Acknowledgements

The authors of Before 19 would like to express our gratitude for all those who have made this publication possible. First, to Vincent Galgano: you have given us your time, patience, and expertise, and for that we cannot thank you enough. To the administrators of The Masters School: thank you for supporting us wholeheartedly and allowing us yet another platform to express ourselves. To Sang Bae: thank you for capturing us at our most thoughtful. And lastly, to Caroline Dumaine: you have been an invaluable teacher and mentor year long, and a superb editor in these last months. You have taught us all a lesson in kindness and strength, and inspired us to reach farther than we thought possible. Thank you for instructing us in the art of sharing, and thank you for always being there to listen.

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The Towers or How I Learned to Stop Fearing God

By Luke Davoren

Being the son of a civil engineer gives you a twisted view of New York City. Most kids walk through the city grid with their head down, eyes to the asphalt, dodging sidewalk cracks. Occasionally they might look up to search for a hotdog stand or a hot pretzel, but otherwise their head is buried in childhood thoughts. Not me. My father, who builds buildings for a living, instilled in me awe and pride in the buildings around me. As a child when we walked through the city streets, he would point to the highest parts of the skyscrapers. I would stop and stare with my mouth open and when we got back to walking, all I could think about was why I couldn’t see the tops. I was somewhat of an expert. My father had given me a deck of cards with crisp pictures to study from, and at five I could list all of the best American buildings: The Sears tower, Empire State Building, Chrysler Building. When we went to museums and Yankee games, I looked not at the exhibits or players. I looked at the buildings that held them. I hoped to see in real life what I fantasized about from my trading cards. I loved them all, but out of all the cards in my deck, there was one that was most wrinkled.

The World Trade Center. New York’s Pride, My Father’s pride. It was 110 stories high, 1,368 feet tall, once the tallest in the world. That card was my favorite. I carried it in my front pocket before and after the attacks. I kept it until my father asked to frame it for his office.

I only have a few memories from that day. I remember being called in from recess early, me standing in the back, grumpy because we couldn’t finish our game of tag. I remember the teacher wiping her eyes with a Kleenex, telling us to sit in the block corner, and I remember this being weird because we never sat in the block corner. She pulled up a stool and sat down in grave silence. Stuttering through a few inaudible sentences, she finally decided on her phrasing, “Kids, I have something terrible to tell you.”

I was sent home early that day. My mom drove my sister and me home from school; I had many questions, none of which my mother could answer. We sat at the kitchen table sipping milk and Hershey’s syrup as my mother paced the room, constantly checking the landline. We were waiting for my father, who finally came home at dusk with shaky hands and eyes that seemed like they could stare through anything.

A lot happened on September 11th, 2001. I am of the youngest group of people who will remember the events first hand, but I, unlike my father, only remember slivers of that day, mere glimpses of the tragedy. From my father’s stories, I have developed false memories of the towers, images of blue-raspberry skies and soggy ash. My father’s cathartic re-telling of that day has made me almost believe that I was there with my father, standing behind his office window, lungs crushed, watching the tower in front of him disappear into black and ash. In reality, I only remember two things following the tragedy. I remember church, and I remember school.

Most families I knew turned to God to cope with the fall of the towers. We already went on a weekly basis, but suddenly the pews were filled past their breaking point. Incense and morning breath passed our noses more harshly, and when we said our prayers we said them with the urgency of a man on his deathbed. The church gave us a breath of comfort. Outside our chapel’s walls there was anger and fear, but inside our organ lulled us into love. We would shake our neighboring pew’s hands and offer them signs of peace, and for the first time in a long time, we meant it.

The priest taught me not to worship false prophets, but when I pressed my palms together and closed my eyes, I was praying to the eagle and the flag and the firefighters.

At school we pledged our allegiance and belted, “God bless America.” Our teachers were as tortured as our parents, and they offered us no explanation for the events. I suppose it is impossible to explain a terrorist attack to a first grader, so instead we found refuge in song. We read books about firefighters and army men, but otherwise the classroom was void of any talk about the upcoming war.

There was no catharsis for us first graders. No one could explain what had happened in Manhattan on September 11th. Not my teachers, not my parents, not the priest. From my father’s late-night, wide-eyed conversations with my mom, I knew that people had died and that we were going to get the bad guys, but beyond that the events were as vague as the book of Genesis. It wasn’t an act of terrorism. It was an act of God.

I started making pictures of the towers at school. After lunch our teacher passed out printer paper and dried magic markers; we were told to draw. I made buildings with 110 windows. I drew see-through planes with white passengers and smiling men in the cockpit. In free time I would build block
castles 110 Legos high, one for each floor. When I was finished I'd knock it down like an all-powerful giant, crushing an imagined New York City like a twig.

I was tortured by images of the towers. Before the attack my father had taken me to see them, but he didn't take me back to see ground zero. There was no explanation. There were only vague stories from the priest and wet eyes during the national anthem at the Yankee game.

After church I went to catechism. A priest led us up creaky stairs into an empty room with a chalkboard. There was one lesson that I remember very clearly. He told us that, no matter what, God always loves us. Naturally, I asked, “What about Osama Bin Ladin?” He said that yes, even Osama Bin Ladin, and then everything became so much more confusing. Prior to this I had equated God and America as one and the same. In my eyes “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers” could be substituted by “Pledge of Allegiances” and “God bless Americas.” George Bush, the flag, and the army man belonged up on the trinity next to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. All of a sudden the views of the news were conflicting with those of the priest. I didn't realize it then, but that was when I lost my faith. I feared God and I feared Osama, but I only believed in one of them.

God was never tangible after my revelation in the stuffy attic of CCD. I was no longer a willing servant to the church. I didn't realize at the time that I had lost my faith, it took me years to fully grasp my lack of faith. It is hard to describe, being an ex-believer. God becomes fuzzy, the plot becomes muddled. It's the same feeling you get when you watch a thriller, and the hero's best friend is the bad guy all along. You don't know why something feels off, but the story takes a turn and clues seem out of place, and then suddenly there's a realization, the “Ah hah!” moment, when the killer is revealed and you think to yourself “I knew it all along! It was right in front of me!” That's the feeling I felt in CCD class in first grade. I found my first clue; all that was left was to connect the pieces.

When disaster strikes, some people turn to religion. My father is one of them. When he stared the apocalypse in its face from his office window, saw the beasts descend from the sky to make war against him, he turned to God. Me, I don't have that security. If tragedy comes again, I guess I'll just have to hope that the national anthem will provide me the same security as it did when I was little.
The smooth beige interior of the car was painfully clean. Everything from the floor mats to the seats to the windows and the little wood inlays next to the door handles was perfectly clean. Even the small plastic sheets covering the dashboard and its assorted knobs and dials were still in place. In short, the car, the absurdly luxurious, sixty thousand dollar Mercedes Benz SUV with LED lit cupholders, was as new as new could get. And it had been bought by one of my father's friends for the express purpose of ferrying us from the airport to my grandparents' apartment. I felt increasingly uncomfortable at the thought of someone spending such an enormous amount of money simply to ensure that we didn't have to take a taxi, but as my dad rattled off a list of what exactly the man did for a living, the Mercedes seemed to grow more and more insignificant with every word.

“Ni shu shu was born near Hang Zhou you know, pretty close to where I grew up myself. Very small village, rural area, one of those towns where everyone grew their own food. He only got through primary school before being taken to work as a salesperson in a nearby village factory. And by salesperson I mean ad hawker.” My dad paused and laughed, waving a hand around the interior of the car. “Now look at him, owner of real estate and oil companies in Beijing, Shanghai, Hang Zhou, Hong Kong, New York, Canada. Five hundred million pounds towards the reconstruction of the Crystal Palace in London. Tian a, what a man.”

I gazed out of the windows as he went on at length about the construction of an enormous private residence Ni shu shu was currently engaged in, picturing an oriental-ized version of Gatsby's mansion complete with marble lions guarding the front steps. The darkness outside seemed amplified by the amount of pollution, the headlights of passing cars suffusing the hazy air with a sulfur-yellow glow. In the perpetual gloom, even the cold brightness of the Mercedes top of the line headlights (also LED lit) had difficulty illuminating the path ahead, and I found myself wishing that the smog would clear up if only to let the moonlight through. Several minutes later the driver pulled off onto an exit ramp and soon we were entering the familiar nighttime bustle of the Chao Yang district. Everything remained largely unchanged from our last visit save for some large billboard advertisements plastered with images of Nicolas Cage and several electronics shops with slick white tiled walls that had sprouted sometime in between. The neon strips and signs that covered many of the smaller shops still burned like streaks of fluorescent highlighter while the larger establishments had maintained their dignified blue and white lighting. I looked over at the Nicolas Cage billboards in amusement, but the electronics shops quickly turned my attention. While there was no denying that they were well kept and run, the surgically clean white floors and walls seemed strangely out of place with the rest of Chao Yang's lopsided apartments, tiled roofs and paper lanterns that might have been lifted out of the Tang Dynasty. Even the customers there looked different, all of them young and well dressed, not a single dirty shirt or pair of scuffed shoes in sight.

As we cruised by a hotel suite sporting an enormous glowing “cheap rooms” sign, a flash of light in the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I rolled down the window and craned my neck in search of it. The light was coming from a group of kites. On the roof of a very tall, official looking building stood a group of three people. Nine paper and cloth swallows rose from their hands, swaying and fluttering in the night breeze, each one tethered by a rope with strings of white Christmas lights wound around it, though, viewed from so far below, they may as well have been floating in the air all by themselves, small pinpricks of brightness against the inky tar-like black of the sky. I caught a glimpse of one of the kite fliers wearing what looked like the sort of traditional Tang Zhuang garb my grandparents favored, but before I could wonder what exactly they were doing, or how they'd even managed to get on to the building's roof, the car was rolling past and I soon lost sight of the strange kite fliers.

About two weeks into our stay, we received a surprising invitation. Ni shu shu had been chatting away with my father over the phone, and the two of them had decided it would be nice to have our family visit the private residence Ni shu shu was currently working on. The next day at 7 am the four of us loaded back up into the Mercedes for a three-hour drive. I slept for the first half of the ride but was woken halfway through when we stopped at a service station for some food. Ducking out of the car, I looked up and gaped in surprise at the sky. Where only minutes before had been gray and white, a completely cloudless blue sky stretched across the horizon as far as I could see. Aside from the nearly crumbling service station, there was not another building in sight. Fields of wild grass dominated the countryside and threatened to grow onto the road while the rest of my family simply stood there, dazed by the first clear sky we'd seen since
our arrival. I watched a pigeon flap upwards into the blueness, and for a moment I believed it might simply disappear, swallowed up by the azure expanse above. It seemed impossible to me that two such different skylines could exist within the same country, that the black fog sky of Chao Yang and the brilliantly cloudless sky of this service station in the middle of nowhere could exist at once.

An hour and a half later we were strolling around the massive compound where the soon to be Asian Gatsby mansion would be erected. Some of the buildings were already done and as Ni shu shu led us around their interiors, I wondered at how a single person could possibly have any use for so much space. As grand as the buildings were, I still found my gaze drawn constantly upwards. A balding construction worker in faded slacks saw me gaping skyward and chuckled to himself as I walked by. By the time we headed back to the parking lot, dusk was falling and the first stars winked down at us from the sky. Looking up at them, I was reminded again of the kite fliers I had seen on that first night and I imagined for just a moment that if they could gather more people to fly their kites, the night sky of Chao Yang might look just like the one here.

I did not see the kite fliers again until the last day of our stay. The night before our flight back to New York, I was sitting on the balcony of my grandparents' thirty-second floor apartment, alternately reading the book in my lap and staring out at the faded buildings and alleyways below. Looking up from my book for the umpteenth time, I stopped.

There, from one of the neighboring condos, just like the day we'd first arrived, were the swallow-kites and their fliers. Just as before, the nine birds rose up into the sky, lengths of gently undulating Christmas lights unwinding behind them. Only this time, even as I watched, there were more kites taking to the air from other high-rise buildings. Here was a painted dragon, a phoenix, there a roaring lion, an enormous koi fish, all of them trailing the same little light bulbs. I looked down for a moment, and this time I could clearly see the fliers. Their faces were carved with hard lines and their hair white and wispy, but their eyes as they looked skyward were every bit as bright as the light bulbs trailing from their kites. And as the night wind carried the kites higher and higher, for one moment, as one of the phoenixes twisted around, I caught a glimpse of a single character painted upon its back. 星. Star. In that instant, I could have sworn that the kites shone brighter than even the Mercedes and all of its high-powered LED headlights.
Harvest

By Gillian Goodman

I run to the garden most days in early autumn. Burst from the car, drop the backpack, circle past the front door and around to the wooden fence with sticky hinges. The momentum that shoots me from the car stills as soon as I round the corner, dies like a stale wind, gently removes its firm hands from my back and drifts someplace else. If it’s easy, I’ll slip out of my shoes, but I usually don’t have the patience for laces. So I’m either barefoot or in heavy black boots when I reach the 8 x 8 foot patch of tilled earth, with cut wood boards keeping the dirt from spilling out of its careful square. I take a breath. Sometimes two, if it was one of those days when the straps from my backpack leave imprints in my shoulders and I can feel my heartbeat pulse behind my eyes. In the garden stand four tomato plants, their overburdened weight held up by long thin sticks and their vines tangled up in each other. They reach all the way up to my head, and almost every day we have to find some new way to support their majesty. There’s one small eggplant sprout, which crouches dejectedly in the last of the four corners. It sometimes bears one or two misshapen purple teardrops, which we pick but never eat.

