

Adventure

The Journey Within



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This issue of the *MMC Magazine* is dedicated to Sonja Olshove.

Sonja Olshove made it her adventure to share her passion for psychology with her students. She had an unbreakable spirit, a kind heart, and a warm compassion for everyone at Northwestern Michigan College. Sonja was a great professor and an even greater person. We will miss her dearly.



Table of Contents



Koree Bemiss

- Poster "Adventure Awaits" 15

Bryce Blick

- Photo "Sam" 48

Amanda Coddington

- "Inside Your Eyes" 78-80

Jeff Comerford

- "Paid in Full" 48-49

Lisa Cooper

- Photos 66, 69

Brittany DeFilippo

- Photos "Iceland" 38, 39

Rachel Eskelson

- Poster "The World Beard & Moustache Championships" 11
- Drawing (Dragon) 23
- Drawing "Healing Hands" 27

Nicholas Gerstner

- "In the End" 28-31

Rachel Harden

- "The Hunt" 16-24

Zack Harrington

- "Sisyphus Climbs Olympus" 32-37

Nichole Hartley

- Design "Forest Road" 2
- Photos 10, 31, 40-41, 75, 77

Evan Hatch

- Poster "The Model Adventurer" 54

Meagan Heator

- "Seydistjordur, Iceland" 38
- "Vik, Iceland" 39

Ann Hosler

- "Elemental Harbinger" 25
- "Adventurous Trio" 27

Rachel Howse

- "The Measure Of..." 12-13

Grace Kohler

- Design "Looking for Adventure" 5
- Drawing (Flower&Bee) 26

Zachary Kyro

- Poster "Adventure" 34

Alissia J.R. Lingaur

- "Milo Re-Incarnate" 43-64

Joshua Lugiewicz

- "Bowling Green, Kentucky" 8-9

Deanna Luton

- "Sweet Serpentine" 26

Rachel Lynn Moore

- "From the Open Road" 6-7

Aleah Nelsen

- Front Cover
- Design "Moon" 12
- Painting (Mountain) 47

Susan Odgers

- "Oh Indeed... The Places You'll Go" 3-5

Lyric Pawloski

- "No Boundaries" 50-51

Michelle Ravellette

- "Just Go" 7
- Photo & Quote 42

Caroline Schaefer-Hills

- Photos & "Notes From a Conference" 64-65

Emma Smith

- Back Cover

Alexis Steig

- "Clara" 76-77

Liam Strong

- "Driving Home" 40-41
- "Hell is What You Make It" 70-75

Matthew Suehr

- "Alone Abroad" 66-69

Nicholas Walsh

- Poster "Adventure" 14


John Robert Williams

- Quote 2



Choose Your Own Adventure

Rachel Harden, Zack Harrington, Ann Hosler, Liam Strong, Alissia J.R. Lingaur 52-63



*Go down a road you've never been down.
Go somewhere you've never been before.
Do something that scares you every day.*

-John Robert Williams

"Oh, Indeed... The Places You'll Go"

by Susan Odgers

For several years, I taught at the University of Nice, France. During one particular spring break, my 18-year-old bilingual assistant, Karen, and I decided to vacation on the nearby island of Corsica. We ferried four hours across the sea on a large ship, arriving at a quaint harbor adorned with beautiful statues of favorite son, Napoleon. Grabbing our bags, we traveled uphill a fair distance to our hotel.

At an outdoor cafe the first evening, I noticed a woman with three friends at a nearby table. The Mediterranean-looking woman was using a sports wheelchair. I smiled at her; she smiled back and then left before we did. Sipping our coffees, Karen and I discussed our plans for later that night. Neither of us had been to Corsica, and Karen wanted to linger at the casino while I hoped to interact with the locals. As we headed toward the casino, I spotted the familiar woman using the wheelchair far ahead of us.

I nudged Karen to approach her and ask a few questions regarding accessible places to visit. For years I'd been told by well-meaning relatives that old world and nature travel were off-limits to me. Instead, I'd learned that by doing research, remaining flexible, connecting with locals and asking for help, I could visit most of the planet.

Nonetheless, Karen refused, saying she didn't know the woman, spoke a different form of French, and that it would be imposing on the woman's privacy for Karen, a complete stranger, to speak to her. As was typical for us, we argued back and forth. Finally in frustration, I wheeled ahead and spoke to the woman, Karen tagging behind.

The woman, a local named Alizee, was friendly and receptive to all of my questions. She even invited Karen and I to her apartment the following day and to tour the island with her in her car. I was thrilled. The next day was the anniversary of my stroke, and I couldn't think of a better way to spend it than in a beautiful, exotic land with a "sista in the struggle".

After visiting the casino, Karen and I stayed up late talking. At one point, laughing in the dark from our beds, I thought Karen had said that I was a big personality. Instead, she was complimenting me on having a big personality. As irritating as I could be to her, she said she wished she was more like me.

The next day we met Alizee for lunch at her apartment. She introduced us to her boyfriend and friends and then took us in her car to see the sights. We figured she'd had an accident and her age to be about 38. Alizee drove her sedan with hand controls. I sat in the front seat and Karen was alone in the backseat. My wheelchair was in the trunk; Alizee's wheelchair was folded behind the driver's seat.

Corsica was breathtakingly beautiful: mountainous, massive red rock formations like our southwest, dark green-blue water, lush flowers and forests, beaches and hillside medieval villages.

After driving, talking, and laughing for several hours, Alizee suddenly stopped the car in the middle of a dusty deserted

**"Silently, I
berated myself for
being so trusting
of a complete
stranger"**

wilderness area and ordered Karen and I to get out. We were stunned.

Silently, I berated myself for being so trusting of a complete stranger, and ironically, underestimating a woman using a wheelchair. I quickly ran through the most probable scenarios: Alizee's friends were in the nearby woods and were going to rob and kill us; Alizee had had enough of us as tourists and was dumping our annoying asses in the wild to find our own way back, and/or this was Alizee's sick sense of humor and a practical joke.

Realizing Alizee was serious, Karen nervously got out of the car and pulled my wheelchair from the trunk. Putting it next to the passenger seat, I slid into it, grabbed our purses and slammed the door. Alizee sped off out of sight.

At the time, flip cell phones were more popular in Europe than the in USA. Crying, Karen started calling her family back in Nice. Before she could finish dialing, Alizee zoomed her car towards us. I told Karen to keep her phone open as Alizee brought her car closer.

"Get in," Alizee yelled.

Puzzled, Karen and I looked at each other and then at Alizee.

"Why did you dump us?" Karen asked in slang French. "Are you going to hurt us?"

Alizee started laughing, mumbling something about what's lost in translation.

"Hurt you?" she asked. "I needed privacy to quickly pee."

Travel Resources for People with Disabilities

• Accessible Journeys: disabilitytravel.com

"Accessible Journeys is a vacation planner and tour operator exclusively for wheelchair travelers, their families and friends. Since 1985, wheelchair accessible vacation travel has been our only job."

• Flying Wheels Travel: flyingwheelstravel.com

"The first and most experienced travel agency for people with physical disabilities, chronic illness or difficulty walking."

• The Guided Tour: guidedtour.com

"Since 1972, thousands of men and women with developmental challenges, autism, down syndrome, and other special needs have achieved greater independence through travel experiences provided by The Guided Tour, Inc."

• American Society of Travel Agents: asta.org

"ASTA is the leading global advocate for travel agents, the travel industry and the traveling public."

• Disaboom: vcelkaj.wixsite.com/disaboom

"Disaboom is a Disability Resource Website and is the premier online community dedicated to improving the way individuals with disabilities or functional limitations live their lives."

Before my husband, Tom, and I moved from metro-Detroit to northern Michigan, we decided to vacation on Isle Royale and South Manitou Island. We'd already done a fair amount of tent camping in Canada and Lower Michigan.

First, we headed to South Manitou Island by way of the ferry boat service out of Leland. When we arrived on the island, the National Park Service rangers shuttled us by Jeep to an area where we could wilderness camp. Over the course of a week we explored the island, picking wild leeks for spaghetti sauce, watching a massive

nighttime electric storm traverse the Manitou Passage, and hiking to ruins. Later I learned from the National Park Service that I was the first wheelchair camper on South Manitou Island.

For the Isle Royale trip, we flew on a seaplane from Houghton and returned via the National Park Service ferry. To get into the plane, I slid across the wing. Due to thick fog, the seaplane pilot lost contact with the tower and had to rely on his navigational skills. When we finally arrived at Rock Harbor, rangers showed us the trail to the Rock Harbor Lodge. The lodge served as our base to investigate the island.

"Due to thick fog, the seaplane pilot lost contact with the tower and had to rely on his navigational skills."

Since then, the field of adapted travel has grown immensely. Adventurers can pretty much pick a destination and find the information, equipment, and support to make it happen.





From the Open Road

by Rachel Lynn Moore

Dad,

I'm far from home. I graduated a month ago, and a couple days after that my boyfriend Jacob and I decided we needed to get out of Michigan for a while. His dad had a half-decent car he wasn't using, so we borrowed it and headed out. We went to Mount Rushmore first. I didn't like it much. Why ruin a beautiful mountain by carving some old men's faces into it? I don't think you would have liked it either.

We went to Yellowstone next. You've probably been there before. We camped out for a couple of nights and went hiking all over the place. I even saw a bear! We were standing up on a ridge and it was fishing in the river below us. Jacob wouldn't let me get a closer look, but it was one of the greatest things I've seen. Nothing has ever more perfectly belonged where they are, like that river and those woods are the exact place that fate intended for that bear to be. I miss Yellowstone already.

Last time Mom talked about you—I think sometime last winter—she said you were driving trucks in Alaska. I checked it out online and saw how beautiful it is. I'm trying to convince Jacob that we should visit but he says it's further away than I realize, and his dad's car has started making some funny noises when we drive fast.

Even if we don't go to Alaska, I'm still loving every second of this adventure. I never understood what kept you away and on the open road, but I do now. This morning I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon as the sun rose. I never felt so free in all of my life. It was like I could go anywhere and do anything that I wanted. Maybe that's just what traveling feels like.

Jacob says we should head home soon. I don't see why. Neither of us still have jobs. My classes at the community college don't start for months, and it will be easier for Jacob to find a job once the college workers on their summer breaks go back to school.

My only worry about going home is Mom. I didn't tell her about the trip before we left. I called her from South Dakota the second day and told her I'd be home before the summer was out. She calls a lot, but I only pick up sometimes. She asks me to come home because she doesn't understand this adventure like we do. I've been trying to get an address so I can send you things, but she says she doesn't have one anymore.

"This morning I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon as the sun rose. I never felt so free in all of my life."

Anyway, my stomach is growling and I think Jacob will be waking up any minute. I'll write again soon.

Sincerely, Laurie

Laurie flipped through the last few pages in her notebook before closing it. Every page was another unsent letter addressed to the father she'd never know. She set it aside and glanced up at the rearview mirror to watch Jacob sleeping in the backseat. His head hung off the seat, jaw open

wide with a thin line of drool swinging slowly from the corner of his mouth.

Laurie's stomach rumbled again. She pressed her hands hard against it. Jacob had taught her that if you push down on your stomach so its insides touch each other, you could trick it into thinking you've eaten. She wasn't sure this actually worked, but it was worth trying. The rain picked up, pounding on the car roof. Jacob stirred and raised his head. He wiped his mouth as he sat up and the half-finished crossword puzzle on his chest flopped to the floor.

"Hey," he muttered. He plucked his navy baseball cap from the pile of clothes he'd been using as a pillow and put it on. The orange embroidery on the front read "Dooley's Auto Repair" and the right side of the hat was covered in greasy streaked fingerprints. He crawled limb over gangly limb into the driver's seat, chuckling to himself. "What a shitty day to be homeless in Saginaw."

"We could leave Saginaw," Laurie suggested.

Jacob turned on her. "And go where? With what money?"

Laurie bit her lip and looked at her lap.

"Laurie, hey," Jacob set a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"It's Sunday," she said, still staring down.

"And?"

"The church over by Wal-Mart serves free lunch on Sundays."

"Alright," Jacob said, starting the car. "Let's go."

As they drove, Laurie watched raindrops splash on the windows and wondered what they saw as they fell from the sky. Her stomach growled and she pushed down on it harder.

JUST GO.



Michelle Ravellette

"Laurie watched raindrops splash on the windows and wondered what they saw as they fell from the sky."

Bowling Green, Kentucky

by Joshua Lugiewicz

To whom it may concern,

I believe today is September 22. I overheard someone talking about the first day of spring, but I could be wrong. I'm writing this from the bed of a highly illegal and extremely unsafe 1970-something Dodge truck. As grateful as I am for this strange, bearded, redheaded man's kindness in offering me a ride, I'm convinced he's trying to hit every bump between Louisville and Bowling Green. I apologize for the sloppy handwriting. He said he would've let me sit in the passenger seat, but he doesn't trust girls who look the way I do, "rich folks" as he calls them.

My journey so far has been difficult to describe. I'm attempting to rediscover the simple things in life, so I'm hitchhiking my way as far across the country as I can.

So far I've met plenty of kind and giving strangers. Many people willing to buy a meal for someone they've never met before. People who love unconditionally and ask for nothing in return. They're the kind of people who remind you that sometimes the world really isn't all bad. I've met some people I wish I hadn't, too. I try not to think about them.

I like to think about the good things that have happened so far. I've found a new level of respect for Chris McCandless. I've explored places I didn't know existed and learned a lot, too. Did you know West Virginia was where Mother's Day started? Well, you do now.

The highlight so far has been the best friend I made. He was handsome and sweet and we fell in love on sight. He stayed by my side as long as he could, but I know I found him a better place. He was a homeless coonhound I called Buddy. I wanted him to stay with me until the end of my journey, but his needs were greater than the help I could offer. I was forced to leave him at one of the shelters we passed. I miss him more than you could know.

Buddy was disgusting. He was dirty, he did nothing but drool and probably gave me fleas, but he made me appreciate the deep connections in life. I feel like mine has been full of relationships existing on a surface level. As I'm discovering, true love might only be possible between strangers. They care about you, the person. I think that's some of what I needed, what made this journey fulfilling.

The thing I needed most, though, was the thing that continues to grow: space. Space to think and get in touch with new people and places. They say blood is thicker than water. That may be true, but these last couple days, I feel like I've lived without both — without a lot of things.

"As I'm discovering, true love might only be possible between strangers."

I spend a lot of time riding in cars. I read a lot, too: newspapers, pamphlets, flyers, anything I can get my hands on. I would read in the car but it makes me too sick (writing, not so much). The rest of my free time I spend talking to locals. I want to learn as much as I can firsthand. There's only so much a textbook can teach you.

You haven't seen them, but I've been sketching pictures of those who made the biggest impact on me during my travels. So far, I have about a half dozen drawings of people, all different races and sexes and backgrounds. Some of the wisest people I've met have been curled up at a bus stop or sweating into the back of a garbage truck.

I'm in great condition. Physically, I feel great. To be honest, I was getting a little sick of wheatgrass and kale. I haven't checked, but I imagine I've gained a couple of pounds living off cheesesteaks, burgers, and cheap barbecue. My diet continues to change, so I guess we'll see what it looks like as I travel farther west.

"Some of the wisest people I've met have been curled up at a bus stop or sweating into the back of a garbage truck."

Money is hard to come by, but I make it work. I earn minimal amounts at a time, much of it charity. I've been working difficult, odd jobs in every town since Massachusetts. Some of them have been pleasant. Some are things that make you want to take a shower and take a long nap.

I think the gingerbeard man is preparing to kick me out, so I'll wrap this up. I don't know who you are or if you read every crumpled piece of paper you find, but thanks for taking the time to learn my story. If you want to check in on me, you can find my next letter somewhere in Nashville. I'll hide it in a book in the first coffee shop I see. Maybe I'll even leave one of my sketches.

Much love,
Amanda





THE WORLD
BEARD &
Moustache
CHAMPIONSHIPS

LABOR DAY WEEKEND , 2017

AUSTIN, TEXAS

The Measure Of...

by Rachel Howse

Aleah Nelson



One day man will fly. One day man will walk upon the moon. "One day" is any day that people strive to meet and exceed their goals. These intentions are not bulletproof. Behind every

aspiration there's an inkling of doubt, a seed that's unsure of its future in the open air.

American scholar William Lyon Phelps claimed that beliefs are the stairway to accomplishing "virtually anything." In contrast, Bertrand Russell, a renowned philosopher, declared that all opinions and beliefs have "some measure of doubt." The reality of the situation is that there are both. With every thought that originates in your cerebrum, there is certainty and doubt. Doubt is a constant, but the desire to create, succeed, and establish new things is infinite. Their true relationship is of knowledge, of understanding, of comprehension. It is accepting a goal or a challenge, and then overcoming the obstacles of doubt and fear. This phenomenon has happened time and time again, a legacy that's been proven to recur repeatedly. It's human nature; it's unchangeable, but not unendurable.

"Armstrong saw with certainty the goal he wished to attain, and he was going to reach the moon."

To elucidate, certainty is never an absolute; there is always a "measure of doubt", but this uncertainty does not have to disable men from rising up. For example, Neil Armstrong during the Vietnam War. Americans wallowed in insecurity, fear, and hopelessness.

What was different for Armstrong? Nothing. Armstrong was an American, a man. A man determined to see the moon. Armstrong strived for this goal,

but even with this strong assertion he still held doubt and darkness in the recesses of his heart. Doubt was a part of the entire mission: a rocket explosion, suffocation, or spending eternity drifting through timeless space. Armstrong knew doubt like the back of his hand, but as Veronica Roth claimed in her renowned book *Divergent*, "becoming fearless isn't the point. That's impossible. It's learning how to control your fear, and how to be free from it, that's the point." Armstrong saw with certainty the goal he wished to attain, and he was going to reach the moon. Not with the absence of doubt and fear but with the acceptance of it, and the endurance and strength to

surpass it.

