Unwound: A Creative Arts Journal
2019-2020

Minnesota West Community and Technical College
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A special thank you to all those not already credited who helped to make this publication possible.

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Leah Gossom, Art Instructor
Eric E. Parrish, Music and Theater Instructor
The Heist
Jeremy Hopfinger

The passenger car of the train rocked side to side in a subtle, rhythmic dance as it raced through the Arizona desert, the heat surrounding the coach shimmering in the mid-day Sun. Jane slowly looked up from her slumped-back position in her seat, tilting her head to the side to get a better view of the car’s occupants. She had been in this situation before, bouncing around a train car, smiling to the man or woman who sat next to her, with some small talk thrown in occasionally. Normally, she wore a soft sky-blue dress her boss had purchased for her while she traveled by train. Today though, today was different. She was dressed like a cowboy. Her hair was done up and hidden under an oily, leather hat, and the shirt she wore under her vest was red, oversized, and smelled of a weeks’ worth of man-sweat and dirt.

She had dressed up like a man once before, and the disguise failed miserably, her fake mustache falling to the floor as she quietly demanded money from the General Store’s shop keeper. She knew the shop keep was suspicious of their transaction from the start. The fake, wispy haired mustache hanging from her lip did nothing to help ease his doubts. The robbery could have gone better. She had to shoot at the shop keep and lucky for him, the bullet only grazed his head. She stood there stunned, a moment before grabbing the money out of the till and slipping out the back room to freedom. “View from the Inside” by Vanessa Olivares

The train’s loud, sharp whistle snapped her out of the daydream. She leaned to her side, getting a better view down the aisle from her. There he sat, “Boss.” Her employer and farrier. He sat in his seat dressed like a banker from the east coast, a gold watch chain visible around the collar that clearly did not belong to him. She this man looked. He was at face and his hands and face had put in as a smith. The contrast of the clean suit, against his sunburnt and dirty face did nothing to ease the passenger next to him.

She nodded slowly at him, wondering if he would see her at all, though she made no effort to hide the fact she was awake at this point. He looked at her, then out the window before getting up and heading towards the middle of the train car. As he made his way slowly up the aisle, she could see he was scanning over the crowd of people in the passenger car. There were a lot more women on the train than she had anticipated and on more than one occasion, she had started to doubt the success of this robbery as women of the day tend to all carry tiny Derringer pistols. But then she would glance over at Boss and see how relaxed and focused he was, giving her a sense of security.

Boss stopped about mid-way up the isle and leaned down, looking out the window to his right. “What the hell is that thing there?” he said, loud enough to get everyone’s attention, his words coming out like cold syrup from a bottle. The people sitting on the side where he was looking started to murmur and point at various cactus and bushes as the train raced past the scenery. The people on the other side of the car began to sit up higher, arching their necks to get a better view of what might be going on.

She knew this was her cue as she jumped up out of her seat and headed to the coach door near the back of the train. She looked back one last time; the people in the car were now out of their seats, loudly talking amongst themselves and still pointing at random things that zipped past them. The door was locked, so she twisted hard on the knob, popping the lock mechanism to open the door, allowing her to slip through.

The wind slammed the door behind her, and she instinctively placed her hand on the cold, wooden grip of her pistol as she looked back through the window to see if anyone heard the door. Boss was doing a great job in keeping everyone’s attention as he waved his hands like a magician doing a card trick. The noise was
much louder than she has anticipated, the click-clack of the train’s wheels hitting each section of the rail made her want to cover her ears.

Looking across from her, she saw the target. A mail car, containing anywhere from two to five safes, and usually one postal worker, looked fairly old but sturdy. She looked down and saw the rushing rail track ties zip by and knew she had to keep moving or she would freeze up from the fear of what she was about to do. Boss would point, whenever someone looked over at him and ask where or what, responding with a low tone, just under the sound of the carriage clacking. He knew he had to keep everyone occupied enough not to notice what was about to happen to the mail car. By now, most of the passenger car’s occupants were on one side of the car, each of them jostling for a better view of the nothing that was happening. As he looked towards the back door, he saw Jane’s feet slide up and out of sight. “Good girl. Fight the fear,” he thought to himself as he redirected his attention to the other side of the train car, pointing and making a loud grunt. His audience turned their attention to the new nothing that was outside.

“Two Horses” by Erin Langendorfer

The mail car was of a pretty solid build. Iron bars crisscrossed along the side of the old wooden car, adding to the impressively large iron doors. Jane had no problem getting to the top of the car. There were plenty of places to grab on to, but it was the swaying from side to side that would sometimes throw her off balance for a moment.

She made her way to the center of the car where the hatch was located. It too was made of iron and nowhere near the size of the doors on the sides of the car. But it was big enough for a person to fit through or take things out of. She fiddled with the hinges as well as the latch device, looking for a way to pop it open without much effort, but there was nothing obvious to her, so she started to run her fingers along the base of the outer part of the hatch, looking for that knot in the wood where she could hammer it out with her gun and reach into the locking mechanism.

Jane knew the next part of her job was crucial. She carefully made her way towards the passenger coach and climbed back down the mail car. Gripping the side rail tightly, she began to kick at the car’s coupler, her boot smacking the metal with little effect. She knew the cars had to be separated before they reached Tombstone. The heist would be a failure and she would surely get arrested for riding outside the coach while trying to uncouple the cars from each other.

She sat on the edge of the mail car, and with both feet, kicked hard against the couple, causing it to click and unlatch. She quickly climbed to her feet and watched as the train moved away from the mail car. She could see Boss in the distance, his head outside of the coach’s window, waving to her. The first part was done; now the fun began.

Jane gripped the handrail near the door as the mail car began to slow down. Lost in the image of Boss fading away in the distance, its cold steel snapped her out of her deep thought, and she set to work getting the mail car open before the engineer noticed the missing weight. The dust was kicking up around her as she approached the side of the mail car’s door, figuring the top hatch wouldn’t be the best place to squeeze in and with the amount of time Boss and Shey were expecting this to be done, she opted for the loud entrance.

The door was made of many thick planks of wood, framed with a flat steel beam that had to have an overabundance of bolts holding it in place on the planks. Jane studied the lock as well as the hinges holding the door, noticing both were made with the cheap steel she had encountered in the past. She grinned to herself,
moving closer to the door. Removing the dry-cracked leather glove from her right hand, her skin beneath it was clean, pale and white in contrast to the dirt and mud she applied to her face to give herself that rugged appearance.

Gently touching the lock, she ran a finger along its small face, feeling the tiny bolts that held it together, sharp and jagged, threatening to tear her soft skin. “There you are…” she said aloud as her hand stopped near the side of the lock’s keyhole. The sweet spot, she called it, would speak to her revealing its secrets. She pressed her finger hard against the lock, smiling as she watched tiny ice crystals form around her fingertip and spread out along the face of the lock, invading each crack, seam and split as it encased the steel lock after a matter of seconds. A hissing sound, drowned out by the cracking of the metal as its molecules gave way and split apart, told her the lock was weak and ready to be liberated from its purpose. She grabbed her pistol with her left hand and smacked the lock with the butt of her gun, shielding her eyes with the other hand. Peeking through a crack between her fingers, she watched as the frozen metal gave way and exploded into tiny splintering pieces of ice and metal, shimmering like a million stars as they fell in slow motion around her.

“Druidess” by Stephanie ‘Rose’ Strider

The City of Mirrors: The Truth at the Heart of the City
Bernarda Alrawashdeh

Petra Warden nears the barrier cement walls of a nearby fallen city – war-torn for its resources. She’s hardly out of breath in the thin atmosphere, but the scorching sun has made her biomechanical body perspire. The dust she’s kicked up from her ten-mile trek has caked around the exposed parts of her face. For a moment, she leaves behind her own city, the secrets they keep, and Violet, who doesn’t know where Petra goes. She takes off her headscarf and wipes around her brown eyes and slight nose bridge. Ignoring the bright yellow hazard sign plastered on its façade, she contorts her slender body through a fracture in a wall surrounding the abandoned city. For months, she’s been frequenting the abandoned city in search of anything useful to refurbish or to trade with anyone who will buy from her. She brushes aside the foliage and emerges through the other side, plucking a leaf, rare as it is, off its branch and tucks it behind her ear. She scales a mound of rubble and ruins from old factories to scour the war-torn arena. Perched at the top, she spots the building she was looking for. The sun will set soon, and Violet will be expecting her before dark at their makeshift home on the outskirts of her own city, the one that believes they’ve achieved utopia. Here, she thrives, unearthing the last chunk of building that blocked the path she now maneuvers through, to the heart of the city, in hopes of making sure she and Violet don’t go another hungry night.

The sun sets onto the street, and Petra’s heavy boots grind the rubble beneath what once bustled with commerce. She comes to a halt. Her head follows up the length of the only building left intact: a hospital. It stands out like a temple amidst the ruins. Those who could afford it came here for Mechanobiology-Synthesization, a new procedure for its time, meant to defy mortality. The procedure done in this time is mind-internet chipping, meant to incorporate the world’s knowledge into your mind. The President launched POM or Peace of Mind, allowing the mind to be uploaded to a database.
She runs her rough hands over the smooth, chrome columns of the hospital entrance and enters through the broken glass door. The once immaculate-white reception area is now covered in a thick layer of dust but otherwise remains as it was over a hundred years ago.

“Let AI antibodies fight your illness today,” she reads from a pamphlet on the counter, when suddenly a woman’s voice breaks the silence. The holographic receptionist greets her, saying,

“Thank you for choosing us as your health care provider. Please, hold out your wrist for scanning, and I will call you once your registration is complete.”

“No, thanks. But I see there’s still electricity here.”

As she wonders how the precious resource has managed to bypass the greed of Mirrors, she straps on her headlamp and looks for the stairs. Her footsteps reverberate off the walls of the stairwell as she descends to the lowest floor in search of her preferred materials: optical fiber cables. Bob, whom she trades with, uses them to make bootleg mindreading devices. They aren’t as powerful, but thieves try their luck at picking up brainwaves from rich people making deposits at the bank. She remembers the first time she traded with Bob, declining his offer of being a memory thief, preferring a more earnest way of living.

A solid, white door panel seamlessly splits in two as Petra enters the electrical room. Circuit machinery form identical rows and from each, machine cords run in a tangled mess. “Eureka!” She rips hundreds of cables from their ports and stuffs them into her satchel. “This’ll earn me enough food to put on a feast,” she says aloud as she flattens her bag to fix the buckle shut.

Making for the exit, she rounds a corner and trips over a bundle of luminescent cables strung across the floor. Her eyes follow the glowing strands leading from a generator and looping around the back row to one circuit board, which is loaded to its capacity, sparklingly lit. She hears murmurs from a different room, interrupting her pondering. Someone is hiding something. She turns her light out and stands petrified, listening.

“The lights aren’t working. Electrical room?”

“No, not yet.”

Without a pause she runs back down the hall, up the stairs, through the entrance she came in, and back towards the crack in the wall as swiftly as those extinct animals she remembers reading about in the orphanage she grew up in. Deer, were they called?

She nears the wall and breaths out, “Who the hell was that?” Hunched over, her hands clenching her knees, she notices the darkness that surrounds her and the promise to Violet now broken. She pushes aside the vines and writhes through the opening in the wall as she hears a mechanical whirring in the distance approaching overhead. She makes her body as small as she can as the vehicle shoots across the sky, temporarily illuminating the dusty vastness of the Barrenlands that were once fertile farmlands. Petra wraps her scarf around her face and heads back to the outskirts of her own city of lies and secrets, the city of Mirrors.

Back at the abandoned train station, under the overall roof, Violet lies asleep on a bench that she’s converted into a bed. Petra quietly slips in through the tarp door, and kisses her wrinkled forehead, tucking in the sheets around her feeble, old body. She sits on her bed, taking off her satchel and boots, and lies back, the day’s events reeling through her head. Rolling on her side, she looks at Violet and remembers the day they left.

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Petra rolls onto her back and gazes through the hole in their ceiling, into the night sky, polluted with smog and light. Why would somebody else be there? She wonders this until she falls asleep.

Petra wakes up to see Violet folding her blanket neatly over her bed. “Good morning, Petra. Another late night?”

