most about music is the connections it brings. It connected me to wonderful teachers and deepened my connection to my church family. Those connections will continue to resound long after the final notes of my lackluster career have faded.

I STILL DIDN'T LOVE
PLAYING THE PIANO.

Song of the Clock that Ticks

BY CONRAD PRUNEAU

Burn your bed, you won't sleep here;
The Wrath of Time is coming near.
And those still working work in fear,
For such he sings, all ears to hear:

"With wrath, I ride a winding way
To stir the cold and lazy fray.
I will not tarry, shall not stay,
For I have wages I must pay.

He who wasted me, I will waste
'Til he's a ruined thief disgraced.
As hasty spent he, let him haste
Against the rising storm to brace."

This is the song of the clock that ticks.
His notes and lyrics always stick
To workers thin—to slackers thick;
Hear the song of the clock that ticks.



Back to Sunnydale

BY RYLEIGH WOOD

COMMENCEMENT CONTEST WINNER
ORIGINAL FICTION



Sometimes a setback is just an opportunity in disguise.

When I said goodbye to Sunnydale County School six years ago, it was for good. Or at least, that's what I thought. I was never coming back. I packed my few belongings and drove off in my dad's red Chevy. I was ready for the big city, for adventure. Besides, no one would miss me. Ok, almost no one.

My car lurched forward as I hit a pothole, and hot vanilla latte sloshed all over my perfectly pressed dress. *Oops*. I had once read that ninety-five percent of making a good first impression is dressing appropriately. This wasn't a good start.

I sighed. It wasn't just about the coffee. I'd graduated from the University of Georgia with an MS in Counseling and Psychology. My diploma even had *summa cum laude* etched in gold letters. Since a child, I'd dreamed of becoming a renowned counselor. I wanted to fix marriages, to help people.

It had all started out so well. Everyone who knew me understood that I was an expert. Well, everyone except some middle-aged lady with three-inch heels and bright red lipstick. "We're looking for someone with more experience," she'd said. "People just don't look for relationship advice from someone who's never been married." And she wasn't the only one who saw it that way.

But that's how it was in the city. There was no help for you, no gentle coaching, no second chances. It wasn't Sunnydale County but the real world. The world I had chosen.

As I pulled up to my old middle school, I chuckled. *You made it really far, Chrissy.* In high school I'd been voted "most likely to succeed." Now, I was single, unemployed, and had a degree in talking about people's problems. Thankfully, my aunt didn't see it that way. She said the school needed a counselor and someone to fill in as a substitute teacher. So here I was.

Again.

I grabbed my briefcase, trying to ignore my newly acquired coffee stain. *It's just middle school, I thought. How hard can it be?*

I waited for the bell to ring before taking my place at the front of the classroom. "Good morning, class. My name is Miss Ellis, and I am taking over math for Mrs. Perkins while she is recovering from surgery." That's when I noticed how uneven the rows of desks were. It was just my obsessive-compulsive disorder. I could probably ignore it.

"She told me that you were working on long division." A Cinnabon wrapper crinkled loudly. "Umm—excuse me," I pointed at the third boy in the second row. "Sorry, I don't know your name yet."

"Me?" the boy asked. "I'm Bryce."

"Hi, Bryce, can I ask what you're doing?"

He held out every syllable. "Ea-ting break-fast."

Patience. "I see. Let me just remind you that you're not allowed to eat breakfast in class."

"What? That ain't a rule. Mrs. Perkins always lets me," he protested.

Isn't. It's isn't. "I understand why you think that," I said. In Human Behavior 203 I had learned to use the magic phrase *I understand why* when dealing with problems. "But in the

future, please finish your breakfast before class."

"Well, my Ma said you can't do nothin' on an empty stomach."

He smiled and a piece of sticky dough poked through his uneven teeth.

I cringed. "It would be better English to say 'anything' rather than 'nothing.'"

Bryce laughed. "English? Oh, I ain't English, Ma'am. I'm 'Merican, born and raised."

Oh boy. I turned to the chalkboard and wrote the first problem in neat, even numbers.

When I swung back around, my eyes instantly glided to the uneven rows. "Today we're going to start with—" The foot of each chair didn't line up with the one in front of it. I couldn't take it.