If it’s hot, as it often is these days, the space will smell like warm clay, and some unmistakable growing scent lies sharp in the air, feeling like yellow shoots sprouting up in your nose. If it’s rained the day before, or even raining when I arrive, a heavy softness is everywhere, and the space smells of damp earth and Italian grandmothers, and the world is green and dripping. Orange and yellow and purple tomatoes lie still and glistening, lying in shades of green and gold. When the sunlight comes from behind, I can see their soft pink veins showing through, looking like stained glass windows in an outdoor cathedral, and I marvel at their architecture. Sometimes I lie down in the wet grass beside the boards and wait until I can feel the earth rotating underneath me, circling the sun.

The tomatoes are as nice to eat as they are to smell, and on Sundays I go to them in a blue dress with yellow sunflowers and big pockets. I pinch them gently from their beds and shove gleeful handfuls into the deepest parts of the dress. I let them roll softly in my palms, and the dew that lingers from the early morning anoints my fingertips like holy water. I press my hands to my face and inhale. Some have splits in their deep red sides from too many days on the vine, and these are the sweetest.

Sometimes I take the dog with me, and something about the place makes him come when I call. He trots along beside me while I pace up and down the perimeter, slipping him halves of overripe tomatoes. Maybe something about the green smell of the place recalls in him the spirit of the complacent country dog, or else some other magic turns him from his stubborn self into the picture of pastoral companionship. Sometimes, if we’re out there for a while, he’ll sit panting in the shade, curled in on himself and sniffing the grass. On other days he lies with me, his soft flank pressed to my legs or back, and we stare up at the trees and smile.

I love it there, and I love myself there, and I love the whole of the world and everything in it when I’m there. Every atom seems perfectly placed, and I find proof of god again and again in the patterns of the leaves and the curve of the sky. I fill up big bowls of orange and yellow and purple and bring them inside to display proudly in a windowsill. I even love watering the plants, the green plastic can, the stretch and pull in my arms from carrying the weight of the water, the inevitable sloshing. It’s like a small pilgrimage: from the sink to the garden from the garden to the sink, I make my rounds like some dutiful devoted. It gives me something to think about besides myself, and the pilgrimage begins anew every fall, like clockwork. It’s a garden without temptation or trouble. It’s a garden without snakes. It’s a small garden, but I run to it regardless.
Placid
By Olivia Mason

It is a lazy afternoon and the sun shines, warming the room off the kitchen. I sit on one of the low benches that serve as seats to the miniature tables that line the room. Leaning back against the wall, I let my eyelids droop shut as a sigh escapes my lungs. I had not pictured the Himalayas like this. They are so remote and calm. Their almost silent hum speaks to me, lulling me into their serene embrace. The school where I am staying is in a breathtaking location. It rests in a valley surrounded by mountains on almost all sides. The mountains rise far into the sky, reaching up to the clouds to be embraced by blankets of shadows. The air tastes thin, urging me to inhale deeply. It is unbelievably dry here; the ground and mountains are made of sand and rock. The sand is a strange mix between khaki and gray and there is hardly any grass except right next to the river that surges below the cliff nearby. But there are trees and other plants that grow. Their vivacious green contrasts with the dust they grow in.

I can smell the greenery of the school’s garden in the crisp, clean air that flows through the open window in the room. If I listen intently, I can hear the river roaring. To my back and behind the river sit the mountains. They rest there quietly as untouched piles of sand should, but their presence is always felt. A breeze carries the cries of kids arriving at afternoon classes to the door. My toes creep along the black stone floor as my legs stretch out in front of me. Across the room a drop of water falls from the tap into the sink. My eyes snap open. I watch as water on the freshly washed dishes creeps down a cup on the drying rack and onto the counter.

The smell of steam enters the room from the kitchen and I know Benoi, the cook, is making some afternoon tea before he starts dinner. Something soft nudges the side of my hand, and I look down to find the nameless kitten. He is a friendly gray with white here and there, or is it a she? We just call it kitten. It lets out a soft mew as I pick it up and cuddle it in my arms. It curls up in a ball on top of my left leg, and I stroke the grey ball of fuzz till it nods off to sleep. I run my index finger from the top of its head gently down its neck, and it begins to purr in time with my strokes. Ironically, I do not normally enjoy the company of animals, but I think I have fallen in love with this one.

The light streaming in has moved. It now casts abstract shadows through the little plants on the sill above my head onto the seat beside me. It throws shapes onto the tables and the floor. I trace the shadows with my free hand and watch as they dance across my fingertips. Stanzin comes in from the kitchen and offers me chai. I accept it politely. He smiles. Stanzin is one of the older students and my good friend. I know he is not much older than me, but his face says he is older. Mountain men age differently, I know that now. There is something awfully comforting about his face and his crow’s feet wrinkles about his eyes. He looks at me with the admiration of an older brother. He pokes my side and forces me to break a smile. He laughs softly and then leaves the room.

Holding the cup in both hands, I let it warm my fingers. I take in a large breath of the leafy scent of tea before I take a sip and nearly burn my tongue. Chloe, my roommate, arrives and joins me. Chloe takes the kitten from my lap, and I long for the return of its furry company. The kitten wriggles in her arms before resettling itself and resuming purring.
The bell rings, signifying the end of class and the start of sports hour. Through the window I see others leaving their rooms or duties to go down to the volleyball court. My friends pass them by on their way to the water pump. Their water bottles swing at their sides and jingle slightly as they walk down the sandy path and disappear into the trees.

I get up to leave and try to shake the stiffness from my legs. I poke my head into the kitchen, steel a carrot from Benoi and grab a bowl of milk. I bring the milk back to the kitten and Chloe. The kitten leaves Chloe for the milk as I place it on the sill. We walk to the door and duck our heads so as not to hit the frame while going up the stairs. The bright light greets me and my hand goes up to cover my eyes as it reaches my face.

Chloe and I sit on the roof of the kitchen gazing across the school campus. She takes out her book and begins to read while I stare up at the mountain closest to us. We hiked it yesterday. I had counted my steps along the steep, rocky path to the summit and prayed that I would be able to sit down, so I could breathe calmly again. The view at the top was gorgeous. I could see all of the school grounds and the Indus River flowing alongside it. Beyond that was the small village we drove by every time we came and went within our secluded valley. I felt strangely at peace on top of that mountain. I was less human and more wild. It was exhilarating being so high up and feeling almost weightless. My eyes wandered across the landscape drinking it all in. The air smelled of nothing but itself. I had never breathed in something so pure.

Chloe has gone to help Benoi in the kitchen, leaving me to my own devices. I soak up the placidity that washes over me when a mild breeze caresses my face. This place has a feeling to it, much like home, except not at all.
How to be Seventeen
By Julia Butterfield

“It was suddenly being hungry, tired, hot, furious, so unbelievably startling sad.” — Daniel Handler, Why We Broke Up

“Oh! How good it is to be your age!” pursued Anna. “That mist which covers everything in that blissful time when childhood is just ending and out of that vast circle happy and gay, there is a path growing narrower and narrower, and it is delightful and alarming to enter the ballroom, bright and splendid as it is.” — Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

Spend too much time staring at yourself in the mirror. Stuff too many friends in the backseat of your mom’s sedan. Drive too fast or too slowly or forget to indicate when you turn. Have too many dumb inside jokes. Scotch tape things to the walls of your room. Dye your hair on impulse. Get to know 3 AM. Be obsessed with having the perfect soundtrack for everything. Worry so much about what other people think of you that you never think of them. Make a decision one week about what class you’re going to take next year on a whim, but a week later agonize over whether to buy that red shirt that looks good on you but what if you don’t like it later? Write your name in the steam on the mirror after you take a shower. Date yourself when you mention The Proud Family to someone four years younger than you and they have no idea what you’re talking about. Wonder if this is how adults feel when you’ve never heard of Lesley Gore. Spend fifteen minutes searching for that shirt you must wear today or that book you must read right now because only it is perfectly suited to how you feel this moment, only to realize that it was right in front of you the entire time. Feel like death if you have to wake up at 6 AM but happily stay up until 6 AM. Promise yourself every week that you’re going to start reading more or eating healthily or going to bed earlier or washing your face with that acne cleanse your mom bought you. Date someone and be struck by the terrifying realization that you will either break up or get married. Let everything be a crisis. Say things ironically so much that it stops being ironic. Have weird hair or a nose that’s too long or shoulders that are too square or eyes that are too far apart. Judge everyone. Wonder if everyone else judges you. Think about college so much that you start to forget what it actually is. Suddenly feel lost. Suddenly start to panic about nothing. Suddenly find everything funny for no reason. Suddenly have an existential crisis. Worry too much about the future. Feel like you’re always waiting. Feel like your friends know you better than your parents do. Get nervous when adults say that these are the best years of your life and wonder if you’re doing something wrong. Want simultaneously to leave behind everything you know and reinvent yourself and do all you can to ensure everything stays the same forever. Hate everything. Love everything. Change your mind. Worry about being cliché. Wonder if you’re too young to be nostalgic. Wonder if your friends feel this way. Wonder if your parents felt this way. Wonder if your parents feel this way. Wonder if all adults feel this way. Wonder what adults do with their time. Yell at your parents. Perfect the dramatic storm out. Learn to drive and think it’s the coolest thing ever for about three weeks. Never talk to someone outside of class until one day you have to work on a history project together and realize that if things had gone a little differently you could have been best friends. Go back to never talking to that person outside of class. Fidget. Gossip. Giggle. Be Angry. Take too long to finish your math homework. Watch bad movies late at night with your friends. Still look for shapes in clouds. Wonder if you’ll be like this when you’re thirty. Decide to make mac and cheese at 1 AM. Lose your phone. Lose your keys. Lose your physics notes. Have parents who don’t understand that you don’t want to talk about it. Realize that the universe does not revolve around you. Reject that out of hand. Eavesdrop. Cry. Make-out. Yell. Climb trees. Complain about the same three things. Play your music loudly and sing along badly. Laugh at yourself. Lie in bed smiling to yourself about how it felt to be kissed. Sneak onto the roofs of buildings or wish you were daring enough to. Feel like nothing can hurt you. Feel like everything will hurt you. Become obsessed with preservation. Not know everything. Not yet, anyway. Sometimes just run, simply because you can, because it feels good, because the sun is out and the sky is clear and for the few seconds (or minutes) until you are tired and achy and out of breath, everything is perfect.
When Opposites Attract
By Christina Guarin

He loves watching TV, I think it is boring. When he has free time he spends his days sprawled out on a couch absorbing the idiocy of reality TV and gets annoyed at how I just fall asleep because I can’t possibly analyze what I am watching. I am a horrible test taker even if I study. He can manage to get a 100 without even opening a book. Everything is easier for him. I work twice as hard to get about the same results. He is great at math. I simply don’t understand any of it. How can x equal anything and how do lines on a graph make an equation, it just doesn’t click. I love science, how atoms are everywhere, how strong bonds form when opposites attract.

I hate his friends, and he hates mine. But I’ll hang out with them if I have to—boys are dogs. He won’t hang out with my friends, however—girls are “fake.” He loves food and I don’t. I am a vegetarian. He makes fun of the fact I can’t eat meat and so eats burger after burger in front of my face trying to prove a point. He likes picking on me and making fun and I hate it. He tickles and pinches me, pulls my hair and knows my weak spots. I would try to fight back, that never really worked out. I guess that is what I liked about him; I think he knew the whole time how much I actually like when he picks on me, when he notices me. I love to run, he complains after running two laps around a gym. He still likes to argue that he is a better athlete; this is not the case. I must do my homework ahead of time; he waits till five minutes before class and is always asking me for help. I don’t mind though, I like knowing that he needs me. He’s smart for someone who doesn’t try. He’s not a bad athlete if he actually tried.

He likes to live in the moment, I must have a schedule. Every time I get the chance, I find myself in the library working or studying, and I find his voice as a constant nagging in my ear telling me to stop being such a loser and stop working and socialize for once. I have friends, a lot of them. He picks on me when I’m stressed about work for the next week. He doesn’t make me feel better; it just stresses me even more. If I do something wrong, I immediately prepare for the judgment.

I love chocolate, he doesn’t.
I love coffee, he doesn’t.
I’m always too cold, he’s always too hot.

We both hate spiders. And usually freak out every time we see them. But I learned to live with them; I learned they are a part of nature and we can’t get rid of them. I know they don’t do anything harmful. He gets paranoid and walks with a vigilant eye looking out for webs.

He is very patient. If he is ever running late he just takes one step at a time, daydreaming in no rush. He argues, “If you’re already late at that point it doesn’t matter rushing anymore.” My watch is the most sacred thing I have. Time is a virtue. He makes me late for classes and I yell at him because he is never on top of things and is so lazy I can’t even stand it. One time, he and I were together, watching a movie lying down. It was a little cute I guess (just a little), I didn’t want to leave, but I knew I had to. I lost track of time and I realized I was late for track practice. I started to panic and immediately I knew my coach was going to kill me. Being him, he kept on grabbing me telling me not to go. When I got up to pack my books, he pulled me down, gave me a kiss and let my books spill on the floor. This was one of many times I was late to something because of him.