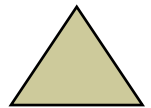
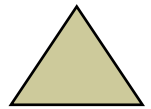
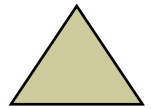
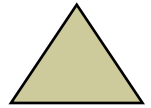
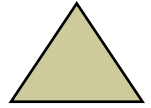
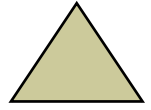
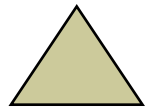
Furthering this concept, consider the abundance of doubt in America's Revolution. The American colonists for the British regime were of miniscule size and insecure in strength. They suffered adversity on every bend. In 1776, Americans denounced British rule and declared war so they could obtain freedom from tyranny. They arose despite their own insubstantiality. They arose despite adversity. They stood from humble beginnings to men and women of stentorian actions, and became people that believed in the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as they wrote in the American Constitution.

Americans craved freedom so exuberantly they declared, "Give me liberty or give me death." The famous American manifesto displayed the very nature of surety and doubt. The statement rings of the need for freedom, all the while revealing the underlying fear of death in the dangerous situation. The declaration pronounced both emotions, but gave the clear assertion that liberty comes first, even if their worst fear—death—becomes inevitable. This is the American way. To see our dreams and pursue them among the precarious events in life. To become emboldened and strengthened by lighting up with confidence, standing ablaze to the world.

The relationship between certainty and doubt is one of hope, desire, and determination to seek higher things. In truth, the correlation between the two is merely in the strength and will that one must have to pursue certain beliefs in the presence of the never-ending smog of doubt. The ability to stand on two legs and "never say die." To be like those we believe in most. Seeing our heroes and not just admiring them, but striving to be them and more. Taking impactful stories, people, or events, and making them part of who we are.

Adversities, challenges, and fears are what make the adventure of life gratifying. Therefore, bear up arms of courage and strength. Flex the muscles of faith and confidence. Become ablaze with knowledge and surety. Then strive to not live with doubt, but rather to conquer it.

"This is the American way. To see our dreams and pursue them among the precarious events in life. "



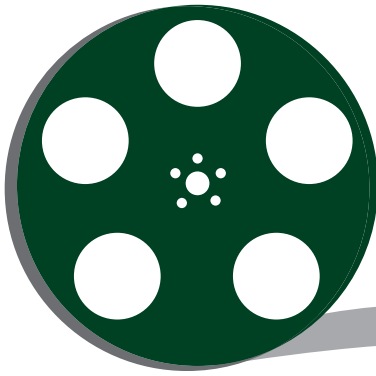
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04	16.9	70	51.2	35.8		28	28.7	335	3
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06	21.8	50	4	38.8		28.6	40.6	255	
07	24.3	50	0	40.3		28.6	40.5	291	
08	26.8	49.6		41.7		28.5	40.4		
09	29.3	9.2	N 9	43.2	N14	28.5	40.4		
10	31.7	310	48.8	44.7		28.5	40.3		
11	34.2	325	48.4	46.2		28.4	40.2		
12	36.6	340	48.0	47.7		28.4	40.2		
13				49.2		28.4	40.1		
14				50.6		28.3	40.0		
15				52.1	N14 26.2	162	35.8	S21	28.3
16				53.6		177	38.6		
17				55.1	25.4	192	41.7		

Nicholas Walsh

18	53.9	85	45.1	47.9		24	28.2	119	
19	56.3	100	44.7	49.0		24.2	28.1	134	
20	58.8	115	44.3	50.1		23.8	28.1	149	
21	61.3	130	43.9	51.2		23.3	28.1	164	
22	63.8	145	43.5	52.3		22.9	28.0	179	
23	66.3	160	43.1	53.4		22.5	298	195	
24	68.8	175	42.7	54.5		22.1	313	210	
25	71.3	190	42.3	55.6		21.7	328	225	
26	73.8	205	41.9	56.7		21.3	343	240	
27	76.3	220	41.5	57.8		20.9	358	255	
28	78.8	235	41.1	58.9		20.5	373	270	
29	81.3	250	40.7	60.0		20.1	388	285	
30	83.8	265	40.3	61.1		19.7	403	300	
31	86.3	280	39.9	62.2		19.3	418	315	
32	88.8	295	39.5	63.3		18.9	433	330	
33	91.3	310	39.1	64.4		18.5	448	345	
34	93.8	325	38.7	65.5		18.1	463	360	
35	96.3	340	38.3	66.6		17.7	478	375	
36	98.8	355	37.9	67.7		17.3	493	390	
37	101.3	370	37.5	68.8		16.9	508	405	
38	103.8	385	37.1	69.9		16.5	523	420	
39	106.3	400	36.7	71.0		16.1	538	435	

40	108.8	415	36.3	72.1		15.7	553	450	
41	111.3	430	35.9	73.2		15.3	568	465	
42	113.8	445	35.5	74.3		14.9	583	480	
43	116.3	460	35.1	75.4		14.5	598	495	
44	118.8	475	34.7	76.5		14.1	613	510	
45	121.3	490	34.3	77.6		13.7	628	525	
46	123.8	505	33.9	78.7		13.3	643	540	
47	126.3	520	33.5	79.8		12.9	658	555	
48	128.8	535	33.1	80.9		12.5	673	570	
49	131.3	550	32.7	82.0		12.1	688	585	
50	133.8	565	32.3	83.1		11.7	703	600	
51	136.3	580	31.9	84.2		11.3	718	615	
52	138.8	595	31.5	85.3		10.9	733	630	
53	141.3	610	31.1	86.4		10.5	748	645	
54	143.8	625	30.7	87.5		10.1	763	660	
55	146.3	640	30.3	88.6		9.7	778	675	
56	148.8	655	29.9	89.7		9.3	793	690	
57	151.3	670	29.5	90.8		8.9	808	705	
58	153.8	685	29.1	91.9		8.5	823	720	
59	156.3	700	28.7	93.0		8.1	838	735	

60	158.8	715	28.3	94.1		7.7	853	750	
61	161.3	730	27.9	95.2		7.3	868	765	
62	163.8	745	27.5	96.3		6.9	883	780	
63	166.3	760	27.1	97.4		6.5	898	795	
64	168.8	775	26.7	98.5		6.1	913	810	
65	171.3	790	26.3	99.6		5.7	928	825	
66	173.8	805	25.9	100.7		5.3	943	840	
67	176.3	820	25.5	101.8		4.9	958	855	
68	178.8	835	25.1	102.9		4.5	973	870	
69	181.3	850	24.7	104.0		4.1	988	885	
70	183.8	865	24.3	105.1		3.7	1003	900	
71	186.3	880	23.9	106.2		3.3	1018	915	
72	188.8	895	23.5	107.3		2.9	1033	930	
73	191.3	910	23.1	108.4		2.5	1048	945	
74	193.8	925	22.7	109.5		2.1	1063	960	
75	196.3	940	22.3	110.6		1.7	1078	975	
76	198.8	955	21.9	111.7		1.3	1093	990	
77	201.3	970	21.5	112.8		0.9	1108	1005	
78	203.8	985	21.1	113.9		0.5	1123	1020	
79	206.3	1000	20.7	115.0		0.1	1138	1035	
80	208.8	1015	20.3	116.1			1153	1050	



Koree Bemiss



The Hunt

by Rachel Harden

Jenny drew the last line down the soft paper of her sketchbook slowly and deliberately. It had to be perfect. She bit her tongue as she shaded, then paused to look at her sketch. The dragon was almost an exact likeness to the one she'd read about in *The Dragon Master's Guide*. She'd kept track of every description and spared no detail. According to her book, dragons had razor sharp claws, giant teeth for tearing human flesh, and a desire to kill or destroy. Many additional details were written in her notebook, but these were the qualities that truly defined her enemy.

She kept these records with hopes that she might hunt the monsters and kill them. There

"According to her book, dragons had razor sharp claws, giant teeth for tearing human flesh, and a desire to kill or destroy."

had never been a good encounter with dragons in her stories. They ruined everything, whether by burning villages or killing her favorite characters. They must be stopped.

A gentle knock disrupted her thoughts and her mother pushed open the door. "It's almost time for dinner, Jenny."

"Alright, I'll be there in a minute," Jenny replied, still continuing to draw.

Jenny's mother glanced at the drawings and books sprawled all over the bed. Jenny sat in the center, leaning against the wall with a heavy sketchbook in her hands. "Jenny, didn't we talk about this? You know how I feel about you drawing all of these dragons."

"It's weird behavior for a girl my age," Jenny recited with a roll of her eyes.

"I never called you weird," her mother corrected. "It's just...you're almost in middle school now, and I'm worried about you being teased by your classmates."

"Then they can get eaten by dragons," Jenny quipped.

Her mother sighed. "I want you to make friends, Jenny. This kind of thing might get in the way of that," she said. "You know, Karen's mother called," she added.

"So?"

"So," she persisted pushing enough papers out of the way to plop down on the bed, "she was thinking the two of you could hang out again. What do you think?"

"I think Karen's strange."

"That's not very nice. You should give her a chance. Her mother and I think it would be great for the two of you to hang out."

"Karen doesn't even like me. She teases me with her other friends."

"I'm sure she's just playing."

"Her friends call me 'dragon tamer' and try to trip me."

"Dragon tamer?" her mother said. Tenderness laced her words as she continued. "Jenny, you need to give people more of a chance. You can't spend your life hoping all your enemies will get eaten by dragons, because it won't happen."

"How do you know?" Jenny shot back.

"Because dragons aren't real."

"Of course they are! They're just really good at hiding."

"I'm tired of having this conversation, Jennifer. I want to encourage your imagination, but you need to realize that's all it is." She moved to the door and held it open. "Now, let's scoot. It's time for dinner." Her mother left the room as Jenny set her sketchbook on the pillow.

Jenny gathered the papers and books her mother had hastily pushed aside. One of the drawings had torn. It felt as if her mother didn't care about her. She sometimes acted just as rude as the kids she forced Jenny to hang out with. Why couldn't she understand the importance of Jenny's studies?

Jenny carefully placed the pile onto her desk and closed the door. As she reached the end of the hall she overheard her parents talking.

"Don't worry honey, it's just a phase she's going through."

"I know, but I'm worried she'll never grow out of this. Other kids don't act like this. They're normal, and she's just so...different."

Jenny glared, hurt by her mother's words. Why had she been putting off her dragon hunt? Clearly there was no reason to stay. She'd set out after dinner.



Jenny tied the laces of her sneakers and shifted the backpack on her shoulders. She'd eaten a second helping of spaghetti at dinner, knowing she'd need energy for the trip ahead. As she snuck into the kitchen, she spied her mother starting on dishes. From the safety of the refrigerator's side she waited for an opening to sneak past. Rushing unseen to the screen door, Jenny shut it quietly and snuck down the porch stairs leading to the backyard.

The wind rustled through the trees as she made her way across the lawn. She pulled the shed door open, cobwebs brushing against her skin as she reached for the lightswitch on the wall. Light illuminated the various tools in the shed, allowing her to search through the rusted red hardware box on the floor for garden tools. Pushing aside handfuls of nails, her eyes sighted a flashlight and some twine, which she grabbed and stuffed in her unzipped backpack. As she left the shed, she discovered a wooden hoe.

"Perfect," she said with a grin.

Aware of its heavy head, she gripped the hoe in both hands. She was finally hunting for dragons. She held out the note she had written to

her family and skimmed it:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am going to hunt for dragons. I don't know if I'll find one or not, but I need to try. They're evil and they hurt people. Their tyranny must be stopped.

-Jenny

She considered going back inside to set it on the counter, but she was anxious to start her journey. Her mother didn't believe in dragons anyway. She crumpled up the letter and threw it in her backpack. They'd hear songs of her brave deed later on.



Jenny stood on a hill overlooking the forest. The last light of day glimmered on the color-changing leaves. She'd have to hurry to find a dragon before it became too dark. Through these trees lay the most likely spot for a dragon to roam. There were green bushes everywhere, and the spaces between the trees were dark and foreboding. She shifted her hoe and moved towards the bushes, knowing she had a long trip ahead.

Jenny pushed some of the large leaves aside, and branches threatened to snap in her face. She kicked leaves as they crunched under her sneakers. Trees surrounded her completely, closing her in. Some of the neighbor kids talked about hidden caves in the forest and she knew dragons lived in them, but she didn't expect to find any caves out here. Too many classmates had teased her about dragon hunts for her to believe them. Instead she followed a river, knowing it would lead her back home after dispatching her enemy.

The river flowed swiftly across moss-covered rocks and dirt-caked tree roots. Burnt orange leaves floated onto the surface to be carried downstream. Though she veered away from the mud on the banks of the water, Jenny's shoes still became soggy. She'd crossed it multiple times, jumping onto the tops of aged rocks wherever they lay. She hopped over a thinner part of the flowing currents and turned around to skip back over it. Jenny felt as if she'd been walking along the river forever. Maybe she'd be lucky and catch a dragon as it drank. Then she could surprise the beast and attack it with her hoe. Jenny swung at tall reeds as she imagined battling with the dragon.

A cracking noise broke the stillness and nearby birds flew off. The sound rang all around her. She searched for its origin and caught the bushes behind her rustling. Sneaking around the side, she noticed something silvery ice-blue. Was it a log?

Jenny stepped toward the foreign object. Her curiosity piqued, she prodded it lightly with the end of her hoe. Suddenly the log spun. Giant sharp-clawed feet filled her vision and she easily discerned what they belonged to as she slowly turned her head upward. A face the same color as the "log" peered down at her from above the middle branches of the towering trees. It stood as tall as a house. Wide shimmering scales clothed its entire body and long ash-colored devil horns emerged from the back of its head.

"Wide shimmering scales clothed its entire body and long ash-colored devil horns emerged from the back of its head."

Jenny's eyes widened, and she felt as if her breath had left her. "A dragon!"

The beast examined Jenny with two green, cat-like eyes and flared its nostrils. "Oh, it's a child," the dragon remarked curtly. It turned to leave, snapping twigs under its clawed feet.

Stricken with fear, at first Jenny made no movement toward the dragon, but then remembered what she'd come to do. "Stop!" she commanded, shakily holding her weapon in front of her.

"I've no time for games, human child. Run along. Your parents must be looking for you."

Jenny was surprised by the dragon's voice. It sounded husky and womanly. She hadn't expected a dragon to be able to speak at all. "I've been looking for you, dragon," Jenny growled.

"You have? I don't remember expecting any company, let alone that of a human."

"I never told you I was coming."

"And what did you expect to do once you found me?"

Jenny sat her backpack down and pulled out a book. She turned to a dog-eared page and held it up for the dragon to see. She smacked a pointed finger on the page. "I've seen all the things you do to humans."

The picture depicted a dragon breathing fire at a village. The homes were burned, people ran away, and the dragon grasped a screaming man in its claws.

The dragon raised a scaly brow. "So you thought you'd hunt me down and kill me?"

"Yes." The little girl moved her right foot back and lifted her weapon in front of her.

Jenny heard movement in the dragon's belly and tightened her grip, expecting a flood of fire to pour from the beast's mouth. Then she realized the dragon was chuckling in amusement. Her face flushed with anger. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because you're funny, human child."

"My name's not 'human child', it's Jenny," she huffed, still filled with rage.

The dragon continued to laugh. "Follow me," she said, wiping away tears of laughter with the back of its sharp claw.

"Why?"

"Well, you want to slay me, don't you? If you were to challenge me out here, you'd have no chance. Let me make it easier on you."

"Make it easier?" Jenny felt shocked, but regained her anger as she realized the dragon was mocking her.



Once they reached the cave entrance, the dragon started to head in.

"Wait!" Jenny shouted. The dragon turned to look at her curiously. "How do I know there aren't any other dragons in there?"

"You don't."

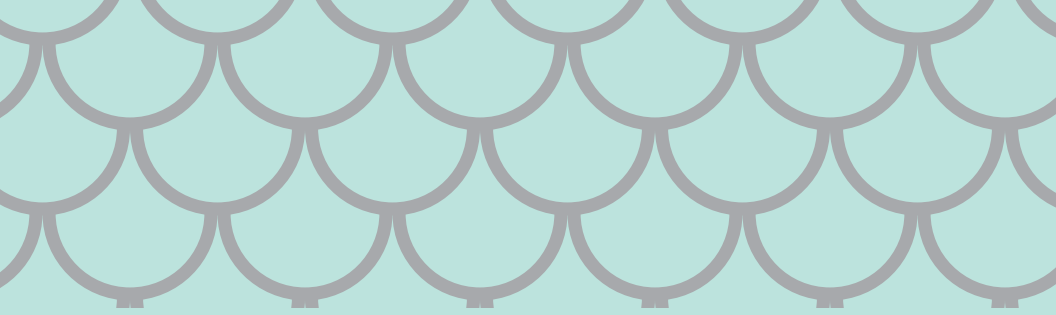
"I can't trust you. I'm not going in."

The dragon turned away and went inside. "Suit yourself"

Jenny looked around uneasily as she entered the cave. This wasn't how her plan was supposed to go.

A massive crack in the ceiling revealed the moon's brilliant light filling the cavern where the dragon began to settle. The cave was far taller than it looked from outside, but not very spacious. The dragon lay on the floor, resting her head on her claws. Jenny wandered within

"A massive crack in the ceiling revealed the moon's brilliant light filling the cavern where the dragon began to settle."



the dragon's sight.

The dragon opened one eye. "Aren't you going to kill me? I'm much more vulnerable in here than I am outside."

Jenny said nothing. She stood openmouthed, unsure of what to do. She raised her hoe to attack, but before she even moved toward the dragon she lowered her weapon.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't get it. You're supposed to be evil."

"Have you ever thought that's just how your kind paints us?"

"But I thought—"

"Whatever you thought was wrong. That's one of the weaknesses of your kind: they're hardly ever right."

Jenny considered this. "So you're not going to hurt me?"

"No, but if you insist on attacking me, I might reconsider," the dragon said with narrowed green eyes.

"I thought you ate humans," Jenny said.

The dragon seemed offended at the suggestion. "I don't. There might be some creatures living around here that do, but I think they taste repulsive."

"What do you eat then?"

"Mostly goats stupid enough to wander near my cave. I snatch them up and roast them." She motioned grabbing a goat with her claws. "Have you ever had goat kebabs?"

"Eww. No."

"You're missing out," the dragon said with a knowing smile.

"You should try human food," Jenny suggested. "Wait one second." She crouched and sat her backpack in front of her. The dragon eyed her suspiciously as she searched through her bag. Finally, she pulled something out. "Here, you want some? It's a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I packed it in case I got hungry, but you can have half." She split it and held half out to the curious dragon, who moved towards her, sniffed, and ate the gooey, crustless food.