"Everyone, stand up!" I announced. The students looked confused but did what I asked.

"Ok, now I need everyone to make sure their chair is in line with the one directly in front of it."

It's fine. It's going to be fine.

Some of the students made a face; others just shrugged their shoulders in confusion.

Bryce laughed. As the kids attempted to push their desks into a straight line, he cupped his hand over his mouth and whispered to the girl next to him. "It's called O-C-D." The girl rolled her eyes.

"Bryce," I said, "believe it or not, eighty-two percent of people learn better in an orderly environment."

He shrugged. "Not me."

I barely heard him because of a loud noise that sounded like thunder coming from right next door. Ok, maybe thunder was a bit of an exaggeration, but it sounded like someone was drilling right through our wall.

IT'S JUST MIDDLE SCHOOL, I
THOUGHT. HOW HARD CAN IT BE?

"Please turn in your textbooks to page 109," I said. The loud noise continued, making it impossible to think. I set the math book down. "Class, I'll be right back."

I tried not to sound flustered, but I could feel my cheeks burning. I walked down the hall to the next room and threw the door open.

"Excuse me!"

There was only one person in the room. He turned off his power tool and slowly raised his safety goggles. He looked confused, but I didn't care.

"I'm Christiana Ellis, and I'm teaching right next door and—"

"Chrissy?"

I froze. *Chrissy*. I hadn't been called that in a long time. And then I saw it. Tommy Baker. The boy with messy hair who had never understood the meaning of "tucking in" your shirt. The boy who asked me to the high school Harvest Fest thirteen times before I finally said yes. The one person who cried on the day I rolled out of Sunnysdale County for the last time. Almost the last time.

"I—um—yes," I stuttered, "it's me, Chrissy."

"An excellent conversationalist as always," he said with a wink.

"Yes, coming from the master engineer himself," I said, gesturing toward the collection of small tools.

He laughed. "I'm just helping out a bit." He paused long enough for me to feel awkward. "They said you were coming back, but I didn't believe it."

I shrugged. "Well, sometimes you just have to go with the flow."

"You can do a lot of things, Chrissy Ellis, but going with the flow is not one of them," he said.

I crossed my arms. "I can go with the flow if I want to. Like right now. I stopped my lesson to come see where this noise was coming from. It's making it difficult for the students to concentrate."

"SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO GO WITH THE FLOW."

His eyes sparkled mischievously. "The students or the teacher?"

Seriously? "Does it matter? Please keep the noise down if you can."

"Your wish is my command," he said, swooping down into a low bow.

I shook my head. "You still think you're so charming." I wished he really wasn't. I turned and left before he had a chance to say anything else.

When I reached my classroom door, I noticed something unusual. It was quiet. Too quiet. It might have been my first time teaching, but I knew that a classroom full of twenty sixth graders should not be quiet. *Great.* I braced myself and opened the door. Each student was sitting in his seat. Bryce's hands were neatly folded on his desk. *Weird.* But when I turned toward the front of the classroom it made more sense. *The little scoundrels.* Every single item on my desk had been shifted over slightly so that nothing was straight. Each cap had been taken off my beautiful colored pens and placed on a different pen that didn't match it. My perfect equation had been erased and re-written in the messiest handwriting I had ever seen. *Maybe I should give these kids more credit.*

I put on my sweetest smile. It was fake, of course, but it sure was sweet. "Please turn to page 109 and start the review questions at the top of the page." I turned and started straightening the papers and other items. As I erased the chalkboard, I could hear the muffled giggles.

"Miss Ellis," Bryce said, "we've all heard that back in your day you were the best corn-chucker Sunnydale has ever seen. I think we're all excited to see if you've still got it at the Harvest Fest?"

Back in my day. How old did this kid think I was?

"Really." I put the correct cap on my royal blue pen.

"You are coming, ain't you?" he asked.

Aren't. "Maybe," I said. I wasn't. I didn't know what it was about the Harvest Fest exactly, but it felt too "Sunnydale-ish." And I wasn't one of them anymore.

The rest of the day went smoothly. Or, as smoothly as it could. Finally, the bell rang, and the students started pouring out. I grabbed an eraser and attacked the chalkboard. I couldn't stand the way some people only half-erased, leaving white streaks smeared across it. I heard a knock.

