TEEN WRITING
CONTEST &
NED VIZZINI TEEN
WRITING PRIZE
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About Ned Vizzini

Ned Vizzini (1981–2013) was raised in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and began writing for the New York Press at the age of 15. At 19, he published Teen Angst? Naaah..., the autobiography of his years at Stuyvesant High School. His debut teen novel, Be More Chill, was named a Best Book of the Year by Entertainment Weekly and selected for the Today Show Book Club by Judy Blume. It’s Kind of a Funny Story was adapted into a feature film and was named one of the 100 Best-Ever Teen Novels by National Public Radio. The Other Normals, his third novel, was a Junior Library Guild selection. He also wrote for television, including MTV’s hit show Teen Wolf. His books have been translated into 25 languages.

The Ned Vizzini Teen Writing Prize

Spring 2016 marked the launch of the Ned Vizzini Teen Writing Prize, which includes cash awards for the winners of Brooklyn Public Library’s Teen Writing Contest. Ned was not only a tremendously gifted author—one who started writing professionally at age 15—he was also a dedicated mentor to young writers. Among the advice he gave to aspiring writers was to read widely, write from their hearts, and seek readers to provide feedback.

The Prize is made possible by the generosity of Ned’s family, friends and fans.

Letter from the President & CEO

Students from all five boroughs submitted over 800 entries to the Ned Vizzini Teen Writing Contest this year, covering a wide range of topics including friendship, dreams, dystopia and much more. One student imagines a fierce underground battle in New York’s subways and sewers. Another writes about getting ready for dance class while watching a tragedy unfold at home.

Many students submitted entries about the stresses of everyday life: party invitations, diets, school, best friends and the near constant desire to simply fit in—like one young poet who considers whether she spends too much time on her phone, too much time thinking about a boy, too much time pleasing everyone but herself. Ned Vizzini, the acclaimed writer for whom this contest is named, would have surely recognized those struggles. His autobiography, Teen Angst? Naaah..., captured his own high school years in New York City, managing homework, parents and college applications. Vizzini, a born and bred New Yorker, often worked out of Central Library. We are grateful to his family for their continued support of New York’s aspiring writers—and to all of the parents, teachers, librarians and caregivers who supported this year’s applicants.

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**Probably**  
*Stella Dempsey*

Probably gonna get ink poisoning by the time I turn 18  
Probably gonna get skin cancer cause I don’t wear enough sunscreen  
Probably gonna die from standards set too high  
Probably probably probably there’s one thing I gotta learn  
What probably means is that you don’t know for sure  

Probably should stop thinking about that guy  
Probably should stop being so shy  
Probably should stop being a doormat  
Probably should start sharing how I feel and talking back  
Probably should stop playing pretend  
Probably should stop thinking about us being friends  
Probably probably probably there’s one thing I gotta learn  
If you live by probably you probably will get burned  

They tell you to make a move  
To speak your mind  
What if what I say will be less than kind  
One of my favorite things to do is not get a clue  
They say you only live once  
Thanks I hear that a bunch  

Probably gonna do some things I will regret  
Probably should make decisions on my own  
Probably should start getting off my phone  
Probably should stop being so selfish  
Probably should stop being so selfless  
People pleaser but not a people person  
That’s probably just the way it works.

---

**Unbreakable**  
*Gia Occean*

In the quiet corners of our hearts,  
Where dreams bloom like wildflowers,  
We are the architects of our own destiny,  
Crafting stories from stardust and courage.  

We are the daughters of forgotten queens,  
The sisters who whispered secrets to the moon,  
Our laughter echoes through time’s tapestry,  
A symphony of unyielding souls.  

Bold we stand, like sunflowers reaching for the sky,  
Our roots anchored in defiance, our petals fierce,  
We wear our scars like battle ribbons,  
For they tell tales of survival, of rising from ashes.  

In a world that measures worth by waistlines,  
We refuse to be squeezed into one-size-fits-all molds,  
Our bodies—canvas for resilience, not critique,  
We paint our stretch marks with constellations.  

To be loved, we need no permission slip,  
Our hearts beat revolutions, our voices roar,  
We dance on shattered glass ceilings,  
Our anthem: “Unbreakable, unyielding, unsworn.”  

So let the world tremble, let it witness our might,  
For we are the daughters of fire, the architects of light,  
In unity, we rise—a symphony of unapologetic grace,  
Winning material? Nay, darling, we’ve already won the race.
Where I’m From
Tamira Bradshaw

I’m from bright lights in the city streets 
From the smells and sounds of the train 
I am from loud conversations at game nights 
I am from mischievous looks after someone puts a card down 
I am from jerk chicken, coco bread, and chicken empanizado 
I am from the rhythms of Cuban music and the soothing sound of 
Jamaican reggae 
I am from the different shades of brown of my people 
From soft hands that hold me when I need them 
I am from fast speakers and even faster dancers 
From laughs and smiles that can light up a city 
I am from tears and cries that fill the church when someone dies 
From red, blue, white, black, green and gold of the flags I represent 
I am from fluffy, coily, soft, and brittle hair 
From dark brown eyes and deep dimples 
I am from athletes, dancers, singers, writers, and hard workers 
From people who help this city run and keep it safe 
I am from these people and these places…

I am Tamira

Welcome to New York
Alan Kofman

Blue Jordans, laces untied and dragging. 
Hands drowning in the sleeves of a hoodie. 
Black Yankees cap pulled to the side, 
Because why not?

Pizza on a flaky paper plate, 
Dripping sauce onto the asphalt 
That people run from all over the world 
To see and touch and marvel at.

The sun is hiding behind the skyline 
That pokes the sky in a million different places. 
The Freedom Tower stabs a passing cloud 
Straight into its wispy heart.

A car honks, tires screech, and the asphalt 
Suddenly becomes adorned with rubber 
That nicely compliments the red blotches 
Of tomato sauce. Subtle beauty.

The air is cold and crisp, but still 
Flavored with the cultures of millions 
Who have inhaled and exhaled in it. 
You take a deep breath and add yourself to the mix.

A vendor is screaming something. 
It is impossible to hear, only to see 
The familiar words sprawled on the T-shirt: 
Welcome to New York.
Monster Dream
Jeffrey Ortigoza

The cold air shivers
In my bed I quiver
Scratching from my closet
Not sure what caused it
Might just be the dog
From my closet comes some fog
And out comes a monster
Eyes red like a cooked lobster
Chilling voice speaks
Sends tears down my cheeks
He says he eats little kids
Eats the flesh off their ribs
He leans in much closer
I scream at him “NO SIR!”
Takes a big ole bite
And I awaken with fright

Contemplating Vincent van Gogh’s Bedroom in Arles
Saviane Frazier

Green shadows
Stand out on the floor
What disguises itself as light
Remains as simply dappled paint

This hidden away room
This tucked away room
With its golden light
In the window
Blended carefully,
With the cluttered nightstand
The hanging pictures

All comes to the person
A hidden person
A tucked away person.
With a dislike for the sun
Or perhaps they have left the room
Which will sit dejectedly
Hidden away

Until that person
Returns
To sit on the bed in the dark, with a
Contented feeling.
There is a light on in the bathroom
In Praise of Darkness

Nadia Kelley

In the darkness I am not seen,
I am neither forgotten nor remembered
I am sent to the corner of the classroom
All eyes staring at something they cannot see

Darkness is the monster under my bed that wants a friend
It is the shadows that lure me in my sleep
It is the ghost that watches me with envy

Darkness is the place I run to after the light has blinded me
It is the place where sadness is accepted
A place that I can hide from all who try to find me
It is the place that no one would expect when playing a game of hide-and-seek in my house
It is my secret weapon

Darkness is the unknown territory that most are scared of
It is the reason kids close their closet doors at night
The reason they check under their bed
The fear that darkness will find a way to reach them
Through the cracks of the closet door
Up from under their bed

Darkness is the monster called death
The future most humans are scared to accept
The monster they will run from
For some, the monster they will run to

Darkness is my escape from the world that not yet understands me
Darkness is often thought of as the opposite of light
Though it is what creates light
It is the moment before the lightbulb is clicked
The time before the sun comes up
The picture you see when you close your eyes

I find the monster that wants to be set free
Not yet I say, not yet

I wonder what darkness has gone through?
What have you done to become what you are now?

She needs to wash her laundry, but it's in the basement
She doesn't want to go through all the possibilities of darkness catching her
The possibility of tripping down the stairs
The possibility of being locked out of the comfort of her home
That is what darkness is, the unknown

I see darkness everyday
I see it in the empty house across the street
what used to be a house filled with joy
Now its owner is deceased
I see it in the broken-down car I see everyday
Abandoned, could have been beautiful
I see it in the man I see as I walk to school everyday
You have to accept
Darkness is everywhere
Melting Memories
Tiffany Liew

I was too young to remember that one day in late December, after we packed all of our things into boxes for us to bring, as if they could fit our treasures and ten years’ worth of memories. But I remember the regret and guilt of leaving everything behind to wilt, the trees we climbed in, dotted with snow and fallen leaves by the lamp post’s glow.

I try to remember the days spent in our yard, basking in winter’s scent until the horizon brimmed with stars and the soft snow was shoveled afar. I reminisce about our friends next door and if they think of us anymore, secrets passed from our balconies that drifted away in the misty breeze. I wonder if the streets miss us too, the ones that watched us grow and cross through for years to get to school around the block, or if our presence had faded like chalk.

In the sullen night, we drove away following clouds of snow and gray, picturing our rooms being replaced, empty as if we left without a trace. If only we were frozen in time, the feeling of home would last a lifetime, but the moments there all seem to fade like the sky dimming to an icy shade. I remember it more than ever, but even December isn’t forever, so I let the memories trail and go like our footprints in the melting snow.

Essential Trio
Samantha Partridge

In my bag, a world in miniature lies, Chapstick, a token for lips soft and kind, Ten dollars, a treasure for unforeseen buys, And a phone, a portal to a vast mind.

With Chapstick, whispers of comfort and care, In winter’s chill or summer’s blazing sun, Ten dollars, a promise of moments rare, A small fortune for joy, just begun.

The phone, a beacon in the darkest night, Connecting souls against the miles apart, In its glowing screen, futures take flight, And memories etch themselves upon the heart.

So in my bag this trio does reside, Chapstick, cash, and phone, my constant guide.
Telephone
Rohan Tobey

Guess what I saw today.
A glass front door.
Why would you make a front door glass?

But why? I mean,
It feels like it is destroying the purpose of a door
Showing the inside, instead of protecting it.

People always have something to hide.
Otherwise, why would there be a door?

Ooh, but it’s kind of ugly.

Yeah, I guess.

But

Seriously though,
Why make your front door all clear glass?

It was a rhetorical question.
Jeez, sorry I asked.

come on, man, don’t explode, contain your blast.

Speaking of blasts,
My model rocket exploded.
Filled the engine with too many combustibles.

Alright, alright, I’ll stop with
The door.
But what’s going on in your life?

So, you’re telling me that you’ve done
nothing since the last time I called?

No breathing,
No eating,
No talking,
No sleeping?

you know what I mean.
i’ve done nothing interesting.

Mmmm-hm.

Alright I went to the hospital.

Oh my gosh are you okay?!
i work there.

My bad.

What do you do there?
i take care of the vending machines.

So how is the college degree coming?
I failed it.

Well, you can always try again.

You are still young.

Only 32.

no.

Stop.

you aren’t my life coach so stop acting like it.

Hey!

Wait!

Dial tone
Dear Grandma
Elizabeth Walen

I miss you. Though I know you’re still here. I can still hold you, and smell your perfume and your old markers you color with. Your body still exists, but you don’t.

I finished mourning when you got diagnosed, but I can still love you and look you in the eye. Do you still feel that love for us? Do you remember the color of our eyes?

When we hide in the kitchen, whispering about you as if it was gossip. “She just can’t remember,” my uncle says, “I think it’s because of those sleeping pills.”

The sleeping pills. The ones you took, when you were sad. That’s what they told me when I was younger. Are you still sad?

I wish I had more time to know who you were. Instead of just stories. I was four when you got diagnosed. I wish I wasn’t.

There was a time I thought I would know you forever. But you don’t know me anymore.

“What grade are you in, sweetie?” You asked me that already. “Eighth,” I say, eating the cookies my mom, your daughter, made from your recipe.

We pack up to head back home. “When will we see Grandma again?” I’ve been asking that question for ten years, but I’ve yet to hear, “We won’t.” We say goodbye, with tears in our eyes.

You don’t notice. You don’t know you are a Grandma, or that you like to quilt, or that you loved to read, you don’t remember.

“Bye, Grandma” I whisper as I head out the door. I swear I’ll always Remember You.
No Rest
Johnny Rouse

First
The ringing of an alarm clock
Pots clattering downstairs
Feet too tired to walk
A brain in need of repairs

Next
A train screeches into the station, crowded densely
Another train, this one empty
A life locked up, bolted in a cage
A worn-out pencil, shuffles, across the empty page

Then
Clusters of kids push through crowded hallways, yearning for a break
Entire classes fight, just to stay awake
Last night's homework started at lunch, finishing is a grind
Classes erupt in groans, as hours of homework are assigned

Finally
The train ride home is a tropical retreat
An escape from the burden to come
The arrival home is bittersweet
The day is done, yet it has just begun
unfinished gun poem

Arielle Lichtman

if i was the scar marked on your skin i would
stretch to leave space for the dots and the bleedings
migrate to bring every part of myself
over you;

bring myself like a wolf to the lonely mountains i used to see
and choke down the sun
if only for a moment.

the question: what would they do with my body
is answerable. how could i dictate where the scalpel went?
how could i tell them to
leave enough space for what was left of you?
i could leave empty the skin for the bleeding marks &
the scratches.
i could leave the mundane & sticky fingers
alone with a tongue. i could let the cherries fall and
bury them on top of the graves.

sometimes things fall & we knew that when you said something
about burning a junkyard down. we lived
and died with the train schedules and bathed ourselves in our
own hands
fingers fumbling and twisting over body parts looking for the hole
where the wrongness bloomed out
and slowly made us wounds. how long until the red and black
took our bodies over?
i was never quite sure how to tell you all my favorite things
had holes in them like buckshot and the gun rang like a bell
and my father owned a pistol quieter than i had ever seen or heard
and my mother
shot it
like the sight was in the shape of a cut; forward and
lonely and it hit like it always would
straight in the head leaving an exit like a cherry
and passing the sweet animals
on its way to the mountains.

My mother once told me
never to bring
flowers to a Jewish woman's funeral
But it's the second week of
March and the last day of seventeen &
there's a bouquet lying
in the center of the dining table.
Lilies and alliums dripping over
the ceramic glaze, the smell of
rot thick in the air.

It's the last day of seventeen,
my friends follow me out to the yard
— a procession line
of short black skirts
and beer bottles.
We sit on the stone and the
wind presses
my white blouse
against me.
the linen draping my body
like a shroud.