"It's a little sweet, but not all that bad."

"I'm glad you like it..." Jenny paused, unsure of what to call the dragon. "What's your name? Dragons do have names, don't they?"

The dragon gave her a sly grin. "They do. I'm called many things, but my name is Galmeya."

"Galmeya," Jenny said.

"Yes?" Galmeya asked.

"Oh! I was just testing it out. You have a pretty name."

Galmeya smiled. "I'm glad you think so." She watched as Jenny ate her half of the sandwich and looked to the bag beside her. Galmeya raised her scaled brow once more. "You couldn't

have expected to challenge me with a simple garden tool. What else lies in your sack?"

Jenny swallowed the last of her sandwich. "I'll show you." She dumped out the contents of her bag for the dragon to see. It spilled in different directions.

Galmeya looked around. "What's that green substance?"

"Aloe. My mom always puts it on me when I get burned, so I thought it might help in case you burned me."

Galmeya gave a grim smile. "I don't believe aloe would have aided you if I'd burned you." She stepped forward, and something crinkled under her clawed foot. "What's this?" she asked, lifting her claws off a crumpled wad of paper. Jenny reached for it.

"Oh." Jenny flattened it against the cavern floor. "It's the letter I wrote to my family before I left."

"Why isn't it with them?"

"I didn't leave it behind."

"Why not?"

"My mom would've gone searching for me and told me how stupid I was. She tells me dragons don't exist."

"She doesn't believe in dragons?"

"No. And she doesn't think I should either. She says I'm too old to still believe in them."

"Did you come here to prove her wrong?"

"No, of course not. I came here to stop the evil doings of dragons. That was my goal," she said. "But maybe...when I defeated one I might've taken a fang back to show her," she added hesitantly.

Galmeya sighed. "I don't like to meddle in the affairs of humans, but I don't think it matters if she believes you or not. Personally, I don't care if she believes in dragons. It does tend to cause a lot less trouble when your kind doesn't." She smiled at Jenny. "But that doesn't mean you should point it out or disrespect her for being wrong. She's only human and all humans have faults."

Jenny glowered at being called faulty, but continued to listen.

"You're also in the wrong, Jenny. You may have been correct that dragons exist, but you came here by yourself with almost no plan. You don't know how much danger you could've put yourself in, and how much your family is probably worrying right now."

Jenny felt guilty. She looked at the cold floor and felt her face warm in embarrassment. Galmeya was right; she'd been too hasty in her decisions.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Jenny?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

"Good, now let's get you out of here. We have a long walk ahead of us."

Jenny threw the items she dumped on the floor back into her backpack. As she leaned forward and to grasp her flashlight, a loud boom shook the ground and she fell against the cavern floor. The ground rumbled again when she pulled herself up. "Is it an earthquake?" Jenny rubbed her jaw as she peered over at Galmeya.

Galmeya hadn't fallen over from the movements, but she looked shaken. "No," she whispered. "We need to leave now."

"How am I supposed to walk when I can't even stand up?"

"Lower your voice. Walking isn't an option now. If we're lucky, we'll be able to fly away from here."

"What's going on?"

"There isn't time to explain. Follow me and stay close."

Jenny picked up her hoe and held onto the ridged back of Galmeya's foreleg. The light of the full moon caught Jenny's face as the two snuck from the cave. As they moved, stepping lightly on their feet, a trumpet-like noise echoed in the distance. Galmeya's ears twitched.

"It sounds sort of like music," Jenny said, leaning forward to hear better.

"Jenny, you need to climb onto my back." Galmeya bent forward so the girl could clamber up the side of her leg. It was no easy feat; the edges of the dragon's thin scales were very sharp.

"Oww!" Jenny cried. She'd cut herself on the first scale she'd closed her hand around. She sucked blood from her palm. Another trumpet noise sounded. This time it was closer.

"It's looking for us," Jenny whispered.

"Hurry!" Galmeya demanded.

Jenny tried kicking her leg over Galmeya's massive body and managed to grip the toe of her sneaker against the scales of the dragon's back. She'd just gotten her foot over the other side when she felt the ground rushing under her. The trumpet noise blasted in their direction. The hidden creature bounded towards them, bringing with it a song of murder. Its notes were coarse and sharp. Jenny covered her ears at the horrible sound.

"What is that?" she shouted, no longer concerned about keeping quiet. Galmeya kept running and didn't reply.

The noises grew louder and new sounds emerged from the creature: the thudding of paws against forest floor that pushed it closer, and a hissing, like air slowly being released from a balloon. Moonlight filled Jenny's face as they reached a clearing. Galmeya bounded toward it and jumped over a dead log. The creature's claws scratched the log as it pounced at Jenny with a trumpet-like bark. She turned to face the creature. Lion paws reached for her on either side and she saw a face like a man's with three rows of shining, pointed teeth stretching all along where cheeks should be. She screamed, horrified, and kicked desperately to get away. She landed a blow to the beast's face, but it remained unharmed and hissed louder while opening its jaws. It grasped for Galmeya's sides, but her scales were too hard and slippery for it to grip.

"Hold on!" Galmeya commanded. She thrust forward, knocking the beast from reach of Jenny.

Jenny scooped as close as she could, almost pressing her whole body against Galmeya's neck. The creature barked its trumpet noise and swept its claws at her, but they scraped against Galmeya's scales instead. Jenny closed her eyes.

Galmeya dashed forward a final time and kicked off into the air. The creature lunged with its claws extended, swiping at Jenny, but it only met with air and fell to the ground. Jenny laughed in delight as she realized she wasn't about to become that monster's dinner. She held out an arm to keep the branches from smacking her face as they rose above the treetops.

Once they emerged, Jenny watched the creature's eyes follow her. Even from

"The hidden creature bounded towards them, bringing with it a song of murder."

their height, she saw the creature's unblinking stare. It made no noise and turned back into the woods. Jenny hoped its next target would be as lucky as her.

She turned toward the sky and could almost feel the clouds against her face. Wind rushed against the sides of her legs and caught the bottom of her sweatshirt, making it blow like a cape. Her hair whipped behind her. The moon illuminated the shapes of the trees and the full length of the dragon. Night air pressed against her and she shivered violently as they flew swiftly above the treetops. An owl swooped below, diving for unseen prey. She saw a barn with horses standing outside sleeping in the cool breeze. All of the sights were remarkable. She had never experienced anything like this before.

"She turned toward the sky and could almost feel the clouds against her face."

"How are you enjoying the view?" Galmeya inquired.

"It's unbelievable," Jenny said breathlessly. "I feel like I'm on top of the world."

Galmeya chuckled. "The whole world is sleeping."

"Not all of it," she said darkly, peering toward the clearing where she had last seen the creature.

"You're safe now, Jenny. He won't hurt you--not as long as you're with me."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. No creature alive can pierce my scales."

"What was it?"

"An evil beast that eats the flesh of humans. They're too weak to take on dragons and that's the only reason you weren't devoured whole."

"Why'd it attack you?"

"It was desperate to eat you. Not many humans wander these forests anymore. It had probably been searching for food for a while."



Rachel Eskelson

"If you hadn't found me, I would've been dead," Jenny realized.

"It's dangerous for humans to be out here," Galmeya scolded fiercely.

"There's other creatures like that one and it's a wonder you ran into me rather than some horrible fate." She quickly glanced at Jenny. "For now, I'm going to take you home."

"How will you know where to find my house?" Jenny said.

Galmeya smiled cunningly. "We dragons know much more than we let on."

"You said there's other creatures. What sort are you referring to?"

"I'd tell you, but I'm sure that'd only make you come back and explore sooner."

"Are there other dragons?" Jenny asked excitedly.

"Yes, but not around here. I'm one of the last in these woods, but I still wouldn't go searching for them if I were you," Galmeya warned. She drifted toward the earth. "I'll take you to the entrance of the woods. I don't want to be seen."

Jenny braced herself for impact with the treetops. They were heading back into the forest. Leaves brushed past her cheek. Galmeya found a new clearing near the entrance and galloped forward as they touched ground. She crouched once she landed, allowing Jenny to slide off her shoulder.

"I suppose this is goodbye," Jenny said, facing Galmeya. "Will I ever see you again?"

Galmeya began walking further into the forest. She turned. "Perhaps you'll see me sooner than you think, child."

Jenny grinned as she watched her friend stride a few more paces before gaining speed to fly above the treetops. Jenny ran to the shed so she could see better. In the moon's light, Galmeya's full form shimmered. Even from a distance, she looked enormous. Her tail flicked from side to side and her body bobbed as her wings kept her afloat. They beat against the night air, producing a gentle, steady rhythm. Jenny felt awed as she watched her. The night chill nipped Jenny and she rubbed her arms to keep warm. She gave one final look to the sky and waved to her distant friend before walking through the dew stained grass.

Elemental Harbinger

by Ann Hosler



Sweet Serpentine

by Deanna Luton

hatred hissing across my skin,
forked tongue tasting the salt
slowly evaporating within.
syrup sticky venom like honey—

bees buzz from petal to petal,
collecting pollen to craft sweet nectar.
honeycomb habits, stinging nettle
pricking my porcelain fingertips.

snake slithering across my wrist,
sensation quickening my pulse.
fear inside growing like a cyst,
so seduced by smooth scales.

wandering the seas, the agony
adventure sometimes can inflict—
when your homeland is at apogee.
falling victim to the songs of sirens.

many men have lost their mind
searching endlessly, getting lost
along the way, trying to find
treasure sunken beneath the waves



Adventurous Trio

by Ann Hosler

Cursed

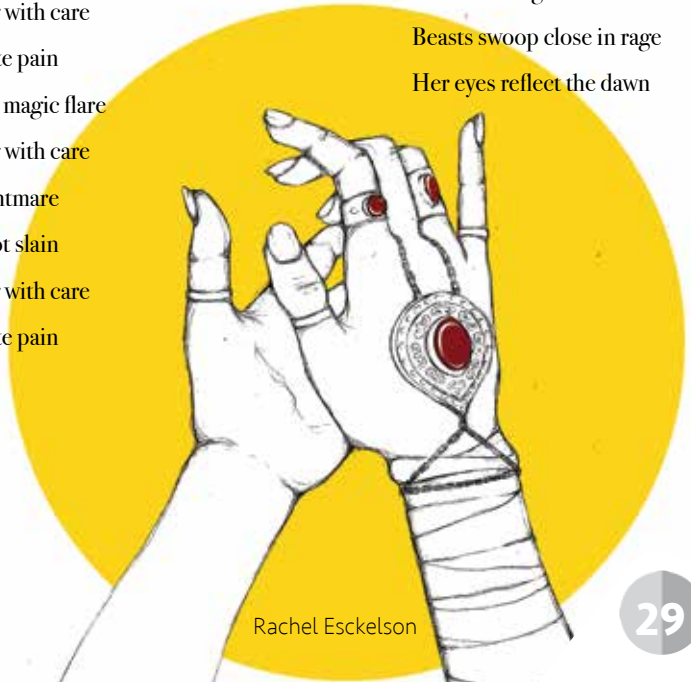
The dragon pierced by his blade
A roar of anger shook the cave
Shafts of light ravage the shade
The dragon pierced by his blade
Soul trapping our hero could not evade
Cursed he joined the hapless brave
The dragon pierced by his blade
A roar of anger shook the cave

Weaver

Fingers glowing with care
Healing exquisite pain
Ancient earthen magic flare
Fingers glowing with care
The battle a nightmare
Allies injured not slain
Fingers glowing with care
Healing exquisite pain

Immolation

Beasts swoop close in rage
Her eyes reflect the dawn
A sacrifice to save this age
Beasts swoop close in rage
She aims the staff to engage
War with magic not brawn
Beasts swoop close in rage
Her eyes reflect the dawn



Rachel Eskelson

In the End

by Nicholas Gerstner

November 17, 1974

My young friend,

I recently re-read Hesse at your direction, specifically a collection of his essays, which contain an addendum to *Das Glasperlenspiel*, a letter between Knecht and Ferromonte, which I highly recommend. Upon reading, I immediately recalled your undergraduate work on Hesse and his response to the horrors of living through two world wars. I used it as an example for my students until I retired a decade ago; even now I have the copy you gave me back then.

More than twenty-five years have passed since we met in my course on comparative literature. You married, have three incredible children, and are acknowledged as an expert in your field. This is as it should be. I am gray and have reached the twilight of my life. This, too, is right.

“... Aging with grace is a struggle that not all may face, and I count myself lucky that I have the chance to do so.”

As I write this letter I am traveling across the Pyrenees toward Spain. You will roll your eyes at me, I know, for taking the train from Paris to San Sebastián. In the era of commercial flight, why use such an antiquated form of travel? You may be right—the brilliance I remember is gone, replaced with drab compartments, angry conductors, and expensive water bottles. The push and pull of the cars claws at my ears; the endless twists and turns through the mountains sour my stomach. Nevertheless I continue on, too tired, hesitant, or just too disinclined to do differently. My wife, whom you never met, always told me that I was a stubborn old bull. Not that she had ever seen a bull, young or old.

You will be happy to hear that I have not yet experienced any more of those dreadful episodes that so marred my visit to your home last September. Please assure Sarah that I am taking care of myself as well as I am able. My complaints are simply those of age.

I especially enjoyed another of Hesse's essays, one appropriately titled *On Old Age*. One sentence in particular struck me: "Being old is just as beautiful and holy a task as being young, learning to die and dying are just as valuable functions as any other—assuming that they are carried out with reverence toward the meaning and holiness of life." I don't know about the holiness of life, but relish the words just the same. Aging with grace is a struggle that not all may face, and I count myself lucky that I have the chance to do so.

My wife would have disagreed. I imagine her yelling at me to fight with every last breath, every ounce of being, to not give up, to struggle, to continue on for just another day because this is life and life is everything. That was how she lived. She was fiery, a phoenix in a small human package. She didn't get angry, she exploded, eyes fierce and wild. I sometimes called her Red, even though she was just as much brunette as you or I.

She passed away decades ago, yet I recall her final moments with startling clarity: laying in the bed of that horrid hospital, strands of hair plastered to her forehead—she was beautiful, even then. I remember the rise and fall of her chest as she struggled, to breathe once more, to push just one more time. Her hand, slippery with sweat and white with strain as she held mine with a tenacity I had never experienced before nor witnessed since. She died as she lived: with passion, with fury. But enough about the past.

How are Sarah and the children? I have enjoyed watching them grow over the years. They are just as precocious and frighteningly intelligent as I would expect for the children of a man who married a woman even smarter than he is. I did not get the chance to see my daughter grow up, but I like to think that she would have been similar to your youngest, all smiles and wonder. I know I don't have to tell you, but never forget to treasure every day you have with your family.

"She was fiery, a phoenix in a small human package."

I was, and am, intrigued by your suggestion to re-read Hesse—might I expect a new article or perhaps even a book in the near future? If so, send me an advance copy as soon as you are able. I have included with this letter my

friend's address in San Sebastián. If you are not writing anything, start now.

In your letter you asked what I was reading as I traveled through France. Not unlike Hesse himself (truly a prescient recommendation on your part) I have in recent years been drawn to literature of and concerning the Far East. At the moment, I am working through *Yukiguni*, a little book written by the Japanese Yasunari Kawabata that won the Nobel prize for literature just a few years ago. It is filled with a sense of calm sorrow, of love and regret. The Japanese call it 'mono no aware', an awareness of impermanence we do not possess in the West. It is beautiful, and I wish I had the ability and inclination to read it in its original Japanese. I cannot recommend it enough.

As the sun sets and my hand tires, I must now write of less enjoyable things. It may be that you and I will continue to correspond over the next weeks and months; it is equally possible that we will not. In the event that the expected happens unexpectedly (for these things are always unexpected, no matter how we prepare) you will hear from my solicitor. Everything will go to you and your family, or to the university. Do not argue and try to convince Sarah to accept it graciously. Show her this letter if you must.

You are my student, my colleague, and my friend. I thank you for all that you and your family have given me in this life. While I may just be starting my travels across Europe and northern Africa, I have already read, and lived, tens of thousands of lives. Mourn, if you must, but do so briefly.

This is a natural place to end this letter, yet while I feel excited, satisfied, and perhaps even enlightened, there are on the edge of my consciousness frustration, loneliness, and fear. It is fitting. Life goes on, and I will live until I die. I will die with sadness and frustration and fear and loneliness and things unfinished. Hopefully, I will also die with hope. With peace. With love. With curiosity. With wonder.

Thank you, and give my love to your family.

Sincerely,

Hal

“While I may just be starting my travels across Europe and northern Africa, I have already read, and lived, tens of thousands of lives.”

Sisyphus Climbs Olympus

by Zack Harrington

In the same year, I climbed the two tallest mountains on Earth. Mauna Kea and Everest have their challenges, but Olympus Mons? It's out of this world. Mars, specifically. And brah, it is mega crazy tall. Like, more than twice the height of either of those molehills. So I trained like a madman, and now here I am climbing the tallest volcano in the solar system. Gonna put my name in the record books. I can see it now: Captain Jesse Ho'opi'pi, highest man in the universe. Wait...

With Earth's mountains your biggest hurdle is the pressure, but on Mars all my little organs are safe and vacuum-sealed inside a spacesuit that can lift a car. Scratch that, on Earth I could lift a car. On Mars I can throw a tank. Problem with all that metal and motor is even with lower gravity, I'm heavy. I mean, I can walk fine, like carrying a hiking backpack, but I can't hop, skip, and jump up the mountain like in all the movies. I would just stroll around in my birthday suit, but I like breathing. Sue me.

Getting dark. Walked all day. Can't tell how far. On Olympus, the Martian horizon is only three clicks at any given time, and dust is always flying up. All that makes for a lot of radio interference. Ten klick range. Lost contact with Olympus Base hours and hours ago. Better check my progress.

"Oi, Nate. Where we at?" Buzz buzz.

"Please state your mission identity. Over." An East Indian accent tinged with auto-tune drops into my earpiece, separate from my helmet's radio. Guess I have to play this game.

Cough cough. "This is Sisyphus to NATHAN. Do you read me? Over."

"Greetings, Captain Ho'opi'pi. How can I assist you?" So polite.

"I've been walking for a while. How many klicks have we gone?"