It was Tommy.

"Hey, if you don't mind, I have to fix a desk."

I sighed. "Be my guest."

That was all the invitation he needed. He went over to the desk and opened his toolbox.

"Big plans for the Harvest Fest?" he asked.

I didn't look up. "I'm not going."

"What?" Tommy laughed. "You're joking, right?"

"No, I'm here because I need a job *not* because I love corn. Who cares about the Harvest Fest anyway?"

"You do, from what I remember."

He was right. It seemed like just yesterday I was the one putting the Harvest Fest together. If there was any corn chucking going on, I was there, front and center. Back then, I wouldn't have missed the Harvest Fest for the world. "Yeah?" I asked. "Well, not anymore."

Tommy stood up. "What happened to you?"

I shrugged. "People change, Tommy. They grow up. Maybe I realized that the world is bigger than the end of Mr. Bryan's farm. I've seen things. I've figured out who I am."

Tommy laughed. "If you think you can change who you are by wearing fancy clothes and driving an expensive car, then you're just wrong."

My insides seethed. *How can he say that when he doesn't even know me?* "Well, I guess this is just who I am now."

Tommy just looked at me. There was something different in his pretty blue eyes.

"AREN'T YOU GONNA FIGURE OUT WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?"

Something that reminded me a lot of a little puppy who had just gotten dropped off at the kennel for a week. "I guess I just kind of liked the old Chrissy better," he mumbled.

Ouch. "Well, the 'new Chrissy' has to go to her counseling session now."

"You getting help or giving it?" he asked as he pulled the door open for me.

"Very funny." I walked down the long hallway until I reached the last office on the left.

The almond-colored desk sat in front of a single window. A floral sketch hanging by the door was the only attempt at decoration. I set my purse down and lined the pencil sharpener up with the seam on the wooden desk.

A few minutes later, a fist pounded on the door as the handle turned. Bryce Holiday's narrow face peeked through the crack in the door. Oh no. I folded my hands slowly. "Come in, Bryce."

"Cool." He threw his backpack on the floor and collapsed into the cushioned seat.

I had taken a lot of courses on adolescent behavior, but I was pretty sure nothing could have prepared me to deal with Bryce. "Okay," I said, "we already know each other so let's get started. Why are you here today?"

Bryce shrugged. He chomped down on a piece of neon green gum. A whiff of spearmint hit me, but I tried to ignore it. "Well, it's going to be hard to help you if I don't know why you came."

Bryce fidgeted with the empty gum wrapper in his hand. "Aren't you gonna figure out what's wrong with me?" he asked.

I tapped my finger on the desk. "That depends. Do you think there's something wrong with you?"

He folded the gum wrapper in half. "Well, yeah, everybody says there is."

"Can you give me an example?" I asked.

"My teachers say I don't learn nothin'. I try. I just . . . I can't read and write well. The letters do little happy dances around the page."

"Hmmm . . . happy dances?"

He nodded. "Yeah, b's look like p's and numbers get all mixed up in my little mind. I can do quick math in my head, but I try to write 'em down and they go all crazy on me. You reckon I'm just dumb?" For the first time, he looked up, and his green eyes met mine. He had dark eyebrows, a cluster of freckles around his nose, and some Cinnabon icing on the corner of his mouth from this morning.

"No, I don't think there's anything wrong with you," I said, unfolding my fingers.

Dyslexia? . . . ADHD? . . . who knew with this kid? I shook off my thoughts. "Actually, you want to know a little secret?"

Bryce nodded.

"I used to have the same problem when I was your age."

"Wait, you?" Bryce's eyes got big. "No way!"

I smiled. "What helped me was writing all my letters as capitals. They're much easier to tell apart that way."

"Capitals! Well, that's buck wild," Bryce said. "I ain't ever thought of that before!"

I winced. *Haven't.*

For the next ten minutes Bryce rambled on about Jon boats and motorcycles and anything other than school. Finally, he jumped up clutching his bookbag. "Bye, Miss E.," he said as he headed to the door. He reached for the silver handle and stopped. He whisked around. "See you at the Harvest Fest?"

"I wouldn't bet on it," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, for someone who

knows a whole lot, you sure could learn a thing or two." He turned to leave, but his eyes caught the floral frame on the wall. He reached up and pushed on the edge of it until the frame was just a little crooked.