Leaning back against the wooden face,
I dig my heels into the dirt.
The soil falls onto my skin
like a casket littered with earth.
I close my eyes,
and I listen to my friends serenade me
with
drunken wishes and prayers,
but no matter how hard I try,
all I can hear is a
Mourner’s Kaddish.
cold blue seats
Maisie Carroll

we sat with our knees underneath us
skinned skin pressed against cold blue seats
the blue was always our favorite
they didn’t feel old and worn and sticky
like the segmented orange

our hands would press against the window
our foreheads against our hands
eyes peering into pitch black
following a yellow line of railing
seeking parallel trains

we would be dragged along by our parents’ hands
down escalators, down stairs,
ducking under turnstiles

and getting to swipe a card for the first time
is one of the millions of milestones
that scatter across years until
milestones
stop feeling euphoric

and instead
catch my breath

on quiet nights after baseball games
we’d catch the Q
Manhattan-bound
from Coney Island

the cars would be empty
still.
a strange sight
in the city

and we’d run door to door
swinging on poles
jumping on seats
pull up contests on bars usually crowded with sweaty palms
glee that can only be so easily earned
in the summer heat of childhood
in the final few weeks of the school year
when free months stretch out before you and
September
seems so far away
too far for a ten-year-old’s mind
to comprehend or even
bother
to think about.
Scorpion
Adelaide Sendlenski

The point of a pen opens a hole
Into a soul’s dereliction. This search
For the right word bores through stone.
— “Smoking the Bible” (Chris Abani)

the scorpion arches its back and
thrashes a barbed tail threateningly
as the boy pokes it teasingly with a stick.

thick chinks along its coiled length poise—
nostrils flared & miniscule array of
pearly-white gnashers clack menacingly
& the sky settles to a dirty fishbowl
gray.

a man, somewhere,
slices a half-moon crescent of a ripe tomato,
its flesh scarred by pickup trucks & splinters of wooden crates
cuts it neatly into regret.
an immigrant, proudly
castigated by pungent spices in another’s
cooking. they embrace the bland & unforgiving, here
in america.
he awakens to another frigid november morning,
where the ice raises its hackles in the lobby of the apartment
complex & he
musters faith in braised goat, tender lamb & mouthfuls of hot rice,
peels an easy-to-peel clementine— the belligerent pulp & roughly
sweet aftertaste
raise an influx of memories; Luxor market at midday, the cresting
wave of sand dunes coupled with
the heavy footfalls of tourists, mastigators of the land,
warm brown eyes and a familiar tongue & hand in his.

mourn only what you must;
you can only unwrap your first child once
you can only swaddle your regret & pain & dread
you can only halt your smile for a nanosecond
you can only write the words on the pages as we teach you
you can only speak an unfamiliar tongue now
you can only look your mother in the eye once more.

the persistent aftertaste of a lost home
lingers in his mouth.

he replaces his prayer mat with the gold threading & plum dye,
keeps the Quran passed down by his grandfather,
lights frankincense & myrrh for cleansing despite the
neighbor’s derisive complaints of a “foreign smell”
kneels in supplication
and opens his palms
to the chink of light in the window.
An Ode to a God I Do Not Worship
Tucker Griffith

dear Nezha, did you always feel so unlovable?

i know we are not the same on any type of scale;
i did not test the waters that a dragon king ruled over by killing
his son.
i did not have to return my flesh and bone to my parents to pay for
my mistakes.
i am not of your religion, your culture, nor your magnitude;
just a child who can’t seem to do good enough.

and perhaps it is my own fault, that i can’t deny,
but i did not fit what my parents want(ed) me to be,
and i am afraid i never will.

am i a bad child, Nezha?
too bold, too brash, too loud and needy.
(too queer, too disabled, too much.)

i hope you do not mind me asking,
although i do not pray.
(i do not believe in gods;
i fear them more than anything else.
but i offer a paper lotus and a candle fire
because you represent something i believe in.)

a tale told for filial piety instead turned defiance-
Do you shed your parents’ name, or do you honor them still?
are you angry and tired, yet you know they love(d) you,
and you are not without blame?
does your sympathy outweigh your anger?
your legacy?

i do not know if it is worth the flame and fire.

am i- are we- bad children, Nezha?
(even if you had an answer, i don’t expect you to answer me.
i must figure that out myself.)

The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far from the Tree
Nordel Delma

If my dad were an apple tree
he would be very grand;
gorgeous bark with fresh leaves.
But underneath, weak wood
infested with bugs.

A kind sight for sore eyes,
the eyes of outsiders.
You look just like him.
I hope no one tells me that
I act like the grand apple tree.

The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.
But you are a tree on a lonely hill.
I’ll break from your branches
and I hope you heal one day.
But I’ll roll far, far away
to grow my own tree.
Mama grabs my hair tight.
Hits it with her comb, untangling my hair.
Little cowlicks pop up no matter how hard she tries.
Each one declaring their own revolution against the comb.
Sticking to the sides of my head like cacti.

Hair grabbed and in position, ready to fire down at the enemy.

“Mija, give me the hair tie.”

I look down at my hands.
Directionless and lost, I mutter.

“There’s nothing, ma.”

She looks at me and laughs.

“Descabezada.”

To be without a head,
To be without direction, a foolish plight,
Someone so foolish that you’d think they’re deaf, slow, and without sight.

“Go get it,” she says, tapping me on the back.
Leaving me with a gentle slap,
Sends me flying to my room,
Socks whispering on the wood tiles.

Alone I think,
Descabezada,
Giving it an experimental try on my tongue,
Little glass shards trying not to hurt me.
At that moment, I was descabezada.
General Cheddar stood at the entrance, perched atop his squirrel. He turned to face the troops, and removed his helmet.

"My brave rodents, I know many of you are not optimistic. The Pigeons have endless advantages. They are richer, smarter, and they have the high ground. But let’s not forget who we are. We are the Rats! Mighty lords of the sewers, gods of the subways! Those avian gluttons have never experienced adversity! We have escaped the deadly poison of man, skillfully eluded traps and survived against all odds! When someone knocks us down, we scamper right back up! Tonight, we fight not only for our lives, but our rightful place in this city!

"To battle! For The Kingdom of the Rats!" he yelled out, his booming voice echoing in the station.

The Rats charged towards the exit, the pitter-patter of their paws filling up the empty station. They emerged from the staircase and raced down Seventh Avenue until they faced the Pigeons, all in the same silver armor, aligned like tombstones.

"Charge!" General Cheddar yelled.

Swords and beaks clashed together, soldiers collapsed, storm clouds began to brew ominously overhead, and General Cheddar feared the worst. His troops moved sluggishly, but their spirits weren’t nearly as bad as the weather. Cheddar felt the rain soak through his chainmail. The sidewalk became slippery and slick, covered with rain and blood, causing some of the squirrels to slip, throwing Rats against the hard cement, their armor clanging as it hit the ground. A symphony of fallen soldiers.

As if the battle wasn’t already bad enough, Cheddar heard a small noise coming from overhead. He slowly looked up, and to his horror, another troop of Pigeons was directly above them.

"Duck!" he hollered, but it was too late. The Pigeons released their excreta upon the unlucky Rats below – it was a massacre. Cheddar almost gave up. Almost. He directed his troops back to the station, and the Pigeons pursued. The Rats bolted back down the stairs and

through the station. The Pigeons, never having been in a subway station in their lives, looked around themselves in confusion, giving the Rats time to hide in a space behind the staircase, far too small for any Pigeon to gain access to. The Rats stayed quiet, and Cheddar instructed them to take out their bows and fire at the birds. They did, and soon they saw a dark gray Pigeon waving a white flag. The battle was over. The Rats cheered, and the Pigeons solemnly returned to their barracks, and waited for negotiations to begin. Immediately after the battle, General Asiago Cheddar, Ambassador Gruyère Parmesan, and Prime Minister Gorgonzola Swiss and many other high-ranking Rats went to a meeting hall to discuss what they wanted from this surrender.

Gruyère Parmesan was the first to speak. “After the atrocities that the Pigeons have committed, I believe they owe us some tribute. Our nation has suffered financially from their oppression. I believe the Pigeons should deliver at least two million pizza crusts, soft pretzels, and bottle caps to us every month; if they do not deliver these things, then warfare will resume. Along with this, since we were confined below ground for so long, we should punish the Pigeons in a similar way. They should not be permitted to come within 10 feet of the ground,” Parmesan said haughtily.

General Feta Burrata raised a confused eyebrow. "If they are not to come within 10 feet of the ground, then how are they to retrieve these things?"

“That sounds like their problem,” Parmesan said, dead serious.

Prime Minister Gorgonzola Swiss stood up from his cantilever chair. “I have a different idea.” Swiss flashed a sinister smile. “Those avian usurpers don’t even deserve to be in this city! We should move them to Boston! Every single one of them!” He declared loudly.

As the day went on and the sun began to set, no one could agree on a plan. Cheddar sat, leaning his head on his right paw. He stroked his whiskers for a moment, then stood up. “I believe we should do what we can for peace. True peace. Not confining them to the sky, or to Boston. No monthly payments. You, Prime Minister, have you enjoyed living in these subways?”

“No, sir.”

“Then why do the same to the Pigeons?” The room filled with a deathly silence. It was so silent, in fact, that you could hear the elderly Brie Gouda nibbling cheese in the back of the hall.
“Are you a fool?” A whiny, nasal voice asked from the corner. It was Ambassador Parmesan. “Are you seriously petitioning for the Pigeons to not receive consequences for their actions?” He folded his forelegs across his chest.

“I suppose I am.” Cheddar looked around the room. “We are only giving the Pigeons an excuse to fight back in a few years. The only solution for long term peace is coexistence.” The hall erupted. Some hurled insults at him, others declared their support.

“Hear ye! Hear ye!” General Burrata yelled over the commotion. The room fell silent once again. “I say we take a vote. Who’s with me?”

“Aye!” The hall cheered energetically.

“All in favor of General Cheddar’s plan raise their paw.” Burrata slowly counted the paws raised; it wasn’t obvious if it was a majority yet.

“All not in favor?” Paws shot up. Cheddar held his breath.

Burrata sighed. “It’s an exact tie, but there is an uneven number of Rats in this room. Who didn’t vote?”

“It was me,” Parmesan said. He stood up.

“Well, what is your vote?”

Parmesan rubbed his nose, saying nothing. Cheddar sat at the edge of his seat. After what felt like an eternity, Parmesan began to speak.

“I’m in,” he said. Relief washed over Cheddar’s body.

“All right then, let’s call the birds in.”

General Colomba Livia, Ambassador Hato Aves, General Golub Colm and three other Pigeons strutted into the hall, still in their armor from battle, and still seething over their defeat.

“Good evening,” Burrata said while shaking each one’s wing.

“First of all, we would like to know whether this surrender is conditional or not,” Parmesan said.

“Unconditional,” Aves said. She squinted her eyes and furrowed her brow.

The creatures of the hall huddled together and wrote a treaty. They then formed a line and signed it one by one.

January 29, 2034, 3:53 pm

“That is outrageous! Using law enforcement will only escalate tensions between the Pigeons and the Rats!” Cheddar exclaimed.

Burrata’s beady eyes stared right through him. “That is the only realistic way to resolve things,” She snapped back.

“Why not hold a conflict resolution effort with respected Rat and Pigeon leaders to encourage people to come together and mourn this tragic death instead of fighting each other? That will ease tensions far more than police.” Cheddar said, pleading.

“Geez Asiago, how were you ever a general? Sometimes you need to show these people who’s in charge. That’s the only way these rioters will listen to us. Stop being such a pushover,” Burrata smirked and snorted.

“What if the police only make them angrier?” Cheddar said, raising his voice and angrily thumping his paw on the table.

The meeting continued, but Cheddar was far too irritated to say anything else. After it ended, he quickly exited the hall, making sure to not make eye contact with Burrata. He couldn’t believe they had ever been friends back in their days as generals. Cheddar began to walk home. On his way he walked past the square. A crowd of Rats was congregated there, a few holding a sketch of a Rat, viciously slain by a Pigeon. Cheddar looked away. He hated to think about the rising tensions between the Rats and Pigeons. Why couldn’t everyone just get along peacefully? He arrived home at dusk. His wife greeted him by the door.

“How was the meeting?” she asked.

“All right, me and that absolute fool Burrata are still butting heads, but I think I got through to a few people on my idea to hold a conflict resolution effort,” he said as he rubbed his temples.

She sighed. “I’m sorry she’s being a pain, I know how hard you’ve been working to try and stop the riots. If it helps, I made your favorite for dinner tonight.”

Cheddar sat down at the table but couldn’t eat; he couldn’t sleep that night either. He tossed and turned, haunted by ideas of what he should do, or at least what he could do, if anyone could agree on an idea. If only they could just find a way to organize themselves so they could actually get something done. **We need to write a constitution, and we need to write it fast.** He jumped out of bed, hurled himself out the door, got on his squirrel, and raced over to Burrata’s house. He violently kicked on the door.

“What are you doing here, Asiago? My family and I are trying to sleep!” Burrata said, extremely aggravated.
“Feta, I know you and I haven’t exactly gotten along recently, but I need to discuss this idea with you,” Cheddar said, still out of breath from the squirrel ride there.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think we need to write a constitution. Things have been so disorganized. If we don’t write this, then we’ll never get anything done. Are you with me?” he asked.

“Fine. Come in,” she said.

They talked and debated about the previous war, the riots, and a multitude of other issues. Then, they unfurled a blank roll, pulled out a quill and dipped it in ink. They wrote until they held in their paws a document that they believed both Pigeons and Rats could agree on.

“So, what now?” Feta asked, drowsy.

“I think we need to call another meeting,” Cheddar said, excited. He held the scroll close to his chest, as if to protect it.

February 2, 2034, 12:00 pm

“Hear ye, Hear ye!” Prime Minister Swiss yelled. The room fell silent.

“We are here today to discuss a greatly important matter, concerning our nation’s current state, and our future. Cheddar, Burrata, would you like to take the floor?” Swiss asked.

“Thank you, sir,” Feta said. They click-clacked across the linoleum tiles.

“A few days ago, Feta Burrata and I drafted a document that we believe should become our nation’s constitution. We put an enormous amount of effort into this, and we submit it humbly for your consideration,” Cheddar said.

Cheddar laid out the scroll on the table for people to come up and read. No one moved. The room of Pigeons and Rats just stared back at him, flabbergasted. A constitution? This sort of thing hadn’t been used by Rats or Pigeons for generations! Then, finally, a lone Pigeon came up. Minutes later, a Rat walked up to the table. Then almost everyone was huddled around, reading this piece of paper.

Gruyère Parmesan smiled. “Hmmph. A constitution you say? A bit of an odd idea, but I’ll give credit where credit is due, this is great. I do have quite a few suggestions though.”