“I’m so sorry, Violet,” Petra apologizes, not mentioning the company she had while looting as not to worry her. She grabbed her bag, showing Violet the fiber-optic cables.

“I found these and they’re in perfect condition. I think Bob will give us extra rations for it.”

Violet frowns, “Who’s Bob?”

Petra, splashing water on her face, stops and turns to Violet. “You remember Bob, don’t you? You always haggle him into getting more food.”

Feeling increasingly confused and disoriented, Violet mumbles, “I think I’ll stay here and wait for you to come back.”

Petra turns away to hide her frown. She grabs a geode from her bag. She kneels down to look into Violet’s gentle eyes, handing her the rock with crystals inside.

“Do you remember when you gave me this?”

Violet, taking the rock suddenly remembers, “We were tired from wandering when I noticed it sparkling. I picked it up, and there were beautiful crystals inside, like I’d never seen before. It was just like you, Petra. A hidden trove of beauty, waiting to be discovered.”

Petra closes Violets hands around the rock, “We mustn’t lose hope, Violet. I will be back soon with food, and everything is going to be okay.”

Petra does not know if anything will be okay. Violet’s memory is getting worse, and Petra’s energy reserves are getting critically low. As she follows the old train tracks into the city, leaving Violet behind, an overwhelming sense comes over each and every one of her cells. She feels that something is about to change, like how birds knew when to migrate.

“Fallen” by Tah So Gay

**Adventures of Mr. Teddy: Origins of Friendship**
Rebecca Hopfinger

Mr. Teddy had been in Tegan’s life for the last three years. She could not imagine living without him. He was her sidekick, partner in crime, and the only family she had. It was odd to see a child of her age walking around alone, but Tegan was no normal child. Her perfectly ringlet curled hair danced around her shoulders like cascading waves of honey. The ruby, satin dress that she wore was full of ruffles and ended just below her knees. It was Tegan’s eyes that explained to anyone she encountered she needed no parental supervision. Those icy-blue eyes were large, with flecks of gold and hints of wisdom beyond her years. She wore a leather backpack that jingled quietly when the items inside moved around. Mr. Teddy was the most important thing in her life. Tegan remembered the day they met vividly.

Tegan was only four when she happened upon a shop of curiosities. It was a hovel made of warped wood, weathered and run down. The sign on the door had only one crudely carved word on it, “Exceptions.” Though it was dilapidated, the entire shack seemed to glow softly with magic. Skipping up to the entrance, Tegan carefully pushed the door with both hands to be sure she got no splinters. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark candlelight of the shop after coming in from the bright day outside. When Tegan approached the shop, it looked rather small. From the inside, it looked as though it went on for a mile.
beyond the door was the shopkeeper, a large oafish looking young man. He slept behind the counter undisturbed by her presence.

Tegan surveyed the treasures scattered about as she walked through the aisles. There were very few items on each shelf, and they all looked worse for wear. Piles of scrolls, stacks of books, and even rods filled with hanging robes went on forever. Nearing the back of the shop, Tegan heard a gentle hum. Glancing around, the sound seemed to resonate from an old, large chest. Thankfully there was no lock, so Tegan was able to unlatch and open the chest quickly. Her tiny arms pushed with all her strength to open the treasure box as she grunted. Her heart started to fill with excitement. She knew something was calling to her, something special. With one last push, Tegan opened the chest. The heavy lid smacked the wall behind it, sending an echo through the store. The beautiful humming suddenly stopped, as though whatever it was got scared.

She carefully began rummaging through the chest until she finally saw him, Mr. Teddy. A fluffy, white teddy bear with a small, black bowtie. He was hidden behind some dusty scrolls that looked as though they were being used as blankets. His head was propped up on a pile of books, and many rows of tally marks filled the side of the box next to him. Despite the dirt that covered everything else, his white fur was bright and clean. He laid there with a vacant expression; Tegan noticed Mr. Teddy was missing his left eye. His helpless little furry arm seemed to be reaching out in her direction as if he were asking her for help. With no hesitation she snatched him up gently, holding him close, instantly precious to her. Tegan knew Mr. Teddy would be her best friend forever. She felt their hearts connect the moment she held him.

“I know you,” she said to him, gently petting his head and face. “You are my Mr. Teddy, and I am your Little Misery, and we will be together forever.” She stared at him with a whimsical smile, then instantly began to cackle.

Taking in a deep content breath, still giggling a little, Tegan regained her composure and set out on her new task, finding the eye. She began to sneak around the store; searching through all the ancient collectables, she knew she had a quest to complete, and she was determined. She held onto Mr. Teddy’s arm and brought him along to help in the search. Tegan felt a tingle in her feet that surged up into her gut. Something was pulling her towards the front of the store. The shopkeeper continued to snore as Tegan hunted for the elusive peeper. Taking a moment to rest, Tegan got on her knees and held the bear out, staring deeply into his eye once again. She placed a cupped hand over where his missing left eye should be, covering and uncovering it, whispering, “Peek-a-boo, I don’t see you.”

Just then her giggles were interrupted by movement that caught her attention from the corner of her vision. Tegan quickly turned to see a large, hairy tarantula, with an abdomen as big as her entire body, staring at her. Its thick front legs tapped on the wooden floorboards, thudding through the shop. The arachnid’s eight shiftly, lifeless eyes glistened black in the candlelight, almost mesmerizing Tegan.

The little girl stood up slowly and with unwavering confidence, walked right up to the giant spider. The mandibles of the spider moved wildly, and the spider’s legs rear up as though it was about to pounce. Tegan calmly raised her hand towards the spider and whispered, “No.” Instantly the spider’s body was engulfed by searing flames. It screeched, thrashing about the store, smashing into the shelves violently, trying to escape the flames covering its body. The fire jumped from the spider and spread through the rotten wood shelves quickly. Soon the entire shop was ablaze. The keeper continued to sleep, unphased by the events unfolding.

As Tegan looked cheerfully upon Mr. Teddy, drops of blood began to flow from her nose. Falling to the bear’s perfect white fur, the blood was absorbed instantly, leaving no trace. Taking out a blood-stained white handkerchief, Tegan wiped away the blood from her nose. Pulling Mr. Teddy close, she rubbed noses with him and gently placed him in her backpack, all the while paying no attention to the building burning down around them.
Skipping down the aisle, humming a happy tune, Tegan made her way towards the front of the store with no sense of urgency. All around her flames danced, burning anything that got close to touching her. Reaching the front counter, Tegan gently grabbed the index finger of the still sleeping keeper. She tugged two times on the digit, and he jumped to his feet looking around. For a moment he started to panic, but then was soothed by the smile on Tegan’s innocent-looking face. They both walked out of the front door as what was left of the shack crumbled into a pile of burning debris.

The bewildered shopkeeper took a seat in the grass nearby, staring at the destroyed building, feeling lucky to be alive. He sobbed, complaining about how he had lost everything and would need to start all over again. “It was not easy capturing some of those creatures or finding some of those trinkets. I am not as young as I once was and everything I have is gone. This may be the end of me yet!” he exclaimed. Tegan walked to the man and gave him a tight hug, smiling as she told him, “Mr. Teddy sends his regards. He also says, teddy bears do not belong in chests.”

With that she skipped off down the dirt road, Mr. Teddy safely nestled in her pack. Tegan did not know what their next adventure would be, but she did know that whoever crossed their path, would never forget them.

“Empath” by Suree Sompamitwong

Inner Thoughts
Lissette Ailon-Perez

“I don’t love you anymore.”
The last words I heard—
What a heartbreaking sentence,
No one wants to hear.
Don’t cry.

“Everything will be fine.”
That is what everyone says,
Trying to show remorse.
It is not enough.
Don’t cry.

Convincing myself that I am
Strong.
This shouldn’t be hard;
I know myself better than anyone.
Don’t cry.

“You are tough,”
“You are a role model,”
“You are confident,”
“You’re always smiling.”
Am I though?

Anger, Happiness:
Both emotions, tears fall upon my cheek.
Shouldn’t be this way,
No control.
Don’t cry.

Now I am underwater,
Gasping for a small amount of air.
Nothing.
What do I do?
Don’t cry.

Wear a smile every day.
Everyone will think you are okay.
Just fine, like nothing is wrong,
Like snow in spring is normal.
Or is it?

Thinking about my old friends,
Realizing that they do not notice
My missing presence.
Not a text or call.
Should I be surprised?

I don’t like how they disappear on me.
Better off without them,
They were not there for me.
New friends are here,
This is okay.

This transition is tough,
But I am tough too.
I should be okay with this,
Smiling should help.
It will, right?

Out in public: free.
Smile, cheese, click.
Meeting new people,
I really like them.
This is great!

New friends appear,
“Welcome!”
Common interests we all share:
Music, hobbies, and sports.
I really like them.

New friendships,
They make me laugh.
This time it is not fake.
I believe I can trust them.
Right?

Secrets are shared.
Small group of friends,
Feel security and trust.
Advice is given.
My turn to share:
An hour goes by quickly,
Still sitting around a bonfire.
Moon shines bright upon us,
Stars glistening, night sky,
What a perfect night.

Continue to talk,
And they are actually listening.
Finally!
Company, actual company.
These are my people.

“Warrior” by Mackenzie Miller

Depression,
And the like,
Is not a joke.
Worth is not up to us.
What is my worth anyway?

Those were tough times.
New friends help.
Taking care of me,
Keeping me in check and occupied.
I hope this will last.

Advise me to let it all out,
Did exactly that.
Expressed,
Tell never show.
Still, saying all this helps.

Composure,
That is what I need.
Body feels warm against mine,
Patting my head.
Perfect company.

A shoulder to cry on,
Hugs.
Are you okay?
Yes, I am.
I am now.

Alone is not an option anymore.
I have people
To rely on.
Here for me, just like I am for them.
Friendships are meaningful.
Ring, Ring.
Hello, my friend.
Invitation to a party,
A good way to get out there.
Finally going to enjoy myself.

Hair in a bun, lips glossed.
Off the shoulder crop top,
Mile-high heels,
Velvety purse.
Dress to impress yourself.

I am here for a good time.
Inside the mansion,
Indoor pool, a Cueball,
a DJ blasting hip hop music.
I have never been invited to a party.

Met a new guy;
He’s kind and sweet.
New friend,
Not a lover though.
I am not ready for a relationship.

Sun setting on the horizon.
Hangout was a breeze,
Talked and talked.
Time flew.
A new friendship forms.

Everyone assumes we’re a couple,
Without a doubt.
Feelings lay out,
Possibly.
Does he feel the same?

Soft, gentle lips.
Went for it,
Dead silent.
Connection.
Is he my boyfriend?

Months go by,
Happiness.
Thought I could never feel like this,
What a Prince Charming he turned out to be.
Hopefully I do not ruin this.
Fairytale suddenly takes a turn,
Unexpected.
Offers me a drink,
Intoxicated, drugged.
Did I do something wrong?

Next morning,
Everything vanished.
Not a piece of clothing worn,
Lying dead silent in bed.
Complete loss for words.

What do I do?
What do I do?

Nothing... 
No one here... 

Fell into a void.
No light shines,
Trapped.
Hostage to the darkness.
Anyone? No, okay. On my own again.

Ohana 
Kiana Leighty

“Hey Varmint”.  
“Hey grandpa, how are ya, you old fart?”

“Not too bad. Good to see you all, it has been too long.”

As we hugged, the smell of Windsor, cigarette smoke, and musky cologne rolled off him and seeped into my eyes, making them water. Although I say this, I never wanted to let go.

My grandpa’s name was Reid, and he always gave the best hugs, making sure to always squeeze tighter at the end. It just made me feel safe and loved unconditionally. He had a silver horseshoe shaped mustache around his upper lip that touched down to his chin on either side. His laugh came from the belly and lit up the entire room with smiles. Those were just a few of my favorite things about him.
Besides that, he always gave me wise words of advice that I will always hold dearly. They were, “Never give up on your dreams. I know no matter what you go through you will change the lives of many. Just remember to always move forward, never back.” Family is what pushes me to be the best version of myself; without them, I feel as though I would be lost.