We never understood each other, we were too inconsistent, and we were never on the same wavelength. It seemed the more we were together, the more we fell apart. I’ve known since the beginning that he was not right; I have been told millions of times that he and I were just so different that it didn’t make sense. But that was the point. It didn’t make sense. And I loved that, because we didn’t have to make sense and honestly, I didn’t want it to. People don’t get him like I do, and people don’t get me like he does. But he doesn’t know everything about me just as I know nothing about him.

Sometimes when we do have nights that I consider to be “cute,” or it is so cute, I think it’s romantic. I ask him if he remembers the first time we met or kissed. He says no, and I turn away. It seems impossible to believe that you could forget after a year of getting to know each other, all those times lying on
the dry grass in the fall fighting over whether the flashing lights in the sky were actually a UFO or a plane, winter nights video chatting on Skype just getting to know each other playing 21 Questions, trips to the movies if you dare to call that a “date,” getting out of Tuesday and Thursday study hall to keep me company, helping me with math homework (logs will never make any sense), being on the same track team, hearing him murmur congratulations under his breath, lying on the quad in the spring with the sun shining on the both of us listening to the best of Disney songs; sitting in absolute silence, because while there may not be any words just knowing that the other person is there…is all you need.

I would point out my insecurities, he would override them with compassion. I would be doubtful and he would shut down that idea, reassuring me of myself…of us. I think he liked when I gave him the attention, when I noticed him. I have tried to distance myself from him…but I can’t. My friends have asked me “why do you keep talking to him?” It’s because I know that if I don’t, I won’t stop thinking about him. I always cared about him and I feel that I always will, but one thing is for sure, it seems nearly impossible for us to just be friends. But sometimes, as I remember those moments that we’ve had, I look at him and make eye contact, I take a deep breath and smile, and I remember why I still deal with him.
Kenz and I
By Emma Cunningham

She wakes up to the buzz of the alarm, crushes the snooze button, and rolls over. I groan, but as if compelled by a supernatural force, I crawl into the bathroom and wash my face with water and cleanser. I peer out the door to see her already back asleep, as if the piercing reminder that the day was beginning had, in fact, not happened at all.

When I dress myself in the morning, I turn to her before turning to the mirror. I rearrange my attire until she is satisfied. “You look like a bruise. Who in their right mind would put that black and blue together?” she laughs from across the room. I bow my head and pick up the pink button down lying on my bed. “Is this better?” I ask in a hopeful voice, willing to wear most anything for a yes. She throws on the first thing her hands touch and still manages to look perfect.

She neglects to zip up her thick black Patagonia and walks out the door with a smile, welcoming winter with open arms. I zip mine up quickly before the cold has a chance to steal a place underneath it. Her blonde hair blows beautifully in the wind, while mine instantly becomes tangled in knots. She associates winter with warm fires and the poignant smell of Christmas pine. To me, winter is depressing and long and cold.

She was born at 10:04. I was born at 10:05, and she will never let me forget that difference. Four pounds. Four pounds and two ounces. Two small ounces that would proceed to haunt me for the rest of my life. We put on our patterned bathing suits, the most thrilling reminder that summer has arrived. I glare at her toothpick legs and flat stomach, wondering how the bags of Cheetos and boxes of cookies have yet to attack her. She glances towards me and I watch as she immediately eyes my thighs. “You should go for a run later,” she tells me, almost instinctively. The thrill of summer is gone as quickly as the pace of her confident strut toward the pool.

She likes to listen to music while she does her homework. I find it extremely distracting. She listens to music for the catchy lyrics. I listen for the lyrics that make me cringe, that make my stomach tie into an intricate knot at every word that is somewhat relatable.

When she talks to someone it is natural. She leaves each conversation without a hint of doubt. I hang on to every word, constantly repeating them over and over again in my head until my analysis is no longer coherent. “You should be more confident, Emma. Guys don’t like insecure girls. Confidence is key, oh and you should really stop over thinking everything.” This apparently comes easily to her, but for some reason I can’t seem to grasp that concept.

I taught her how to parallel park. It’s rewarding to know that one of her talents is finally thanks to me— that I can take credit for something that she does, because I give her all of the credit for who I am and how I act. I admire her, “The Outgoing Twin.” Not “The Shy Twin,” not “The Awkward Twin,” and certainly not the “The Fat Twin.”

I have my license. She doesn’t, and there’s something about being the only one that is comforting.

She likes the rush of driving a race car through a quick and curvy track. When I drive, it is slow and therapeutic— I prefer dirt roads surrounded by trees over hot asphalt surrounded by an audience. She likes the rush of passing someone on the inside around a left turn. I like the rush of a scary episode of Criminal Minds.

We both love the beach. We both walk and subconsciously inhale the warm, salty summer breeze in tandem. As we exhale, things begin to change. She is reminded of our childhood memories, spending Thanksgivings and Christmases in Palm Beach. She remembers boogie boarding in Nantucket and building drip castles in Anguilla. I am taken back to Outward Bound. The trip
that changed my life. The one thing that I completed on my own, without my other half. Each crashing wave evokes memories of my eighteen-hour solo in the Outer Banks. Stripped of my cellphone and any other connection to the real world, no one was in sight, no contact could be made, especially no contact home. The waves relax me, bringing to memory my greatest accomplishment: solitude. Not only was I fully capable of creating a shelter out of three tent poles, a kayak paddle, and a tarp, but I was finally able to be independent, on my own, without my other half, my better half, by my side. When I arrived home from my trip, she told me that she was extremely proud of me for doing what I did, and that she could not have done that. Now when we talk about it, she rolls her eyes and denies that it happened. I don’t think she likes me knowing that she’s proud of me, or that I did something that she couldn’t, but I wouldn’t forget something like that.
Valentine’s Day
By Sophie Lieber

Valentine’s Day could easily be one of the most nerve wracking days of the year at The Masters School. As a freshman, you quickly find out that it’s a mad dash to receive your mountain of erratically cut slips of white and salmon paper with your name scribbled all over them in your best friend’s recognizable bubbly handwriting. That pile of thin paper quickly becomes a full bouquet of blush, rosy carnations… or you wish. You envy the polished senior girl who seems to have received an endless supply of those stupid, floppy flowers that die the next day. She strides throughout Masters Hall with her bouquet trophy in hand as every girl’s eye realizes she’s won the competition. Then, it’s sophomore year and you rip off those stapled slips once again, but this time you notice an unsurpassable blush-colored note with unrecognizable skinny scribble. And then it all changes and those carnations definitely don’t seem foolish anymore.

I brought this note and carnation over to my friends, unsure what to do with it. It read, “We should talk sometime – Evan Campbell” with a small smiley face. As a group of anxious, unstable, and insecure fifteen-year-old girls, together we stared at this note, speechless.

“Sophie, he obviously meant to send it to me. He just got our name mixed up,” Samantha teased. “Could this be a joke?” “Maybe he misspelled someone’s name...” I laughed. Warmth shot up my face and I knew that my complexion was now a fiery red.

Evan Campbell was a senior, a member of The Pack, a group of friends that dominated the library of the school. But unlike many of his friends, he never wore a hat on his head or walked with confident swagger. To grab The Pack’s attention, all you had to do was take a step inside the library. To avoid eye contact with these boys, my sight would dart around the room from the clock to lacrosse stick, back, front, windows, head down. I routinely perfected my tunnel vision in order to walk through the library in peace. As I approached my friends, I could feel their eyes beating on my back. To my friend group, they were the male equivalent of Mean Girl’s The Plastics. They were two years older, and their confidence intimidated us. They invented their own language, and half the time they were making fun of us while the other half they were praising, but we could never tell which was which because we didn’t know what “tss tss” meant. They had strength in numbers, traveling as a pack and trading inside jokes. But behind their wolf pack façade, individually the boys were incredible people. They were smart, kind, and complimentary, and we were constantly seeking their approval. We practically worshipped the ground they walked on. They were ridiculous, and we loved it.

“Well, you know you have to go thank him now.”

I couldn’t fathom why he would want to talk to a sophomore like me, and now I had to go up to him?! I spent most of that day hiding out in the bathroom trying to wrap my head around how and when I could properly approach him to thank him. This shouldn’t be that hard. Just go up and say thank you. That simple. I walked into the library, and we had crossed paths unexpectedly. I noticed the stubble on his face and piercing, slim eyes. Startled, I began to walk over to him. With every step I took, I lost each word I had prepared to say. It wasn’t his physical presence that was intimidating; his short height did not reflect his notable personality. However, it was the small smirk that emerged on his face and his gaze, which was straight into my eyes. So now I was standing in front of this senior boy mesmerized within his charming smile, speechless, and bright red. Definitely not how I had planned. Now, I was on my own.

“Um, I just wanted to thank you for the carnation.”

“So he’s still dragging out this little mix-up?” Samantha joked.

“Anytime.” He smirked. “What’s your number? We should hang out sometime.”

“Yeah, for sure,” I sputtered. And I quickly stumbled to remember my phone number as I exchanged phones with him.

I remember that conversation as the exchange of numbers and uneasy feelings. I had finally gotten this confrontation over with and marched back over to the comfort of my friends with a new spark concealed within my suppressed smile. “What’s all the excitement for Soph?” Amanda questioned. I proudly displayed the new contact within my phone.

“Very funny Samantha. I guess so.” And I ran off to World Religions.

Time passed by, but my fear and nervousness only grew greater. His poise had the ability to erase all of my thoughts. My mind would go blank and I had no idea where to start. I tried to steer clear of his friend group’s intimidating presence, but only then did it seem like they were around each corner. Each time I ran into Evan and The Pack, they would snicker and immediately erupt in laughter. My constant struggle to find the right words had them labeling me as Spacey Sophie. “Still in space today, Sophie?” I was evading the situation not
because I didn’t enjoy his company, but because I was trying to save myself from embarrassment.

April 20th, 2012 finally arrived. My friends and I had been planning this day for a while. Equipped with red solo cups and ping pong balls we had prepared to throw down the first sophomore party. Together, Samantha, Amanda and I had composed a text to invite Evan. The response: “Oh really? I’ll try to roll through. We’ll see, kid.” The reaction: squeals and jitters. In Evan Campbell’s nonchalant language, that meant that he would be there. Well into the night, upperclassmen were pouring down the stairs and I spotted The Pack through a haze of Ketel One, parading their way down the stairs in flannels and T-shirts. My liquid confidence had encouraged me to greet Evan. Soon enough we were standing behind the nauseating green ping pong table together, sinking shots into those plastic cups. The night quickly passed and chills were sent throughout my body as I stood outside, resting against the isolated greenhouse. He prevailed and the chills quickly disappeared when he grasped the pockets of my narrow jeans, pulled me in, and kissed me. Jittery feelings glazed over me, but on the inside I had finally reached a calm.

After a few days I realized that the calmness on the inside never really left me. I could walk through the halls with my shoulders back. I now knew that someone had noticed me, and that was something I had never experienced before. Evan’s witty confidence impressed me. He always knew exactly what to say and his lips would run so smoothly. I never really knew how to take the constant stream of sarcasm and jokes that came from him, but his motivation to continue talking to me had encouraged my nerve.

It was a cool April day, and I tried to keep warm in my creamy, powder blue cashmere sweater. At lunch Amanda, Samantha, and I were sitting around a table in the library and by the smirk on their faces I could tell they had something to say. Instead, they both got up and bolted to class and I quickly followed, looking down at a text as I walked out of the library. I lifted my head to the sound of laughter and stepped back to realize that Evan was standing in front of me next to a computer screen that said “Sophie, will you go to prom with me? –Evan Campbell.” With rosy cheeks, I quickly responded, “Yes,” and he pulled me into the warmth of his embrace.

Within our new “promlationship,” Evan took me under his wing into a happiness that I so desperately needed. I could travel throughout the halls with some of Evan’s poise that he passed on to me. I would sit and talk to him, trying to let the words flow naturally.

“Are you in space right now, Sophi?”

“No Evan, I’m right here with you.”

Two years later and I can almost say that talking to him has become a bit easier. With my newfound confidence and “sass,” as my friends like to call it, I am pleased to find the words “Evan Campbell- iMessage” light up on my phone screen. I only assume this feeling occurs because my last momentous encounters with him had left me well and feeling special. After not seeing him for a while, I only realized this major confidence change when my friends and I recently got together with The Pack. While playing a game of Kings, he was asked who he was most excited about seeing that night and as I nonchalantly motioned towards myself he pointed over to me, smirked and said, “This one.” In my mind, I could see my sophomore self cringing and turning a hue of bright red, but I had shed that skin.

I will never let go of the words he left me in yearbook. “You, Sophie Lieber, made the end of my senior year as great as it was. I got to go to prom with my biggest crush… so it looks like you’ll go down in Evan Campbell history…. Before I met you, I was always curious when I saw you in the halls, and not because you’re beautiful (which you are) but because you just kinda had this simple kindness about you.” He always had a way with words that made an impression on me. Now a senior, I can see that his influence on me was only amplified because he was the first. Evan Campbell was my first real crush and taught me a thing about composure throughout high school. Looks like he will go down in Sophie Lieber history.
Better Left Unsaid
By Jazmine Figueroa

He makes me nervous. No boy has ever made me nervous. As he walks toward me I take a deep breath and try not to lose my words. He smiles and my heartbeat quickens. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks and chest. He doesn’t know it, but inside I’m dying. My hands tremble as he speaks to me softly. He reaches for my hand, and for just a moment our fingers are interlocked. He looks down into my eyes and all I can do is stand there. I take in his words and I nod and smile, unable to respond. He checks his phone and the home screen reads “10:40”; time to say goodbye. He leans in to hug me and I fall into him, wrapping my arms around his waist for stability. I let go as he releases me from his hold and give him a sweet smile as I watch him walk away, breathless. I stand in the hallway listening to my rapid heartbeat trying to contain the flush of color clearly showing in my cheeks replaying our small yet intimate moment in my mind over and over again.