"We have traveled thirty kilometers since departure this morning. Should you keep this pace, I estimate you will reach the peak in ten days."

"Hot damn, I'm on a roll! Pull up and get me, I'm calling it quits." The extremely badass RV following me closes the fifty meter distance between us and skids to a stop. Now, I hear you saying, 'Jesse, why don't you just drive to the top of Olympus Mons?'

Because that's not really climbing, is it?

I have to clamber up the ladder to the airlock, but in moments I strip off the hulk of equipment encasing me, and wait for the last hatch to open to my home for the next few weeks.

And whoosh! I'm breathing fresh(er) air. I throw up my arms and legs, zombie walk through the cabin to my cot, and collapse. God, is every day going to be like this?

"How are you feeling, Captain?"

I open my eyes, taking in my robotic partner. Simple humanoid design but every bit as strong as my spacesuit. iPhone 7K white casing. Two red cameras for eyes, two ear holes, no mouth. Doesn't need it. Nope, his voice is broadcast solely through my earpiece. I'm never out of earshot.

I smile. "Call me Jesse. And I'm on top of the world." I haul myself upright. "Damn hungry though. What's on the menu?"

"That depends on what you would like, <Jesse>. There is all manner of petri-grown protein shmeats. I am able to provide sham, shlamb, shmeef, shmicken, shmobster, shmurkey..."

"Stop, stop, god... stop. Sham, is that anything like spam?"

"I would not know. I cannot eat or taste."

"Well duh, but that doesn't exactly answer my question."

"It may taste like <spam>, but it may not taste like..."

"I'll have the sham in a sandwich then." I can't help but roll my eyes. Dude's never heard of spam!

Either way, Nate walks over to the small kitchen area and begins re-hydrating the disgusting little MREs packed for my climb.

I make my way to the small latrine by the airlock and whip out a little...

"At least he cooked for me before touching... that."

conversation. "I want to get moving early again, so first light you wake me up. Capiche?" I finish peeing (eventually; I held it for thirty clicks, remember?), sanitize my hands, and finally sit down to eat the amazing 'delicacy' that is the shamich. Bite, chew, choke. And while eating this astounding 'gift' to humankind, Nate collects my urine for recycling. I get to drink that water again tomorrow. Much yum. At least he cooked for me before touching... that.

I sip some Tang and try to get comfortable.

"So, know any jokes?"

Nate looks up from the pee pouch. "I come installed with 2,800 jokes." And back to pee pouch.

Blink blink. "Care to share?"

"What is black and white and red all over?"

"Uh, know any others?"

"Why did the chicken cross the road?"

"Any good jokes? Any at all?"

"Knock knock."

"Goodnight, Nate," I grumble as I turn over in my bunk.

"That is the incorrect response. Goodnight, Jesse."



I wake up to two crimson orbs

in my face. "Personal space!" I shriek, shoving Nate off me.

His gyroscopes right him as his very unique voice swells right into my earpiece.

"Good morning, Jesse! Would you like me to prepare breakfast?"

My heart begins to return to its original position as I sprawl and leak sweat. "No coffee for me, thanks..."

Soon I'm suited up and hiking the hill towards destiny, my heart reinforced with purpose. My vision narrows, my feet fly, and focused instinct motivates me forward.

"So Nate, you're like my personal cheerleader, eh?"

"I do in fact have a cheerleading routine installed."

My mind tries to absorb that, but it's too slow to react to the robotic throat clearing.

"RAH, RAH, CAPTAIN JESSE..."

"No, no, nooooo, no, no," I protest to no avail, as Nate's (loud) programming drives him to sing ten minutes of eardrum. Droid's got a bad motivator.

Later, after that particular assault, I make my next mistake. "You play music?"

"I can play several thousand songs."

What he means is he can sing thousands of k-pop hits. By the time I crawl into the RV that night, I have to switch the earpiece to my opposite ear for fear of tinnitus.



It's... harder to get out of bed the third day. NATHAN makes pancakes. Even puts little smiley faces on them; I don't notice the smiles. I've decided not to let NATHAN talk too much today.

"Hey NATHAN, are we there yet?"

"No we are not, Jesse. Are you feeling alright?"

"It's just a joke. Hey NATHAN, are we there yet?"

"No we are not, Jesse. Are you feeling alright?"

Tee-hee. "Better. Hey, I ever told you about

my childhood? I'll start where any good story does: the beginning. When a mommy and daddy love each other very much..." I ramble. The more I speak, the less he does. I talk and talk for clicks and klicks. But my helmet, well, it's getting stuffy. I stop to catch my breath, so NATHAN thinks it's his turn to talk.

"I believe I have the answer to your deep and serious issues in my psychoanalytical therapy programming. If Freud is to be believed..."

I wheeze, "Whoa whoa whoa, hang on a sec, I'm just, you know, talking. Venting."

"Has your spacesuit been breached?"

"God dammit, nevermind. You know NATHAN, when two people are confined in a close space for too long, murder comes to mind."

"Please Jesse, let me treat you with my psychoanalytical therapy program..."

"God dammit! Nevermind!" Now I really AM thinking about murder... "Hey

NATHAN, I heard that robots explode if you ask them 'what is love?'"

"I do not know."

"About the love, or the exploding?"

Whir whir. "What is the nature of your query?"

I sigh as loud as I can, steam clouding my visor. "Worth a shot."

"I shall file this particular conversation as recorded, psychological therapy pending."

I halt. "What? Did you just say you're recording me?"

"Yes, for posterity's sake." My vision of the Martian mountain tints evermore red.

"Have you been recording me this whole time?"

"Affirmative."

Affirmative, he says. I've been on the line with a telemarketer for three days. I've been speaking to 'Nintendo-fer-brains' for 72 hours. His mouthless voice has gone unfiltered into my ear for 4,320 minutes.

He is in my head.



The next day I attempt to get the robot to play "the quiet game." He loses every time. The day after that I let him tell me all 2,800 jokes he knows. Now I know every punch line invented for every dad joke ever. The sixth day he wants me to play 'I, Spy': "It will serve to distract you from the monotony of your journey."

I don't wear my earpiece the seventh day.

Let me take this opportunity to tell you EXACTLY how monotonous Mars is. I have walked about 200 klicks at this point. For perspective's sake, that's like walking a third of the way across Arizona. Not from the States? That's a third of the way across France. Olympus Mons is the size offrickin' France. I have walked uphill for a week towards the horizon, distorted by the curvature of the planet. Like walking upstairs without even seeing

**"He is
in my
head."**



the top. You can't see the top of Olympus from the bottom and you can't see the bottom from the top. Really. Look it up.

And it's all red. ONLY RED. Just red rocks as far as the eye can see... Wait, holy crap, is that an orange stone!? Wait, no, no... That's a red rock. Ooh ooh ooh, dust! Sand!

The eighth day draws to an end. The robot is calculating the remaining time to the top.

"If you do not increase your pace, you will not reach the summit until the eleventh day." The sun's been down for about an hour, but I don't stop trudging. Oh wait, I do. I fall to my knees. God, don't make me go back in there. Don't make me go back.

"If you keep this velocity, you will never make it to the top."

I just start crying. Like, my tough guy facade, my manhood, my humanity. All crushed by that robot. That robot. That robot. I turn around, walking toward the headlights, blinding me as I approach. I don't go to the hatch. Right to the shiny. I scream and throw the hardest punch I can right into one of the headlights. The exoskeletal suit amplifies my strength. The headlight explodes, heat and electricity and light and anger shaking the several ton rover.

I pry my fist out of the twisted metal while the robot spouts off questions, voice squealing like the grill of the RV. I drown them out, drag myself through the airlock. The earpiece flies into the robot's face as it approaches me. I eat a shamburger, and piss on the rest of the shmeat. I fizzle asleep. Eventually.



Day numero nine-o. The robot is trying to be ginger with me. Holds out the earpiece. I glare at him with eyes redder than his, but I take it. "Make me coffee and cornbread. Maple syrup, too."

A, well, uncertain look flashes over the robot's face. "I apologize Jesse, but we are out of coffee."

Snap.

"I'm to be addressed as Captain Ho'opi'pi. You are to maintain radio silence unless there is an emergency."

For a robot, he really seems hurt. "There is all manner of caffeinated teas..."

"ROBOT. MAINTAIN RADIO SILENCE."

I'm sick of him trying to speak my language. So I'll speak his, but louder. He obeys, with a frustratingly contradictory "Affirmative, Captain." I eat my coffee-less breakfast in silence, the robot staring at me, waiting for my signal.

Six blessedly quiet hours later, I eat my lunch in silence too.

But now here I am, dusk set in, some meaningless trudging behind me, and more god-forsaken trudging ahead. Yet trudge I must, anything to avoid getting back into that RV. I ignore the clock, marching through twilight dulled wasteland, my shadow cast up the mountain by a single light.

"Jesse, I am picking up increased meteorological activity. It may indicate the presence of a..."

"Nu-uh, you call me Captain. I ordered you to call me Captain, and you can't even do that. Do it, let me hear you say it. Call me Captain."

"But Jesse, this is an..."

"CAPTAIN. CAP-TAIN. C-A-P..."

"Captain, sand storm!"

My anger-distorted face rebounds to shock. I look to my left and right, searching my surroundings. "Ok, drive up and get me. We'll look for cover to blunt wind." I start to haul myself back down the mountain as quick as the suit lets me, but I already see the red miasma of dust obscuring the one headlight.

Suddenly I see the headlight really well. RV's not slowing down. NATHAN tries to swerve once he sees me; I still go flying. I twist and roll and spin and tumble across ground that had once

seemed so lax with sand. Now it's jagged with volcanic glass and rusty obsidian.

"I'm ok, I'm ok," I squeak, flopped half-dead. My suit absorbed most of the impact, but that wasn't gonna cut it. At least one rib is busted. Red sand rotates in my vision but I make out the RV, crashed onto its side. Suppressing vomit I choke out, "NATHAN, I am ok, how's the RV?"

No response.

"Nate, DO YOU READ?"

Nothing.

"Stay where you are. I'm going to tilt the RV upright. Do not open the airlock."

My suit's exoskeletal joints were designed exactly for this task. I limp to the side, trying to see through the windows, the windshield. The glass is everything-proof, shouldn't be any cracks, but it's tinted too, can't make out the interior. Don't have time. Right the s.o.b. and get inside, storm's getting worse. I grab the handles, plant my feet, and roar past my ribs bending. The suit takes over and the RV leans back onto its tires...

Now, I've been complaining about walking uphill this whole time but truth is, Olympus Mons ain't that steep. Only has a five degree ascent. That's like a wheelchair ramp. Righting the RV will be easier if I roll it downhill, right?

The whirlwind drags the spinning RV into the dark depths of Tartarus. I scream and give chase, but it barrels down the mountain. The dust becomes fog, the fog becomes ocean, and I am lost. I, Sisyphus, curse the gods of Olympus, my breath endless as profanity and pleading escapes my soul. My wretched form is encased in bloody glass, and I am laid to rest.



All I see is grave. Sand packs up to my visor, restricts my movement. But I boil, fight, quake my cave. I rip my body out of the Martian earth, resurrected. Only for a moment though. My senses return and energy evades me. I collapse forward, haunted by my predicament. Something

clatters in my helmet. What is that? Little white plastic...

Earpiece.

Oh my god, my earpiece. It's not that Nate couldn't respond; I couldn't hear him. I can't even take my helmet off to insert it back in. But... maybe Nate can still hear me? Maybe he's still in range? Maybe Nate's still alive?

I try not to, but my voice cracks in desperation, "Nate, Nate, it's Jesse. I'm ok but my earpiece is out. I can't hear you, but I pray you can hear me. I don't know where you are. Looking for you will take too long... you might be buried, or three days walk away, or just something." I inhale carefully, deliberately, trying not to lose my shit.

"If you can hear this, and if the RV isn't buried—if the RV even works—meet me at the top. I won't live long enough any other way. But if you can't make it just... go back to base. Tell NASA what happened. Maybe someday they'll find me at the summit. Maybe I'll still make the record books." I smile, ashamed and afraid of the words I spoke, probably to no one.

I face the peak once more. I need to live. To race. This godless mound of red death is not king of the solar system.

I need to CONQUER.

Calculations put me at three days of brisk walking. Those same calculations say I'll dehydrate or asphyxiate in two. Faith and voodoo are all I have left, and they say I can make it.

The tenth day passes. I consider walking through the night, but my training kicks in more than ever before. I become fetal in an attempt to sleep, but I nail fetal thinking about how far I made it that day. Thirty clicks? Thirteen? Three? Who could tell?

Nate could.

My stomach growls at me the next morning. It's all lies; it takes a long time to starve to death. Doesn't mean I have to like it. No, what I would like is a

"I rip my body out of the Martian earth, resurrected."

frickin' space baggie of coffee. Or Tang. Some waffles, hash browns, shmacon. I'd even eat oatmeal at this point.

Sun says it's noon. Water'd be nice. Just a sip.

Focus. Practice your Guinness Mars Records acceptance speech. Ahem, I'd like to thank the following people: My parents naturally, hahaha. All the brilliant people at NASA. And my good friend, um, Nathaniel, who supported me the whole way. God, you sound boring.

Hard to breathe. Helmet choking me. I took my oxygen mask off when I topped Everest. Big breath of thin freezing air. Is Martian air any different? Yes, yes, don't take off your helmet.

Dark again. I look up toward the stars, searching for the Martian moons, Phobos and Deimos. Even though Olympus Mons is too far north to see either of them, I feel fear and dread regardless. Probably gonna die tonight. Should I go out fighting, or sleeping? My heart says fight, my brain says sleep. My legs say sleep too. I'll just rest my eyes...

I can see the top! I mean, I think I can see it. I might still be dreaming. Better check. Hmmm, how do I pinch myself in a space suit?

Ok, I'll just pretend it's the top. And I'll pretend that someone is up there with some Tang, a shamich, a two liter of Kahlua, and I'm dreaming because some Martians are waving at me. Go ahead and wave, but keep walking.

I think I'm awake now. The ground is moving but I think I'm awake. I can't



feel my feet but I think I'm awake. I can see the top but I think I'm awake.

Seeing the summit is the worst part of mountain climbing. From there time slows down; it's only the halfway point mentally. Ha! Peak's only three clicks from here. I just walked three hundred clicks with Nate. A stupid grin splits my lips. Three clicks is nothing.

I'm about to mount the peak. I'm about to find out if I die here. What should be the greatest moment of my life may be the final moment. Heh, I mean, Olympus Mons is a volcano; maybe I can make it quick and 'jump' in. But if I'm gonna die, I just wish it wasn't alone. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna make my peace.

"Nate, I'm glad you came with me. It kept me sane, how you drove me insane. It kept me going; mindless, zombie, walking. Just so I didn't have to look at you. I'll never do it again, but if I had to... I'd bring you."

I crest Olympus Mons. And there waiting for me, mouthless face smiling, my mortal enemy who I will never stop hating, is the NASA Terrain Humanoid Assistant Navigator. He's holding a camera, and I'm crying. I did it. I lived. I reached the top.

**"I did it.
I lived. I
reached
the top."**

There's a script for such a monumental achievement.

I improvise.

"Let's get our stories straight. I got here first."

Seyðisfjörður, Iceland

by Megan Heator



Greta Fjordsdóttir clambered up the side of the fjord overlooking her home. Her lamb Bumbí climbed ahead, albeit a little more skillfully thanks to his four legs and sheep's intuition. From down below, Greta's mother could be heard calling her home to supper. Her rumbling stomach would heed the call soon, but first she wanted to make sure everything was ready. It was going to happen any day now and she had to be prepared.

Her supplies were gathered and the shelter still in place. Turning back, she and Bumbí headed home. After dodging her mother's questions and scarfing her dinner, Greta retired to the back porch to gaze at the sky. If her calculations were correct, it would be tomorrow. Could be. Or next week. It wasn't an exact science. Still, she was ready for whenever it did happen.

The next morning, Greta and Bumbí awoke to a strange silence, and although it was morning it was still as dark as a moonless, starless night. She heard her mother calling from outside and headed toward her voice, feeling her way through the darkened house. Her mother was holding a lantern, a small flickering light against a black nothingness.

As Greta's eyes adjusted, she saw similar flickering dots of light in the distance. The other townspeople were out investigating this strange and frightening phenomenon, too. It's time! Bumbí let out a soft bleat.

She dashed inside to grab her own small lantern, and using its weak light they headed toward the base of the fjord. Scaling the fjord's side expertly, as they had done countless times before, Greta thought she could feel a low rumble coming from the mighty rock.

"Quick, Bumbí!" yelled Greta into the darkness.

"Greta could hear the screams of the townspeople below as what she had been predicting for months finally came to pass."

As they reached the top, the sound had graduated from a rumble to a crackle. They barely made it to their post where shelter and supplies were waiting when it happened. A great flash of light illuminated the town and the sea beyond as the fjord expelled a final

resounding roar.

Greta could hear the screams of the townspeople below as what she had been predicting for months finally came to pass. The fjord, her fjord, began to move away from the town, out towards the sea, like a great creature finally waking from a long slumber.

With a few more groans and rumbles, the fjord freed itself from its bonds to land and at last reached the open sea. Greta stood at the very edge looking out ahead, noting its course. Bumbí bleated softly, reminding Greta to look back one last time at her old home, at the little dot holding the little lantern that was her mother.

Greta raised a hand in farewell before turning back to the sea, breathing in her new adventure.

Vik, Iceland

by Megan Heator

He hiked up here to see the cliffs again, like he did every morning. It was harder in the winter when it was always dark, but he still did it then, too. The cliffs drew him in, making him long to know what it would be like to jump off and fly away like the birds.

And there were so many birds here!

Swooping and gliding, squawking and squabbling, nesting and wooing. They used to attack him when he came up here, but they had stopped bothering him over the years. They knew him now, knew he meant no harm. This fact had been passed down the bird-generations and none questioned his presence.

The view from up here, the bird's view, was incredible. His little town nestled below to the east, the vast flat beach to the west, and the great stone pillars out to sea. He often wondered what the view was like from those pillars. The birds knew; but though they knew him, and he them, neither had learned the other's language yet.