June 14th, 2016 is when my grandpa had his seventh heart attack. I had my driving permit for almost a year, so my dad let me drive as we went on our family vacation to Colorado to visit some of our family. I’m from a family a five, which includes my two parents, older sister, younger brother and myself. We were on this trip with my aunt, uncle, and cousin. About an hour into the drive, my mom got a call from my great aunt Kris, who is my grandpa’s sister-in-law. She was one of the family members we were going to visit.

Barely able to talk, her voice weak and cracking, Kris said, “Where are you at? Are you on your way here yet? You should stop as soon as you can and call Karen.”

Karen is my grandpa’s second wife. My mom began crying and could not speak. About a quarter mile ahead, I pulled off at the exit as my mom called Karen, worried. She said, “Hey, Karen, what’s up? What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

My grandma Karen replied, “Your dad has had another heart attack. He is in Jackson and his heart has stopped. They are airlifting him to Sioux Falls shortly.”

We all were immediately shocked and got out of our vehicles and began hugging one another at the rest stop. We decided it would be best to turn around and go back home, instead of trying to make the drive to Colorado. We then visited my grandpa the next day in the hospital. Walking into his room, all I could focus on was the color of his skin, the look in his eyes, and the machines that he was hooked up to. I slowly walked over to my grandpa and grabbed his cold hand, “Hey, old fart, glad you’re okay.”

“Oh, Varmint, glad you came to visit. You really shouldn’t have skipped your vacation for me.”

As a tear rolled down my mother’s face, she walked towards him and said, “We needed to make sure you are okay, and we couldn’t do that in Colorado. You mean so much to us. We love you, Dad, and we’re glad you are okay.”

My grandpa, rubbing his cold thumb across two of my knuckles, turned and looked at me, “Well, the doctors put another stint in my heart. They went in through my wrist. I’m feeling more lightheaded then I was last night but other than that, I am feeling a lot better.”

This was my grandpa’s ninth stint that he had to have put into his heart. Seeing him in so much pain made me tear up. I then realized one may never know when a loved one is going to leave and go to Heaven. My grandpa and I always messed around with each other when we were together. What if the last time I saw him would have been the very last time I ever spoke to him or heard the words, “Hey, Varmint” come out from under his mustache and make me smile from ear to ear. After visiting for a while, we decided to let him rest. He was then released from the hospital three days later.

January 10, 2017 was when my grandpa had his eighth and final heart attack. He was home alone when it happened. He hit his head on the corner of the counter, making a gash in his forehead. He then laid himself down on the couch. Karen found him there, dead, when she arrived home from work later that night. At that time my dad, sister, brother and I were just finishing up supper when my mom came home from working at the bar. Knowing it was only seven o’clock, it seemed odd that she was home already. She came into the house with a rain shower of tears rolling down her cheeks.
As all of us were asking what was wrong, she said the words that made my heart throb, “Grandpa is gone.” We all ran to her and hugged each other. All our shirts were drenched from all of the tears.

The next day, we went to the funeral home to say our final goodbyes. I sat in the back of everyone, not wanting to walk up to my grandpa and say one last goodbye. I did not want to say goodbye to his smell of Windsor, cigarettes, and his unforgettable cologne. That was his smell and as weird as it is to say, it was one of my favorite smells as a kid because it meant I was hugging my best friend.

I eventually got the courage to walk closer, but not all the way. The closer I got, the stronger the feeling of letting go hit me. I never wanted to say goodbye, and I never thought this day would come. I knew he was without pain, but I was wishing he would just wake up one last time to give me a hug. The days got darker and longer, and I put myself into a shell. I did not want to let anyone in or know how I felt because I knew they would not understand how bad it hurt to never have one of the best bearhugs or hear a smart remark ever again. I went into a dark place without him here being just a call or fifteen-minute drive away.

When I turned eighteen, I had in my head the exact decision I was going to make. It was something that would never let me live a day without my grandpa, my best friend. I was going to get a tattoo that represented my grandpa. My sister and I went and got tattoos together. I decided to get two tattoos, one especially for my grandpa, and one to represent my whole family.

“Always forward, never back” are the wise words my grandpa once said to me. It is written in cursive ink on my right side to represent my grandpa. It helps me know that he is still here with me, even on the days I feel like I have no one. He is right by my side to keep pushing me to do my best and achieve my goals.

“Ohana” is inked on my right wrist. In the movie Lilo and Stitch, Ohana is a word they use quite often. It means, “family. And family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.”

I know I will never forget my best friend. I know I will never forget how he called me the nickname “Varmint.” My grandpa was always my number one supporter with anything I did and always wanted me to go above and beyond everyone’s expectations. I will never forget family; they are inked on my body forever. Family means the world to me and wherever I go, they will always be with me. Right by my side.

“Lotus Phase” by Stephanie “Rose” Strider

Fragile Flower
Lucrecia Ramos

Living in a land far from home, Jasmine sat in her black leather chair, with wheels at the end of the four legs and puffy enough to provide comfort – the kind you would find in the main room of a bank. From the third floor of her dorm building, she could see the tall trees across the parking lot as she looked out her window, which separated her from the blowing winds of the autumn season. They were evenly covered in various warm colors; their leaves were on the ground, ready to be stepped on. Today would be her first day of college in the United States. Her heart was close to home, France, but she was physically miles upon miles away from her comfort zone. Thoughts raced through her mind as her heart pounded each time the clock ticked. Tick-tock, tick-tock... Was leaving my family, friends, culture, and hometown behind worth it for me to discover who I am as a person? she wondered.
Lost in time and in reality, her thoughts started to buzz like swarming bees until Jasmine realized her only morning class for today was about to start, at 10:00 A.M. What a way to start this Monday, by overthinking. I need to stop and get moving. Jasmine spun a 180° and looked at her “miniature home” as she called it. It was a rectangular room with enough space to provide a decent school year for Jasmine. From her view, the door that would eventually expose her to the new world looked back at her. To the right was another door that led to the bathroom, and to the left was the kitchen. Next to the kitchen was a small living room where she would spend hours doing homework. From where Jasmine was sitting, her wooden desk faced the wall to her left and her hibernating spot, also known as her bed, was to her right.

After three sighs, Jasmine finally got up and walked towards her tall, wooden dresser covered in black paint next to her bed. She pulled out some black skinny jeans, a white shirt, and a baby-blue hoodie. She put on the black boots that she hoped would keep her feet warm. Now it was time to get some breakfast. Thankfully, she had previously gotten some needed groceries the day before. She diced some strawberries and topped them on her microwaved waffle.

Z-z, z-z, z-z.

“Hey mom!” she excitedly answered.

“Hello, my dear Jasmine, how are you feeling on this thrilling day?”

“I have mixed emotions mom. I won’t lie, but I feel so nervous because I don’t know anyone. I’ve been awake for the last two hours just thinking of all the possible ways this day could take a wrong shift on me, which is making me think of my decision on coming here to the other side of the world. I just, like, I don’t know like—”

“Calm down, my girl. You’ll be fine, and I totally understand you. Your choice wasn’t an easy one—that’s for sure—but keep in mind that you are a strong individual who is capable of doing the unimaginable. I know being bullied for several years in school has affected your way of viewing the world. You are in search for a purpose in life and that can only be obtained by making choices that are sometimes hard to deal with at first. But, despite the hardship this might bring, keep in mind your values and trust yourself.”

“Thank you so much, Mom. I truly needed to hear this from someone. You’ve given me a wave of relief. I love you so much.”

“I love you more, my dear. Always remember your purpose and go forth into the greater world that waits for you. Find adventure and live them for your benefit.”

“I hope I do. I have to go now, Mom. My class starts in twenty minutes. Talk to you later.”

“I’ll be waiting for your call, good luck!”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

After the phone call, Jasmine felt a bit more confident about this special day. She quickly got ready to head out the door—finally. She took a step into the hallway and turned to close and lock her door. Off she went to begin her year-long journey in this land. She skipped down the stairs two floors and walked towards the door. Her silky, brown hair flew back as a breeze entered. Out she went and walked straight across the grassy land to reach the brick college building. At about a hundred feet from the entrance, Jasmine could see some students coming out and others going in for their classes.

About a minute later, she went inside and attempted to find where she was headed to until reality came to her.

Okay so, I need to find room 302, and I have no clue where that is. Where could that be? Should I stop someone and ask, or should I pretend I know what I’m doing and roam the hallways in search for the room? Oh wait, is that a map? Yes, it is!

As she searched for the room, the clock marked five minutes until 10:00.

Okay, so first, I need to go up the stairs, straight across, then take a right until a left hallway appears.

Up the stairs she went, almost as if she was hiking because there wasn’t enough time to go slowly. Students kept on bumping into her and saying, “excuse me.” With a confused expression, Jasmine realized she was on the “wrong side” of the stairs. She moved to the right where people went up.

How did I not realize that? I wonder what people thought of me.

With thirty seconds left, she finally found the room. Jasmine took a deep breath and walked her first steps in. Awkwardly looking around, she found a spot in the middle of the white square room. The students already seated were talking with each other; some were too loud for a normal conversation.
This is uncomfortable.

The professor suddenly came in and set her materials on the desk found in the right corner of the class. She introduced herself as Professor Morgal. She would be her Psychology teacher—Jasmine’s favorite subject. The class was surprisingly quick because it was only the first day and there weren’t any major lessons except an overview of the course. The topics covered included the syllabus, test dates, what each chapter of the book would cover, attendance, and late work policies. The class eventually dismissed after the students introduced themselves and gave some interesting facts about their persona. Jasmine came to realize she, along with another girl named Julia, were foreigners. Somehow this made Jasmine feel less stressed by knowing she wasn’t the only one who explored the unknown.

At the end of the course, the class of twenty students stood up and started to walk towards the same path. Out in the hallways, students walked left or right to the direction of their next destination. The chattering of the students was mostly inaudible because each conversation blended with others, making it hard to determine the words. Jasmine noticed the amount of diversity in the school, making her feel mesmerized at how different it was compared to back home. She thought to herself that, like her, they also had to make tough decisions in order to obtain their desired future. Lost in thought, Jasmine felt a soft tap on her left shoulder.

“Hey, my name is Paola. You dropped this,” she spoke as she handed Jasmine her keys.
“Thank you, I didn’t realize it,” she stuttered.
“No problem. Are you new here?”
“Yeah, I’m from France and this is my first year,”
“Interesting! Well, see you later, my friend! I’ve got to go.”

Emerging” by Vanessa Olivares

Jasmine didn’t even have time to respond as she watched Paola walk ahead of her. She followed behind until Paola was nowhere to be seen. Once again, she walked the same path she took earlier towards her dorm. After she entered and sat back down, thoughts began to swirl again. This time, unlike her morning thoughts, they were of hope.

What a day. It was quick, but I’m glad I was able to prove that my overthinking is just a fear itself. Experimenting the unknown in order to find myself is my goal and I plan to achieve this no matter the cost because I am the only one who can change who I am. No one else will do it for me, but me. Tomorrow will be another day; I wonder what will happen then. No matter what’s prepared for me, I know I am capable of facing it.
Minnesota West Theater Production

Native Gardens

Written by Karen Zacarías
Directed by Eric Parrish
Photographs taken by Vincent Gene

Performers from left to right: Samuel Martin, Kendra Rautenkranz, Sergio Sanchez, and Rebecca Matheney
Performers from left to right:
Antonio Vázquez-Ramón and Than Than Kyaw

Performers from left to right:
Kendra Rautenkranz and Sergio Sanchez

From left to right:
Director, Eric Parrish
Lights Technician, Sam Van Westen
Performer, Antonio Vázquez-Ramón
Performer, Kendra Rautenkranz
Performer, Sergio Sanchez
Performer, Samuel Martin
Stage Manager, Paul Seifert
Performer, Rebecca Matheney
Performer, Than Than Kyaw
Costume Designer, Roxanne Hayenga-Johnson
Assistant Stage Manager, Dominic Burns
The Untangled Sigil: Ashen Forest
Gunner Loeschke

Seventeen years of training in the colleges since the young age of five and Alucard had finally graduated. The harsh training his mentor set out for him paid off, and after completing the Trial of Crowns, Alucard graduated at the top of his class. The Trial had been close. He almost lost in the final round, but his splendid proficiency in not just one school but three had saved him, threw his opponent off guard, and earned him first place.