MAYBE IT WAS MY PRIDE.

The little rascal. I sighed. "Goodbye, Bryce."

Five minutes later, I scooped up my purse and binder and flicked the light out. As I stepped out into the hall, I noticed the large Harvest Fest poster. The sign-up sheet lay on the little table near the door. *Oh, why not?* I picked up the pencil, but my hand felt stiff. Maybe it was my pride. Maybe it was the old memories. Or, maybe, I was afraid that if I got too attached, I wouldn't be able to turn my back on Sunnydale a second time. I set the pencil down and walked out without a second glance.

The next day was much like the first. As was the next one, and the one after that. Every time I walked into my classroom, something was crooked or shifted out of place. But every day, the number of items turned sideways decreased.

Every afternoon after school, Bryce would make his way to my little office at the end of the hall. We worked on techniques to help his dyslexia and attention span. He always asked if my name was on the Harvest Fest sign-up sheet at the end of our session. But every day, I made some excuse.

Well, until my third Friday of teaching. It was the last day to sign up for the Harvest Fest, and I had just sat down to mentally prepare for Bryce's session when he came flying through the door with a textbook in his hand.

"Miss E.! Miss E.!" he yelled, wheezing. "It's happening! It's finally happening!"

"What's happening, Bryce?"

"Them letters," he shook his head in disbelief. "They ain't dancin' no more! Look!" He shoved his book under my chin. "That's a *b*. And that there's a *p*. Yes, sir, if I do say so myself."

Something warm washed down my back and a smile crept on my face. "Bryce! I can't believe it!" *Like how?* I wanted to add. "This is fantastic!"

"I know." He squeezed the book to his chest. "I'm gonna go show my Ma!" He spun around and raced to the door. Then he stopped and turned back toward me. "Thanks, Miss E.," he said. "Who would've known? I guess I ain't dumb, huh?"

"Never doubted it."

When I emerged from the office a few minutes later, I stopped in front of the sign-up sheet. *I mean, would it actually hurt?* I could see Bryce at the Festival, hands full of corn, waiting for me. *I won't be going for me.* I picked up the pencil. It was for my students. I bent over to write my name. One hundred and eighty-seven names had already been written. The last one was Chrissy Ellis. Wait, What? *No, no, no, that's not right!*

"I knew you'd come through eventually," a voice behind me said.

I swung around. It was Tommy. *No wonder my name looked so messy.* "So, you took the liberty to write my name down?"

He laughed. "You might have changed in some ways, Chrissy, but you never could have missed out on a Harvest Fest."

"Oh really," I picked up the pencil and violently started erasing my name.

He looked at me confused, and then his eyes got sad. "Was I wrong?"

I shook my head. "No, but Tommy Baker, if my name's going to be on this list, it's going to look nice!"

Love Is a Floor-Ham Sandwich

BY KAYLEY OCKER

Love is patient, love is kind, love is a floor-ham sandwich.

My bedroom door flew open with a *bang* as my four-year-old sister Kinley slowly backed into my room, her little arms full. "Buggy!" she shouted. "I made you lunch!"

"You did?" I asked, smiling as she struggled to hold everything she was carrying. Kinley nodded as she shoved a wad of paper towels into my hands.

"Yeah! Here, it's a sandwich."

I unwrapped the paper towel and saw inside the saddest ham sandwich I had ever seen. Two suspiciously damp slices of ham sat on a mangled end piece of bread, and an overabundance of mustard dripped into my palm. While I poked at the sandwich, Kinley handed me a bag of chips and an apple.

"I would've cut the apple," she said, giving me a pert look, "but *I'm* not allowed to use the knives."

"That's because you're four. Knives are off limits until you're at least in the double digits, kid," I said, quickly moving past the long-standing argument of who in this house was "big enough" to use sharp cutlery.

"Well, thank you," I said, wiping the mustard onto the paper towel. I cautiously picked up the sandwich and inspected it for any clear signs of tampering or foul play. "Why'd you make me a sandwich?"