“I agree,” Swiss said.

“Me as well,” Hato Aves said.

October 1, 2034, 5:40 pm.

Cheddar walked up to the table, dipped the quill in ink, and wrote his name in his squiggly signature. It was done. He sighed, then walked out of the building, and mounted his squirrel to begin his commute home. He looked around, enjoying the scenery of Seventh Avenue. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar green staircase. He made his way over there, for old times’ sake, he thought. Asiago Cheddar stood at the entrance, perched atop his squirrel.
Anxiety creeps around in the shadows, watching my every move and ready to pounce the second she decides something is going to happen. She masquerades as rationality, convincing me that she knows best. Psst, did you know that you might see someone you know at the grocery store? Better look like you’ve actually gotten some sleep the past few days.

I need to fulfill her request and make her happy, so I put on my best outfit and do the best face of makeup. Eww, no, that’s all wrong. What if people think you care too much about your appearance and waste all your money on beauty products? Take that off right now.

But I don’t have time to, because I need to rush to the grocery store in order to make it to a party at my friend’s house. Just don’t go then. Traffic will be too bad, and you’ll end up not getting there on time and everybody will hate you. They didn’t even want you to come anyways—they only invited you out of sympathy.

I rush to the grocery store, my heart racing, my throat tight and dry, sweating most of my makeup off. As I put a bag of popcorn in my cart, Anxiety reminds me, don’t do that. You don’t want the cashier to think you’re unhealthy. After all, you could really benefit from a diet. Put that back and grab those veggies—but make sure to get the ones that aren’t the cheapest but not the most expensive. Don’t you remember what you look like?

I place the items in front of the cashier, but he doesn’t look me in the eyes or smile at me or tell me to have a good night. He must hate me.

When I finally get back home and collapse on the couch, Anxiety pounces on me. Make sure not to fall asleep with your makeup on. It’ll ruin your skin and it’s too early to go to bed—your sleep schedule will be more ruined than your face. Go do your skincare.

I head to the bathroom and grab the closest cleanser I can find. You’re wasting your makeup by only having it on for less than an hour. You’re going to go broke from this.

I am too braindead to yell at Anxiety about how hypocritical she is, so I go on autopilot and follow her rules. I collapse onto my bed and Anxiety explodes. Oh my gosh. No. Not at all.

Going to sleep right after your skincare is just wasting even more money! What is wrong with you? I am so done with this!

I shrivel up. I have disappointed one of my best friends. Anxiety’s right—something’s wrong with me. I’m a horrible person. I curl up into a ball under the covers, biting my nails down to the frame and ripping my cuticles to the point where they start bleeding and staining the white blanket. I shiver and shiver and shiver a piece of my hair off. Anxiety comes back out from hiding and goes under the sheets with me. She cups her hands around my ear and whispers to me, What if your little sister was kidnapped and only had one call to make so she chose you, but you didn’t answer? What if you end up meeting that one guy whose dog you asked to pet and when he finds out you prefer cats he thinks you’re two-faced? What if a nuclear bomb launches on your town and you don’t have enough supplies? Why hasn’t your best friend initiated contact with you in a while? Is it because she hates you? What if everyone talks about you behind your back and you don’t know and they laugh internally when you act all nice to them? Do you need to use the bathroom, because if you do you should go but if you get up you might not be able to get back to sleep? Or are you hungry because if you’re hungry you should eat something because you don’t want to die of starvation but maybe eating this close to bed messes up your digestive system? And what if a spider crawls down from the ceiling and goes on you while you’re sleeping? Maybe you should write your will or work out instead of sleeping? What would people say about you if you died, and does everyone see the world differently? Have you updated your calendar in a while? What if someone discovers your Notes app? And what time is it because how much sleep are you getting? It’s midnight? Is it too late to go to sleep? What if you need to charge your headphones? There’s no point in going to sleep now if you’re only going to get six hours.

So, I get up, because Anxiety has told me to and I stay up with her until 3 am, when I crash onto my bed. Anxiety never comes for me in my dreams—she’s nice enough not to do that, but I will see her in the morning when I wake up. But that’s all right.
Monsters

Lina Kovner

I am a knight. I come from a respected family of knights. My mother was a knight. My grandmother was a knight. My great-grandmother was a knight. Since I was a little girl, I knew my purpose was to protect the people, protect the king but, more than anything, to slay the monster in the woods. Everyone knows about the monster. About how it killed the people in the town before the big wall was created, and how no one, except the knights, is supposed to go outside of town and into the woods. I am a knight. I am meant to slay the monster, or to die in the process. Or at least that’s what I thought.

One day as I was going on my usual route through the woods, I heard someone laugh. Instinctively I pulled my sword out of its sheath and silently got closer to the place the voice came from. As I moved a few branches that blocked my vision, the laughing stopped. I moved the final branches aside and could finally see into what turned out to be a clearing, protected by trees from every side. And in the middle of the clearing stood a girl my age, or something that did a very good job of looking like one. After a more careful look, it was the second option. The “girl” had long golden curls and was wearing a simple sundress, but she also had purple eyes, claws and, it turned out when she smiled at me, long sharp fangs. I aimed my sword at her, and she stopped smiling. She looked scared. She looked at the sword I was aiming at her chest and then, slowly raising her eyes, she looked at me. Neither of us said a word for a long time. We just stood there, staring at each other as the wind played with our hair.

After a long time just standing there, she broke the silence. “Well?” she asked. “Did you make up your mind then?”

“About what?” I asked, lowering my sword a bit.

“About whether I’m the monster you’re looking for or just an innocent girl with a weird eye color,” she answered.

“And?” I looked at her

“And what?” she asked. It looked like she had lost interest in the conversation and was now looking at a butterfly, like it was the most interesting thing in the world. I lowered my sword.

“Are you a girl or a monster?” I asked.

“I’m neither,” she said, “and I’m both.” And just like that, she disappeared.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I lay awake in my bed, thinking about the mysterious girl in the woods. When I got back to the castle, I didn’t tell anyone about what happened. I was too ashamed. No one noticed I wasn’t there for dinner because, well, I don’t have many friends. Or any, when you think about it. My mother always told me that in order to be a good knight, I need to wear armor not only around my body, but also around my heart. And I believed her. Because everywhere I went I saw heartbroken people crying, or trusting people getting hurt. So, I kept a shield around my heart, and I didn’t let anyone in.

The next day, instead of going on my usual route, I tried to find the clearing. It took me hours, but I was determined to find that clearing, and when I’m determined, nothing can stop me. And after what was probably hours, I did find it. I came in through the opening I had made yesterday and saw the girl. She was sitting on the grass, and when she saw me, she smiled and said, “Oh, hello again,” and then disappeared, just like yesterday. “No!” I yelled in frustration. I looked at the spot where she just was and noticed something weird. The grass where she was sitting was a little squashed as if someone was still sitting there. I took a step closer and went silent. And there it was. If I listened very carefully, I could hear someone breathing. I smiled under my breath and jumped forward, hitting her with all my weight. She became visible immediately, a shocked expression on her face.

“Oh,” she said, surprise in her voice. “You’re not as dumb as the others.”

“No,” I answered, my grin getting wider. “I’m actually quite smart.”

That was the beginning. I kept meeting with her every day in the woods. Every day I would tell myself that today is the day I’ll tell someone. And every day I didn’t. Maybe because it was exciting, maybe because she was the first friend I had ever had. We could talk for hours. We could also sit in silence, each of us lost in thoughts. I thought it was funny how I didn’t know anything about her, and yet I felt like I had known her forever. When I told her that, she asked me,
“What do you want to know?”

“To start,” I would like to know your name,” I answered.

“It’s….” she trailed off. “It’s Wild Flower.” She didn’t ask what mine was, but I told her anyway.

“It suits you,” was all she said. She lay down on the grass and I lay next to her, her gold curls mixing with my black strands.

“What else do you want to know?” she asked.

“Where is your family?” She was always alone when I saw her.

“They’re dead.” she said, “the monster killed them.”

I rolled over and stared at her. “Are you serious?” I asked quietly.

She rolled over too, her eyes wide. “Dead serious,” she said. “The monster hunts all of us, anyone who’s a little different, and it kills us.”

I was shocked. I didn’t know what to say. In the end, I just asked her, “Then why are you staying here? Why don’t you run away?”

She looked at me for a couple of seconds and said, “Some things are worth the risk.”

Wild Flower knew more about the monster than anyone else I have ever met. She said she saw it when it killed her family. She told me it had eight sharp silver fangs and it had a red leather coat. She also told me you can know when it comes because you will hear the sound of a horse running, and there are no horses in the woods.

One day, months into our secret meetings, as I was walking through the woods, I saw the footprints of a horse. I remembered what Wild Flower had told me about the monster and I wished I had my sword with me, but this morning I had decided to take my bow and arrows instead. They’re not as useful in a fight but they’ll have to do, I decided. As I followed the footprints, I noticed something else. There was blood on the ground. I quickened my pace, now almost running after the trail of the horse.

When I got closer, I could hear a girl crying, and I recognized the voice.

When the scene came into view, I almost cried myself. Wild Flower was on the ground, blood staining her face and her dress. I knew she was too weak to do her invisibility trick.

“Oh good, a knight,” a voice said, reminding me I wasn’t alone. I looked toward the speaker and recognized him. And how could I not, his picture was in every house, every room in the castle. On a black horse, looking down at me, sat the king.

“Your majesty,” I said, bowing my head respectfully.

“I found the monster,” he declared. “Shoot an arrow into her heart and rid the woods from her.”

“I found the monster.” The words echoed in my head as I looked at Wild Flower, looked at her purple eyes, at her inhuman fangs and claws. I took my bow and pulled an arrow. I knew I wouldn’t miss. I never miss. This is all my fault, I thought, I let my guard down and now I have to pay for it. Just as I was about to shoot the arrow, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. The king’s crown. It had eight silver thorns. I then noticed his majesty was wearing a red coat. My eyes widened.

“Knight, could you hurry this up?” the king said.

“Yes, of course, your majesty.”

I am a knight. I am meant to slay the monster, or to die in the process.

I took a deep breath, pulled the arrow as far as I could, and released.
Witchcraft, like most forms of suspicious activity, is best perpetrated under the cover of darkness. In addition to discouraging onlookers and providing a nice witchy ambience, nightfall can increase the effectiveness of one’s spell-casting and make one’s soul a smoother conduit for the necrotic and perhaps unholy magic that all witches are blessed with. Which is why, if a person—say, me—were to hold a séance, the best time to do it would be at midnight. Were this hypothetical version of myself to hold a séance, I would, of course, do it right. It would have to be a properly planned and prepared for endeavor.

Now, conducting a séance is no easy task, which is why, were I to even attempt such a dastardly and obviously illegal deed, which I would, I’d like to point out, scarcely dream of, it would have to be for a reason. And I suppose I would have a reason. Wouldn’t we all like to speak to our dear lost ones? Yes, my dearest Aunt Ethel was recently taken from me before her time. I loved her so—it was she who passed on to me the family trade, the peculiar apothecary that each of the Bushwick family matriarchs had owned in their time. I would like to note that the connection between apothecaries and witchcraft throughout history has been a long-running misnomer—apothecaries are perfectly legal and legitimate businesses. The point being, I miss my Aunt Ethel terribly and would do anything to see her again—anything legal, of course.

But I digress. As any half-witted, blathering fool would be able to tell you, the setup of a séance requires a salt circle of exactly 21 inches in diameter, with seven rose candles placed along its edge. It requires an incantation under a pearly full moon. And, most importantly, it requires a cherished possession of the deceased in question. Clearly, I would not be able to acquire any of these ungodly relics of sorcery, making it impossible for me to conduct a proper séance. (Although, rose candles are currently having a two-for-one sale at Bushwick Apothecary. Get them while they’re hot). And the full moon passed just three nights prior, so I couldn’t summon my dear auntie even if I wanted to.

And, most importantly, I lack powers of witchcraft. My proof? When my brother and I were small, we enjoyed frequent games of “Ring Around the Rosie,” a favorite ritual of schoolchildren, cult circles and, incidentally, witches. After ringing around hundreds of Rosies, I had yet to see anything more than a weed sprout from my ring. No flashes of light, otherworldly creatures, mysterious voices. I was, for better or worse, normal. Ask my brother if you don’t believe me. He is dead, but conducting a séance isn’t impossible. Not that I would know. I am without the slightest smidge of magic.

But say I was gifted with the unholy craft—after forming my séance circle, I’d proceed to chant in the witchiest of languages, Latin. And, to quote my childhood tutor, Henri Vellium Esquire, my Latin is “an abhorrent, despicable sight, the sound most reminiscent to the dying pleas of the Bulgarian horned toad—a fragile, desperate croak for mercy.” The whole séance is a waste of time, dignity and rose candles if one lacks the proper enunciation in their Latin. Which, as my former tutor so bluntly and, might I add cruelly, laid out, my Latin is... not nearly exquisite enough. Anyone who didn’t believe me would be advised to seek out my former tutor, though, still living, he retired to Bulgaria and became a hermit, living amongst the famed horned toads. He claimed to have been cursed by a witch, then plunged into a self-imposed exile, refusing to show his face out of fear. Good riddance, I say. But it’s unfortunate for him to have suffered from such a terrible accident. I suppose these things are simply a part of life.

Back to this hypothetical séance. Say my Latin succeeded. Say that this whole venture has been perfectly executed. I’d then raise Auntie Ethel’s prized possession above my head (a locket with a picture of her tortoise hidden amongst the carefully carved gold roses), call out her name, and her spirit would (hopefully) phase through the sort of windowpane that keeps the spirit world separate from ours in a brilliant flash of green light. I’d need some way to communicate with her ghost, which isn’t hard—the age-old “one tap for yes, two taps for no” method works just peachy. I personally, however, prefer a classic talking board for my many hypothetical communications with the deceased. So, after retrieving Aunt Ethel’s locket and a dusty talking board which I may or may not possess from my attic, hypothetical me returns to her salt circle (in the cemetery, Aunt Ethel’s final resting place) and summons a ghost.
And after that? What would I say to dear Aunt Ethel? Really, I just wanted to see her again, if only once. In her spiritual presence, I'm flustered, speechless. I know, I can feel, that she's all around me, waiting to see why I've aroused her from eternal slumber. And isn't that what I'm waiting to see, too? Her life had a meaningful end—she died happy, loose ends tied up. So why am I trying to unravel the tips of the rope? What am I doing, really, aside from rehashing her past life for my own selfish purposes?

I suppose I'll never know. For I never did finish that séance (and I of course didn't start it). And if Aunt Ethel were ever there, she left our world as quickly and quietly as she had the last time. So, fear not—I am completely innocent of witchcraft of all varieties. Please do not hang me. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Oh, and to placate any eyewitnesses claiming to have seen me at the cemetery three nights prior with a suspicious sneer upon my face, carrying a large sack of rose candles and wearing all black, well, I was merely paying my respects to Aunt Ethel.