Why couldn’t you just say something to him? He’s just a boy, a boy who is also your friend. Relax, I think. I breathe in deeply wishing I could’ve said something, anything before I turn and walk away leaving our shared moment behind me.

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We leave the dining hall in silence as he walks me to my dorm. He looks down at me and smiles as he connects his fingers with mine. I look back up at him and give him a sweet smile as I watch him walk away, breathless. I stand in the hallway trying to contain the flush of color clearly showing in my cheeks replaying our small yet intimate moment in my mind over and over again.

I sit in bed as my phone buzzes, the home screen lighting up with a message from him.

“I want you so bad, but idk.” His words cut at me like a million knives.

“Are you unsure because you don’t think I would try?” I reply. I sit and wait for what seems like hours for a simple response until my phone finally buzzes again after what seems like hours.

“Yeah.” I was expecting a long, meaningful message, but I don’t get that. I never get that from him.

“I will try this time” is all I can respond.

I know I can’t try as much as he would want me to though. I can’t put myself out there the way he wants me to. He drives me insane. When we talk I seem to misplace my ability to speak. I melt every time we make simple eye contact, and I am taken over as I watch him play basketball from afar. My stomach quivers every time he smiles. And my hands shake at the mere feel of his touch against my smooth skin. I lie awake at night replaying our conversations and wish on every 11:11 that I could’ve done things differently.

As a child my mother always told me to express my emotions. Nothing good will ever come from hiding how you feel she’d say to me. My mother was right. Girls nowadays expect guys to always understand how they feel, and what they’re thinking, but the truth of the matter is they don’t. Boys will never understand how a girl is feeling or what she is thinking until she tells him. If she never tells him, he’ll never know. I expected him to understand how I felt. I expected him to know he made me nervous, and why he made me nervous. I expected him to come running back to me every time I was too shy, too scared or too nervous. I was wrong.

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We’re sitting in the dining hall and my legs are shaking. He’s in the chair across from mine, my hands folded within his on his lap. His hands are dry but I like the feel of them against my soft skin. His friends surround us with their laughter and silly jokes. He laughs. He tilts his head slightly with every giggle and squeezes his fingertips into my palms to control his laughter. I don’t laugh. Other girls are starting to like him, and I’m left as a bystander, a distant memory he’s clearly forgotten all about. I watch him joke with his friends about the girls

me, and I from him. He leaves towards his dorm, and I enter mine wishing I had just kissed him.
with long brown hair, tanned skin, and perfect bodies -- none of them anything like me. I collect myself and prepare to leave when he stops me in my tracks. 

“What do you want from me?” I yell. “Please just tell me, because I can’t keep doing this. I drive myself insane with all these little girl emotions over you and I’m just so done with it.”

“I want you,” he yells back. 

“If you wanted me you wouldn’t be texting her.”

“What am I supposed to do if I never know what you want? One day you tell me I make you nervous, but you’re gonna try. And the next you want nothing to do with me. No girl drives me as insane as you do, Jazmine. Can’t you see that?”

“No. I can’t see that. And I’m done trying to see it. I can’t keep doing this back and forth with you. I don’t want to do us or whatever this is anymore. I’m tired.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“Yes. I want us to be friends. Nothing more, nothing less. Just friends.”

“Just friends then,” he says.

And yet somehow I don’t just want to be friends. I’d never tell him that though. I want him to want me in all the ways he says he does. I want him to make me feel like I’m the only girl in the world, and he can’t. I wish he could see that. He doesn’t. So I will keep how I feel to myself, because sometimes things are just better left unsaid.

He comes close to me and looks into my eyes, as if he’s searching for something, anything. I keep my head down and my eyes plastered to the ground as I turn away and walk out the door. I turn once more and watch him at the top of the steps. He wants me to run back into his arms, I can feel it in my bones. He’s staring at me, begging me to come back. I can’t. I walk out the door and don’t turn back. The tears burn my face in the cold walk back to the dorms. My chest shudders at the sound of the dining hall door opening and closing. I fight back the urge to turn around, convincing myself it isn’t him.

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It’s a quick kiss. But it’s still a kiss. I sit on the bleachers as he stares at me awaiting a response. He doesn’t get one. My chest trembles, and my mind is empty. I’m nervous again. I’m back in the place I told myself I wouldn’t go back to. I can’t help but melt a little inside when I watch him smile. He notices I’m staring and winks at me. I redden faster than usual watching him, and I shake my head in frustration. I can’t let him do this to me anymore. I can’t let him make me nervous anymore. I can’t freeze up at the sight of his touch. And I can’t lose my words when he talks to me.

We’re still friends. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just friends. Sometimes I wish we were more. Sometimes I wish we weren’t. Sometimes my heart doesn’t flutter when I see him smile at me. I don’t always stumble a little when he touches me. My cheeks don’t usually redden when he leans in to kiss me on the cheek. My heart still races when I see him. I get lost in his smile when we have conversations. He makes me nervous.
The Lying Game
By Sabrina Stanich

1.
She reaches up, releasing stringy dark hair from her ponytail, then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Clang, clang... She cringes at the metal slam of the stall door behind her. Leaning forward into the mirror, she studies herself. Sallow skin, bruised under-eyes, cracked edges of lips. She splashes cold water on her wrists, her neck and her face. Reaching into her back pocket, she pulls out a piece of spearmint gum and drops it lightly into her mouth. She leaves the bathroom.

“Yo, did you study for APUSH?” A boy calls to her from across the hall. “L-o-l, of course not. I’m so over it.” She giggles, hyper-extending the “o” in “so,” and tosses her hair casually over her shoulder.

“Oh, word,” he calls back, nodding in agreement. Her face erupts into a knowing smirk but her mind flashes back to last night at three in the morning when she sat on her bed desperately attempting to memorize the entirety of 1930’s America. As she climbs the stairs to her history test, her stomach growls. Immediately, she places a hand over the mumbling alarm clock and takes a swig of water.

As she scrawls out the fourth page of the essay, her finger begins cramping. Releasing her pencil gently to the wooden desk before her, she flexes each hand and rubs them together for warmth. Her head drops violently with the slightest movement downwards. She is dizzy, weak. While FDR was considered a socialist by some, his implementation of... what’s the word? Oww—Stop. Focus. The implementation of the programs... Ow—focus. But it hurts. Oh, shit. What were the names of the programs? AAA, TVA, umm, FDIC... fuck. She massages her temples, straining her mind to focus on the essay, to remember the Great Depression. Instead, it remembers that she hasn’t eaten lunch yet. It remembers the clanging of the bathroom stall, the running water, the taste in her mouth. It remembers that the only thing she put into her body in the last sixteen hours is now mingling with shit-laden toilet water and dirty metal pipes.

2.
She turns to the side, scanning her image in the mirror. Strawberry blonde hair tumbles down her shoulders, and a diamond necklace decorates her collarbone, slightly concealed by the collar of her pastel J. Crew button-down. She folds the bottom of the shirt upwards and traces her fingers from her belly button to the waistband of her jeans. She sucks in her stomach, feeling her hipbones, then reaches up, fingers slowly outlining her ribcage. Groaning, she tugs down her shirt, hits the lights and slams the door behind her.

She jogs down the stairs, kisses her mother goodbye and promises that she’ll grab a bagel at the train. But she averts her eyes from the bakery stand as she walks through the station and fights the barbaric clawing of her stomach. She clutches the sticky pleather seat-tops for balance as she maneuvers through the still car, then falls into a vacant chair, pops three almonds into her mouth, and opens up Glamour magazine.

3.
She giggles loudly, intertwining her hand with his, as her worn boots clack against the wooden hallway. Her skirt is three inches too short, but she paired it with ripped black tights, so I’ve been told that it looks cool not trashy. Her disheveled, rusty hair falls lifelessly against her back and shoulders. Smudged black eyeliner degrades her bright smile, and her glazed eyes and dark circles share the truth about her weekend. Her collarbone protrudes visibly through ashen skin and the light fabric of her T-shirt fails to mask her skeleton. The sharp angles of her ribcage and sliding waistband of her skirt fight for my attention. My stomach coils instinctively and my face contorts itself in pain, as I divert my eyes from “the hottest girl” on campus.

*****

“Let’s hit up the diner. I’m feeling french fries.” Thomas grabs his backpack and car keys. The others nod in agreement, she bites her lip and folds thin hair behind her ears. After a few moments, they designate who will drive whom and they walk to the parking lot. Slam. The wooden door swings back into the doorway, just as she goes to take a step outside. Whimpering, she throws her back against the metal bar of the door, pushing herself outside with the weight of her body. The door was heavier than she remembered, heavier than she realized. Stumbling, she falls against the cold trash can adjacent to the building.

“Yooo! Are you coming?!” Someone calls from the group, thirty paces ahead.
“Yeah!” She forces a smile, “Just left my phone on the table!” She exhales, counts to ten to orient herself, then races to join the group. Fifteen minutes later, the waitress begins taking orders.

“Sweet potato fries and a chocolate milkshake.”

“Chicken Caesar wrap with fries.”

“Chocolate chip pancakes and bacon.”

“Diet Coke, please.”

Pause. I look up from my menu to see Whitney raising her eyebrows at me, then tilting her head over at the girl ordering. Very softly, subtly I shake my head, then look back down at my menu.

“Is that it?” The waitress smacks her gum, pen poised to transcribe the next order.

“Yes.” The girl smiles sweetly and hands the waitress her menu. The rest of the group finishes ordering, then begins complaining about too much stats homework and joking about Russia annexing the Ukraine.

“Everyone, please take some of these french fries.” Shelton gestures to his plate, “I’m not going to finish them all.” Excitedly, several hands dig into the plate while hers stay folded upon her lap. He turns to her, his eyes wide in concern, “Do you want some? Aren’t you hungry?”

She smiles, then politely declines, noting that she ate a huge lunch like an hour ago so she really isn’t hungry, but don’t worry. He smiles, accepting her answer, and the conversation about Eastern Europe turmoil continues.

***

Drunk in love, I want you
We woke up in the kitchen saying,
“How the hell did this shit happen?”
Ob baby, drunk in love

Beyoncé blares from the speakers in the impromptu dressing room. Scattered party clothes and littered high heels dust the floor. “We be ALL NIGHT!” Taylor shrieks, throwing her hands up and flipping her hair.

“Loooooove, loooooove…” Whitney and Sarah join in, twirling around the room. I wiggle free from my jeans, adjust my bra straps and dance my way over to my dress. As I whirl around, I catch her watching me. Her eyes travel slowly from my collarbone to my ribcage, searing every inch of skin in between.

Scathing, critical, and painful. Her gaze lingers around my hip bones and thighs, until I am so utterly uncomfortable that I shove the dress I’m unzipping against my body and excuse myself to go to the bathroom.

She stays behind, carefully scrutinizing every curve, angle and blemish of the five other girls. While they karaoke and throw their double-digit bodies against the surrounding air, she sits silently, alone.

After we finish changing, we take turns at the mirror—concealing under-eye craters and oily pores, illuminating lips and lengthening lashes, and coughing up the Chance by Chanel flavored air. The six of us file out of the room, grabbing purses and cellphones, but she stays to fix her hair.

Five minutes later, she enters the kitchen—the part of her hair has indeed flipped, but her cheeks are flushed and her lips are swollen and pigmented like maraschino cherries. As she takes a sip of water, and her mouth departs the glass without a bright imprint, it becomes clear that the bright color was not a result of fresh lipstick. As the girls gossip about their crushes, she quickly scans the group, then reaches into her bag and pops a mint into her mouth.

***

“Do you have any Advil?” she whispers, patting my leg under the table.

“No, sorry.” I frown, copying down notes from the board ahead of us.

Properties of the natural logarithm, \( \ln e^x = x \), \( \ln(xy) = \ln x + \ln y \), \( \ln(x/y) = \ln x - \ln y \).

“My head really hurts.” She keeps tapping my leg. “Feel my hands. They’re so cold. Make them warm.” She folds them into the crease behind my knee.

Instinctively, my leg slides forward, I can feel it through my jeans.

“How have you eaten anything?” I ask softly, casually. Her hand slides back to her lap and she bites her bottom lip. Toying with her cuticles, she softly shakes her head. “Well…that’s probably why your head hurts. Here, I have a granola bar….”

“Ew, no. I don’t want that. That’s gross. I’m fine I’m not hungry anyway,” she recites mechanically.

“Why don’t you go get some water?” I suggest. “Are you sure you don’t want a bite? It’s just chocolate and almonds.” I pass it to her under the table. She stares at it, winces, then drops it back into my lap. I force myself to not roll my eyes, then I take a bite of the bar myself.
Thirty seconds later, I hear, “Sabrina… my head huuurtts…” My nails dig into my palms, silently. I take a breath, then suggest, again, that she either eat something or go to get water.

She is quiet for a few minutes, then turns to Whitney and asks for Advil.

