Unwound: A Creative Journal
2020-2021

“There’s nothing to writing, all you have to do is sit by a typewriter—and bleed.

—Ernest Hemingway—
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Introduction

Storytelling is an innate part of the human experience. While most animals inherit knowledge, humans must discover it. We must tell and be told; we must listen and read to understand. Narratives are how we share and learn information. They are the fabric of human existence: comforting us, guiding us, teaching us. They help us understand the world around us and connect with each other. They help us to do our work.

Whether we are a nurse composing the story of a patient’s medical history, a foreman reading how to safely operate the machines that make the products we depend on each day, a parent sharing with our children the stories of their ancestors, a police officer writing a report or the details of an investigation, an entrepreneur pitching an idea, an agricultural engineer sharing designs to improve farming, or a teacher constructing knowledge with students, we spend our lives spinning yarns.

Each letter is a raw fiber – discolored and impure – spun, drawn across the wheel and collected to become a single, long strand. Some of these strands are laid tight, warped along the frame and rod to be woven, some twisted together and textured. “Missing Movies,” Andrew Prekker

Using the raw materials at hand – single moments that are felt, experienced, and shared – the fibers are dyed – sepia, alabaster, sage, coral, bronze, honey, obsidian – making each strand different from the last.

A knot is slipped, a needle threaded. Each colorful cord then carefully wrapped, pulled, stitched – spiraling, threading together, pulled firm at the seams. The sentences weave their way across the page, forming the fabric that will make the tapestry of the tale.

We will choose to wear some of these tales for all to see; others, we will pack away delicately, lovingly – to be saved as legacies shared with only a few. These narratives help to explain our nature, a nature that initially appears as a fragmented mass, spools of contradictions, but when thread together thoughtfully and skillfully, become stories that inform and instruct.

Whether it is learning to write using rhetorical modes of development or learning basic story-crafting techniques, through writing, we gain the satisfaction of fashioning something beautiful from the raw materials of life.

 untitled, Tyshawn Bryant

Whether it is reading to learn lifetimes of wisdom and experience, to examine how stories have influenced culture and have shaped our modern identities, we gain the satisfaction of understanding the human experience. “American Bad Dream,” Erin Langendorfer

Each life is a single anecdote in the narrative of human history. Stories are the inheritance we receive from our ancestors, that we pass on to future generations. I would like to thank the students who chose to share their stories with Minnesota West Community and Technical College, and thank you for your interest in their tapestries.

Sincerely,

Gillian Singler

Creative Writing Instructor

First published in The Globe
Evanescing Idyll: Prologue
Addison Wass

Subject: The Aurora
Object Class: Alterra Capital Ship
Mission: Construct an interstellar phasegate to enable safe and efficient travel to the outskirts of the Ariadne Arm for the purpose of exploring uncharted sectors of our galaxy.
Status: Operational—On course to perform a gravity slingshot maneuver around Planet 4546-B, an unexplored Category-3 ocean planet.
Current Crew: 5,480 Federation Personnel
EMERGENCY: ABANDON SHIP

Berkeley jolted upright in his bunk, nearly bashing his head on the frame of the bunk above his own. His eyes opened, only to snap closed again as they were assaulted by the harsh hazard light that spun on the wall of his living quarters. With squinted eyes and hands over his ears, Berkeley stumbled through the room, knocking trinkets and papers off his desk before reaching his locker. His brother and bunkmate, Danby, had already made it to the lockers and was in the process of donning his uniform.

“Rise and shine, Berkeley! What a way to start the day, eh?”

“What the hell is going on?”

ORBITAL HULL FAILURE DETECTED: PLANETFALL IN T-10 MINUTES

“Well, taking that into consideration, I’d assume we’re crashing!”

“I knew this job wasn’t worth the credits,” Berkeley replied with an exasperated groan, “six months of uneventful spacefaring, and now this?”

When the pair had finally finished putting on their uniforms, they started to grab various items from around their quarters. Things like flares, filtered water, and vacuum-packed rations were the first to disappear from the room, followed by spare clothing and personal effects.

“Really? You’re bringing that?” Berkeley playfully chided after watching Danby place a small stuffed dinosaur in his duffel bag. “We’re only supposed to bring essentials y’know.”

Danby scoffed and turned away from his brother, arms crossed on his chest, “It is essential! If I’m going to die today, I’m dying with Charles.”

“Alright, alright. Just don’t be too surprised if you get reprimanded for this,” teased Berkeley, turning back to his duffel bag with a smirk.

PLANETFALL IN T-8 MINUTES: ALL CREW REPORT TO YOUR DESIGNATED LIFEPOD
“We need to hurry,” Berkeley was browsing through the Lifepod assignments on his PDA, looking for his and Danby’s names. “Our pod is on G-Deck.”

“G-Deck? That’s 3 floors down!” Adrenaline ripped through their veins as they sprinted out of their cabin toward the elevator. The footsteps of the crew thundered through the ship as they scurried toward their capsules of salvation, drowning out the noise of the sirens. Emergency lights protruding from the walls of the corridor repeatedly flashed a grim crimson glow that served to illuminate the path towards the Lifepod bays. Members of the crew gathered at either end of the hallway, crowding the elevators that would take them to safety.

“Well, looks like the elevators aren’t an option, and stairs would take too long,” Berkeley paused to think of a way out of this situation. His panicked state seemed to lubricate his cognitive gears, allowing him to formulate an alternative route to the Lifepod bay in just a few moments. Berkeley perked up and looked at his brother, “Follow me, I have a plan.” Berkeley dashed away, but Danby stood his ground for a moment before eventually following.

“Berkeley, we’re not going the way the lights are telling us to.”

“The lights are also telling us to go to the elevators, but we’re not doing that.” Danby caught his brother by the arm and tried to pull him back the way they came.

“Those elevators aren’t exactly small, Berkeley; shouldn’t they be able to take all of us down?” With an annoyed look on his face, Berkeley turned away and continued running down the corridor, dragging Danby along with him.

**PLANETFALL IN T-7 MINUTES**

“They should, but is that a chance you’re willing to take? You saw how much of the crew was piled around those doors.”

“And the alternative is what, running away and finding a place aboard the Aurora to lay down and die?” Berkeley stopped and grabbed Danby by the shoulders, looking him directly in the eyes.

“Let’s put it this way. Many of the people crowding around those elevators will not survive. There’s only enough time to take two more groups of people down, maybe three.”

“Then let’s go back! Maybe we’ll—”

“No! Listen. With the amount of people there, three trips won’t be enough, and besides, we’d be at the back of the line. Your only chance of surviving is if you follow me.” Danby froze, and for just a second, the visage of a scared child flashed across his face. He let his gaze fall to the floor.

“Okay. I’ll follow your lead.” These words elicited a sigh of relief from Berkeley.

“Good, now come on.”

**PLANETFALL IN T-6 MINUTES**
The brothers ran through the halls of E-Deck. Berkeley seemed to know exactly where he was going, but Danby was confused. It seemed to Danby that they were taking corners at random; first a left, then a right, followed by another right at the next junction. Danby had lost all orientation of where they were by the time Berkeley stopped them in front of what looked like an oversized air vent. Danby leaned against the wall and clutched his side, panting after every few words he spoke.

“Berkeley, did we run all this way just to get to your favorite vent?” Berkeley glared at his brother as he knelt in front of the vent to begin working. “You know that we passed at least four others on our way here, right?”

“Were you even paying attention to them, or were you too busy trying to wrap your tiny little brain around what my plan might be?” He never looked up from his work while insulting his brother. Pulling a small screwdriver from his pocket, he began removing the screws that held the vent cover to the wall.

“Now that’s just mean.” Danby continued to lean on the wall, staring at Berkeley with contempt written all over his face.

“Yeah, well, the truth isn’t always nice,” Berkeley removed the last screw from the door-sized vent cover and shifted it over to his brother. “Set this somewhere.”

PLANETFALL IN T-5 MINUTES

“I still don’t see how the air vents, which drop straight down mind you, are going to help us escape.” Berkeley groaned and turned to his brother, wondering just how thick his skull was.

“It’s not an air vent idiot, it’s a gravity well.” He reached through the opening to access a keyboard inside the shaft.

“A gravity well?” Danby seemed to recognize the phrase, “Aren’t those just theoretical?”

“Not anymore. A few years ago, Alterra found a way to create, shape, and implement them into their fleet.” Berkeley could barely keep himself from giggling.

“A few years ago? Why wasn’t this made public knowledge? More importantly, how do you know about it?” After tapping a few more keys, Berkeley turned back to his brother with a cheeky grin.

“Of course gravity wells aren’t real, you moron. I was lying. We’re not even close to being able to make that kind of technology.” A soft hum could now be heard through the opening, increasing in volume until a large platform descended into view, held aloft by four ion thrusters. “It’s the service elevator we engineers use whenever plebian technicians like yourself are hogging the main elevators.” Berkeley chuckled as he turned away from Danby to continue prepping their means of transport.

Danby frowned and turned away from his brother, ashamed that he had been fooled so easily and hurt by his brother’s comments. Berkeley pulled Danby onto the platform, and after a few more taps on the keypad, the pair began to descend towards G-Deck.
PLANETFALL IN T-2 MINUTES

After a few minutes, the service elevator reached G-Deck and deposited the pair just down the hall from the Lifepod Bay. Berkeley, ecstatic that his plan had worked, proudly led both brothers toward their designated pod, G-06. Sprinting past other pairings of their crewmates, they quickly maneuvered into their pod and sealed the hatch. Danby and Berkeley took their seats within the dark pod, secured their harnesses, and took a moment to mentally prepare themselves. Berkeley typed a command into his PDA, causing the pod to come to life. Blue lights suddenly illuminated the space, and an electronic, vaguely cockney sounding voice began speaking to the brothers.

“Lifepod G-06 Ejection Sequence Initiated.
Performing Launch Preparation Procedures.”

PLANETFALL IN T-60 SECONDS

“It’s just a race against time now, nothing more we can do.” Berkeley stared at the monitor on the wall between him and Danby which detailed the ejection sequence. Danby’s knuckles were white from gripping his restraints. His eyes were closed as he looked down, mumbling prayers under his breath.

“Please, please, please, please, please…”

“Landing Thrusters… Operational
Flotation Devices… Operational
Stabilization Gyroscope… Active
Emergency Parachutes… Functional
Mothership Decouplers… Awaiting Launch Command”

PLANETFALL IN T-10 SECONDS

“Come on already, we need to launch!” Like his brother, Berkeley’s knuckles were losing their natural color, as if the pod would launch faster if he squeezed his seat tighter.

“Lifepod G-06 Ejection Sequence Completed.
Launching in 3…
2…
1…

If not for the harnesses holding them in place, the force of the jettison would have knocked Berkeley and Danby out of their seats. As Lifepod G-06 rocketed towards the alien ocean below, the bulk of what was left of the Aurora crashed into Planet 4546-B. The resulting wave, a gargantuan wall of water reaching for the stars, traveled away from the shipwreck in all directions. Lifepod G-06 was struck by this wave and was swept below the surface of the water, left to slowly sink to the bottom of the ocean.
Subject: The Aurora

Object Class: Alterra Capital Ship

Mission: Construct an interstellar phasegate to enable safe and efficient travel to the outskirts of the Ariadne Arm for the purpose of exploring uncharted sectors of our galaxy.

Status: Shipwrecked—Transmitting black box data to Alterra HQ.

Current Crew: Unknown

A Bad Day in the Airport
Lillian Smart

I was concerned about where I would park my car and how much it would cost if I decided to leave it in an airport parking lot for over three weeks. My good friend Jessica, always willing to help, declared that she would drive me. I wouldn't have to worry about a thing, she assured me. “I’ve never seen anyone with a second, secret purse before,” Jessica commented as she watched me shoving items in my decoy purse. I always carried a little purse that held my I.D., passport, and credit cards. I would hide it, neatly tucked, behind my real purse.

“You’re like a magician making purses appear out of thin air,” she laughed.

“You know how I am in an airport!” I responded. “Someone could easily snatch my purse when I’m not paying attention. If that happens, I’ll still have what I really need, and all the purse snatcher got were some trivial things like lip balm, loose change, and tampons.” We both laughed together as I triple checked my pockets and zippers to make sure I had everything.

After hugging Jessica goodbye at curbside pickup, I found myself in a sea of people with the same feeling of dread I always get when first entering an airport. I never seem to remember how to proceed with anything. My mind draws a blank the minute I walk into a terminal. My eyes drifted around the building to all the different figures buzzing about. Dozens of people were slouching on the moving sidewalk. A woman in fashion booties, a black dress, and a trailing purple scarf glided across the floor with the air of someone who was out for an afternoon stroll. I admired the other travelers who were dressed up. It made me think of a different time when people always dressed up to go anywhere. Times having changed.

I saw others like me, fitted in sweatpants and a hoodie, preparing for a long uncomfortable flight. A family of six, struggling under the weight of a dozen or more suitcases, sprinted down the platform.

“Kathy, I told you we should have gotten here earlier!” the husband yelled.

“Mom, my sandals are giving me blisters!” cried one of the daughters.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” whined the youngest son.
At least they know where they’re going, I thought with envy as the family stumbled out of sight. There was even a dog, decked out in his own little security vest, sniffing the floor and bags while being led on a leash through the building.