—Signed, Penelope Esmerelda Bushwick,
February the Second, 1692
To the esteemed Governor of Salem, Massachusetts
The Natural Society
Leo Sussman

It all started with a post. A single XFace post with a photo attachment. The degrading caption read “Disgusting tyrant eats innocent carrot!” Attached was a photo of twelve-year-old me, eating a carrot at my family home dining table. Thirty-two years ago, my mom posted that same photo to her Instagram page. At the time it was cute. I was sitting with my two brothers, and we were all enjoying a well-deserved snack on a warm Friday evening after school. Now, though, it was the face of utter evil.

A few months ago, the world was forever changed when a team of renowned “scientists” from Brazil, France and India declared that plants were just as capable of exhibiting feelings and pain as humans and animals. The reasoning behind this questionable discovery was scarcely questioned before the internet went rampant with it. Former pop star turned devoted activist Taylor Swift posted about the discovery and it blew up. #STOPEATINGPLANTS was trending number one within six hours. News outlets reported farms burned, supermarkets looted, and restaurants throwing away their fruits and vegetables.

Then, two days ago, it happened. An XFace user by the name of “Sedition Hunter,” known for being an injustice “vigilante” on social media, was scrolling through the old Instagram archives when they stumbled upon the photo of me. It didn’t take even two hours for his repost of the photo to garner 646,000 views, 542,000 dislikes, and 123,000 reposts. By the end of the day, it had 3.2 million views and had already made the national evening news. The reply section was filled with death threats targeted towards the subject of the photo (a child) and horrible, demeaning language.

The next day, a close, longtime friend of mine sent it to me, recognizing the child in the photo. The whole thing was ridiculous. The photo was from 30 years ago, back when it was okay, normal, and even encouraged to eat plants. What was really on my mind though, was how long it would take for people to figure out who that child was... I decided that I would run some errands to temporarily take my mind off the pressing issue. I got in my car and drove to the local supermarket. As I pushed my shopping cart down the endless, consuming aisles of the Walmart store, I got an alert on my cell phone. I recognized the tone as someone tagging me on an XFace post. Fearing the worst, I took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, and tapped on the white bubble.

“Phew,” I said to myself as I read the post. I continued shopping, and just as I was about to get in line for self-checkout, I got another notification. My nerves still on edge, I opened it. When I read the caption and saw the photo, I almost collapsed. The page held the same fateful photo, but this time it was tagged with my username, and actual full name.

I knew I could waste no time. Leaving my full cart of groceries behind, I darted out of the store and sped off in my family’s SUV.

When I got home, I pulled into the garage, locked the door, and ran inside. “Honey?” I shouted.

“Yes?” My wife called back from the kitchen. “Where are the kids?”

“Outside, playing,” she explained as she chopped beef and threw it into a large pot.

“Well, bring them in here, they can play inside!” I called out as I entered our room and pulled a heavy metal safe out from under the bed.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, her voice turning more concerned as she watched me retrieve a 9-millimeter SIG Sauer handgun from the safe. Weapon in hand, I walked into the living room, lifted the remote, and pushed the red power on button.

“An XFace post of a young boy eating a vegetable has gone viral, with over 3.5 million views and a comment section full of threats of harm,” the anchor said. My wife dropped her knife and walked over to see for herself, shocked by what she saw. “WNBC-7 will be back after the break.” I muted the volume as commercials took over the program.

“Is that you?” she exclaimed, not expecting her husband to be the subject of a viral news broadcast. “That’s not even the worst of it.” I showed her the post from today, and she again clasped her mouth in shock.

“I’ll… I’ll bring the kids inside,” she said, struggling to hold herself together as she quivered. As she went to the yard to retrieve our kids, I decided I would sit outside and ensure that no one would attempt to
trespass or vandalize our home. I opened the front door and walked over to the swinging bench we had on our porch. It was a beautiful spring day and a cool breeze washed over my face as I took a deep breath. Amidst all the anxiety brought about by the events of this morning, sitting on the porch of my castle, indulging in nature, still brought me joy and peace.

Only a few minutes later, that peace would be cut short by a car pulling up to the curb outside my house. I stood up and walked down the porch steps to investigate. “Can I help you guys with something?” I asked as a young couple exited the car.

“Yeah. Are you Adam Westley?” The man asked, glancing around, taking in the sights of Grande Lane.

“Yes, in fact, I am.” I had a feeling I knew where this was going.

“Oh, so you’re the maniac who ate that poor carrot!” the woman concluded, her tone expressing her disgust.

“You should die in hell!” the man continued. He suddenly began approaching me, and I responded by backing up, preparing to take a defensive position. Suddenly, though, he stopped. He glanced down at the holster on my hip, and immediately jumped back, cowering as he realized that I carried a firearm.

“Uhh! Are you gonna shoot us, you crazy nut?” the woman shouted.

“When did I ever say that I would shoot anyone?” I asked, not sure why the two made the conclusion.

At the time I was unaware that during my argument with them, some of the neighbors had noticed and come out to watch the event. After three minutes of arguing, I gave up and walked back to the porch to take a break. Slowly, a crowd began to build up around the couple’s car.

“Plant-eating coward!” The shouting and insults intensified. The street was full of protestors, some carrying signs, others with megaphones, broadcasting their messages to my family. There were so many people, in fact, that the news stations couldn’t even get to the house and had to film from people’s lawns across the street. As I tried to keep a straight face and an unfrightened but still somewhat remorseful look, my wife slowly opened the door and rushed over to me, shielding the side of her face with a hat. I turned around and noticed the television broadcast through the front window. The national station was broadcasting live footage of me, on my porch, at my wife’s side, surrounded by an angry mob.

As I spaced out, trying to contemplate how insane the situation was, I was oblivious to what was occurring behind me. I turned around to see a deranged man charging towards me, knife in hand. “RUN!” I shouted at my wife. She swung open the door and darted in, heading straight for the kids to hide them. Meanwhile, I struggled to organize the mess in my mind during the two seconds of preparation I could allot for my response. My brain was taking too long, and so I decided to take the easy route, and un-holstered my handgun.

Before I could shoot however, the man jumped on me with his knife, stabbing the side of my chest.

My life flashed before my eyes, except all I saw was all the bad, regretful actions I had made throughout my lifetime. Time slowed down. A voice in my head reminded me to not give up the will to live. I was suddenly snapped out of my self-contemplation as my neighbor Morris yanked the deranged man off me. Never had I felt such appreciation for my neighbors before that moment. As policemen ran up to the man and tackled him to the ground, Morris winked at me. I tried to wink back, to show how much I was thankful for his heroism, but I was so incapacitated and disoriented that I couldn’t differentiate between my body parts.

The next few hours were a flash in my memory. The paramedics rolling me into an ambulance, the crowd still roaring behind me, the intense conversation between the paramedics and ER staff, the reassuring voice of a female trauma surgeon, and the bright, blinding lights of the operation room. I woke up the next morning aching, but slowly recovering. I was lying in a recovery room, and as I stretched out and tried to sit up, my wife came to my side.

“Hey honey, how’s it going?” She asked.

“I—I don’t even know.” I explained. “Everything’s a flash in my mind, and my wound still hurts, but I think it’s actually improving.”

“Great! The kids are with Uncle Ted for now, I thought it would be best for all of us if they didn’t see you until you were worked on. Didn’t want them to be frightened or worried.”

“Good, that’s prob—probably for the best.” Over the next two weeks, I slowly recovered from the stab wound. Despite the whole event being a very negative experience, it allowed me to stay off the grid and away from the fury that continued to rage online. I had my wife make sure that I didn’t have access to my phone, not wanting to see the hateful sentiment likely brewing against me. Apparently,
someone had figured out which hospital I had been sent to, and there were a few incidents where hospital security had to intercept angry protestors, but besides that I was relatively isolated. At one point, the local news station asked for an interview, but I declined, fearing that what I said would just cause even more outrage.

A month after the stabbing incident, my nurse came into my room with a letter. “You’ve got some mail, Mr. Westley,” she said. Most of my letters nowadays were hate mail, and so they were all thrown away. This one, however, was apparently relevant. I opened the envelope and pulled out a neatly folded slip of paper. As I unfolded it, I noticed that the heading read “Missouri Circuit Court.”

Confused, I read on.

Dear Mr. Westley, my office writes to you today to inform you that you have been summoned for a criminal trial in the 26th Judicial Circuit Court of Missouri. You will be arraigned on August 10th on the following charges:

(1) Unlawful Consumption of Plants
(1) Plant Cruelty
(1) Conspiracy to Defraud the Natural Society

Failure to appear in court is illegal under Missouri law.

—Sean Platt, State Judge for the 26th Circuit Court

A mix of emotions again struck me. My world of isolation, living my own life and keeping back from public anger was over...

The trial was ridiculous. For my representation, I had to take funds out of our family savings account just so I could afford a decent attorney, as well as my bail. The trial was heavily publicized and as I struggled to walk into the courtroom, still recovering from my injury, millions from around the country and beyond were watching it on television. My lawyer made it apparent to me before the main proceedings that I didn’t have much of a chance of an innocent verdict. When I was put on the stand, I expressed how the photo was taken way out of context. It was posted initially at a time when eating plants was normal, I was no different from most people in the world! None of the jurors ever questioned their own mistakes, their own imperfections, their regretted actions, and yet they were quick to judge me and my life like my situation meant nothing to them.

On August 13, I walked into the courthouse for the last time. A lot was on my mind, but I tried to remain calm and assure myself that there was still hope. “Has the jury reached a verdict?” the judge asked.

“We have, your honor,” the foreman said. “On the count of Unlawful Consumption of Plants, we find the defendant—guilty.” I almost collapsed. “On the count of Plant Cruelty, we find the defendant—guilty. And on the count of Conspiracy to Defraud the Natural Society, we find the defendant—”

I pleaded in my head that somehow the jury would spare me. “—guilty.” I sat there in disbelief. My attorney gave me a slight pat on the back before gathering his materials. My wife ran over to me, crying, and as she wept over me, I sat motionless, unfazed.

“Where have people’s senses gone?” I asked myself. Later that day, the judge sentenced me: thirteen years in prison.

I spent the night in a holding cell at the County Sheriff’s Office, before being transferred to Algoa Correctional Center. I was allowed one visit with my family. I was ecstatic, but unfortunately I would be confined to a phone across a large glass barrier. When I saw my wife walk in with the kids, my heart sank. I wanted to cry, I wanted to smash the glass and come to them, but I didn’t. Instead, I cherished what would be one of the few opportunities I would have to talk to my family.

“Honey, I’m gonna miss you a lot while I’m gone, but I’ll see you when I get out.” I said on the phone.

“This whole thing is so ridiculous, everyone’s already forgotten about the post, they’ve moved on. I’ll see you soon...” she responded, her voice crackling through the old audio system. She got up and had the kids take over.

“Jack, Mia, take care of your mother. When I see you again, you’re gonna be much older, and so will I, but the time will fly.” I stared for as long as possible as my wife and kids walked out of sight, not to be seen for what felt like years. As a corrections officer escorted me to my cell, I contemplated the last two months of my life. Forty-four years down the drain, just like that.

Forty-four years of a humble, peaceful, and innocent life, gone because of the judgment of strangers.
Ponytail
Zoe Chun

I used to wear my hair in a ponytail every day. It was a nuisance if it wasn’t pulled back—always tangled and in my face—but if it was up in a ponytail, it was sleek and pretty. My mom could take a hairbrush and an elastic to it in the morning, and I wouldn’t have to think about it for the rest of the day. My ponytail would bounce and swing like Betty Cooper’s as I walked down the hallways at school, and I never even had to look at it.

No one else in my family had hair like mine. My mom’s was thin and the color of milk chocolate. My dad’s was impossibly thick and pitch black. My sister inherited mom’s thin hair. I somehow inherited both—Dad’s thick underneath and Mom’s frizzy on top. My sister got milk chocolate; I got 80% cacao. She got, “I wish it had more volume” and “maybe I should get bangs to make it interesting,” while I got, “oh my God, I’m so done, like, it never does what I want it to do and I always end up looking like Natasha Lyonne.”

I started to hate my hair. It would get puffy and huge when I let it air-dry, and it didn’t help that my dad would jokingly compare me to the lion from Narnia. I got so frustrated with it that by the end of kindergarten, I was asking my mom to put my hair in a ponytail before school every day. Sometimes she’d complain about how tangled my hair was because of how I slept or that she was going to be late for work, but she never stopped doing it. She was so reliable and just so good at it. Because of her, I never had to learn how to do it myself.

I remember that she went on a work trip when I was in first grade. The morning after she left, I had to ask my uncle to make my ponytail for me. The one he made was lumpy and loose in all the wrong places. I ended up going to school with my hair down for those few days. It was frizzy and I was miserable, but she never stopped doing it. She was so reliable and just so good at it. Because of her, I never had to learn how to do it myself.

I remember that she went on a work trip when I was in first grade. The morning after she left, I had to ask my uncle to make my ponytail for me. The one he made was lumpy and loose in all the wrong places. I ended up going to school with my hair down for those few days. It was frizzy and I was miserable, but my mom was back by Monday, and then my hair was smooth and perfect and all was good again.

Then second grade came around. My mom started sleeping in more instead of getting up early to make smoothies for breakfast, and my dad started making instant oatmeal instead. He packed my bag for me and sent me off to school in the morning, telling me to have a good day but not giving me that familiar lipsticked peck on the cheek. On the weekends, he made waffles with sausage and bacon instead of her grapefruits and yogurt bowls. My mom started sitting on the couch a lot more, reading or watching TV. She was never standing up long enough to get a glass of water, much less to make my sister and me food or to get us ready in the morning.

She started talking more yet somehow saying less. She started forgetting things, like her coworkers’ names and her phone number. She started criticizing, complaining, and contradicting all the time.

She started doing a lot of things. She stopped making smoothies, like her coworkers’ names and her phone number. She started criticizing, complaining, and contradicting all the time.

So there I was every morning before school, standing at the bathroom sink for half an hour trying to get my hair to behave. I tried brushing it smooth. I tried wetting my hands to tame it down. I found video tutorials and WikiHow articles, but none of those girls had hair like mine. I tried lemon juice, cocoa powder, and even Vaseline. Nothing helped. No matter what I did, my ponytail was never good enough.

Extended family started visiting us more often, and they would stagger their trips so at least one of them was with us at all times. We moved my stuff into my sister’s room so we could have a proper guest bed. Adults I had never seen before started coming by to talk to my mother, not interrupting her as she called them by the wrong names and talked about nothing for hours.