Kinley just smiled. Her ice-blue eyes, which matched mine, twinkled up at me. "Because you always make me lunch," she said, "and I love you, too." She reached over to steal one of the chips she'd brought me. "I used the ham

from Costco and the last piece of cheese from the baggy. I dripped mustard on the counter, but don't worry because I wiped it up. I didn't get mayonnaise anywhere because you don't *like* mayonnaise, so I didn't get it out of the fridge."

I listened to her chatter about her sandwich-making process and thought about what she'd said.

I made Kinley's lunch every day—usually a sandwich cut into four triangles (with the crusts removed so she could eat them separately), a sliced apple, and a couple chips. I would typically eat a bit of her fruit and snag a chip before heading downstairs to focus on schoolwork.

Something that seemed so rote to me was an act of love to Kinley, and in her four-year-old way, she was showing me that she recognized it. I could've cried as I swallowed every soggy-yet-stale bite of that sandwich (and not just because it tasted truly awful).

"Thank you for my sandwich, lovely," I said, giving her a squeeze, heart full and stomach turning.

"You're welcome," she said as she reached over to grab another one of my chips. "I dropped the ham on the floor twice, but I rinsed it off in the bathroom sink, so it's okay."

Sometimes, love is making your baby sister lunch every day. Sometimes, love is making your big sister lunch, just because. Sometimes, love is eating a floor-ham sandwich.



Acting Upward

BY DANIELLE KICKBUSH

Acting—more than a play?

The curtains opened for the last time. The audience erupted into cheers as I took a bow with my castmates. Then, I lifted my face to the bright lights and smiled, relishing the moment before raising my arm toward heaven to acknowledge the real star, Christ.

When I auditioned for the Christian musical *Surrender*, I never expected the show to be such a journey. I was excited to be part of my second show with the Christian theater group Shining Light Players and was thrilled to have landed a lead role. As I continued rehearsals, I found a new place to direct my talents—a place that gave me purpose. I was ecstatic and unaware of any hardships to come. But the events three weeks before opening night took me by surprise.

"Don't forget to study for midterms!" my college teachers encouraged.

"You might want to start cleaning for white glove soon," my dorm supervisors suggested.

"We never see you anymore!" my friends whined as they packed their bags to go to the beach without me.

Rehearsals lasted four hours every night and all Saturday afternoon. On top of rehearsals, I still worked and had my regular assignments. I also tutored, led my collegian, and volunteered at service outreaches and church ministries. Because of my overloaded schedule, I turned in my very first late assignment, skipped classes, and watched my friends hang out without me. I was a mess.

Now that I've been acting for some time, I realize that I'm not the only one who struggles with a loaded performance

schedule. Daniel Higginbotham, the editor of Prospects, a website that helps mentor individuals in their careers, recognizes the heavy commitment many actors are required to make. "Performers are required to work long hours . . . and are expected to give 100% to every performance. The work can take its toll both mentally and physically—especially on performers who work additional jobs."¹ Mr. Higginbotham is definitely right.

I had tried to do everything all at once, and when I realized I couldn't, something had to give. That something was my self-care. Staying up until two o'clock most nights to finish assignments, I was tired enough to pass out at any moment. I skipped many meals, surviving on Kit Kats and beef sticks. Desperate, I prayed to God, asking Him to reveal whether my interest in acting was even worth the struggle.

I didn't understand why the play was so important until we finally performed for an audience. A little girl approached me afterwards and asked questions about salvation.

"I can't believe anyone would die for their faith in Jesus," she said with wide eyes. "I want to know more about your Jesus."

I realized that she may never have heard about Christ in such a powerful way without the show. At that moment, I began to view acting as a ministry rather than as a hobby.

Stephen Burke, the man who started Shining Light Players with his wife, helped me see acting as a ministry. He believes that there is a prevalent need for Christian entertainment: "This ministry is important because God has called each of us to stand in a gap. There is a major gap in the theater world. Shining Light Players takes our place sharing the gospel through theater and inspiring other Christians to take their posts rescuing souls from an eternity in hell." I finally understood what he meant after that little girl asked me about salvation. Our shows, written by Mr. Burke, share the gospel message or even re-enact stories from the Bible.

They give a practical meaning and show the audience how to take action. Every time I took the stage, I was being transformed into a witness. As Colossians 3:23

says, "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men." This verse gave each performance new worth. I wasn't acting for the audience's sake anymore, but for Christ's.

