The Nemadji Review 2019
The Editorial Board

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Editor’s Note

Dear reader,

With immense pleasure, the editorial board presents you the 2019 edition of The Nemadji Review. We thank you for reading our journal.

We extend our warmest regard for all the contributors who helped create this work of art. Without their artist within, this annual journal would had been impossible to publish.

I am also appreciative of the Editorial Board for all their endeavors, of Dr. Jayson Iwen for his steady support, and of UW-Superior for facilitating a literary journal.

I present you the eighth volume of The Nemadji Review.

Yours sincerely,
Uzman Qaisar
Editor
# Table of Contents

Editorial Board 2
Editor’s Note 3

## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Investigator</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windmill, Windmill, Windmill</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Walls</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowy Owl</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoying</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for Daylight</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mysteries</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghosts of the Fitzgerald</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of Promise</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful AK-47’s</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Years</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoint</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life After Childhood</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stardust</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At The Dump</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emirate of Nightshade</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 16, 1969</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonnet 42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Prose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hyacinth</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casualties of Being a Pirate</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters in Conversation</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sparklers</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark In Here</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bette Davis Wannabe</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Era</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lehrer Teacher</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happily Dead After</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Terrible Winter’s Dream</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synyx</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Pictures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Cover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duluth Smoke</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountains</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhambra Palace</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split Rock Aurora</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roll 2</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Shore</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnicon</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Desecration</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers For Anne</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To The Crowd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vahdeta’s Inert Remnant</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirtless Summer</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home To</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armor</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poetry
The Investigator
Bailey Harris

It’s a stockholms syndrome case, says the Investigator.
I ask him what that means, even though I know.
He looks at me as if I’m confused.
I mean your relationship, says the Investigator.
I say I know, as if it’s simple.
He looks at me as if I’m dumb.
You don’t need to be his friend, says the Investigator.
I tell him that I’m aware of that.
He looks at me and pinches the bridge of his nose.
He controls you; manipulates you; makes you feel horrible about yourself, says the Investigator.
I nod and agree, even giving him some examples of when he does just that.
His jaw drops; the Investigator’s.
And why are you still his friend, asks the Investigator.
I shrug and say that I don’t know.
He gives me a sad look and flips through his notes.
It’s a stockholm syndrome case, says the Investigator.
Windmill, Windmill, Windmill
Lucas Dietsche

Windmill, windmill, windmill
Creaking outside the barn.
Is this your form of complaining?
For the most part you work everyday.
I apologize, i don’t know your wildward words.
But, you are the barometer of me.
When, where the wind, points against your steel wind soaked wheel
is when i go against.

You don’t keep the breeze with you, i should learn to let it all go.
You stand alone and proud like the last sunflower
Standing out of a grassed greeny crowd.
You are a clock, without hands to catch time or
numbers to measure how fast time winds the windmill clock.
White Walls
Sophia Johnson

The white walls hold me in.
No wonder I used to cover them in places I’ve been.
Then I wouldn’t feel trapped inside.

It feels like a prison, and it is now pristine.
I stare at the walls, wishing I could leave.
I know the date and time that I am free.

It’s grown eerily quiet—too long to be silent.
It echoed down the dark hallway, so much safer between the white walls.
For two years, I’ve been here.

My bed on the left, and I stare at the right.
These white walls were once brown, then blue.
The white steals the dreams of everyone who comes through.
Snowy Owl
Justin Thompson

A beautiful hunter of the north.

A wizard’s best and favorite mail-carrying companion.

A gentle ghost passing smoothly through the morning air.

An illusive beauty that only the keenest of eyes can see.

A lovely subject of nature that makes for a great poem.
Annoying
Bailey Harris

Unreturned smiles.
Doors that aren’t held open.
Doors that are purposefully slammed shut in faces.
When bits of paper wrapping stick to popsicles.
People hating each other for the color of their skin.
Lovers being afraid to love.
Untuned guitars.
Tuned guitars that are played obnoxiously.
Belittling people for not doing as well as yourself in something.
Belittling yourself for not doing as well as other people are.
Being stared at.
Eye contact.
Smiling at people you don’t like.
Being told that your happiness doesn’t matter,
Your feelings don’t matter.
Burning your tongue on hot drinks.
Families pretending to be happy.
They way that your shoulders hurt when you’ve been doing things all day.
Lists of things.
Waiting For Daylight
Jan Chronister

Daffodils glow in rain
knowing they will bloom
again next year. When I die
paper clips will hold things together,
ribbons tie up gifts while I exist as a name,
no longer planting bulbs
mailing packages or writing poems.

Out there is that dark place
I used to worry about as a child
lying at night in the room next to my parents,
wondering if the universe had walls
or went on forever, scared by
where we go when we die.
Mysteries
Bud Brand

As light encircles the Earth, my mind opens to the universe. Mysteries enshrouded in shadows appear with no apparent answers. “I think, therefore I am” becomes my very personal mantra, but will I ever reconcile life’s unknowns to earthly reality?

Only God knows the answers to all of these questions, but to some the biggest mystery is whether God exists.
The freighter to which I belong currently sails a gentle lake. Much gentler than the ill-fated crew of the Lake Queen Edmund Fitzgerald that fateful night in late ’75.

On the wind of this calm night, I can hear the lost crew whisper to me, telling me to “Beware the Three Sisters, the devourers of innocent mariners.”

One can only imagine that those three evil waves were the last thing the Fitzgerald saw before she was swallowed by the gullet of Lake Superior.

Yet no cry or plea for help came from her brave crew of mariners. No help came from another vessel either from Duluth, Superior, or Ontario.
The great Queen of Lakes and her crew perished together as one before the calm waters of the next day.

The voices on the wind tell me to spread the word to those accommodated with the safety of land to remember that night years ago.

To remember the twenty-nine brave men who endured gale, freezing spray, and rogue squalls to bring themselves and their cargo back to land.

Even with a brass bell to ring and a light to shine from Split Rock, nobody on land quite understands the hardships of lakes and seas.

Land dwellers will never know the hardship no matter how many ships are swallowed by the cruel fate of all lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario.

The next crewman comes out to relieve me, and before I enter the hull I look out to the horizon of stars and water.
I will keep my promise to the voices I hear- Reminding all my friends and family on land to never forget the crew of the Fitzgerald that stormy night and to respect all men of the lake for the sacrifice and dedication to provide for those who choose to stay on land.
Full of Promise
Melissa France

Verschwundenes Leben, verschwunden im Kugelhagel.
Ein junges Leben, in langen Nächten herbeigesehnt
Raffte sich auf zur Tat, der Name des Todes unerwähnt.
Dumpfe Schüsse erfüllten sein Ohr
Und die Vögel waren still als er sein Leben verlor.
Noch ein Blick, bevor der Sarg geschlossen wird mit dem letzten Nagel

Vanished life, vanished in gun hail.
Endless nights this young life yearned for,
Ready now to take action, the name of death abhorred.
Dull shots filled his ear
Ushering in the bird’s silence as his life disappeared.
Now just one last look before the coffin is closed with the final nail.
Peaceful AK-47’s
Sophia Johnson

You say we want to be free again.
You want the American Dream again.
You want to make America great again.
You fight fire with burning the plans.
Goddamn, what’s his name?

You see a war won in the desolate sun.
When people scream in fear, you won’t be able to hear.

I used to breathe, but my neighbor turned on me.
I used to breathe, but my friend turned on me.
I used to breathe, but my classmate turned on me.
I used to breathe, but it was an accident.

The gun was staring at me.
I am supposed to feel free.
You want the American Dream with your peaceful AK-47’s.

What are you going to do, shoot me?
100 Years
Melissa France

Squandered youth and innocence lost
On fields of mass graves boys no longer play war.
Mothers anxiously wait and knit
Mittens and socks no longer needed scattered throughout the
End of all wars.
some say
my views
of society
seem to be
a little
acidic -
i do not aim
to be a judge,
but i surely
can be
a critic.
Life After Childhood
Lucas Dietsche

life after childhood means driving through breeze, 
weeds’ head-hair edge of the Nemadji drooling river. 
Rivers south do not handle my dreams,because all end up 
meekly 
upping into Lake Superior’s stomach. 
i do not know my skin anymore, since summer has a fever, it’s sardine oily and tart. 
the headquarters of summer sun-broiling hot of melanoma is 
walking on old ocean floor and humid air, sickly threat of sweat of rain. 
here comes life after childhood with eyes deep in Amnicon! 
it takes a waterfall to drown these detoured thoughts 
with rushing constant of busy freeway. 
i go driving round curves, 
Tampere valley with precious ranks of Wanio pine children. 
even quiet does not have sound here, only nature knows. 
shawn colvin riding shotgun near c.d. player with 
stems of powerlines crucifixes past. 
pipe in my mouth huffing-puffing, past choo-choo train 
driven by a wolf while clouds scratching sky. 
i hear those minutes, their stomachs gurling with 60 stomach aches. 
how many will give heartburn? 
these minutes are fodder for hours. 
this is what we have after childhood. 
a head made of marble, skin sticks to velvet shoulders, on some trip into 
the Amnicon, looking at 
lapping blue tongue of river.
Stardust
Bailey Harris

There’s a galaxy inside of him,
Teeming with stars that spill over the edge of infinity.
There’s iron in his blood.
Nitrogen.
Oxygen.
Carbon.
Sulfur.
Phosphorus.
There’s a galaxy inside of him,
Filled to the brink with cliched amounts of opportunity.
There are thoughts in his head.
Doubts.
Fears.
Confidence.
Hope.
Wonder.
There’s a galaxy inside of him,
Spilling out onto the bedspread through a tear in the universe.
Out leak the stars.
The nitrogen.
The fears.
The sulfur.
The phosphorus.
The wonder.
The life.
At The Dump
Jan Chronister

We pull into the cul de sac
surrounded by trash
park by the flag.
Wally checks our garbage
for treasure before we
toss it in the pit.

Useful items line up
at the edge:
mason jars
mattresses
buckets
coats.

Wally chooses
a choice couch,
carpet to furnish
his caretaker’s shack.

We watch the fire,
wait for explosions of aerosol cans,
throw a few promising pieces
in the car and head back home.
Christopher
Bud Brand

he is only four
yet he has lived a lifetime.
he does not speak,
and his interests are few.
he was late learning
to walk,
and now
he likes to walk on his tiptoes.

he likes routine,
and has one all
his own.
his diet is
limited,
but not his hugs.
his personality shines bright
as if through a prism,
though he has a condition
known as autism.

he is my grandson
he is Christopher.
Emirate of Nightshade
Lucas Dietsche

long after the Hours,
the world takes its last breath around 10pm in summer stage’s life of year,
is when i hold court,
after i took over to keep the night up with my both barehands,
while you take allowed sleeping solace.
i am barefoot upon recently kinda cleaned carpet,
with the dusted thrones,
bleached porcelains,
i only in drab gray uniform.
i notice the lights turn on.
these street lights with spry spy eyes,
stoplights is one deady cyclops glare.

i am a watchmen inside these windows.
i declare my own fiefdom,
3 floors above your hair.
for i am an owl
from this precipice parapet.
from here, looking at a map outside, we will command the world.
i welcome the broad warring weather coming in.
puffs of smokey clouds emerge in sneakiness.
during winter’s habitat, i see the windows full of snow.
in my one-human arsenal state,
after my work in a nightshade emirate.
August 16, 1969
Jan Chronister

raining, raining
everything wet
short circuits and static
performers almost
electrocuted on stage
scaffold of amps
rocks in the wind
bands play on
blinded by lights
can’t see
half a million muddy faces
shining up at them.
Sonnet 42  
Uzma Qaisar

Were’t for thou to be content, with the bequeats  
The men of thy honor dost conferred on thee  
But that which they endowed, doth from thee eats  
On entertain’t bequests, grow on further’s applea

Thou dost thanked thine engorgers, instead  
Whilst thine possessions doth suffered the blow  
But when did thou need them, what they feed  
When thou doth created for self, indebt their endow

But if thou altered this scheme, and thou bestowed  
An heir with the obligation of outward honoring  
Better wil’t prove to merry friends, than exile foedz  
And whilst thou mixt to dust, him a new beginning

But ev’n if thou exile choose for some privy good  
Thou remain in art, thine dubiety still not subdued.
Prose
“But you see,” I said, my words starting to slur together as I flipped my next batch of nuggets, “If I come to work drunk enough, maybe they will fire me”

Rodney grunted in response. His back hunched over the thousands of fried eggs we had on the grill. He looked like the hunched back dude from that tower movie. He’s a moron.

“Yeah you’re right,” I mumble, “probably not a good idea.”

I had spent the entire previous night drinking Philips vodka, the nectar of the lower-class gods, and playing league. You wanna hear about league? I’ll tell you about league. I’m one of the top 10% of players in the world. I’m good, really good. Better when drunk, I win more. Or maybe I lose more and don’t know it. I wish I had brought more alcohol to work.

Rodney drops an egg on the floor and starts to do his angry dance. That’s what I call it, the angry dance. He starts by shuffling his feet back and forth, trying to spread around the egg on the tile floor. Once he is finished he will realize its on his shoes. Rodney doesn’t like that. I wanna call him Hot Rod. People at work think its funny, he probably wouldn’t.

Hot Rod has now realized that the egg is stuck to his shoes. Screaming time. Rodney stomps his shoes to get the egg off, realizes he can’t, and starts to jump up and down, screaming incoherent words at the eggs. With a loud shriek he rips off his apron and storms out of the store, slamming the
door behind him.

“You good back there, Ben?” My manager, Allen, calls from the front of the story.

“Just dandy.” I shout back with a little too much enthusiasm, giving a shaken half thumbs up. My head lolls to the side, I quickly straighten it. Being this drunk is a bad idea. Going to work this drunk was a great idea. People love drunk me.

I talked to Amanda. She’s cute, I like Amanda. Girls are scary and weird, but I like Amanda, she’s pretty. I didn’t say that out loud did I? Nope, all good. Just drunk Ben’s head thoughts. Amanda gets called in since Hot Rod left. Once he leaves he doesn’t come back, he hates this job just as much as I do, but I have more control over myself.

I drop an egg on the floor and just look at it. Oh well, things fall on the floor all the time. Que Amanda’s entrance while I’m sadly staring at the egg on the floor.

“Hey Ben,” says Amanda.

“Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy,” I drone, the left half of my face feels like it’s falling off the longer the greeting lasts. Amanda giggles. I like her giggle.

“Ben are you drunk?” Amanda asks.

I look her dead in the eyes, I’m going to tell her I like her. NO! Don’t do that, bad idea, not good. Run and hide. Maybe drink more. What was her question? Time to wing it, wing man Ben here we go!

“I’m great, how’s your day going?” I say. She giggles, wrong response I guess.

We work for a few hours, making food on the grills and serving it to people who very obviously know the menu more than either of us do. Sit down Porky, you’ll have to wait to eat your half of the menu today, Mrs. Porky beat you here. I’m mean when I’m drunk, or sober, I’m not sure. Fuck off.

Amanda is leaving for college soon, she’s going to River Falls. I like Amanda, River Falls is far away, I can’t walk that far. I’m really good at walking. I walk everywhere since I don’t drive. I can drive a lane in league. That’s not important. Stupid drunk league thought. Amanda is out of my
league, is she breathes she’s out of my league. I can’t do this, I need to go home.

“Wanna come over tomorrow?” I ask drunkenly. Why would I ask that! I’m not comfortable with this. She’s cute and I’m not funny and hold up, yes? Really? She said yes? She actually wants to come over. Fuck yeah! Go drunk Ben. I high-five myself when Amanda’s not looking.

Amanda came over, we partied. I may or may not have been more drunk that night than when I asked her to come over. Drinking really helps, stop trying to tell me it doesn’t. Aaron came over right as we finished making pizza. Don’t get any ideas Aaron.

Aaron talks way too much, he’s trying to sell me to Amanda, bruh she’s already here, stop trying to get her to fall all over me. Still talking. Stupid Aaron.

Amanda keeps laughing at Aaron, I knew this was a bad idea. She turns over her shoulder and smiles at me. I feel all warm and fuzzy, I smile back. She laughs even louder, Aaron is smiling too. I think I’m drunker than I thought, I slam another shot.

Pizza is done, and Aaron eats half of it, good friend Aaron. He likes my cooking. Drunk Ben can cook, a lot.

Amanda and I are dancing, more friends are here. I’m nervous. What if they don’t like Amanda? What is Amanda doesn’t like them? What is I walked to Kwik Trip for some garlic and made pasta? I like pasta.

Aaron, Grady, Michael, Ally, Snowball. Good all friends are here. I like friends. Vodka likes me. Another shot!

I sat with Amanda most of the night while friends played pong. I’m lanky and not good at pong, but I’m good at sitting with Amanda. She smells different, perfume? Drunk me needs a nap. Another shot!

Amanda says good bye and leaves, she’s packing for school tomorrow and leaving in a few days. I’m sad, drunk me really liked sober Amanda. She’s fun. I wanna drink with her and have her like me back.

I’m in my room and I send the message. Oh god, I’m not drunk enough for this. Two shots this time! Party Ben is here! I sleep.

All my friends know I told her. We are all waiting for the response. I don’t like being sober. I need another drink.
Mrs. Gibbs wagged her jaw side to side to shake it loose. She’d been sleeping with it clenched again. She brought her teeth together tentatively, wincing as she felt them wiggle a bit in their sockets. She stared at the smooth, white plaster of the ceiling and wondered if she could get away with missing work. The smell of children gagged her.

She sighed as she threw back the jacquard duvet. She sighed again as her feet landed on the cold oak hardwood. She sighed once more as she pinned the ironic smiling apple brooch to her denim dress. She knew the district needed her, just like she knew that no one in their right mind wanted to teach sixth grade children. They lie, they sneak, and worst of all, they stink. She knew that the apple cinnamon potpourri placed strategically about the classroom did nothing to mask the fleshy odor that would assault her nostrils the moment she crossed the doorway.

Mrs. Gibbs stared into the mirror of the hall tree in her foyer, wondering if it would be possible to break an arm or a leg on the way to her Buick Century. She shook her head at the reflection as she remembered her five-thousand-dollar deductible. Resisting the urge to scrape her fingernails down the face in the mirror, she grabbed her purse and headed to the car. She plopped down on the burgundy seat, cringing at the feel of her pantyhose catching on its velour material. She quickly slid her feet forward, her kitten heels scratching across the carpet floor mat. Every sense
was magnified this morning, which inexplicably made her teeth hurt. She sighed a final time before putting the car in reverse to back out of her driveway.