She started walking less. My dad bought her a walker. Then she lost the ability to walk, so he bought her a wheelchair. Eventually, he bought one of those remote-controlled beds with rails on the sides. He let my sister and me try it out when it was first set up. Once they moved my mom into it, he took a leather chair from the living room and put it in the corner so he could sit with her while she slept.

I sat in that chair too sometimes, and my mom and I would watch TV together. There was this one time Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets was playing. They were just getting to the good part when my mom threw up all over herself. I ran from the room to get my dad, but he was working; one of the nurses would clean it up later. After that, I couldn’t bring myself to go back and sit with her for a whole month.
In third grade, I got into this fancy ballet school where all the little girls had to look and act the same, and all their mothers were fussy and wore huge sunglasses. The whole scene was

like Dance Moms but somehow worse: Ballet Moms. (A shiver just passed down Abby Lee’s spine.) The mothers would make these identical ballet buns for their little girls—it was almost like a source of pride if your daughter looked exactly like all the others. My aunt was worried that I wouldn’t fit in there, so she came over one Sunday afternoon and taught my dad the whole hair procedure. He got the bun down just fine, but he couldn’t do the ponytail, the first step. I reluctantly agreed to do that myself.

We perfected the ballet hair routine over the next few months. I would do my best with the ponytail and pass it off to my dad for the pins and hair net, before it was back to me for hairspray and finishing touches. But my dad was getting too busy to make my bun every day. He was certainly home more often, but he just didn’t have time to help anyone but her.

I had to start doing my ballet hair myself. Sometimes my buns were lopsided. Sometimes they were a little too high or a little too low, but eventually I could make them look pretty good with the help of some extra pins and clips. I could fake it well enough to not stand out.

I’m pretty sure I was in fourth grade—about a year after my dad stopped doing my hair—when he told my sister and me that the two of us needed to go sit with Mom for a bit. He said we could tell her anything we wanted because, apparently, she couldn’t speak, and she couldn’t move and it might sound like she’s in pain, but she’s not so don’t worry, she can still hear you. He told us that this might be her last chance to hear our voices.

_Just make sure you tell her you love her._

***

My sister and I squeeze into the leather chair together. Neither of us knows what to say. I can hear my heartbeat. The two of us sit there and watch our mother’s chest rise and fall.

Rise, fall. Rise, fall. Rise, fall.
I try to breathe with her.
Rise, fall. Rise, fall.

“Hi, Mom.”
Rise, fall.
“I’ve been doing my own hair for ballet.”
Rise, fall.
“My bun looks just like all the other girls’.”
Rise, fall.
I’ll be fine.
Rise, fall.
If you really have to go, I can do this myself.
Rise, fall.
I finally learned how to do my own ponytail.
In the fluorescent-washed desert of a middle school hallway, two girls stop to talk. They are still best friends, and nothing bad could ever happen to them. They’re talking about nothing important, because they have all the time in the world to be friends. The first girl laughs at something the second said, and the second gives her a wide grin, silver-sharp with braces.

She doesn’t know that someday she’ll have no place to put the knowledge that the first girl loves yellow and hates coffee, that she likes chocolate better than vanilla and can’t eat gluten or she’ll get sick. The faded posters on the walls watch them mournfully, as if they know what’s in store. The two girls wave goodbye to each other as the hallway fills with water, flooding through the gaps in locker doors and cascading over the fluorescent lights, washing them away to class.

In math class, the second girl tries to write, but her pencils crumble in her hands. Her best friend laughs at the pencil dust covering her desk and gives her a bright yellow pen, solid and warm from her hands. When the teacher’s eyes fix on her, the first girl lets the second use her answers. The first girl’s handwriting is curly and neat, fitting itself onto the second girl’s paper with grace. The second girl’s writing stumbles aside devotedly to make room for it. Their writing should look mismatched, but it fits together, because it’s always been like that. Girl One and Girl Two, a matched set, a two-headed creature. Yellow and blue, fire and wood, roses and dahlias.

When yellow’s mother’s flood-light eyes burn away her shadow, blue lends her hers. When it snows and wood forgets her gloves, they each wear one of fire’s and tangle their other hands together in a snarl that they have to cut apart with the kitchen scissors when they get home. Teachers chuckle genially about the double-thing they are, and it doesn’t matter if one gets called by the other’s name. They’re interchangeable by now, yellow-blue becoming green, fire-wood becoming ash. Girl One and Girl Two become Girl, two creatures formed, melded together, seeming so natural that one wonders why other people don’t grow tangled like that. They’re a fact; a tree has moss, a corpse has decay, the girls have themselves, themself, their combination.

As they grow older they grow together, tree roots spreading into an inseparable, interwoven thing. They love—not each other, precisely, because to be each other you first have to be two separate things. Nonetheless, they love like moonlight loves water, like fire loves a forest.

Drift apart is what they tell people when they ask about the scars years later, but that’s not how it felt. They were cut apart, becoming one-and-another where they were one before.

Do you want to know a secret? They did it with their own hands, growing brambles and swelling with rot until they ripped themselves apart. They did it with their own hands, nails biting into skin until they were separate again, because it was that or be strangled by their own thorns. They did it with their own hands because it was that, or be consumed.

They wash past each other in the halls and the water tinges red around them. The tattered posters on the walls are the Greek chorus to this tragedy, wasted on two little girls who haven’t done their unit on Ancient Greece yet. The chorus watches their blood dissolve through the water with its discolored eyes.

Their combination, their double-thing, their ash-green tangle was not a wholesome union. It was the death of two whole things to give life to something new, split again into two broken parts that would never be the same. It was a love and a monster, closer to a disease than a marriage. And oh, it was beautiful.

They live with holes in their bodies where their now-other used to be, feeling each other like phantom limbs, feeling the parts of themselves that the other took with them that they’ll never get back. When they hear an old favorite song or find a dust-covered yellow pen under a table, they bleed. Separate beings who become one do not so easily become separate again. Each now is not one-as-in-whole, they are one-as-in-alone.

After a while it becomes almost natural, being like this. Like a statue with missing limbs that looks so lovely broken you wonder that it had ever been whole. But it is a terrible thing to walk the world as only part of a creature, water stinging your wounds, limping up subway stairs and irritating everyone behind you because you are used to your other part holding you up. But you cannot mourn what is scattered but alive, so you continue on as if you had always been like this, a living ghost of some long-dead thing, the lonely arm of a broken statue.
Train Ride to Danger Station
Amanda Chen

I prefer to take the express N train home from my school in Manhattan because it will get me there faster. Occasionally, I take the F train with my friend to ensure she gets off at the right stop in Manhattan. Then I have 19 stops before I get to my stop in Brooklyn. When I get out of school around 4 pm, the trains are packed with other students and people I assume just got off work.

However, two months ago on a Thursday, I noticed a man wearing a ski mask and sunglasses as I followed my routine of taking the F train. I ignored him because I’m used to seeing strange individuals on the train. Most of the time if I ignored weird behavior, it wouldn’t bother me. He had gone from train car to train car, and I noticed him again when he sat across from me. I was mostly alone on the train with a few people further down. As I looked up from my phone, I noticed his hands down his pants with a slight movement that seemed creepy. He noticed my gaze and stared at me throughout the train ride. When I got up to get off, not because it was my station, but because I was scared, he got up and moved toward the door. Lucky for me, the doors closed in his face. The only person who noticed this was an older woman, the only other woman in the car, who got off at the same stop. On the train, she had been watching both of us and now she told me that she noticed him fidgeting with his pants. She got on the next train, but I waited until the one after came to minimize the chances of running into him again.

Since then, I’ve changed the way I travel. I no longer take the F train anywhere around 4 pm to avoid such an incident again. I am much more alert to my surroundings, especially when changing trains. Sometimes I am afraid someone is following me home, so I walk a couple of blocks away from my apartment to ensure that I’ve lost them. This happens more in the summer, but occasionally during the school year. I always check my surroundings or walk with a friend.

As the oldest of three siblings and daughter of immigrant parents, I didn’t have anyone to consult about this issue, so I started consulting with my friends. One friend noted that if that man was wearing a ski mask and glasses, it wasn’t the first time he had done this, and so I asked, how many other girls has this happened to besides me? Out of the six friends that I asked, four had been harassed this way, and the other two were uncomfortable talking about it, unsure how to respond. Another friend told me that as she waited on the platform a man approached her saying “you’re cute,” and when she stepped away from him, he inched closer to her. Another woman stepped up and asked if she was all right and if the man was bothering her. She scolded him and told him to leave. A third friend shared that on Halloween, she and her friends were on the subway platform and were continuously catcalled and followed by a man. They asked him repeatedly to stop, but he didn’t. They ended up walking fast into a crowded area outside the subway, where he finally left them alone. When retelling this encounter, my friend said, “That’s usually what happens. I’m sure you can relate—like you can’t confront them.”

This happens to a lot of teenage girls. I’ve noticed that around the age of 15, we started to change how we said goodbye. When I was 10, I said “goodbye, see you tomorrow,” but now we mostly say “bye, get home safe” or “bye, text me when you get home.” We had to deal with tough situations like these because we can’t say no to them.

At the time of this shift, I had just returned from two years of online learning during COVID-19 and mentally still felt like an eighth grader. As I grew up physically, I had to catch up mentally in the sense of having to adapt to how men perceived me. Although I’m not sure if my peers also felt mentally stuck in eighth grade, for me being so unprepared made it more shocking.

Months later I haven’t encountered the man on the F again. But the anger never went away. It made me realize that this was just the beginning of many uncomfortable incidents I would have to face. Sometimes I think about this experience and a rush of emotions overwhelms me. I’m furious because of my vulnerability—I have no power to make the person stop. I can only hope that sharing these experiences will bring more light to the issue because this isn’t just happening to one person: it’s a universal experience among girls and women.
Wonderland
Thuy Holder-Vinh

In the beginning, it was easy. Just the two of them.

Her with long brown braids that fell to her waist, him with bright green and tousled hair his mom helped him dye, and impossibly bright blue eyes. Her violet Crocs studded with star stickers their teacher handed out in class, his aggressively green and pink flashing light-up shoes. She told him they would help him fly, and he believed her. He told her she was the princess of the fairies, placing a bejeweled gold crown on her head, a canny replica of the one she’d painted in art class. On schooldays, they’d climb the fence and walk through the park and search for bugs in the dirt. On weekends, they’d sit in front of her TV, watching Sesame Street or Wild Kratts or whatever their favorite show was that week—more often than not they agreed, but her mother would have a long-lasting memory of her daughter standing on top of the kitchen counter, yelling insistently about watching My Little Pony over Sofia the First. Her mother would later recall how her heart had lurched seeing her toddler’s slippery socks on the marble, screaming with such ferocity at seemingly nothing. To her daughter, it was everything.

Afterward, they were brought to the library where they adventured through fantasy worlds filled with magical creatures as she sat at a table, book in front of her, immersed in daydreams about the two of them floating into outer space. Later she’d recount the stories to her dad, tales of the two of them meeting the queen of dragons or defeating Maleficent. Sleepovers were more common than not and, in the years to come, her dad would tease her about the time in second grade he found his daughter scribbling over the pages of Alice in Wonderland. “We didn’t like the ending,” she’d explained. “It’s dumb. She should’ve gotten to stay in Wonderland.”

“But it wasn’t real,” Her dad had patiently explained. “Like an imaginary friend. It’s nice to dream about, but it’ll never be the same as a real one.”

“Well, that’s dumb. Imaginary friends can be good too,” she’d said, scrunching her face in displeasure.

The boy didn’t have an imaginary friend, but he’d said, “I’m never gonna forget you.”

“I’m not imaginary, silly,” she’d replied, giggles spilling out of her gap-toothed grin like goldfish out the bag at snack time.

She always thought she’d grow up to love him, to marry him. It would be so romantic, a dazzling event, where her mom would cry, and her dress would be made of fairy dust and his family—the ones he’d told her about, the wood elves with hair made of braided leaves and dazzling green eyes, tall and elegant and royalty, would bring magical woodland gifts.

I’m not old enough to love him, she’d think to herself. But I will be one day.

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By tenth grade, she has forgotten him almost entirely.

It’s a hot June day; summer is coming, and her braids are gone, replaced by short, caramel blonde waves. Violet crocs have become white Converse. What were once striped rainbow leggings are now ripped jeans, her clip-on earrings are real golden hoops, her dinosaur long-sleeve is a vintage Beatles t-shirt. She doesn’t walk to school at all, she boards the bus and hugs her boyfriend, a ridiculously tall guy with tight black curly hair and shoes that don’t light up. And her dearest friend, from so long ago, watches her from the back of the bus, hair neon green as ever, eyes still bright and big and blue.

She doesn’t notice him, she never does, just unknowingly leaves him to sit in silence, still as a statue. At school, they have all the same classes, but she has an abundance of new friends and he has none at all. On the weekends, he sits in front of the TV and stares at the black screen, wishing it would light up and wishing she’d sit down next to him again. On the weekends, she goes on dates and to the movies, she kisses her boyfriend and updates her Instagram and doesn’t think about the boy, the boy who misses her like a broken body misses a limb, the boy who, despite the flamboyant hair and rainbow clothes, seems to go unnoticed by the entire high school population. He still feels as boyish as ever, only now his silliness seems foolish. He wants nothing more than to talk to her—no, he wants her to remember him. But it seems all thoughts of him slip through her mind like the playground’s dirt through her fingers. So
he watches, an eternal observer, a frozen moment from the past. He spends the rest of his time trying to revive the television, trying to will it into playing *My Little Pony, Alice in Wonderland,* anything.

It would turn on if she was here, he thinks, over and over and over.

***

One day, it almost does.

He's trailing her to the bus stop—he always does, a step behind her, not quite there, but not quite absent—when she trips.

There's something there. It's small, and it's worn, and she hasn't thought about it in years. But when she falls, when her elbows scrape pavement, drawing out the tiniest beads of blood, she comes eye-to-eye with it: an engraving in the sidewalk, a heart, with two initials. One is her own, the other is too crumbled by footsteps and time to read, but she knows what it is in an instant.

She remembers the drizzly April morning, shadowed by the kind of rain that's not quite there but dampens your clothes anyway. This section of the sidewalk had been closed. She remembers them, the two of them, tentatively walking into the road to get past the wet concrete, their rain boots splashing in the puddles between the road and the street, looking both ways for cars despite the mostly still-asleep town. After they'd safely crossed—or maybe it was before, perhaps even later in the afternoon, the memory has distorted itself with age—she'd picked up a stick on the side of the road and drawn a heart.

"Put our initials in it," her companion had suggested, and she'd complied, delighted by the idea. Them forevermore, permanently set in pavement thousands would walk on, hundreds would spot their mark and smile to themselves; everyone would know of them, everyone would admire their friendship. Admire our love, she'd thought to herself, a little mischievously.

She can't remember his face now.

The memory comes quick, catching her breath in her throat, and in an instant he is by her side again.

The TV flickers.