I went to print my boarding pass and the machine took what felt like an eternity to print out my ticket. I glanced around to make sure no one was looking and gave the machine a swift kick, which caused it to scan and print my ticket reluctantly. I proceeded to walk a few feet down the platform and found myself confronted by a wall of screens. All the flight numbers seemed to jumble together every time I tried to focus on one. Finally, catching a glimpse of my flight number after straining to see it, I thudded over to wait in the security line. I couldn’t fit my new hiking boots in my lone backpack that I had brought in an attempt to travel light. I had no choice but to wear them.

I had all my things ready to go, or so I thought. I questioned, Is my hand lotion over three ounces?

“Get behind the line!” I looked up, startled out of my worries, and saw the smallest, but most aggressive security guard I had ever seen yelling at the lady in front of me.

“Jesus!” The woman reacted in alarm. I couldn’t help chuckling to myself. I probably shouldn’t have been laughing, considering if it had been me on the receiving end of it, I would have had tears in my eyes.

I walked up to the table, yanked off my clunky boots, set them on the conveyer with my backpack, and proceeded through the scanner. “Beep, beep!” My bag set off the machine.

I don’t remember packing anything I shouldn’t have. I thought to myself. The bulldog of a security guard ushered me to the side. He ripped open my bag and started riffling through it as if I wasn’t even there. He pulled out a nail file I hadn’t thought twice about packing.

“Miss, do you realize you have a weapon in your bag?”

“It’s not a weapon, it’s a nail file. You know…for filing your nails?” I replied, a little annoyed. He looked at it for a few seconds and tossed it in the trash bin sitting at his feet.

…and what about these? He held up a small box of matches. I didn’t have a good enough excuse, and already being irritated, I remained silent. He looked me straight in the eye and sent them tumbling into the trash. “Ok, we’re going to have to search your person to make sure you’re not carrying any other dangerous items.”

This was humiliating. I had to stand there, legs and arms spread out, and receive a pat down while the other travelers watched. I saw looks of relief in their eyes because they were not the ones being subject to this. Finally, looking at me with suspicion, he declared I was free to go.

This unfortunate scene had lasted longer than I thought. By the time I finished lacing up my boots, I heard a booming voice calling from the heavens.

“Donna Williams to gate 34. Flight 503 is boarding now. Donna Williams to gate 34. The flight is boarding!”

I broke out in a cold sweat and dashed down the floor. I ran as fast as I could. I ran past all the stores I was hoping to browse before boarding my flight. Candy, perfume, liquor, and so much more were disappearing in a blur. Suddenly, a new sense of dread came over me. Why did I feel like I was missing something? My new boots squeaked on the floor as I came to an abrupt stop. I forgot my bag! I cried to myself. My name still echoing through the airport, I turned with a new speed I didn’t know I had and ran back in the direction I had just
come from. Turning the corner, sure enough, there was my maroon backpack with the pink ribbon tied on it so I would recognize it in the mess of bags at baggage claim. I didn’t even stop running, but in one full motion, I ran to the table, grabbed a strap, and continued my marathon. By this time, I could feel sweat beading on my forehead. I made it to the tram that took you from one end of the airport to the other and prayed I would make it on time. As soon as the doors opened, I elbowed my way passed the other passengers and commenced my run. I finally reached my gate, but to my horror, no one was sitting and waiting in the rows of navy colored plastic chairs. The door to that beautiful grey tunnel was sealed up with no chance of it opening again till the next flight. I stared in disbelief. I didn’t know what to do with myself.

Eventually, I made my way to the help desk hoping I could board a later flight. A tall woman in her mid-forties was standing behind the desk busily tapping at a keyboard. She had long, grey-streaked blonde hair, and she informed me there were no more available flights till the following day. I stood there speechless with my lower jaw drooping towards my chest. I turned away and sat down on a nearby chair to contemplate. In my haste, I didn’t feel the stinging sensation on my left heel. I removed my boot to find a big crimson stain on the back of my white sock. I should have been deciding what to do next, but the only thing I remember thinking was, I guess I can browse those shops after all.

A Tale of Treachery
Samuel Duncan

The castle rose above the city with staggering splendor, putting common architecture to shame. The Kelnan family had ruled the Brilan Kingdom for centuries, widely regarded as just and kind rulers. A lone elf contemplated this information as he walked through the marble gates, occasionally glancing about to admire the town. Mythrock was in a remarkably adequate state, especially given that the Kelnan family seemed to be waging some sort of war every turn of the moon.

The elf hurriedly pressed onward through the streets, trying his best to conceal his identifying features. His long, white hair and dark red eyes were enough to make any human uncomfortable, but his onyx-colored skin was sure to be the nail in the coffin. Elves and humans had never gotten along, but dark elves were universally hated for their harsh culture and even harsher dealings with humans in the past.

After several minutes of walking, the elf stood in front of the castle. The wind nipped at his cloak as he climbed the spectacular marbled staircase and into the throne room. This large hall was splendid to look at, but this splendor was lost as the elf noticed the array of guards the king had lined up against either side. Each one had glistening silver armor and slender swords hung at their waists. While not as equipped as other guards from different kingdoms were, the Brilan Kingdom guards were renowned for their expertise in combat.

Untitled, Josh Durham
“Ha-ha! You have finally come Zaknn, the legendary swordsman. Tell me, what news do you bear?” the king asked, his voice filling the throne room. King Kelnan was a large fellow with an even larger appetite. Zaknn was surprised by the king’s apparent disregard for Zaknn’s race. If the elf’s presence did make the king uncomfortable, he was doing a marvelous job at hiding it.

“I must regretfully inform you that I have no new information regarding the whereabouts of your possible assassin, my King.” The elf bowed low, carefully choosing what to say. If he played his cards right, he was certain to leave this place with more gold than King Kelnan originally promised. “However, I am keen on asking a favor of you. Though rumors I may have heard, many assumed that the assassin is close to you. I humbly request full access to the castle so that I may continue my investigations.”

The king snorted. “Why of course! And here I was afraid you were going to ask for more money!” King Kelnan was a loud fellow, and Zaknn regretted standing so close to him. “By all means, please investigate further!” The elf nodded, bowed once more, and exited the throne room.

Zaknn thought back to a few days earlier. After agreeing to help the guards prevent the king’s rumored assassination for enough gold to retire on, he had secretly met with the queen to discuss a profitable business arrangement. Easily swayed by the promise of more gold, Zaknn couldn’t help but hear her out, and the deal she offered was too good to deny. In addition to the gold Zaknn was promised by the king, the queen was willing to match that amount if he found some way to kill the king without being caught. While the moral questions were too great to ignore, the possibility of doubling the already massive amount of gold he was promised was more than enough to justify forsaking any semblance of honor he held.

Giddy with the thoughts of vast wealth, the elf practically waltzed his way into Queen Kelan’s wing of the castle. Every corridor was beautifully decorated with a wide variety of floral arrangements and diverse paintings and each room had some sort of meeting inside of it. She was an active queen, so it was no wonder that she wanted the king out of her large number of dealings. Zaknn came upon her room and knocked on the door.

Queen Kelnan quickly opened it and practically pulled the elf in. “What were you thinking? You almost gave us away!” The elf was taken aback by her volume. The illegal nature of the topic of this meeting was enough to make a professional like himself uncomfortable, and Queen Kelnan’s yelling was not particularly helping.

“I am terribly sorry, madame. I had only wanted to ascertain the extent of the rumors. I wanted to make sure this would not come back to me. I have a reputation to uphold,” Zaknn slowly spoke, not trying to mask his sarcasm.

“What reputation?” the queen sneered. “That you’re a filthy assassin?” The elf was once again surprised by the queen’s behavior, though she was right. Zaknn had been doing odd jobs and such for years. He became a killer when a merchant with deep pockets had more enemies than he bargained for. Ever since, if there was gold involved, Zaknn was there.

“I don’t appreciate your accusations. I consider myself rather clean when it comes to what I do,” the elf snarled. “Besides, it should be easier than before. I have complete access to the castle. Nobody will suspect my involvement.”

“And what of my involvement?” cried the queen. She was right. More than a few people have noticed her strange behavior, including a few of the castle servants. Something was bound to get out.

“I’ll be sure to set that straight when I kill the king,” the elf assured her, eager to leave. He was afraid somebody would question the length of this meeting; he did not want to be considered one of the queen’s ‘special’ guests. The queen nodded and gestured towards the door, not saying a word. Once he was outside,
Queen Kelnan unceremoniously slammed the door. Zaknn couldn’t blame her for being on edge. The queen was renowned for her kindness and hiring a mercenary to kill her husband wouldn’t fit that description of her very well.

Zaknn had a plan to prevent the queen and himself from being suspects in the investigation that was sure to follow the assassination. Earlier that day, he had stopped by one of the brothels the king frequents. After some light interrogating, he had discovered the name of one of the girls the king was fond of. He had secretly pulled her aside and gave her a small necklace. The necklace wasn’t terribly impressive, but its signature blue stone was an identifier for an agent of some kingdom to the north, one that was infamous for assassinating kings of opposing kingdoms.

Zaknn stood outside the king’s bedroom, promising the guards that they were free to go. As soon as he was certain he was alone, he gently opened the door and moved inside. Just as he had anticipated, the king was there with the girl. Without a second thought, the elf moved faster than the king could anticipate and plunged a slender, bejeweled knife into the king’s throat. As the king heaved his final breath, Zaknn grabbed the girl by her long, golden hair and began to walk to the bedroom door.

“Found your assassin,” Zaknn spat as he pushed the girl towards the guards who were walking by. “And I think I know who hired her.” He gestured to the necklace the poor girl was wearing.

“Go get the queen!” a guard called, his eyes widening. Zaknn quickly slipped away during this new commotion, keen on avoiding any accusations that may be thrown at him. He figured it was smartest to avoid any public attention until the trial was over.

The next day Zaknn was once again in the throne room, watching as Queen Kelnan decided the fate of the poor girl. In tears, the girl tried to convince the queen that she was innocent. Zaknn wondered if the queen felt any remorse for the girl as the executioner arrived with his axe. It was a mighty thing, jet black with more nicks in the blade than Zaknn cared to count. As the executioner hefted the axe into his hands and began his swing, Zaknn considered again what he had done, but any doubts he had were cast aside as he fingered a heavy pouch of gold at his waist.

As gruesome as the scene before him was, the elf was undeniably happy as he felt every piece of gold in the small pouch.

**Made up My Mind**

Josh Ingle

I remember a time when I definitely needed to make a decision. This was a decision that could have changed my life for the better, or for the worse. I was trying to find something that I could use for my entire adulthood: something that I could use to not only benefit myself but others around me who could count on me to do the
best job possible. I was very much an indecisive person, so figuring this out was something that took not weeks, not months, but years. It all started with accounting class.

Sophomore year was coming, and I could not wait to see what classes I had in my schedule. I pulled up my phone, logged on to my high school’s website, and anxiously awaited the schedule I had been dying to see. First period: Spanish II. Second period: Health. Third period: Accounting. Fourth period: Geometry. Fifth period: Advanced English. Sixth period: American History. And last but not least: Algebra II. My heart stopped when I suddenly saw that I was taking accounting and advanced English, and I knew what I was prepared to do. I was prepared to learn some very complicated topics, specifically with accounts and numbers, and very complex grammar structures. My mother encouraged the thought of taking accounting.

“Junior, if you take accounting, you would be able to work in a bank or an office where it’s more comfortable for you,” she said. “Please trust me on this, okay?”

“Oh, Mom, but I do not know what will happen when I take it. I don’t want it to be harder than all the other classes I’m taking,” I explained. It was an unfortunate situation because I was already good at algebra and critical thinking.

“You have nothing to worry about, kiddo. Trust the process, and make sure you ask questions if you ever need any help,” she reassured, easing my anxiety.

In a flash of time, the first day of sophomore year came. At this time, I was scared. I was terrified of the fact that I was going out of my comfort zone to learn something new, something that I have never been experienced with before. I was going higher in my mind, and I was reaching the clouds towards happiness. This happened a week before school was in session.

To be honest, accounting class was not all that bad, and I enjoyed every single minute of it. I considered a career in accounting for two years after that class, and I was genuine enough to enroll in the PSEO program as a senior. Granted, I could have continued my high school English education, but I kept thinking to myself, “Should I get ahead in college and get enough credits to graduate early?” This question was revolving all around my mind for a while. I fully decided to talk about going to college with my parents because I wanted to hear their opinion about it.

“So . . . I want to go to Minnesota West this year, and I was wondering if you guys are okay with that?” I was entirely nervous when I said this.

“Son, you are bright enough to do whatever you put your mind into,” said my dad; although, he didn’t really care about what I wanted to do.

My mother’s reaction was unexpected. “Alright, but you are only doing two college courses. Trust me, I have tried it and it obviously did not work.”

“How come?” I asked.

“Well, I always liked to slack off during one of my classes, and that caused me to drop out of college. I was a PSEO kid too, but I then had to transfer to the ALC to receive full credit for all of my high school classes. You don’t want to do the same things I’ve done as a high schooler.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I concluded.