Sarah always worried. In fact, it was something at which she considered herself very skilled. She would imagine the deaths of her parents while lying in bed at night, tears streaming down her cheeks to pool behind her neck as she stared at the popcorn ceiling of their dirty, small apartment. She would tirelessly search for designs hidden within the dusty, asbestos-filled protrusions to shift her focus from the obsessive thoughts of her parents skidding off highways into the black of night. When she couldn’t find dragons or flowers to trace with her eyes, she would sing all fifty states in alphabetical order, over and over. Other times, it would be the alphabet forward and backward, and forward again. Anything to turn the volume in her mind down to a quiet hum.

She knew it was ironic to be afraid of losing her dad, as she realized that she was as equally scared of him as she was to lose him. Sometimes he yelled. Sometimes he hit. Sometimes he ignored. The pattern was never predictable. Sarah had been wearing pants all week to hide the red, hand-shaped welt just above her knee. This one came from eating a cookie that was meant for her dad’s lunch. It was often confusing to decipher what exactly was permissible at what time. When her parents wanted to stay out all weekend after her father got paid, her mother would tell her she could eat whatever she wanted; and Sarah always rose to the challenge. Food, it seemed, was often the only companion that stayed around. It didn’t even hit her. After her parents left, she’d stay in the kitchen for hours. Sometimes she’d plunk a teaspoon into the powdered sugar just to watch it respond with a sugary puff into her face. She’d eat several spoonfuls of the dry powder, relishing the chalky coating it formed across the roof of her mouth. She’d also use that time alone to squirrel away food in her bedroom, so that she’d have something tucked back for the times her dad wasn’t feeling quite so charitable. These times usually came about very soon after a loss of an entire paycheck at an Oklahoma casino.
Today, though, she was worried about school. Most years, she worried that she didn’t have school supplies or clothing. Most years, her teachers looked at her with what she knew to be pity. They were often embarrassingly kind to her, pulling her aside for private conversations about her thoughts, her dreams and then, by no coincidence, her home. They became overly encouraging, making her realize that they didn’t appreciate any certain ability of hers. Though she knew these things, she had clung to these teachers as though they were her own mother. She spent recesses following them around, talking about things she’d read or heard on television to try and impress them. Sarah had never felt invisible to them the way she did to her parents.

This year, though, was different. She wasn’t invisible to her teacher. In fact, she was overly conspicuous. Every flaw, every speck of dirt, and every sign of neglect stood out as though neon when she was in the presence of Mrs. Gibbs. It was evident in the way her teacher’s face scrunched up with disgust every time she looked at her.

Mrs. Gibbs scrawled across the tops of homework pages with thoughts of going home, rather than prepositional phrases, in her mind. The overly large, irregular letters that crawled above and below the lines meant to contain them was bringing about yet another round of nausea. She clenched her jaw, sliding her eyes across the pages without focusing. Children, much like their handwriting, were terrible at being contained. They demanded attention, even in memories. Mrs. Gibbs took a steadying breath to ward off a shiver. Unlike normal shivers that originate from the base of a spinal column, Mrs. Gibbs’, strangely, ran in reverse. Hers seemed to creep down her body from the top of her head, like cold fingers trailing over her flesh to leave it riddled with goosebumps. As the fine hairs on her neck threatened to stand on end, Mrs. Gibbs was reminded of the egg game she used to play with her daughter while she cooked dinner. She remembered how she’d rap a fist lightly upon her daughter’s head, exclaiming she’d just broken an egg on her. Mrs. Gibbs would then run her fingers down the length of the girl’s shiny, chestnut hair, asking her if she could feel the slimy innards of the egg coating it. The girl would laugh,
reaching up to grasp her mother’s hands with her own small pair. Mrs. Gibbs shook the memory away as quickly as it came, and squinted at the paper on her desk.

As the rhythmic grinding whir continued several turns beyond the standard amount necessary for sharpening, Ticonderoga No 2 perfume wafted from the metal shavings receptacle of the crank sharpener inconveniently bolted next to Mrs. Gibb’s ridiculously large desk. As the whirring ceased, the rubber squeak of dirty high-top Reeboks on yellowing asbestos tiles replaced it, cutting through the stagnancy of the small, square room like the bizarre squawk of a rubber chicken in a hospital sickroom. After a scrape of chair legs, Sarah’s classroom was swallowed by quiet once more.

There was no sun in the sky, only heavy swirls of dreary grey threatening to drop sleet upon the fading Kentucky bluegrass spread sparsely across the kickball field. Color and life had receded from the rectangular window, piling on to the weight of the classroom’s gloomy pall. Even cars seemed to be taking alternate routes to town, avoiding the exterior walls of slate cladding that surrounded the room of her confinement.

Sarah wondered if the black metal desks, with their faux walnut Formica tops, have shrunk since last Friday, as it has become difficult to squeeze her rounded thighs beneath them. Sarah always felt too big, especially around the other sixth grade girls. When she ran next to them on the playground, she imagined she was a Stephen King character named Lardass, and expected chants of “boom-baba-boom-baba” with every lumbering step that seemed to shake the earth beneath her feet. Today, however, she felt much larger than usual. The cold ridge of the desk’s opening cut across the top of her legs, but the thought of scooting the chair back a few inches to get relief was terrifying. She imagined the deep red indention that would soon reside next to the hand shaped welt.

She chanced a glimpse at the round white face of the clock hanging on the pale cinder block wall above the green chalkboard covered in dusty circular smears of half-hearted erasing. Half of the black numbers were obscured by the red and white stripes of the stiff papery flag that taunted her every afternoon. It left her continual question of “how much longer?”
unanswered, though the slow tick-tick of the second hand gave her mild reassurance that time is indeed passing.

She dropped her chin quickly as Mrs. Gibbs slid a paper across her desk. Heart pounding, she peeked through her clumsily-cut bangs to see if there was a steely, squinty-eyed glare directed at her. The eyes, however, were glaring at what must be a grievous offense that had occurred on the piece of homework on her desk. God save the person whose name was scrawled across the top of that wide-ruled paper.

The desk continued to shrink, cutting into the flesh between her ribs, limiting her already shallow breaths. Her belly seemed to have grown since lunch, straining against the waistband of her pants until it turned over onto itself, transforming into a tourniquet around her abdomen. Pins and needles were poking the soles of her feet, but it was easy to overcome the temptation to tap them on the tile floor when Mrs. Gibbs was so near.

Sarah looked straight ahead, avoiding glancing to either side, fearful of accusations of cheating. She focused instead on a poster next to the rectangular window. It was picture of a golf green titled, “SUCCESS,” and she couldn’t imagine her teacher ever donning brightly colored pants to play golf beneath a shining sun. She imagined Mrs. Gibbs shopping at the teacher store full of gold star stickers and scalloped bulletin board edging. She wondered what prompted Mrs. Gibbs to pick up this particular golf poster. Was there a hidden message within it? There had to be a reason this specific poster was tacked to this specific spot with the grey dots of sticky putty. Perhaps if she could figure it out, Mrs. Gibbs wouldn’t be so repulsed by her.

Inspired to look for further clues into Mrs. Gibbs mind, she scanned the bookshelf that lined the lower half of the wall beneath the golf poster. She squinted to make out the titles, but to no avail. Her eyesight was terrible, and though she itched to push her tortoise-shell glasses up her nose to see if it would help, the fear of drawing Mrs. Gibbs’ attention overcame the desire to see. She made a mental note to check the titles later, and let out a low, slow breath to see if it would help her belly deflate.

It didn’t. Her gut had grown larger, and ached in a way that was foreign. It was though there was a deep, dull throb in the very bottom of
her belly. It made her want to wrap her arms around herself, but she didn’t dare move. As her bloat worsened, the ache deepened. She wished she could go home, but she knew that she’d just get into trouble once she got there.

The sky outside of the rectangular window had grown heavier, and though it hadn’t seemed possible, the world became even greyer shade of grey. The color seemed to have leached from every post and blade of grass since the last she’d looked out the window. Sarah turned her gaze toward the sliding oak doors that lined the back of the room, grateful for a bit of color; no matter how dull of a brown it is. Her eyes adjusted from the pallor outside to the indoor fluorescent lighting that rendered everything it touched a sickly greenish hue. She turned her head to face forward, realizing there was no softness in this room. It was full of 90-degree corners and sharp edges.

The discovery somehow made the ache in her belly escalate into a pulsating cramp. She wondered if she needed to go to the bathroom, but the cramp was unaccompanied by any particular urge. The desire to change position began to supersede the abject humiliation of approaching Mrs. Gibbs for such a base need. She shifted her weight against the back of the blue plastic shell seat to scoot the chair from underneath the desk. She moved slowly to prevent the lewd screeching of the metal chair legs on the tile floor. When there was enough space for her to stand from her chair, she took a slow, shallow breath. A cramp shot through her lower belly toward her thighs, as though cueing her to stand. With her eyes on Mrs. Gibbs, Sarah rose from her seat. Her knees were stiff and slow to straighten from remaining rigid for so long. As she moved behind her chair to push it in beneath her desk, she noticed a small smear the color of rust on its seat. The stain was less opaque than poster paint, and when she ran the tip of her finger over it, she discovered that it had settled down within the grainy texture of the seat. She wasn’t certain what it is, but something about the red contrasting against the blue plastic seemed obscene. It made her feel dirty. The discovery of a cockroach on her shoulder before leaving home for school that day inexplicably flit into her mind. Sarah always felt dirty compared to the other children in her class, but this was a different kind
that had nothing to do with the smell of her parents’ tobacco smoke that clung to her skin. This kind made her feel contaminated and untouchable as though she were diseased.

After a steadying breath, Sarah made the trepidatious walk to Mrs. Gibbs desk. She stared at her teacher’s profile, forgetting for a moment why she was there. Sarah wondered how Mrs. Gibbs arranged her hair into perfect blond circles to form a poufy crown upon her head. She watched her teacher make precise curls and swirls in red ink across the top of a classmate’s homework page. She admired how each of her teacher’s coral fingernails was perfectly rounded. Sarah clenched her small hands into fists to hide the fingernails with black lines of dirt embedded in raw, chewed skin. The tick, tick of Mrs. Gibbs small gold watch filled the space between them, and Sarah wondered if expensive watches were made to be loud on purpose.

“Is it customary for you to breathe over someone while they work, or did you need something?”

Sarah eyes snapped up from the ticking watch. Why was she here? The moment the question came to mind, pain shot across her lower belly. She was reminded of a spoonful of ice cream settling on her rotten molar. The palms of her hands and her inner thighs felt sticky, as though the room had increased in humidity.

“I need to use the bathroom, please,” Sarah whispered.

“Bathroom breaks are scheduled, Miss Flynn. You do not decide when to leave this room.”

As Sarah turned away from her teacher, fiery tentacles slithered up her chest to encircle her neck, threatening to choke her. The stickiness intensified as her face grew itchy with heat. She kept her eyes trained carefully toward the floor as she walked back to her stained plastic seat. She ran her tongue across the roof of her mouth, imagining the comfort of a sweet, chalky film.

God, how she hated being around that kid. As Mrs. Gibbs stared into the girl’s round face, she tried to ignore the waist-length mousy hair.
It may be stringy, but it was still too close. The girl reeked of tobacco, neglect, and worst of all: child. It made Mrs. Gibb’s stomach squirm. She looked back down at her desk. She couldn’t stand the way the girl begged with her beady little eyes.

“Love me. Pay attention to me. I promise I’ll be good,” they always say. It made her sick.

The girl’s swinging hair captured Mrs. Gibbs’ eye as she turned away from the desk. Resisting the impulse to shove her away, Mrs. Gibbs held her breath. If she smelled it, she would remember. She would remember burying her face into the daughter’s satiny hair after the egg game, inhaling the milk and honey scent of pure, unadulterated child. The girl’s chestnut hair moved like a pendulum in rhythm with her steps. Mrs. Gibbs’ eyes traveled down the length of it, discerning the same gold and amber tones she’d seen so long ago. She couldn’t help but wonder if, beneath the tobacco and neglect, the girl’s hair had the same honeyed scent. Mrs. Gibbs’ eyes journeyed past the end of the girl’s hair, and met the rust-colored stain on the back of her dingy white pants.

Though she tried to push it away, it made her remember the hyacinth. The columns of curled red petals were vivid now. When the florist had asked her in hushed tones what she would like, she had thought of the hyacinth springing up from the blood of Apollo’s lover. She had found comfort in the idea of reformation. She remembered how she placed the stem of the red flower in the pair of small, pale hands before leaning over to bury her nose in the shiny, chestnut hair a final time. Mrs. Gibbs looked back down at the paper on her desk and sighed. She couldn’t help but wonder if hyacinths would spring from her daughter’s blood that lies beneath the ground.
Casualties of
Being a Pirate
Giorgi Keppers

Outpost 147 was a port in the business of building ships. Floating in between several planets engaged in another space race, it was always busy with making new and faster ships for the corresponding planet. The large port was bustling with people in preparation for the new ship, Titan’s Queen, to leave on its maiden voyage. Excitement was in the air but so was worry. It was well known across the galaxy that this ship was one of the fastest to sail the skies, and it was rumored that the notorious Pirate Cox and her crew had just lost her ship. Guards of the planet Pasithee, under orders of King Antoni, the owner of the ship, were posted everywhere along the ship and port. Every precaution was taken—backgrounds of the crew and guards before they were hired, no outsiders allowed within 50 feet of the ship, and of course, the best security system money could buy.

Briony sighed as she stared out the window of the bar where she was keeping watch over the proceedings, fingers tapping over several maps of a ship.

“This is boring. Why can’t we just take the ship now and get out of here?” she whined quietly through her transmitter she kept in her earring. The barman gave her a funny look at her whispering, but she just smiled prettily.
The barman smiled back and started towards her, but was stopped when a patron called out for a refill.

“You know why, Bri. We need to get supplies and a few extra hands. We’ll be off soon, don’t worry,” a soft voice crackled through the static.

Briony grumbled to herself, playing with the empty glass in her hand.

“Yeah, yeah. I hate being lookout though,” she complained. “Why is it always me?”

This time the voice was a little sharper. “You know the answer to that as well. Now stop distracting me, I’m in the middle of negotiations.”

Chastised, Briony propped her head on her hand and watched the guards closely. An officer stepped out from behind the line of them, coming from the ship. Briony narrowed her eyes. The ship’s crew was supposed to stay on board until right before takeoff for the breaking the bottle ceremony. Some traditions from Earth never changed. But this officer. . . he looked familiar. As he got closer, Briony could see the traditional captain’s uniform of Pasithee and the peculiar way he walked, with his toes pointed inwards. She groaned. She couldn’t possibly have this bad of luck. The man was walking directly towards the bar where she was staking out.

“Shit. Dagger, come in. I have a situation here. One of my exes is coming this way and he’s the captain of the ship we’re gonna steal!” she hissed, hearing only the crackle of static in response. “Fuck.” Briony thunked her head on the table. “Hit me with another double shot, barman.”

“Ex?” the raspy voice of the barman asked, pouring the silver liquid.

Briony turned her head to watch the filling of her glass. “Unfortunately.” The barman made a commiserating noise as he stepped away to fill another patron’s glass. Briony sighed as she raised her head and took the shot. She shook her head as if to clear it of the alcohol she just imbibed, she turned half around on her stool. She shook her head again, this time to get her dark brown hair to fall enticingly over her shoulders and she leaned back on one of her elbows. A few minutes passed and he walked in, slamming the door open. He paused, surveying the smoky interior of the bar and his eyes lit upon Briony.

“Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in,” he purred, sauntering towards Briony and leaning against the bar top next to her.

Briony rolled her eyes and took a deep breath before turning fully
around and pasting a sultry smile on her face. “Hey there, Eddy.”

“Edward,” he corrected. “What brings you to Outpost 147?”

Briony tossed her hair over her shoulder and shuffled the maps more behind her. “Oh, I see. You’re all professional now. Not like when I knew you,” she winked.

Edward turned a blotchy type of red briefly, but recovered quickly. “No, not like then.” He coughed and leaned forward on the bar, waving a hand to signal the barman.

“I’ll take a pint of ale and another of what she’s having,” he nodded to Briony’s empty glass. The barman did as asked silently, placing the ale down with nary a sound and filling the glass without a splash. “Bartender, have you seen Corporal Jones?” The barman shook his head and Edward slid a few gold coins across the bar top for payment. “Thanks anyway.” Briony narrowed her eyes at Eddy and this presumably missing Corporeal Jones. He could throw a wrench in their plans.

Once the barman left to deal with other patrons, Edward turned back towards Briony. “Still slumming around Kallichore, dreaming of sailing?” His eyebrows were raised as he took a sip of his beer, looking down at her.

Briony, refocusing on Eddy, clenched her fist underneath the table and smiled saccharine-sweet as she grabbed her glass with her other hand. “Actually, no. I’ve moved on and up in the world. I work on Aoede as a cyber security consultant for SafeSpace.”

“I see. They didn’t have issue with your past then?” Eyebrows still raised, he smirked sardonically, taking another swig of ale.

Briony smiled smugly. “If you recall, I was never caught.” She gestured towards the Titan’s Queen. “SafeSpace did the security measures on the new Pasithee ship. I’m here to make sure that nothing goes wrong with the security system before it leaves port.” She took a sip of her drink, staring directly in his eyes, which had widened at first, but then settled back down to an unimpressed expression.

“Well, I’ll make sure nothing goes wrong on our end, just for you.” He added in a wink at the end before checking his pocket watch for the time. “Looks like I’ve got to get back to Titan’s Queen without Jones. I’ll look you up if I’m ever on Aoede.” He smirked and downed the rest of his ale, setting the
pint down and strutted out. Briony rolled her eyes at his theatrics.

“You can’t look me up on the ship if you don’t have the ship,” she muttered, taking the shot and swinging herself into a standing position. She shrugged on her brown overcoat, settled her dark top hat with goggles on her head, and tucked the maps down her off-the-shoulder shirt. Sliding a few coins to the barman, she walked out into the dusty sunshine, adjusting the goggles over her eyes to filter out the starshine and dust particles. “Iliana, how soon can we move?”

“Not quite yet, we still need to get a few things,” the same voice as before came through the air.