Alucard walked into his new quarters in the barracks of the Eastern Red Tigers: an elite force designated the role of protecting the Kingdom by halting invading armies in the mountainous terrain of the east. His room was rather spacious. All his books had been moved in and now rested in neat rows on the shelves. A small bed took up one corner with a desk in the other. In the center of the room, on an armor stand, rested his new red and black armored robes. Hanging from the same chain as his pendent that marked him as a wizard of the Eastern Red Tigers was a note:

*Congratulations on your successes in the colleges, I wish you luck in your new endeavors here in the ERT. Don’t celebrate too much; you are expected in formation at sunrise for your first assignment. May the mountain’s rivers run red for the Kingdom hears their cry.*

*Captain Cole*

Alucard was the first at formation the next day, other than Lieutenant Jacobs, a man with a nicely trimmed beard who wore silver armor that shone even though it was still dark out, with a red under-cloth and a crisp, black cloak. It seemed that Jacobs hardly even noticed Alucard’s arrival as he studied his reports until ten soldiers arrived, falling into formation behind Alucard.

“Today, you will be traveling to a nearby village where a suspected sorcerer is living. He is rather young and believed to be unaware of his link, so the danger level is low. You are to bring him here,” Jacobs finally barked after a firm salute. He then looked at Alucard for the first time. To the troops he said, “This is Sergeant Alucard, he is your wizard. Be nice and follow orders, he is fresh out of the books.” He saluted again then marched off to dish out orders to another unit.

Alucard turned around to see the men that comprised his unit for his first mission. Seven had two ragged, arching claw marks painted in red onto their breastplate, marking them as veterans of two campaigns, and the other three had three claw marks.

“Prep your equipment and meet at the stables in ten minutes,” Alucard ordered and began towards the stables, enjoying the way his robes swayed around him and how his silver, scaled armor shone through from underneath.

*“Tree of Life” by Courtney Nath*

The unit only came across one beast, a twisted mix of a dear and a wolf that was quickly felled by arrows during their four-hour ride along a stony path through the Ashen Forest. The Ashen Forest earned its name from its appearance: a forest of birch trees that had all the color sucked out of their leaves by a sorcerer who had turned the entire forest white when a woman had said she liked the way it looked in the winter.

The villagers paid no mind to the group as they entered the village. The village had nicely laid cobblestone paths with gray, brick houses and beautiful, red shingles. The villagers bustled about with bundles of freshly picked vegetables, and children chased each other in the streets, play-saluting the soldiers, and gasping as they cleared the way for the horses.
It had been decades since even the Kingdom’s most rural communities had witnessed violence; likely only the most wrinkled of elders remembered it.

Alucard smiled and waved to the children and turned to his men, “I will cast a simple communication spell, and then we will split up and begin searching for the child, notify everyone when you spot him.” Alucard then drew elegant, complex sigils in his mind and chanted a short spell, shortly after the sigils flashed into life, floating just off of each person’s right ear.

All but one three-striker moved out to scour the village. The three-striker who remained moved his horse next to Alucard’s. “Watch your back, the Crows have been active in this region lately and aren’t likely to let us get our hands on a sorcerer easily,” The three-striker stuck next to Alucard while they searched.

Alucard’s butt had just begun to hurt when he heard a whisper, “Boy, about eleven years old, white streak in his hair, spotted heading west out of the town.”

“Everyone split and circle around, give no signal that he has been spotted,” Alucard ordered, nodding to the three-strike who had warned him.

Alucard was the first to lay eyes on the boy that was in the edge of the forest, making sure not to head directly towards him. He activated the second ring of the communication sigils. Getting a sense of where each soldier was, he began giving out movement orders to each one individually, forming a loose circle around the boy.

He then gave the order to move in and confront the boy. The northern end of the circle responded slowly and wasn’t closing, but it was fine. The boy couldn’t outrun the horses even if he tried. Then Alucard noticed the northern side wasn’t responding at all; in fact, their signals had stopped.

“A.Crows!” he shouted, raising his hands together with palms facing out to form a sigil in front of them.

Just then, a white shadow dropped down through the leaves of the trees. It landed next to the boy, and a black, metal, beaked mask peered at Alucard from under a grey and white hood. It raised a crossbow from under its cloak as swords sang from their sheaths. The three-striker charged the figure with his sword raised, prepared to hack it in two. A crossbow bolt smacked into the neck of Alucard’s horse, it bucked and threw him off, breaking his concentration and his spell.

A second crossbow appeared from the folds of the figure’s cloak, and a bolt pierced into the side of the armpit of the three-striker, dropping him from his horse. More shadows dropped onto the horses of the other soldiers, throwing them off or killing them. A bolt flew from the trees at Alucard, glancing off the magic shell that protected him.

Alucard drew his sword and rushed the figure by the boy. Alucard raised his hand, and a sigil appeared on the figure’s forehead, his hood blew apart as a sharp rock flew out of the back. Two other figures began pushing towards the boy only to be met by one of the other three-strikers, who was struggling to fend them off.

Alucard started another sigil at the pommel of his sword. Forming a forceful sigil as far away as the man had been and creating material had drained Alucard momentarily, and he couldn’t do it again. He stopped and pointed his sword at the boy. The sigil at the pommel flashed bright as it activated. Alucard’s sword left his hand, flying faster than an arrow shot by any bow, and struck center in the boy’s chest.

Alucard plopped onto the ground and used his remaining energy to enforce the strength and speed of his remaining soldiers. He knew The Crows would run after they realized their target was dead and that they had lost all remaining advantages of surprise.

The fight had only lasted two or three minutes with one three-striker and three two-strikers as casualties. The rest had minor bruises or scratches. It probably would have been worse if one of the three-strikers hadn’t shot down The Crow’s archers from the trees.

After getting their wounds tended, Lieutenant Jacobs stormed into the medical tent with the mission report still clutched in his hands. Alucard and the soldiers immediately snapped to attention. Jacobs let out a deep exhale, “I hate to say it, but good call out there Alucard, many couldn’t have handled it better.” Jacobs sat down on a cot, “I would rather have a sorcerer caught than killed, but it is still preferable over them being free, and far better than them siding with The Crows.” Jacobs then looked the soldiers in their eyes, “And thank you for saving my men. They are far more important than a potential bonded, especially one who is still a child.” Jacobs didn’t speak for a little bit, almost as if he had even stunned himself. “Alucard,
report to my office tomorrow afternoon. I’ve decided who your accessory will be.” Jacobs gave a stiff salute, and quickly marched out of the tent.

A Fool’s Night
Andelina Limmer

“Did you hear that?” The soft voice beside me whisper. I turn my head, my questioning baby-blue eyes clash with terrified green ones.

“Hmm?” I ask, not interested in hearing what this blond-haired girl has to say since most of what she says is either lies or made-up stories.

“Someone is groaning in the basement.” She whispers loudly so the other girls can hear her; she is trying to draw their attention to her. A short brown-haired girl sitting on a cot across the room from us groans at her words, her caramel-brown eyes flash with annoyance.

“Sally, not again,” she mutters, rolling off her cotton socks and putting them away in the old rickety drawer.

The other girl in the room, with a head full of red hair that is tied up in piggy tails, pulls her thin blanket over her head. “I don't like scary stories.” She is a couple years younger than the rest of us and fears everything.

Sally narrows her eyes. “It’s not a story, Kate! I heard it as I was coming back from putting Jamie in his bed.” She points her finger towards the old wooden door that separates us from the hallway as if that’s enough evidence to convince us.

I sit leaning upon my cot; it is the farthest one away from the door but close to the only window in the room. I glance out the cracked window; it is a still April night, no wind or breeze, no sign of any movement.

“Are you sure it was someone groaning and not the just the old floor creaking as you walked back here?”

She rolls her eyes and huffs out a breath. “Of course, it was not the floor. I'm not stupid!” She looks at us in disgust and betrayal. “You don’t believe me!” she gasps. “You and Carrie think that I’m lying.”

Carrie looks at her with mocking brown eyes. “Of course, we do! You’ve done it before! Many times!” She walks up to Sally, “for instance, the time you said that the children that leave don’t go to a family; remember that we had to follow them to town just to see that Barbra was truly with her new family?” She pauses, her eyes glaring at Sally, “Or what about that time you said that Mrs. Turner is a witch that raises us children for her stew to eat, remember the officials had to come over and look everything over, you're lucky that she didn’t abandon us then. So, no, I don’t believe you! I will never believe you!” She pokes Sally’s chest with every word. “And unless someone that I believe like Jess or Katy says that they hear ‘groaning’ from the basement. I’m not going to go check, nor do I want to hear about it.” She turns away from Sally and pulls open her blanket and climbs into her cot.

A slow scraping sound comes from the other side of the hardwood door. It is there for a minute, then an eerie quietness takes over the room, a chilly breeze comes from under our door. No one says a word, each of us paralyzed in fear; all of our eyes are trained on the door, waiting.

A knock suddenly comes from our door, making all of us jump. The door opens. A brown-haired boy opens the door. Keith, one of the older boys who also lives here, walks in, holding Jamie. Two other boys, both sporting blond-hair and blue eyes, are close behind him.

“There is some groaning coming from the basement. We heard it from our room.”
The basement is somewhere that is off-limits, none of us have ever been down there before. I remember when I got here, Mrs. Turner told us never to go down there.

“Really?” Carrie asked her face pale. Keith is someone who does not joke around. “Did you hear the scraping?” she asks him.

He shakes his head. “I only hear the groaning.”

“Didn’t Mrs. Turner go down there earlier?” John questions, looking between us.

“Yes, but she is at a meeting; she’s not here.” Keith shakes his head.

“Should we check it out?” I ask as I pull on my shoes. Carrie does the same and follows me over to the boys. Sally picks up Katie, who is still wrapped up in her blanket.

“I think so, yes, we should. If something is going on, we need to know,” Keith answers.

Kyle and John nodded in agreement.

“Yes, maybe it’s a ghost!” Kyle jokes, shoving John out the door.

We exit the girl’s room; the basement is only a few doors down, so it is only a couple of steps before we reach the door.

“I don’t hear anything. Are you sure it wasn’t a wild animal or something?” I mutter.

“Help me!” a low, guttural voice groans out; it sounds like it is on the other side of the door. Everyone jumps, Sally and Carrie scream. Katie starts to cry.

“Shhh!” I hush them. Kyle pushes past me and straight to the door. His hand reaches out touching the door.

“Don—!” Carrie cries, but he opens the door and the flicks on the light.

Nothing. It’s only empty steps that lead down to a room. The light flickers on and off every couple of seconds.

He looks back at us and smirks, “See nothing’s there, you chickens.” Just then the power goes out; everything is pitch black. He cries out.

I try to grab him, but I only catch air; I can’t see anything in front of me. The lights come back on and the only wrong thing is that Kyle is missing. His shoe is laying at the bottom of the stairs.

“What the hel—” Carrie starts.

“But what’s going on! Where is Kyle!”

“I don’t know.” I look down the stairs.

“Help me!” We hear Kyle’s panicked voice coming from below.

My foot touches the step, and Carrie grabs my arm. “You’re not going down there!”

“How else are we going to find him?” I ask, looking back at her. I see fear is in her eyes.

“You guys don’t have to come with me,” I say as I begin my way down the stairs.

Sally and Carrie both look at each other hesitating.

Keith looks at us and says, “John, take Jamie and Kate to the girl’s room and watch them, the rest of us will go find Kyle.”

John nods, takes the younger two by their hands, and heads to the room.

“Why does he get to go where it’s safe?” Sally whines.

Because he is more leveled headed than you two are at the moment, and Jess is already down the stairs.” His reply is followed by to squeaks, and then I hear the pounding of feet behind me.

I look around the basement; this is the first time any of us has been down here, shelves filled with junk line up the walls. It’s open except there is a door on the far side. I head to it. The lock is broken. I unhook the chain the open the door. It is a long dark hallway; spider webs hang from the ceiling.

“What the heck is this place?” Carrie asks as she follows behind me and Keith.

We reach another door.