Somehow my mother was always good with giving advice, even better than my father. She was way more understanding and she could relate to situations I was going through at the time. I have thought about this
moment from time to time, and when it came down to it, I did not listen to her advice, and honestly, I wish I did. I registered for four classes, including one that I was taking at the high school. My mother was not impressed, but she knew it was bound to happen at some point. One of those classes was Composition I, and I enjoyed it very much. We, as college classmates, had a lot of fun discussing different topics and reacting to stories and informative essays we were reading. College accounting was not that fun because it was basically the same class I took two years prior. All of these choices came to my mind as I got closer to the business world: Should I be an accountant or a manager? and Should I be a financial consultant or a financial advisor? Everything changed when the second semester of my senior year came around.

Second semester was when I took another composition class and an introduction to business class. Business was something that I found interest in, so I decided to take that class to get a better understanding of the principles behind that topic. The second composition class, on the other hand, was something better. We were all assigned a book titled Method of Madness: The Making of a Story. I was worried I’d be a little bored at first because I knew I would be reading passages averaging fifteen pages long. But on the contrary, most of the passages were amazing, and they entailed such great detail in them. We were assigned discussions so we could talk about what happened during all the stories, and I loved to write about them. Sometimes I got carried away, and I was continuously writing about them for at least twenty minutes when it should have taken five. It is probably the best English class I have ever taken in my college career.

A couple of weeks since the second semester started, I decided to change my mind about business and go into English instead because I loved to write, and I loved to read. I felt that I could write professionally, and I could discuss and review popular books as well. But I sat on my bed, thinking about my parents agreeing to let me suddenly change my career. They had been so supportive of me going into business that they volunteered to help pay for college once I really needed to. I got up from my bed and walked through the hallway into the living room where my dad was sitting on his recliner watching cable.

“Hey buddy, what’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing much, I was just thinking about something lately,” I said.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah... so basically, I was thinking about changing my career and going to a different school after I graduate, you know? And I was thinking about changing that from business to English, because I love to write and read.” I expressed a happy gesture towards my dad at this point.

He sighed with disappointment. “You know, you have been thinking about going into this business thing for how long, and for you to suddenly change that for a career you don’t even need, it’s quite sad. You need to make up your mind about something that you genuinely enjoy. I don’t know if it’s the business or that English one you mentioned, but you need to make it up now. You are about to become an adult in a few months here, and I can’t have you sit there and change your mind every week because you suddenly have an interest in things. I was the same way and look where I ended up. I’m sorry buddy, but I can’t see you as a writer.”
I was furious, and I stormed back to my bedroom. I threw myself on my bed, willing to cry myself to sleep for about six or seven hours that night. I was confused about why he didn’t support me going into English. I woke up the next morning, and I decided to tell my mom about our conversation. She looked at me, and she said, “I know you are curious about reading and writing, I have known that my entire life. But where can you see jobs around here offering those sorts of things, you know? You would have to move to the big city and find something you will enjoy over there.” She was very reassuring about the situation. This was the time for me to act fast.

I had to think quickly about the decision I was about to make, and how it would affect my family members. At this point, I didn’t care whether or not they agreed with it. As long as they supported me through all of my decision making, that was all that mattered to me. I had already decided on what college to go to, so that was good. The problem was figuring out what I would major in. Business had been my interest since tenth grade, and I cherished those moments every time I could. English is something I have genuinely enjoyed throughout college, and I wanted to continue my journey through that. My family knows that whatever I do for me will be the best thing that will happen to me; I am always going to try to make the best decision possible.

I decided to declare a double-major: Business and English, because I cared about both of them, and I loved everything about both of those careers. I know my family will be proud of me for making that decision because it will make me extremely happy for the rest of my days. This was it. I had made up my mind.

**White Rabbit**
Katrina Chaophasy

Growing up in a predominantly white community was hard and problematic for me. Everyone thought I was weird because I had darker skin and did not look like them or did not act in the ways that they would consider “normal.” To them, the way I talked was comical because I had trouble pronouncing certain words, and I was bullied to the point where I had a near panic attack from simply being picked by the teacher to read aloud in class. My peers would snicker at the way I dressed and the lunches and the small snacks I brought in for the brief period of rest between the 4th and 5th hour classes. At one time, I brought in my favorite food that my mom had cooked the day prior, and it wasn’t the prettiest thing too look at with its swampy texture, but the spices danced passionately together on my tongue as if it were a prince and princess falling in love. Just because no had ever seen or tried it before, it was gross. Therefore, I was gross by association. Distraught by my classmates who made fun of me for bringing it in, I never wanted to eat my favorite dish ever again. I didn’t want them to continue thinking I was weird. Growing up, I sat by myself during lunch and kept to myself, quite a lot. The voices in my head convinced me that no one wanted to talk to me and anyone who did, only ever wanted to hurt me by bashing on my culture or telling me how weird I was.

“Soeping Emotions,” Emma Singler

For years, I cowered and walked with my head down so often that I became labelled as the extremely shy kid at school. I developed a love for drawing due to my lack of friends. Drawing calmed me down and became my escape when life felt like a bomb being planted in me with only seconds left for it to explode. I drew pictures of cute, woodland creatures having a picnic with realistic people who I later named, and they became my only friends. It’s like how young children have imaginary
friends that they play with at home while their moms and dads are work. The only difference between others’ imaginary friends and my imaginary friends were that I drew all mine.

My favorite character I created was a dashing young pirate I named Luna and her little rabbit with tiny wings. She was tough, brave, and stood up for things she believed in, while the little rabbit contradicted Luna’s personality by being extremely timid and shy. They would go on adventures and Luna would make the rabbit do things she was never comfortable with. When confronted by pirates and on the brink of death, Luna stood firm while the little rabbit would bury her tiny head in Luna’s golden locks. Luna became my idol and everything I aspired to be.

My family did not bat a single eyelash for my love for drawing this character. As far as they were concerned, I loved going to school when really, I dreaded the thought of stepping inside the old building that always had the distinct smell of old people and the walls stained with pencil marks from the children who went down the hall when we were put into gender specific, single-filed lines. Today, she is one of my favorite people to draw because of the impact she had on my childhood.

No one knew what I drew. In fact, I made sure that no one saw what I was drawing by shutting my notebook and waiting for others to pass or covering my drawing by burrowing my head into my notebook like a timid rabbit. On an autumn’s day, I was drawing as usual, but I left to go to the bathroom and returned to a sea of dolphin-like screeches coming from a group of people a few desk spaces away from mine. Curious, I trotted over and tried secretly observing what was riling up my peers during our noon break time.

“Wow!” one of my classmates proclaimed. “Rebecca, did you draw that?”

“That’s really good!”

“Can you draw me?”

Finally, my classmate Rebecca spoke up. “No, I didn’t draw it! I just saw it laying on that desk right there and I wanted to look at it.” My eyes followed where she pointed and saw that my notebook had disappeared. My eyes jolted back to Rebecca holding my sketchbook. I couldn’t have mistaken it; the sage green sketchbook my sister bought me that had an ink drawing of the Eiffel Tower. I slowly crept over with my head covered and my hands rubbing my arms in a repetitive motion to try and soothe my anxiety. I slowly looked up, with tears threatening to spill, towards the thief to ask for the sketchbook back. Not sure how to go about it, I stood there awkwardly without making peep, only thinking about how something I possessed and valued with my life was now in another’s cold hands. It was just a mishap that I left my sketchbook wide open for everyone to see, but in my defense, I really needed to go to the bathroom.

My peers finally noticed, and they all turned to look at me. Soon everything clicked and their eyes lit up like the lights on a newly bought Christmas tree or the fireworks display the town puts on every year for 4th of July. I was bombarded with questions asking me to draw all types of animals; even ones I had never heard of. You want me to draw your farm? How long have I been drawing? Maybe two years. What was I drawing there? I can probably draw you a rabbit. What is a capybara?
My thoughts and the questions overwhelmed me to the point it almost felt like a panic attack, and I wasn’t ready to have an embarrassing panic attack in front of my classmates. I always had daydreams of one day becoming popular, but my younger self was not prepared for the scene before me. Before I knew it, I snatched my sketchbook from Rebecca’s cold hands and bolted out of the classroom as the teacher frantically called my name. I didn’t know where I was going, I just knew I had to get out of there quickly before I burst into tears.

After years of being called the weird, quiet kid that keeps to herself the majority of the time to becoming the center of attention and being bombarded with questions about myself because they suddenly learned I knew how to draw, well, it can account for being the coolest thing to a bored 4th grader; it felt like too much at one time for my young, processing brain.

Out of energy, I plopped myself in a chair at a table far away from the classroom I feared going back to only to witness everyone’s reaction of me randomly walking back in after retreating from them like a rabbit running away from a pack of coyotes. That’s when I decided to draw. I took a deep breath, opened my sketch book to a fresh blank page, and began drawing. I briskly moved the pencil across the page, and it glided in a beautiful motion that became mesmerizing. Soon, I felt myself becoming calmer. The sounds around me became mute where it seemed like it was just me in my own little space bubble, sitting at a table drawing, minding my own business. No one came to stop me, and if there were people looking for me, they were doing a terrible job, but it didn’t matter to me at that moment because I was busy drawing.

When I finished my drawing, I held it up and happily glanced, with stars shining in my eyes, at my creation. I had drawn Luna with her mascot, a pristine white rabbit with tiny, white wings. The rabbit was my favorite animal at that time. I don’t know the reason, but thinking back, if I had to describe myself to anyone by choosing an animal, it would have been a rabbit. Specifically, the Artic hare.

Rabbits are pure creatures known to run away when they sense they are in any danger. Even when the people around them only want to admire their beautiful fluffy tail and long ears or stare at their bright, mysterious, black eyes that resemble a blackhole, they will cower away thinking only of the worst-case scenarios. They’re going to kill me. They see me as lunch. I need to get away quickly. They don’t let anyone near them, just like how I was. I never let anyone close to me because I thought they only wanted to harm me by telling me I was such a dunce or assume that I dug in the trash for food every day. I cried myself to sleep because I really wanted to show everyone that I was more than what was on the outside, but I never had the confidence to stand up for myself like how Luna would have. After that day, I decided I would do everything in my power to no longer be a “rabbit.”
**Violet Road**
Carmen Elston

I hit the ground running
thought I was cunning
left that small town behind
not sure what I’d find
I had dreams in my head
no money to be fed
Followed that river of life
found it full of strife
All of its twist and turns North
I kept moving forth
Searching for that violet road
to find where my story is told
To find bravery and be bold
searching for that violet road
I was tired of being the one to roam
seeking to find my way back home
With welcome arms
and country farms
Searching for that violet road

**Sunflowers**
Tara Porter

Sunflowers are my favorite flower. I used to dream all the time of waking up in a field of sunflowers. The sun was shining. Everything was bright. I’d lay there in the field in complete awe every time. I had no idea this type of beauty existed. It is what I imagined heaven was like. It’s that dream that I am having now.

Here I lay, in the middle of a field of sunflowers. The heat of the sun causes sweat to bead on my forehead. A slight gust of wind lifts at the edges of my yellow sundress. It cools the sun beating down on me. I take deep breaths, inhaling the clean, non-polluted air that I only get to breathe in my dreams.

I live in the beautiful city of Denver. Well, it was beautiful. But now it is polluted, and the buildings are falling apart. I shouldn’t complain, Denver is better than most places in this country. Even the small towns are overrun with pollution to the point where you can’t see the sun most days. Everyone wears respirators when they go outside, just to breathe, and you can’t go outside at all when it rains. That’s why I like to live in my dreams with the sunflowers and the peace.

I can feel someone shaking me. I try to ignore it. I’m better off here.

“Eden, wake up already!” A deep, panicked voice interrupts my dream. “Eden! Wake up!”
Finally, I allow myself to stir. “What is it, Abel?” Abel is the boy I was roomed with. He’s not of any relation, and he’s become a good friend.

“It’s happening. Someone is trying to take over the Capitol.” He speaks in a low whisper.

“What? How do you know?!” And why are you panicking? This is good.

“Look out the window.”

So, I walk over to the window, usually not much can be seen because of all the pollution, but this I can see. I see fire. Lots of fire. Everywhere. The Capitol is a distance away, but I can only assume that’s where all of this fire is coming from. And it’s spreading.

“What is this?” I’m panicked. I don’t like the Capitol either, but the fire is moving quickly. “What’s happening, Abel?”

“We need to get out of here. Go get ready!”

I rush to the bathroom and try to prepare for the inevitable. I can see the panic plastered all over my face. I wish I could go back to the sunflowers. I quickly tie my chocolate waves up in a tight bun on the top of my head. I can hear Abel rummaging through the drawers in my room, and he appears a moment later with clothes in his hands.

“Wear these.”

I quickly slip into the snug black leggings and long sleeve shirt.

“Won’t this be a little warm? With all the fire?” I ask him.

“I have no idea what will come of this trip. We might have to stay somewhere overnight, and I’d rather you be warm.” I can see he has put on an outfit similar to mine. It looks good on him. Now’s not the time to be thinking about that… I give myself one more quick glance in the mirror and can’t help but think I look like some sort of ninja or spy, and it gives me some confidence. Like this is one big mission to save the world. I seriously need to get my mind back on track.