Briony grumbled to herself, “Now you answer. Where were you when I needed you?” Dodging the street vendors selling “top-of-the-line laser guns,” “new mechanical goggles,” and “corsets—these with pockets!” Briony almost was swayed at the last one. She longingly looked at the new corsets as she patted her own slightly worn-out one. Tearing herself away, she strode towards the shady docks and out of the main thoroughfare. Ducking into an empty wooden stall that was missing half of its swinging door, Briony shuddered at the desolateness of these docks. As Outpost 147 grew bigger and more industrial, the old docks were left bereft, which made a perfect place for a crew of pirates to hide in wait.

Briony tapped her homemade clock wristlet, turning the gears so a hologram map of the outpost popped up with the locations of her crew. “What things do you have left?”

“Mostly just last minute provisions, in case the ship doesn’t have it.”

Briony tapped a booted foot. “The captain of Titan’s Queen is Eddy,” she whispered.

“Shit,” the voice exhaled. “We can move now. We can live without a few luxuries.” The voice can be heard in the background yelling at the crew to get a move on. “Meeting place, five minutes” was the last thing Briony heard before the connection cut out. She grinned. Perfect. It was time to steal a ship.

Briony clicked the gears back to collapse the holographic image and bent down to grab her six-shooter out from its hidden place in her boot. She checked the scope, staring down the barrel and clicked the safety on and off. Smiling, she tucked it in a hidden holster on her corset and strode out to the
The old commercial horse barn where the rest of the crew would gather. Even though the barn was only maybe fifty yards away, Briony couldn’t help but feel exposed in the open space of the old docks. Tugging her fitted jacket closer to herself and ducking her head, she hurried the last few feet to the barn.

The old commercial barn itself was nondescript looking, neither the worst for wear in this part of town, nor the best. The red color was faded so that it more resembled dried blood than the deep red it was originally and the wide doors swung deceptively easily open when Briony placed her hand on them. She closed them swiftly, barely letting the light from the stars above in as she entered. Turning around to face the interior of the barn, she grinned.

“Right under their noses,” she sang happily under her breath. Compared to the desolate look of the abandoned district, the inside of the barn was almost as busy as the main thoroughfare in town, as well as comparable in size. Many different glamours were set up to protect this underground world. Vendors were set up in various places selling assorted knock-offs of the products sold in town, as well as rare and hard-to-find items.

People bustled to and fro, bumping into each other as they tried to navigate the narrow passageways, but somehow, Briony was untouched by their movement. She walked confidently towards the back of the barn to where the crew’s camp was set up. The camp was small since the crew was small, and Briony entered the biggest tent, pushing aside the flaps to reveal a much larger space than one would have thought. The tent was decorated in deep red and beautiful brown tapestries with gold accents. Instead of being dominated by a bed, a large table took the centerpiece. Made of synthetic mahogany and inlaid with mother of pearl, was the most ornate thing in the room. Briony headed straight toward it, flinging her jacket on the bed that lay near the table in a corner. Briony stood in front of the table, which was covered in various maps of Outpost 147 and of the Titan’s Queen. Taking off her watch, Briony laid it on the table, bringing up the hologram map of the crew to intersect with a map of the outpost. Nodding at their progress, she pulled a canvas and leather bag out of a drawer and set it on the bed.

“What to pack, what to pack,” she muttered to herself as she flung open an armoire that was more akin to a gun locker than anything to do with holding clothes. As she was taking weapons by the armful, Briony called out, “I
thought you’d never make it back in time, oh captain my captain. What was the hold up?”

A swish of tarp was the only cue she received before being tackled from behind. Instead of defending herself, Briony sighed and relaxed in the grip of her attacker. “I thought we were done with all this protective nonsense.”

A nose pressed into her neck. “Never. You always seem to get into trouble, no matter how safe the mission is.”

“Hey,” Briony protested, turning in the arms holding her hostage. “I’m not to blame for this one, how was I supposed to know that Eddy made captain of the ship we’re going to steal?”

The woman holding her rolled her eyes. “Bri, you seem to be a holder of all knowledge, but when it comes to your own safety, you don’t even think twice.”

Briony pouted. “Iliana, I’m not some damsel in distress, you know.”
Iliana smiled and kissed Briony softly. “I know.”

Briony smiled, kissed her back, then stepped out of the embrace.

“What’s the plan now, Captain Cox?”

Iliana smirked and stuck a hand in between her diagonal hip holster and her skin tight beige leggings. “Kissings over, come on in,” Iliana said, voice slightly raised.

Not even a moment later the crew poured into the tent, talking excitedly about the heist that was about to happen. There’d been talk and planning for months and now it was finally time.

“All right, this is what’s gonna happen,” Iliana started, as she took Bri-ony’s hand.

Briony hurried through the crowd, alarms blazing from the Titan’s Queen. “Excuse me, SafeSpace consultant coming through! Move, people!” Bodies pressed against her from all directions, preventing her from making much headway. She sighed, aggravated. Hands on hips, she scanned for an easier way to get to the ship. People, people, and more people. Finally, her eyes lit upon the rigging strung up like a highway system between buildings and
shops, leading all the way to the ship. It must be for transporting goods to the
ship that would be hard to get across via the streets, she thought, grinning to
herself. Briony cracked her knuckles in anticipation. Shoving her way sideways
wasn’t much better than going forwards, but at least she was closer to her des-
tination.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” a voice yelled as she climbed up the side of
what was probably his building. “You can’t do that!”

Briony smirked down at him, reaching for the rigging above his build-
ing. “Watch me.” She grabbed handfuls of the rope and tested the strength. It
would hold, she determined. Steadying her feet, Briony started to sway, build-
ing up momentum.

The voice that yelled at her earlier finally realized what she was plan-
ning on doing and began climbing after her. “Girlie, you better get down or I’m
gonna make you,” he warned.

Briony snorted. “I ain’t no girlie.” With that, she pushed off one last
time and swung out over the crowd. Reaching for the rope ahead of her, she got
lost in the motions of swinging from rope to rope.

She was halfway across before the crowd caught on to what was hap-
pening above them. “Hey!” “Would you look at that!?” “Get her down!” the
crowd shouted. Briony was oblivious to the stir she was creating below, focused
only on staying aloft and making it across to the ship. Three quarters the way
there, Briony noticed a change in the tension of the rope. There seemed to be
an added weight behind her, tightening the rope. Chancing a look back, Briony
saw that she was being followed by a young man who was being cheered on by
the crowd. Rolling her eyes, she faced back forward and picked up the pace. She
was almost there and no upstart could catch up to her now.

The young man must have realized this at the same time Briony did
and changed tactics. Pulling himself to a building, he stopped swinging after
her. Briony sighed in relief, only to be jarred when he started to shake the
ropes, disrupting their resting state and causing Briony to lose her focus- and
momentum.

The crowd cheered and the man called after her, over the crowd. “Can’t
do much now, without your momentum, can ya?” he taunted. Briony turned
in midair, smiled sweetly. “Oh honey. Don’t presume to tell a woman what she
can’t do because she’ll do it to spite you,” she said with venom and flipped him off.

Taking a deep breath, she swung herself back and forth, building momentum. Arms straining, she reached for the next rope and the rope after that until her rhythm was back. This time, the crowd was cheering for her instead of booing. Fickle beasts, crowds, Briony thought as she swung for the last rope.

Pulling herself up, she stuck the landing on the Titan’s Queen and bowed to the crowd. Turning from them, she whistled sharply at the ship’s crew that was also panicking, but in a more sedate manner. At her whistle, everyone on the deck stopped and looked at her.

“Who can bring me to Captain Eddy?” Briony stood tall and smiled winningly. A long pause followed and her smile drooped. “Please?”

One of the crew stepped forward. “What business do you have with our captain?”

“I’m a security consultant from SafeSpace,” she answered. “I can figure out what set off the alarm since I’m assuming no one knows why it’s going off because it hasn’t been turned off yet.”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “As long as you can turn off that bloody thing, you can follow me.”

“Thank you,” Briony said, hurrying after him. “Can I ask your name?”

The Tethyian replied, “Cordu,” as he lead Briony deeper into the ship.

“I’m Briony.”

Cordu smiled. “I know.”

Briony decided that was enough conversation for now and followed Cordu silently towards the captain’s quarters. Technically, she could’ve found the captain’s quarters herself, but she had the disadvantage of not knowing where Eddy was. It also wouldn’t raise as many questions if she had a guide.

After making several turns leading deeper and deeper within the ship, they finally came to a halt outside a large metal door. Briony lifted an eyebrow.

“The boiler room?”

Cordu shrugged again. “Seems so. Cap’n is inside. Good luck.” With that, he left, disappearing almost immediately due to his dark blue complexion and dark suit. Briony squared her shoulders and painted a pretty smile on before knocking and leaning back against the door, checking her nails for chips.
The Nemadji Review

The door wrenched open, light and smoke billowing out. “Jeff, I told you for the last time, if someone bothers me, I’ll make them walk the plank,” Eddy shouted, coming out. His perfectly disheveled hair was a mess, his face was streaked with grease and his usually pristine uniform was dirty. “Briony?” he looked taken aback and immediately suspicious. “What are you doing here?”

“ Sounds like you have a problem, Eddy,” Briony remarked casually, straightening up.

“Yeah? What can you do about it?” he said moodily, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m the security consultant, remember? I can probably fix this.”

“Oh.” He stayed silent, unmoving.

Briony shook her head and pushed past him, patting him on the shoulder. “You go rally your crew up to the top, I’ll stay down here and fix whatever’s wrong. Give me your walkie.”

“Uh, why?” Eddy furrowed his brow as he gave her his walkie.

“Communication, duh. Not like you’re good at it, but whatever,” she mumbled the last part.

“I meant the crew thing,” he clarified.

She squinted at him. “You can’t be serious. This could be potentially dangerous to your crew that’s stuck down here. At least if they’re up top they have fresh air.”

Eddy tilted his head and nodded slowly. “Okay,” he said easily. “I’ll round ’em up. Keep me updated?”

Briony smiled, “Of course,” and shut the door in his face, locking it behind her. She leaned against the locked door and sighed, a wide smile creeping across her face. “I’m in,” she whispered.

The familiar crackle of static was all she received in response, but that was okay. She had a job to do.
“That’s not at all what I’m saying,” Andy remarked as he struggled with his chopsticks. He was new to using the utensils but wanted to impress his date. After a few pointless tries at grabbing the sushi, he gave up and tossed one of the sticks onto the table. Using the lone stick in his hand as a spear, he stabbed the piece of food in frustration, lifted his prize into the air, and ate it happily. Amy wasn’t impressed. “I just think things would be easier if you weren’t hiding me from them. That’s all.”

“Yeah, totally.” Amy replied. She didn’t look up from her food, another plate of order out sushi from some small place down the road. Instead of investing herself in her date’s conversation, she decided to invest herself in the food in front of her. Food was always easier to work with than people.

“But I don’t think you do.” Andy grumbled. “I want to meet your friends, your family. I want to go to the movies with them, see a show, go drinking. All you’re doing is hiding me.” Amy didn’t reply, she just kept eating.

“Amy.” Andy said, loud enough to break Amy’s concentration on the food. She reluctantly raised her head to join the conversation. Her face didn’t hide her boredom.
“What is it Andy? What do you want me to say? That you’re boring me? That I don’t want you around? That I don’t want you to meet my friends just because we are nothing more than a casual hook up?”

Andy sat there in silence, that was everything he had hoped she wouldn’t say. He stabbed another piece of sushi, more aggressively than last time, and ate it. Amy stared at him, the boredom now replaced with anger.

Andy’s a nice guy, she thought. He just doesn’t know when to shut up.

The two of them sat at the dining room table in silence for the next few minutes. Amy progressively chugged more of her wine while Andy slowly finished off his personally skewered fish. A half an hour went by before either of them tried to talk again, and it was only because they had run out of food.

“Amy,” Andy whispered, setting his last chop stick down. Amy grunted as a response. “Amy, I like you, a lot. These past few weeks have been some of the happiest moments of my life. But I don’t want to keep seeing you if it means that you’re going to hide our relationship from everyone you know.”

Amy stood up from the table and carried the dishes into the kitchen. Andy continued talking, knowing very well that she could still hear him.

“You made us leave the mall fifteen minutes after we got there because you saw someone you knew. We left a very good movie right before it started just because you saw someone you know walk in and sit in the front. We were in the back-row Amy, and you made us sit there because you didn’t want anyone to see us together!” Andy paused, hoping Amy would say something before he blurted out the last thing on his mind. His companion was silent. Only the faucet in the kitchen answered him.

“Amy, I’ve had enough, you won’t even talk to me about this. The sex has been great, every moment I’ve been with you has been better than the last. You totally get me, and I get you, but I’m not sneaking around anymore, Amy. Either let me meet someone in your life, or I’m leaving yours.” Andy let the words hang in the air, hoping that the silence meant
that she was thinking and not waiting for him to follow through on his ultimatum.

“Don’t take it so harshly.” Said Sarah.

Andy nearly fell out of his chair, grabbing the table right before he tipped over. Sarah, one of Amy’s roommates, had entered the house and the dining room without him noticing.

“Its Andrew, right?” Sarah asked, extending her hand.

“Andy.” He replied, reaching his hand out to shake hers.

“Nice to meet you Andy.” Sarah said. “I haven’t heard much about you, but don’t let that get to you. Amy is like that with every guy she starts seeing.”

Andy’s face sunk. He had figured things would be like this, but that didn’t stop him from hoping that they wouldn’t. “How many guys has she dated?” He asked.

Sarah didn’t have to think hard before answering. “You’re number five this semester. Most guys don’t stick around for long, only a few weeks or so.” Andy’s face sunk even deeper.

“Don’t worry about it, Andy.” Sarah said with a smile. “That’s just how Amy is. Not a whole lot you can do to change her.” Sarah patted him motherly on the shoulder and started to leave the room.

“Feel free to leave whenever, she probably won’t talk to you again while you’re here. It was nice to finally meet you Andy” Sarah said as she disappeared up the stairs.

“Yeah, you too.” Andy mumbled. He sat there for a moment, stunned at the bluntness of Amy’s roommate. The fifth guy this semester, he thought, and every single one of them was shut out and turned away like he was about to be.

Andy stood up from the table, the wooden chair he had been occupying grinding backwards on the old wooden floors. He marched across the dining room and stopped in the kitchen doorway, where Amy was slumped down in the corner, crying quietly.

“Are you going to talk to me or not?” Andy asked, his own voice choking. A quick sniffle and cough fixed that.

Amy didn’t respond, she just buried her face deeper into her lap.
“Okay Amy.” Andy said, turning around. “If that’s how you want it to be, make it six guys who have walked out on you this semester. But don’t think for one second its because of me. I tried Amy, I really did. You just won’t let anyone into your life. You’ll let us into your room, but never your life.” Andy stood there with his back to her. “I hope someone comes along and just shatters that wall you keep putting up. I hope they completely break everything you have and somehow get you to open up. That would be a day worth seeing.”

With his last words, Andy grabbed his coat from the back of the chair and walked to the front door of the house. He could hear Amy silently whimpering in the kitchen as he grabbed the door and flung it open. Andy slammed the door shut behind himself, a sound that the other residents of the house were used to hearing, but it still hurt them to know what had happened before the door closed.

Andy got into his car and sped away, leaving the lights and the people of the house, far behind him. The sound of Amy crying still echoing in his mind.
The Sparklers
Haruka Hamanaka

Midnight at the beach. The contrast of the tranquil sea with no waves and twinkling, bright, and lively sparklers makes sparklers look even brighter. I can also see another kind of light—very soft one on the sea a bit far away. Because the gentle light moves slowly and steadily, it should be the one from a small boat. Sparklers are, on the contrary, still intensely and actively giving off the orange lights in front of two of us. It even seems to scream something, which looks pitiful.

“—Anyway, I would say this summer was successful for both of us. Don’t you think?” he asks, without looking at me. I feel like his voice comes from far away, around where I see that boat.

“Um, yeah... I think so too. You mean, all is well that ends well, right?” I cannot see his face for some reason and pretend to get fully absorbed in the sparklers. A red ball of fire on the tip of the sparkler is now the biggest and seems ready to fall down. Don’t fall—! I’m crying out inside, trying to keep my hand steady so that the orange light continues sparkling for a little while longer.

“Yeah, I still remember want-to-do lists you made at the beginning of this summer,” he says, looking at the gorgeous lights of my sparklers. “You really wanted to do sparkles together before you leave here, right?”

“Oops,” I see the tip of my sparkler fall down. I recognize there are still a few more sparklers to play. I don’t know how many of them I’ve al-
ready burned and seen falling down tonight. I repeat this process over and over again. It lasts forever even though I know there is the end. I can’t stop it. My right hand reaches a lighter and another sparkler.

“I shouldn’t have made so many lists,” I say with laughing weakly. “The fact that we haven’t completed them makes me sad.” When I made the want-to-do lists with him, of course, I didn’t ever expect that we would complete all. Rather, I thought uncompletion would give us the reason to be together. For me, it was just so much fun to talk about things we want to try and explore together. But now, I cannot help but ask myself; “Is this what I am supposed to feel on the last day of the summer break with him?”

“Don’t say that. When you come back here, we will do all the rest of those,” he tries to make my mood brighter. I don’t say anything back. I’m just trying to know where the boat with the soft light heads to. Now it is at the right verge of the sight. Unintentionally, for a moment, I try to shut myself into a far place so that I can control my emotions for him.

“Oh.” We both reach the last sparkle and stare at each other for the first time for a while. His face is unclear but the moonlight helps me to see in his eyes, which look gentle but somehow a little sad. How many times have we faced and tried to share our real thoughts with each other like this moment? How much have we committed ourselves for each other?

Now he gets closer to hug me, and I realize that I have exactly the same feeling when I see the sparkler’s light fall down and disappear, as if there is nothing. I stand still while he hugs me without saying anything. We don’t need any words. In those few minutes, I can count at least experiences I will never experience again:

01. The way of his hugging me as tight as always

02. The view of the quiet and peaceful ocean with him

03. The feeling that maybe he is regretting what he did and didn’t with me during this summer

04. The smell of the soft breeze from the ocean surrounding us
05. The smell of his T-shirt which is always the same and smells of fresh detergent

06. The sense of being hugged by him for the first time

07. The sound of our breathing

08. The feeling that I cannot blame anyone about the way we are

09. The knowledge that hugging sometimes works better for us than kissing or talking to understand each other

10. The desire of knowing what is/was wrong with us

11. The desire of knowing what he is thinking while hugging me

12. The gratitude that it is not windy nor cold but is peaceful and beautiful

13. The way the moonlight reflects on the surface of the sea while being hugged by him

14. The way of me being hugged by him

15. The hope that he is not sadder than me

16. The hope that he is not regretting he met me and loved me

17. The experience of being hugged by someone without saying anything for a while, which feels to continue forever

18. The feeling that I have and cannot describe in any words while being with him

19. The sense of hatred about myself who is not happy with him at this
20. The desire for him to forget all mistakes we made

21. The realization that probably I haven’t touched his heart and won’t

22. The realization that he accepts his feeling and my feeling by hugging me

23. The gratitude that he shared a lot of moments with me during this summer including this moment

24. The experience of not being loved enough by him, who hugs me so tight

25. The feeling that I will not come back to him after saying goodbye tonight

26. The feeling that he should know what exactly our conversation meant

27. The sound of his heart

28. The sense of being physically comfortable with being hugged by him despite of messy feelings I have in mind

29. The sound of voice and laughter of people a bit far away from us

30. The feeling of regret

31. The feeling of gratitude

32. The feeling of remorse

33. The feeling of courage to let us go
“I’ll let you to burn the last sparkler. Go ahead,” his words make me get back to the real moment. He releases me.