"You all right?" he asks, kneeling down to help her up. She glances at him and, oh, there it is. The widening of her eyes, the gears turning in her brain. He offers her a delicate hand and a concerned smile. She just stares, pushing herself up by her forearms. They make eye contact.

His eyes are so big and sad, his lashes long and spiked. A beat.

"Yeah, I'm okay." she finally thinks to say, clearing her throat.

"Okay. That's good."

"Yeah."

Another beat.

Thump, thump, thump, her heart goes nervously, so loud in her ears she's sure he can hear it.

"Do I know you?" she asks. There's something so, so familiar about him, something impossible.

His face falls, the TV sputters out.

"No."

"Okay." She says, unsure what to say next. So she walks away.

***

Now she sees him everywhere.

In the reflection of the beakers in science class, in the backseat of the bus, in the row behind her in the movie theater.

They make eye contact all the time. She can't stop thinking about him. Familiar, familiar, familiar.

Whatever it is about him dances in front of her. Like he's an unsolvable problem, just out of her reach, maddeningly taunting.

She'd never noticed him until her fall. She's so sure they've never ridden the bus together. No one ever talks about him. No one ever notices him.

He's a ghost—but real in a way she knows is only for her.

The night after, she has a dream about him. He's chasing her down a hallway, except he's younger and it's not a hallway at all, it's a playground, it's a library, it's her house. There's a ringing in her ear, a whistling noise that shifts and morphs into words.

Don't leave me here, how could you? Come back, come back.

She grows increasingly frustrated at his continued appearances; he feels like a splinter in her palm, a wound that only hurts when touched. Whenever their eyes meet, her heart yearns for something nostalgic and lost. It's like seeing an old video of herself as a child, bittersweet, because God, she was happy, but God, she'll never feel so free again. That's what his presence feels like, all bottled
up into a skinny body and topped with a bright green stopper. She hates it. She wants to hate him. (She can’t, and she doesn’t know why).

Back home, the television sputters, not on or off, but stuck in some limbo, in between channels.

***

Eventually, she grows frustrated at it all.

She’s lying on her loft bed, eyes to the ceiling plastered with stars like her old crocs, thinking about him, scared to sleep.

What is it about him, what is it about him?

It takes a few seconds to realize he’s here. She feels it before even thinking it, knows with certainty that if she rolls over and peers down below, he’ll be there. She considers it for a moment. She could ignore him. She could go to sleep. But, really, she can’t. So, she relent, lets her heart guide her head to look over the edge of her bed. And there he is.

“Hi,” he says, and they make eye contact, and there’s that feeling again.

“Hey.”

“Will you come down?”

A beat.

“No.”

“Oh,” he says, resigned, like he already knew the answer. “Can I come up, then?”

She thinks about it for a second.

“No,” she repeats.

“Okay. Then I guess we’re stuck like this.”

“Yeah.”

They stare at each other for a moment, his gaze unfaltering, hers wary, until she finally asks, “Do I know you, don’t I?” Except it’s not really a question, more of a statement.

“I guess. You used to,” he shrugs.

“We were friends.” She’s more thinking aloud now, letting the memories of fourth grade float back. Long walks to school, calm mornings in her living room, trips to the library. He’s there. In nearly all of them.

“The best,” he agrees.

“Why can’t I remember you? We were always together, I—oh! You’re not real.”

Until now he’s been standing unblinkingly there, regarding her, but now she sees his whole face flinch. That’s it.

“I dunno about that,” he says with a lopsided smile.

“No,” she says shakily. “You’re not real.”

“Yowch.”

“What do you want? Are you my, like, guilty conscience?”

“Nope. I want you to come back with me. Come back to Wonderland, Alice.”

“My name’s not Alice.”

“Metaphor.”


“You’re not real. I dreamed you up.”

“Yeah, you did. It was a good daydream though, wasn’t it? Don’t you miss that? Let’s go back.”

“Where? Your home, with the elves? I made that up. There’s nowhere to go, you’re Insane,” she replies, a little incredulously.

“I’m not real,” he reminds her. “Don’t you miss it? Aren’t you tired? Let’s go back, we can watch television all day, we can run away, whatever you want. Please, I’m so—I’m so lonely. I miss you.” His voice breaks, he breaks a little. He’s all alone. He’s been alone, he needs her, he can’t spend the rest of his days in front of the television, he needs her next to him.

“Come back!” he yells, angry all of a sudden. “You did this to me. You left me here! Come back.”

She flinches, recoiling. Her head hits the wall next to her bed—a thudding pain—and she loses sight of him, but he’s growing now, back into her line of sight. Bigger and bigger and bigger, but the same boyish face.

“Come back!”

On her bookshelf, there’s a collection of classics her parents gave her for her ninth birthday. Alice in Wonderland she read, hated, tucked away. Peter Pan is a different story. She’d watched the movie, disliked the message—too similar to Alice in Wonderland—until fifth grade, when they’d been required to read it for English class. It was the broken fantasy in there that woke her up, the book’s painfully real message that influenced her to leave him behind. She can’t go
with him, she knows already. He’s stuck in the past, he’s not even real, he’s a stormy sea dragging her down, and she knows if she lets him take her, she’ll never get up. She’ll never grow up.

“I can’t go with you,” Her voice is steady. He’s not real. He’s not real. He’s not real.

“Why? It doesn’t matter that I’m not real! Promise! I pinky swear.”

He’s begging now,

falling to his knees, tears on his cheeks, but he’s not crying. The tears are just there. Because he’s not real, none of this is. She leans her head over the ledge again, but she won’t climb down. She can’t.

“That’s not why, Peter,” Steady voice, sad.

“My name’s not Peter.”

“Metaphor.” She’s sad. It’s all so, so, sad.

She wakes up crying.

The TV never turns on again.
Raising the Bar
Walker Varghese

There is nothing like a cash transaction with a stranger on Craigslist to demonstrate one’s bravery. The exchange felt completely illicit; I palmed him $5 and a cold metal tangle of engineering was shoved into my chest, pushing me backwards while his door slammed shut. I white knuckled my purchase until I was securely bolting my own door a few blocks away. A bead of sweat snaked through the phalanx of puberty deployed on my upper lip. Safely in the confines of my foxhole, I examine my new acquisition: the pull up bar.

I stand a flex shy of six feet tall. I don’t even have to jump to grab the bar. Confidently, I press my palms against the cold steel. I vice my fingers. I tilt my chin. I pull. Up.

My feet are bolted to the floor. The surrounding aether morphs into molasses. I am inexplicably coated in lead. The air molecules are now gravel and I am buried. Still looking upwards, I release the bar, stung by the betrayal of reality. Not even an inch off the ground.

My self-professed bravery is not translating into material strength. My failure is unexpected and unwelcome. I am certain that I could easily sell this item back on Craigslist for $10, doubling my cash and rewriting this tale from physical defeat to monetary gain. I could brag about my windfall and celebrate turning a fast buck, never referencing this humiliation.

I scowl at my ferrous nemesis, lording over me, perched high on the door frame. I am no longer the tallest presence in this room. It dominates me. It knows. I wonder if this apparatus is some sort of a curse, if the seller was only too eager to rid himself of the grim reminder of an exercise he couldn’t master.

It dawns on me how badly that interaction could have turned. My self-professed bravery needs recalibrating. This is how headlines are made, how the sides of milk cartons are filled. I may look older than my 13 years, but my impulsive tendencies belie the unearned wisdom.

I crack my knuckles. I bow my head. I squeeze my eyes shut, exhale, and try again. This time, with a jump. No dice. I know realistically I wouldn’t be cranking out reps immediately.

This is normal and expected. Internally, I am disappointed, although I don’t allow the feeling—Sir, permission to feel a human emotion, sir! Permission denied, private. At ease.

My phone buzzes, snapping me out of my inner dialogue. I am grateful for the distraction. It’s my squad member from Valorant, our game starts in a few minutes. I take his call.

We usually only talk while engaged in the game, protecting each other’s backs against enemy fire. Our dialogue is mostly good-natured ribbing, but a few weeks ago, he reported that he wanted to get into shape. He was inspired by his online avatar and wanted to more closely resemble that in real life. I ask him how the progress is going, and there is uncomfortable silence. He admits that NEXT week he plans to start getting in shape FOR REAL. He’s my online friend, so there is no way for me to know what he actually looks like. His honesty is both unsettling and refreshing. He easily could have exaggerated a string of tales about effort, success, gains, and wins, and yet he is honest about his failure to launch. Is he being brave right now? Is this bravery?

I inform my friend of my goal to conquer the pull up bar. I don’t need him to hear it, I need to hear myself say it out loud to manifest it. I could whine about not having a skill, or I could put in the work to gain the skill. I know I would have a sympathetic ear if I made excuses for why I didn’t try to learn pull ups. We may even have bonded over how hard exercising was.

But that’s not my way.

Three weeks of constant effort, and my ankles sprouted wings as I soared towards the rafters, finally able to look the pull up bar in the whites of its eyes and growl victoriously in its phantom ears that I had prevailed.

There is nothing like a heated exchange with an inanimate object hanging on a door jamb to demonstrate one’s victory—Sir, permission to feel proud, sir! Permission granted, private. Forward march.
M&M Cookies
Talia Arcasoy

This is the last time I can buy my cookies this year!
Sigh... still four months until May....
Ma! Only three more weeks until I can buy my cookies! Are you excited?

In June of 2021, I made a rule for myself: I could only buy M&M cookies during the summer. An eighth-grader oblivious to the pains of AP season, I decided to consider May 1 as the first day of summer, since May was typically the month when the pressures of school began to abate. Once school resumed, I could no longer buy them until the following year.

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The rule came to fruition after a long day of shopping—or, rather, walking around luxury department stores and trying on clothes we can’t afford—at Roosevelt Field Mall. My mom and I head to the Stop & Shop a few blocks over to pick up two for $4 soft drinks. I shiver as the automatic doors close behind us, a gust of refrigerated air settling over my sunburnt skin. My mom grabs a produce bag to pick out broccoli crowns—we’ll be here for longer than I thought.

The Auntie Anne’s pretzel nuggets I ate over an hour ago haven’t fully satiated my hunger, so I make my way towards the bakery section. The blueberry muffins look dry, and the concept of patriotic-themed cupcakes is not exactly appealing to me, so I’m about to return to my mother with a shopping cart when I see them. Sixteen delicately arranged chocolate chip cookies marked with tantalizing specks of yellow and blue and orange in a rectangular container, sealed with a sticker thanking me for my patronage. In a sea of other containers filled with plain-old chocolate chip cookies, its singularity makes me feel as though these were made for me. I swoop them up, checking the expiration date before they make the hour-long journey back home with me.

After unloading and wiping down $100 worth of groceries that were never supposed to be purchased to begin with, I change into my swimsuit and run downstairs to the yard. The sun is about to set, but it is still almost 90 degrees outside—the perfect weather to spend an evening in my above-ground pool, an alternative to Rockaway Beach during the pandemic. Moments later, my sister joins me to work on the synchronized swim routine we made up the day before. The racket of house music from a birthday party can be heard from a few houses down; the children next door scream in delight as they take turns bouncing on a trampoline. My sister calls our cousins to come over and join us for dinner. We compare our mosquito bites until my mom arrives with a large aluminum tray of air-fried chicken strips and french fries. It’s not much—a sparsely furnished backyard with a rusted dining set shaded by the stubs of two trees cut down years ago—but it’s enough to keep a smile on my face the entire night, my only concern being whether my sister would get into the shower before I could. Even then, there’s no need to worry; I race upstairs while she ties the tarp cover over the pool.

Before rushing to the bathroom, I halt at the sight of my cookies placed precariously at the edge of the kitchen counter. It feels like an eternity since I’ve seen them last, and she always takes a while to hook the tarp to each pole, so I open the container and bring one cookie to my lips. The soft dough melts onto my tongue—soft but not too crumbly, sweet but not too sugary. I bite through each chocolate chip as I let out a visceral mmm, licking my fingers as I put the seal back on the container. Unbeknownst to me, the water has been running this whole time. My sister beat me to it.

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My rule went into effect just as I started high school. There was something too special about the cookies—they weren’t worthy of being eaten during any time of the year other than the summer. From thereafter, each time my mom and I would enter the store “just for soda,” I would yearnfully walk past them, admiring the neat stack of cookies left untouched by other customers. They were my little secret. No one understood them like I did. When my mom would place them in the shopping cart when I wasn’t looking, I would put them back on the shelf. “You don’t get it,” I would tell her. “These are for the summer only. They give me motivation.”
“Motivation for what?”
“That summer is almost here, and then I can really be happy.”
“What’s stopping you from being happy right now?”

I don’t know. Maybe it’s the oversized puffer coat I am wearing that somehow fails to keep me warm in the freezer aisle. It could be the large rain droplets that accumulate on the lenses of my glasses and seep through my brand-new sneakers. Or the fact that the sky is pitch-black at 5 pm. It’s not just the weather, though. Maybe it’s the social studies test that I have to study for when I get home, or my B+ average in chemistry that I just can’t seem to bring up to an A. Regardless of what the actual reason is, I shouldn’t get my hopes up. When it isn’t summer, it’s impossible for me to truly be happy. The cookies symbolize that sacred shift in my life that occurs once every year—when my surroundings suddenly transform from despondency into beauty. When I am relieved of every unwanted expectation weighing down on me. When I can go through each day without having to reflect on whether I’m getting things right. I wouldn’t want to taint the cookies by indulging in them too soon.

That isn’t to say that I am incapable of experiencing happiness during any other season. Sure, I begin to feel more spirited when Daylight Savings Time rolls around and I can appreciate the view of sunlight gleaming onto the East River as my train passes over the Manhattan Bridge. The orange conversational seating is flashy and generally inconvenient but complements the greenery of southern Brooklyn in the sort of way that encourages me to spend the extra 15 minutes to take the Q home as opposed to the 2 train. I love curling up on the couch under my king-sized throw blanket on the first night of winter break each year to watch It’s a Wonderful Life with my family. I take off my glasses to wipe my tears at the very end of the film, then peer over at the Christmas tree adjacent to the television. The seven-foot-tall tree dominates every square inch of the room, illuminating the hardwood coffee table and recliner chair with its array of neon lights delicately wrapped around each branch.

I feel a sense of coziness—like the first moment when your head hits your pillow after a long day of exhaustion—and the draft in the house becomes unnoticeable.