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“This is ridiculous. She is so transparent.” She slaps her computer screen in frustration. “She claims she has a fucking eating disorder and then she puts up a picture of herself in a bikini as her profile picture?” The last two words slice through the air with such disdain, I break eye contact.

“Well,” I start slowly, “Everybody has different coping mechanisms…. Her habits are probably a result of poor self-esteem, so people complimenting the photo makes her feel better about herself.”

“That’s stupid. If she was actually self-conscious, she wouldn’t even wear bikinis, let alone post pictures about it for all 963 ‘friends’ on a social media website. People with real problems don’t do that.” She slams her computer shut, complaining that the girl in the picture is an attention whore and pulls upwards on her belt loops as she stands to go to the bathroom.

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“Can I speak to you for a quick minute?” She gestures outside of the classroom. I shrug and follow her into the hallway. “So, um,” She purses her lips, tightly crossing her arms and rocking gently against her right leg. “Did you report me to the school counselor?”


She pauses, surveying my expression, slowly. Blankly, I stare back at her. She opens her mouth to speak, pauses, then closes it. Finally, she retorts, “Well, someone did. Do you know who?”

Yes. “No.”

“Do you swear?” She squints tightly, studying my every alteration of facial muscle.

No. “Yes!”

“You’re lying.” She raises her eyebrows.

I know. “No, I’m not.”

“Fine. Was it Whitney? I know it was Whitney. I just can’t believe that she would do that…” She sighs in exasperation, then begins ranting about trust and the definition of real friends.

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Soon, people begin calling her “hot” and “thin” and “sexy” and she likes the sounds of those words. She likes that eighteen-year-old guys murmur “daaaaaammnn” and whistle and snicker and raise their eyebrows when she struts past them in her 00 jeans and 34A push-up bra. She likes the inflection when they say “Yo, she’s bad,” how they drop their pitch a little, nodding slowly and swallowing audibly. She likes walking in late into a room full of people, clad in skinny skinny jeans and ankle boots because she likes how their eyes follow her as she sits down. Or, rather, how their eyes follow her legs. And, perhaps most of all, she likes that when girls whisper to each other about how much weight she’s lost she can hear a sharp pang of jealousy. Because she was successful.

Because she lost count of the number of times she dropped her head into a toilet bowl and refused granola bars, but she can count the two-digit number on the scale beneath her feet each night. Because she created the body that boys want to touch and girls want to have, and she feels special.

The lies are slow to start, but they begin building on top of each other, escalating and elaborating. She claims she ate with her parents, with a club at a meeting, with a teacher during extra help, that she really just isn’t hungry. The lies grow more and more absurd, and soon she begins lying to cover her other lies that she forgot about. Friction over the lying game slowly dissolves relationships, and she doesn’t even realize. She makes jokes about the situation, and her laughter grows increasingly louder. With every rise in volume comes a drop of authenticity, and the laughing is blaring, forced and empty. Tip-toeing ensues: every word remotely associated with food or eating is a trigger word. If dropped within a ten-foot radius, she pounces on the grenade and the conversation bursts into flames. Her mood swings peak at obnoxious highs and dip into miserable lows, alienating those closest to her who begin asking questions. She begins creating superficial friendships to surround herself with people who look like friends to outsiders, but end up leaving her empty and isolated. She likes that,
though, because they won’t report her. If they haven’t noticed the *problem* by now, they don’t care enough and that is just fine. It gives her a reason to keep going.
It was the fourth day of the trip, and already we were slipping bits of mangled Arabic into our vernacular. That night at dinner I called out to Julia Yo Jules I’m so jodanah, can you pass me some khobz? and all the others in the restaurant stared. My blushing matched my sunburn as I quietly took the bread from her.

Later in our rented rooms I fell asleep to the newly familiar lullaby of groans and flushing toilets. We had greedily feasted on street food our first night in Morocco, and we were still paying the consequences.

We soon moved on from Marrakesh, the big city where the ten of us took our first steps on foreign soil. It was filled with dirty motorbikes and vendors hawking cheap plastic necklaces, and we all took a deep breath when we learned we were spending the next few days up in the mountains. The plan, Kempie the Guide explained, was to help rural school kids our age plant some trees and paint some murals, you know, community service stuff. We all nodded and licked our lips, thinking about college essays and personal growth. The van ride was long and dusty and we all sang “My Favorite Things” to pass the time.

It was hot when we got to the mountains, and I fumbled with my sheet of Tachelhit. The harsh mountain dialect was even more alien than Arabic, and I looked up at the dusty girls around me in mute panic. They stared back, dark eyes blinking slowly, impenetrable. I tried the most manageable word, tafukt (sun), and pointed up at the sky. They all nodded and smiled, like teachers praising a messy first grade finger-painting. With every thump of my shovel, I watched them watch me dig. The wind whipped arid dirt into my eyes and I wiped them quickly. I readjusted my grip, held the splintery wood harder, and THWACK, brought my shovel down hard onto a rock. The dusty girls looked down at their sandals, or at the tree, or squinted into the tafukt. I let the dark boy with sinewy arms take the shovel from me. The tree was planted in a matter of minutes. Kempie the Guide gave me the thumbs up and smiled enthusiastically from across the garden.

I had a Polaroid camera with me to document the digging. I huddled close to the two girls nearest to me and gestured to the camera. Their eyes widened as the whirring machine produced a blank white square, which gradually faded to reveal our faces. I’m smiling brightly and broadly. They grin shyly, revealing crooked teeth. I took a second picture, and gave the first one to the girls. Others came closer, slowly, cautiously. I held the camera high to try and get us all in the picture. When it printed, I gave it to the schoolmaster, who decided to photocopy it and distribute it to all the students. I looked over my shoulder to see the first two girls holding the picture I gave them like it was a Kleenex used by a movie star.

After the trees and herbs had been planted in neat and numerous rows, the ten of us went up into the dorms to rest for a while, until our sweat dried tight on our skin and we decided we had to shower. The dark girls and boys were finishing up outside, placing stones to mark the different plants. The five girls in our little pale gang headed to one gray bathroom, and peeled off our grimy clothes until we stood in just our underwear. I agonized over where to put my favorite linen pants; every surface was dingy and grimy. I stood naked and paralyzed for a few moments, before begrudgingly setting them down near the sink. We screeched from the cold water and stood side by side in the large open showers, laughing as our white shampoo whirled round the grubby drains. We dressed quickly and rested again. Just as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard the thump thwack of some last minute digging. I noticed that my linen pants had a small gray stain in one corner and tried to wipe it away. I licked my finger and rubbed the stain in time to the sound of the boys outside digging.
After our nap, they served us dinner, course after course, and we ate until we were stuffed. Cracked white plates came laden with chicken with raisins and rice, tagines of kefta and eggs, warm pastillas filled with potatoes and peas. Our group sat at one table, and the girls filled up three other tables, which were pressed against a wall. No one spoke much, except to exclaim over the excellence of the food, or to remark how wonderful it was that we had gotten so much done in one day. I could not understand a word from their side of the room, no matter how hard I strained. The girls brought our plates into the kitchen when we were done, despite our protestations.

Full and sleepy from the meal, I wandered slowly back to my dorm. I opened the door to our plain white room to find MJ huddled on the floor, cradling a giant frozen water bottle and looking around anxiously. She threw me a desperate look, like a helpless mouse caught in the talons of an eagle. She started to speak, swayed back and forth, and promptly threw up into a plastic bag. I smiled and shook my head and stared out the window while I rubbed her back.

Once the mess was cleaned up and all five girls (plus Kempie the Guide) had assembled in our room, we began getting ready for bed. I was halfway into my pajama shirt when there was a small knock on the door. The girls sleeping in the room across from ours filed in, and one after another they lined up to kiss us on our cheeks. Our group snuck small glances at each other, but we quickly accepted their kisses. Some girls gave one kiss on each side, some two on one, three on another, and I accidentally kissed one girl full on the mouth. I reddened and turned quickly to the next one. Their faces were warm and rough, and most looked at the floor as they approached us. They were wearing nightgowns far more stained than my linen pants. They kissed each of us, and mumbled foreign words of bedtime pleasantries. When the door closed behind them, I exhaled softly and held one hand to my cheek. I stood there, staring at the door as the rest of our group quietly crawled into their cots. I was still staring at the door when the lights turned off, and Julia’s fan clicked on. I was still holding my cheek as MJ began snoring quietly, her noise mingling with the soft sounds of the dusty girls across the hall.
Needle and Thread
By Anthony Cao

The fencer's sword is an object of remarkable precision; the blade is wrought from an ugly hunchbacked lump of steel that is folded over itself hundreds of times into a single, perfectly square length of cold brilliance no longer than ninety centimeters, which at its widest point remains less than a centimeter thick. At the tip is a tiny metal plunger that must be able to support a minimum weight of exactly five hundred grams.

Though it is an object of finesse, the foil is not born from it. Unlike a delicate vase slowly and lovingly coaxed into its shape by the caress of the glassblower's ever careful breath, the foil is forced into being, beaten, thrust into the forge's fiery maw and beaten again before being drowned in a trough of water from which it rises in its new form hissing like an angry snake, the brutal blunt force of the ore honed into the laser like precision of the needle. Despite its new body, the foil retains the raw power of its unrefined form. It lies dormant in the blade's grip until you reach for it, at which point it sparks into being between your thumb and index finger and you feel its coiled presence, like an electrically charged spring waiting to be released, like your own private tornado.

Once, when I was a child, I saw a German Shepherd break free from its leash to run down a squirrel. I remember the bunching of its muscles and the arc of its head tracing the rodent's movement, the sudden and visceral sense of great force as the leash snapped taut, the trembling in the hound's legs as it strained to escape from its owner's grasp and finally, the explosive forward surge as the leash buckle snapped. When I replay the scene in my mind though, I do not see the tension in the dog's muscles, the spring of its legs as the leash breaks. Instead I am distinctly, physically aware of them. I can feel the power the leash struggled to contain, like the tense rigidity of a soda bottle recently shaken, and I can feel the rush of motion, the power not projected, but set free. The squirrel escaped in the end, scampering up into a tree beyond the German Shepherd's reach where it sat, eyes darting anxiously back and forth. I remember watching the hound slowly return to its owner and lie down at his feet, panting lightly from the sudden burst of exertion.

The foil's handle is typically referred to as a pistol grip due to its shape. Indeed, one holds the foil like an old flintlock pistol, two fingers below what would be the trigger and two fingers above, the grip held firmly between thumb and index finger. The analogy of a pistol extends beyond the physical form of the foil, though. Just like the former, the foil carries the potential for deadly force.

During the 1982 World Championships in Rome, a Russian fencer named Vladimir Smirnov was killed while fencing Matthias Behr of West Germany. During the bout, Behr's blade snapped during an attack. He was unable to stop himself in time and his momentum propelled the foil through Smirnov's mask and right eye to lodge itself in his brain. Smirnov died nine days later in a hospital.

I had been fencing for only a few months when I first heard of the incident from my coach. My reaction was not one of shock or fear at what happened, but of inexplicable guilt. At the time, I quickly put the feelings behind me, but in retrospect, the reasons behind my sentiments seem obvious; the foil instills a sense of power in its handler and seeing the damages wrought by that power made me feel guilty for taking pleasure in it. The first time I held the foil, it was as a complete novice with no experience in any sort of martial sport. Even so, to my untrained hand the weapon felt alive and I was filled with a strange thrill of power. I took pleasure in repeating the basic actions Slava taught me, feeling surges of pride when he uttered a rare word of praise or approval or noted an improvement in my form. Now, four years later, I still feel the very same sense of empowerment when I pick up the foil. The feeling has not mellowed with age, but grown and intensified. My once slow and clumsy actions have grown swift and sharp, beaten into my reflexes through countless repetitions and hours of drilling. I can tell by the slope of someone's shoulders, the lean of their back, the bend of their knees and the light in their eyes whether they are committing to an attack or merely feinting; I have power over them in my awareness and that power brings with it a sort of intoxication. It is the intoxication of seeing an opponent struggle to catch your blade, his movements growing jerkier and more desperate with every missed parry, of knowing what action he will take next and knowing that you've already foreseen it. And it is this intoxication that made me feel so strangely guilty upon hearing of Smirnov's death, because I know that Behr must have felt that same heady rush of power as he lunged toward Smirnov, felt it as he landed the touch, felt it even in the fatal moment when his blade snapped and the jagged end tore through Smirnov's mask.
To the observer's eye, the fencer's movements are smooth and precise, each action calculated, deliberate and executed with the effortless grace of a master dancer, the foil moving as a natural extension of the arm. To the fencer though, his movements are of a completely different nature, bursts of effort to control the blade rather than direct it. Like the cavalry rider upon his surging mount, the fencer's mastery of his weapon exists only in appearance. It is the foil itself, not the fencer, that propels the blade toward its target and drives its point into an opponent's chest. The fencer does not project the blade's force. Rather, he is tasked with restraining it, bending and taming its violence to direct it as he, not the foil wills. In fact, if you watch carefully enough, you will see that when the fencer lunges into an attack, the blade precedes the wielder, rocketing forward by itself before the rest of the body follows, drawn along by the foil's force.