Abel has already left the room by the time I manage to get my thoughts in order and is packing a bag full of water bottles and canned food. He also grabs a blanket, some flashlights, a lighter, and anything else he deems fit. Looks like we aren’t coming back anytime soon. And then he grabs another bag, and my eyes widen. We really are preparing for the end.

Next thing I know, I’m grabbing my shoes and respirator and slipping them on. Out the door we go. He has one bag. I have the other.

The respirator is protecting me from all the smoke in the air, but it’s still hard to breathe. And it’s hot. Very hot. The flames haven’t quite reached our building, but I know we need to move fast because it got a lot closer in the time we took getting ready. My shirt is practically drenched, and we’ve only just stepped outside.

Abel grabs my hand and is dragging me away, running at full speed. I can’t keep up. I’m tripping over my feet.

“Come on, Eden! We need to move!” I can tell he’s one second away from picking me up and carrying me. I pull myself together and run with him now. It’s so much louder outside. I don’t know how I didn’t hear this all
before. There’re planes flying over us, it looks like they are dropping bags. Supplies maybe? My eyes widen when I see one hit the ground. Those aren’t supplies. They’re bombs. It’s not the Capitol getting attacked. It’s us. With that my feet start moving quicker. More planes start arriving. We left too late.

One “bag” lands fifteen feet in front of us and we are both thrown back. We land on the ground hard. I try not to cry out. God, that hurt. I touch the back of my head. Blood. Yikes. I look to my left and see Abel lying on the ground. Blood pooling around him. This sucks. I look up, just in time to see another bomb landing right next to us again.

Everything goes black.

I open my eyes and find I’m back in the sunflower field.

Wow, that was nothing like the movies. One bomb got Abel. The second one finished me. In the movies, we would’ve made it out. But this isn’t the movies, and that’s okay. I’m where I’d rather be. I’m with my sunflowers. I was right. This is heaven.

**Cryptozoology Danger and Facts**

Grayson Anderson

“Interior,” Cindy Hernandez

Cryptozoology is the study of animals whose existence is disputed or unsubstantiated. In the 1950s, two zoologists founded the idea of it. The study of these animals often referred to as “Cryptids” is extensive and has proved the existence of certain animals before. A wide array of skills and understanding are used such as Anthropology, Archaeology, Geography research, Paleontology, Genetics, and Zoology. They were founded with the intent to prove the existence of these animals as well as the potential dangers of them. Cryptozoologists study and search all over the globe. Sightings of Cryptids have been intertwined in civilization since the earliest times in the origin of humanity – from the Paleolithic era to now with modern technology such as recording devices. While there are many interesting and peaceful animals, there are dangerous ones as well. A few quick examples of animals that have been proven through Cryptozoology research are the Thylacine “Tasmanian Devil,” Okapi, Ivory-Billed woodpecker, Giant Squids, Coelacanth, and Homo Floresiensis. Additionally, there have been cases when animals have been proven false such as the “King Cheetah,” which was a result of genetic mutations in Cheetahs. Despite all of this, Cryptozoology is often not considered mainstream and is rejected by a lot of scientists.

The first Cryptid to discuss, and the most commonly known within North America, is “Bigfoot” or “Sasquatch.” This Cryptid has left Cryptologists baffled for many years, with photos dating back to the earliest cameras, video footage, and thousands of claimed sightings. Extensive searches and studies have been carried out in the search of what is commonly referred to as “Bigfoot,” not to be mistaken with the “Yeti.” Studies involving Paleontology have suggested that it could be “Gigantopithecus Blackii,” a giant member of the ape family that coexisted with early homo sapiens. Information is currently being collected and the study is ongoing. For the most part, interactions with “Bigfoot” have been relatively peaceful. There have been accounts of it attacking and throwing rocks, but the behavior appears to only be present when entering certain
areas or trying to get close to the animal. There are of course false reports and lies as well. But there are a plethora of responses that appear to be genuine as well.

The second most famous Cryptid that is often spoken of is the “Loch Ness Monster” or “Nbessie.” Most commonly sightings and research are often specifically towards the “Loch Ness” Lake; however, there have been sightings of this creature in many lakes and bodies of water. The Loch Ness Lake has an underground water system that leads to the ocean, and it is often reported to have been spotted on land as well. Research has been difficult on the creature, but footage has been taken of it as well as many sightings in water and over 40 years, dating as early as the 1920s when the lake first started to come into contact with human civilization. The “Loch Ness Monster” is commonly believed to be derived from the Plesiosaur. The sightings as well as the fossil evidence suggest that it is a predatory creature. A common theme amongst these creatures is the general belief that they originated from species thought to have gone extinct such as the “Tasmanian Devil,” which had a legitimate sighting long ago and was thought to be extinct, but even so, reports of the animal are still reported today.

The third and most important example of this paper is the Cryptid, which is now known as the Giant Squid. The scientific name is Architeuthis Steenstrup. Up until 2003, it was a Cryptid and the only evidence of it was in folklore. This also happens to be the most aggressive and dangerous of the three mentioned. The Giant Squid has been depicted sinking boats and attacking them, and shortly after the Giant Squid was proven to be real, a Giant Squid tried to drag a yacht underwater in the ocean.

The prior three Cryptids, with one of them being proven real, are only the “Tip of the Iceberg.” There are hundreds more and some said to be a lot more dangerous, such as the “Skinwalker.” A large portion of the sightings of Cryptids take place in North America and especially in the United States. The danger of Cryptids is potentially very real. On average, approximately 1,600 people disappear in the national parks each year. This is less than 1% of the missing cases for 2019 and is only a small percentage; however, a large majority of these people are not found again alive. Often bodies found are chalked up to bear attacks; however, on average, there are only 40 bear attacks per year and only 11 take place in North America.

In conclusion, well, the study of Cryptology is often not mainstream and not seen in a serious light, there are many facts that support Cryptology in many ways, and while some Cryptids are more unlikely to be real, there is still the possibility of that being the case. The next time someone goes missing in a National Park, it could be because of the Cryptids, bears, or other instances. But throughout history, Cryptids have been documented and there have been many Cryptids that turned out to be real. From “Bigfoot” to the Giant Squid, they can pose dangers. 1,800 a year is a pretty big number of people to never be seen again.
Work Day, Week Day
John Hanson

work day, week day
try to shirk day
up all night and didn't sleep
outlook bleak, will is weak
tv, screens, party scenes
show up late, slur to speak

work day, week day
want to lurk day
try, get up, my bones creak
others busy, all clockwork
background, sneak, unseen antique
money, respect, that all I seek?

work day, week day
my clothes reek day
laundry, shower, brush my teeth
feel like a jerk, new groundwork
muck, murk. clean, squeak

work day, week day
up the creek day
Heracles, Sisyphus. labors, task, ancient Greek
overwork, coffee perk
knuckle down, go berserk
do my best, havoc wreck

work day, week day
finished, perfect. above critique
'how do they do it?' my mystique
masterwork, peak technique
downtime? dress up. stylish, chic
eyebrows, nails, hair on fleek
go big, go out. winning streak

The Family That Danced with Bears
Tamara Aanenson

A long time ago…
There was a family that lived in Bavaria. They loved animals and took care of them. Cows, chickens, goats,
sheep, dogs, cats, and even bears!

The bears lived in the woods, were shy, and they loved to eat.

The families name was even Behr. One day, their sweet little boy named Griffin wandered into the woods
alone and came out of the woods with a BEAR! It was beautiful little black bear cub. Griffin and the bear
became best of friends. They grew up together. The little boy taught the bear tricks by giving him treats!
One day the bear learned to walk upright. And he could turn around.
And soon he was twirling around and dancing with Griffin. He had two brothers and they learned to dance with the bear too.

They brought the bear into town and it made children laugh, and they brought happiness wherever they went. Soon, the whole family was dancing with bears. They went from town to town dancing and spreading joy.

All because Griffin went into the woods and came out with a dancing bear!

**Creative Nonfiction**

Joshua Phipps

I was a nursing assistant for four years prior to becoming an LPN. Funny thing is nursing has been a calling for me in so many ways looking back on my current stance of my career. First, I had no clue growing up I wanted to be a nurse until the fifth grade. That may seem odd to some. As most fifth graders I was struggling with math and other courses let alone worried about what I was going to be when I was older. I was told by my teacher one day the school nurse would be coming in to complete our basic aid training. I recall studying this with the teacher. The written information test was part of the science class. We had to know the blood flow of the heart, how the lungs worked. The basics of understanding as a fifth grader. I recall the school nurse showing us CPR. I recall thinking isn’t that what my mom watches on the television show ER. I followed the instructions.

I just remember the nurse telling me, “Okay it is one of your family members who has passed out and they’re not responding to you, what do you do?” I checked for a pulse. Back then there was the a 15:2 ratio. Fifteen compressions two breaths. I did this three times. The school nurse stopped me as I hadn’t stopped, I did not look at her, I just did CPR. She looked at me when I was done, a little out of breath, but not exhausted. She said, “You should be a nurse.” A nurse? Like on the show ER? I thought to myself. I then went on through school and was beginning my freshman year.

My mother read to me in the paper, “The nursing home needs nurse assistances. Theirs a class and it is a great job; you would be a great person to help in the nursing home.” I thought, what me? Why me? Why would I be good at that? I asked my mom what a nursing assistant did. She explained I would assist the nurse. I would be trained to help them and would help care for those in the nursing home. I really was terrified of the thought of doing some of the tasks in the nursing home. My mom told me it would be like what my grandmother does for a living. She always had her nursing stethoscope hanging with her keys at the doorway. I would take that green stethoscope place it in my ears and listen to her dogs’ heart and lungs. I took the application and completed it with my mom’s help. I mailed my handwritten application in as there was hardly internet working in the time, I was doing this.

Nearly a month later I was accepting a job interview. I went in after work in a dress shirt. I was hired and placed in a class that went on for 8 weeks full time. This massive binder over six inches thick was my book for this nursing assistant class. We listened to RNs present lectures on how to perform nursing assistant tasks, ranging from personal cares to vital signs. We watched videos of nurses that had been filmed in the mid-50s through the mid-90s. We were tested both physically performing tasks, through written exams and oral exams. It was exhausting and I loved every minute of it! It was fun, exhilarating interesting and once I was in the clinical hands on portion, I knew I was called to be a nurse. I was called to do this. Our career is often referred to as a calling. I heard that calling from God to do this. It was what I was called to do. I cannot really explain other than it was my calling.

I am a nursing student yet again. Unlike many other students, I am much older perhaps a bit more experienced, I doubt I am much wiser. I have been through this nursing calling for over a decade. It has been at least ten years since I have physically sat in a classroom. I had dreams at the time to advance further my nursing career. Things change in our lives at times. I got a job out of school right away as a licensed practical nurse (LPN).
loved the work. A program designed to accelerate the associate in an applied nurse program to a bachelor’s in science of nursing program had taken their last nursing group. They shut down the offered program my last semester as an LPN. During this time, my schoolwork was changing from more of an in person traditional approach to what we called a hybrid course. We had to do both in person, but we also had to learn how to work online more and more as the semesters work evolved. It was challenging as a nursing student not used to using a computer much at all other than writing papers to learning how to click on things, how to research using the internet, how to google and find appropriate research was a great challenge for us at that time. It seems odd trying to depict what we used to do to research things. In fact, going to a library that did not have a computer system. The difference in work we did then was evolving to what we now have. I recall a few years after I graduated seeing an iPad and thinking, I could have had nursing textbooks on that thing? Now look at us today with our advancements in technology. And I think it is a great blessing especially with all the issues we have faced with a pandemic.

I had to work. It was time for me to live my own life get out on my own and experience living and working for myself. I had worked for the four years through school-working hard to be a post-secondary educated student, working nearly full time as a nursing assistant to pay for my tuition for my LPN program. I had graduated and I was broke. I took the first job I could barely get. The economy was not the greatest at that time. I was lucky to get a nursing job that paid me 50 cents more than I made as a nursing assistant. Things changed in the economy at the time somewhat forcing me to take the job I had been blessed with. Exhaustion of working full time set in and going back for my advancement with all the new knowledge of knowing my professional tasks was overwhelming. Yet look at me now I’m an adult learner and I’m thrilled to be blessed to go back to school. College experiences will stick with you for years to come. It may be exhausting and overwhelming but following your dreams for a career or even trying to find what you want now for a career is a great blessing.

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**Warning: The following story contains mature content.**

**Don’t Cry: Part 1**

Hayley Denelsbeck

“I can’t hear shit. I'm outta here!” Toni hollered at her boyfriend. This was the concert of her lifetime: the one she had always dreamed of going to, but never thought in a million years she would have the opportunity to attend. After her mom died money was tight, but even if she could only afford the cheapest seats, she was determined to see her favorite band live. From the nosebleeds, the first minute of “Sweet Child O’ Mine” sounded like the most unpleasant, deafening, piercing blasts of sound filled with words she couldn’t even make out. Even though she knew all the lyrics to every single song, she knew she wouldn’t enjoy herself if she stayed. Toni shoved her way through the crowd of people towards the exit.