I blame myself who suggested we do sparklers on the day before I leave here. In my hand, the sparkler is now burning beautifully, passionately—but sadly.

“I will write a letter soon after you leave. It was really a good summer, thanks to you.” While hearing his gentle lie, I focus on seeing the end of this beautiful object.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

The sparkler never starts lighting once it falls down.
He started by talking about his wife. With the first beer he men-
tioned her passing. With the fourth he heaved a sigh and said she had
always been too beautiful for him. It happened too young, before anyone
was ready. I had only recently decided that I could call Roy a friend. Before
then he was just my boss, basically a stranger. By the seventh and eighth
beers we were swapping stories of devastation, pulling back our sleeves to
show each other’s scars.

My mother’s condition began, really, before her youngest son had
even died. Near the end his unconsciousness became a blessing, because
her behavior almost certainly would’ve scared the kid if he’d been awake.
She refused to leave even after they took away the body. The room had to
be readied for other patients, for people still living, so they dragged Mom
through the hallways in handcuffs.

“I remember that, the not wanting to leave. Handcuffs, though?”

“They were ready to haul her off somewhere until my dad and
uncle came back for her… she’s doing better now, I think.”

It must have seemed a natural transition to him, from speaking on
other people’s deaths to speaking on our own. His response to my story
was:

“I have lung cancer. I’m told I’ll die pretty soon.”

Dad got to be the one who broke the news about Stevie. I came
home for Christmas break to an empty house, and a message scribbled on the kitchen whiteboard describing a family trip to the emergency room. Familiar handwriting encouraged me not to worry, so I carried a half-empty bag of potato chips into the family room and drifted to sleep watching nature documentaries. The front door woke me much later in the evening. A disheveled woman flew past my vision without acknowledging my presence. From their bedroom came the sounds of drawers crashing open and suitcases being unzipped. Expecting explanation, I calmly sat up as Dad walked into the room, but the sentence got caught somewhere in his chest. I watched him shake like the last leaf in a winter breeze.

“You’re the only person I’ve told.”
“Jesus. I’m sorry, Roy.”
“For what?” I’m still not sure. He didn’t wait for me to answer.
“It took my wife less than a month to die, and now I can’t remember anything that happened before. I stay up all night trying to remember. I’m ashamed, because I honestly wish I could’ve just skipped it, you know? Like I wish I just slept through it.”

We sat at a high top positioned in the darkest corner of the room. Three other patrons at the bar faced away from us, and my eyes fell on the dull flannel designs on their backs during the many lapses in our conversation. I thought of time machines and cryogenics. I thought of my mother’s bloodshot eyes and frightening weight loss, anxious stretches of days with no sleep. Now she takes Ambien.

“Slept through what, Roy?”
“Just the end.”

Serious complications arise when a body creates an abnormally high number of white blood cells. At twenty-three, seven years older than Stevie, I had trouble wrapping my head around this concept. It sounded like my brother was too healthy. The letters ALL meant nothing to me.
When the doctor at the children’s hospital tried to explain that the extra cells were cancer, the only thing I heard was:
   “...very treatable...”

Then Stevie got three blood transfusions in a week, and even after that, it felt like it took a very long time. With a thirty day prognosis, you find hope becomes a drug in itself.

It sounds like an accident. Really, it was. Having left my parents’ house in a rush late the night before, I was barely conscious of the general direction my car faced, but that was about it. My brother had been dead for nearly half a year, and I drove as if each mile might relieve a piece of his skinny ghost from my shoulders. My own hunger didn’t even occur to me until the gas light came on. The only thing to read in the diner was the local paper, which ran a help wanted ad for some place called Schwenderman Custom Window Co. I decided weeks earlier that I wouldn’t be returning to school that semester. I enjoyed the idea of making money, something simple that I hadn’t really done much of in my life. There were more desirable places to stop, of course, but that off-ramp was as good as any, it didn’t matter to me. The ad listed a high starting wage, and a phone number that turned out to be his personal cell.

Schwenderman Co. was essentially a warehouse in a flat industrial town. During the interview I learned that the company manufactured “art glass”. Massive kilns and furnaces made of glittering steel occupied one half of the open space inside, with all the cold working and finishing equipment organized on the opposite end. The interview had gone so well that he introduced me to everyone immediately after, calling me kid in a friendly, almost fatherly voice. Before long everyone else followed suit. Most had been Schwenderman employees since before I was born. They all belonged to some union that no one ever bothered asking me to join.

I spent most my time working directly beside Roy. He seemed intent on teaching me everything there was to know- precise oxide mixtures
used to produce different colors of glass, specific isopropyl-based solutions for polishing outdoor versus indoor windows, safety guidelines to be observed when welding together the often incredible lead frames. No one else in the company seemed to understand why I got this kind of treatment. I guess they all figured Roy saw something in me that no one else could. I still don’t believe it, myself.

“Don’t you have kids?”
“Jesse and Sarah. Three grandchildren, too, so far.”
“Why haven’t you told them?”
“I didn’t think it would be anything to bother them with until the other day. They both live out of state.”
“Alright.”

The accident then fulfilled its potential, transformed into something familiar and ugly. This was a Tuesday morning in mid-October, after I’d been on the job for almost sixty days. I watched Roy use a bandanna to polish the edges of a two-inch thick glass circle with a diameter taller than himself. My job was to hold the thing upright from the other side. The piece interested me. I’d never seen anything like it. The interior of the circle contained a swirling and fusing of differing shades, from the brilliant yellow of the sun to a deep blue like the bottom of the ocean. How Roy managed this creation remains a mystery to me.

As the bandanna in his hand followed the uppermost arc, and descended back towards the floor, a convulsive cough demanded all of his attention at once, bringing the lesson to a halt. I had to reposition my body to prevent the window from tipping over. I asked if he was okay, and peaked around the edge to see spots of blood being quickly wiped away. He turned his head only slightly, and asked:

“Do you drink, kid?”
In my friend’s sick room, a tiny three-season attached to the side of the house, windows surround me. Yesterday I saw an overgrown yard, bordered with hedges in dire need of a trim. A disintegrating brick path, a few empty flower beds. In front there was an ancient oak with a tire swing, which had once fallen into disarray, and only recently been resurrected for the hope of grandchildren.

He has tumors in his spinal column, and possibly in his brain, as well. About a week ago, a kind and experienced oncologist, a man close to Roy’s age with gently graying hair, informed us that he’d have to order more tests to know for sure. My friend declined, and the doctor’s face displayed an understanding that I doubt many people in this world possess. It’d been hard enough on Roy the week before, when the nurse handed him an over-sized Popsicle stick to bite down on while the same doctor slid a needle into the space between two vertebrae.

Today there is only Roy’s sleeping form huddled in a flickering halo from the nightstand, an I.V. drip hanging from a nail in the wall, a wooden chair beside the same bed that Roy and his wife slept on in their first apartment. He’s asked that I pick up boxes of cheap candles instead of turning on lights. He also instructed me to purchase large black and bed sheets, then hang them over all three of the monstrous double windows in here. “With whatever you can find laying around, kid”, I covered each of the other windows on the ground floor of Roy’s house, as well.

This morning I flipped the brand new deadbolt on the front door. I did the same to the other two doors, one for the attached garage and one for the patio in back. Earlier in the week, in anticipation, Roy taught me how to change the locks. I don’t think he’s left the bed since.

“What?”
“I said I’m not going to tell them. I don’t want anyone else to know until it’s done.”
“You’re not going to tell your family that you’re dying?”
“I need someone to take care of things.”
“Like your estate? What, you don’t trust them?”
“No. I need someone to take care of me. Until it’s over.”

My parents checked Stevie into the hospital and he never came out. Hospice was a word I enjoyed a hesitant awareness of, like an unsettling rumor. I’d never thought much about it, a place where people go to die and not to get better.

“Kid? I need someone.”

By this time only one of the bearded men in flannel remained, loudly snoring with his body heaved on top of the bar.

“Did you see ‘registered nurse’ anywhere that application you had me fill out?”

“I’ll pay you. Obviously.”

It’s hard to tell if he’s actually breathing; his chest is so thin that the blankets hardly rise. Beads of sickly perspiration accumulate in the troughs of skin beside his mouth. If I sit here long enough, I can see the sweat first appear on the top of his bald scalp and inch all the way down the side of his face. It’s good to see that some of his bodily functions are working correctly. I think he’s shit the bed. I haven’t checked yet, but I will. That’s part of our deal.

Another purchase made at Roy’s direction was a large pack of Depends. Through the mask of illness, I recognized shame on his thinning face the first time it was needed. Neither of us spoke once I understood. The smell hung in the air and stuck to my hands even after the rubber gloves came off and the bundle fell to the bottom of the empty bin in the garage. Any discomfort dissolved as the time drew closer and Roy decided himself incapable of sparing sparse energy to embarrassment. To ease the tension between the two of us, he sometimes told jokes:

“Now you’ll have plenty of practice... for when you knock up some unfortunate young woman.”

I first wiped my friend’s ass nineteen days ago. He hasn’t woken up in four. I don’t know what else to do, so I continue to hang the I.V. bags he somehow acquired. I administer scheduled intravenous medication. Every
two hours I check his pulse. Roy’s house is large, dim, and empty.

“I bet your a great dad.”
“What would make you say that?”
“They’ll know something’s wrong. They’ll come looking.”
“It won’t take that long, kid. You just call 911 from my phone, and leave. You won’t see anyone.”

I pass my time between taking vitals by studying the incredible number of photos in Roy’s living room, which lies just beyond the open door from the porch. In his lifetime the widowed father spent a modest fortune on frames and developing photography. It doesn’t look like there would’ve been space for many more. There’s a single portrait of his wife hung above the mantel in a two-foot-tall frame. She is beautiful and young, wearing a flowing white bridal veil.

There’s nothing to do but speculate as to what all of these people are like. Roy didn’t say much about his family when he was still speaking, so I try my best, partly out of boredom, to imagine these lives. Carrying a small candle inside a coffee mug, I spend maybe fifteen minutes with each photo.

Compared to the porch, time passes much more quickly in here. A son and a daughter grow, frame by frame, from teenagers into adults with children of their own. There’s one from when the kids must have been in high school. Waves break in the background, Jesse’s floral print shirt is open to the wind, and Sarah wears a skirt of reeds. I decided that Roy surprised his children with a trip to Hawaii the year after their mother died. In this one, nailed to the wall above the light switch, Sarah has a suitcase by her side and a twelve pack of cheap beer under her arm. Her smile is the same as her mother’s above the mantel, bursting with excitement and promise. Her first class is at 8 a.m. She’ll meet her husband in that lecture.

While Stevie was living in the hospital, my mom used technology as a substitute when she couldn’t be physically with him. Scrolling through albums on her laptop, she’d ambush family members walking through the
den to the kitchen in the middle of the night.

“Remember this? The cruise? Right after you graduated high school, remember? You were such a nice big brother looking after Stevie.”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m driving back to school in the morning. Call me if anything changes, okay?”

She pointed a shaky, accusing finger at the memories on the computer screen, as if there was a chance I’d already forgotten about our third sibling.

On the end table next to the love seat is a portrait of Jesse in his twenties, beaming in formal attire, housed in an antique frame. I first noticed it seven days ago, immediately after Roy said to me:

“People die, son, that’s what they do.”

His voice carried all the seriousness the situation warranted, but I wasn’t sure if Roy knew where he was. So I silently traded the hardwood of the sickroom for the carpeted living room. He didn’t seem to notice, or, at least, he didn’t care. The pattern on the blanket covering him in bed preoccupied him. To me it looked like a regular, uninteresting plaid, but Roy saw something in the light comforter from a different life.

I found the picture after scouring the walls for a few minutes. Our faces appeared to be almost the same size when I held the frame up beside my reflection in the mirror. Empty prescription bottles, catheters in unopened plastic packaging, and my own personal toiletries covered the vanity. I was relieved. I didn’t see the resemblance.

“I have to ask something.”

“Sure, kid.”

“It might make you uncomfortable, but I have to ask.”

“Why don’t I just kill myself? Save us both the trouble?”

“Basically.”

He peered at the wood grain through the bottom of an empty pint glass. His lip curled weakly upwards as he quickly shook his head.

“If you get bored enough, maybe you can bring yourself to do it, kid. Wait until I’m asleep, though. Okay?”
I just checked Roy. He’s still there. Presently, I’m sinking into the heavy, worn cushions of the love seat, staring at the photo of Jesse and recollecting the sound of his voice. Not long after Roy lost consciousness, the concerned son thought to check in on his father. I answered the phone, stupidly, instinctively:

“Hello?”

The phone has since been turned off. Why it was on in the first place, I’m not sure. Days later I caught myself wondering what I might’ve said to Jesse if I hadn’t been shocked into hanging up. I asked myself why I agreed to be here in his place.

More recently, though, I’ve stopped asking. It’s easy to be numb to the other breathing human in this house, now that breathing is all that he does. What I should probably say is that I don’t feel sorry for him, at least. As for the people in the living room, they’re as imaginary as television characters—so long as the phone is off. I realize that I’m glad I never knew any of them. Someone (probably a fed up mailman) has been knocking on the front door every day or two. I’m afraid that if I pull back the bath towels to check they might see me. And then what?

Really, I shouldn’t let it worry me. Everything’s already been taken care of. All my friend has left to do is die.

At the exact moment that Stevie quit breathing, I was out of the room. Mom’s state for the last few days made it impossible for me to process what I had been told would soon happen to my brother. A short distance down the hall, I found a janitor’s closet that someone forgot to lock. I slipped inside to sit on the floor and quietly weep into my hands. By the time I returned, after I don’t know how long, my brother had died and my mother had broke.

Six months later, when Dad asked me where I disappeared to that day, I told him I was getting a drink of water. It was clear to see in his eyes that he didn’t believe me, that he thought his living son was a coward. My mind had already been made up to leave, so I didn’t let it bother me.

“Are you ever going to visit your mother? It’s only an hour away. She really wants to see you.”
“Sure.”

Roy’s dead. I was the only one to hear, so it doesn’t really matter, but I’m pretty sure these were his last words:

“It sure is dark in here, son.”

I had no response. That was over a week ago. He probably didn’t even notice me sitting beside the bed in the same chair I’m sitting in now.

It took me a few minutes to admit that I felt nothing beneath my finger tips as I held them to Roy’s neck. Following instructions, I then automatically retrieved the phone from the nightstand drawer. Turning it on was as far as I got. It’s ringing in my lap.

There’s also a heavy pounding at the front door. It’s rapid and uneven. I imagine multiple mailmen, a whole army bearing a month’s worth of packages, bills, inquisitive letters. So many fists sound like someone firing an automatic weapon.

I hear all this, but it’s not enough to break my gaze. It’s nothing compared to what’s before me in the bed. The eyelids had been closed already, of course, the last thing Roy got to do for himself. The skin was bone dry when I touched it. The body is physically smaller than the man Roy was. It’s shrunken and withered, like a bleached white raisin.

But the pounding gets louder. It takes on a desperate staccato. Indistinguishable voices begin calling things I’d rather not hear correctly. Some unclear instinct lifts me from the chair, tears my eyes from the bed and out the open doorway. Off the right side of the living room is a staircase that restricted the last month of Roy’s residence in his own house to the ground floor. At the top is a master bedroom. At once I understand the urge manifesting in the back of my head. I need to hide.

My foot hits the bottom step, then two more. I’ve been up here once before in a frantic late-night search for window covering materials. The candle stub I had been holding cleared just enough of the darkness from the room to locate the bed, which has since been bare and empty. I flip the switch on the wall, the first in weeks. The bed’s the only piece of furniture in the spacious room. It’s the only thing at all.

A confounding circle of light reflects off the mattress in a murky
rainbow of hues. There’s a stained glass skylight in the ceiling. It’s a familiar piece. Roy had the thing built into the slant of the roof, flush with the wall, so the spectacle would occur around mid morning. With the abundance of illuminated dust hanging in the air, it looks like the type of thing through which saints ascend to heaven, or abductees to flying saucers. The pounding hasn’t stopped, but up here I can’t it hear it so clearly.

It turns out there is something else, another photo, stuck to the wall right above the headboards. It’s the second photo I’ve seen of Roy’s wife. At first she’s just as alive as downstairs, just as beautiful and young. But as I creep closer I see the eyelids are shut. The skin is the same color as Roy’s is now. The unmistakable generic dots of a hospital gown cover her shoulders.

Curiously exhausted, I drop to my knees. I suppose there would be space under the bed.

I’m leaving, again. I’m in my car driving further south. There was no reason to call anyone, as it happened. I opened the front door and walked right between them, knowing they could see my face and not really caring. Maybe they’ll find me, though I’m not sure if I did anything wrong. I’m not expecting any thanks, but their father would’ve said I was doing them a favor, sparing them an experience they’re better off without. I’d have to agree.

The highway unravels behind me as the failing afternoon pours in the cab. It’s the same spectrum of light I saw refracted by the stained glass hours ago. The same that cut the darkness in streaks resulting from half-drawn blinds in Stevie’s hospital room. The same as everywhere. It’s beautiful, and as far as we’re concerned, it’ll last forever. But it’s nothing more incredible than the sun, a ball of unconcerned gas, who’s only purpose, it seems to me, is to brighten.
For as long as I can remember I’ve always been a dreamer. I was one of those kids who would lock themselves away in their room and dream the day away. I’d put on my favorite records, stand in front of my mirror with a hand brush for a microphone while wearing my favorite long brunette wig, and pretend I was singing on American Bandstand as one of the members of Tony DeFranco and the DeFranco Family. Now, I realize I had a family of my own, but in my imagination, I would make up these unbelievable stories that would enable me to be miraculously adopted by the DeFranco family, without killing off my own parents. My brother and sister, on the other hand, would constantly tease and pick on me, so dreaming of them being carried away by a tornado or being lost at sea was never a problem!