What happens when the foil is freed from the will of its wielder then? When the German Shepherd breaks away from its leash? When the fencer fails to control the primitive energy of the blade, gives in and lends his own strength to its wild demand for action? Most of the time he will surge forward in a mindless charge, only to be stopped by the scream of the scoring machine's white off-target light as the blade meets an arm or leg instead of the chest. And just like the German Shepherd realizing that the squirrel is beyond his reach, the fencer will slowly return to the starting line, freed from his brief moment of insanity. Other times though, the blade's energy is too much to be contained and the fencer loses himself to it, his motions spiraling out of control like a propeller broken off from its rotor mid cycle.

I imagine that is what happened to Behr in his bout against Smirnov. I can see him in my mind's eye, lithe and agile, clad in the white jacket and silver lame of the foil fencer, blade arm darting forward to score a touch upon Smirnov and I can see the foil snap and Smirnov turn around, shrugging with a rueful smile. Then, in that crucial moment, my attention shifts. I do not see Behr as he must have turned back, do not see the horror on his face as he catches sight of Smirnov, the blade lodged in his mask, a monstrous streak of gray and red upon the black mesh. Instead, I am following the fragment of the blade as it spins away through the air and I can see on the broken edge hundreds of tiny ripples where the steel was folded, folded, folded against itself.
What Did You See On Mulberry Street?
By William Stanton

A large amount of my youth was spent on military bases. These places have no reason to be visually appealing; they simply serve functionality purposes. As such, nearly all of them are categorized into the old, ’70s feeling California vibe, a unique, dirt brown feeling that prevails in a lot of buildings in the west. If one were to enter Camp Pendleton today, (a navy base in San Diego), the look of things becomes much duller once one passes the tall, barbed wire fence.

Everything is organized logically, from the local markets that require your military I.D. privilege card to the government subsidized housing, the library, the gym, a bar, and a gas station. Other buildings seem far less interesting, and more devoid of life except for the occasional man in uniform, and these windowless buildings take up the majority of bases. All buildings on the base, housing, other buildings with function unknown, and uninteresting to the young child me, are rectangular in shape, and are usually tan or occasionally gray. Directions are not given by a map, but simple signs that wear the most unremarkable white font in plain brown give directions to where you want to go. The most interesting and visually appealing building usually is the fast food joint on the base, and mostly this is a McDonald’s or a Taco Bell.

Perhaps this monotony was one of the more stable aspects of my surroundings. We moved a lot as an active duty, enlisted navy family, and so at some point I came to accept the rectangular cloned buildings that predominated the bases that we stayed at in South Carolina, Connecticut, California, Washington, and Hawaii. The few bases outside of the country that we were located to were perhaps the most interesting, but hardest to remember as I was less than five years old then. They were in Germany and England, with an in-between stop in France to further my mom’s attempt at an opera career. I vaguely recall the architecture being more interesting.

Temporary military housing is nothing but a glorified, yet unadorned hotel room. Your kitchen is part of the living room and dining room, separated not by a wall but by a boundary where cheap white and black tile turns to muddy colored carpet, all in a single room. This room is adorned with a small shower and toilet. A small door separates the living space from a bedroom containing a queen-sized bed, which is normally where my parents slept. I slept on the transformable sofa bed. It was pretty exciting to be an only child at this time because at night I got an entire room to myself.

My immediate family was in that particularly interesting category of families in which there were many difficulties. At the same time, those parents wanted to “shield” me from their mistakes, when the inevitable divorce happened. Looking back all those years ago, I’m truly impartial to what happened—as outrageous as it may be. My parents, when I was twelve, both seemed infallible, incomprehensible creatures. Now, it just seems like some escalated high school drama with mistakes that one of us, a child, could have made.

My favorite children’s author was Dr. Seuss--I literally had a mini shrine dedicated to the man that could only be described as a library of his books--and I’m not sure if it was my father’s or my favorite book personally, as our opinions were so intertwined at my early age. That book was And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street. The book, as it turns out, was Dr. Seuss’s, aka Theodor Geisel’s, first book published, perhaps having that special quality of a book that is an author’s first and holds a certain charm and originality that a first artwork has and that its copies lack. The earliest memories I have are of my father and me reading this book together, with me under my covers and his vascular hands guided by strong arms turning pages, his eyes obscured by lighting reflecting off his cheap prescription glasses, and his mouth moving, talking about all the
absurdities that Dr. Seuss had in store for us.

Since my father was in the navy, he was usually out to sea on six-month to year-long trips, so when we lived with him, we didn't really. Yet, we lived with him more than anyone else, as where he was stationed changed frequently, making us move more than twelve times across different states and countries based on where his current ship of residence was. We (my mother and I, I was an only child then) lived in the temporary military apartments close to or on each of the bases where the ship was. I'm sure it didn’t seem like it then, but as I look back, the only significant times that mattered to me and are remembered with any clarity are times that my father and I were together-- all other faces, friends, and peers, faded into obscurity. I remember being in constant awe of my father. The few times he wasn’t asleep from his nightshift when he was not on the ship, he was working out, always running, lifting weights, or something along those lines, and I wanted to be like him, too. On choice weekends we would go out to the closest track and field late at night, and I would ride my bike next to his almost gazelle like gait as he did his laps, as the street lamps faded into a neon yellow line with the only stationary thing being him and my bike. Those moments were the ones I looked forward to the most, even if they only happened three, four times a year. Truthfully, I don’t know what I remembered most-- the few days out of the three hundred that I saw him-- or the rest I spent waiting for him to knock on the door.

I never paid a lot of attention to the interactions between my father and my mother, but looking back on all of the pictures they had taken together smiling, I suppose times then weren’t turbulent and stormy. But perhaps they did a good job of hiding it. I remember vaguely the shouting at four in the morning when we lived in Connecticut and this was three years before everything was taken apart, by whom or what, is still a little unclear, even today. Even now, I still wonder if they tolerated three years of being “married” for me, their only child? The shouting that night in Connecticut, I couldn’t remember what was said, or what happened afterwards-- they acted normal the morning after, so I wonder if I just dreamt the entire thing. Their lies were so believable, in regards to everything, that I took their word as my only truth. Maybe if I had half of a brain, I would have recognized the distance when they took separate cars on the trip across the country to where we were stationed next in San Diego. I was too busy feeling loved by both of them.

In San Diego my dad took up carpentering as a spare job, and when I got back home from school (I was now in kindergarten) we would go on little trips to Home Depot, which was as exciting for my dad as Toys R us was for me. The first birthday my father wasn’t out at sea was my eighth, and after receiving a crazy, elaborate 2000 piece US Nimitz Lego set, we spent the rest of the day sawing wood and coughing up sawdust outside under the hot sun, for some job that he had, some job I couldn’t remember for the life of me. Perhaps I didn’t care, or perhaps I was too busy coyly pretending to be bored out of my mind. Even if where we were was just a dirt hill near a construction site near our militarized apartment (where my dad set up a little workbench), and not the beach, I set up a little clay sand castle and pretended twigs in the ground were invaders and I was defending my cute steeple with an army of sun dried, brown leaves. There weren’t too many bugs that were annoying-- all I remember now were the snails that came out after the rare night of rain. When I think back, it’s almost unnerving how much of my father’s time I remember with him and how little of everything else I remember when he was gone.

I remember crying after he returned after being gone for nine months, and how I ran across a park that was near the ship, how he almost was a stranger but he smelled like the familiar aftershave he always used. I remember how mad I was when he was passed out on the couch the same day because he was exhausted instead of playing with me. I also remember him being out to sea when I was in the hospital day in and day out for my severe asthma. It was hard to remember how many times I collapsed in the summer heat and woke up in the hospital on the base, or the late night blurs in the car on the way to the emergency room. I remember thinking, “I wish my dad was here,” when staring at the clinically white ceiling. My mom talked about my dad often-- and then she just stopped. It was around this time I met David Silverman, the father of my sister.

For some obscure reason, which is obvious to me now, my mother and I went on month-long trips to Oregon, a state above us, while my dad was on eight-month trips out to sea. My mom at this time kept hinting about how we were going to move up to Oregon eventually, and she claimed that this was for my benefit, trying to get me to get excited about leaving my homeschooled education and going to a private middle school in Portland, the biggest city in the state. My first impressions of David were as follows-- he was super cool, he had the latest computer games, and he got me a cool gift nearly anytime I met
him. He drove one of the coolest cars I’ve seen— a BMW sports two-seater, which seemed so much faster than the station wagon from the 1970s that my mom was still lugging around. I was a bit more mentally developed than an infant at the age of seven, so I asked my mom where David came from. She just replied, he’s my best friend from high school.

Back in San Diego my mom became visibly pregnant. The timing was such that it seemed it was Dad’s kid. I was eight at the time when I accidentally walked into my parents’ bedroom. I had no idea what sex was at the time, and I left when they said get out in a tone they never used before with me. I went to go play with my Legos, mostly confused about why they would act so strangely.

I forgot about it and moved on.

The time with my pregnant mom was interesting— she had a lot of cravings that she didn’t normally have, but perhaps the memory is exaggerated by all the times she was complaining about having them. My father, as usual, was somewhere out to sea. When her belly was really big, I remember my dad getting special permission to come home— and looking back, I was much more excited about seeing my dad again than actually having a sibling. By this time I knew it would be a girl, and I personally didn’t know what to feel about it— what would it be like? I was worried that she would take some of Dad’s limited time with me away, but I would be gracious and allow it if she (my new sister) recognized who was in charge.

Following the turbulent time of the child’s birth, full of sleepless nights for my mom and me, I remember thinking about how different my sister looked from me, in facial features and skin tone. She was redder than I was when I was small, a bit chubbier, and her hair was a dark blonde when it grew out. My hair was a near black brown. My dad wasn’t really there for her development, and I don’t remember him around much of the time. In retrospect, David, the real biological father, had no say in naming Tamara and wasn’t there for her birth— instead, my dad was.

When Tamara was two years old, my mother and I moved up to Oregon, which was strange. As limited as my knowledge was, I knew that there were no navy bases in Oregon. My father was still stationed in San Diego, and this was the last time I would have seen him in person. Now I was ten, and my mom tried to fill in the gap by sending me to cub scouts, but she still homeschooled me, so I didn’t have the experience of meeting normally with my peers. I went on a few camping trips in the beginning, and they were fun, but unmemorable, and I decided cub scouts wasn’t for me. I was still fairly sickly at the time, and I quickly developed a need for glasses when it turned out all the late nights reading with a flashlight under the covers destroyed my eyesight for seeing things far away. I weighed forty-five pounds at age eleven, which was apparently underweight for my height, and I never went anywhere without my inhaler.

Two years later, my mom left her email open after the death of her sister, and I saw something I shouldn’t have, or perhaps I was meant to see. It was the court terms between her and Mr. Stanton (as it stated in the header) and contained unfamiliar words like child support, division of money, etc. My sister was four now and developing fast— she nearly weighed as much as me. She was overweight for her age vs. my underweight status. It hit me, suddenly, that I hadn’t seen my dad for two years. It couldn’t be that long, it was normally eight months. I asked my mom at dinner, if my dad was on a longer trip than before. I forgot how, but she seemed to have turned me against my dad. The atmosphere in the new apartment that we lived in seemed anti-him. She wouldn’t talk about the guy that I grew up with and idolized for so long. She somehow tried to make herself seem victimized— I still believe that both of them were in the wrong. I forgot the conversation after I asked that question, and I forgot how she incriminated him. It was something about him finding someone else overseas, from some other country.

She never told me, never mentioned that crucial detail about my sister not being his child— I found that out in another court letter. It was court ordered to video chat my father, though, and I remember almost crying every time I heard his voice. One day I buried my head into my pillows and couldn’t stop tears from wetting the cotton after a particularly fake cheery goodbye to my dad. At the time I genuinely didn’t know why I felt so sad when I heard my father again, over the grainy filter of prehistoric Skype— if he was such a “scumbag” and that “I shouldn’t care about him” from my mom. The entire affair was so distasteful. He was the opposite of my mom— she seemed all fire and brimstone, and my dad seemed cooler, and a quiet kind of strong. Even if they both seemed like titans of strength, at the time I felt weak for feeling that way with my dad. It hurt to think about him or read his emails, and it hurt more to say good-bye again. I didn’t know why I couldn’t see him in person.

I didn’t know why, but one day the video chats disappeared. Maybe they didn’t have Internet at sea at the time, or perhaps other distractions got in my
way, like starting middle school and going on into high school. Over time I learned my father did find someone else, and that I had a third half-sister somewhere, whose name I didn’t know. At the same time, I was introduced to my pseudo-stepfather’s kids, Leo Silverman and Daniel Silverman. It was as if I was never an only child, except I didn’t really like anyone.

I made an email when I was eight on Yahoo once. I realized when I was sixteen, in the summer before attending this school, that this was the only email that my father knew existed, and he didn’t know about the ones that I regularly checked, like my Gmail account. I saw one email from him, dated four years ago in 2010, titled-- “What’s new?”

Dear William,

Is there nothing new to tell? Did you see nothing interesting on Mulberry Street?

Love Dad
By Christina Guarin

My favorite story my mom tells me happened when she was pregnant with me. At the time we had one of those phones that was attached to the wall and had a long cord. She had already had two baby boys (my older brothers) and was now expecting her third child. Daddy asked what the gender was of the baby and the world lit up for him when they told him that they were expecting a baby girl. He screamed and ran into the room where my mom was, still holding on to the phone by his ear. He had broken the phone off the wall in excitement; all that was left was the cord hanging from his ear. Whenever I talk to my mom, she tells me that same story. I always ask to hear it. I like to be reminded of how much my father had loved me.