“Baby COME ON! We gotta stay. We may NEVER have this opportunity again! PLEASE!” Johnny pleaded as he chased her, but when Toni had her mind set, there was no changing it.

When she finally reached the exit of the Mile High Stadium, Toni pushed the door open only to find herself hit with a cold blast of the September night’s air. “Damn it, Johnny. I forgot we were supposed to meet my dad and Missy after the show,” she whined with her arms crossed, trying to get warm.
“Well, might as well flag down one of those filthy, unpretentious, over-priced wagons and get the hell out of here.” Johnny rolled his eyes.

As they started to make their way to the edge of the street, Toni noticed a familiar man stumbling towards them. “DAD is that YOU?!?! Where the hell is Missy?! You guys had tickets right by the stage. What. The. Hell. is going on?”

“I wanted a beer, and that swine wouldn’t let me, so I called her a bitch and made my way out.” Her dad slurred. She could smell the Jäg on his breath. Toni hailed the next cab, and the three of them left the concert.

When they finally reached the hotel, Toni was annoyed and sober. She kicked off her boots as she walked into room 214 and flopped onto one of the stiff beds. Johnny and her dad were still outside smoking cigarettes, giving her a minute to just chill. How can we make this night better? She stared at the popcorn painted ceiling and wondered if the guys had any ideas.

Fuck this place. She shot up off the bed and headed to the bathroom to freshen her red lipstick. As she smacked her lips and looked in the mirror with confidence, she heard the door crack open.

“Toni! Come here, I have to show you something!” She could tell her dad’s buzz was wearing off.

“So... ah... you two love birds wanna have some fun tonight er what?” Frankie’s eyes were glazed.

“What kinda fun are we talkin’, my man?” Johnny nudged him on the shoulder.

Frankie went over to his bag and pulled out an old cigar box, immediately putting it behind his back as if he were trying to hide it.

“Missy and I picked this up for ourselves. I wasn’t gonna show you guys, but we’re in the same room and I just thought -- whatever, ya know?” Frankie hesitated. “I wanna have some fun with my daughter and her boyfriend! It’s not that often that I get to hang out with you two.” He winked, seeming to forget about Missy altogether.

Toni’s palms started sweating. “What’s in the box, Dad?”

He slowly set it down on the table, looked them both directly in the eyes and whispered, “If you tell anyone, I might have to kill you.”

When the box opened, Toni noticed a substance that looked like little clumps of baking soda and other shit she had never seen. What the fuck is going on? Her mind began to race.

“You guys ever seen this stuff?” Frankie looked at them with an eyebrow raised.

“Is that . . .” Toni paused for a moment, “coke?!?” Toni had only ever seen it on Goodfellas.
Johnny laid back and slouched in his seat. “Baby, chill.” This was a side of him Toni had never seen before. “A little bump won’t hurt ya. Let loose and have a little fun for once.” He leaned over and pushed her hair behind her ear as he kissed her cheek.

“A little bump! Since when are you speakin’ this drug slang?” Toni gave Johnny a look and pushed his face away.

“Tone, this will be fun, I promise!” Frankie laid out the beady balls of the powdery substance and crushed them with his credit card on the table in front of them. “It’s not every day you get to have a good time with your old man, is it?”

Toni started sweating. Three lines were laid out in front of them, two big and one small. She watched her dad roll up a fifty into a tight little tube. He snorted, then Johnny. Now it was her turn.

Her heart fluttered and her stomach felt weak. But if Johnny did it, so can I... plus, life hasn’t been that easy lately. Shit. Why not let loose just this once? She put the fifty up to her nose, snorted half up her right nostril and half up the left, like she watched the guys do, almost as if she was a pro. Instantly, the back of her throat felt numb and she felt more alert than ever.

“Hell yeah!” Frankie’s inner 20-year-old was thrilled. He kept laying lines out until there wasn’t much rock left. “Fuck. Missy’s gonna kill me.”

It was at that precise moment that she walked through the door. “Speak of the devil,” Frankie snarked under his breath.

Missy knew what was going on the second she saw his face. “You’re a worthless piece of shit!” Her eyes bulged like they were going to come out of their sockets.

“Come on, let’s go. He’s not worth it.” Toni pulled Missy by her arm towards the door, trying to avoid being kicked out of the hotel.

It wasn’t long before the two of them were standing outside of a ritzy club. Toni looked around and noticed the up-scale swanky feel to the place. Why are we in a women’s strip joint?

She felt extremely uncomfortable for a moment until Missy said, “I like coming here because the men buy me drinks and the women aren’t filthy,” as if she had heard Toni’s thoughts.

Toni decided to let loose and have fun with it; the coke was still in her system, and she was feeling good. The ladies wore nothing but tight panties and stilettos, and even made her forget about Johnny for a minute. Do I like women? She had never felt this turned on before. Toni walked around the place whistling at the ladies and told them how sexy they were, but after a while, her high wore off and she went to find Missy.

Toni found her surrounded by a group of men and attempted to pry her away. “Missy, you ready to get outta here?”

“Yes, Hun, give me a minute.”
A half an hour later, they were inside of another musty-smelling cab, but this time it was a van. Something felt off to Toni when she realized how flirty Missy was with the driver. She overheard her talking about scoring some blow and realized that they weren’t headed back to the hotel at all. Missy wanted to get back at Frankie.

At the next stoplight, Toni unlocked the back door of the van and slid it open. As she shot into the thick darkness of the night, she heard Missy yell after her. Even though Toni didn’t know where she was, she wasn’t going to turn back. She sprinted all over the streets looking for a payphone to get ahold of Johnny at the Residence Inn.

“Residence Inn, this is Allie. How can I help you?” A woman answered.

“Can you connect me to room 214 please?” Toni begged.

“Sure thing, dear.” The front desk lady transferred her call.

Ring . . . Ring . . . Ring . . . Toni anxiously waited for her dad or Johnny to pick up.

Crown of Magic
Madison Johnson

Many moons ago, in a far-off valley, there was the Kingdom of Hargett. The small village of Hargett was full of picturesque cottages placed along the hillside with a market full of warm baked goods, fresh picked produce, and meat butchered each morning. Trees, greenery, and rolling hills surrounded the village as far as the eye could see. Up on a high ridge sat the Bran Castle where a young princess lived with her pet goat.

Princess Sasha’s parents, the king and queen of Hargett, died when she was a toddler. After the death of her parents, her lady’s maid took over and raised Sasha to be the young lady she had become. Soon, she would be able to take the throne and become Queen Sasha of Hargett.

Princess Sasha, as described by the people of Hargett, was kind, fun-loving, and full of energy. She could typically be seen throughout the kingdom and was not afraid to talk or approach the commoners of the village. They saw her as a normal teenage girl, even though they knew she was the Princess.

Sasha’s uncle, Elliot, had been watching over the kingdom; he was a boorish, plump, short old man who just wanted the throne for himself. Because of something he made up to make them look bad, a few townsfolk believed Elliot had been sabotaging the king and queen by causing unrest in the village. The townsfolk could not wait until Sasha came of age to take over the throne from her uncle.

During this time, the princess met her best friend, a baby goat that she found alone on a hillside. She took him home and gave him a delicious meal of clover and alfalfa. He decided to stay with her and be by her side every minute of the day. The baby goat was white with brown spots and big green eyes. Sasha decided to name him Milo. Milo, who was a buff little guy, was by the princess’s side to protect her and love her. She believed Milo was destined to be hers because when she discovered she had powers like no one else had, Milo assisted her in discovering what she was capable of doing. Milo was her familiar; she was meant to find him and take him home with her so that they could care for and watch over each other.

More recently, Sasha had been noticing some strange and unusual things happening around her that she couldn’t explain. She was walking around the village one day when she noticed objects moving without anyone touching them. For instance, she noticed a barrel adjust itself before it fell off of a trailer causing a major disaster. Odd, mysterious things had happened where sometimes nobody else could figure out what was going
on either. Some of the things included when she thought about something happening to someone, and it did, even though she didn’t say anything or do anything to make it happen. As Sasha thought back, there had been a towns woman that had a small problem. Her chicken wouldn’t hatch eggs, and that was how she made her living. Princess Sasha recalled that she wished the chicken would hatch the greatest eggs and supply them to help the lady. A day later, the chicken did end up hatching the most prized eggs, hundreds of them, where the townspeople took notice, and the lady felt extremely blessed and her worries of money and feeding her family were over. Little did anyone know that the Princess, unbeknownst to herself or others, was the one that made this happen. This was the first time she could recall doing something magical.

Sasha was confused, worried, and curious, most of all about how these occurrences were happening to her. She decided to go to the library in the castle in hopes of finding something in the many books there to explain what was going on. Sasha had run hastily up the hill, with Milo not far behind, through the castle and up the many stairs to the library. She had been searching through the dusty books for hours and hours. Just when Sasha was going to give up, she stumbled upon a book of magic that explained in some detail about magic. After more research and searching the endless books, she found the book of spells. When Sasha was reading the book explaining magic, it stated that a witch’s powers don’t show up until they come of age. The age was 13, which would explain how most of these things were happening after Sasha had turned 13. Sasha took the book to her chambers, along with Milo, and read it from cover to cover, many times over. Sasha then began to try a few of the spells in the book, and realized she was the one that was doing these things; she was doing magic! She realized, what she probably had known all along, that she was a witch. Sasha and Milo ventured out into the woods to find a hidden cave to continue her learning and practice of witchcraft and what she was truly capable of. She hid her magic away in fear that she would be cast away from the Kingdom of Hargett and looked upon as an unwanted being in her own town.

After some time learning about her powers, Sasha and Milo were one day in the marketplace of town and noticed that the butcher had cut himself while working and was needing help to stop the wound from bleeding, but nobody was able to help him. Sasha decided that this was the time when she could be of great help with her magic. She pulled him aside after the crowd had cleared and whispered to him that she could fix his wound with her magic if he would trust her to do so. A sparkle of light came from her hand, and the butcher was in awe that his wound on his finger was healed instantly and no longer hurt him. He was very grateful but still surprised at what just took place.

The next day, the town was buzzing with rumors of what Princess Sasha did to help the butcher in the market square. Their curiosity rose with thoughts and ideas. The Princess found out about the talk in town once the castle post arrived that day. The townspeople had been talking about what she had done to help and were showing that they were accepting of her and what the possibilities were. With this acceptance from the townspeople and her gaining her confidence in her abilities with magic, she decided it was time to leave Hargett to go help others in the surrounding towns. She saw that this would be the greatest gift she could give with her magical powers. So, she made a plan to leave at dawn with Milo and see where the path would lead her.

After days of traveling, she was tired from walking and roaming the forest area, with no real direction of where she was headed. She took a rest in a cave, as she was unfamiliar with the area, because she had never been out this far in the forest alone due to what had happened to her parents years ago. After their rest, Milo suddenly took off and she followed in haste to see where he was going and tried to catch him. Milo wasn’t running away, as he knew where she was needed, and he led her to the people and places she could help.
Sasha finally caught up to Milo outside of a small neighboring village. He bleated to her in encouragement to go into the town. As she walked into the town, she saw a family whose cow ran away. The family told her that the cow was their only source of income. Sasha cast a spell on Milo that made him a marvelous searcher, and he took off in the direction of the cow. After about an hour, Milo and Sasha discovered the cow stuck in a thistle bush. Sasha used her magic once more to help free the cow from the thistles. They walked the cow back to the family's home. The family was so grateful that the mother and father tried to reward her. She turned the reward down and mentioned to them that helping them was a reward in itself. After helping multiple people in this village, she realized that she could travel from country to country assisting people with their problems. So, Milo and Sasha packed up their belongings and the knowledge they had gained and set off on their new journey.

**Good Riddance**
Emma Budden

May 19, 2007 is college graduation day! The smell of springtime fills the air as Melissa and her family make their way across campus to prepare for the coming ceremony. Two underclassmen greet them at the large main hall doors, handing out programs that list all the students who will be graduating that day. Before walking in, a cheery, blue-eyed boy politely asks Melissa, “How you are doing today?”

Her heart races at the question. Melissa irrationally thinks to herself, *Not great! I have no idea what I’m gonna to do with my life. Seriously, live in my parent’s basement under their rules until I die?*

“What do you care?” She says snobbishly back to the boy. Ripping the program out of his hands, she mumbles to herself, “Stupid freshman, what kind of question is that?”

With a puzzled look on his face, Melissa’s father, Mark, gives the boy a nod as if to say, *sorry about that, not sure what has gotten into her.*

The family continues into the gymnasium to find their seats as Melissa makes her way down the hallway to join her class. Melissa paces back and forth. *This is it,* she thinks. *I’m going to be another failed low life walking across the stage in the dress I made.*

After the commotion dies down, the lights dim and the voice of the school president begins to echo across the gymnasium. One by one, the graduates are called up on the stage to receive their diploma, a firm handshake, and a round of applause congratulating them on all their achievements. Melissa is one person away from the president announcing her name. She can feel her heart beating faster as she inches towards the doorway of the gymnasium. Then her name blares across the loudspeaker: “MELISSA ELIZABETH ROBENSON.”