I can remember at the age of thirteen, I used to sit all my stuffed animals on my bed and proceed to act out a scene from Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Now, I hadn’t figured out yet that this was a comedy about a girl, pretending to be a boy, pretending to be a girl; I just loved the idea of being able to practice my British accent. I can still hear my dad saying to my mom as they were walking past my bedroom door, “When will she ever get her head out of the clouds?”

I could never understand why he had a problem with me pretending to be someone different. I remember one time he gave me the
strangest look when I came to the dinner table with a bathrobe tie, bobby pinned to my head, pretending to have long hair.

“What happened to your wig?” he asked.

“I want to experience method acting,” I replied.

One day, when I was in high school, my mom came home and caught me smoking one of my dad’s cigarettes. I had just finished watching All About Eve, starring Bette Davis, and everybody knows that a cigarette is the quintessential Bette Davis prop. Man, that woman could make the inhaling and exhaling of cigarettes sexier than an excerpt from Fifty Shades of Grey. When my mom walked in, I was right in the middle of acting out the scene where Davis is confronting her associates about the lecherous Eve, and her arms are flailing about while her cigarette comes inches away from burning everybody she’s talking to.

“What in Heaven’s name are you doing?” my mom screamed at me.

“Pretending to be Bette Davis,” I stated matter-of-factly.

My mom then proceeded to quote Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind.” I just gave her that dazed “come on” look and shook my head. Honestly, I figured since God was everywhere, then he definitely was in this dreamer’s heart and soul. Therefore, I gained a new religious fervor and made God my new agent.

My twenties were supposed to be my selfish years. It was a time to take the rulebook, toss it in the trash and fly by the seat of my pants. Instead, they bit me in the ass. It has always amazed me that from the time we are born the human brain works 24/7, 365 days a year, but will completely shut down the second you fall in love. Everybody warned me that I was too young and shouldn’t rush into anything. “It’ll never last,” they’d say, but I didn’t listen. I was in love, and in this dreamer’s head, love is like the movies; it’s able to transcend all time, space and reality. Right? Wrong! Next thing I knew, I was twenty-one with two kids and going through a divorce, and standing right beside me was my dad saying:
“Time to get your head out of the clouds now girly girl!”

God, I hated it when he called me that! Whenever he’d use that nickname, I would start singing Georgy Girl, but I’d replace Georgy Girl with “girly girl.” He would look at me like I was nuts, but it sure did help me swallow that nickname down with a spoon of satire.

“Well, what’s your plan now?” Dad asked.
Hey, there Girly girl dreaming of the someone you could be—
“Time to grow up. You have a family to take care of, and dreams don’t put food on the table!”

Life is a reality, you can’t always run away… “I know that Dad.”
“Why do you do this? Stop singing – I’m trying to talk to you!”
Don’t be so scared of changing… “I hear ya Dad.” and rearranging yourself...

“I warned you not to marry so young, I told you this would happen. All the dreaming in the world isn’t going to fix this for you.”
It’s time for jumping down from the shelf… “Yes, Dad.” a little bit...

As much as I hated “girly girl,” my dad loathed the fact that I ended my sentences with “dad” even more. He claimed I was only trying to push his buttons - he was right of course. Guess I went a little too far that day because the next thing I knew he was walking out the door and washing his hands of the situation. “That’s it – I’m done. You’re on your own girly girl.”

Hey there, Girly girl there’s another girly deep inside… “I know Dad.”

During my thirties and forties, my life changed dramatically. I thought I’d met the man of my dreams. Prince Charming had ridden up on his white steed and carried me and my children off to happily ever after, or so I thought. The fairytale lasted a while, but soon my husband’s jealousy and insecurities toward me and my children’s father began to emerge. Before I knew it, my life had become one long drawn out scene from the movie Gaslight. My husband was not only good with a fist and cruel words, but he was also a manipulator of my reality and self-esteem.
He had a knack for building me up just enough for the next take-down and the more abusive things became, the more I clung to my imagination. Ironically, my dreams of aspirations suddenly turned into dreams of desperation. One day, while we were getting ready for a friend’s wedding, my imagination warped into some kind of “creative overdrive” after I had come out of the bedroom wearing a pretty sable-colored dress he had helped pick out.

“You look really nice sweetie, but you’d be more attractive if you had gotten the red one, I told you to get.”

I looked at him thinking how natural it was for him to mix a compliment with honey and venom. His forked tongue hissed and flickered with each poisonous word.

“You told me you thought I looked pretty in this color.”

“As usual, you screwed it up again. Can’t you do anything right?” His eyes became slants of lethal green and amber.

“But when I asked you which one you preferred, you said sable.”

“You look like an overstuffed pig in that color! Why the hell would I tell you to buy that one!” His mouth began to open wide and his jaws unlocked, ready to pounce and swallow his prey whole...

“You don’t have to yell at me.”

“Yes, I do dammit, otherwise you don’t listen! God, you just don’t get; you’re so stupid. Suddenly, his mouth changed direction, fangs struck at his midsection, and struck again! I watched as his jaws slowly and painfully started to devour his feet and legs.

“I mean – c’mon look at you,” he said while walking away. “Who else would want you?” Bulges of his flesh moved along inside as he slowly devoured himself. His screams of pain turned to muffled pleas as he slowly disappeared.

I can still feel the sting from those words, and I have never been able to wear anything in that color again. I’m like Pavlov’s dog – the first sign of sable, and I start to salivate for pigs-in-the-blanket.

I may have been incapable of physically hurting my husband, but my imagination wasn’t. Yeah, there were times I shocked myself at how gruesome some of my dreams were. But let’s face it, humor can fix a lot of
things, but it’s pretty damn hard to find anything funny about abuse, so I don’t beat myself up too much for it.

It wasn’t until I finally got the courage to get rid of the son-of-a-bitch, that I finally found my sense of humor again. He actually had the balls to say: “You’ll never find anyone else like me.”

My reaction was to bust out laughing while replying: “That’s the point!” Once I started laughing, I couldn’t stop. I stood there with tears rolling down my face while crossing my legs trying not to wet myself. I actually think I scared the hell out him because he looked at me like I had finally gone crazy.

After my divorce, it was back to just me, the kids, and you guessed it – my father again. “Thank God, you didn’t bring any kids into the world with that asshole,” he said. “Smart move girly girl,” he whispered in my ear before giving me a kiss on the cheek. “I know Dad,” I replied winking.

Hey, it meant a lot that I had my dad’s support, but I still felt like a complete failure. Mentally, two divorces wreak havoc on a person’s psyche. My dreams and imagination became a way to reconnect with my children and myself and today is no different. My dreams and imagination are with me all the time. I do have both feet on the ground, I am an adult after all, but I’m like a ballerina. I’m constantly trying to stand on my toes, striving to keep my head in those clouds. I’m terrified of flat feet! No matter how hard I try to stop dreaming, my heart won’t let me. This year I turn 58, and I’ve often asked myself “what kind of mentality allows you to forgo all the rules of practicality?” I’m not exactly sure what’s wrong with me. Freud would probably say something like: “She shared her dreams me with today. Something about a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to be a girl. Definitely has to be about sex. I might even call this transference.”

Do you remember the Fol-de-rol lyrics, that the fairy Godmother sang, from the Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical Cinderella?
Fol-de-rol and fiddledy dee,
Fiddely faddely foodle;
All the dreamers in the world are dizzy in the noodle.

Leave it to me to compare my life to musical theater. I mean it was Shakespeare after all who said: “all the world’s a stage” and far be it for me to contradict Shakespeare! I mean life is hard enough the way it is without putting any more stress on it, so why not dream it away, right? Listen, if I can get through my day, at a job I hate, pretending I’m really this high paid executive who deals in producing movies and gets to go too far off exotic locations, what’s the harm? What’s wrong with driving down the beautiful rural roads from London to Brighton, instead of the same old boring street that I’ve driven on for 15 years on my way to the grocery store? Hell, if I can get myself to work out on the treadmill because, in my imagination, I need to get in shape for a movie I’m starring in with Tom Hiddleston rather than the fact that it’s just plain good for my health, you better believe I’ll frickin dream it. I mean - come on, have you ever seen Tom Hiddleston?

I had a nightmare the other night that I was on this elevator. When it finally stopped the doors opened, but instead of that familiar ding sound you usually hear that announces your chosen floor, I heard that sad trombone sound effect of failure: Wah Wah! When I stepped off the elevator I was dressed in a bathrobe and slippers, just like that crazy cartoon character Maxine, and standing in front me was Bette Davis, holding on to a cigarette saying: “Fasten your seatbelts. It’s going to be a bumpy night.” I don’t remember much of anything after that except I woke up in a fright and drenched in sweat. Either it was the warning from Bette Davis or a hot flash.

You know that moment in time when you finally understand life and you just get it? Well, I’m not there yet. My kids seem to get it, which is pretty amazing considering the fact that they spent those crucial developmental years living with me and my baggage. I’m sure they’re praying that their mother isn’t going to get lost in some kind of dream dementia and never return. I miss the age when I really thought I’d have
my shit together by the time I got to be the age I am now because none of my dreams have come true so far. Some days I feel like if I blink, all my chances will disappear, and I wonder if I’ll always be searching for something that has never been mine for the taking.

Maybe Freud is right and my dreaming has brought about what he would call an “onset of psychosis.” My God – what if I’m actually dreaming now, and when I wake up, I’m still a Bette Davis wannabe, who’s really just a crazy old Maxine?

But just when my head has almost convinced myself to give up, my heart screams at me to “stop this nonsense and go find out who you’re meant to be!” So, that’s what I’m going to do. Whatever it takes I’m going to chase down my dreams. I’m not going to let fear, confusion or procrastination stand in my way. After all, this is my story damn it, so I’m going to write it!
New Era
Melissa France

I

The air was filled with tension and apprehension. Though nobody said it the soldiers knew that the war could not be won anymore. Almost four years ago they had been told that they would be back from the front by Christmas. Victorious, celebrated, the pride of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. Now only the unlucky ones were left standing, their empty ranks filled with new recruits. Boys who were expected to fill the shoes of those who would never return home. Georg sat next to the commanding officer, who kept looking at his pocket watch. He noticed that the fingers of the other soldier were trembling but he said nothing. Nobody wanted to fight any longer, and he knew that the officer hated himself for leading most of those under his command to certain death.

9th November, 1918

Dull murmurs crept through the wooden beams into Georg’s room while his body urged him to get out of bed. He was in no hurry to get up quite yet however. He had heard rumors of the proclamation so he knew it would be best to not join his parents in the kitchen. There was a rap on the front door, announcing the small boy his father paid to fetch the
newspaper for him every morning. Georg thought this to be ostentatious, they were not wealthy people. He knew his mother would open the door and bring her husband the paper without glancing at it; it was the man’s privilege to read it first. First there was a rustling and then a loud bellow.

“Himmel, Arsch, und Zwirn!” “Heaven, Ass, and Twine!” Georg heard it thunder from below. The storm that had been brewing over the left-over scraps of a once great empire had now arrived in his home dousing its inhabitants. It was November 9th, 1918 and the world they knew was falling to pieces.

His father continued, “It’s ending Louise, the world is ending.”
“What is it Ludwig. Is it awful?”
Georg heard his father read aloud:

“Verkündigung der Republik
In der gestrigen Sitzung der provisorischen Nationalversammlung, die im Parlament abgehalten wurde, erfolgte nach einer groß angelten Rede des Staatskanzlers Dr. Renner die einstimmige Annahme seines Antrages
**Deutschösterreich als Republik**”

Proclamation of the Republic
During the meeting of the provisional National Assembly that was held in parliament yesterday, it was decided after a large-scale speech by state chancellor Dr. Renner to unanimously accept his proposal of

**German-Austria as a Republic**

Louise tried to soothe her husband. “We knew this would be coming, there wasn’t much left after emperor Karl abdicated the throne.”
Ludwig could not be consoled however. “He lost his spine, that’s what happened! Sneaky politicians! This will be the end of Austria, I tell you”, he shouted.

“Could you please be quieter Ludwig, you’ll wake Georg up. I heard
him tossing and turning all night again. He came home six months ago and he still suffers from nightmares.”

Georg could only imagine his fathers’ grimace, an unempathetic devilish grin creeping onto his broad face as he listened to his response. “Every soldier has nightmares after battle. He’ll get over it soon enough, sooner if you don’t continue to coddling him. The boy needs to man up; it’s a new reality we’re all living in now and he’ll need tougher skin if he wants to survive.”

“Whatever you say dear.”

“I do say so.”

That’s how their arguments always ended. Georg’s father got the last word in and his mother slunk into a corner of their kitchen and pretended she had something to clean.

Restlessness began to itch in his bones and so Georg decided to get up and face the world. He swung his legs over the bed and faced the brown wallpaper that was slowly fading into nothingness. He sat up and began to massage his left knee. It had been seven months since he had been wounded in battle against the French army and it still bothered him. He had a premonition it would be life-long reminder, a morbid souvenir of a place he had never wanted to visit.

As a child he had always wanted to travel and see what lay behind the encompassing mountains of the Alps. Break free from the snow-covered cages that others revered as God’s natural monuments. Now he could say that he had been to Belgium and France but instead of marveling the beauty of those countries he had helped destroy them, he had left scars in the landscapes worse than the one he wore on his upper leg. A shiver ran through Georg and he shook his head violently so that the thoughts could fly out of his head. They went straight through the slightly opened window, over the roof tops of Innsbruck, and he hoped they would stay outside for a while. He gripped the chair that stood next to bed and pulled himself up.
“Mother, it’s time to wake up now.” Elise gently rapped against the door of her mother’s bedroom and listened intently if she could detect a hint of the body inside slowly rising.

“I made you breakfast and I promise I didn’t burn the eggs this time.” She almost hoped that her mother Josefina would still be asleep, that Elise would not have to deliver the news that were printed in bold across the paper that sat on the tray. She heard a soft groan and a request to enter the room. Elise took a deep breath but instead of courage only drew in dust. Coughing she entered the chamber and set the breakfast tray onto the night stand next to the four-poster bed her mother was lying in. The room still held most of its former grandeur, with several dressers and vanity table standing against the walls, as her mother had refused to sell any of the furniture when the money had began to run out.

“We will start by getting rid of the pieces your father bought”, she had said. “I inherited these from my parents and over my dead body will they leave this home.” This meant that most of the house was sparsely decorated. The once elegant rooms only sat as a reminder now of all they had lost.

“Bist du krank mein Liebling?” Are you ill my darling?
“No mother, it was only a bit of dust that tickled my throat.”

“Humph,” Josefina grumbled as she reached for the cup that held the last bit of coffee left in the house. “Tell Marie to clean the hallways the next time she comes in. I swear that girl is becoming lazier and lazier, we will soon be drowning in filth by the amount of work she doesn’t do and Helga can’t do it all on her own.”

“Yes mother.” Elise couldn’t tell her that she had to cut the hours that Marie worked as they couldn’t afford to pay her anymore. Luckily her mother spent most of her days confined to her bed.

Josefina took Elise’s hand. “Remember before the war, all the servants we had bustling around. Fresh flowers every day and pastries for breakfast.”

“I do remember. Those were lovely times.”
“Maybe we can return to those. Emperor Karl will revoke his decision to abdicate the throne and the monarchy will return to its former glory.”

“There actually has been news on that front.”

“Oh there has been.” A glimmer suddenly appeared in Joesfina’s eyes.

“It’s not the news you had hoped for.” Elise slowly turned the paper so that the headline announcing the new German-Austrian Republic sprung into her mothers face.

“No! No! No! This can’t be. Those damned socialists, they will be the end of us all!” Josefina grabbed the newspaper and hurled it across the room. The coffee cup and the entire tray of food followed suit.

III

Georg tried to save as many men as he could. They hadn’t come far from their trench when they had been met with a barrage of gunfire. Somehow he had managed to remain unharmed. He hoisted an almost life-less body over his shoulder, the rattle of breath the only indication that the soldier was still alive. When he reached the trench Georg looked at him closely, shocked he realized that the boy could not be older than 17. The medics quickly ran to them and began to work on his wounds. One of them gave Georg a curt smile, meaning that he had saved the boy’s life. He knew he would be hailed as a hero for this but Georg just felt sick. “Where’s Lieutenant Von Theinburg?” the other medic asked him. Georg felt a wave of panic rush over him, if the lieutenant had not had not met with the field ambulance that meant that he was one of the victims. He jumped over the trench and ran out into the open, searching for his commander. Suddenly, he a spotted a pocket watch gleaning in the dirt. He sprinted towards it and went to lift Von Theinburg to bring him to safety, but there was no place safe he could be brought any longer. His eyes rolled back into his head and the limp corpse hung from Georg’s arms. Georg choked back tears, when the sound of guns returned.
7th of May, 1919

Elise watched silently, a ghost in her own home, as the workers wrapped the last paintings her and her mother still possessed in brown wax paper and hauled them to the auctioneer’s automobile that was waiting outside of the mansion. They didn’t know that with every picture they were also taking a part of her family’s history; silent witnesses to every scene that ever played out in the hallways or in one of the many rooms. Elise had always thought that her children would run past them one day, perhaps inventing stories for the different people as she had done when she had been a little girl. Now she wasn’t sure if there would even be any children. She blinked away her sadness and turned towards the stairs. Before Elise could leave, she spotted a young man staring at the single painting still left on the wall. He stood at an angle, favoring his right leg, which lead her to believe that he had been wounded. The picture a handsome soldier, dressed in the traditional blue uniform of the K und K - army. His green eyes stared intensely, even through the oil canvas. He wore a bemused smile on his face, and his brown hair was neatly parted to the side. In his right hand he held a silver pocket watch.

“That painting is not part of the sale.” Elise grabbed the frame from its place and attempted to hide it behind her like a child that was about to be snatched from her.

“Vergebt mir eure Freiin.” My apologies your ladyship. The man turned a deep shade of cherry-red and fixed his eyes on his worn brown shoes. Elise noticed the scuffmarks and the front of the boot was slowly detaching itself from the sole.

“I was not going to take it. I was just. I was just admiring it.”