“Children come play with me,” the voice is back, singing on the other side of the door.
We look at each other scared, but we know that we must find Kyle. Keith opens this one. It’s a small room; each side of the room has shelves filled with jars, piles of blankets cover the floor, and an old dresser sitting on the side. It looks as if it’s been here for years. But that’s not the most noticeable thing here. In the middle of the room, a chain is hooked on the ceiling, hovering over a huge black pot that is big enough to fit a body in. Underneath it, there is wood piled up and ready to be lit. I walk in with Sally and Carrie following behind me; it feels as if I am in the middle of a horror movie.

“You don’t think that Sally was right, do you?” Carrie asks me.

“Naughty children get eaten,” Mrs. Turner’s voice cuts through the air, our scared eyes look around for her, but no one is in here except us.

“She’s going to cook Kyle.” I panic and quickly turn around; my foot catches a blanket on the floor, uncovering a pile of bones. I stumble back, shocked, accidentally hitting one of the shelves with jars on it. The jars topple off, breaking on the ground. Eyes, fingers, and noses, each jar holding a different body part, scatter across the floor as the jars shatter.

“No! No! No! I made that up! Mrs. Turner is a nice lady. How can she be a witch?” Sally panics. As she turns to leave the room, the door slams shut, and Keith is nowhere to be found.

“WHERE IS KEITH?” Carrie screeches, grabbing Sally’s hand. Both are sobbing. “I want to wake up; please let this be a dream,” Carrie mutters. The old dresser shakes, rocking back and forth. A person wrapped up in a sack falls out, the sack moving.

“You lied, Sally,” the guttural voice comes from the sack. “Why did you lie!”

“I’m sorry for making up those stories about Mrs. Turner; I’m sorry I lied to everyone please make it stop!” Sally panics. As she turns to leave the room, the door slams shut, and Keith is nowhere to be found.

“Please wake up,” Carrie continues to mutter. “This is not real, no way this can be re—” she breaks off with a scared sob.

“Okay, that’s enough; you have class in the morning.” A sharp female voice cuts in, and the door opens as Kyle, Keith, and Mrs. Turner walk in.

“What? What’s going on?” Sally asks.

Carrie grabs a fake bone and jumps at Mrs. Turner, ready to strike, “You were going to eat us! You monster.”

I quickly grab her and hold her back.

“It was fake, Carrie, a prank,” Kyles says.

Her tearful eyes lock on him. “A prank?”

“Happy April fool’s!” Keith, Kyle, and I say chuckling.
Dear God, it's me Evelyn.
I know things will work out.
I know you have a plan.
I wish Mommy could see that.
I also wish things would go back to normal.
I know you are good though.
Whatever may happen, will you give Mommy the strength to continue?
Even if I am not with her.

I remember the first time I got sick. Daddy walked out on us, and Mommy was hanging on by her last thread. It was two years ago that I was diagnosed. I was diagnosed with leukemia. The doctors caught it early enough that it could be managed, but they could not manage what happened between Mommy and Daddy. Daddy thought he was doing his best for the family. He picked up over time and was never home. Mommy needed a break, but she never got one. She was constantly attending to me. I knew she kept it together for my sake, but every night she and Daddy would argue when they thought I was sound asleep. One night Mommy yelled at Daddy to leave, and he did.

I remember the day I was diagnosed with Leukemia. I remember Mommy and Daddy's faces. The fear that would now be permanent on Mommy's face. Cancer of the blood and bone marrow. I would have to do chemo treatments. The chemo always made me so tired and was like a monster that took all my energy. I felt so weak during the treatments, but the cancer was being monitored. It was a huge possibility that within a few months I could be in remission, that is what the doctors had said. Things were looking up – until they weren't.

"Nature Sings" by Shawna Larsen

I got sick again. The cancer came back, hitting so hard like a sledgehammer against a wall. This time around there was nothing the doctors could do. My body was growing very weak very fast. Mommy insisted that we try chemo again, but the doctors said it probably won't work this time around.

I remember it was a nice day when the cancer came back. It was beautiful and sunny. I should have been outside playing, running around, causing a ruckus. But my immune system would not be able to handle it. I already had to wear masks, and I could not be around a lot of people. I was quarantined. I remember when the cancer came back, that was the day Mommy lost her faith.

Dear God, it is me Evelyn.
If you are listening my Mommy is so stressed right now.
She must take care of me. I am sick and the doctors can't help.
I believe that it will be ok. Mommy doesn't.
She used to read me your word each night before bed.
But since I have gotten sick again, she has stopped.
I want you to know that I don't blame you for my sickness. I think Mommy does though.
She blames you, and I think she blames me too.
There was not a whole lot I could do for I was always stuck in bed, but I believed God was still good. I would pass my hours talking to him. I would write him letters. I knew there was still hope, and there was still good. I prayed to be healed and that I would be able to enjoy the cold windy air and hot warm sun. I prayed that I may be allowed to play outside again. I mostly prayed for Mommy though. I prayed that she would remain strong.

It was time to just have the cancer run its course. I was resting one day when I heard bits and pieces of whispering coming from the hall. I sat up and looked around, Mommy was out of the room. “Last days” hung in the air, making it thick and hard to breathe. All was silent and dead. There was a stir, and I quickly laid back down and shut my eyes tight.

I knew mommy was watching me, and I knew her heart was breaking. Tension hung in the air so thick. Suddenly, I could feel her small trembling body next to mine and could feel the tears rolling down her soft cheeks. After a few days of monitoring me, they sent me home. The doctors did not say anything; they did not have to. I was going to die. I might as well die at home where I could be most comfortable.

Each night before bed I would use all my strength to write letters to God. I believe that he could hear me and somehow my prayers would be answered.

Dear Mommy,
I want to thank you for raising me to be strong.
I might not be here for much longer, and I am so sorry mommy that I must go so soon.
I love you more than anything, and I regret that I can’t stay longer.
Thank you, Mommy, for never leaving my side. Even though at times you may have wanted to run away.
I am so sorry, Mommy.
I promise though that in heaven I will keep watch over you.
I will be your angel. This time I will protect you.
I am so sorry, Mommy.
I love you.

Dear God, it is me Evelyn.
I want to thank you for watching over me.
And watching over Mommy. I pray that you will keep her in your loving arms.
I don’t know if she believes anymore.
But I pray she will again.
I know I was not miraculously healed. I don’t blame you.
Everything happens the way it needs to.
I pray Mommy won’t blame you either.
I will be seeing you soon.

I laid there in bed listening to the wind hum and felt a brief, cold breeze. I imagined myself playing.
Playing outside. Laughter filling my ears. I was in between Mommy and Daddy. I was not sick, and it was a normal spring day. My favorite season. They each held my hand and swung me to the sky. Invincible. I imagined this and many other things. Things that were of distant memory.
I then closed my eyes, knowing they would never open again, as Mommy kept me safe through the night. I did not have to worry about the darkness or fear the monster that would soon swallow me. Mommy was by my side like always and Jesus would soon be here to come get me.

“Better Days” by Stephanie Flores

Flutter by, Butterfly
Lisa Chiglo

The sun was shining as I whipped my hair back into a ponytail. I grabbed my favorite mug from the cupboard, the brown one with LOVE written in black letters. I stepped out onto the porch and felt a rush of warm air upon my face. I sipped my morning coffee while being entertained by the hummingbirds zipping around the feeder. I was interrupted by my phone ringing.

“Hello,” I answered.
Ron, my mom’s husband said, “Hi, Lisa?”
I stood up from the porch and came into the house so I could hear better. Once I sat down, on the red recliner in the sitting room, I finally answered the voice on the other end.

“Yes, what’s going on?” I had prayed every day this call would never come. I was certain I knew what was happening.

“The doctor called, and your mother has an appointment today at 12:30 p.m.,” explained Ron.

“Okay, I will be there as fast as I can.”

I was flooded with emotions – disbelief, uncertainty, sadness, and grief – as I hung up the phone. I immediately began sobbing. I heard footsteps coming from upstairs. When I looked up, I saw my nineteen-year-old son, Treyten, walking towards me. His eyes were filled with concern and worry. Treyten came down from upstairs to check on me. Being the brave and level-headed young man he is, he helped me pull myself together and as I stood up, he gave me a hug.

Once I arrived at the hospital, I anxiously searched the waiting room in hopes of seeing my mom still waiting. Gathered around her were Ron with my brother, Greg, and my sister, Kim. They were all waiting, waiting for the doctor, waiting for me, waiting for the news we all knew was coming that none of us could speak of. I found my mom sitting in a wheelchair with her back to me.

“Mom, hi, I made it!”
As I gave my mom a hug, I noticed she didn’t look like herself right away; I knew something was wrong. Holding back the tears, I asked, “Mom, can I get you anything?”
I received a minimal slurred, “no, I’m fine,” response.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” I continued.
Another barely loud enough to hear response of, “I’m fine. I’m just tired.”
Mom, the woman who usually couldn’t keep quiet, struggled just to give any response to simple questions. Her hair had not been washed, and she looked beaten and broken.

I

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How could God do this to her? I wondered.

Sitting in the waiting room was torture. As much as I wanted to push this appointment back, it had arrived, and I couldn’t stand the waiting. I checked my watch for the third time, only minutes had passed. I sat and waited as life slowly unraveled around me.

 Didn’t they see her? She looked awful. The pink in her cheeks was gone, and the bags under her eyes had grown bigger and darker. Why are they making her wait like this?

I was getting more anxious and furious with each passing minute. This was the longest twenty minutes of my life. I just wanted it done.

“Vickie Goetzke?” The nurse called mom’s name, and I froze. As I stood behind Mom’s wheelchair, my family just stared at me.

What was the matter with them? Didn’t they understand this was not going to be a normal appointment? This was not going to be another chemo treatment and then we would bring mom home. No, this was it! This was the appointment we have all been dreading!

As the thoughts ran through my head, I began to move my feet. They felt as if they were stuck in quicksand. I struggled to walk toward the nurse who was calling mom’s name. Pushing Mom to her fate, we entered the doctor’s office room.

My brother, attempting to mask his fear with humor, asked, “Why don’t they call this the second waiting room?” He has always done this ever since we were little, always wanting to make people feel better and laugh! “Laughter is the best medicine,” Greg always says.

Knock, Knock. The door opened slowly.

“Vickie, hello,” the doctor greeted my mother before he introduced himself to my sister, my brother, and me. “Vickie, how are you feeling?” The doctor asked.

I thought to myself, Terrible, just look at her. Can’t you tell? She feels awful!

“Nice to meet you all. Let’s get down to business,” continued the doctor. “It’s bad, Vickie,” he said as he is scanned the room, ensuring to make eye contact with each of us.

Mom looked at each of us kids in the eye and whispered, “I love you.” She was being strong for us, her children.

As the voices inside my head screamed and sobbed, I looked at my mom, walked over and knelt on the floor in front of her, taking her hand and whispering, “I love you too, Mom.” After a few brief moments, I realized the doctor was still talking.

The doctor continued, “The cancer has spread to your brain, and it is very aggressive. You have two options: radiation on your brain, which may give you three to six months, or leave it and you may have two to three months.”

The doctor paused in his explanation to let it sink in.

This is it? The voices are quiet; Why? Why do not they scream now; I sure want to scream! This cannot be my life; this cannot be happening to my mom. She is only 59 years old.

After this brief pity party, I jumped back into the harsh reality that this is my life, and I am the oldest and must step up to make this easier on the rest of my family.

“Lis,” mom said as she looked at me to make the decision, “what do we do, Lisa? What do you think?”

I do not know. I cannot reply. I cannot even believe this is happening.

I responded to my mom with, “Mom, this is your decision. You have fought hard for three years. It’s your call. Just know we will support whichever decision you choose.”

We all knew she had told us no more radiation. Kim was crying uncontrollably and left the room. My sister Kim had always taken everything so seriously and instantly thought of the worst possible outcome. I wanted to chase after her and reassure her everything would be okay, but I could not because wouldn’t be! Nothing would be okay.

My mom courageously announced, “I’ll fight. I’m not ready to give up just yet.”