For years he had done this, always wondering what it would feel like to jump. Not because he was sad or because he wanted to end his life. On the contrary, he had a fine life! All the same, he felt as though something was missing, a feeling he had as long as he could remember, since he had first started making this hike up the cliffs as a boy.

He stayed a little longer than usual on this particular day, wondering, as the birds dipped and dived around him. Someday, he thought.

The bird nearest to him squawked.



A few weeks later, the man's wife was putting out the cat when she looked up toward the cliffs. She spotted her husband's tiny figure atop the vast cliff. There he is up there again.

"He's getting too old to make that climb alone," she said aloud to the cat, who silently agreed with her.

Before going back inside, she looked up at her husband again. With a feeling of dread, she watched him run towards the edge of the cliff. She and the cat watched helplessly as his tiny figure reached the edge and leapt. Through her tears, she saw him fall, arms outstretched, down, down, down toward the sea. She buried her head in her hands and began to weep.

The cat, sad but unable to weep, continued to watch her master's descent. He was halfway to the water, but as she watched he suddenly stopped falling and was now gliding, not down, but out, out to sea, toward those great stone pillars!

The cat paused to lick her paw, and when she looked back to the pillars, he was gone.

"Through her tears, she saw him fall, arms outstretched, down, down, down toward the sea."

Photos by Brittany Defilippo



Driving Home

by Liam Strong

I'm driving into town from Williamsburg and
the sun is so bright it makes the air glaze over
as if swales of dust were sprinkling in from the north.
Dust, I think to myself, dust! I don't know
why I'm so excited. I play pop-punk bands on the stereo
all the way back because the sun and sky look
no different than the glistening of summer at its peak.
I feel warm in the unheated car doing 55 in whatever
the sign said five miles ago. The road has melted
and I see its filmstrip face sleek with newborn slush.
I love the sound of it curdling underneath the tires.
Receipts crinkle in my back pocket as I lull the car to a stop
after 20 miles without a shift in the speedometer.
Its indicator is content and so am I. Content with
the sounds of my own summer beckoning from within
the January calendar. The bay doesn't look like a lake anymore
but rather a memory of everything
I've wanted to leave in the back of my eyes, where
the migraines take their vacation, leisurely every month.





Nichole Hartley

I'm driving so I can fall in love with places without entering
their presence symbiotically, but skirting their periphery.
I'm driving so I can be the center of attention
for two seconds at nameless intersections that want
to be remembered for their fast food joints or
their homegrown boutiques, something for someone
to sit down at and plant a memory. I remember
the places but not the names. The winter
failing reminds me of everything I needed
to forget before the snow. But I don't want it to go.
I want to ride with it to ice-capped mountains,
ice-clothed lakes, and ice-paved roads that lead to me staring
into revelation in the rearview mirror,
my lungs shivering with cold, the arms of my breath
reaching outward as I exhale, think about my best route home.
I want to go home without lying down upon my name.
I want to be home without feeling the heater or
air conditioning as I open the door.
I want to be my home.



It's moments like these
that we are reminded
of how small we are.



Milo Re-Incarnate

by Alissia J.R. Lingaur

1.

Water slaps Milo's back and shoulders, spits in his ears and over his forehead, but he swims on, arms slicing through waves, the shore a pale brown strip on the horizon. Behind him, the sun wipes sleep from her eyes, annoyed to be woken by this early morning swimmer, this mortal so keen on exercise and heart health that he daily braves the brisk spring dawn, leaving Mary in their marriage bed, sleeping on her side as she always has, arms crisscrossed over chest and her left hand thumb just visible above flannel sheets, so he can challenge the ocean once more before their grandkids arrive for a week at Nana and Papa's beach house. For almost 40 of his 68 years, Milo's swims were rarely interrupted by impending visitors or his career as a photojournalist. No matter where in the world, he found water.

Again, froth grabs his biceps, yanking them backwards until muscles scream with fatigue, eyes fill with salt, breath coughs and catches. Milo perches upright, feet down, face toward the sandy finish-line, away from the wet fingers, treading water, treading water, treading until his lungs settle and he crawls forward once more.

Almost to shore, the ocean drums a warning and a wave devours him, forcing him down, down, below and within the churning current. His knuckles scratch against the rocky seabed. Feet reach for purchase, aching to thrust him skyward until light pierces his shoulder, illuminating the salt water, and Milo squints in the glare. His eyes, ears, lungs swell with bright until it overflows his fingertips and bursts in ripples, whispering, "Let go, Milo. It's time."

And he does.

2.

She opens her eyes. Below her tree perch, the white ape crouches, pulling peaches from a bag at his feet. His hairless hand offers her the fruit, and she picks a seed from her teeth, considering. She understands the hand signs all the white apes use, having learned them in her youth, especially the letters of her name, but though this

white ape calls her Gracie, she remembers the truth.

Furry knuckles grip the bark of the live oak, a tree common in the forests of northern Georgia at this sanctuary, but not in the lab, and never in Africa, the land of her rebirth, her capture, her separation from troop and family, and she swings down to the ground, easily landing three feet from where he squats. She flops into the grass, tired after thirty years of captivity, and lonely, missing the girls she'd lived with at the medical lab, the others who answered the researchers' questions, who spelled sorrow with their fingers.

"They'll be here soon, Gracie," he says. "Beatrice, Nancy, and especially, Jo." He holds the peach higher, reaching, and she extends fingers to snag the fruit, happy for the treat, its sticky juice and fuzzy rind. She chews it whole, separating flesh from pit with large teeth, then spits the hard center into her palm. He smiles. She doesn't return the grin though she is glad for company, even someone smelling of soap and khaki.

"Her fingers shape the letters, M-I-L-O, as she stares."

She sniffs the air for her adopted family, hoping she'll track their scent on the next breeze, but no, just the white ape and fruit, an easy reward for her cooperation. Really, a bribe. She frowns at the pit in her large hand. Looks at him. Back to the mottled tan stone.

"It's okay, Gracie," he urges. "Would you like another?"

She flinches as once more, he speaks this false name. He reaches for another peach, and she chucks the pit at him, hitting his forehead center-dead.

"Oh shit!" he yells, falling onto his back, feet shooting skyward.

Hopping and running, she escapes into the underbrush, searching for the water, a stream where she can see herself: brown-black eyes, tanned face, lips stretched wide over useful teeth, no longer capable of words. Her fingers shape the letters, M-I-L-O, as she stares.

3.

The grass smells especially delicious today as he searches for the stick, nose to the ground, barely hesitating over a rock that emanates squirrel, that rodent he's chased for the last week but still hasn't caught. Paws eagerly trot him forward for Hannah's favorite game. She'd even named it: fetch. And she asked him to play it every day.

"Fetch Milo? D'ya wanna play fetch?" she'd call after she finished her Cheerios, and he'd eaten his kibble. She'd leap from the kitchen chair and dash to the back door, Milo at her knee. But they hadn't played in... he can't remember, with Hannah at school or working at the ice cream parlor or since she began filling boxes with her clothes, books, everything that carries her lilac scent, so Milo's happy to be searching once again for the wonderful stick that Hannah has thrown during a break from loading her car. Aha! The bark tastes remember, with Hannah at school or working at the ice cream parlor or since she began filling boxes with her clothes, books, everything that

carries her lilac scent, so Milo's happy to be searching once again for the wonderful stick that Hannah has thrown during a break from loading her car. Aha! The bark tastes tangy on his tongue as Milo grips the stick and runs back to Hannah and the blue car, tail wagging.

"Good boy," Hannah says, patting his wiry head with her hand as he wag, wag, wags in joy before dropping the stick at her feet and leaning down, tail to sky, paws outstretched. "Okay, one more time, buddy, but then I gotta go." Hannah stands, holding the stick. She arcs it over her shoulder then jerks it forward, releasing, and Milo, ears perked, tongue dangling, darts to the lawn's edge and waits for the stick to drop, so he can retrieve it once more for Hannah, his Hannah.

Thwap! The stick slaps the grass, and he pounces, tearing it in half with his teeth. The longer of the two ends he lifts and turns to present to Hannah, but her car no longer lingers in the drive. He drops the wood and spits splinters into the grass, a pause before padding to the porch where water awaits him in a stainless steel bowl, and he laps the liquid, soaking his dangling ears. After quenching his thirst, he sits and stares at the lonely driveway, by now understanding that living is love, pure and unconditional.

Milo sprawls on his side, nose aimed at the mailbox. Hannah'll return. She always does.

4.

Before them the gray asphalt stretches to the left and right. Clear. She squeaks to her offspring, three fluffy brown bundles behind her, cottontails white and springy, eyes wide to the world, her third litter since spring. Above them the maples shade red and orange and yellow against the azure sky, reminding her of the morning she'd leapt into the river and swam across to its opposite shore, outsmarting the coyote that wanted her for breakfast. She enjoyed the dawn swim, her muscle memory swelling as she easily cut through the current, paddling as naturally as breathing. She'd shaken the moisture from her fur and burrowed beneath an unmelted snowbank just in case the hungry coyote forgot its fear of submerged logs. Near that riverbank she'd met her first mate of the season, ever eager to begin repopulating the Earth.

A blue car speeds past and she ducks back into the tall grass growing beside the gravel shoulder. Her young follow, touching their quivering noses to her haunches, sniffing for milk and comfort. She thumps a long hind foot against the ground and eases toward the road once more, the babies, her shadows. Nothing on the horizon.

Run, run, run! Kicking heels, they dart across the pavement. She hits sand first. One babe finds the rocky sideline. A second arrives unscathed. But the third lags behind, and a truck tops the hill, its chrome bumper roaring toward the small, furry bundle who's stopped on the centerline to examine a grasshopper. She screams. Little one looks up and jogs forward, and as the machine almost topples him, he

"...happy to be part of this life-giving process."

skips to safety. Thub-thub, their heartbeats thump in unison as they reunite under blackberry bush brambles, far from the tires of man.

5.

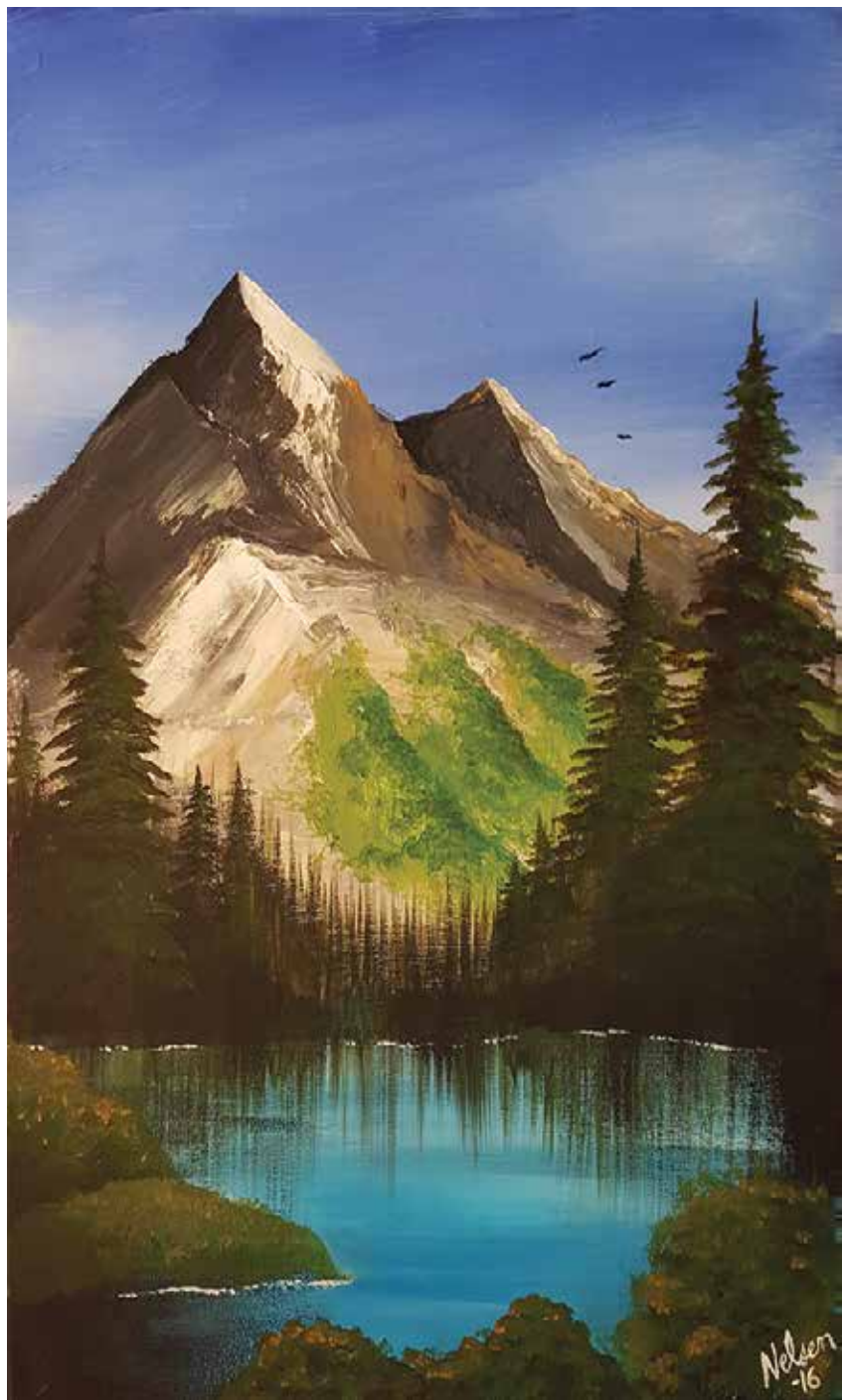
She flies the path of her ancestors, their figure eight dance that leads her over the stream, that water she's always been drawn to, and beyond to the meadow and the black-eyed Susans and other rudbeckia growing tall and straight, dark disks pulsing with pollen ready for the harvest. She nuzzles those centers, filling her honey sack with nectar, eager to carry her catch back to the hive. Grains of pollen stick to hind legs, ready for the return journey, and she putters contentedly among the wildflowers, their yellows and purples, oranges and browns, each blossom whispering a call for her attention, happy to be part of this life-giving process. Though she's forgotten who she once was or when she once lived, she intuits the importance of her mission as critical to the planet's survival, despite the dangers that await each field trip.

Just over her wing, an ominous drone. She takes flight, buzzing through the grasses, back over the flowing water babbling a warning, a black and yellow arrow aimed at her hive. Yet the Assassin Fly zips to her right. His needle-like mouth jabs, ready to inject poison and suck her insides dry, but she continues on, zigging and zagging just beyond the reach of the fly's bristly legs, his death-grip. There! The entrance to her hive opens before her, and she flits her wings faster, faster, faster, and just as she's about to dive into the hive's dark depths, the assassin flings himself at her head, legs outstretched, mouth clicking. He misses, and she's inside. Only to fly again tomorrow.

"Closer to creation's spark than ever before."

6.

A single perfect cell floats through the murky pond water, extending cytoplasm to form pseudopodia, false feet that skate the cell forward and backward and everywhere in between, aside cattails and beneath lily pads, above and below tadpoles and minnows, within and without sunfish gills. No longer he or she but eventually more when the time comes to split in two. At last complete, containing all that is necessary for life, and anything needed to continue life seeping through the cellular membrane, free of preoccupation with sadness and fear or hatred and love, not even distracted by consciousness, returned to the water, beyond names and birthright. Closer to creation's spark than ever before.



Aleah Nelson



Paid in Full

by Jeff Comerford

Mr. Willis,

My name is Clarissa St. Claire. I am 25 years old. My father is Senator Joseph St. Claire. I desperately need your help.

There's a man that my father has been meeting with. His name is Jack Ross; I think he may be dangerous. I came

home to visit my father for a few days and overheard this man talking to somebody over the phone. He mentioned something about "getting the job" done. There was also something said about Lover's Bluff.

My family has plenty of money. I know your fee is \$100, but I'm willing to offer \$1,000 when we actually meet face-to-face. This money is real. This job is real. Please find and do something about him before somebody gets hurt.

Clarissa St. John

Clarissa,

I've done everything you've asked so far. Nothing has come of it. I want to be able to say I have pictures. I don't. I sat there and waited for that supposed "act" to happen. Nothing came to pass. The next night rolled around. It amounted to the same result. Three more nights like this. I don't think I've slept in a week.

Then it hit me. Maybe I should do a little side-digging on you. See if you're the saint you so righteously hold yourself up as. I just want you to know, I found them. I found your records. Knowing what I know now, there is no chance in hell that I could possibly keep you on as my client.

I have so many questions for you though. Things you don't have to answer—at least not right away. All you need to know from me is this: I can't spend another week sitting near a cliff that also serves as a popular make out point, watching every goddamn car that drives up, searching for something suspicious.

As far as you and I are concerned, we're done. I have far more pressing matters on my back burner to deal with. You need to be talking with a professional. The man you asked me to chase down doesn't exist, and according to my research, he never did.

Attached to this letter will be the money you were kind enough to pay me up front.

Dick Willis, Private Investigator

Dear Father,

I need to know something. I sent a letter to a private investigator and asked him to investigate the man you had been meeting with. He insists this man doesn't exist. He's wrong, though. I know he's wrong. I'm scared. Please help me.

Love, Clarissa

Mr. Willis,

I am writing in regards to what is happening with my daughter. I assume you have discovered her deepest, darkest secrets. I apologize for her putting you in such an awkward situation.

You must know I recently had a chat with Franklin Stevens. Dr. Stevens has worked with Clarissa in the past. I had no idea she had stopped seeing him. In all fairness, you must know that I don't actually speak with Clarissa very often. Her most recent letter to me was something of a surprise.

The strange thing was Jack Ross. You said you found nothing on him. I find this unusual because he did indeed exist. Mr. Ross was my business partner, but has been dead for over ten years.

Sincerely,

Senator Joseph St. Claire

Nobody believes me. I only wish I knew why. They make assumptions that I know are wrong. I firmly believe now that either God or the Devil himself will answer me, will believe me. Goodbye.

Mr. Senator,

I am very sorry to hear of your daughter's passing. I don't have much to say other than I wish to offer my condolences.

Dick Willis

No Boundaries

by Lyric Pawloski

A kiss, a kiss!

Any sort of wanted kiss cannot be missed.

A sweet, loving, tender kiss not even to the lips.

On my hair, did he mean to plant it there?