I lived in New Rochelle for a little more than half my life. To many, it was a cozy home, but my eyes saw all the troubles that would seep into the walls. My parents always fought. From what I remember, my mom always yelled at my dad. He would just stand back and listen to her screams. He never fought against her. She had reasons, he was irresponsible, my mommy wasn’t; he lied, cheated and seemed to never move forward. I started sleeping in Mommy’s bed with her and Daddy started sleeping in my room. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw them kiss.

But my daddy loved me with all his heart. He fed my two-year-old self, kissed my four-year-old self, hugged my six-year-old self, and he could combat the goblins that haunted the space under my eight-year-old bed. He was the only one who could do my ponytails for me with such precision, he was the only one who pushed me on the swings, and he was the only one who could make my favorite shrimp with spaghetti. We could talk about anything; he understood me and I always wanted to be with him. We did laundry together and had lunch together. I was never happier than when I was with my daddy. He made me laugh, he was always so proud of me; whatever I did he was supportive and came to school events and games. He gave me everything I wanted. I was his princess.

One time when I was about seven years old, Mommy wasn’t home and so Daddy decided to take my brothers and me to the park. It was not just any park; it was the same park he took us to every time we went out. It is in Larchmont, bordering New Rochelle. It had tennis courts, a pavilion, basketball courts, a soccer field, a sandbox and my favorite: the massive playground. My brothers would go to the basketball courts and I would go straight to the bright red and yellow swings. Daddy always kept an eye out for me to make sure I didn’t get hurt.

“Pa! Can you come push me on the swing?”

“You can push yourself!” he giggled, speaking in his usual sarcastic tone.

“Pleaseeee, I like when you do it!” I always smiled exposing my two missing front teeth. My walnut colored eyes glowed and the ponytails my dad did for me earlier hung graciously with such precision on both sides of my head.

Daddy never said no to me. He couldn’t. He wanted to see me happy. He would push me really high on the swing, and I never wanted to get off. I wanted to be at the park all the time.

He was not the disciplinary sort, very passive, which aggravated my mom. The summer I turned eleven, Mommy left my daddy. Everything packed up in brown boxes stacked on top of each other, the princess left her castle and moved to White Plains. My parents were separated, but that didn’t mean the problems were. It seemed like the more they were apart, the more the fighting absorbed the both of them. But I didn’t like being with my mommy, I wanted to be with my daddy.
“I’ll talk to your mom, why don’t you stay with her, I’m sure you can work things out.”

“No Pa, I don’t want to, why can’t I live with you, you’re my dad?” I would hug him and snug my head into his shoulder when I said this. I hoped that maybe he would feel a little bit bad for me.

“I’m busy right now, you need your mother.”

I never asked to go live with him again.

Daddy is short, chubby, has a birthmark above his lip that my two brothers and I all inherited, deep brown eyes just like mine. We have similar noses and the same bold, infamous Guarin eyebrows that arch when we raise them up and down. My dad was a workaholic. He worked as a supervisor at Morgan Stanley in Purchase, New York. However, no matter how much he worked, it always seemed like he still never had enough money. He didn’t know how to spend it. It wasn’t on gifts. I don’t remember the last time my dad bought me something. He has been wearing the same clothing for the last few years and has not bought anything new in a very long time, wears the same blue shorts with white T-shirt, and since the separation he has lived in four different homes. Sometimes he would ask to borrow some money—$50, $100, $200. Reluctantly, we lent him the money. Years later, he still owes us money and we have no idea where it goes.

Every other weekend we’re supposed to spend with my dad, but as time passed it seemed we saw less and less of him. Weeks and months would pass and we wouldn’t see him.

“Carlos, why don’t you take the kids for the weekend,” my mom would ask.

“Umm, I will let you know, Tina. I’ll call you back,” he would respond with a stutter and a pause between every other word.

No call back. He would disappear for days not answering my mom’s phone calls or texts.

In eighth grade I wanted him to come to my soccer game.

“Pa, I have a game next Wednesday, will you come, it’s at 4:00?”

“Sure, I think I can make it, I will see you there,” he replied. A grin broke out across my face, “Great! See you then.”

I looked out at the benches waiting to see the man I hadn’t seen in weeks. No signs of him. Maybe he was running late. Still no sign. I hope nothing is wrong. Maybe he got caught up in work. Game over. I check my phone two messages, one missed call.

First Message from Ali: good luck at your game girly!

Second message from Jhon: let me know when you’re coming home.

Missed call: it was only Hope.

I checked for something from my dad, No messages.

I called my mom. She came to pick me up, the grin had disappeared from my face and my eyes watered. He never came. My mom didn’t ask questions, it was a bad game. Again, we didn’t hear from him for days. The cycle never ends.

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I caught a cold, my mom was out, and I had to stay in bed. She told me to call my father and ask him to bring me some soup, maybe ginger ale. I call, no answer. He calls me back.

“Hey Sweetheart.”

“Hi Pa.”

“Your mother told me you were sick, is everything okay?”

“I’m not feeling well, and Mami isn’t home, do you think I can stay with you?”

Silence “I would, Darling really, but I have to work tonight and I’m really busy.”

“Okay,” I answer slowly.

“But if you want I could bring some soup?”

“It’s fine, thanks anyway.” I bite down hard and cringe.

“Okay well, feel better. I love you.”

End call.

I stopped visiting my father. He didn’t seem to mind, he didn’t try to see us. He never called. Maybe the occasional “good morning I miss you” texts, but I usually didn’t respond.

When I see him, we run out of things to talk about, hugs are awkward, and if I do something bad and he tries to reassert his authority, I simply answer, “Now, since when does that matter to you?” I roll my eyes.
Months pass.
My mother asks me, “Have you spoken to your father?”
“No,” I answer coldly.
“Why don’t you call him or something?”
“Why should I call him?! It doesn’t seem like he wants to talk to me! He should call me!” I yell. I begin to tremble and I leave the room. *Silence.*
I sit in my room, in the park, at school, during practice. Does he really miss me? I ask myself. I can never find the answer.

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I’m about to turn eighteen, getting ready to go to college, application season, most important time in my life. It’s the start of the beginning of a new life. I apply to a lot of schools, some on the east coast, some on the west coast. I want to get out of here. My first choice is University of California Santa Barbara. The deadline is coming up and I am almost ready to submit. I go to school, sit down with my college counselor. We look over everything and within minutes, I’m looking at the confirmation page for my applications. I have officially applied. I text my friends, my brothers, my mom.
“Congrats chica! I am so proud of you!” my friends send.
“That’s awesome sis!” my brother responds.
“That’s so exciting, I feel old now,” my other brother replies.
A blessing from my mom.
I forgot about my father, I text him: “Paa I applied to college! The applications were $270 for the California schools.” I wait, no response.
The following day he responds. Excited, I quickly open, I read:
“Ok…and”
I stare at my phone for a moment, I get goosebumps, I hang my head down, I feel my shoulders tighten and my eyes are glossy as I want to cry. I stop myself. I sit down and just lock my phone. *Silence.*
I grew out of my 2, 4, 6, 8, 11-year-old self. My father still seems to be stuck there. My parents still fight, but my mother gave up on him. We all did. I stopped missing him, but it never stopped hurting. I grew up, but seven years later the goblins still haunt me, not the same ones under my bed, but the memories of what my father and I used to have. My daddy can love, he loved my mother, he loved me, he just doesn’t know how to love, and he doesn’t know what it means to love. But for some reason I still sit in my room, in the park, at school, during practice. Why doesn’t he love me anymore? I ask myself, “How could he hurt me like this?” and still, I can never find the answer.
Dishing It Out (And Taking It)
By Luke Davoren

My mom has lots of scars; she says she deserved all of them. She is one of eight kids, six of whom are brothers. She lost both her front teeth from sibling fights and has shiny scars on her knees from touch football. She’s from a big family, and therefore is afflicted with a classic case of Big Family Syndrome. She knows how to dish it out, and she keeps nothing sacred.

Back in elementary school I told my mom that my leg hurt and I couldn’t walk. She smirked and told me that I would just have to crawl to school until it got better. So I gathered my play crutches and hobbled my way to the bus stop, and she waved to my sister and me from the front porch with a twisted smile as if she enjoyed watching me fake an injury. She thought she was catching me in a lie, but my injury wasn’t fake. My joint pulsed with pain every time I put weight on it, and as the days wore on the pain became more acute. Finally I convinced her, and she gave in and begrudgingly took me to the doctor. He diagnosed me with an infection in my knee, and as he shot me with needles my mom begged me for forgiveness.

When my mom tells this story at parties, people are generally horrified. Sometimes they laugh out of courtesy, but no one has ever countered her story with something worse. Most people can’t understand why my mother feels so comfortable telling everyone about the time she wouldn’t take her sick son to the doctor; sometimes she even seems proud of making me “suck it up” for a couple of days. However, I think I can explain. Stories like this are prevalent with my family, and therefore is afflicted with a classic case of Big Family Syndrome. She knows how to dish it out, and she keeps nothing sacred.

Before 19, Volume 3, 2014

A little red head popped out of the snow and a desperate high-pitched scream pierced the camera “Need Help!” “Need Help Mom!” Thomas spun himself in a desperate attempt to unstick himself from the thick snow, and with no success, he screamed again in his high-pitched toddler voice, “Need help!”

My mother laughed from behind the camera. The frame shakes as if she was sitting down to get a better shot. “Oh Thomas? Where are you? I can’t see you!” She dragged her words out long like a nursery rhyme to sound playful. In her head she was playing a game of hide and seek.

“Need Help!” my brother screamed again. He was making some progress through the shoulder-high snow, but he was clearly not enjoying any of it. “Help me Mom,” his voice trailed off. My mom snapped out of her joke. The camera was thrown to the ground, and she began speaking soothing motherly words. She always knows when she takes a joke too far, and she always knows how to fix it.

She must have gotten her humor from her own mother. I remember my grandma. Her name was Mikey, and she was the same way. I always loved going to Mikey’s house because she bought me sugary non-organic oatmeal, and I was allowed to eat as much as I wanted. Mikey would set me and my siblings up with a train set and a couple bowls of hot cereal in the kitchen, and then she would talk with my parents in the den. We would never last long without bothering them, and when we entered the den to ask questions or to settle a fight, she would always say the same thing: “Go play in some traffic.”

That’s what she always said, and to us it always meant “I love you.”

As a child, I never got a lot of affection from my mother. Before bed, my dad would tuck me in and kiss me goodnight. When my mom tucked me in, she would flip the switch from the doorway. I used to hide love-notes to my parents around the house. When my dad found them he would write another and hide it under my pillow. If my mom found them she would chase me around the house, waving it in front of her screaming, “I’ll skin you with a dull knife!” I knew from a very young age that my parents’ reactions were different responses to the same emotion. Both of them loved me; she just never liked to say it.

My mom likes to gang up. From a young age I’ve been fighting unfair battles. One time my sister convinced me that boys were supposed to pull out their eyelashes. “I can’t believe Mom hasn’t told you yet? You should have started a long time ago,” she taunted me. It was summer. We sat on the parking lot asphalt of the Stop ‘n Shop, waiting for my mom to buy non-alcoholic beer.
Before 19, Volume 3, 2014

Dishing It Out (And Taking It)

It was hot and my mom didn’t want us to suffocate in the car so she left us sitting in the parking lot.

“You think I should cut them?” I asked. “They seem kind of long.”

“Yeah Luke. Those are SO long. You need to cut them or people are gonna think you’re a g-i-r-l.”

I grabbed an eyelash, pulled, and threw it onto the ground. “It hurts.”

“It’s supposed to hurt!” My sister was a year older so she spoke with authority. “That’s what grown ups do. *dub.*”

So I kept pulling and discarding onto the asphalt. With each pull I grimaced, and my sister cackled at my pain. I finished my left side before our mom returned.


“What are you doing Luke?”

“Nothing, just waxing my eyelashes,” I said. Micah Jo had taught me that waxing meant pulling out hair, and I wanted to sound like an adult.

“You’re what?” Mom stared in confusion.

“Luke didn’t know boys aren’t supposed to have eyelashes!” Micah Jo smirked at Mom. Stacey nodded softly and gave a subtle smirk.

She put her head in her hands. “Oh Luke. I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.” She looked at me with a convincing stare and I went back to tearing out my eyelashes with conviction. I grunted with every tear.

Micah Jo started laughing. I looked up and they were both trying to contain their amusement. “I-I tricked you! I-I tricked you!” Micah Jo taunted me.

My mom pushed her fingers through my hair. “You can stop now Luke. You look fine just the way you are.”

Her humor rubbed off on her kids. From a very young age my siblings and I imitated her jokes. When my dad made chicken, he would tenderize the meat by banging a pan over the table. With every loud crash my mom would scream “Ow! Peter Stop! Peter that Hurts!” We found this hilarious, and we made it a thing that any time my dad made chicken the four of us would scream in unison.

Sometimes her humor got her in trouble. We didn’t go out to dinner a lot as children, but sometimes on special occasions my parents would take us to Emperor’s Choice Chinese Restaurant. In reality it was pretty trashy, but to my younger self, it felt like five-star dining.

I remember sitting in the corner table with my entire family. Micah Jo and I convinced our little brother to stand up and sing. We whispered into his ear what he had to say, and because we were older and wiser, he happily obliged. He stood up, and belted “Mommy and Daddy Hit Me!” He sang in a cheerful, nursery rhyme tune. Within seconds the whole restaurant had focused their eyes on our little corner table.