My body was filled with relief and guilt as she was saying what she knew we all wanted to hear. Mom had said months ago that she just could not go through radiation again; it made her feel like she was dying inside. I left my mom’s side slowly, grasping what this all entailed and realized I was not ready either. There were so many things we had not done, so many things we had not talked about.
About a week later, I was sitting in my mom’s kitchen setting up hospice care. I came to the realization I would have to take a leave of absence from work to care for my mother. It is a responsibility I was willing to take on. It had only been about a week since our visit with Mom’s doctor. Mom’s health plummeted quickly, and there were no options left. Death was dictating what we did next, not us.

As I prepared to head back home, I said goodbye to my mom, “Bye, mom, see you soon!”

“See you in heaven, Lis, love you,” she whispered.

“Love you too, mom,” I expressed.

Several days later, as I was preparing my son’s stay at the Minnesota State Fair, my phone rang.

“Lisa, come now! Mom is in and out of consciousness. Her breathing is erratic and labored. She has completely stopped breathing a couple of times,” my sister called in distress.

“I’m on my way!” I exclaimed frantically.

Luckily, I was already in Minneapolis and was able to make it to my mom’s house in about two and a half hours. When I arrived, I walked into the house through the kitchen and I was greeted by my grandpa. A quick hug and I was through the kitchen and into the living room, which had been transformed into mom’s makeshift hospital room. I was brought to my knees the moment I laid eyes on my mom; this person lying in the hospital bed vaguely resembled her. She was incoherent, extremely pale, her breathing was labored, and her eyes appeared lifeless. She was struggling to stay with us. I sat on the bed next to her, and I held her hand. It felt as if she were already gone.

“Mom, I’m here. It’s me, Lisa. I’m here now. It’s okay.” As I spoke these words, I am falling apart inside; however, I am strong.

“Ok? Okay for what? Did I just tell my mother it was okay for her to leave us, for her to die?”

I continued talking to my mom, reassuring her all her family was by her side. I knew this would bring her joy and comfort. Her family was the most important thing to her, and I wanted her to know we were all there with her. She was not alone.

“You have to tell her, Lisa. You have to tell her it’s okay to go,” Ron said to me as he cried next to Mom’s bed. “You have to. She is waiting for you to let her know that she can go.”

This is the hardest sentence of my life, and it takes all my faith and courage to speak these words to my mother.

“Mom, it’s okay for you to rest. We are all here with you. It’s okay. I will make sure everyone is okay.”

I sat with her and held her hand long after she took her final breath. I was brought some comfort knowing that she was able to go peacefully with her family at her side.

“New Beginnings” by Suree Sompamitwong

Faith has always been a huge part of who I am. After my mom passed, I felt I lost my faith and couldn’t understand why God would take her away from us at such a young age. It took me a while to realize my faith had not gone anywhere. I was grieving and trying to make sense of senseless death. If not for my faith, I would have never been able to be strong for my family, my mom, or for myself. My faith is exactly what aided me through this most difficult time in my life.

My mother left me with her final words, “I’ll see you in heaven.”

Treyten, a brave young man told me, “It’s not good-bye. It’s just, see you later.”
The Collapse: Chapter 1, The Roof
Trevor Casey

The sky is beautiful from my vantage point on the roof. It’s funny, how carefree the world used to be. It’s only been a couple of years since The Collapse. It feels like so long ago when one’s worries were school, relationships, and work. What I would give to go back to those times. What any of us would give. It doesn’t do us any good to think about it; however, I’m pretty sure we all do. Things could be worse. I could be alone, a scavenger, no Pack to call my own.

A bang on the ground behind me causes me to turn my attention away from the street below me.

“Ho, Cal, how’s it go?” A friendly face smiles at me from the trapdoor in the ground.

“Nothing new to report,” I say to Jason as he clammers onto the roof beside me. Perched atop the Knickerbocker, a fancy hotel in Time Square, we have a pretty good view of anyone who could approach the hotel. I do enjoy being the roof scout. It’s peaceful. Just you and the sky. Really the only time I can get some damn peace and quiet. The Knickerbocker is home to a hundred or so teens.

“You gonna tell me the real reason you’re here? Or just stand there all day?” I ask as Jason stares out at the horizon.

“Cob wanted me to tell you that you’re on the scouting trip tomorrow,” Jason says, looking grim. I acknowledge this with a grunt. As a cross country runner in high school, I’m usually chosen to run point on scouting trips. Although the Knickerbocker is pretty well stocked with food and supplies, Cob usually orders a scouting trip every other week or so. One of the rovers probably found a stockpile or something.

“Hey man, I’ll be fine. Lord knows I’ve gone on enough of these,” I say, noticing the unease in Jason’s face.

Jason and I grew up together, and while we grew apart in high school, we both lost our families during The Collapse. We’re each other’s family now. All that we have of the past. And while a scouting trip doesn’t explicitly put its members in immediate danger, anytime anyone leaves the Knickerbocker, there’s no guarantee they’ll return. Midtown Manhattan isn’t the worst place you could be, but the world is far from safe these days. The fact that we have meals and security makes the Knickerbocker one of the more enviable places in town; however, it also puts a target over our head. Skirmishes with other Packs, groups of people banded together after The Collapse, aren’t rare by any means. Nobody knows how Cob came into the cache of weapons that makes the Knickerbocker one of the better-armed Packs in Manhattan. In fact, nobody knows much of anything about him Pre-Collapse. By the time Jason and I had joined the Knickerbockers, Cob’s name was being whispered all over the streets of New York. Who was this guy? Making order in the midst of chaos? In charge of a large cache of automatic assault rifles? Hell, I’m not complaining. The man’s saved my life more times than I’m willing to admit.

My thoughts are interrupted as a head with long, blonde hair peaks out of the trap door in the ground. Clarisse and I hold eye contact for a second before she makes her way onto the roof. What goes on in that blasted head of hers, I’ll never know.

“Relieving you from duty, Callum,” she says, her stony expression showing no sign of the night we spent together. Her eyes narrow at Jason.

“Shouldn’t you be in the kitchens?” Meeting her gaze with an equal coolness, Jason nods at me and descends down the trap door. I wonder what that was about. They don’t really know each other, to my knowledge.

Clarisse takes up a position on the edge of the roof, eyes roaming, the perfect soldier. Damn me but she is beautiful, hair flowing in the wind, blue eyes that could pierce the wind. Her holstered rifle only adds to her majestic appearance.

“Are you going tomorrow?” I ask. As one of Cob’s Elites, she’d have more information about the trip than Jason would. She turns to face me and once again, I’m reminded of the night we spent on guard duty together a couple weeks ago. I coulda swore there was something more behind the smiles and laughs we shared that night, but apparently not, as I’ve barely gotten a word out of her since.

“I’m on the retrieval team. Liz stumbled into a storage cache on Park Ave. and East 31st.,” she replies. Liz was one of our Rovers, constantly on the move, looking for supplies, scavengers, possibly food. When adults started dying following the second wave of Covid-19, the government implemented storage caches all
over the United States. It’s been close to a year since we’ve found one, and all storage caches in New York were thought to have been found. This was exciting news. My sudden excitement quickly turns to dread as I realize just where she said.

“That’s in the middle of Wolf territory! What in The Collapse was Liz doing all the way out there?” I exclaim.

Clarisse, unperturbed by my outbreak, turns back towards the edge of the roof. I’m left to my thoughts as my question goes unanswered. I’m about to open my mouth to repeat the question when she turns around and meets my gaze. At that moment, I realize she doesn’t know. That she’s just as scared as I am. The fear in her eyes disappears as quickly as it appeared. Holy Collapse, she is stunning. Focus, focus, focus, I think to myself.

“You should go check in with Cob. He’s probably wondering where you are,” Clarisse says, still holding my gaze.

I search her eyes one more time for... well, anything. Affection, trust, anything. Anything that shows the kiss we shared meant something. Not seeing what I was looking for, I lower my gaze and sigh.

“I guess so.” I holster my rifle over my shoulder and step through the trapdoor, onto the ladder leading down into the hotel.

“Cal,” Clarisse says. I look up.

“Be safe out there tomorrow,” she says, an earnest look on her face. I let go of the breath I’d been holding.

“You too,” I say, looking her in the eye before closing the trap door on top of me.

“Unobtrusive” by Jon Adams

Chapter 2, Cob

The Wolves. What in the name of The Collapse was Liz doing that far in their territory? The Wolves are one of the most notorious packs in Manhattan. Only a few miles inland from the Knickerbocker, no sane person would want to go anywhere near them. I hop off the ladder and into the uppermost stairwell. The door in front of me leads to the children’s floor, as far away from potential enemies as possible. I say children, but they’re all older than ten, younger than thirteen.

The virus wiped out all children younger than ten and most adults older than twenty-one with terrifying accuracy. Babies born post-Collapse have all died within a couple of months, as well as twenty-year-olds turning twenty-one. Scary times we live in. A timer always ticking. As part of The Revival Movement, I believe this is God’s way of ridding the world of humans. Makes sense to me. We sure as hell did fuck up his world. Others believe the virus escaped from government labs and what not. I don’t see the point in dwelling on it too much.

As I make my way down, there are guards posted on specific floors. The elevator would be nice, but electricity, phones, computers, the internet – they are all a thing of the past. Gas ran out early in The Collapse, rendering most vehicles useless; however, we’d found a hundred gallons of gas from a storage cache, a year or so back. Now it’s just waiting to be used for an emergency. Cob used it to trade with other packs in the past for essentials. It’s not easy to keep his little society running.

I stop when I get to the third floor. A nod at the guard by the door gets me through. This floor belongs to Cob and his elites. One of these rooms would belong to Clarisse, but I have no way of knowing which. I make my way to room 333 and prepare myself for the debriefing.
Cob’s room is simple: a desk sits perpendicular to the window, giving a view of the front of the hotel, the same bed we all have in the corner. What makes his room different from anyone else’s, however, is the array of guns in the glass case. Everyone’s issued a gun when admitted into the pack, though, those guns are nothing compared to these. Automatic assault rifles, military shotguns… makes a man wonder how someone got their hands on all of it.

“Isolation” by Shawna Larsen

“Ahhhhh Callum, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if I’d have to grab you myself,” Cob said, smiling as he turned to me from his seat at his desk.

“Have a seat, have a seat,” he continues, standing and moving a chair out for me. Cob is the epitome of confidence. African-American, tall, with close-cropped hair and a clean shave, scars litter his well-muscled body. He is young, in Pre-Collapse terms, a year or two older than me, probably nearing his twenty-first. That is a scary thought.

“Ho Cob, how’s it go?” I ask. I take in the maps at his desk, my eyes flicking to the circle drawn at Park Ave and East 31st.

“Did Clarisse already talk to you?” Cob asks, ignoring the question.

“She mentioned a storage cache but that’s all,” I reply, trying to get Cob’s side of the story.

“I see… well, make yourself comfortable, and let us go over your role in tomorrow’s events,” Cob says.

“You’ll be running point in tomorrow’s mission. Scout ahead of the group and make sure there are no nasty surprises waiting for us. You know what to do. This is where things get a little tricky,” his eyes flicker to the map and the circle drawn deep in wolf territory.

“We need that storage cache. We haven’t had an opportunity like this in close to a year.” He pauses. “Ah, I can the unease in your eyes. You’ve already figured it out. Yes, the storage cache is in Wolf territory, but Liz is confident she knows the guard rotations and can sneak us by,” he continues.

Even more strange is the fact that Liz was in Wolf territory to spy. I’m not in the politics here at the Knickerbocker, but I’m pretty sure risking a life for this information goes against some unspoken rule. There aren’t laws in this world run by teens; sure, there’s order in some places, but as a whole, there are no laws. There’s nothing stopping any Pack from moving against another. I guess I just thought we were above that. No need to risk lives if we don’t have to do that kinda thing. I could be getting ahead of myself. I just find it strange Liz was spying on Wolves and stumbled into a storage cache. Something is not adding up. But I do as I’m told. I nod my head, say “yes, sir,” and listen.

“The Wolves don’t know about the storage cache, and they won’t be expecting anyone to recover it. We get in, we load the carts, we get out. Nobody ever has to know we were ever there. It’ll be a small team: Liz leading, Clarisse and the twins manning a cart, myself as the firepower, and you running point.”