“You’re kind to apologize but there’s no need. I am sure you meant to harm. And there’s no need to call me your ladyship. After all the monarchy and royalty are no more. I am just as bürgerlich or common as you. It is I that must beg forgiveness. I did not mean to snap at you. I am only very protective of this particular painting.” She saw that his eyes had turned misty. She wondered if he had known her brother.

The man smiled shyly at her. “Thank you madam. You are very
kind.” He cleared his throat, “However I must disagree, a woman as beau-
tiful as you could never be common. I bid you a good day then.” He tapped
his hat and walked across the room before she could say anything more.
Elise stared after him, flabbergasted. She considered being offended, as be-
fore the war a man of his social standing would have never dared to speak
to her in that manner, but as she had said herself, she was now a bürg-
liche, and without the family fortune her and her mother had no social
standing at all. And why had he stared at her brother’s portrait?

A tap on her shoulder pulled her out of her musings and back to
reality. She turned around to see the grubby face of an elderly worker.
“Pardon me madam, but we have finished packing up all the paintings.
Will that be all then?”

“Yes, thank you Mayer. All that is left are our personal belongings,
and we will manage those with my uncle’s car. Thank you again for all
your help.”

“I’m just doing my job madam. I’ve done this work many times
since the war ended. Many families like yours have lost their houses in the
past six months, and are moving in with relations. I wish you the best of
luck.”

“Danke Mayer.” Thank you Mayer.

He made a swift bow and left her standing alone in the great room.
Elise felt like a shell, the monarchy had been destroyed and she was now
disappearing with it.

IV

“I can’t believe the cheek of you, calling a woman like her beau-
tiful. Bist narrisch g’worden?” Have you gone crazy? Georg’s friend Willi
shook his head and took a sip of his beer as two sat at the bar of their fa-
vorite pub. They had done this before the war as well, and tried to make it
seem as it was before. But nothing was at it was.

“I don’t know what got into me” Georg tried to explain himself.
“She just looked so miserable standing in that empty hall, her entire life in
shambles. I guess I just wanted to cheer her up.”

“You think her life is shambles? She probably has some rich relatives she can flee to and will be married off to a rich Industrialist or something. It’s us you should be worried about.”

It was as if Willi’s bitterness was dripping into his beer and sustained him over and over as he continued to drink. Georg eyed the sleeve that was pinned to his friend’s chest where his left arm should have been. It was the price that Willi had paid to the Fates to let him come home from the Eastern front. Silence built between the two, as it often did now. Both lost in their own thoughts, an invisible wall constructed of the horrors they had lived through. Before the war they had been able to talk about anything but neither of them knew how to put the memories they carried with them into words.

Georg tried to break the tension, “Is there even such a thing as a rich industrialist any longer?”

“I don’t know. There probably is, someone always gets rich off of wars.”

“You’re probably right. And I probably have gone mad. I’m lucky she didn’t send the police after me for paying her a compliment.”

They gave each other a grim smile.

When there was nothing left to say, Willi drained the last dredges of the golden liquid and stood up from their table.

“Ich bin dann mal weg.” I best be off then. “See you again tomorrow?”

“Yes, I think so. I’d rather not be in the house when my father has come home and dinner isn’t served yet. He loves reminding me that he holds a steady job while I am a temp worker.”

“You have to learn how to stand up to him Georg. Der fette Sauhund, that fat bastard, wouldn’t be able to hold his job either if he had a knee like yours.

“I am aware of that. He just isn’t.” Georg smiled at Willi, grateful for the words of encouragement. I’ll just have to stick it out until next fall until I am at University again.”

“Well, until then you’ve got me and liquid courage.”
The two clasped hands in parting, slowly dismantling another brick of the wall the war had put up between their friendship.

V

21st of May 1919

The first noise that Georg heard was the scream. It was short, hacked into tiny pieces, not like the long screech that came from his mother after she had discovered the two dead mice their cat had brought into the kitchen. Short. Short and filled with anguish. A sharp pain went through his knee and Georg began to feel a warm trickle down his lower leg. He wanted to tell the man who was screaming to shut up, but instead of words, there were only more screams. The howling was his.

Georg awoke in a puddle of fear. It had drenched his pajamas and seeped into the mattress of his childhood. His forehead was moistened with terror and the smell dug deep into his nostrils, filling him with even more panic. He tried to jump out of bed and run to the bedroom window, but with a jerk his knee gave out and with a loud thud of humiliation he landed on the wooden floor.

“Verdammt Scheisse!” Damn Shit. He swore under his breath. Tears were creeping into his eyes and he tried to crawl to crawl to the window. How pathetic he was, a worm inching along the floor. His self-hatred pulsated through his body and Georg clenched his teeth so to stop from biting though his tongue. When he reached the wall below the window he tried to grab the windowsill but his fingers just missed by an inch.

“Wertlos, wertlos, wertlos.” Worthless, worthless, worthless. With every word he punched himself in the stomach, to punish himself for his weakness. He was pitiful creature, a useless cripple who was not worthy of being called a war hero. It was now almost exactly a year that he had been wounded and sent home. The only thing his father had said was that it was lucky the doctors had dug an English bullet out of him, otherwise
people might have thought that he wasn’t up for the fighting any longer. “Wertlos, wertlos, wertlos.” Worthless, worthless, worthless. The insult became a mantra, one word with every jab. A steady rhythm, so that each blow fortified his knowledge of how little worth he had. Slowly the hatred gave way to hopelessness and the muttering turned into quiet sobs from deep inside his chest, only allowed to break free in the dead of night. Georg turned back into his bed and dragged himself back to the mattress that was still soaked from his nightmare. He hauled himself up and curled up into a tiny ball, while despair continued to stream out of him.

VI

Elise stormed out of her uncle’s house into the balmy spring air. She knew she would have to pay the consequences for her behavior when she returned but she hadn’t been able to hold back any longer. How dare he suggest that they put Mama in an asylum? Couldn’t he see that she was grieving? Not just the loss of her son, but also the loss of the life they all had lived before the war? Elise huffed indignantly, and tried to channel her anger into her stride, taking brisk steps to widen the distance between her and her uncle. It’s not like we would be able to afford a doctor, she thought. We could barely keep the house heated this winter, not too mention scraping together enough to buy bread. She felt like screaming as she made her way to the Inn river but then thought better of it, she wouldn’t put it past her uncle to put her in an asylum as well. Lost in her rage she barely paid any attention to her surrounding and sat down on a bench facing the river.

Elise gave a small jump as a young man next to her spoke “Guten Tag.” Good day.

“Excuse me sir, I didn’t see you sitting here. I shall find a different space.”

“Don’t leave on my account madam.”

“You won’t find me improper if I stay seated next to a man without a chaperone.” He laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m much to common to find you
improper.”

Elise took a closer look and then looked down onto the shoes he was wearing. They had scuffmarks and the soles had begun to detach from the rest of the shoe.

“Now I must beg forgiveness again. I didn’t recognize you at all. You were one of the workers from the auction house.”

“Well day laborer would be more precise, but yes. I understand you not recognizing me, that must have been a very difficult day for you.”

“Not as easy as others but not as hard as some. It feels silly because compared to other losses material things are quite inconsequential.” Elise wanted to continue but stopped herself. She barely knew the man.

As if he had reading her thoughts he said, “Here I am sitting next to a lady and I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Georg Reuter.” He tipped his hat to her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Elise van Theinburg. It used to be von, but all that changed as you probably know.”

“So you are a relation to Lieteunant van Theinburg then? I thought so when I saw the picture at the house but wasn’t sure.”

Staring down at her hands Elise murmured, “He was my brother.” She looked up, directly at Georg, who was nervously pulling on the sleeves of his jacket., “Did you know him then? Did you know him in the war?”

He stammered. “I- I did. I was there when he. Pardon me, but I must leave now.” His face had turned ashen and he got up and grabbed a crutch that had been propped up on the bench. Before Elise could say anything else he began to walk as quickly as he could down the pathway towards the city.
FADE IN:

ESTABLISHING - BERLIN

EXT. BERLIN STREET - MORNING

Large apartment buildings rise above the street level. They tower over MARGARET as she walks down the street. The older German-style buildings of brick are painted with colorful murals on the sides. The sidewalk is cracked with every step. Most of the shops on the street level have rolldadens, which are large metal shutters that cover windows, covering their windows. Margaret rushes past them.

Margaret, 22, wears high boots and a nice jacket. Her hair is pulled back, but wisps of it escapes. She claws them back. She has a large purse swung on her left shoulder, and she looks nervously at street signs while biting her lip: “Rosestrasse,” “Orchideestrasse,” “Edelweissstrasse,” “Gänseblümchenstrasse.”

Stopping for a second, Margaret looks at her phone and reads “Blu-
menstrasse.” She peers left and right before moving quickly again down the street. She pushes past PEOPLE as they walk with headphone in.

EXT. BERLIN U-BAHN STATION - MORNING

The U-Bahn station is busy with many PEOPLE. The platform is off the ground, and the ground and railings are painted yellow. The HORN of the train comes, and people push forward. The yellow train comes into the station, and people push on.

Margaret runs up the stairs with a scared look, and she barely gets into the train.

INT. BERLIN U-BAHN TRAIN CAR - MORNING

The train inside has yellow, hard seats with different colored personal ads posted high. A large map is by the door, and it lights up with the next station.

Margaret is out of breath as she looks nervously at the people around her. PEOPLE stand by the doors and in the aisle. Walking forward, the train jerks forward, and Margaret trips and almost falls into the lap of a STRANGER. Margaret smiles sheepishly at the stranger.

MARGARET
(in broken German) I’m sorry.

Margaret continues to move forward in the slim train car, and she spots an open seat. People specifically stand around the open seat next to KHALID.

Khalid, late 50’s, wears worker overalls with a name plate. His hands are dirty, and there is a smudge of grease on his nose. A backpack sits on his lap. His head looks down at the piece of paper in his hands. Khalid
MUTTERS softly to himself.

Margaret stops in front of Khalid and pauses. Khalid glances up. He shifts over in his seat, and Margaret sits down next him.

Khalid glances up, staring to the front of the train, and he MUTTERS softly. Margaret peers over at him, and Khalid glances at her. He swallows and looks down at his lap again. He goes back to MUTTERING to himself.

AHMED, mid-20’s, turns to Khalid. Ahmed wears the matching uniform of Khalid with work boots. His hair is put back, and he has a clean face. He throws a wrapper at Khalid, and Margaret jerks out of the way.

AHMED
(in Arabic)
Stop muttering. You look crazy. (in German)
Hey, how are you?

Ahmed winks at Margaret, and Margaret stares at him, tilting her head to the side. Ahmed watches Margaret, and then he looks away, turning to one of his other friends. Margaret looks forward again. Khalid MUTTERS.

CUT TO:

INT. BERLIN U-BAHN TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Margaret moves through the moving train car, and she holds two large textbooks in her hands. She wears jeans and a nice shirt. Her hair is down today. Her large purse almost smacks SOMEONE in the face, but she pulls it back with a sympathetic smile.
Looking forward, Margaret notices there is only one open seat left open in this train car as PEOPLE crowd around. Margaret lightly pushes forward and sits next to Khalid.

Khalid MUTTERS to himself, glancing up to the front of the train quickly, and then he looks back to the piece of paper on his lap. He does this numerous times.

Ahmed turns to Margaret and smiles.

AHMED
(in German)
Are you new here? Second day on the train. Berlin hasn’t scared you away yet.

Margaret watches Ahmed while biting on her bottom lip. Her eyes narrow in on him as she tilts her head. Ahmed turns to Khalid. He throws a wrapper at Khalid.

AHMED
(in Arabic)
Khalid, you look crazy. Don’t scare the new girl.
(in German)
Don’t worry about Khalid. He’s crazy, but he doesn’t hurt anyone.

Margaret smiles nicely at Ahmed as she pulls out her own piece of paper and reads over it. Khalid continues on with his head bobbing.

CUT TO:

INT. MARGARET’S APARTMENT - NIGHT
Margaret’s apartment is small with barely a kitchen and a small bathroom. Her bed is pressed up against her desk, and an open suitcase waits on the floor. Clothes, books and other personal items are spread out. Sitting down on her bed, Margaret opens her textbook.

MARGARET
(in German)
I’m sorry. Excuse me. Do you speak English? My German is not good. Can you help me please?

Margaret puts down the textbook and takes a bite of her dinner, which is currywurst and French fries.

MARGARET
(in German)
I’m sorry. Excuse me. Do you speak English? My German-- German is--

Margaret sighs and picks up her textbook again. She studies the page with her finger, and then she takes another bite of her food. A mayo-ketchup covered fry drops from her hand, and it splatters all over her book. Margaret lets out a GROAN and picks it up. She wipes the mixture off of her textbook with a napkin. Margaret continues to read.

CUT TO:

INT. BERLIN U-BAHN TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Margaret makes her way down the train car aisle, clutching her purse. Her sneakers and t-shirt does not fit in with the PEOPLE in suits around her.
Margaret sits down next to Khalid, who is again MUTTERING to himself. He has more grease on his face than usual. He runs his hand back through his greasy and whitening hair, and then he shakes his head. Margaret pulls out her textbook and reads again.

CUT TO:

INT. MARGARET’S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Coming into her apartment, Margaret steps out of her wet shoes and onto the cold tile floor. She pulls her wet hair into a ponytail, and she puts on a baggy sweatshirt that reads “University of St. Louis.”

Margaret pulls out three hard rolls from her large bag and then some pasta. She sits down on her bed in her small apartment and pulls out her textbook. She reads.

MARGARET
(in broken German)
How are you? What is your favorite movie? Do you know-- know where the police station is? Do you speak English?

Margaret rips a bite off of her hard roll and reads.

CUT TO:

INT. BERLIN U-BAHN TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Margaret pulls her jacket around her body tightly as others do so. People’s shoes SQUEAK against the floor. She pulls out a textbook out of
her wet bag. Khalid has a paper flattened against his lap, and he stares directly forward. Margaret opens the book.

The U-Bahn train jerks to an immediate stop, and both of them rocket forward. Khalid’s papers falls to the ground. People GROAN around them. Khalid reaches forward for his sheet. She picks it up, and it is soaking wet. Khalid looks sadly at the piece of paper.

MARGARET
(in German) I’m sorry.

KHALID
(in German) Everything is good.

Khalid takes the piece of paper and flattens it against his lap again, his holey backpack getting wet too. He squints at it. A lot of the writing is blotched now.

Giving up, he crumbles up his piece of paper and places it next to him. Khalid stares outside the window at all the buildings that past. Margaret goes back to reading her textbook.

KHALID
(in German) Can I get out?

Margaret watches him, and he stares at her. Khalid stands and tries to walk past her, and finally Margaret moves. The train jerks to a stop, and Khalid exits.

A MAN steps beside Margaret and motions for her to move in. She does. A piece of paper CRUMPLES as she sits on it, and Margaret picks it up and reads it.
CUT TO:

INT. MARGARET’S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Margaret takes off her wet jacket and shoes, and she pulls out her textbook from her big bag and her dinner. Walking over to her bed, Margaret sits down and pulls out a notebook. She opens the textbook to reveal Khalid’s piece of paper, which is now dry but is blotched from the water. Carefully Margaret writes on a new piece of paper what Khalid had written.

CUT TO:

INT. BERLIN U-BAHN TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Walking down the train car aisle, Margaret wears a sweater while other PEOPLE on the train wear heavy jackets. She notices the open seat next to Khalid, and with a shy smile on her face, she sits down next to him.

Margaret pulls her bag closer to her as Khalid stares down at his new sheet of paper. She carefully glances over his shoulder to see that it barely a quarter full. Margaret pulls out the sheet she created for him, and she placed it on her lap.

MARGARET
(in German) Excuse me.
Slowly, Khalid turns to her.

MARGARET
(in broken German) Yesterday your sheet was wet. I made you a new one.
Khalid takes the sheet from her outstretched hands and looks over the sheet of paper. A smile crosses his face.

KHALID
You know English?

MARGARET
(in broken German)
I am American. My German isn’t very good.

KHALID
English is not good. Thank you for this.

MARGARET
I added a few things on there.

KHALID
Thank you. Why are you here?

MARGARET
University.

KHALID
(in German)
I tell Ahmed all the time he should go to university, but he doesn’t listen. We come to Germany for a better life, and he doesn’t even go to get it.

Margaret watches him very intently, her eyes on his lips, with her head tilted to the side. Khalid’s eyes become wide and his mouth opens. He holds up his new piece of paper.
KHALID
Thank you. You study German?

MARGARET
Yes. I try.

KHALID
You help me with English, I help you with German?

MARGARET
Yes.

KHALID
(in German)
Let’s start.

Margaret pulls out her textbook, and Khalid pulls out more of his sheets of paper. An excited smile is on his face as he points to a thing on his sheet, and Margaret looks over his finger.

CUT TO:

INT. MARGARET’S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Margaret takes off her sweater and removes her shoes. Sitting down on her bed, Margaret takes out her dinner and then she takes out her textbook. By passing that, she takes out a fresh sheet of paper with Khalid’s writing on it.

MARGARET
(in German)
I have that thing, do you want it? I like Germany because it is
beautiful and the people are friendly. My favorite place is the Tier Garten. In my opinion, I think that that is a good idea. My German is good if you give me a minute to answer.

Margaret leans over and takes a bite of her currywurst. She waits until she is done chewing before she moves back over to Khalid’s sheet to read aloud again.

FADE OUT:
“Hello everyone and welcome to our first tour of the day for Happily Ever After; the magical world where all of your favorite Fairy Tale creatures and people live and exist, just like you and I.” Betty beamed at the tourists. She had been hired here at Happily Ever After only earlier this year, but she had quickly gained the reputation as the best tour guide. The tourists all thought she was entertaining. Betty straightened the wrinkles out of her yellow taxi cab of a uniform and cleared her throat, her brown curls bouncing as her head moved.

“Today you will all have the pleasure of getting to see the world that was created in all of our childhoods. Each and every one of the people and places you will see today are in fact real and living their lives, so please be respectful and don’t eat the flowers.” Betty chuckled as she smiled to the group of tourists. All seventeen of the ugly, camera-clicking, brain-dead people chuckled along and murmured their excitement. Someone took a photo of Betty and the large wooden door behind her. “All righty everyone, if you would please follow me, we will begin our tour!”