Did he miss?

I found it even sweeter in its uniqueness—that kiss.

A kiss to the hair, near the top of my head, sends such a loving air.

And with it invades a sweet draft

that wafts through my hair to what's in there.

O, this is not an unrequited love, no more one concocted.

What kind of love comes from one drafted oceans and countries apart?

Not to mention miles.

Could there be, between you and me, an adventure?

One not meant to form—like our love—

that seemingly teleports through the miles and floats city to city without stop.

To it there are no borders, not even countries.

Adventure sees no boundaries

and with love to back it up there is no stop.

But, to pop in for food, money, gas,

the voids that need be filled by something besides love.

Millions of hearts it would take to fill the sea

that will soon rest between I and thee.

Nor did I mention how many lives beat in between—

for the number would be uncountable.
Ah, to think of how many hearts can beat together
to the rhythm of their individual love,
in their individual town.
Though it may not be Meppen,
whose love curls round with the river.

I suppose those millions of lovers
take the distance between them and their other heart for granted.
For it is hard to miss the beat if you can feel it close
thudding in an intertwined rhythm.
Will I ever get there with the kisser of my head?
Will it be another instead?

I know not now whether we shall soon choose to split up
with the miles between us.
If not,
will it constantly feel as if he is red heart sand
slipping slowly through the fingers of my hand?
I do, and do not, wish to know—for then I could make a plan.
Alas, whether the budding flower of our heart
beating love does or does not grow,
I get not now to know.
I can only enjoy the man behind where there is no plan,
and the memories beyond the miles.

You're the Hero:

A Choose Your Own Adventure Tale

by Rachel Harden, Zack Harrington, Ann Hosler, Liam Strong, and Alissia J.R. Lingaur

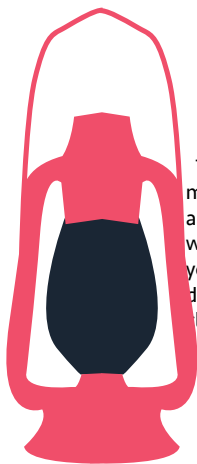
SCENE 1

You are Twill, a young village woman experienced with a blade and a penchant for trouble. Your younger brother, a mage named Ferrim, has been captured by castle guards and thrown into jail. As they took him away, you were told he had stolen from the king. Many whisper around your village of loved ones jailed for similar crimes they didn't commit. The only thing the "criminals" share is that they all know magic. Something strange is afoot in the kingdom.

You intend to sneak into the castle tonight and help your brother escape the dungeons. You patiently wait until the moon rises above the trees and ride toward the castle. You only take your sword and dagger, leaving your horse to graze on the outskirts of the village. You cannot risk the guards seeing you approach. Rushing toward a tree, you hear them above laughing merrily as they chatter, clearly not alert.

A moat stretches along the entirety of the castle. You pace backwards, gaining enough distance, and dash toward it to leap. The back of your heel skims the mucky earth at the edge causing mud to cover your leather boot, but you've made it over without catching anyone's attention.

You hear water draining behind a turret and see a gap in the bars leading to the sewers. An awful stench wafts from behind the grates and you cover your nose. It's unlikely any guards would be lurking around here. Peering at one of the castle walls, you notice stones jutting out that might be scalable, especially since you have a grappling hook. A window rests above you in the wall. You notice a light coming from inside and curtains flicking in the breeze.



CHOICE

Traveling through the sewers would be messy and smelly, but it may lead directly to the dungeons. However, you've heard rumors of alligators swimming in these waters. Stones on the wall leave you with a number of easy footholds leading to the window. However, you will have to face your fear of heights and be sure not to cause a disturbance. You decide that you can either traverse the sewers or limb the wall to sneak through the window.

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- • • • • *If you choose the sewers, read on to Scene 2A.* • • • • •
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- • • • • *If you choose to scale the wall, skip to Scene 2B.* • • • • •
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You descend into the sewers, squeezing through the gap between the bars. You wait for your eyes to adjust to the intense darkness ahead. Were it not for the damp, you'd light some form of torch. But you work best under cover of night; soon you take in your surroundings with little effort.

You head in the direction you believe leads to the dungeons. Tentatively you step, attempting to avoid deep points in the water, making as little noise as possible. The moat is supposedly fed by the underground spring the castle uses as a well. This sewer must separate at some junction so as not to contaminate the drinking water.

There. A waterwheel churns in the chamber on your right. The creaking sounds increase as you draw near. The fluid around your knees accelerates, leading finally to a waterfall cascading into a whirlpool in a torchlit room. A gate leading into the castle! You strain your hearing. Can you make out Ferrim's voice?

No, you hear the roar of water, a bass growl of nature. Angry, yet somehow hungry. You realize too late. You turn and see the flash of reptilian teeth pounce toward you. You reach for your sword but are tackled by the alligator and fall off the ledge, down into the spinning spring below.

The beast has you in its jaws. Your leather armor keeps its fangs from plunging into your flesh, but you can't escape the pressure. The darkness grows greater as you struggle for air. You are dragged down by leviathan and current. You feel as if the Earth is drinking you.

Using your free arm, you tear your dagger off your hip. Swinging in assault will do you no good, submerged as you are. You expose your eyes to the filthy water for just a few moments and stab your dagger to the hilt in the beast's eye. Blood spurts, diffusing throughout the water. Once you twist your body free of its grip, the alligator thrashes to reacquire you as its prey. You kick against its snout, lunging upwards toward the surface. The riptide fights you both, knight and dragon. The alligator, in confusion, falls toward the core of blackness. You, in desperation, burst out of the water.

You draw your breath aggressively, ragged. The decision is quick; you play your chances on the gate since there may be more alligators in the water. You take the torch off the wall, pausing to dry yourself to avoid leading guards after your wet boot prints, and enter the recesses.

This section of castle is no dungeon, but instead a massive central staircase for workers and soldiers. There may be no stealthier way through the castle than this. Undisturbed, you reach the highest portions of the castle, searching for some manner of entry. Light softly glows in a room, outlining a crack in a door large enough to spy through.

Skip to Scene 3.

SCENE 2B

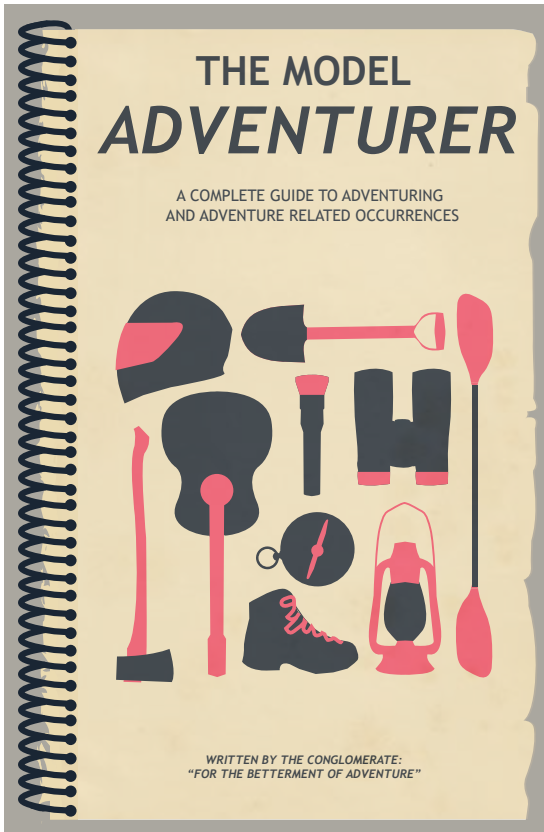
You toss the grappling hook onto the ledge of the open window. It makes a cringe-worthy scraping sound as it grips the rocky sill. You plaster yourself against the castle wall, waiting a few minutes in silence before determining that no one was alerted to your presence.

Tugging on the rope to ensure the hook is secure, you slip on your leather gloves and begin scaling the wall. The protruding stones make your progress easy, if tiring.

Near the window your right hand loses its grip. You swing out slightly with one hand grasping the rope and feet pressed hard against the stones. Your gaze sweeps over the moat far below and a wave of dizziness crashes down on you.

You close your eyes and suck in several deep breaths, calming yourself. Looking up, you reorient and grab the rope again, closing the rest of the distance to the window ledge.

Read on to Scene 3. • • • • •



SCENE 3

Inside a man paces a worn burgundy rug, his long legs covering the room's width in five strides. His hands gesticulate as he moves and regularly slip to his head, where his fingers tussle thinning brown hair, shifting it left and right across his bald spot then off. On the wall, candles sparkle and spit as if lit with otherworldly flame, the source of the strange glow shining through the window.

At the far end of the room, King Rodarian sits in a coarse wooden chair, eyes staring blankly forward, not following the man's frantic movements. Occasionally, he yawns and caresses the hilt of his sword where it rests across his knees, as if he's heard the man's speech many times before. Two guards are visible on either side of the room, sentries posted to keep watch.

You lean in closer, eager for word of your brother, Ferrim, but instead you hear, "And that, your highness, will be the moment we strike!" The man slams his fist against his palm and stops. He looks at the king and smiles, revealing teeth so straight and perfect they could be false.

King Rodarian yawns once more. "Well, Xaldor, it seems you have this all under control."

"Almost," Xaldor adds before resuming his pacing. "I must possess all magic, and this boy, this Ferrim, holds the key. His powers are strong and he's been able to resist me so far, but I will break him, and once I have his magic, I will be great enough to rule the realm!"

"Of course, of course, Xaldor," King Rodarian says, nodding. "Now when shall we dine?"

Xaldor sighs and grabs what's left of his hair, yanking the tendrils to the ceiling. "Classic: I brainwash you to take over your kingdom, but a brainwashed king cannot appreciate the glory of my genius." He turns toward you, and you slip out of the light, continuing to listen, safe in the dark. "Tonight, I shall deal with the boy, but first I must attend to the earthly needs of the figurehead." Xaldor faces the king and exclaims, "Come, your majesty, let us descend on the dining hall to feast and sing songs of your grandeur."

The two men leave the room.

CHOICE

You look back at the guards still lingering. They appear almost ready to leave, which would give you a perfect chance to sneak in, but perhaps you could engage them and interrogate one. There are only two of them after all. You need to decide quickly. Either wait until they leave or fight them.

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• • • • • • • • *If you choose to wait, read on to Scene 4A.* • • • • • • • •

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• • • • • • • • *If you choose to fight, skip to Scene 4B.* • •

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SCENE 4A

The room is empty. The guards have followed Xaldor and King Rodarian away, presumably to the dining hall for dinner. Your stomach rumbles at the thought of turkey leg and greens with a tall goblet of ale. You listen a moment longer before entering the room. Your leather boots slide across the burgundy rug without a sound. You must reach Ferrim before Xaldor does, and there may be a clue to his whereabouts hidden in this room.

You run your hands along the wall, up and down, moving around the circular area until you reach King Rodarian's wooden chair. Your fingers inspect the chair, but there is nothing beyond splinters and faded velvet cushion. Again, you step quietly, hands grazing the cool gray stone from floor to ceiling, hoping to discover a hidden door, a hidden room, perhaps a magical opening that will reveal something of Ferrim's location. Beyond a bare wooden table, its legs the diameter of an ogre's thigh, and King Rodarian's chair, the room is empty.

Having traversed the entire room, you turn and face the space, hands on hips. Where else can you look? You flick your toe and toss a tassel from the rug off your boot. Yes, the rug! You leap to the rug's corner and grip the itchy wool. A quick wrist-flip and you pull the rug back onto itself, revealing the large flagstones of the floor. There you spot a rectangular wooden door, just bigger than a grimoire. You push the rug farther back, exposing the entire secret door.

You reach for the handle and tug, but it does not open. You stomp on the door, kicking the handle to force it aside. Nothing. Finally, you slam the hilt of your sword against the rusty hinges, which crack under the force of your blow. Wedging your dagger into the gap between door and frame, you pry the door upward. It creaks as it lifts. Before you can grab the edge, momentum forces the door's trajectory and it slams flat against the stone floor. You crouch with blade upheld, ready for guards.

No one comes, so you sheath your weapons and grasp the cache's contents, pulling it onto your lap. A plain white cloth, smooth on your fingers, covers something heavy and solid. When you unwrap the item, gently shifting the folds back, you find a mirror. And when you peer into the glass, clouds form, swirling across its surface.

The longer you stare at the mirror, the more defined the shapes become. Clouds shift to wisps which transform into figures with clothes and colors and mouths moving as if to show you their hearts' desires. But what you desire most is to find your brother, Ferrim. You do not care about these nameless beings, whether they are trapped inside the mirror, whether they live in another realm, whether they even exist at all. Instead, you feel time's weight on your shoulders, the mindless marching of seconds, minutes, hours, until your brother is sapped of his magic, his lifeforce. An image of Ferrim as a young boy galloping across the meadow on a chestnut pony springs forth in your memory. The boy laughs as his pony speeds toward a low wall built of fieldstones your father had painstakingly unearthed as he tilled the soil. But as Ferrim and Broon reach the wall, Broon rears, frightened, dumping Ferrim on his rump. The boy cries, and you rush to comfort him.

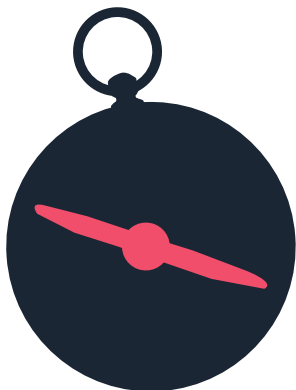
As you feel Ferrim's ginger hair against your cheek, the mirror changes to show your brother, chained to a wall in the dungeon, cheeks streaked with tears, his gentle brow creased with worry. You touch the glass as if to touch your brother, and your hand slips into the mirror. A portal! Quickly, you lay the mirror on the floor, focusing on your brother in the dungeon, and you step into the glass. Your feet slip and slide as if on water, and Xaldor's room disappears. You stand, finding yourself in the dungeon, your brother at your feet.

Skip to Scene 5.

SCENE 5

You rush to Ferrim's side and lift his head. He's barely conscious, and you can't tell if he can see anything through squinted, exhausted eyes. You plead with him to wake up, get up, say you'll escape here alive. His face is so sunken he looks as if he gained many years. He coughs, and tries to form hushed syllables. You can't hear him, lean in, and he repeats it once more.

"T-he o-rb," he breathes, and is too weak to say more. You're uncertain as to what he means, but you do know he will die here if no action is taken.



CHOICE

Between you and your brother, you were always the stronger one. It will be difficult, but you think you might be able to escape with him. However, you suspect the reason for his weakness and pale appearance is Xaldor. You consider your options, but there aren't many. You can either attempt to escape with Ferrim or confront Xaldor alone.

- • • • • *If you choose to escape with Ferrim, read on to Scene 6A.* • • • • •
- • • • • *If you choose to confront Xaldor, skip to Scene 6B.* • • • • •

SCENE 6A

You decide to help your brother out of the cell. You need to escape. There must be magic at work here that might cease when you leave the castle. He lurches against your shoulder, barely able to walk. You slowly make it down the hall seeking an exit, but hear rapid footsteps behind you.

As you turn around to unsheathe your blade there is a halberd at your neck. And another pointed at Ferrim. You are separated from him by a guard who steps behind you.

“Take them to Xaldor,” the guard grimly orders.

The guards tell you to keep quiet and you shuffle along, persuaded by their halberds. They take you to the top of the castle, an eternity of staircases, to be dealt with by the advisor. Ferrim seems to have gained enough strength to lumber along better, or at least without falling over.

Finally you reach a heavily armored door. You have no idea how far up in the castle you are. Maybe the top. Ferrim stands by your side, trying to hold himself up as strongly as possible. He keeps his head down, tugs at your sleeve. He seems to be overcome with something, but you cannot feel anything behind the door.

One of the guards opens the door and pushes you forward. The guards shove Ferrim, who falls on his knees with a grunt. As you lift him up, you see a figure standing at the back of the room. Ferrim leans on your arm. Sharply inhaling, he gestures with his hand and the guards are sent flying, the door slamming shut as they soar through it. A bar bangs down, sealing you from their return. Pounding ensues, as if the guards are trying to bust open the heavy oak door.

The figure steps forward and you recognize his face. It’s Xaldor. He smirks, unconcerned that he’s alone. He holds a clear orb in his hand that starts to swirl dark purple in the center. Ferrim speaks a magical phrase and makes a weak gesture, as he faints on the floor. The spell slashes Xaldor’s hand, causing him to drop the orb. It rolls toward you.

Did Ferrim miss? You draw your sword, readying yourself.

Skip to Scene 7.



SCENE 6B

Scaling seemingly endless staircases you finally reach a heavily armored door. You pause for a moment to steady yourself and notice that it isn't fully closed. Gently pushing, the door soundlessly swings open, revealing Xaldor peering out an open window.

He turns and arcs a brow. "What have we here?" Xaldor's beady eyes rake up and down your body as his lip curls into a sneer.

"I'm here to stop you, Xaldor." Your voice shakes but you keep your head raised and sword gripped tightly at your side.

He barks a laugh. "I see that tonight I'm on vermin patrol."

Stepping around the desk, Xaldor raises his hand, tightly clutching an orb. His strides engulf the distance and you barely raise your sword in time.

"I will defeat you!" you snarl, slashing the air as he pivots.

Laughter greets your boast, followed by a thump as an invisible blast of air slams the back of your left knee. Losing your balance, you lurch forward with your sword only half-ready to strike again. Xaldor tries to step away but the edge of your blade slashes his hand, causing him to drop the orb he clutched.

Read on to Scene 7.



SCENE 7



Xaldor holds his hand, unable to suppress the blood gushing from it. He glances at the orb on the floor and his face twitches. He raises his eyes, looking terrified. Almost whimpering, he says, "You've bested me child. Take the orb. It's yours, just don't hurt me."

You're confused. You'd been fighting to save your brother, not for the orb he was holding. Yet... the orb calls to you. Its gaze looms inside your very soul. It's so... calming. The orb's power swells, its warm glow unlike anything you've ever felt before. You feel tempted to use it. You recall your brother's words from the dungeon once more. What did he mean?

CHOICE

The orb holds so much power. You could easily destroy Xaldor with it...or could you? You cannot even guess the extent of its power. You stare into the orb. You summarize your options: either you must use it or destroy it.