I hate the twins. Hate’s too strong of a word. I have a strong dislike for them. Built like linemen, you’d definitely want them on your side of a fight. But they’re bullies. They abuse their power as elites for little things. Jason’s had his fair share of run-ins with them in the mess hall. Why are those two brutes are coming on a stealth mission? I know not.

Carts are… well, exactly what they sound like. Shopping carts. Instead of filling backpacks, we’ve found it’s easier to bring a couple carts with. Blasted things make a hell of a lot of noise. There’s no way we’ll be able to get everything from the cache with only three carts, but I agree with Cobs’ decision on that. Any more would be a dead giveaway for sure. Three might even do the trick.

“Understand me, soldier?” Cob says.

“Yes, sir,” I reply, swallowing my doubts.
“Clean your rifle tonight and we’re out at 6 am sharp, be in the lobby by 5. We’ll need as much darkness as we can get. Dismissed,” Cob finishes.

The whole mission would be better off at night, but Post-Collapse with no streetlamps, flashlights would stand out like a sore thumb. Best to start the journey at the crack of dawn. Troubled, I leave Cob’s room and head to the mess hall to find Jason.

High School
Sidney Gerdes

High school can be a great place for some people, but for others it might be a tough four years. I have been able to witness both sides of this life. The first day I got dropped off by my parents and entered a school is a day I will look back on when I graduate. I will remember all the first times: whether it is getting dropped off, the first game day, the first crush, or the first time being bullied. High school is where a lot of the things that will stay with me for many years happened. Even after I graduate, I will still look back at days and things I went through. High school is a major test to most friendships, whether it is with a friend or a romantic relationship.

The first day as a young student is an important day for most. This was day when I branched off and started to figure out what I liked and what I don’t like. The first day was also the day that I would meet my friends that I hoped to have all throughout my life. This is not always the case for everyone. I had a teacher my freshman year who made me write down who my closest friends were at the time. This teacher told me I would not be allowed to open it back up until graduation. To this day, I can remember some of the friends I wrote down. Some of those friends I wrote down are no longer my closest friends.

As the years go on, many people change. Being involved in different sports can hurt a friendship. I was an eighth grader who got moved up to play on the varsity team for two of my sports. This hurt quite a few of my friendships. This was not only because I wasn’t around them as often but also because I had to make older friends since I was the youngest around. I went for two years talking to all the older people and not really doing anything with my grade. As the years went on, I thought I was getting closer to the older group.

One day, I was at practice and found out that I wasn’t getting closer to them. During practice, the people I would have called my friends were all in a group joking around. This was when I overheard them talking bad about me. Later on, they found out that I had heard them and tried to make things right. This was hard for me because I want everyone to like me, but this was one thing I had a hard time letting go. I had many rough nights because of this day.

These friends that I thought I had were also captains. Since they were captains, I couldn’t really go to them or to the coach. This being said, I stayed there and didn’t say anything to anyone. I kept this to myself and let it hurt me.

A couple weeks later, it had happened again. At this time, another girl on my team had noticed this was going on. She had also heard them saying stuff about me but didn’t really know what she was supposed to do for me. She came to me that day and told me that she was going to talk to the coach because that was not the way to talk about someone. I told her that it was fine, and I would live with it. She would not allow that to happen. She talked to the coach and tried to help me through this hard time. Since the coach was aware of what was happening now, there was less of it.

As the years went on, I started to lose some of my older friends, and the people who bullied me, because they graduated. This is when it hit me that I needed to make it right with my classmates. I never completely lost touch with all the people in my grade, so I knew that it was going to be easier than I thought.

As I grew up, I realized how young and dumb it was to think getting moved up in sports was such a big deal. I found out it can get in the way of friendships. This was the year that I realized I needed to become more independent and not care so much about what other people thought.

I have never been the one to be independent and not care about what others thought of me. I went through the majority of high school worried about what some people would think of me and if they were going to talk bad about me again. I was someone who wanted to impress others and make sure I wasn’t the target anymore. Becoming friends with my grade again made me realize how dumb that was and how I could have
prevented being bullied. Fixing my friendships also made me realize how nobody really cares what I wear, or sometimes who I am friends with.

The years went on and I was now in the people I thought were my friends, they bullied me. As the year went on, the coach would make sure that everything was going alright. When I was the age of being a well as a senior, he came to me and wouldn’t do the same thing. He had gone through and how I was it and overcome the situation. He wasn’t going to be the person thing to others. now the captain and the older responsibilities. Since I had been for many years, I knew how to these situations.

I was now the captain and the older one with the responsibilities. Since I had been on these teams for many years, I knew how to handle some of these situations. I have always been the student to try and make everyone like me and to care what they all think. Being a captain made me realize there is more to a sport than just the sport itself. One thing I realized was that I wanted to make sure nobody on my team would go through the same things I went through. Since I was the captain and I had this background on my shoulders, I knew that I wasn’t going to be the one to bully them.

Holding a position as a captain allowed me to be able to teach some people how to handle situations as well as what not to do as they got older. I think that going through the things I went through at a young age was a good thing. I know most people wouldn’t say this, but I’m glad I did. I did my best to make sure everyone enjoyed the season and, more importantly, had someone to turn to if they needed it. I hope that being able to lead by example will stick with those girls and they will be able to pass this trait on as they grow older.

Senior year was the best year I could have ever asked for. I became really good friends again with some of my classmates. All seniors say how much it hurts to be a part of all the last things that happen with their senior year, and they’re not wrong. One thing this has all taught me is don’t take things for granted as a student. I was the student who wanted to be done with high school and said how much I needed to graduate because of the difficult time that I experienced in my high school career. Now I am the student who wants to redo high school because I want to be the person others can count on. Going through this situation made me realize that there needs to be more people like the one who stepped up to help me when things got tough.

What Do I Do?
Joslyn Birger

I arrived home after the most terrifying event had just happened to me. I entered my house, trying to hide my bloody hands. I saw my mom in the kitchen, and before I could run down the stairs, she asked me, “Mia Jo Johnson, it is almost midnight, where on earth have you been?” She then saw that I had been crying, and she asked, “What is going on, darling?”

I tried to speak, but I just began to cry. I ran into my mom’s arms as fast as a lightning bolt. I wiped my tears away, told my mom to sit down, and I began to tell her it all from the beginning.
It all started when I was leaving work. I work as a lifeguard at this beautiful waterpark, filled with colorful slides, a long lazy river, a huge wave pool, and a pirate ship full of sprinklers. Every night, the waterpark closes at 8:00. That night, after all the guests left and the employees cleaned up the park, I was able to leave at around 8:30. I jumped in my red Jeep Liberty, and I began to head home. I live about fifteen minutes away from the park, and I was excited for a quick ride home. As I drove, I blared my music in my car so loudly, I thought the whole city could hear it.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, one of the cars from the other side of the street swerved into the lane I was driving in. That car hit the side of a car that was only two cars in front of me. It was a good thing the car ahead of me was keeping its distance like I was. We were both able to slam on our brakes before we were a part of the accident. The car that was hit rolled into the next lane over and another car was involved. That car slid a couple of feet until it was stopped from the side of a bridge. It was smashed between the car that was rolling and the bridge. The car that was first struck was upside down.

I had never seen anything like this in my life. It was as though everything went in slow motion, but then again it happened so fast, I didn’t know what to do. It seemed like the car that came from the other side of the road was going a million miles per hour.

As I saw everyone jump out of their cars, I also went out to see if everyone was okay. I walked over to the scene, and all I could see was blood and shattered glass everywhere. It was a mess. My brain couldn’t focus on anything that was happening. It was so loud outside, cars were honking and many different people were yelling, “Call 911!,” “Hey! I need help,” and “What is going on?!” No one knew what to do. I stood there, frozen, shocked at what had just happened.

In the car that caused the accident, there was a dark-haired man, about forty years old, driving with a dark-haired woman, who looked around thirty. Aside from small cuts on their heads, both were okay and getting out of the vehicle.

The car that was struck first had a younger woman in it. She had golden-blonde hair and was probably in her twenties. She blacked out for only a moment and then was fine. Her car was upside down, but with the help of others surrounding the scene, she was unbuckled and pulled out. She was very bloody, with a deep cut in her leg, and it was difficult for her to stand. She was crying. She looked frightened as she just stared at her car. She was sitting in the tailgate of someone’s pickup, waiting for the ambulance to arrive to treat her.

The third car was smashed between the bridge and the car that was upside down. Some people began to push the cars away to get to the car to help this man. He was a middle-aged man with dark, gray hair. They pulled him out. I could see he was unconscious. Three men were carrying him, and others created a clean area on the road to lay him down. He wasn’t breathing.

I thought in my head, oh my goodness, he is dead. I just saw him get killed.

Then a man yelled, “Does anyone know CPR?”

When no one said anything, I suddenly thought to myself, Mia! You know CPR. You practice it almost every day for lifeguard training! As scared as I was, I slowly raised my hand and I said, “I do.”

The man then said, “Okay. Come here, he needs you.”

When I approached the body, I could see his arms were cut up and so was his face. He had blood all over him. As soon as I was about to begin, I froze, and I felt like I didn’t know what to do. Everyone was yelling at me, but I was so scared. What if I couldn’t save him? What if I do it wrong? I finally took a moment, closed my eyes, took a deep breath to relax, and began. I knelt down beside his body and started compressions.

I learned at lifeguard training that for CPR, you do thirty compressions with two rescue breaths, and you continue until the ambulance arrives or the guest begins breathing. When I began the compressions, I knew I had to go a certain depth for a compression to count. And while I didn’t have a ruler to measure the exact depth, we were taught that once you hear ribs cracking you are going deep enough. With all the strength I had, I pressed into his nipple-line area, and I began to feel his ribs crack. This was the worst feeling. But I knew that having cracked ribs was going to be the least of his worries. I kept going. I was doing this for five minutes, and then I began to feel someone pulling me away from his body.
It was a woman. She was a paramedic. Even with the loud sirens, I couldn’t hear the ambulance coming. I was so focused on saving this man. I had blocked out all other distractions. It was as if he and I were in a dark room with no noise, and I was just trying to save his life.

Once I was pulled out of that world, I saw the lights, I heard the sirens, and I saw the paramedics. As I was just standing in the middle of the scene, a lady pulled me away and said, “Good job, honey.” She was an older woman. I could tell that she was a mother. She was comforting me and trying to talk to me, but my eyes were set on the man and the paramedics. They were trying to revive him.

After a little bit, I finally heard someone say, “He is breathing.” But I could see he was still unconscious. They put him on a stretcher, stuck him inside the back of the ambulance, and took off.

One of the police officers at the scene came up to me and said, “You helped save his life.” I grinned and headed towards my car. I was still shaking. I could barely walk.

Once in my car, I looked down at my hands to find the man’s blood all over them. I looked like I had just murdered someone. I began to cry. I don’t know why. I just helped save a man’s life, and here I was crying. I just wanted to go home, but I couldn’t move. I was still frozen. Looking ahead at where the accident happened, I could see it replaying in my head. I told myself, “Mia, you need to go home.”

So, with the little bit of strength that I had left in me, I put my car in drive and drove home.

**Backyard Shenanigans**

Don Carlson

“Watching” by Vanessa Olivares

Another rainy day, and Robert had had enough. The nice sunny days, the sunburns, watermelon, and swimming, it was all Robert thought about when the snow is gone. And here he was, stuck inside staring out the window at his backyard. The blue slide was covered in rain along with ropes climbing to the slide. Robert saw a puddle in the sand that surrounds his playground, a place where he escapes the real world of his parents telling him to eat his vegetables or clean his room. A secret meeting place for his new club he created with his buddies from school, with a secret code word used to enter mainly because outsiders like Robert’s evil sister are not allowed inside. His home away from home. And here Robert sat on the windowsill, overlooking the very wet, and partially flooded backyard for the third day in a row.

“Robert! I need you to get your dirty clothes in the basket,” Mom yelled from across the house. “Robert! Have you brushed your teeth?”

“I can’t take this madness for much longer,” Robert said to himself, as he waited patiently for the rain to stop.