A small cheer went up from the group of tourists as Betty pulled the gold key from her pocket. The key fit the size of the door. It took both hands for Betty just to hold and turn it. The door unlocked with a loud thud that echoed around the abandoned store that the tourists were standing in.
The large wooden door had been discovered in the back of an abandoned shopping mall one afternoon by some curious kids. They had poked their heads through and wandered into the magical world, later to return home, sick from all the candy they had eaten. The Sugar Queen from Candy Land wasn’t very happy when Betty’s current boss had gone to talk with her, apologizing for the children. Awkwardly, to Betty’s distaste for the story, her boss and the Sugar Queen had really hit it off. After a few hours of a sweet, unspeakable activity, Happily Ever After came into being. Betty now gave tours for Happily Ever After three times a week, sticking to the approved path of course.

“Our first stop will be a place you all know and love, the homes of the Three Little Pigs,” Betty said. All of the tourists made sounds of approval and raised their cameras, shuffling through the large door frame.

The tourists were amazed when they exited the large doorway and entered into a forest. The door was now part of a tree. Everyone immediately turned around, some people walked around the large tree to see what was on the other side. They were surprised to find that it was just a tree. A very large, normal tree. People immediately took pictures of everything.

Betty instructed everyone in her best tour giving voice, “Alright everybody, I need you to listen closely. Please keep in mind that these are actual people and creatures. Everything you see here is living its life in an uninterrupted manner, so please help us to keep it that way. Don’t go picking or smelling any magical flowers. Also, if the rocks start talking to you, be polite. We are guests here in their world. Please follow me and stick together.” Everyone scuttled after Betty, they smiled and nodded at the fact that they were walking on the Yellow Brick Road.

The first stop of the tour was only a short walk into the woods. The large trees, often big enough that it took ten tourists to reach around them, were spread very thickly throughout the forest. You rarely could see more than a tree or two ahead of you before another tree blocked your view.

The group exited the woods into a small grassy field where three little men were working on the roof of a house. As the group got closer, their sounds of excitement got louder. There was lots of camera clicking. The little men were not in fact little men, but three little pigs. Each pig
wore a different outfit, which Betty had never seen them change or wash. One wore a flannel with khakis, another wore a set of jean overalls, and the third wore a suit. Today they were working on the roof of the stick house.

“Hello, pigs!” Betty called. The pigs all stopped working at the sound of her voice. They all turned around and waved.

“Good morning, Ms. Betty,” they all oinked in unison, waving their tools in the air. The tourists loved this. More pictures were taken.

The group watched the three for a time, marveling at their craftmanship and strength before moving farther along down the road. They entered back into the woods, which had now become a nice birch forest. White trees punctured the leafy forest floor.

“Next up we will be coming to the house of Little Red Riding Hood’s Grandmother.” Betty said.

The crowd cheered at getting to meet the next famous Fairy Tale character. They walked through the woods for a short time before coming upon a cute little cottage, the smell of freshly baked cookies wafted through the air.

Betty didn’t say anything to the tourists, but something about the cookies smelled different than normal. Part of being a Fairy Tale person is that you often did the same thing every day. Grandma always baked the most delicious sugar cookies when Betty brought a tour through. Grandma loved sharing the cooking with the new people and hearing about their lives. She was a typical Grandma.

As the group rounded the last bend of trees, they are met with a grizzly sight. Well, more of a wolfly sight. There, hung above the path in the trees was the Big Bad Wolf, dangling by his torn-out intestines. His mangled body was torn to shreds as blood dribbled from his stomach onto the path. A decent sized puddle had already formed. One tourist quietly snapped a shot of the scene.

“Well,” Betty stammered, “that most certainly is not part of the tour.”
After the discovery of the dead Fairy Tale creature and a couple hundred pictures, Betty had quickly evacuated all of the normal humans out of Happily Ever After. The tours were quickly shut down and canceled until further notice.

The creatures of Happily Ever After were more disturbed by the sight of the Big Bad Mutilated Wolf than any of the tourists had been. A large group of creatures had quickly gathered around the corpse. A few squirrels volunteered to cut the branches that the body was hanging from. Once the body was free from the tree, it fell down onto the path, splashing the puddle of blood onto all the creatures who had stopped to watch. Up close, the sight was worse than anyone had imagined.

The intestines of the body had been pulled out through a large gash in the wolf’s side. The mixture of pink and brown rope-like substance had been ripped out by the tree’s branches, leaving chunks of torn, bloody skin in the tree. The body was covered by the inverted digestion track, as well as hunks of digested meat. Most of the wolf’s limbs were only connected by a flabby slab of skin. One of the arms ripped off as the body hit the ground. Some of the hair on the arms had been burned off, revealing large cuts and bruises underneath. There were portions of the wolfs body where bones were visible, the skin peeling back to reveal what was underneath. The wolf’s body was missing a total of three fingers and a leg, which were later found to still be in the tree.

The stench was the worst part. Mixed together with the smell of Grandma’s sugar cookies, everything was rotten and molding flesh. Most interested creatures had been turned away by the smell before they saw the body.

As the crowd stood around the puddle and the heap of flesh and carnage, Grandma attempted to pass around the cookies in hope that they would make everyone feel better. Not a single cookie was eaten. It was the first time anyone had ever rejected a cookie from Grandma.

All these events occurred about a month ago. Since then, ten more
murders had occurred, and a unicorn and a singing frog had disappeared. Their bodies hadn’t found.

Hansel and Gretel were found two days after the wolf. They had been hung up by their ankles, a large gash in their necks revealing their veins and esophagus’, which was deemed the cause of death. Their spines had also been ripped out, broken apart at the neck.

Tinkerbell was found naked at the bottom of Pirate Cove. Her wings had been ripped off, leaving two deep gouges in her upper back. Large bite marks covered her bare legs.

Papa Bear had been impaled by a spike. The large stick entered through his mouth and protruded from his back. His neck and jaw both hung at broken angles.

The Three Blind Mice were found skewered and roasted above a cooking fire in the woods.

Cinderella was found in her castle’s dungeon. Suspended in the air, every limb was tied with a rope to a nearby wall fixture. Broken glass slippers punctured her entire body.

Two of the seven dwarves were found in a mine. They were tied together with barbed wire and each had a pickaxe embedded in their face, the tips just poking out the back of their skulls.

Thanks to these events, Betty was no longer able to do her job. Since she wasn’t required to give tours, Betty used her knowledge of the Happily Ever After world to help search for the missing creatures. She had found three of the bodies in the past month. The sight of the mangled and deformed creatures eventually numbed Betty. She was no longer her cheerful self.

After a long day of searching through the forests, Betty followed the main trail back to the town hall of Nottingham, where Robin Hood was leading the investigations. When Betty arrived, Robin had been joined by Snow White, Merida, Prince Charming, The Ginger Bread Man, and the Sugar Queen. The room was silent, a sound that most Fairy Tale creatures had become accustomed to.

“I didn’t find anyone today.” Betty murmured as she entered the
room. Grunts and sighs were all she received. The members of the search team all sat around the room, a large table with a hodge podge looking map stood in the center of the room.

To some it may seem confusing how the worlds of all Fairy Tale creatures blended together. There weren’t exactly any borders, each world just melded together to meet another. The map depicted each world perfectly, showing every house, hut, campsite, tree and hill. Whenever something changed in the Fairy Tale world, it appeared on the map. That was how they found the Three Blind Mice. The campsite they were found at hadn’t previously been on the map, but it appeared the day they died.

People were starting to get desperate. Each town center had been turned into a refugee camp, a place where everyone was welcome to come and stay. Everyone hoped that there would be safety in numbers.

After everyone shared what they had or hadn’t discovered during their searching, the team went their separate ways. Only Robin Hood, Prince Charming, and Betty remained behind.

“Its been five days and we have yet to find another body.” Robbin Hood sighed. He rose from his chair, the wooden legs squeaked as the chair was pushed back. He walked over the map, laid his elbows on the table, and looked for some sort of change.

“Cheer up, Robby,” Prince Charming said as he rose from his chair. He met Robin Hood at the table and started rubbing his back. “We will figure out what’s going on.”

Robin Hood smiled at the prince and weakly nodded. Once the disappearances had started occurring, everyone’s character personalities had drastically began wavering. Prince Charming was the first to change. Instead of saving princesses in distress, he started hooking up with anyone who was willing.

Peter Pan began aging. He didn’t take it well. Witches of the woods turned into trees. The remaining Two Bears ate on the floor. They tried sushi. Snow White and The Five remaining dwarves did exactly what everyone thought a single woman and five lonely men would do in a cabin all alone. It was consentful.

With a quick hand squeeze, Prince Charming left Robin Hood’s
side and began walking towards the building’s stairs; Robin soon followed after him.

Betty stood up from her chair and worked her way over to the table. She often spent time after everyone left for the day looking at the map. After a few minutes of scanning, she was surprised to find that one of The Three Littles Pigs houses had disappeared.

“That’s odd,” Betty whispered. “Their houses only disappear when the Big Bad Wolf destroys them.”

Since the Big Bad Wolf no longer existed, Betty figured it was worth a look. She left the building and made her way through town and over the river and through the woods to her next destination.

Betty lay on the cold wooden table. It had been a few hours since she had awoken and in that time nothing particularly interesting had happened. The first thing she had noticed was that she was strapped down. Bound to the table by leather straps around her ankles and wrists, Betty wasn’t able to do much more than wiggle her torso. She had tried pulling on the braces to detach them from the table, but quickly found that they were secured by an unnecessary number of nails. Whoever put her here didn’t know how to swing a hammer. All of the nails were bent and crooked, save the ones that were actually able to make it into the nice oak table.

She found she was in the house of the Three Bears. It had been a few months since anyone had seen the other two bears. The search committee had looked, but eventually they stopped after a few hundred other creatures went missing. Most of them showed up a week or two after they disappeared. Every single one was always murdered, mutilated, scarred, bit, eaten, cut, bruised, and dumped somewhere to be found.

After hopelessly struggling until the adrenalin of her situation died down, Betty slowly came to accept that she was going to be the next victim in the almost year-long spree of deaths. The most recent count of the missing had showed that three hundred and sixty-four people had disappeared.
It was now a fully three hundred and sixty-five with Betty. 
Laying there on the table, there was nothing that Betty could do but wait until the time came to die. After a full year of deaths, guts and gore, Betty wasn’t surprised to find that she didn’t cared if she died. She had become numbed by everything to the point where it didn’t bother her if she was one of the victims. She knew it would eventually happen after the magical door to her world disappeared. It took a while, but she came to accept that she would die in this world and not her own. 

Every creature and person had reached the point where they didn’t care if they were the next one to die. Fairy Tale creatures had started to board up their doors and windows in hopes that they would be safe behind the barricades. It was quickly discovered that nothing would save them from the killer. Everyone eventually started leaving their doors and windows open at night, hoping they would be the next one to have their suffering over a missing love one ended. There wasn’t a single clue as to who the killer was, but Betty was sure that she was going to find out very soon. She was almost looking forward to it. 

Judging by the shadows on the branches outside the window, a few more hours passed before the door to the house opened behind Betty. She had unsuccessfully tried a few more times to remove herself from the bonds during the wait, but never made any leeway. Laying there in the silence, Betty had longingly watched out the window above the sink to her right and wished that the birds would at least be chirping, but even the animals of Happily Ever After had come to share the same grim trepidation that had infected everyone else. It wasn’t until the door opened that Betty truly felt the panic that had been hiding inside of her. 

Footsteps moved slowly into the house as the door swung closed. Betty could hear the creature remove its jacket and hang it on the coat rack. It even took the time to untie and remove their shoes. 

“Hello Betty,” greeted an unfamiliar, childlike voice. “I’ve been waiting a long time to get to meet you.” The tiny footsteps of the creature padded around Betty’s head to the left side of the table. Betty rolled her head to the side but couldn’t see the origin of the voice. There were only the two broken chairs, a wall with a crooked painting of the bear family,
the ugly green painted stairs, and a sack of porridge oats. “Please give me one second.” The tiny voice said as it attempted to scramble up onto the table.

Betty watched as a very small pair of hands reached up over the edge of the table. With a strength beyond its size, the miniature creature launched itself up next to Betty. Now standing next to Betty was the killer. The dangerous murderer that had infected all of their lives, killed and slaughtered their friends and family, and the presumable reason that the one-way Betty had home had disappeared. The creature responsible for Betty losing her job, the friends she had made here, and all the hours of sleep that she had forfeited in order to help find the missing Fairy Tale people. Betty was expecting some scary, monstrous, shadowy creature that fed on people’s fear, instead she got some tiny little redhead girl with an oversized lollypop.

“Who the fuck are you?” Betty asked angrily, staring down the toddler as she shook on the table. “As soon as I get out of these stupid straps, I’m going to strangle you and rip those fucking tiny pigtails off of your tiny fucking head!”

Betty thrashed on the table as the small child watched her curiously, periodically licking the lollypop.

“Well you certainly have a potty mouth.” The girl said as she stepped over Betty to the other side of the table. “I’ll take care of that.” Reaching down, the child brushed the sharpened edge of the lollypop along Betty’s leg and a shallow cut appeared. Betty thrashed and screamed even more at the girl, completely irate with everything that had happened.

The girl sighed and watched Betty throw herself around on the table in rage. With a quick smack to Betty’s face, the girl produced a small splatted of blood as Betty’s nose broke. Still appearing curious, the child slowly licked the blood off of the sucker and tasted it as she watched Betty.

“Oh, you’re going to be a fun one,” the child said as it dragged the candy along Betty’s arm, cutting a large gash right below the shoulder. “My mommy always said you were my daddy’s best worker.”

Once the sharpened lollypop was removed from her arm, Betty stopped shaking. “You can’t be one of the Happily Ever After creature,”
Betty screamed at the child, “sure, there are evil creatures, but you’re just fucking satanic!” The girl listened as she licked more of Betty’s blood off of the lollypop.

The little girl chuckled as she plopped down next to Betty on the table. The girl randomly cut Betty across the stomach and then proceeded to taste the blood, appearing to search for a difference. Unsatisfied with the taste of Betty’s blood, the child would periodically try blood from other areas of Betty’s body.

“You know,” the little girl hummed, “You really shouldn’t talk to the princess that way. After all, I am the only reason you have this nice job. Well, had. I guess I’m also the reason you lost your job.” Betty stared at the crazy child, the killer’s identity frustratingly sat on the tip of her tongue.

Suddenly, like a fire cracker, everything clicked for Betty. The candy weapon, a princess, the size and age of the child, her daddy’s best worker, the reason Betty had received and lost her job. This was the demon spawn of her Boss and the Sugar Queen. The girl smirked as she watched Betty figure out her identity.

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“Let’s have some fun, shall we?” The girl grinned as she started snapping Betty’s ribs. “I guess our kinds were never supposed to mix. After all, look what I turned into.” Betty could only catch a few of the princess’s words as she faded into unconsciousness.

Betty awoke for the second time from her unconscious state to find that the red-haired girl had finally stopped cutting her and was happily sitting in the corner alternating between licking the blood off of the lollypop and nibbling on Betty’s amputated leg. Betty looked down to where her knee had been shattered and then pulled from the rest of her leg. Her wrists and ankle were heavily bruised from all of the shaking and pulling that she had done. There were cuts of all sizes and shapes covering her now blood-stained body. Some of the blood had dried and crunched when she moved because of how long the girl had been toying with her. From what she could tell, Betty was missing the middle finger on her left hand and the pointer and middle finger on her right. The left-hand lay limp in the bond, completely smashed by that evil rainbow candy on a stick. Her right hand
was fine but bled pretty heavily onto the floor. The girl had spent some time sucking the blood right from Betty’s missing fingers on the right hand, after she bit them off and swallowed them.

Betty stood behind the door as she waited for the tiny devil child to re-enter the house. Leaning against the wall with her one good leg, Betty clutched the evil lollypop by the stick. The girl had thought that she would be safe leaving her torture stick next to Betty on the table as she went outside to use the bathroom. Betty quickly ripped her broken hand through the leather strap, almost passing out a third time from the sharp pain. She had managed to get all her other attached appendages out as well before hiding behind the door.

Betty waited for the girl to return. As the tiny child came skipping through the door, Betty swung with every ounce of strength she could summon and cracked the girl on the head with the lollypop. A small scream escaped from the child as her face broke on the hardwood floor. Betty grabbed the red pigtails and smashed the girl against the wall. As her limp body thumped against the floor, Betty took another swing with the lollypop and severed the girl’s legs. Using the flat side, Betty also crushed the girl’s arms.

Since the child was no longer moving, Betty tossed the bloody sucker into the sink and hopped over to the body. Grabbing the child again by the hair, Betty slumped her up against the wall. After making her way over to the counter, Betty grabbed the small gun she had started carrying with her the past year. With four quick shots, Betty put enough holes in the child’s head to make sure that she would stay dead.

With the last bullet leaving the chamber, Betty smiled as she dropped the gun to the ground, thankful that everything was finally over. She made her way to the door and using a walking stick that she had found propped against the wall, Betty made her way back into town.
A Terrible Winter’s Dream
Alison Tollas

Everything was familiar, but nothing made sense. Clara perceived shapes of people she barely knew lurking nearby; she remembered she had to tell one of them something important. Then, she was in a room which she accepted as her bedroom from home, even though it was missing the soft carpet and large window. She was trying to pack to go back to college, but she couldn’t find what was needed and her mom kept rushing in to yell at her to hurry up. Suddenly, the room disappeared, and she stood in the center of a wide, straight highway. A semi truck sped toward her like a charging rhino and would hit her within the next second. Clara realized that she was going to die, as desperately as she didn’t want to accept it. With all the speed she was capable of, she lunged to the right shoulder.

Clara was on the floor of her tiny dorm room, quivering uncontrollably. While sleeping, she had flung herself off her narrow bed and over the unorganized pile of textbooks scattered on the thin carpet. The first thing she noticed was that she was alive, but it took her a few minutes to actually believe it. Then, she felt a throbbing pain in her left knee and burning sensation on her right elbow. She must have hit her knee on the ground or the concrete wall her bed was up against. Sobbing, she checked her injuries in the dark. This wasn’t a new experience for her, but it had been months since her last night terror.

No voices could be heard from the hallway, so she must not have
screamed and alerted the other residents on her floor. This was an incredible relief. In bed once again, she reached for her knee, which was radiating tortuous blades of pain. There was no one to comfort her, and there never was when this happened. She continued shaking for what seemed like hours, enduring the sharp ache and only thinking about the fear.

“I had another bad night terror,” Clara said, rubbing her knee, which was still sore two weeks after the incident. The day after that night she could barely walk to her classes.

Dr. Nelson nodded once, her light blue eyes narrowing. “Have you tried what we discussed before?” Clara was supposed to put on an alarm and wake up 30 minutes before her night terrors usually started. This had worked in the past, when she was living at home and had a more predictable sleep schedule, but now, it seemed like too much of an inconvenience.