Trying to keep herself from bursting into tears, knowing this is where she will gain the title of a low life who lives in her parent’s basement, she takes a step into the gymnasium. Her ears fill with a high pitch sound and everything around her disappears. Click. Click. Click. The sound of her heels echo across the room. She continues walking towards the stage for what feels like a slow-motion eternity.
In the background a voice yells, “Yeah, Melissa!”

Snapping out of her daze, Melissa collects herself and makes her way across the stage. One tear falls from her eye as she places her sweaty hand on the diploma. *This is it,* she says to herself. More tears welling up inside her eyes. She quickly walks off the stage, each step faster and faster until it becomes a sprint. Crashing though the main hall doors, she falls to her knees, the emotions bottled up inside rush out. Contemplating life, she lays there for quite some time.

“Despair,” Shawna Larsen

Finally, the people watching start to come outside, her family being one of the first to exit. She panics and quickly collects herself to look unbothered. “Congratulations, sweetheart!” Melissa’s father says cheerfully. “Where do you want to eat?”

“I don’t know. Why does it always have to be up to me?” Melissa retaliates.

Her father smiles, “Why don’t we just go to your favorite restaurant?”

The next morning, Melissa wakes to the sound of her father’s annoying alarm clock. *Ugh, he does this every time I’m home.* It’s literally my only day to sleep in.

Ten minutes later and the alarm clock continues to sound. Not being able to fall back asleep, Melissa decides to get up for the day and take a long, hot shower. Her emotions getting the best of her once again, she beings to cry, legs weak and wobbly, dropping her down to the tile floor.

*Why couldn’t I have just done something normal like be a doctor or a lawyer? Fashion? Really, of all things, you choose -- fashion. What are you going to do with your life now, stupid?*

After some time in the shower, Melissa hears her father’s booming voice calls through the door, “Melissa, hurry up! I need to get ready for work.”

Still annoyed and angry from the disturbance of her sleep, she huffs, “Yeah, yeah, I’m getting there.” Melissa thinks, *I should probably get out of the shower.* At that exact moment she hears her father’s hand pound angrily on the bathroom door. The sound resonates through the bathroom. Shortly after, she hears his booming voice again, “Melissa, seriously, why aren’t you out of the shower? You’re going to make me late for work,” her father insists.

Now not wanting to get out of the shower because she has been told to do so, Melissa reluctantly yells, “I’m coming!”
Slamming the shower door, Melissa makes her way across the cold tiles on the bathroom floor. Opening the door, she purposely bumps into her father’s shoulder as she stomps out of the bathroom.

“Excuse me young lady,” her father reprimands. “You’re lucky I’m late for work. We’ll discuss this later!”

“Ugh, whatever,” she says more to herself than him.

That afternoon after everyone is out of the house, she decides to get herself together and do what she went to college for. She brings out her drawing book, fabrics, and sowing machine. Hours pass. “This might be my best design I’ve ever made!” she says proudly.

The front door slams shut, and Melissa quickly turns her head. “That’s it. This is the last straw. This house is an absolute mess!”

“I’m working on starting my career. How about you try it for once?” she blurts, shocking herself with what she had just said.

“I am sick and tired of your attitude,” her father says. “Ever since your graduation day, you have done nothing but take every opportunity to be rude and disrespectful and I won’t tolerate it.”

Feeling like nothing she does is good enough she snaps back, “Oh, you think I’m the one being rude and disrespectful? Did I let my alarm go off for ten minutes and wake up the whole house? Did I demand that you get out of the shower this morning? If anyone is being rude and disrespectful, it’s you. That’s fine though. If that’s the way you feel, it won’t be your problem anymore. I’m moving out.”

That same evening, Melissa sits down at her computer to hash out the details of where she will go. Aha, that’s it! I’ll go to New York and start my fashion career there.

She finds a plane ticket for the following day. Staring at it for a moment before submitting the order, she contemplates whether she should go. No, I’m going! she thinks to herself. Her hand shaking, she grabs the computer mouse and clicks submit.

Bright and early the next morning, before her family wakes up, Melissa gets ready to leave for New York, making sure to pack her drawing book, fabrics, and sowing machine. As she is walking out of her room, she notices her father is not in his room. Wanting to be devious, she looks around to make sure no one is watching and sneaks into his room. She tip-toes over to his side of the bed, reaching down to grab his alarm clock. She resets the clock to 3:00 AM, making sure it will disturb her father after she has left. Melissa sneaks out and acts like nothing happened. Checking her list for the last time, Melissa grabs her travel bags and heads out the front door. Ready for her new life, she walks down the driveway confidently.

“What a beautiful day, ay?” The taxi driver greets her.

“Why, yes, it is, smells fresh!” Melissa responds cheerfully.

The taxi driver smiles and collects her bags while opening the passenger door. Melissa hops in and takes a deep breath. “Well, this is it, huh?” she says aloud to herself.

“Are you ready to go, Miss?” The taxi driver asks as he hops back in the driver’s seat.

Melissa takes a last look at the house, “Yes, I am. To the airport please.”
I am walking down the streets of Sparta, watching the future Spartans, named Nasos, play with wooden swords enjoying this rare sense of peace. I continue my walk home with my old sword and chest plate. “Adios,” a man calls out. I look up to see Phaedra, a wise old man.

“How are you, my boy? I see you still carrying around that junk.”

Laughing, I reply, “Yes, I believe the gods are testing how strong I am.”

He grabs my shoulder, “My boy, you are blessed by the gods with this amazing strength and power. You are a great Spartan, and you will lead Sparta to victory.”

Smiling, I say, “Thank you, but I should be off now. Mother is waiting.” I shake Phaedra’s hand and go my separate way.

Opening the door to our home, I see my mother and father sitting at the table. My mother runs to me, crying and hugging me.

I ask her, “Mother, what is the matter? Are you ok?”

With tears in her eyes, she cracks a smile and responds, “We are so proud of you.”

Confused, I looked at my father for an explanation. He smiles and puts a letter on the table, sliding it forward.

“Father, what is this?”

He responds, “Come here boy and read it.”

I slowly start walking towards the table thinking about what it could be. I slowly grab it and start to read it out loud to my parents:

“To Adios, you have been selected to stand and fight alongside our great king, Leonidas. You have been chosen as one of the 300 Spartans that the king himself will lead. All 300 hundred soldiers are expected to come to the training grounds by sunrise.”

Shocked, I look at my father, shaking. He has a proud smile. He looks at me and says, “You are coming from a bloodline of warrior. Now wait here. Let me get you something.” He heads into our storage downstairs, taking his time moving stuff around to get to his armory room. When he walks back upstairs, he is holding something. He is holding a sword, but not any sword; the sword he is holding has been passed down through generations of our bloodlines of warriors. The sword has a golden handle with the engraving saying Sparta. The blade is made out of iron and still sharp. The sword is centuries old but still looks like the blacksmith just crafted it.

“Father, what is this, why are you showing me your sword?”

He chuckles, “Son, it is time for me to pass the sword forward to you. My time as a warrior is over and now it is you who will carry this sword with great honor.”

Holding the sword proudly I say to my father, “I will not let Sparta down.”
“Adios, Adios, it’s time to get up. You have been called to serve Leonidas.” As I wake up, I see my mother rushing around the house.

She yells “Adios, don’t make me come into your room.”

I respond, “I am up mother, I’m up.” I stand up, and my mother walks into my room.

“What’s this?”

I quickly clean myself up and head into the kitchen. I walk into the kitchen and see the table full of food. I asked my mother, “What’s this?”

She explains, “Since you are not going to be home for a while, I decided to give you a farewell feast.”

I give mother a big hug and begin to eat. After I finish eating, it is time to head to the training grounds. I grab my father’s sword and my chest plate. I start to head out the door and give my mother and father a big hug. My father shakes my hand and goes back inside to lay down.

My mother looks at me and says, “Make us proud. Come back with your shield or on it.” My mother loves Sparta. For my mother, it is an honor that her son will be fighting for Sparta.

“When I walk onto the training field, it is still dark. Usually, the field would be empty at this time but not this time. Hundreds of Spartans are here. Some of these soldiers look familiar and some I do not recognize. These soldiers seem more focused than the other soldiers I trained with. Suddenly, we all hear “Get in line!” All of the hundreds of men run to line up beside each other.

I quickly follow the instructions and get into line, observing the men I will be going to war with. I look at the soldier beside me. He is a big man with scars all over his body; he looks confident. Standing at around 6’5,” with a strong build. Then a man walks on the stage. The man has black hair and blue eyes. His build is not a big build. It is more of an athletic frame.

He begins to look at every soldier standing in front, “Soldiers, I handpicked each one of you to come and fight for me for you to die for Sparta! I chose all of you because you are hard. There is no room for being soft. Not in Sparta. Now Sparta needs you, thousands of filthy Athenians are marching here to attack our great Sparta. They need thousands, but I only need my few Spartans to fight against their weak army. Tonight, we move and stop Athens dead in their tracks.”

Shocked, I ask, “Today? We are moving tonight?”

The soldier beside me laughs and says, “He is a true leader. If they want war, he will bring it to their doorsteps. That is our king, Leonidas.” Leonidas continues his speech and prepares us to walk in the deepest depth of hell.
The earth seems like it is shaking with 300 men marching. The same man that stood beside me during the king's speech is still beside me. He grabs my shoulder, “Don't die on me. I will hate to carry you back on your shield.”

I respond, “I hope you don't die. Carrying a big man like you will be harder than the battle itself.”

He laughs, “My name is Leon.”

I reply, “Adios.” A roar comes from the front. It sounds like our king.

He yells, “We are here, men.”

I look at Leon, “So what now? We just wait?”

He nods and sits down. I look around at the terrain. We are in a rock valley where the alleyway becomes too narrow, especially for thousands of soldiers. As it becomes nightfall, we hear marching. We all know what time it is. Leon looks at me and says, “It's time to face our destiny and decide the fate for Sparta.” We all get into battle formations, blocking the path with our shields and lining them row by row so the men behind are supporting the men at the front. We start to see men appear from the horizon. It looks like their army has no end.

Leonidas screams, “Men, tonight we dine in hell!”

The battle begins, the sounds of swords and spears hitting the shield. The men with the shields have long spears stabbing the enemy as they try to break through the Spartan wall. I look at the men beside me and do not see fear in their eyes. They look ready for battle. They are proud to fight for Sparta.

The battle bleeds into the next day, Leonidas screams, “Spartans! Prepare for glory!”

I walk up beside King Leonidas and tell him, “It is an honor to die beside you.” Untitled, Suree Sompamitwong

He responds, “It is an honor to fight beside you.” The shields pull back and the rest of King Leonidas' Spartans charge forward. The Spartans sword clash with Athens’ swords. Slowly, the Spartan swords start going through the Athenian soldiers, cutting off their limbs and heads. Spartans come out slaughtering Athens. It is clear how much stronger Sparta is.

We battle up to the sunrise. Most of our men are tired or dead. I see King Leonidas slaughtering Athens like a hungry lion in a field full of rabbits. I slash my way to King Leonidas and tell him, “Sir, our men cannot keep fighting like this.”

He responds with, “Yes, we need to finish this quickly. There is no way we can defeat all these Athens, even if we are strong enough. We do not have enough soldiers, and they have more than enough soldiers.”

But then I see a soldier on a horse. This soldier has a crown.

I yell, “Leonidas, that is their king.”

He looks around until he sees the crown. “Let’s go rip that pig’s head off.”
King Leonidas raises his sword and points to the Athenian king. All the soldiers who see the king’s sword rise follow it. We begin pushing up to the Athenian king, watching our fellow Spartans slaughter and get slaughtered by Athens. I step over the bodies of Spartan men and filthy Athenians until I see a familiar face. It is Leon. His eyes had no life, his body is missing limbs. Before I get the chance to grieve, I see an Athenian soldier rush toward me. Before I can bring my sword up, the soldier's arm gets sliced off. It is King Leonidas. He is not even phased. His men are dead. He has one goal, and its to get to the king. We get near the king. It is obvious the king is no warrior. He tries to flee on his horse, but a Spartan spear soars through the sky striking the Athenian king in the back of his neck. The moment the pig's body hit the ground, the Athens' spirits die with him. They start to flee like little pigs. We slaughter any Athenians we can as they try to flee the battle, finishing them off. We begin to find our dead Spartans and carry them home on their shields. The battle is finally over, and I look at my body full of scars and blood. We have protected Sparta.

Marching back into Sparta we are greeted by the civilians of Sparta that were cheering us on. I look back and wonder what they are celebrating. King Leonidas comes beside me and asks, “Why do you look so upset? You just won your first and most important battle.”

I reply with, “How do you see this as a win? We left with 300, and we came home with maybe 100.”

He looks at me and responds, “Those men sacrificed their lives for Sparta. They had accepted that. It is our job to keep Sparta safe. Now cheer up.”

King Leonidas walks up to the stage and gives a speech about the battle, but then he calls me up and says, “Adios is one of the reasons we have won this war. He found the king, leading us to victory. From now on, he will be my right-hand man.”

Shocked as King Leonidas shakes my hand, I am ready to help him lead Sparta.