Christian theater is not only a ministry; it is also a fellowship. Having formerly acted in a community theater, I can testify to the stark contrast between community and Christian cast members. Blog writer and actor Zachary Lawson recognizes what secular theater is all about:

"Don't belittle theater to keep an aspiring actor from realizing what it is: pure competition . . . The theater is and will always be competition."² Although Lawson seems blunt, he genuinely portrays the mindset of most actors in a secular environment.

Actors should compare Lawson's shocking statement to what Rachael Northrop, the lead in a brand-new Christian musical, has to say: "Acting in a Christian theater company is like a family because we have the common bond of Christ, and we are able to support each other and be praying as a group with one another. We each want everyone else to succeed, and we strive to support each other rather than compete." The contrast between the mindset of most actors and those in Christian theater is easy to see. A Christian environment produces better teamwork and a more efficient, uplifting cast. I, for one, can honestly say that my castmates from *Surrender* have become my family. Even now, we still get together for breakfast or coffee, and they never stop encouraging me.

Perhaps the most worthwhile part of acting is that it has developed my confidence and speaking skills, allowing

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me to be a more effective witness. According to Mary Jo's Performing Arts Academy, "Talking and performing in front of audiences will teach a child so many important parts of public speaking,

including volume, enunciation and inflection."³ Daniel Higginbotham seconds this opinion, adding that "stepping onto a stage and performing in front of an audience requires a huge amount of confidence and self-esteem, as you're displaying your talent and inviting judgment."⁴ When an actor has experience speaking to an audience, it can bolster his confidence to share God's Word.

Aubrey Kickbush, who has been acting since she was seven, can attest to how public speaking has bolstered her confidence when witnessing. Due to her stutter, she has had to overcome many obstacles. "Acting has helped my stuttering in many ways," Aubrey says, "I have become more confident talking to others since I've had to perform in front of people so many times, and I'm less nervous the more I do it." For those who are shy or even struggle with speech impediments, acting can be a great way to break free.

Participating in a Christian production may not be easy, as I learned in the show *Surrender*, but every second of the rehearsals, long nights, and shed tears is worthwhile because God blesses the commitment. After the show ended, I had the choice to audition for another production or to go back to my normal college schedule. I decided to audition again, and though I still don't get much sleep and it's hard to keep up with everything, I feel fulfilled when I take part in the ministry of theater. After all, acting to bring glory to myself will only leave me feeling empty. Acting to bring glory to Christ fills me with purpose and helps me realize that He will use whatever skills I have, as long

as I surrender them to Him. That is what makes Christian theater so worthwhile.

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel Higginbotham, "7 Skills You Need to Succeed in Performing Arts," Prospects, last modified April 2022, <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/creative-arts-and-design/7-skills-you-need-to-succeed-in-performing-arts>.

² Zachary Lawson, "Theater Is Competition," OnStage Blog, last modified November 30, 2017, <https://www.onstageblog.com/columns/2017/11/30/theater-is-competition>.

³ Mary Jo, "The Benefits of Acting," Mary Jo's Performing Arts Academy, accessed October 2, 2022, <https://mjpaa.com/the-benefits-of-acting/>.

⁴ Higginbotham, "7 Skills."

Windows

BY SHAE JACKSON

Some slam the shutters, seal out light,
Afraid of being seen;

Still others peer out past the sill
But soon duck back beneath.

Some lean out, searching, grasping for
Rewards they cannot claim,

While scoffers stand behind the glass
They never brave to breach.

Few sit, no screen, no shade to shield
Their smiles from the world—

If eyes are windows to the soul,
Who will I see in yours?





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MOMENTUM

No one said life is easy. All too often, our daily challenges leave us drained. We stall. We coast. We shift to autopilot. Sometimes we stop moving altogether. Meanwhile, the future looms ahead, daunting and uncertain.

You can't take the future at a standstill. You'll need to refuel. You'll need to restart. You'll need to gather momentum.

This 35th edition of *Fountains* contains stories of people who broke out of their old stagnant rhythm and challenged their limits. We hope these stories will drive you on to greater accomplishments, helping as you finish the race that lies ahead.



"THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS A FOUNTAIN OF LIFE."

PROVERBS 14:27A