She told Dr. Nelson that she found that if she went to sleep after midnight, she usually didn’t have a night terror. The night of the last incident she was so tired she was sleeping by 11:00.

The doctor nodded again. “You just finished up with finals, correct? The stress probably had something to do with it, too.”

Clara instantly agreed. She didn’t think it was right, though, that she should still be having them. Night terrors were something children had and grew out of eventually. Why did she, at twenty years old, have to worry every night about injuring herself or waking up everyone on her floor? At least it wasn’t as bad as when she was younger. She would sometimes get them weekly, then, instead of a few each year.

“I can help you set up an appointment with a sleep doctor, but there isn’t much that can be done besides going on medication,” Dr. Nelson said, typing something on her computer.

“That’s okay,” Clara said. She had already decided that she wasn’t ready to give up on waiting for them to go away naturally. “I’ll see if I have another one this winter, first.”
Clara’s older brother Matt strolled in from the kitchen one overcast January afternoon to ask his sister if she wanted to go cross country skiing with him. The siblings had come home from their respective colleges for winter break. Clara worked in their town’s public library when she was home, but Matt was currently jobless and didn’t have anything to do until he went back to school the next week.

“Naw, my knee still hurts,” she replied from where she was lying on the old, tan couch in the small living room. Even a month after her last night terror, she sometimes felt tweaks of pain. It was enough to serve as an excuse not to hang out with her brother.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that,” Matt said, sitting down on the armrest by her feet and cracking the knuckles of his long fingers. “You had one of those night freak outs again.” He smiled smugly at her, his white teeth shining.

Clara knew he just wanted to argue, which made her want to argue, too. “You know, people don’t make fun of people who have mental conditions. It’s not something they can help.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty obvious you have a mental condition,” Matt said, losing control of his grin. He laughed loudly and stood up, heading back for the kitchen. Although they hadn’t been as close as they used to be as children, Matt still knew how to annoy her. Obviously, Clara understood there was nothing she could do about her problem. It didn’t make her feel less embarrassed about it, though. She could only get back at him.

“At least I know how to take care of myself!” Clara shouted after him. “You can’t even make a grilled cheese sandwich right!”

Matt stopped and whipped around, morphing his face in a comical pout. “Don’t insult my cooking skills, sis. You know I can make a delicious bowl of cereal.”

Clara gave up on her coldness and allowed herself a smile. She had forgotten how fun it was to argue and joke with her brother. They knew
each other’s insecurities so well, and they also knew that they were mostly joking when they teased each other about them.

“Why don’t we go take the dog for a walk? It’s actually pretty warm outside,” Matt asked, still in a good mood.

“No thanks,” Clara said, grabbing her thick fantasy novel from the end table and opening up to where her bookmark was. She had nothing to do all day, but she wasn’t about to give her brother what he wanted. Now he wanted to hang out with her, after ignoring her basically all through high school and now through college.

Matt’s smile became less dazzling. He took the leash and harness from the hook in the entryway, and their lovable golden retriever barged into the room.

The next morning, Clara decided that she needed to be outside. The sun was bright, reflecting off the additional layer of fluffy snow that had appeared overnight and coated the trees in white. She had slept in until almost 9:00 am but was inexplicably tired. The cold air would feel nice, she thought, as she looked out the window of her second-floor bedroom.

She ate breakfast and got ready. It took a while to do so because she ended up lying on her bed looking at social media on her phone for a half an hour. At last, she was outside, the soft wind bathing the exposed skin on her face between her fuzzy headband and long blue scarf. Her dog Jupiter was with, of course. His teeth snapped together as he tried to eat the snow that had collected on the scraggly bushes at the front of the house.

Clara’s clunky winter boots crunched loudly as the pair traveled the sidewalk of the quiet street. She wondered if Jupiter was irritated by the sound. When she tried to walk with less noise, she was only slightly successful. They passed houses like their own, with wind-blown snow stuck in clumps to the siding and weighed-down maples and pines in their front yards. She breathed through her nose to pick up her favorite mixture of woodsmoke and clean winter air. The two had to keep switching sides
of the road to avoid icy and unshoveled sections of the sidewalk.

When they turned onto another street, Clara saw a group of children in bright-colored jackets and snow pants having a snowball fight in one yard and an older man in a blaze orange hat putting away Christmas decorations in another. She could still hear the children’s angry accusations and playful shouts as they turned again, this time back towards home.

Jupiter stopped to sniff at the base of a young, thin tree. Clara let her grip on the loop at the end of the leash relax as she waited for him to move on. The sun was now covered by a dense sheet of clouds that had begun to overcome the light blue sky. Now, the breeze felt less refreshing and more cold.

She looked back at Jupiter, who had stopped sniffing and was staring across the street, his tail slowly swaying back and forth. A huge German Shepherd was glaring back, its teeth bared in a savage threat. Clara immediately looked for a leash, but there was none. Her grip tensed, and she grabbed another section of her dog’s leash with her other hand as she prepared to slowly walk away.

Jupiter had never encountered a mean dog in his seven years of life. He didn’t seem concerned at all that the German Shepherd was moving toward him, growling an obvious warning with foamy saliva escaping his black lips. Clara pulled the leash as hard as she could, but the naive golden refused to move, thinking he was going to meet a new friend. The other dog charged across the snow-covered street in a few athletic bounds and sank his teeth into Jupiter’s furry pelt. There was nothing Clara could do. She let go of the leash and screamed as the scene merged into blackness and fear.

Clara woke up the next morning knowing she had experienced an incredibly realistic night terror the previous night. She remembered her mom coming into her room to wake her up by turning on the lights. After she left, Clara had laid awake, shaking and crying until she fell asleep hours
This was severely different than a regular night terror. It had seemed like she had woken up for the day, and she could remember exactly what had happened. Clara reached over to her nightstand and switched on her phone. The display read 9:42 am, which was near the time she had gone outside in her dream. She slid off the side of her bed and hurried downstairs.

Matt’s room across the hall was empty when she had passed it, and she knew that her parents were at work. Most concerning, the hook for Jupiter’s leash and harness was bare.

Clara thought about how ridiculous her thought process was. There was no possibility her dream had shown the future. She had a sleep disorder, not a superpower. She quickly put on her jacket, gloves, and boots anyway.

The plan Clara decided on, as she rushed to get outside, was to drive her normal route for walking Jupiter and hope she could meet Matt before they turned to go back home. It was guaranteed he wouldn’t listen to her if she told him what she dreamed. There was a chance, however, that he would be convinced to get in the car with Jupiter if she said she wanted to go with them to the park on the other side of town. He had wanted to hang out with her yesterday, so all she would have to do was explain why she had forgotten to change out of pajama pants.

She started the car and quickly wiped the light layer of snow off the windows before cruising out of the driveway and into the street. When she turned, she saw the exact same children playing and man in an orange hat cleaning up his yard. Clara started breathing faster as the fear from her dream emerged into reality.

Matt’s tall figure appeared ahead on the right with Jupiter trotting beside him. They hadn’t reached the corner where she had turned back in her dream, but the sky was getting darker, so Clara knew she didn’t have much time. She parked on the side of the road and ran around the front of the car to meet them.

“Hey, is something wrong?” Matt asked, glancing at her pajama pants and unbrushed mess of hair.
Jupiter greeted her with an excited bark, and she patted his head with her gloved hand. “Um, no. When I woke up I saw that you took Jupiter out, and I wanted to see if you guys would drive over to the park with me.” She smiled as sweetly as possible, hoping he would somehow believe her.

“Wow, you actually want to hang out with me?” he asked, narrowing his eyes. “That’s unlike you.”

“I know, but you leave in a few days and I wanted to talk to you about something.” Clara looked around, but she saw no savage German Shepherd. It must have been just a dream, after all. Now, she was stuck hanging out with her dumb brother. She decided to tell him about what she had dreamed. “It was the weirdest thing, Matt. I had a dream last night that I was walking Jupiter and he got attacked by another dog.”

“That’s why you were screaming last night? Pretty sure it woke up the entire block,” Matt said, smirking. He didn’t move toward the car.

Clara wanted to smash his head in the snowbank. “I change my mind about going to the park. I have work in a few hours.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll let you know if Jupiter picks any fights on the way home.” He chuckled and waved goodbye.

In her panic that morning, she hadn’t stopped long enough to think about how absurd it would be for her to be able to tell the future with her dreams. Her night terror was definitely realistic, but it was already fading away. She left her brother on the sidewalk with Jupiter and started driving home. The man was dragging a Christmas tree out to the curb as she passed. Clara felt sick at the reminder and considered turning back for a second. Large snowflakes began falling. She pulled into her driveway, hoping, for once, that her brother was right.

Her phone rang as she was moving to turn off the car. It was Matt, telling her in a strange voice to come back, quick. She backed into the road like a criminal in a police chase, returning in about a minute despite the slippery road. Matt was holding onto the leash of madly barking Jupiter. Across the street from them the man she had seen earlier was fighting off a snarling German Shepherd with the Christmas tree.

“I called the police because that dog looks rabid,” Matt said as Clara
rushed out of the car and opened the back door.

“Here, get Jupiter inside,” she said. Her brother dragged him toward the car. Meanwhile, the man kept the tree between him and the German Shepherd as they circled around his yard. The dog seemed to be losing interest, as the snow was deep and difficult to run through.

Clara had some treats in her pocket that she used to get Jupiter in the back seat. Once he was inside with the door closed, she stood by her brother on the sidewalk, wishing she could do something to help the man.

“That dog came out of nowhere and started stalking some little kids,” Matt said, staring at the scene, his voice somber. “It’s lucky that guy got its attention so they could get inside.” It was also lucky that she had stalled her brother long enough so he and Jupiter hadn’t met up with the dog first, she thought. Jupiter would have gotten severely hurt, or killed, if the dog had attacked him like it had in her dream.

Clara looked at her brother’s face, trying to judge what he was thinking. She wasn’t sure what she was thinking, besides wanting the police to get there soon. He wouldn’t turn to make eye contact, which made her uneasy.

“Sorry, sis. Guess I should have believed you,” Matt said. Clara expected him to call her a freak or something. When he didn’t, she grew more worried.

“I probably won’t sleep well tonight,” she said, trying to make a joke, even though the idea wasn’t funny to her. What if she had another realistic dream that went beyond a normal night terror and something bad did happen in real life? Also, who else would believe her if she tried to warn them, besides maybe her brother?

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Matt finally turned his head.

“Huh? Oh yeah. I was mostly just trying to get you guys in the car,” Clara said. She watched as the German Shepherd wandered away from the man and laid down in his driveway.

“Do you want to grab some hot chocolate after this? I’m pretty sure I do have something to talk about now, and no one else would believe me.”

“Yeah, I’d be down. Let’s stop at home so you can change first,
though,” Matt said, chuckling.

The man across the street stood with his tree held upright like a hiker with an over-the-top walking stick. Clara saw how lonely Jupiter was by himself in the car, so she joined him in the back seat once the police arrived. His fur was wet from the snowflakes that had melted on him. Clara let him sit on her lap anyway.
Synyx came to us by way of boat. He stepped off the loading ramp and into the snow with a purpose, with a drive. He looked around and when his eyes met mine, I had no thought other than that they’d already been frozen by the cold around us: nearly white but still managing to claim the color of blue, they narrowed against the cold. He wore the uniform of a MedicAid hailing from Canada, a thick jacket and gloves shielding him from the cold.

I ignored him as he walked through the snow and instead counted the crates that he’d been dropped off with. He was here to replace the Aid that had died a few days before and everyone around knew it. I knew it most of all; it had been my Aid who died. By suicide, not a combat injury, a man called Gerald Schmitz was sent back to his home in Germany inside a box. I hoped Synyx would be different.

“Are you Vendt?” a voice to my side asked.

I turned around, surprised not by the question, but by the way which it was asked-- in the Hungarian that I was so used to speaking in prior to the war.

It was Synyx, standing a respectful distance away from me.

“Your accent is horrible,” I answered in English, hearing the jumbled words coming out of my mouth coated in hypocrisy. The corner of Synyx’s mouth twitched.

Copper was dropped off with a shipment of linens and syringes. He came off a helicopter looking dazed and scared and pathetically thin. I
didn’t think much of him, and wasn’t sure if my opinion would be changed after first introductions were completed.

I ignored him as he stood there in the snow. I made my way over to him, checking that the labels matched what was inside the crates scattered around the landing pad. His uniform was thin and looked to be of no more use than one of the sheets would have been if draped around his paltry form. Typical Americans, barging into a fight in which they had no place with only their ignorance to keep them warm.

The wind hit Copper from behind and I watched him struggle to remain upright. The cigarette between my lips seemed to have a more secure internal structure than my new Aid; my hopes for Copper’s survival steadily declined as I finally walked over to his shivering self. His hand flew up to salute me in the way that an American soldier would.

“Lieutenant-” he said, but I was too chilled to make small-talk with this freezing creature.

“Observe and live,” I said, taking a drag of my cigarette. I gestured to Copper’s posture. “Knock that off.”

“Quite a place you’ve got here,” Synyx commented as we neared the barracks. I shrugged without comment. As the door of the building swung open, we were greeted by the rotting stench that I’d grown accustomed to after being exposed to it for so long. It was one of coagulated blood and vomit. Synyx gagged.

“You’ll get used to it,” I said, ducking under the door’s low frame. I thought he seemed surprised at how clean the area was, considering the smell. His eyes widened just a bit as he looked around at all the soldiers lying on stretchers, on blankets on the floor, in hammocks strung up in corners.

I continued to walk. Synyx accompanied me silently, matching me stride for stride. His shoulders were higher than mine, his legs longer, yet he didn’t seem to take longer steps, nor did he look to be shortening his stride for my sake.

Copper scurried after me, hauling the heavy bag that had accompanied him from the chopper on his shoulder. What he had brought with him in such large quantities, I had no idea. He would be receiving a new uniform shortly; the clothes in his bag would most likely be burned or given to wounded soldiers.
Copper followed me to my office, though it didn’t deserve that name. It was the place I slept, ate, and spent the majority of my spare time signing death certificates. While I sat at my desk and picked up my pen, he stood in the doorway as if he were waiting for permission to enter.

“Plan on standing there all day?” I asked.

“No, sir,” Copper stepped inside. He walked himself to a corner and sat down on his duffle bag.

“Who said you could sit?” I asked, my tone slightly aggravated. Copper jumped to his feet, eyes wide. I bit my tongue and searched through a drawer in my desk and found after a spell what I was looking for.

“Shower,” I said, tossing a bar of soap to him. I pointed to the door; Copper understood his dismissal.

“You’ll have to sleep in here,” I said as we entered the room that I was given as an office. Synyx did, and as he sat down on his duffle bag, I walked over to the window. I stole a glance over my shoulder at this new man. He looked unfazed by the small quarters. His eyes met mine and I turned my attention to getting the small stove in the far corner started.

“Might I ask why?” Synyx asked, no disrespect present in his voice. There was no “sir” tacked on the end of the question, no authority-acknowledging tone used when speaking. It was a simple, casual question; I found myself relieved at the lack of professionalism.

“The compound is under construction,” I answered, striking a match with cold, trembling fingers. The flame caught and I gently put the tiny fire into a bed of kindle. “No bunk rooms yet.” Synyx didn’t make a sound in response, just sat there and watched me go sit back in my desk.

“The showers are down the hall,” I said, picking up a Gerald’s death certificate with a reluctant hand.

“I’ll get right on that,” Synyx said, and I saw his eyes stray to the paper in my hands. He turned his attention to rummaging through his duffle bag and finding what he needed to go wash up.

I must have fallen asleep between when he left and when he got back. I woke from a dreamless sleep to a blanket being put over my shoulders and opened my eyes slowly, reluctant to go back to the cold world that existed outside of my office. But it wasn’t anything major; Synyx had merely been nice and
done something to express that. I watched him as he quietly put himself between the door and myself in typical MedicAid behavior.

“Goodnight, Vendt,” Synyx said, his voice hushed and soft. He curled up in a sleeping bag, back to me, and I heard his breathing relax as he began to snore a short bit later.

Copper returned from his shower soaking wet and wearing clothes that didn’t belong where we were.

“Queen?” I asked, motioning to his shirt. Copper smiled sheepishly and nodded with unrestrained enthusiasm. I didn’t make any attempt to further the conversation. My attention went back to the papers in front of me, supply requests and death certificates with some patients’ graphs intermingled.

*Fraternization was, at first, forbade within the barracks. The regulations on the subject were loosened when it was discovered that attempting to keep everyone out of each other’s pants just wasn’t reasonable. That’s not to say that everyone was sex-crazed; no, some people just wanted a way to relieve themself from the horrors going on around us all.*

So I wasn’t too surprised when Synyx appeared in my office to sweep me off my feet. He’d been with the unit for months at that point; we were closer than anyone, especially me, could have expected. His footing in the war was solid, and I admired him for that.

Copper’s footing in the war was faulty. He’d been with the company for months, and he still forgot where he put things. Still wore his damned boots in the halls. Still slept in my office, even though he had a perfectly good bunk room down the hall.

He was going to die, I was sure of it.

He was going to live, I was sure of it.

*Synyx was smarter than anyone I’d ever met. He slept in my office with me; the both of us shivered in our wool pajamas when fuel for the fires was low. He knew how to keep himself alive, how to keep those around him safe, too. His hands were some of the steadiest that I’d ever seen in a surgery room. Every stitch he made was with purpose and precision.*

He left me dumbfounded.

Copper was a good twenty years younger than me, and I felt myself
falling into a parental role with him. This I supposed was only natural. I didn’t mind, really, but I wished Copper might have picked someone else for the part. I smoked; good fathers didn’t. I cursed, another action that didn’t make a person into a particularly shining figure. I ran around with pockets of medication and syringes; that alone should have worried anyone trying to befriend me.

“Why do you love me?” I asked one day. We were washing linens, slowly turning white soapy water into a shade of unnatural pink. I saw Synyx’s mouth twitch. He picked up a towel and started scrubbing it with a bar of soap.

“Well,” he said, “Who else would I have reason to love?”

He always talked like that, like we were in a play by Shakespeare. I was his Juliet, his Romeo, his Titania and his Oberon, all packed into one person. I was the drumming in his heart, the sun through a yonder window, and he never did give me the chance to forget that, even momentarily.

I was the only one that cared about Copper, about keeping him alive, and he never did give me the chance to forget that, even momentarily.
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