The Perfect Day
Elizabeth Johnson

There was a girl, about the age of 11, and her name was Stella Marie. Stella was an adventurous young girl, always getting in trouble with her curiosity. One thing that she loved to do was fish with her dad. She was constantly asking him to go, but he said no most of the time because he was always busy with work.

One day Stella snuck out to show her dad that she did not need him to go fishing; she took her pole and headed out to the lake, but there was a big issue. The lake was frozen, frozen solid, like one giant ice cube. Stella thought to herself, shoot. She had the bright idea to find something to break the ice. Stella set down her fishing pole and walked around the giant ice cube of a lake. When she found what she was looking for, she shouted out loud, “Perfect!” It was a big stick, sharp as a knife. She then took the stick and began pounding the ice like she was using a hammer to pound in a nail.

She had high hopes that this was working, but then her dad found her. He had been out looking for her for about an hour. Her dad said, “Stella, what do you think you are doing? You cannot fish like that.”

Stella then became really discouraged and looked up at her father and said, “Bu, Dad, I want to fish, and you are always too busy for me.”

Her dad said, “Pick up your pole. You’re coming with me.” So, they left and went home.

On the way home, Stella’s dad said, “You should have asked me to take you. What you did is not safe. You could have fallen through the ice.”
She replied, “I just really want to fish, and I do not know how else to get you to notice.”

Her dad then said, “Well, I am sorry you feel that way, you little missy. How about when we get home, we discuss taking a trip to a lake?” From a mile away, you could see that Stella was overjoyed, smiling from ear to ear.

She said, “You really mean it this time, Dad?” Her dad nodded his head in agreement and turned on the radio station to their favorite channel until they arrived home.

Once they got home, they sat at the kitchen table and pulled out a map and set it on the messy table. They examined each corner of the map all the way down to the tiniest pond when they finally picked a perfect lake to go to the next morning.

That night, Stella could barely sleep. She was so excited to be going fishing with her dad, nonetheless, ice fishing. She tossed and turned restlessly all night. Finally, bright and early at 4:30 A.M., her dad walked in her room and said, “You ready to go yet? I have everything packed up from the house to the heater, and even some lunch for us.”

Stella jumped out of bed and threw on her clothes. She felt like she was ready to conquer an avalanche with the amount of warm clothing she had on, from her long sleeve shirt to her hoodie and coat, all the way down to her jeans over her leggings and fuzzy socks. Stella ran to the truck and hopped right in the front seat.

On the road, the two decided to stop for breakfast at a little diner. They went into the diner and sat down. While sitting there, Stella took in all the scents from the savory sausage to the sweet maple syrup. Then the waitress came over and asked, “What can I get you?”

Stella said, “I’ll take a ham and cheese omelet with toast and a hot chocolate. I have to stay warm because I get to finally go ice fishing with my dad today!”

The waitress giggled and asked Stella’s dad the same thing. He said, “I’ll take a black coffee and a ham, pepper, and cheese omelet.”

A little while later, the waitress came back with their drinks and food. Stella quickly scarfed down her food and was out the door before her dad could even pay the bill. Back on the road again they went.

They finally arrived at the lake at 6:15 A.M. Her dad unloaded the truck and the four-wheeler, and they headed out on the ice. Stella got to pick the spot to put the house. She found a little corner of the lake and thought that it was perfect.

“Dad! Dad! Dad! There! Right over there! That is the spot for us!” Stella shouted.

Her dad drove the four-wheeler over to Stella’s so-called perfect spot and began to set up the house. He gave Stella the important job of picking where to put the holes in the house, and then he drilled the holes with the auger. Stella picked out her poles that she wanted to use and the bait that she thought would catch all the big ones. Her dad put the bait on for her and dropped her lines.

“Dad, why haven’t I caught anything yet? Why is this taking so long? I just want to catch a fish already,” she impatiently asked her dad.

Her dad responded, “Stella sweetie, it has been five minutes it going to take a little --“
He was interrupted when Stella started to scream, “I got one! I think.” Stella reeled up the line. It was lighter than she expected, but before she got discouraged, the line came to the top of the hole. She saw a little baby perch. She was overjoyed.

Her dad said, “Well, would you look at that! What a nice little guy, but honey, he is too little to keep. We have to throw him back.” As they tossed the little perch back, you can see the tail move side to side for a good three feet.

Stella got another bite. It was another perch, this time big enough to keep. Right after Stella reeled up hers, her dad pulled in an even bigger Northern that they could keep. Within the first hour, they had their limit in perch and were two shy from their limit in Northerns. Suddenly Stella got a bite, a big bite. She got to reach for her pole, but it was too late as she watched it fall down the hole. Stella started to cry because she felt like she messed up, but her dad tried to reassure her it was okay.

“Stella! Grab your other pole fast. You have another bite,” her dad said. Stella reached for the pole and set the hook. The pole arched to the roof of the fish house.

“It’s a big one, Dad. It’s really big. I do not know if I can do this by myself,” Stella stated.

“You got this, Stella. Just take it slow and easy. You can do it,” her dad replied.

“Holy Cow,” Stella shouted as she pulled a Northern the size of a football field through the hole.

“Good job, sweetie. I knew you could do it. Just look at the size of that fish. He is for sure a keeper,” said her dad.

“Can we mount it on the wall, Dad? It is soooooo big,” Stella asked. Suddenly, they noticed another line attached to the massive fish. They pulled the other line in and realized it was Stella’s other fishing pole.

“Well would you look at that. You did not lose it,” stated her dad. Stella then said, “Oh, wow, that is so cool. I thought it was gone forever. Dad, can we go now? I want to show mom my big fish.”

They packed up all their gear and hit the road back home. On the way home, Stella couldn’t stop jabbering, 10,000 miles a minute it felt. She cannot wait to tell her mom all about her day. The car ride drug on for Stella. It felt like it took 20 years to drive home because she was just so darn happy.

When they finally arrived home, Stella ran into the house and went to her mom, “Mom guess what? I caught a Northern the size of a football field, come see it. Dad says we can get it mounted and put it up on my wall,” she rambled a mile a minute.

Her mom said, “Honey, that is so exciting, but you have to slow down and catch your breath.”

Stella and her mom made it to where her dad was starting to fillet the fish for supper. “Dad, no, no, no, you promised I could mount my fish on the wall,” Stella cried.
“Sweetie, do not worry. I will not fillet yours. It is over there, but we are going to eat the others for supper because in all the excitement we forgot to eat lunch,” her dad replied.

Stella shows her fish to her mom and her mom said, “Wow, that is so cool. It will look so good on your wall, but let’s go in and eat some supper.”

After supper, Stella took a shower and got ready for bed. Her dad came in to tuck her in and said, “Stella, sweetie, I had a lot of fun today. I’m sorry it took me so long to take you out fishing.”

Stella replied as she was starting to doze off, “Thanks for taking me fishing, Dad. I had the perfect day!”

“Thoughts,” Samantha Brink

Shining Star
Karoline Dahl

The day seemed to be perfect. The sun was out, birds were chirping, and the summer breeze was blowing just perfectly. I had been babysitting all morning and once I got home, I watched TV until my dad received a phone call. Sometime during the phone call, my dad heard bad news and due to that, he screamed in rage and frustration. He broke a lamp. I was worried, no, terrified. The first thing that went to my head was that he had lost his job. After a few seconds, I went upstairs and saw my dad rushing to pack a bag, and he handed the phone to my mom. She broke down immediately, and I could hear my grandpa’s voice over the phone. That’s when everything added up: something had happened to my grandmother. My mom had gotten off the phone with my grandfather and told me what happened. My grandmother and aunt had gotten into a car accident, and they didn’t know if my grandmother was going to make it. There are no words to describe how I felt other than numb. It was a mix of fear, anger, and motivation all blending together into numbness. After a minute argument between my parents and me, we decided that my mom would come with us to North Memorial Health Hospital despite the fact that she was on crutches after just having knee surgery the previous Friday. After I quickly packed my bag, we rushed my mom into the back seat of the car and left. An hour and a half later, after going 80-100 mph the whole way, we arrived. When I got out of the car, I noticed that the sun was hidden behind clouds. This gave me an even more uneasy feeling about the day ahead.

Once we finally got up to the room, my cousin Miranda, her fiancé, John, my uncle Mike, and my grandma’s cousin Kate were all in the tiny 8x16 ICU room with the hospital bed holding my grandma who was laying in the middle and cords blocking off the back half. I stood there utterly shocked at how injured and bruised my grandmother was. She had bruises on both hands, a broken arm, stitches in her head, and a brace on her neck. The room was cold, dark, and I couldn’t hear anything except the steady beeping of the machines connected to my grandmother.

An hour later, my aunt Brenda and my grandpa arrived at the hospital. We then went into a room to figure out what to do. The doctor had informed us that she probably would never be able to live without help again, and the neurosurgeon said the same. Everyone in my family had the same opinion as to what she would’ve wanted, to remove the breathing tube and let nature take its course. That moment would mark the second time I had broken down, the first being on the way there. We all decided that we wouldn’t remove the breathing tube until my grandma’s sister, Maurine, got to say goodbye. About five hours later, at 8:00 PM, the priest arrived and gave my grandma her Last Rites. An hour after the priest came, Maurine arrived, and we had the breathing tube removed.
I remember the horrible sound that came out of her mouth when they removed the breathing tube. It sounded as if someone was coughing while gargling water. It was so bad that I had to go to the waiting room for a few minutes; that would mark the third time I had broken down. When I finally returned to the room in the ICU, my grandfather cracked a joke for the first time in years, “Forty-eight years of marriage and now she starts snoring on me.” It was about three and a half hours later around 12:30 AM that everyone finally decided to head to the hotel, but we ended up staying at a poor hotel that featured a man getting arrested in the front for smoking pot. Again, I looked at the sky, and no stars were to be found. The wind had picked up, and again, chills ran down my spine, giving me a very uneasy feeling. The next day when my family and I woke up, we went back to the hospital. Her breathing had calmed down a lot more, which was incredibly shocking to the doctors. It turned out her heart was incredibly healthy, so she didn’t need much oxygen for her blood. I sat at her bedside for about two more hours with nothing happening, hearing only the sound of her steady but shaky breathing.

After a few hours, she was moved into hospice care, which had the advantage of a much larger room. While we were waiting in hospice care, my maternal grandmother came so she could give my mom and I a ride home while my dad stayed. After an hour, my dad went to get a bite to eat while Brenda and my grandpa went up north. My mom and I were both in agreement that we wouldn’t leave until my dad came back because we didn’t want my grandma to be alone. After about an hour my dad came back. I spent about fifteen minutes in the room saying goodbye. I remember the warmth on my face from the tears pouring from my eyes which never happens because I don’t cry. It was quite an unusual feeling. I was feeling as though my heart had been ripped from my chest. I held my grandmother’s hand as tight as I could. I looked at her bruised face and told her just how much I loved her. I kissed her forehead, said goodbye, and walked out the door.

During the whole trip back, I couldn’t eat or sleep. I had become completely numb. I stared out the window to see that the stars were shining exceptionally bright. A few minutes later my dad called to inform us that my grandmother had passed a few minutes before. She was at peace.

A week later, my mom and I went to Backus, Minnesota for the funeral. I skipped a camping trip the weekend before to write the eulogy for the funeral. It took about an hour and a half to come up with three short stories of our time together. I feared the stories I had come up with wouldn’t do my grandma’s legacy justice. The day before the funeral, my parents, grandpa, Mike, Brenda, and I had supper with my grandpa’s brother and sister, Kent and Kathy. That supper had to be the highlight of my year. I learned so much about my grandfather’s side of the family, and I found out my love for business and politics came from my great-grandfather who was a big business tycoon in Chicago.

Untitled Pieces
Kenan Harris and Katrina Chaophasy
My grandfather and I left about an hour and a half early because he had to set up, and I had to go over the eulogy with the priest to make sure it was all right. As soon as the funeral began, I broke down; my entire family did. I do believe I broke down two more times before I read my eulogy. I delivered the eulogy clearly with no tears. That was one of the proudest moments in my life. My grandma would have been so proud. After the funeral, my dad and Mike went up to Bemidji to bless her urn with the rest of the family. The car ride was the first time I had gotten some actual rest in over a week. After the blessing, my mom and I went home while my dad stayed to bring people to MSP International Airport the day after.

When my mom and I arrived home, and I was ready to call it a night. I was exhausted in every way. I went to close my curtains but looked out the window one last time before I went to bed. The stars were still shining brighter than I had ever seen, and a shooting star flashed quickly across the sky. My grandma is happy where she is, being the shining star she is.

“Figure,” Suvie Inthirath

Thinking back on that difficult time in my life, I realize family is and will always be the most important thing I will ever have. Both distant and close family will always be the people I can rely on most during times of trouble and despair. They are the ones who bring me comfort and joy in my times of need.

The Gift of Life
Erin Schablin

After having known for months and purposely avoiding my mother’s phone calls for three weeks, I finally got the courage and strength to tell her. I had to share with her that she was going to be a grandma, again. I knew this was going to be one of the hardest conversations of my life. I was so frightened, so scared. The suspense of her reception to the pregnancy consumed me. How would I break the news? How do I even start this conversation? Is she ever going to forgive me for such a huge mistake? What if she didn’t forgive me? What if she didn’t want anything to do with me afterwards?