He had many things to discuss in the club. And the sandbox was taking water fast. Looking up at the sky, he saw no break in the clouds. Upset, Robert took off to do his chores. Maybe then the rain will have stopped. Clearly, we can’t live like this forever.
After a painstaking two hours, Robert had to check the weather. Dropping everything, he ran to the back porch. Still cloudy and still very much raining, Robert was fed up. He had had enough. “If I’m quiet, maybe I can go out and get some of that water out of the sandbox before it all sinks into the mud,” Robert said to himself quietly.

Acting on impulse, Robert quickly fished around for his rain boots in the deep, dark closet by the door. Digging through what seemed like hundreds, even thousands of boots and shoes, Robert climbed in and snatched his boots before the others sucked him into the deep darkness of the closet. He ripped his raincoat off the hanger and finally, he was off, making sure the door didn’t slam behind him he quickly ran to the sandbox.

“The ship is taking on water! We must bail it out!” Robert yelled as he hopped aboard the SS Lucky. Robert quickly grabbed the nearest bucket and started dumping out all the fish from the day. Sir Captain Robert started throwing buckets of water out into the sea. With no end in sight, Robert had to think of a better plan. The rain was coming down so fast and the puddles filled back up quickly.

“Gather the sails! We must sail out of this storm quickly!” he yelled. Climbing to the very top of the boat, Robert was looking in every direction to see if there was a clearing in sight. Rain and wind hitting his face made it impossible at times. Swaying back and forth in the hurricane made him feel brave for doing what he could to save his ship from sinking. With no end in sight, he slid down the pole and reached the flooded main deck.

“Ugh what a mess!” He yelled. Contemplating what to do, Robert decided sailing south would be the only way out of this hurricane. He had to make a drastic decision quickly so he wouldn’t be swimming ashore. Surely, he was the best captain and there was nothing to worry about. After swinging on the monkey bars, running along the rope fence, sliding down the pole, climbing the ropes, and finally sliding down the water-soaked slide, all the sails are pointing in that direction, and there Robert stands. Soaking head to toe, his rain boots are filled to the top with water, his pants dripping from the pant legs, and his shirt under his coat dripping just as much as his coat is. He feels accomplished as the rainstorm rages on.

Grabbing the bucket, he once again starts throwing water out of the sandpit and into sea. “Back to the fishes!” he yelled. Bucket after bucket, Robert felt as though it would never end. Was he sailing in the wrong direction? Was the world going to fill up to the skies with water? Robert, growing tired of the water, started to get frustrated but never stopped throwing water. The loud crackle of thunder filled the air, frightening Robert to the bone.

“I’m Captain of this ship, and I’m brave!” he yelled loudly as he closed his eyes. Opening his eyes, he saw the rain had suddenly stopped. The grey clouds moved rapidly away from him. Had he done it? The seagulls were above in the sky again.

“Entrepreneurial” Robert cried.

Finally, the water stopped flooding. After dumping about five more buckets, Robert decided to let the sun finish drying up the rest. He couldn’t believe it, after three long and painstaking days, Robert jumped out of the boat. He was drenched. He had saved his boat from sinking in the rainstorm, but how was he going to get inside and change, knowing that he wasn’t supposed to go out in the rain in the first place?

The backyard had sucked his imagination into a whirlwind of adventure. As he walked up to the back door, feet squishing in his rain boots and a few drops dripping from his chin, he thought to himself. What excuse was he going to come up with if he was caught?

Robert walked in and ripped his boots off, throwing them in the back of the closet. He ran to his room, hoping he wouldn’t cross paths with anyone. He made it to his bedroom, slammed his door and changed as fast as he could. Thinking he was sneaky enough, he heard someone yelling from across the house. It was Robert’s mother, who was following the wet footprints leading straight to his bedroom.

The Settlement Program
Daniel Walther

Axton woke up with the Westclox blaring in his ear yet again this morning, lying there for just a moment as the wretched sound bounced around his mind until he gained enough consciousness to groggily turn it off. He looked around the sun-clad room with its pristine-white brick textured walls, bright-blue carpet,
and the interactive telescreen hanging from the thick, chrome arm attached to the bed. He clicked the FM option and the sound crackled to life, bristling through the air as he heard the last few notes of a modernized rendition of Buddy Holly’s “Peggy Sue” that hit the airwaves like a Boeing 707. A quick pause and a jingle later, the announcer came on the air to address the latest report on the Settlement Program while Axton checked the calendar for today’s events. The radio in the background talked of Old Joe, the Titan of the East. The man with the Georgian accent whose words came out of his mouth just below his walrus mustache.

Once he was fully awake, Axton made his way to the kitchen for breakfast. His father, a staunch old man, was sitting at the dinner table in the suit he only wore on special occasions. He was smoking from his Canadian pipe, like that of Bing Crosby, and reading the Daily News.

“Bonan matenon!” He greeted Axton as he entered.

“Well, good morning to you. I see you’re already to go,” Axton replied as he glided to the Frigidaire to search for last night’s supper.

“You won’t find it; I already ate it, sleepy-head.”

“Well, then I’ll just eat when we get there.” He closed the door and walked over to the entrance and put on his shoes and jacket. “Come on, let’s go. We’re already late.”

His father put down the paper as he got up. They made haste to their old flying automobile and fired up the engine with slight hesitation in its response as it bobbed up and down until the craft’s eventual hovering state. They zipped their way to the café where Axton’s friend’s cars were stationed. The building prided itself on its corrugated metal exterior and bright neon sign that flashed Kafejo. Axton walked in and saw his friends Calypso and Tyr sitting at the Formica boomerang tabletop, in cushy red-round seats with bright Cola branding on the backrest. Axton moved into his seat. “Saluton, how are you guys?”

“Hey, Axton, how’s it going with you?” asked Tyr.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m kinda nervous,” he said sheepishly.

“Yea, I can understand that. I’d be nervous too if I had to go to the Settlement Program ‘specially with the most current threat,” replied Calypso.

“Most current threat?” Axton inquired.

“Oh, you haven’t heard the news? Old Joe is at it again, stirring up the pot. You know how it goes,” Calypso said as the waitress came over with their sodas and fries.

“Oh, thank you,” she said before turning back to the group. “Now, where was I?”

“Old Joe,” Tyr sighed.

“Right, Old Joe. You know, I bet that geezer is hiding in a bunker somewhere as he’s commanding his army. What a coward!” Calypso rambled on.

“Yea, Old Joe. Listen, I don’t necessarily know if I want to go. Like, I heard some pretty bad horror stories of some of our boys who came back home, and they flipped their lid. I ain’t looking for that kinda lifestyle,” Axton admitted.

“Well, you already signed on to the five-year program, so you can’t back out now. Even if you tried, they’d find a way to get you in there, trust me.” Calypso said bluntly.

“Hey, Calypso, can you please stop ear-bashing? I don’t like your razzing his berries with all this ‘Old Joe’ stuff,” snapped Tyr, adding, “Besides, I heard there are ways of getting out of this situation, though it does have some major consequences.”

“I already know. They leave for Canada to avoid the program, but they’re never allowed to return,” Axton said in a hushed voice. “Can’t say I’m all for that.”

They finished their fries and Axton declared, “I gotta get going. I don’t want to be late.” He got up, gave them parting hugs, and headed for the car waving at Calypso and Tyr.

Axton and his father steadily traveled to the station where they would board their shuttle. They found their seats and waited. A moment later, an announcement came from the speakers above, “Atenton! Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking,” her voice flowed through the air. “The flight has been delayed slightly due to solar flares. We should be taking flight momentarily.”

“Well, this is just great,” someone in the back said.

Axton’s father fumbled in his coat pocket and found his pipe and lit it while waiting. The sweet, grassy scent of bright Virginia and the black, peppery notes of the Syrian latakia pervaded the cabin. Soon, the shuttle took off and for the first time, Axton experienced space. First, he felt the immense pressure on his body as the metal
chariot jostled against the unrelenting force of the Earth’s gripping pull, then in almost an instant, weightlessness. A moment of silence passed. The panic of claustrophobia of the spacecraft started to sink in just as it broke through the exosphere.

After a short moment of eternity, the craft’s engines powered up again and went into full drive. They made their way to the Moon where the next station was. This is where Axton said goodbye to his Dad, and he dismounted the shuttle. After it departed, a Moon-rover came to pick him and many others up to take them to Moon Base Bravo. It was a grey, lackluster facility that only functioned to distill knowledge of establishing a colony. Most would describe Moon Base Bravo as Greaser’s territory. Most who entered here were from The Pitts, the type of guys who have their Italiano wig chops and black leather jackets. This is where they would start their training for the Settlement Program and where Axton would meet his new companions: Neil Turner, Milo Flynn, Asher Byrd, Lazarus Salazar, and Tom Thorne.

“Fallen Earth” by Mary Rogers

Their acquaintance with Moon Base Bravo was short but essential to their survival. Because now they were heading to the big leagues. Their mission: to establish Mars Colony Foxtrot at Acidalia Planitia and establish a connection 45 miles west to Mars Colony Alpha, the headquarters and lifeline to the whole project. It was up to them, along with a company of soldiers, to make this project a success.

Their shuttle landed down on the surface of the regolith, and there the team gathered their supplies and constructed their “shabby shacks.” The first week was full of hard labor and very little sleep. “How you feeling there, bud?” Neil would ask Axton every so often. “Oh, you know, surviving,” Axton would usually respond as he awkwardly held up metal rods that needed to be welded together.

Milo was the type to be found sleeping behind the shacks while others weren’t looking. He’d always give an excuse to this behavior, “Being asleep wastes less oxygen,” or, “It’s better to sleep more hours in order to not be stressed on the job.” All of these excuses were ineffective on the crew.

Asher was a radio technician who set up the radio tower to contact Alpha for shipments and emergency supplies.

For the next few years, shipments came every other week to build the biodome of Foxtrot. Things were moving swiftly until reports of the Reds, the ragtag army of Old Joe, were noticed on a few squad’s scanners. Then, combat broke out when the Reds started moving in. Axton and his crew prepared themselves for the attack.

The fighting lasted for what felt like years. Each time they would fend off the hoard, the Reds, who were stationing themselves north of Foxtrot, would come back with more force. The company of platoons took heavy casualties.

Finally, the enemy pushed hard enough to break through the defenses, allowing them to get to the crew of mechanics.

“Ruĝuloj! Ruĝuloj!” Tom shouted as the Reds came charging after them. The company designed for defense was outnumbered.

Asher managed to get a connection to Alpha and request reinforcements, “Yeh, we are bein’ ambushed by them Red Devils again. We’ve been needin’ some more troops to be comin’ in a-sap!”

The troops only seemed to come in at the end of a fight. If the sands of Acidalia Planitia were not red before, they were now.

A few more times the Reds broke their defenses and managed to take a couple hits on the infrastructure of Foxtrot.
“God damn it!” Lazarus shouted as he was shot at.

“Just hold in there!” Tom said, “We’ll get you down from there.” As Tom moved towards the hydraulic lift to lower Lazarus down, the Reds took their shot at him and the building, which now looked like a massive dome jungle gym.

The next morning, the crew was sitting in their shacks having their breakfast of rolled oats provided by Mars Base Bravo. While the radio was going, there was an interrupting announcement that Old Joe had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and a new leader had taken charge. The budget of the Red Star Program had been cut and, “all Red troops would be coming home defeated and demoralized.”

That day, they finished the colony. The party of mechanics had decided they needed a vacation, so they went to Alpha, a lavish marbled dome with a glittering gold shield for protection. They partied the day away as Alpha sent in the first of the colonists to Foxtrot. Axton was requested to return home the next day. He had completed his five-year mission. As the shuttle left the orange dunes of Mars, he wept, though he was unsure why.

“Memories” by Christina Sergott

Today, you can see Axton sitting on the porch with his father, smoking the same blend of tobacco, as they pattered on the past.

Or you can find him at the café with Tyr and Calypso. Sometimes they comment on his behavior. “Hey, Axton, you’re nodding off again,” Calypso might bring up.

“Oh sorry,” he may say before trying to again focus on the conversation.

You may even see him in a picture frame, housed within the dome of Foxtrot, with his crew, with a plaque underneath naming all those who served in the Mars War.