- • • • • *If you choose to use it, read on to Scene 8A.* • • • • •
- • • • • *If you choose to destroy it, skip to Scene 8B.* • • • • •





SCENE 8A

You lower your blade and pick up the orb to look deeper into it. The endless purplish swirl fills your sight and you feel power pulsing in your hands. The possibilities of the orb flood your mind. Perhaps you can use it to save your brother. Or maybe to destroy Xaldor. Maybe you could even become ruler of the kingdom. You could do marvelous things. You cannot stop the rush of thoughts running through your head. You slump, falling onto one knee. What's going on?

Xaldor laughs. "Did you really think you could use the orb? Cocky girl. Even the most advanced mages have a difficult time controlling it."

You are so numb, so cold. Trying to warm yourself proves useless since you can't even move your arms. Or legs. Powerless, you can only watch as Xaldor nears you. You attempt to speak, force him to stop, but the words trap in your throat.

He reaches for your lowered sword. Grabbing it from your limp hand, he turns it over and examines it. "In a different life I used one of these," he says glancing at the shimmering steel and moving to your side. "But I've since realized magic is much stronger. Still, this should do the trick." With both hands he grips your blade and drives it through the back of your neck.

You choke, gasping on the screams you were unable to produce. Your eyes widen. He pulls the sword from your throat, and you collapse against the stone floor, eyes glazed with death.

Xaldor throws the sword in front of you, picks up the orb, and starts to leave. "How poetic," he sneers.

The End.

SCENE 8B

You remember your brother's pale face and sunken eyes. You've never seen him look like that. You know he is dying; you can feel it, yet you saw no signs of struggle or wounds. What happened?

You glance at Xaldor. He has a wicked grin as he watches you. Shocked to catch you looking, he flinches back to his desperate look. He was trying to trick you! You now know what you must do.

You deny the orb's hold on you and raise your sword into the air. Xaldor shrieks, "No!" as you bring the heavy blade down on the orb's smooth surface. It cracks into hundreds of pieces and the wispy purple swirls blow away.

"My power! What have you done, wretched child?" Xaldor shrieks.

He flings his hand to his chest as it starts to ache, reaching for where a soul might once have been. He starts to blow away, his very being turning to dust as he reaches toward you. He falls forward as his legs become unable to support his body. He sprawls, still reaching, and you step back witnessing the rest of his form disintegrate. His face floods with agony as flecks of his eyes float away. He releases a scream as the last of his being drifts toward the ceiling. You can only imagine what your own fate might have been had you tried to use the orb. Walking toward the fading remains of his body, you push aside some of the dust with your leather boot. Even without knowing any magic, you realize Xaldor had gone too far. He abused the orb to the point of destroying himself in his quest for power.

A deep breath of life flashes through the entire castle, its strength overwhelming. You feel energy return to your body, energy you hadn't realized was leaving you. It must have been the orb wearing you down. Suddenly you find Ferrim standing next to you. He puts his hand on your shoulder, his strength recovered.

"Ferrim!" you say, delighted to see your brother looking better. His color has returned and he can walk once more.

"I figured you'd try to do something stupid like this," he says, smiling. "Thank you."

You return the smile. "No problem."

The door creaks open and you turn as footsteps approach. The king stands before you and you kneel with Ferrim. He waves his hand and says, "There's no need to bow." He glances around the room, taking notice of the glass shards strewn about the floor. "So you destroyed the orb."

"How did you know?" you ask, rising.

"My memory returned."

"Memories of what?"

"Xaldor was controlling me. He used the orb to brainwash me and

by the time I realized it, I was powerless to stop it.”

“Why did he want Ferrim?” you ask, glancing at your brother.

“He was trying to amass an army to take over the lands to the north. He believed that if he had the power of the mages, he could overtake them and rule as king of both this land and the north. And he almost succeeded,” King Rodarian says.

“He was using me...” Ferrim says.

“Yes. But you resisted him, challenging his plans.”

“It couldn’t have done that much,” Ferrim says. “I was close to death and about to give in.”

“Because you held on, he couldn’t gather all the magic he needed. Your resistance was noble,” King Rodarian says. “And you,” he says glancing your way. “Not only did you save this kingdom, but you saved the people of the lands to the north as well. They’re a peaceful people who we have no reason to wage war with. Who knows what treachery Xaldor would’ve wreaked on them?”

Ferrim places his hand on your shoulder, smiling at you with pride.

The king watches and returns a smile. “Both of you shall be knighted.”

You beam at your brother.

The king continues, “We could use more people like the two of you. If there’s ever anything you need, do not hesitate to tell me. Whatever it is will be granted.”

You glance at your brother once more, overcome with the feeling of victory.

The End.





Technology is means to the end



commit to what you remember



in the moment you first saw something you loved

*Notes From a Conference
Caroline Schaefer-Hills*

Alone Abroad

by Matthew Suehr



Lisa Cooper

Dearest Koriana,

At one moment these past four years have seemed an eternity, and the next I see your face in front of me as if I had just left your presence. Is it normal for another's likeness to stay so sharp in one's mind? I have read that even the faces of parents fade in the minds of their children that live on, and only in old photographs can they affirm specific details.

Please forgive the pseudonym that I have addressed this letter with, I couldn't write my real name for obvious reasons. Every morning I wake up to the first red rays of the sun as they tear apart the sable cloth of night. The chirping of birds begins well after I am awake, and it is their melodic singing that reminds me of home. The cackling of pheasants, aromatic fields of wheat, the light glinting off of father's axe as he cut wood for the stove.

But my subconscious reels in horror at those same scarlet beams, so similar to that fateful sunset that was the sigil of the events to come. As earth rolled her face away from the sun, so did God turn his face from mine.

But I shall not dwell on the bad. My days are not filled with depression and torment. My boots are still holding up; I keep the leather in good condition with shoe grease and have replaced the laces only once. The rubber soles give me sufficient traction in all terrains, whether it be the loose dirt of river banks or the misshapen granite blocks of the mountains. The water here is clean and pure. I found that I can drink without boiling or filtering it. Trout are plentiful, and catching them by hand has become a favorite pastime of mine. My archery skills have improved exponentially, fowl and stag alike have fallen to my cedar arrows. Admittedly, I have caught game using, how shall I say, unsound methods. I still recall the art of tannery when needed, and am able to trade furs for supplies at outposts I encounter.

That brings up another matter: people! Never have I felt such a need for company as I do now, even if they are so different than any others that I have known. I understand their language, but when I try to speak I sound like a man after having his fill of beer or fire wine.

The clear, offensive liquid is a local delicacy. They make it from a large tuber that grows here called paka. Its skin is brown like an ordinary

***"As earth rolled
her face away
from the sun, so
did God turn his
face from mine."***

potato but its flesh is dark blue, almost purple. Large quantities are mashed in cauldrons of water. The cauldron is left alone for many days until it starts to smell of vinegar, and then it is heated with a curious orange metal device on top of it. The steam is cooled, collected, and bottled for consumption. I think you would like it, the way it numbs one's senses like a fire burns the bark off a log without consuming the log itself. When my exploring has been especially profitable, it keeps me warm in my loneliness.

When I first arrived on this continent it was overwhelming. Stepping off that three-mast ship and onto solid ground was queer. I had grown accustomed to its pitching and rolling, both of which I still felt for several days. The long voyage across the sea was the most taxing. Food and water ran out, the wine was almost gone, and some passengers had started to spread sickness.

We passed through the Gates of the Gods, a narrow passage between high cliff faces, and flowed into that miniature ocean encased by continents. Here we were able to buy supplies and get rid of "risky" people. It may seem barbaric to dump someone off in a foreign port alone and unwell, but everyone assured me it was for the greater good. Disease can burn through a ship's crew in a matter of days.

After rounding the great boot-shaped peninsula of that region, which I am told used to be the seat of power in mankind's infancy, we zigzagged along its coast until coming to port on the opposite shore. One passenger, a scholar of sorts, told me there were once great metal ships that pushed themselves across the seas without wind, using some sort of fuel extracted from the ground. I did not believe him. Especially when he went on to say there were also giant bird machines that could carry hundreds of people into the sky, but the wars that once consumed the planet had devoured all the sources of energy, and much of the technology was destroyed. Such wishful nonsense made me chuckle, but I have experienced things more fantastic still, so perhaps he was telling the truth.

Deubruvniek is a hive of diverse mongrels, natural for any major port. I used my iron will to cleave through crowds to every known collector of ancient texts. I had a sinking feeling I would not find what I had come here for no matter how hard I looked. I lie; it was more than a feeling: perhaps a premonition, an instinct, or a whispering at the back of my skull.

Walking through an alley of low caste denizens, I found myself strolling down a set of flagstone steps into a low-ceilinged

"...it was more than a feeling: perhaps a premonition, an instinct, or a whispering at the back of my skull."

pub. Lumpy tallow candles shed little light in the smoke filled main room. After drinking a few cups of watered down wine, I turned to see a middle-aged man sitting three seats to my left, reading a gray, deteriorated book. The binding had been replaced, but the cover matched all descriptions I had come by. The man looked up with his cobalt eyes, saw the direction of my gaze and said, "Late is the hour. The more you wait the worse it will be."

Further inquiry only brought on a feline smirk and hysteric bouts of laughter, until I grew so unnaturally furious that I accosted the gentleman and threw him across the bar top into fellow patrons. He merely stood up, brushed his jacket and walked out of the pub, laughing the whole way. The book still lay on the bar top, so I snatched it despite the fearful looks that followed me. A few pages of reading in my cramped hotel room sent a jolt of exhilaration up my spine, for it was the book I had been hoping to find, the journal of our ancestor Krodin Bastel, also referred to as the Black Star.

Now I have followed Krodin's entries into these maliciously beautiful mountains, but I must be honest, the journal has not been my only guide. The persistent instinct that pushed me across the ocean is not merely an instinct, it is a voice. At first it was barely audible, a mumbling in the leaves rattling in the wind. It wasn't until the setting of that crimson sun that I heard it clearly and felt its power. Resistance only caused me insufferable pain. Tendrils of a dominating consciousness crawled across my brain. I don't know how else to describe it. I had the impression a dark figure stood behind me, breathing on the back of my neck, but I couldn't see anyone.

Koriana, I have come to my destination but do not know what the bowels of Earth have in store for me. Most likely my mind will perish, or my body consumed by some gibbering monstrosity waiting in the sunless kingdom. Only time will tell.

I hope you find some peace from this letter. Do not show this to mother and father. I did not mean to hurt those people. May their souls rest in peace.

Sincerely,

Alekzandr Rondul

Koriana,

You could not believe what I have found. Science must be one of many avenues for wisdom for such a thing to exist. I have passed the trials, whole and somewhat sane. They are different for everyone, so I can see no harm in trying to explain.

Each level of the cave challenges a different part of you, focusing on your strengths and weaknesses. Just remember that they are designed to be difficult; persevere and overcome until you reach the end. Come as fast as you can, the instincts will guide you. I am positive you are starting to experience them as I write.

"Large as an ox its black fur glistened in the dying sun, red eyes blazed in hellish fury."

Do not fight it as I did, do not disbelieve—that's how I lost control back home. Those villagers just wouldn't stop kicking that dog, and the power used my anger as a vessel. Before I knew it, green tendrils shot out of my hand and enveloped the dog, turning it into some sort of hellhound. Large as an ox its black fur glistened in the dying sun, red eyes blazed in hellish fury. They didn't have a chance.

Together we can change the world and restore our family to glory. I no longer fear the feudal justice of home, nor will I hide in fear. The cosmic tide is rising, sister, and we shall ride the crest across the planet.

Strength Above All,
Vladimir Bastel



Lisa Cooper

by Liam Strong

Hell is What You Make It

The forest sighs dreamless as we skirt the hem of buried country suffocated with rot. The Easttown men in Grand Rapids who used to live nearby in Burton Heights suggested we go north for refuge, straddle the highway until we reach what looks like sea. People cross the straits to die happy, they said. Or hinted with fear. We've been dead since Lomarkey or maybe even Springfield, traveling from one safe haven to the next throughout the Midwest, the last few evacuated from oncoming traces of the haze. Who knows where we lost the will to live or accept death on our shoulders. There never was a difference. If braving fear is anything like hardening your heart against cold, I've long been frozen.

After we left Cincinnati two years ago, sometimes I would sleep outside our tent and gaze into whatever sky peeked through the overcast. Only after Shai went to sleep. Latent sapphire gleamed beneath the grey algae of night. It's hard to forget any city. We couldn't afford sleeping outside in the Grand Rapids' safe havens, the couple months we stayed after our Saturn died. Vehicles are equally as difficult to afford and find now. We drove all through the night some days. Took turns sleeping. On my shift I'd still use turn signals. I don't know what we're running from; we can't see it. Maybe running is too drastic. Searching. In the sky before sleep encroaches, there sometimes are meteor showers, sprays of them, dissolving in the clear. They streak for a moment, disappear into faint sparkle. Like they're hitting something.

There's an anthem of silence in my head droning with the velveteen haze that looms in the troposphere. Most mornings the only sound I hear is the light wisp of wind brushing against Shai's hoodie. Her hair wavering as if it were a golden flame under morning white. The sun's silk shatters sleep, and we take rations of pork and juice boxes trekking cross country. I tell her I'm starting to see buildings made of cloud and furniture from the trees. She holds my face, closes her eyes, begs that I stop, or just focus on her forehead, or something that resembles mortality. The tighter I hang onto her, the less my eyes seem to sink into my skull.

She knows I'm starting to lose tension in my arms with each passing day. I know it.

In Cincinnati, caramel tongues of pollution twirled their taste into sky-cheek. I fell in

**"I don't know
what we're
running from; we
can't see it."**

love with Shai unknowingly before her diagnosis. I still taste the bittersweet of chapped lips from smoke and tea. Words rotted when I stood with her foster mother in the hospital bedroom.

Maybe that was the moment I knew my life had no meaning or weight or unfurling root. Some days I wanted to sneak her out of the hospital so her words could linger in my ears without collapsing midair. In eight months the chemo claimed her ovaries and I sealed my life in death. I kissed the shine of her head once and know. To think that enough time would pass by and her frailty would reverse unto me.

I look back now and wonder whether or not she should have lived. I try not to mull over it. There's nothing anyone could have done. Survival and recovery are two different probabilities. There's no proper way to feel about any of this.

"You never had to stay, you idiot. You could have broken up with me and I would have been fine," she said once, at the Cincinnati haven before it was evacuated.

I chuckled. "I don't believe you."

She grinned. "Seriously, you might say you're madly in love with me, but we can't have kids. Or at least I can't. And we can't have any grandiose wedding now, either."

"Love's pretty bitchin', though."

"Or just a stone cold bitch." She started to undress to take a bath. "I'm sorry about that, by the way."

"Don't be, there's a certain charm to it," I said, smiling. I didn't feel lust around her; there was no point.

It's been two years since the blank haze first permeated the ozone. Patches of the afflicted developed in cities: people seeing monstrosities those negative in testing could not see. Hallucinations of demons, hellish dreamscapes, otherworldly creatures. Shai said it reminded her of violent and hostile cases of PTSD or even paranoid schizophrenia. And because of that, not contractible. Instead, mass hysteria. We knew where to go and where not. Evade the quarantined, sidle what seems to be locally unaffected. I don't know how we've survived. The haze looks like mangle when it blankets countrysides. People swell indigo and sugar. Claw out their eyes to dictate reality from a nightmarish cataract. Blind themselves. Suicide. Senselessly slaughter those who garnered an appearance of the demonic or supernatural.

We haven't seen a believer in months, haven't heard any news of panacea or redirecting the population, or an updated map of the zonal predictions of heightened radiation or fungi or whatever the hell it is. I've heard the west coast is safest, or the north. The east coast was definitely hit the hardest. To be honest it makes no difference, knowing what's best or not. All I know is that I don't want to believe.

I think it is October. I couldn't say what day, but Shai probably knows. We can see the coast of Lake Michigan miles to our left, the morning flashing the lake alchemic. Any little town we passed along the way looked like a ruin, not for

"All I know is that I don't want to believe."

depreciation but abandonment. Most stores still have food, and clothing isn't exactly hard to come by, either, especially in houses. Sometimes we're lucky to find a working water fountain.

She's still sleeping this morning, so I won't wake her. I walk to the highway, its damp eczema strewn with wind's uncertain clutter. Fast food snack wrappers. Plastic bottles forgotten of semblance. I can't see our camp from the road, which is good. I want to smile in relief, but it will be short lived, I'm sure.

Further along the highway I notice the sodden hulk of a billboard, its once vivid advertisement blotted with estranged graffiti. Extremist symbols. Like a split womb or a divided planet. Humming with fear, pleading me leave. I glance back down the road while walking toward the billboard. It could be quite old by now. Even so, I don't feel alone. The trees grin black, cupping last night's rain in jagged smiles.

There is nothing under the billboard or further down the highway. I cut down to the edge of the forest, return to camp deeper in the woods. Shai is awake, and I can tell she hasn't been for long. She's writing in her journal, a daily morning ritual.

"You took a walk?"

"Just out to the road. Sky looks clearer than back in Burton Heights already." I kneel by her side.

She looks at me looking down. "What else did you see?"

I don't want to tell her. I start searching through my backpack for something to eat.

She places her finger under my chin. "You know something I don't. We look like ghosts; I can tell when you've seen another."

I meet her eyes with a sidelong glance. I'm scared, but keep calm. "Castrato. I saw the insignia on a billboard a little ways up the road."

She breathes. I drown, waiting for her. "We didn't think they'd come this far north," she says.

"I don't think anyone did."

We first heard the word ring from inside her foster mother's house where the small television seemed to just pass it by. A month later we heard rumors. A season later the psychiatric wards were empty, conditioned patients fleeing across the countryside, dividing into sects of rampage. Men and women who had manipulated the haze's effects, but we recognized it as a sort of controlled psychopathy. Occult and brimming with the hate of never seeing humanity again. These were all cases of highly positive infection, the frontal lobe of the brain and the pituitary gland almost completely sprouted with the illness. They said all men must die because no one should have to live the way they do. They earned the name from slaying the inner demons of their clouded vision, but also because they sterilized themselves in the process of their own salvation. They believe. Are believers. That God can't see us through the haze now.