I tend to associate summertime with happiness, and there is nothing inherently wrong with doing that. Everyone derives happiness from specific moments in their lives, regardless of whether those moments occur on a repeated basis. The flaw in my mindset, however, is thinking that it is impossible to derive happiness from any season or time or moment in my life other than summer. When I look back on the sum of my year or childhood as a whole, precious memories are often clouded by the not-so-pleasant ones. I stop myself from eating my M&M cookies from September to April in fear that they, too, will become clouded by the unpleasant moments in my life. This notion is incredibly restrictive—not just to my snacking habits, but to my ability to achieve eudaimonia. It doesn’t need to be summer for me to be happy. Happiness cannot be defined within the span of a particular time frame. It must be quantified in its totality—otherwise, there would not be any meaningful moments to serve as comparison in reminding you of what brings you joy and what does not. There is no reason for me to deprive myself of the small things that invoke pleasure just for the sake of making summer all the more special. I can be truly happy during any time of the year, and if a $5 container of sixteen cookies is what contributes to that general sense of contentment, then I’ll purchase it whenever I’d like. With that, I chose to repeal the rule just before the start of junior year.

I’ve never been a fan of shortbread cookies. Oatmeal raisin cookies always bore me. They just aren’t memorable. I gag every time I eat macadamia nut cookies. There is simply nothing like a chocolate chip cookie, and I have tried every variety of chocolate chip cookies out there. Entenmann’s, Chips Ahoy!, Tate’s, the ones they offer in the school cafeteria—you name it. None of them will ever compare to the homestyle M&M chocolate chip cookies from the bakery of the Carle Place Stop & Shop. I purchase them whenever the craving hits me, whether the windows of the supermarket reveal a sunny, picturesque parking lot landscape or are obscured by clumps of snow. I eat them while I’m studying for exams or watching Netflix or writing essays for English class. There may be crumbs lodged between each key on my laptop, but my heart (and stomach) is full. And there’s only two more months left until May!
Local to Somewhere Else
Hannah Bahn

She sat in a burnt orange seat, riding backwards on an R train at 11:57 am, not knowing when the doors would next open. The lights in the tunnel occasionally flashed through the windows, but the glass was smudged and scratched, coated in handprints and dirt. On the ledge under the window, someone had written in block letters the word “Arson.” She squinted at it, crow’s feet emerging at the corners of eyes, searching for a missing letter.

The seat next to her was empty, so she placed her handbag there as if to reserve it for someone she wished were accompanying her. She glanced out the window and watched her hair frame her face and the mechanisms of the tunnel pass by at 15 miles per hour. Almost every strand seemed to be graying except for a few remaining raven-hued ones, and the roots had nearly gone white.

In the fingerprinted glass, the rest of the car started to bloom into focus: a young boy sat behind her, a 50-something man in front of her, and a woman even a few years older than herself sat across the aisle. As she glanced at each of the others, eyes lifted just slightly, all of them looked back at her and then down at their hands or the speckled floor as they met her gaze. Her vision was still clear and had never faltered, and something about the way the light reflected off her brown irises always made it feel as if she were looking at the dimension behind her subject.

Peering gently at the reflection in the window, she studied the boy behind her. Not quite in his teens, he sat alone with a slim book in one hand and a half-eaten pear in the other, eyes casually darting from one word to the next. The grime of the window may have slightly distorted the shadows of his face, but the pattern in which they fell sent a wave of recognition through the woman’s spine, sent through her that unmistakable feeling of a moment you can’t quite place. And there it was: every Friday after school, she would stop at the grocery store on her way home and purchase the fruit and vegetables needed for the next few days’ cooking, and nearly every Friday, she’d run into a boy who’d buy his family’s allotment of yams and cabbages, peaches and pears, softly whistling a new tune. He possessed a strange ability to pass her an ear of corn or hold a basket for any elderly gentleman and never ask for anything in return, an ability to exude a quiet warmth and politeness without meaning anything by it. They’d exchange a few smiles, at most a few words, and for a year’s worth of Fridays she wished she could summon the awareness to say something beyond a simple thank you after he held open a door. The boy was still behind her—she could hear the sound of paper on paper as he turned the pages—but the pear had been bitten down to just a core, the connection in the middle so tenuous that it threatened to snap in half.

In front of her, the man fiddled with the hem of his shirt, buttoning and unbuttoning the sleeves. The woman across from her was watching him, too, and she spun her necklace chain around as her head tilted up and back down again. She watched the two of them and another aisle of the grocery store painted itself stroke by stroke in her memory. At the meat counter every Friday, she’d join the queue and wait for the cuts of beef for Saturday night’s roast, often kept company by her next-door neighbor, an older woman who kept a few houseplants and house cats, relied on a cane, and ate spaghetti and meatballs every Sunday. They would talk every week, always a variant of the same conversation, and she feared the woman’s kindness, mistaking it for condescension or pity. In a similar way, the butcher terrified and impressed her: the glinting of his knives under the fluorescent light made her small fingers curl tighter around her grocery basket, and his keenness to crack a joke made her even more careful to enunciate her pleases and thank yous. But now, looking at the middle-aged man and the older woman careening forward in the tunnel with her, she envied how the butcher could slice pork and veal for so many customers yet seem to remember every wrinkle in every face, remember who liked which cut of lamb and whose grandfather had fallen ill. She envied how the elderly woman could carry a conversation every week without letting her expression contort at all the ghosts she saw in every face.

She let her gaze turn towards the doors as the trains seemed to slow into the station. Not even arson could extinguish all the faces that she had seen, all the new ones that she would continue to see as the old ones rippled through her mind, ever evolving. She stood up and regained her balance. Feeling the warm air on her back, stepping forwards into the light, she stood still to catch her breath, while the doors closed and those three strangers sat together in the car, hurtling forward into time.
The Long Walk
Ela Kini

Amma — Mother
Baba — Father

The concrete is damp but nobody minds it. The feeling of the ground beneath my feet means I am alive and that is enough. The gravel presses into my heels, smooth from wear. We have been walking for three slow hours, waiting for the final midnight, the final sunrise. No one knows whose. But it is always someone’s last. No night is safe. Nobody is safe. No one mentions the truth behind this. Death is false until you witness it. It is avoidable until you experience it. Tonight is a last night. Another mourning day. We have always known this. But we are all here anyway. There is nothing left behind us but the dust and the bones. The bodies and the homes that are no longer ours.

Ameena loved the image of the sun setting over the horizon. A postcard decorated with a painted Moscow sunset still sits over her bed frame.

I’ll go there someday. When I go, I’ll bring you. And Amma. Baba.

We still haven’t gone. Amma is gone, Baba is gone, and I might as well be. Her mattress is gone, too. But the photo still sits there. That little part of her constitutes a small portion of the home’s bare bones, a pillar of what I chose to leave behind.

You forget me when you go, okay? Better than the alternative. You don’t have to live my life. I live my life for you not to.

Ameena had a way of existing in flashes. I saw her in the early mornings, but never late at night. Her eyes were always reddened from crying. But she never cried in front of us. She’d sit alone by the boarded window. She’d paint it as she sobbed. She’d pray on the thick, woolen mat and cry and pray and cry. Scrub her reddened, clay-coated heels until they were pink and raw, tuck herself into Amma’s silk shawl and wait for the nighttime bombs to fall like shooting stars. The day I left, I brought the shawl with me but not the Moscow postcard. Amma burnt the postcard with Ameena’s body.

The urn is still in the flat; I am nowhere near strong enough to tug a support beam from a building.

Mirza cranes her neck towards the bruised evening sky, the blood clumped in her hair glistening. “The sun will be setting soon.” Sunset means hiding, then sleeping in shifts. We are most vulnerable when resting.

“We still have time. An hour, at least. Let’s get farther down on the beach,” Aashir said. We follow him quietly. Aashir has been walking the longest of all of us. He’s walked for weeks. At night, while he slept, Miriam pointed out his feet to me. Rough, calloused, and bloodied. For weeks, he had walked beside his younger sister. But then they found her. They find the young ones the easiest. The young ones still trust.

Aashir slows, falling into stride next to me. “There are police nearby,” he murmurs. “I can hear them.” Aashir cannot hear their footfalls. He can hear the screams. He and I are the eldest here. The fact makes him believe I am as mature as he is, that I can handle the truth and the fear and think clearly despite. In a way, he is right. In many ways, he is wrong.

“How close?” My voice is quieter than even his. Neither of us want the younger ones to hear. It’s their fear that reveals them. Calm. Calm is the key to escaping. Another week, and we’ll have escaped. That’s what Aashir says. Mirza agrees, and she has the map for reference. She is our age as well, but incredibly fearful. It was her fear that made her bring the map, despite the fact that she’s memorized the route. Some of us joined the walk without any idea of the distance to the border. Desperate, we prayed for mercy for many nights; the night we stop praying is the night our shoes wear out. By the time we reach the border, Mirza says, no one will have shoes with soles remaining.

Aashir’s eyes meet mine. “Close enough that they’ll hear us. A big group like this...it’s hard to stay hidden.” His gaze is sympathetic, but not anxious. In a way, he anticipates death. It seemed to be the inevitable result of this attempted escape. Yet now we seemed too close to fail. Hope is dangerous, and yet, as we get closer, the feeling blooms in my chest. The stretch of time between my breaths grows, as if the police will hear me breathing. As if something so meager as my pauses can save us.

Amma spent the day before Ameera’s death praying. Five hours of whispers against a threadbare mat, then hours of begging Baba and
I to think of where she may be. None of us slept that night. I stared up at the leaking roof, arms crossed beneath my head. My skin boiled from the sticky humidity and I squirmed from the discomfort of my self-inflicted stillness, my inability to close my eyes and rest. When morning came, Amma and Baba prayed together while I stared into the flickering face of the fireplace, attempting to melt myself in the heat of it. By morning, I knew she was dead, or worse off. My parents still hoped for their eldest daughter.

At some point before midnight, Baba went out to check on the old man who lives on the other side of the road. The man’s son made Baba promise, before the boy died. Baba keeps his promises. He undid every lock, pushed open the door, and found Ameena on the bottom, curled like a child again, the clothes torn off her. We didn’t take her to the hospital. They wouldn’t help. The hospitals are full and broken. Too far for her to travel. The price impossible to undertake. Instead, we attempted to heal her with a small bottle of rubbing alcohol for disinfectant. We rip fabric into strips and tie them around her cuts, like in American films we would watch to learn English. Ameena woke up after more than an hour.

“What happened?” I don’t remember who asked. If it was Amma or Baba. All I remember was the crying. It was silent, but you could see it on each of our faces. All of us were crying. Crying means you’re resigned. You don’t give up like that, yeah? That’s what Baba used to say when I got hurt at school. He didn’t say it as he stared at his daughter, frail and resigned at last.

Ameera didn’t answer. She shook her head softly, hissing from the pain of consciousness as I continued to tend to her wounds. We didn’t pressure her to tell us. In a way, we knew enough. And could assume the rest. The police got her. This is another warning. To us. To her. To our village. Ameena cried out and curled into herself again, something hurting her that we cannot see.

“No. No. You’re okay.” My tears begin to fall faster. Her smile widened, but now she was crying too. “No. I’m not. But it’s okay. You will be okay.” Half an hour of crying, prayers, and recollections passed before Ameena’s hand was cold in mine. I pressed the fingers of my other hand to the side of her neck then, but she wasn’t breathing. I shut her eyes gently and cried against her limp chest. Amma and Baba didn’t shed any more tears. They’d seen enough to sit still as statues, quiet with some sort of shame.

Aashir bores his eyes into my cheek, and I watch him in my peripheral vision. “Did you leave anyone behind when you left?” I ask.

“My mother. She was ill. Couldn’t have survived it.” His eyes turn softer than I have seen them before.

“I left both my parents. They didn’t want to go on the journey.” I’ve learned how to speak of them without crying.

“I lost your sister, too. Didn’t you?” The question is gentle, and he reminds me of Ameera in that moment. “I heard from Mirza.”

All I do is nod. We continue walking, careful to keep track of our footfalls, and keep them silent. He and I both hear the police approaching, their footsteps growing louder. Neither of us mention this now. They are too close for us to feel safe running. “Do you still believe?”

In God. In hope. In tomorrow. “Maybe.” His answer is followed by a pause long enough for me to wonder if this is too intrusive. A pause long enough for me to acknowledge that despite the shared kilometers, we are strangers. “I want to believe there is someone watching my mother.”

“I want to believe my sister is in some sort of heavenly place. That she’s at peace.” He smiles at me, and I wonder what it would mean for us to meet in another life without dead sisters and parents we’ve left behind. In another place, where we are walking alongside a park and feeding ducks bread rather than scrambling for food ourselves.

I reach for his hand and hold onto it for just a moment before we both realize the police are close enough that they will catch us. That they will catch all of us. The screams are too loud. I stare at the children around us, some young enough that they are being carried in swaddles. “It’s over,” I whisper, and he knows what I mean, stares towards the beach that is so close, the sunset that has just begun.
He looks me in the eye, and I will later wonder if that look is the moment when I realize what he will do next. He smiles but I can see the tears in the corner of his eyes. I’ll remember his tears 10 years later, even if I’ve forgotten his face. I’ll remember his hand in mine.

He drops his pouch, all the food inside nearly falling to the ground before I catch it. And then he runs backwards, as fast as his worn legs will let him, going as far as he can before he throws himself between the trees, towards the source of the screams. Mirza looks at me, and I see her shaking. Some of the others, so tired they could drop, didn’t notice his departure. Perhaps this is better. This way, they didn’t scream. But this way, there is no goodbye. This is the nature of the walk, the signing away of the right to gentle departure.

I hear the police’s footfalls clear as day for a moment until they grow farther and farther away, and closer to this boy who has named himself a sacrifice. By the time I can no longer hear them, we are on the beach and watching the sunset. It is at this point that people notice his disappearance. There is no comment. Just silent mourning.

The American movies have told me and will tell you that death is a beautiful thing, even romantic. But my eyes are dark and hollow as I stare at the ocean ahead of me, waiting for the low sun to descend beneath the choppy waters. Mirza murmurs that there are only a slew of days left, that this will be the easiest leg. I can barely hear her.

I know his death is not a romantic thing, because when I reached for his hand, I did not know that my hand was the last hand he would ever hold, mine being the hand of a stranger. I engrave the memory of his palm against mine in my mind, stow it away like a ghost story because it is. Even as I held his hand, I believed in nothing more than the ocean in front of us and the expendability of our bodies. I did not pray for his life because his life and mine were deemed over much before our hands even linked. When my time comes, I know I will remember his palm. His smile and the tears. His resigning to a fate neither of us chose. And I did not need to ask to know that he does not expect my prayers. Our only bond was the shared futility. The shared heft of a responsibility it seems only we knew to carry. I hold it on my shoulders in a breath, feeling the tightness of being alone without the comfort that was the stranger. I simply lay still in the sand, waiting. Waiting to feel something more than the emptiness that I’ve inherited from my parents.

At some point, I press my fingers to the vein on my own wrist, and feel the rhythm of life, seemingly underserved. I stare at the moon, and despite my exhaustion, can’t bring it upon myself to sleep. Within what feels like a few moments, we are stirring again. Before I leave, I carve his name into the sand, knowing already that it will be soaked up by the waves.