I thought about her answering the phone and having to hear the disappointing news, and I just knew her heart was going to break into pieces. I knew her image of me, my innocence, would be shattered. I crushed all her expectations, her goals, her aspirations for me. It just devastated me to know I was going to be the cause of such a reaction. I was so embarrassed, humiliated; I had such feelings of guilt for my irresponsibility. You see, I was the youngest of three girls, and was taught better; plus, I had a twin brother who expected more out of me. I had always promised her I would wait until marriage to have sex, which is really what I thought I would do. I never thought I’d lose my virginity at 18 and then to get pregnant from my very first time! She always had such big plans for me. My two older sisters both had babies at a young age and weren’t married. She wanted a better life for me. So did I.
I had just graduated from high school and was ready to leave for college in Hawaii when I found out I was pregnant. In fact, John was never really my boyfriend until after we found out we were expecting. My family certainly didn’t know anything about our relationship. We both knew that after graduation we’d be going our separate ways, and that we would maybe one day see each other again in the future. Well, that was the plan; until the unplanned pregnancy became the new plan. I couldn’t help but wonder what my future really looked like with a baby on my hip. Was I even close to understanding what having a baby really entailed? I was so young. Could I really be a good mother? I liked to think I could be, but I wasn’t certain. What if John and I didn’t work out? Would I be capable of raising a child on my own? There were so many unanswered questions, so many ‘what-ifs.’

Not only was I worried about telling my mom, but I was so anxious about the rest of my family’s reactions. I knew it wasn’t going to be received well by anyone. My twin brother, Billy, had always been my big brother (though I’m technically older) and my protector. I was never allowed to date, because in his eyes, no one was worthy of my attention. He always stood up for me and tried everything in his power to save me from the unpleasantness of life. But this was something that he couldn’t save me from, something that he couldn’t change. There was no rescuing me.

On top of my nervousness to disclose the pregnancy to my family, I was scared to death of becoming a young mom. I hadn’t ever experienced such intense fear in my entire life like what I experienced at that time. Quite honestly, I never envisioned myself having children. It wasn’t because I didn’t enjoy children, because I did. It was more like it just didn’t fit into my desires to travel the world and live a spontaneous lifestyle like I had always dreamt of doing. I had no idea how I was going to do raise a child. Not only was it a life-long commitment, but the financial toll it would take was concerning as well. I only had a high school education and a job that barely paid the bills; it certainly wasn’t a job that would support having a baby.

Oh God, now I need to look for a better job as well. Or work two jobs. I was so worried about becoming another statistic. You know, the “having a baby at 18 increases your likelihood of living in poverty the rest of your life” statistic. Or, better yet, “children born to teenage mothers have a much higher chance of not receiving quality care, not meeting major milestones, or not receiving a quality education.” I knew the odds were against me. Yet, I was devoted to my unborn child. It was then that I decided I was going to be different. That no matter what, I was going to provide my baby with the very best: a loving family, food in his or her belly, a comforting and supporting home, and a great education. I knew already that this baby was a part of me; I could feel it. I knew that I loved this child with my whole being, and that no matter what, I would love it unconditionally.

"Consumed,” Erin Langendorfer

I knew I could do this even though I was terrified. I also knew that this news wasn’t going to be received well. But this is who my mom taught me to be. She taught me to take responsibility for my actions. To trust my heart and follow my instincts, that only I could oversee my own life. She taught me independence, resilience, and transparency, that when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. That whatever will be, will be. I knew this wasn’t her vision for her teachings; yet, it was my reality. I owed her this, the truth. Even though I knew it was going to be difficult, and devastating, to hear. Yet, I knew that everything she has ever taught me was coming into play, just not in the way she, or I, had ever imagined.

Okay. This was it. There was no turning back. It was time to call. My heart was racing. I thought it was going to explode. My mouth was dry. My nerves were shot. I was trembling and felt like the roof was caving in on me. I hadn’t slept well in the days leading up to the phone call. I was emotionally, physically, and mentally
exhausted. I dialed the first four digits. Hung up. Tried again. Made it to five. Hung up. I couldn’t do it. I literally couldn’t get myself to do it. John was by my side. I started bawling like a baby. My emotions were running high. He squeezed me and reminded me that there was no other option. Thank goodness John was with me because I knew there was no way I could do this alone. This had to be done, whether I liked it or not. I gave him the phone, and he started dialing. He then handed the phone back to me, and I nervously accepted and listened. I was hoping it would be busy, but there was no such luck. It was ringing. She was going to answer any second. I resisted every ounce of the urge to hang up. If I were going to be a mother and face major life changes, I could certainly do this, couldn’t I?

“Hello?” Her voice resonated throughout my entire body. I thought I was going to faint. “Hey, Mom, it’s me,” I responded in a shaky voice. “Erin! How are you, honey? I haven’t heard from you in weeks.” I could tell she was overtaken with happiness that I had called and checked in with her.

“Well, I’m. . . I’m late.” I couldn’t believe that was what came out of my mouth. Everything I had rehearsed in my head was suddenly gone. I had gone over this conversation a thousand times. I surely didn’t just say that, did I? Really? There it was that long awkward silence I had dreaded. I knew she knew what that meant.

“Are you shittin’ me, Erin? You’re pregnant?”

I started crying. I was overtaken with her disappointment in me. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. My whole body went into ‘fight or flight’ mode. Her tone verified everything I was so nervous about. That she was pissed. I didn’t say a thing. It felt like forever before she said anything.

Then, I heard, “You know you have options, right?” I couldn’t believe it. She didn’t believe in abortion. Yet, I now know that this was her way of letting me know that if I had decided that, she would have backed that decision. This was shocking.

I responded, “Yes, Mom, I know I have options. But, to me, there’s only one—and that’s to keep the baby.”

She started crying. I felt horrible. I hated to ever see, or hear, her cry.

“Well, if that’s your decision, I will support you. We all will, even your brother, I’ll be sure of it.”

I couldn’t believe it. I felt like I was in a different universe. Was this really my mom who just said that? “Thank you, mom, I appreciate that,” I muttered as more tears streamed down my face. I was so relieved. I felt lighter, like this huge cloud looming over me was gone, and I could breathe again.

“I love you, Erin. I always will,” she said with such certainty. “Now, you need to buy some prenatal vitamins and schedule an ultrasound. Let me know when your appointment is. I want to be there with you and John.”

This was it. I was granted her acceptance, support, and most importantly, her love. For that I will always be grateful. My son, her third grandson, was born that December. He will forever be the best thing that has ever happened to me; the best gift I’ve ever received – the gift of life!

Michael
Alandra Eisenmenger

I’m staring at the glass, still full to the brim. I haven’t even touched it. Instead, I am tapping my finger on the side of the glass, missing the sound it made when my ring was still there. I realize each tap is getting more aggressive, popping all the bubbles in the brown liquid, splashes reaching the top rim where my mouth should be. Sighing, I look at my two best friends. Monica is explaining something, her hands flailing all around like she
is swatting bugs out of her ears. Jess is just laughing away, her double chin bouncing up and down with every chuckle. I look back to my drink wondering why I even came here to begin with.

“Liz, you haven’t even touched your drink.” Monica takes her right hand and pushes my arm. “You can’t stay sad forever you know. That’s why we’re doing this!” Jess and Monica clink their glasses together, Jess’s spilling a little bit, and they down the drinks as fast as they can.

Monica has dark brown hair that she takes the time to curl every morning, especially for nights out like these. She tells me, “You never want a hair out of place. You always want to look your best.” Her long skinny fingers always pick at every loose strand and flatten it into place. It is so obvious when we’re sitting here. Jess, on the other hand, could not care less about her appearance. She wears her old t-shirts from college and the baggiest pants she can find. If she wants to take some time to do her hair, she’ll throw it into a sloppy ponytail, missing a strand or two every time.

I swivel my stool and excuse myself to the bathroom. I can hear Monica’s heels clicking and clapping against the hardwood floor. “Come on,” she begs, grabbing my hand before I can reach the door handle. “Just smile. Please?” I roll my eyes and let her lead me back to my spot. For my friends’ sake, I force a smile and laugh when appropriate. After what seems like hours, we finally go home for the night.

Back at my apartment, I take off my makeup with my favorite makeup wipes. They smell like lilacs; however, they always burn my eyes. Tonight, I am not only wiping off my makeup, but I am also catching every tear that spills down my face, threatening to make me look weak. I don’t want to cry a single tear over him. I refuse to let his absence take the best of me. But sometimes, just sometimes, the memories flood back, breaking the dam I built to stop them. The memories come spewing out of the cracks that desperately need patching.

It was a cool March evening when Michael told me we were going on a trip. “We’re going to Jamaica!” I leapt with pure excitement. I had never left the country. He was always good to me. He made me feel a way I had never felt before.

“That’s not all, my dear Elizabeth. No, I have the whole itinerary planned, and you’re not allowed to see it until you experience it.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently. “I promise this trip will be memorable.” I couldn’t help but shriek with excitement.
The weather was beautiful the whole time we were there. Sunny, warm, sometimes a light breeze, but most of all, I was there with him. He proposed on the second night. We were at an outdoor restaurant, and the sun was just setting over the ocean. He dropped his fork near my right foot, making a clinking sound. He got up quickly, hitting his knee on the table to cause a big scene. He also managed to step on my toes when he knelt, which made the whole situation funny. I laughed as he pulled the tiny box out of his pocket. Grabbing onto my knee to stabilize himself, I heard people gasp as he opened the box. Of course, I said yes, and of course, I jumped up and down with glee. The rest of the night was a blur.

I remember the smell of fried plantains and the quiet sound of music playing in the background, but I was so happy that all I could think about was the beautiful little stone on my finger and my smiling fiancé, treating me to our first vacation together.

“Victorian Romances,” Kymberly VanderZiel

I grab my special bottle of white wine from the shelf. I grab my biggest wine glass out of the cupboard and pour the drink almost to the top. I open the fridge to find a snack. “How can I have no food?” I grumble, staring at the condiments and a left-over cheesecake that’s starting to smell like rotten dairy. I should probably throw that out. I slam the fridge door with disgust, hearing the glass bottles hit each other, and make my way to the living room. My apartment is tiny and falling apart. I sit down on the couch and flip through the channels, settling on some reruns of the Bachelor. I don’t understand how people could watch these whiny girls every week. One moment the girls are getting along, and the next moment they are arguing about the guy or who did what. The bachelor probably just wants to be on this show so he can get with all the girls anyway. It makes me think about how everything can change so quickly.

Months after the wedding, things got strange. My husband was always working late at his full-time job in the town over. I was always home. I work from home all day, every day. I manage some famous influencer’s social media accounts, so I am always on phone calls and distracting myself with her needs rather than my own.

“It just seems like you never make time for me,” he had whined as he pushed the peas out of the pasta I made for dinner. “You’re always on calls with that YouTube girl when I am home, so working late is not a problem for me.” I rolled my eyes, sick of his whining and talking about my job.

“Well, you knew what you were signing up for when we said, ‘I do.’ And I do make time for you! You are the only person I have left, and I need you, just like you need me.” I sighed, taking another stab at the chicken. “I thought you liked peas.”

“Well, I do. It’s just that you’re not a very good cook, and you overcooked them.”

I excused myself from the table and went to bed early that night.

Later, I heard a knock on our bedroom door. “Hey, um, I am sorry for saying that about your cooking. I got called into work so I’m leaving.” I lifted my head from the pillow and walked to the door. I opened the door so I could barely see his face.
“But it’s Sunday,” I questioned, careful not to make a scene.

“Um, yeah. You’re right. But the boss wants to discuss some details about tomorrow’s meeting.” Michael pushed on the door. “Please let me in to say goodbye.”

I opened the door slowly and he came over to hug me. He stroked my hair softly, which would always calm me down. His hands were always cold, but his face was warm against my cheek.

“I love you, Liz,” he said. He walked out the door, making sure to close it, and I just stood there, longing for his touch once again.

The clock strikes two and I decide it is time to go to bed. I set the glass on the coffee table and lay across the couch. My feet barely reach the other end when I lay flat against my back. I doze off to the sound of some girl freaking out on another about how her relationship with the guy is more valuable than the others. I try not to remember, but I do.

I had called his boss, Tom, to make sure that they were actually meeting. I had such a strange feeling, and I needed my anxieties eased. Tom didn’t answer on the first or second try, so I gave up. Just as I was falling asleep, he called me back.

“Lizzy! Great to hear from you. How can I help?” Tom’s eager voice echoed through my head. Just by the way he sounded, I knew Michael was lying.

“Um, hi, Tom. By any chance, is Michael with you?” Tom let out some nervous laughter. I could hear the gurgle in his throat as the nervousness take over.

“Um, what makes you think he’d be with me?” Tom choked out, seeming to have calmed down a bit. I had forced a laugh.

I wake up to pounding at my apartment door and shake the memory off. I wrap myself in a blanket and head to the door. I look through the peephole and see no one standing outside. I look at the big wall clock, four-thirty in the morning. I open the door and drop the blanket in surprise. “Michael?”

“View,” Karina Amezcua