Castrato.

Like the opera singers who did so to reach the highest notes, the greatest voices

they could. They'd give up fertility for legacy. I heard them sing on an old record my music teacher played once in high school. They sounded like angels, howling.

Before we left the Cincinnati haven, we heard about a pack of castrato that entered the city, picking off stragglers. As we hid in our tiny apartment waiting for the military to arrive, we watched the castrato prowl the streets through the curtains. Some twitched when they stared at something for too long, others shrieked when they saw another human, or whatever the people were in their eyes. The castrato were able to distinguish their own kind from ordinary people by the symbols they etched into their shriveled skin, insignia specific to their clan. Not like the believers who just think they've seen a ghost. No. More like an irreversible hell. Shai whispered behind me as we peered out our second floor window, "I'm just like them, when you think about it."

"No, you're not," I retorted. I knew what she meant. "You're sassy, but not psychotic."

"Well, you have a point there. But it's strange how much they look like us—you know, like average people—they just have that look in their eye, you know?"

"Are you saying we're just average?"

"Fine, just you." She smiled.

We decide to continue due north, after some time of silent contemplation in camp. Nervous, I begin to see in the corners of my eyes dainty black silhouettes of dead trees peeking around each other. Burnt bones stark with rot, creeping to reach out. I can't tell if it is my own inherent anxiety or the haze causing this, but I make sure Shai keeps close behind me either way. To retain some semblance of sanity. To keep her safe. I have a cleaver hidden on the underside of my backpack I salvaged from an old butcher shop months ago and my worst fear may be holding it for its intended purpose. I worry about our footsteps not being our own, crunching on the leaves.

After an hour the forest dips into a valley, swampland diverting onto our path.

"It'll take us twice as long going straight through. We'd probably make a bit of noise, too," Shai says, standing at the edge of soggy marsh ground.

"Well, we can't take the road. It's too exposed."

"I never said I was against the swamp," she says.

The second to last phone call I ever received was from my brother. He told me he saw dad. My brother described that when dad came in, drenched in sweat, he asked where mom was after changing his clothes. His face was still dark and full. My brother's voice shook as he explained it all. He sounded like a child again.

We were talking on the phone, my brother and I, but I turned the car away from Decorah where he conducted his end of the conversation, for fear of the haze. We were headed there on less than half a tank. This was shortly after the onset of the world's calamity. I asked my brother if Abby was making dinner, said that we're on our way. He said yeah, she's out getting groceries now. I told him he should tell her dad's home.

**"Burnt bones
stark with
rot, creeping to
reach out."**

I didn't tell him how long dad's been dead. He wouldn't believe me. The last phone call I received was dial tone, from Abby, his girlfriend. I knew what it implied. He was probably trying to kill her, or already had.

It wasn't until much later that I realized Shai was the only family I had left.

I wake from the same dream, of my brother going mad and attempting to kill Abby. I doubt she could have even stayed at the hospital with him, let alone the town, because of the haze. We went the whole day yesterday undeterred. No movement, no life. In spite of this, I worry for Shai's strength, faded from the cancer, how slow we seemed to go, how she tried to hide her exhaustion. We could be ambushed at any moment.

**"Outside the tent
there are scars
of footprints"**

I walk out to the edge of the forest to view the road. I see a wall of fog as the road descends into another valley. Hovering in the air, a faint whiff of smoke. Then the faint screech of something inhuman. For a moment, I think a bird, seagull, even. But I creep back to camp because I fear the worst, and my fears expand when I look inside our shabby tent.

She isn't there.

Outside the tent there are scars of footprints, as if there was a scuffle. It's difficult to tell where any of the prints lead, but I notice how thrashed a patch of ferns surrounding our clearing is. Leaves are pressed deep into the earth. My eyes follow the indents deeper into the woods. I find her knife on the ground, open, trickled with red. Slumped over a few feet away is the filthy body of a castrato, low in the ferns. I press my shoe hard on its neck; it doesn't move or make a sound.

Slipping back to the tent, I shuffle through my bag for a clean shirt and pants. The cleaver. It's in my hands even as I put my jacket on. The air suddenly feels piercingly cold, empty. I chase nothing deeper into the forest. Uncertainty. Her name pulses in my skull but I grind my jaw closed to not scream it aloud. Glimpses of her gaze stilted lifeless. Pale with the golden fire of her hair in wisps across her face. Blurry at the edges. In a moment she's behind every tree, eyes whiter with each crunch of my feet on the forest floor. I try to blink reality back into shape, keep the sting of sweat out of my eyes. When I finally distort the tangle from the haze, I collapse from a blow to the chest. Could be a branch. But I feel it unfurl and tower above me. Fist raised, a bony knob to my cheek. I flip Shai's knife downward in my palm and jab into emaciated thigh. The castrato wriggles and I shove it off me, heaving the knife out. Its eyes flare black at me before I slide to my knees and smash the cleaver into its brow. I grab it by its scrawny neck and hack again, same place. It falls in a clump as I let go, landing on a heavy oak branch.

My mind collects itself as I glance uneasily at the limp rag of the castrato, skin veiled with dirt, yet so pale. It looks like it could have worked in an office in its previous life. It terrifies me from the inside out that this was once someone I could have passed on the street, back when. Oblivious. Another human not unlike myself. Brain recomposed to catastrophe.

There are so many adventures to recall... where do I begin? Do you remember when we went to the Air and Space Museum in D.C.? How you were so amazed, enamored by the large scale of all of it, but you tried to hide your childlike wonder because of me? You shouldn't have done that; I may not have enjoyed it as much as you did but I would've been happy because you were.

Maybe you've forgotten this, but I never could: on your twenty-second birthday, when you blew out the cheap dime-store candle I bought, you left a huge glob of saliva on the cake. That was gross—I'm pretty sure I puked a little, but I didn't let you see my skin turn green.

The more memorable times I'm sure you recall—when we went to the beach last summer, and your butter pecan ice cream fell off the cone into the sand and you started to fake-cry. All I could think was *why would anyone ever like butter pecan ice cream?* Then you smiled and laughed, a ringing bell in my ear that was warming to the soul. I knew you were okay. That night we slept in my bed, your eyes fluttering in a struggle to stay open, breathing slowly and falling into a steady rhythm. Soon, my words echoed into the room with no one to hear them but me. It was okay.

Our first trip together to your parents' house on Christmas Eve; how god-awful was that? The road was covered in ice and slush, but you swore you would make it there. Four hours passed before we arrived, a proud grin splashed across your already rosy cheeks. I lost my balance on a patch of ice right before the door and fell flat on my ass in front of your endearing mother. My sore, freezing bum was on the forefront of my mind while cordially shaking your father's calloused hand.

"Then you smiled and laughed, a ringing bell in my ear that was warming to the soul."

Dinner was mediocre but a permanent smile remained on my face for its duration. The ham was so overcooked and dry I had to drink my cabernet between each bite. You loved every bit of it, soaking in the glow of the Christmas lights draped on the evergreen and faux presents gathered around the base of it. The damp smell of dog lingered in every room from the beloved Weston—stupid as he was, he was the friendliest retriever I've met to this day.

But these times of pleasure and life were interspersed with why-the-fuck-am-I-still-doing-this moments. I don't have to remind you of that. In Colorado, when we ended up stranded with no gas on a desolate back road, I was pissed off and you stormed away into the woods and stayed until I drug you out. We didn't speak for the rest of the night. Then in Maine—the night of the snowstorm, our honeymoon night—I had expected romance and candles (and to get laid, preferably) but you couldn't put aside the inconvenience of not having a bathtub. I told you the shower was big enough for two, but you didn't find my comment funny or arousing. I slept on the couch.

We even went out of the country and couldn't get away from the arguments. The trip to Mexico was a disaster: waiters giving us the wrong food, both of us vomiting from sickness in the water, and not a single shot of tequila before we went home early. Italy was better, probably because it hurt my wallet a lot more. You were more concerned with the scenery and art than paying attention to me.

All of these adventures, millions of miles covered in my ugly brown station wagon, and I still can't find a reason to stop this letter and throw it away. Hundreds of days spent together, sleeping together, being together... and yet I feel the need to make this choice. Maybe it's because I haven't seen your face, maybe because I'm a cold-hearted asshole. Hell, maybe 'fate' is a real and breathing force and it doesn't want us to be together. I guess it's something that I'll never understand.

Even now I think about you and I can't be angry. Reading back through the things I've written, I can't cut you out. All of these memories, even the bitter ones, were made livable because you were there. Our circumstances were dire at times and we butted heads nearly every other day, but I still desired to be with you. I guess a part of me still wants that, and I'm only realizing now when it's most inconvenient.

Am I seeing us through rose-colored glasses, or do I not give our strange relationship enough credit? Is distance making my heart grow fonder or is this something I need to reconsider? You probably don't care. You've probably found another sorry guy to woo and cure of his unhappiness with your ridiculous smile and unbearably charming attitude. No matter where we went you always seemed to make the passersby, waiters, and bystanders smile—a bona fide ball of sunshine. And I, the dreary cloud you bothered to marry, followed in the shadow of your brightness.

Are epiphanies real? Why am I even writing this, as though you're going to read it and ask yourself the same question? You won't, you never will. You'll never read these words or cry about my crudeness or my abject way of seeing our marriage, though I guess it wouldn't be surprising to you.

In the end, I guess I wrote all this nonsense as my excuse to do the wrong thing, to validate an idea I knew was wrong from the start. I wasted a month because of this disfigured notion that my relationship should be better when it's been okay from the start. I feel like I should come up with a nice closing note, which is ridiculous because it's going to end up in the trash anyway. I'll see you soon, I guess.

"And I, the dreary cloud you bothered to marry, followed in the shadow of your brightness."

Nichole Hartley



Inside Your Eyes

By Amanda Coddington

Alex,

I need for you to know that I never meant for this. I thought that this time things could be different. I wanted so badly for your love to be enough, but my soul yearns to be free. If I could go back to our beginning, the beginning of Elle and Alex, and do it all over again just to have the same ending, I would. I don't regret a single moment of our love.

Our journey was so passionate, so profound, that my once daunted heart became brave. I truly believed that I was forsaken. But because of you I had hope. You gave me something back I never believed I could have again. Falling for you couldn't have been more perfect. The tenderness in your touch sent a thrill through my body igniting my very soul. I became a slave to my own passion, a fate I would never let befall me again. I hope you'll find it in yourself to forgive me for the choices that I have made. Leaving you behind was one of the hardest things I've had to do, but the moment I walked out on you, I also walked out on the girl who's been running for so long. I had let myself and every part of me go. I didn't even recognize the face on this girl anymore. I couldn't leave without you knowing this secret, this lie I've been living with. And no matter how you choose to feel about by the end of this letter I want you to consider one thing: what lies are stronger than the lie of love?

"It wasn't the forever promise of life-long adventure I was hoping for."

I know how confusing this must feel, me leaving like this, and I find myself equally confused since I'm still wearing your ring. But you must know that I've had a ring on this very same finger once before. Although that ring came with a heavy price. It wasn't the forever promise of life-long adventure I was hoping for. I was young, and completely enthralled in lust and power, but I had no clue what would be brought into and become of my life, altogether

mesmerized by the commanding presence of respect my former fiancé had. People came to respect me because they respected him, and it wasn't long before I had realized what a mistake I had made. I had lost all control. This life I was living in--it wasn't freedom--I had no choice. Every day I was confronted with my own personal hell that only I knew I was living in. I was being suffocated, washed away. I desperately needed to start over new and find that girl I could recognize again.

It was then that I made the hardest decision of my life. I, rather Ellianna, had to die. She had to die before I could be happy. She had to die before I could even have a chance at life, at forgiveness, at retribution. I couldn't let myself become what I wasn't, my every action, my every breath, dictated to me. I had lost myself.

Since that night my sleep has been plagued with the choking smell of smoke. In my mouth I still taste the metallic tang of blood as it fills, and instantly feel nauseous. Night after night my stomach would clench with the icy cold fear of his fingers wrapped around my neck,



"I, rather Ellianna, had to die. She had to die before I could be happy. "

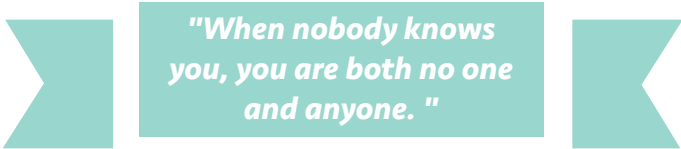


fighting desperately to stay conscious, struggling with everything I had. I couldn't lose myself to him. I belonged to the man that I feared the most.

I really should have known you can only outrun the past, outrun your own fate for so long. Maybe I am forsaken. Secrets never seem to stay dead, no matter how badly you want to silence

them. When I look at this beautiful ring you've put on my finger I'm reminded of the life I once had, and the life that's being threatened now. I can't let myself surrender to the reality of choosing to become part of another person.

Alex, I'm not trying to punish you. I'm preserving what's left of me. I need to find myself again, to be in complete control of my life. Letting go of everything that's become so familiar will be my only redemption, the one way I'll be able to muster enough courage. This is why I have to leave, leave, leave the lie behind. Understand that I had to run, to explore the longing



*"When nobody knows
you, you are both no one
and anyone. "*

within myself. When nobody knows you, you are both no one and anyone.

So what lie is greater than the lie of love? I'm still not sure if I can answer this. Maybe it's the lies we tell ourselves so we don't have to face our own truth. I can't be sure, but what I can tell you is that here alone my heart aches for you, and my sanity has wandered off, and everything else I had seems to have left me. When I look into your eyes I'm mystified by the very light I see within, but when I close mine there's only darkness. I think somewhere deep down I already knew, from the very first time you promised me we'd create our own story that someday I would look into your eyes and be haunted by the thought of me that I killed. That girl, Ellianna, she never truly died. In fact, she haunts me everyday living alone inside your eyes.

Before you find this letter it will be nothing but flame turned to ash, and my memory will become just a shadow of a dream. Just a fiery figment of the passion that together we once held.

Whatever lies next,

E

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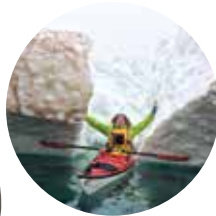
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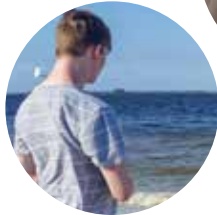
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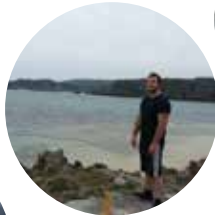
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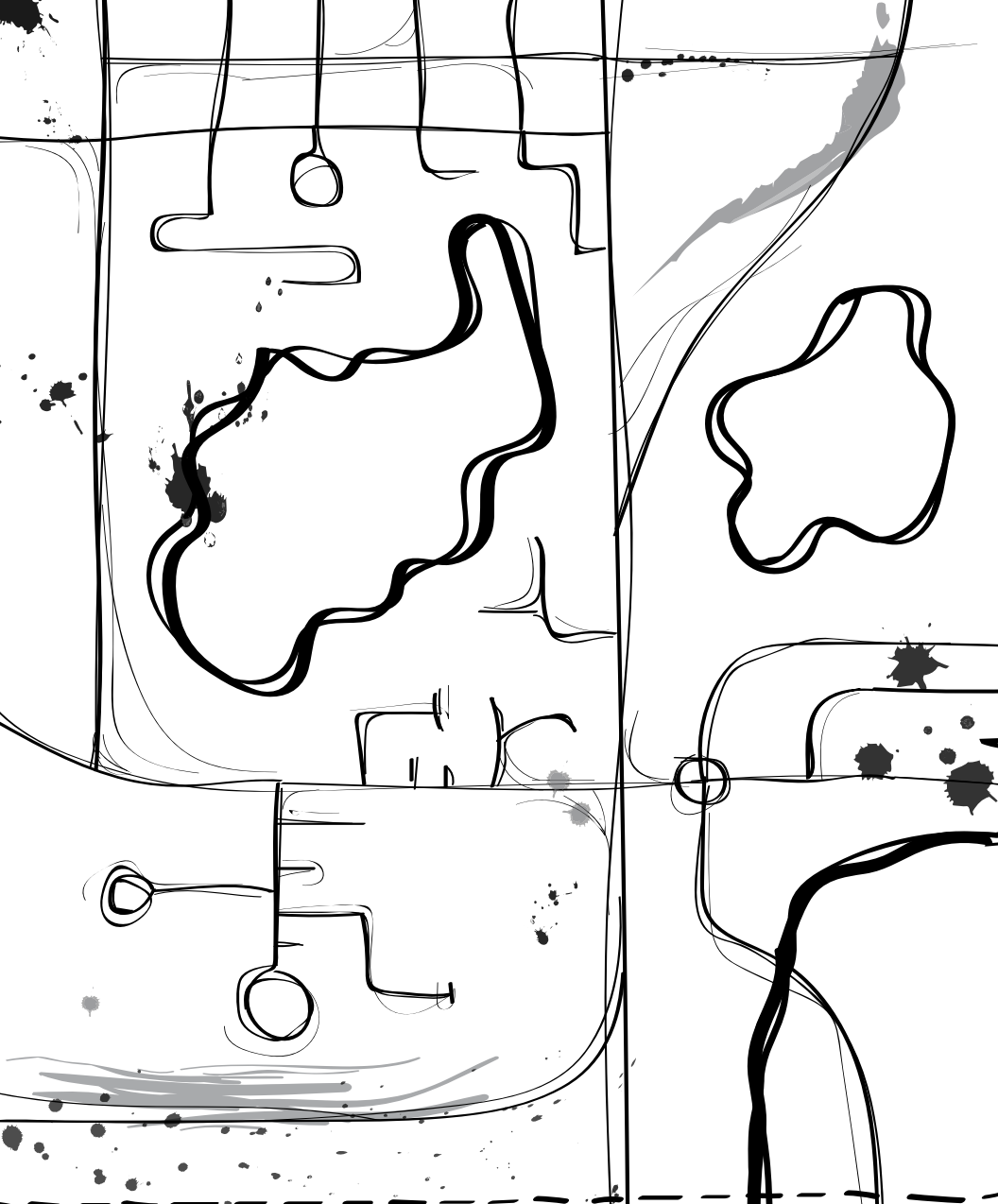
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