And then I start walking again.
Atolia is lying to you, really she lies about most things. Atolia is an amorphous jellyfish, a ribbed chunk of coral. Atolia is an indistinct mass, detritus at the bottom of the ocean. Atolia is in her bed. Her body curves inwards, outwards, inwards again. Its shape rises and falls like the ocean waves reaching for the moon, as it has and will forever and forever and forever. Atolia's body is skin and water and blood. Mostly water.

Atolia feels her stomach fold into itself as her body uprights, the weight of her torso pools in her arms. They press into the mattress and wrinkle the blankets. Her body aches indiscriminately. It's dark out, but a streak of lightness struts across the sky. Atolia can't tell what color it is, exactly, but by her estimation it's 5 am and that streak of light begins spilling across the horizon. The brittle glass windows separating her from the never-ending forest emanate chill. Atolia presses her skin against itself. It's a little bit warmer now.

Atolia has been here for a while. She isn't quite sure how long. But she likes it enough, at the end of the day everyone needs somewhere to be. This is somewhere Atolia can be. She likes how the old wood moans beneath her feet, how even in the heat everything seems to have an underlying chill. She likes the big blue sky. The house is small yet cavernous. Everything is this deep, dark wood. The kind of wood that blends with shadows and makes huge dark voids. Sometimes she feels like it could swallow her up if she doesn't keep track of herself. The house is so quiet, it presses on her. Sometimes that quiet might be a million pounds. Sometimes Atolia thinks of playing music, sometimes she thinks of screaming all the time. She's a bit scared to do that though, as if the house may have some sort of repercussion for disturbance. Atolia finds herself becoming more sure that the house is an entity unto itself with every passing day. Maybe all houses are. But most houses have some kind of kindness to them, or at least a voice someone can understand. The house Atolia is in feels completely alien. It's an unknowable place. Whoever built it didn't know how their hands were moving, maybe no one built it all. Maybe it's always been here. Atolia knows the house doesn't want her there. She doesn't know what does want her, though.

Atolia always feels guilty cracking eggs but she eats them every morning. She watches the egg white lethargically ooze from the emerging thin fractures, then splits it altogether. A bit of egg white still pools in the shell. Gross. Gross. The egg pops and crackles as it hits the pan like popping candy, it hisses and moans and dies, again. The heat rises. The fire climbs. Higher, higher, higher. The heat is unbearable. The heat is unbearable. The heat is unbearable. The heat is unbearable.

Atolia turns the stove off. Gross. Gross. She pours a glass of water. She sits on the couch, pulls a blanket over her lap. The unease is a ritual.

The sound of boots that aren't hers pressing against the floorboards breaks the static. Immediately, a groan rings out and breaks the fragile, terse silence. "I got home like an hour ago and now I'm going again! I told that kind of annoying cousin I would meet her in Anforte this morning, I really shouldn't have. It's like a forty-five-minute drive." Mitzi's dark hair blends right in with the darkness of the house, but her sharp, boney features and (sort of scary) striking blue eyes make her stand out in Atolia's line of view. Everything about her is confident. The posture she maintains so deliberately, her aquiline nose and broad shoulders, the quiet poise she carries herself with, it's all so fascinating. She's a flurry of movement, she grabs things, she looks in mirrors, she puts things down, she picks them up again. Her slender figure extends and retracts like a machine. Atolia watches it all play out again and again in a matter of moments.

"You could cancel," Atolia suggests, her voice sounds strange after hours of silence.

"I don't cancel," Mitzi hesitates for a moment. "That's probably not a great rule to have."

Mitzi isn't home often; she flits to and fro from whatever places she possibly goes to in a place as small as this. A job this week, another job the next, it's bewildering how she can find so many different jobs in a place with maybe six stores in total. When they were little, Atolia used to think she was secretly a Parisian socialite who traveled the world and just happened to end up a few doors down. Mitzi is the only person Atolia would ever be roommates with. It's not really like
they’re roommates anyway, more so Mitzi is a semi-stray cat who sometimes needs somewhere to sleep. That’s probably mean. She’s neat though, she pays rent on time. She doesn’t really do anything wrong. But they’re supposed to be best friends, they declared it on Mitzi’s ninth birthday, exchanging BFF necklaces and having a sleepover. When Mitzi moved away to Idaho when they were 15 the two of them said it over and over again. Best friends, forever, forever, forever.

Atolia wonders if she can tell that this place is somehow outlandish, that maybe Mitzi’s trying to escape the house. Atolia doesn’t say anything. Mitzi doesn’t say anything.

Atolia follows Mitzi out of the house as they both aim for their respective cars. Whatever motion she can find draws her attention; motion is fascinating. She watches Mitzi’s hair, long and dark and thick sway back and forth across her back to distract from the stillness of everything else. Each strand grasps at an arm trying to hold on, only to fall back onto the other. Again, again... Atolia feels the sensation of gravel beneath her feet, thousands of little rocks collide against one another, rubbing and breaking.

The click of the car doors opening echos along the road.

“I’ll see you tonight, Juney.”

Atolia knows she won’t see Mitzi tonight.

“Sure.”

As she drives, Atolia cracks the window a bit although it’s cold. The air’s violent, confident movement feels deeply foreign. It startles her a bit, the sensation of chill like a cut across her cheek. Treforgine, Montana is a sedentary place. The trees don’t move much. The few people don’t move much, either. The cars on the big highways bleed into one another forever and forever, they don’t really seem to move much, either. They exist for a few minutes and then they don’t. The air is crisp and cold but stale, like it’s hung around just a little too long.

Northwestern Montana is cold and mostly pine trees. Atolia couldn’t really tell you why she’s there.

The days all bleed together, portions of her life seem to rapidly slip out from under her fingertips only for entirely separate years to suddenly return to her. Blinking becomes a risk when it takes her into all these disparate places. Time itself is like a fine silk that Atolia constantly finds herself grasping at, it slides and slips, seemingly allergic to her skin. Hours are loose change in her pocket. Minutes are insurmountable mountains. Minutes like these, spent in the Stevenson General Store. Despite all the time she’s spent here, Atolia has never met Stevenson. She hasn’t met too many people here in general, actually.

The store is a slow place. The wood it’s made from is light, the air eternally seems to drip with afternoon haze, the hour is ripe and bursting with sun from all corners. Dust dances along the celestial rays of sunlight and it might be the most beautiful thing. This is a solid place, for all the floorboard’s creaks and moaning. Every moment here feels exactly like the last one, and the next one will be much the same. Atolia knows it all by now. She’s memorized the etches of wood on the counter, how it forms little peaks and canyons. She’s spent identical silent hours here wondering what it’d be like to be an ant traversing these canyons, how the wood grain would bump along her impossibly thin, paper-like ant-legs. If she were one of those dust ballerinas dancing in the sunbeam spotlights, how she’d glide along the wooden valley before finding a place to tuck herself into for the next million years, waiting for the far-off day that a feather duster would take her away. What if she were the wood countertop itself? Enduring the weight of arms and hands and bags of rice and road trip junk food. Quarters and old boots and a million yellow afternoons. Maybe for a hundred years, or however long Stevensons had his general store. How her skin would splinter and soften after decades of touch, but she supposes her human skin is bound to do that anyway. There’s a stain on the far-left side of the countertop, right by a box of caramels that Atolia knows are stale. She believes her real job here is to consider that stain, to trace the contour of its body. To craft elaborate hypotheses on how it came to be, how the spilled coffee it probably resulted from was brewed, how much of it was milk. Maybe it was tea. Is it five years old or 50? The store is a kinder place than the house, yet still unknowable. While the house turned bitter in its decades of isolation, the store’s edges just grew lax and water damaged, yet still stable. Always stable. An ancient, gentle god, one that’s willing to give its followers a sign.

Atolia watches the window and waits for a sign. There are a few other employees here, they don’t need very many after all. If Atolia had to guess, she’d say about ten customers wander in per day, five
young and five old. The place seems to be switching generational hands. Today’s a slow day, most of them are, so she’s on her own. Wouldn’t change much if she wasn’t though, really most of the employees seem entirely uninterested in anything but getting in and out of here, Atolia can’t blame them. They probably have places they’re going to that are out of this not-quite-town, dreams, and people that they’re chasing. Atolia wonders if they’ll be going east or west. The spaces Atolia occupies, the air she takes up, seems tinged with a finality. The chairs she sits in and the footprints she leaves will always keep the pieces of herself she’s left there. Not quite self-important, but more like a worn, faux leather bag that loses its thin pleather layer wherever it goes. She’ll be here in Treforgine forever, she knows that. It was decided for her before she was born, before she even came here. Her safety is in Treforgine, but she can’t form her mouth around the words to describe it. She isn’t from here, every part of her is completely foreign. But nestled among the pine trees and between the wooden roof shingles she found someplace that presses on every side of her like a blanket, the weight of the claustrophobia is a comfort. But this constant unease can’t be all there is, right? She has no material ties, if she’s so unnerved by this place she could really just leave if she could get past the part of herself that seems so stubbornly rooted here. But to some extent she’s unnerved by most places she’s been, her detachment is inescapable.

By the time Atolia locks the rickety door with a rusting lock that could easily be broken, the sky is already dyed in soft indigos as the evening declares its victory against the sun. The beginnings of stars begin to peak between the lapis curtains of sky, and at that moment the world seems very soft and cold and indistinct. The trees surrounding the dusty parking lot blend into one another, a wall of pine needles broken only by the road that lies before her. Winter makes its warning on the wind, it’s brisk and comfortingly unmerciful. The wind will always bite, and its teeth will always draw blood. Atolia loves the chill, she loves the sensation of goosebumps that dapple across her skin like a rock thrown across a pond. Her breath plumes out in front of her. There’s nothing that makes her feel more like a human than instinctively pressing into her coat, her body looking for warmth although her mind is so drawn to the cold. She loves when her body takes control of her, when it pilots itself.

A melodic whine howls across the air, a lullaby for the wilderness. It’s beautiful out tonight. Atolia ducks into her car.

Despite herself, she opens the window as she drives down the big roads that make up more of this place than the buildings. The glow of the other cars makes her feel like she’s in a big city somewhere, like she’s on a grand stage and the lights are blinding. Something ambitious stirs in her, just as quickly as it burns out. But she does wonder what it’d be like to be on an indistinctly big stage someplace, to know everyone’s looking at you and every bit of sweat on your forehead, on every hair. Really, she recoils at the thought, but regardless she can’t help but be moved by the glittery lights against the endlessly cold and dark night. Secretly, tonight she wishes she’d miss the exit and stumble into a place she doesn’t know, to feel the sensation of being eaten alive by those big lights, her flesh giving way to whatever lies beyond it. She wants to miss this exit. She wants to miss this exit. Her hands move on their own. She doesn’t miss the exit.

She blinks, things settle. Her car slows down, so does she. Things equal out.
On the Other Side of the World
Sara Omer

“As-Salamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullah,” recited Reham’s father, concluding the afternoon prayer for the day. Reham, who was praying alongside her father in the middle of the arid and humid air of Khartoum inside their two-story house, leaned against her father’s broad shoulders as she uttered the typical remembrances of God.

Subhan Allah
Alhamdulillah
Allahu Akbar

“Baba?” The little seven-year-old girl called out to her father, who has been deep in prayer for a long time now. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, habibti,” he reassured her. He mulled over his thoughts for a long minute, looking forlornly at his cupped hands as he continued to pray. Reham thought she saw her father wiping away a tear that had unconsciously fallen from his eyes, but she didn’t have time to question it before her father wiped his right eye and urged his daughter to stand up.

“Reham, let’s go play soccer out on the porch.”

“Really, Baba? But I thought you said it was too dangerous to go outside?”

“I’ll be here to protect you, Reemoo. Always. Now let’s go have fun! If you beat me, I’ll make you some Basboosa,” her father said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his melancholy eyes.

It seemed almost like a normal day as Reham and her father ran around the porch, kicking their rugged soccer ball back and forth towards makeshift goal posts, the blazing sun warming up Reham’s body during such prevalent darkness in her home country.

It was exactly 2:21 in the afternoon when the gunshots sounded. In the distance a group of RSF soldiers decked out in uniform and carrying rifles flocked out of a tank. They were breaking down doors of the houses throughout Reham’s neighborhood, Omdurman, no doubt raiding the already little food and supplies families owned when resources were already scarce. One bullet, seemingly out of nowhere, created a dent in Reham’s family car and, before she knew it, Reham was picked up by her father, who ran as fast as he could for a forty-year-old overworked man with high cholesterol and asthma.

Her father slammed the door shut, calling out for the rest of Reham’s family members.

“Reema, Khalid, Rumaysa, take cover, now!”

Immediately, the rest of her family joined them, and they all huddled together in a tiny closet with a broken overhead light. Despite the predicament, Reham was okay, as long as she was engulfed in her father’s warm embrace, with her mother and siblings close by. All she needed was her family, and she would be all right.

Reham felt that sense of warmth dissipate when she saw her father at the door of the closet. Before he could close the door, Reham called out to him, rivulets of tears streaming down her brown skin.

“Baba, why are you leaving? Please, come back,” she choked, wiping her tears in a futile attempt to look composed in front of her two younger siblings.

Her father hesitated, poking his head back into the damp, empty closet.

“I love you. I will come back. I promise,” her father replied firmly. However, much to her consternation, she heard the subtle crack in his voice. The uncertainty of whether or not she’d see her father again made Reham choke out a sob, her mother hugging her and her siblings tightly, caressing Reham’s hair and whispering encouragement into her ears.

What made her stop were the trailing thud thud thud sounds not too far from their closet door. Footsteps, not of her father, but of multiple people. The RSF had infiltrated their homes.

Reham forced herself to stop crying, for the sake of her family. She could never live it down if her emotions were the reason her family were taken away from her. No, she had to be strong. For her family. For her father.

Suddenly, the voices were getting louder and louder in an interrogative and forceful manner. Reham could only hear muffled snippets of the interrogation through the door.

“...we found your documents...”

“Suspecting...”

“...work for the SAF...”
What was first an unlawful investigation—in the middle of war, did laws even matter anymore?—escalated rapidly, with loud voices quickly transforming into yelling, loud thuds and clanks being made, implying that someone was being thrown around.

Before Reham had time to process what was happening, two loud gunshots silenced the entire house. There were murmurs and whispers, incoherent to Reham because—oh my God, they killed her father!

Reham slapped her hands over her mouth, sobbing as quietly as she could, burying her face into her mother’s lap, staying as still as possible as feet continued to shuffle around their house, canned food items, benzene, everything raided by the RSF. With no clock or window, it was impossible to tell how long Reham and the rest of her family stayed in that damp closet, but they stayed. They stayed, mourning over the murder of their father in confinement, fearing the RSF would come after them next. That is, until their cousins from next door came to check in on them hours later, swinging the door open and finding a mother and her kids grieving with so much suppressed anger and sorrow.