My dad froze in embarrassment. He grabbed Thomas by his chest and tried to sit him back down into his chair. My mom embraced it. She laughed and nodded. I’m not sure if I remember it right, but when Thomas quieted down she might have even given a little bow.

My childhood was always fun and always funny. I had my dad to play sports and to be sweet, and I had my mom to teach me how to suck it up. Neither of my parents ever let me cry for long. I used to get upset when I lost baseball games, and I remember my dad telling me that I had to suck it up and be a man. He taught me not to complain and showed me that you’re not supposed to cry when you chop your finger or stub your toe. One day I was watching a movie and he came downstairs bleeding. He had a drill in his hand and the bit had gone all the way through to the other side. He told me he couldn’t drive me to my friends and that he was going to the hospital. Then he left, walking upstairs with the power cord banging behind him. He came home a couple hours later with a bandage and a bottle of pills that he promptly flushed down the toilet.

The suck-it-up attitude changed when my grandmother got sick. Mom began taking daily trips down to New Jersey where Mikey lived to take care of her. All of a sudden, Mom’s jokes became her reality. They were no longer funny, and when I came home from school I was greeted by solemn discussions instead of laughter. We didn’t joke at the dinner table anymore. Mom didn’t want her kids to visit Mikey while she was sick, but we insisted and eventually she gave in. We drove down to Westfield in silence and at the door my mom told us to prepare ourselves for what we were going to see.

Mikey was bedridden. Her veins popped out of her neck and her skin was darkly blotched. She breathed with a respirator and spoke with a soft, hoarse whisper. I was scared to get close to her.

Mom couldn’t understand her mother. Mikey was saying something, over and over again, and my mom just couldn’t make out the words. She began
taking guesses: “You want water? No, you are hungry?” Mikey kept shaking her head.

“Wait, are you trying to tell me I’m your favorite?” Mom gave a little smile. It was the first joke I had heard from her in a while.

Mikey fanatically shook her head. She mustered all of her voice and said loudly, “Absolutely not Stacey!” She lifted her hand as if to play slap her daughter, but didn’t have the power to lift it high enough. Mom laughed and Mikey let out a smile.

Mikey died a couple days later. We had her funeral at a church in Westfield. Her body was cremated, and we spread her ashes in the garden behind her house. We planted a tree in our yard, and then summer came and Mom began to laugh again.

When Mikey was sick, people gave me a lot of presents. Most of the time I got stuffed animals. I shared mine with the ones my siblings had received, and we created a town in which they lived. Each animal had a name, an employment status, family vendettas, and sometimes a mental illness. My sister named all of her stuffed animals with the first letter of that animal. Her lion was named Leo. He was a therapist with anger problems. My brother’s names were a little more primitive because he was younger. He had Heavy Bear, Ma Horse, and Sleds (named after his favorite activity). I named all my stuffed animals after myself. I had Luke Jr., Luke III, all the way up to XII. Our stuffed animals were actors in a soap opera. We would set up weddings. We would sing “Here comes the bride” and the animals would walk down the aisle and kiss. Then when we got bored with the honeymoon, we would set up a divorce. We would sing “Here comes the bride” backwards. The married couple would walk backwards in the aisle, and they would punch each other in the face, completing the divorce.

We decided that Sleds was clinically depressed, and we had no other choice but to operate. We stuck a needle in his arm for an IV, cut him open with a scissor, removed his stuffing, rushed it to the kitchen screaming “We’re gonna lose him!” and then stuffed it back inside him. We sewed him up with a needle, said prayers, and hoped for the best.

Our mom found us playing hospital, and she quickly joined in. She ran to the kitchen, found two pieces of bread and told us they were the defibrillators. “Quick! you’re going to lose him!”

Sleds didn’t make it.

We held his funeral outside by the swing set. We wanted to cremate him, but Thomas didn’t want us to burn his toy. I begged my father to help me dig a hole for the grave. I insisted he maintain accuracy and dig it at least six feet deep, but I compromised and he dug it three feet instead. My sister clipped flowers. I placed Sleds in a cardboard box and displayed him on the kitchen table for the wake. We insisted our parents wear a suit and a dress to the funeral. I fake cried all the way through my eulogy, and we played “The End” by the Doors as we marched Sled’s casket out to its burial site by the swing set. My mother filmed the whole thing. It wasn’t meant to be funny, but she laughed through the entire thing.

I still don’t know why my mom is so dark. It’s probably because her mom was the same way. I found out recently that almost all of my uncles and cousins suffer from depression. I asked her if she ever took medication, and she said that all she needed was exercise and humor. I told her that I was worried that I would get sick too, and she said I was like her and that I had nothing to worry about. She knows how to be happy, and I love that her genes were passed down to me. I’m proud of her and I love her and I hope that one day I’ll teach my kids how to suck it up as well.
Even when I was a little girl, my mother never babied me. When I was seven, my best friend slammed my finger in her door. We ran over to my house to get my mom. She didn’t kiss my finger, or ask me if I was okay. She simply got the first aid kit and began bandaging me up. It hurt, but I didn’t cry. As she dabbed Neosporin over my bloody, broken fingernail, I bit my lower lip to prevent my eyes from becoming glossy. She never cried in front of me, so I shouldn’t cry in front of her.

I started horseback riding when I was five years old, mostly because I had seen how much my mother enjoyed it. It was the only hobby my sister, my mother, and I had in common and it brought us together every weekend. Sometimes I would stay at the barn all day just to watch other people ride. One time, I witnessed a little girl fall off during her riding lesson. Her mother rushed into the arena to cradle her as she cried. The girl wasn’t hurt, she was just scared. I remember thinking back to the first time I fell off, and how my mom stood outside of the arena, encouraging me to get back on.

When I was little, I would always worry about kidnappers. It probably stemmed from the uplifting stories my sister kindly shared with me. She said there was a man who went into children’s rooms with his three big dogs. One time, she whispered, a girl woke up to him sitting on her bed. She ran to her parents’ room but their door was locked so she yelled for them. They told her that she was just having a bad dream and told her to go back to bed. The man was just about to take her, but her parents walked out just in time.

“Mommy,” I whined while she tucked me in at night, “can you check and make sure there is no one under my bed?”

While she peeked under my bed, I clung to her Mickey Mouse sweatshirt that I slept with every night. Once, when my parents went on vacation, my grandma came over to watch my sister and me. She asked me if she could wear the sweatshirt because all of hers were in the wash. My eyes grew rounder as I said, “No you can’t. It smells like Mommy.”

“There’s no one under your bed,” Mommy assured me. “No one is going to take you, I promise.”

“Well yeah, Daddy would fight them because he’s really strong,” I responded.

“I’m really strong too, you know,” she said, almost offended that I didn’t think of her first.

My mother is the runt of the family. She stands at 5’2, five inches shorter than my sister and me. Next to my father, who is 6’2, she looks like a doll. Due to this, she always sticks out in family photos. In contrast to everyone else’s dark hair, her Barbie blonde fountains down to her angular shoulders that poke out of her skin, along with the rest of her bones. My sister and I always joke that she looks better than us in a bathing suit. Ever since I was a child, she has spent at least an hour a day on the treadmill or walking down our hill. She looks like she belongs on a beach in California with her perfect figure and constant natural tan. She refuses to let age get the best of her and fills her bathroom countertop with Olay anti-aging cream, even though she doesn’t need it.

When I was in middle school, she was very firm with my report cards. When I was in my awkward, pre-teen, no-one-understands-me phase, my middle school report cards were generally more than satisfactory. Almost all of my grades were A’s with a couple of B’s. But Mom was a pusher.

“They’re pretty good. Daddy and I are proud. But you can always do better.”

At first, I was surprised. How could she say that when my grades were nearly perfect?

“But Mom, Taylor gets B’s too,” I argued. I always dragged my sister into arguments when I was younger.
“Yes, she does. She can improve, as well.” She stunned me. My sister and I would roll our eyes together. It used to be us against her. We would call her crazy and neurotic. Her expectations were obviously too high.

This expectation carried over into our passion for horseback riding as well. She and my father bought me a horse of my own when I was twelve. When they bought him, he was young and required a lot of patience. Although five years have passed, he can still be frustrating. It is easy to give up, but she never allows me.

“How was your lesson?”

I threw my car keys on the table and found my mom stirring her Greek yogurt, her meal for the day. “Sucked,” I said, refusing to make eye contact so that she wouldn’t see my glassy eyes. “I don’t think I’m going to go to the show tomorrow.”

“Stunk,” she immediately corrected me. “Why was it so bad?”

I gave her a play by play of my horseback-riding lesson. I explained how badly my horse had acted and how frustrated I was. My horse show the next day would be horrific and I wouldn’t allow anyone to see me like that. It was always easy for me to talk to her about riding considering she rode as well.

“Well,” she sighed, “you can’t be mad at yourself or the horse. You haven’t ridden in a couple days. You know he’s always bad the first time back at work. It’s no one’s fault.”

“True,” I agreed finally, “but I think I’m still scratching tomorrow.”

“Oh no you’re not,” she announced, throwing her yogurt out. “You had a bad lesson. Life goes on.”

That was her favorite one liner: “Life goes on.”

“I get that but I still feel unprepared and I don’t want to go,” I quickly responded.

“I don’t care if you don’t want to go,” she snapped. “I already paid for it and it would be stupid not to. You’re going so you might as well get over it and go get your things ready for the morning.”

I started to disagree with her again but she cut me off. “Conversation over.”

In a fit of rage, I rushed up to my room. I didn’t understand how she could be so understanding one minute and so unsympathetic the next. But I set my alarm and got my clothes together, knowing she wouldn’t change her mind.

A couple weeks later, I was watching videos of the horse show that my mom uploaded to the computer. As I cringed at myself on camera, I listened to the conversation between my mother and grandmother.

“They look great,” my grandma commented. I could be falling off the horse and she would still be complimentary.

“It’s a miracle that she’s here right now. Her lesson was awful yesterday. I think she might have cried.” I flinched at this.

“Oh Nikki, why did you make her go if it was so bad?” I always admired my grandma for taking my side in arguments.

“She’s fine,” my mom simply said. A couple seconds later, I watched myself exit the arena with a first place ribbon and a smile. The videotape ended, probably because she came to give me water or take my jacket. Although she doesn’t speak much to me at shows, her presence is still vital. She doesn’t give me advice, that’s my trainer’s job. She doesn’t cheer loudly, that’s my friend’s job. She’s just there to be Mom. And when she’s not there, I feel like I’m forgetting something. Did I leave my helmet at home? Did I remember to take the money that she left me? They are little things, but I still worry.

Even though she is tough, my mom isn’t very strict, and if there is one thing she loves, it is a party. She and my father go out at least once a weekend to dinner or to a family friend’s. And when they are not out, they bring the party to the house. They love watching football games, playing loud music by the pool, and filling their wine glasses to the very top.

I can recall my dad’s fiftieth birthday when I was fifteen. I looked out the window to find her and ten other guests dancing to ACDC with their glasses raised in the air. As I stepped foot outside, she made her way over to me.

“Pooh,” she said to me. She and my dad have called me Pooh Bear for as long as I can remember. I still don’t know the reasoning behind it. “What are you still doing awake?” She blinked her big blue eyes in concern.

“Mom, it’s 9:30,” I reminded her.

“Well, what are you doing? Don’t you have homework? Tomorrow is a school day. You should study. Did you floss? Make sure you brush your teeth good before bed.”

Even when my mother has had too much to drink, she never stops parenting. Although it usually annoys me, I admire it in a way. How she can turn on the parent switch so easily while inebriated is beyond me. I don’t know if she does it to try and hide the fact that she’s drunk, or because “parent mode” is her
natural default. Either way, she loves to bark out orders when she can, a constant reminder that she’s still in charge, despite her alcohol intake.

In fact, being in charge is a favorite hobby of hers. She enjoys reminding my sister and me that she is our parent, not our friend. That is probably the reason we don’t talk about personal issues. I don’t remember the last time she has comforted me over being brokenhearted over a boy, or asked me about parties that I go to. She doesn’t ask and I don’t tell. We like it better that way.

During junior year, I inevitably spent a lot of time doing work. She would walk into my room, with a James Patterson book in one hand and laundry basket in the other, and put a pile of clothes on my bed. I ignored her as my fingers bounced off of the letters of my keyboard.

“Don’t forget to bring your dirty clothes downstairs tomorrow,” she reminded me.

“Yeah.”

“Also straighten up this room, it’s a mess.”

“Ok.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked, peering over my shoulder.

“Nothing, I’m just stressed out,” I replied, my eyes still peeled to the essay.

“Well, better get over it,” she snapped back. I rolled my eyes and began to pounce on the keys even harder. There’s no use retaliating or getting into an argument. I’ve learned her ways by now.

“Getting over it” is an idea that she thinks she’s coined. Along with “life goes on,” it is a line that she uses instead of pitying someone. These lines used to bother me and stun me. I didn’t understand why she couldn’t see I was struggling. Consequently, I would team up with my sister and have a gossip “We hate Mom” session in our rooms. But that has changed. Sometimes my sister still tries to have these sessions with me.

“She’s just such a bitch.” She ferociously twists my hair into curls with her iron. “Why should Mom care if I went on a date with someone?”

“I don’t know,” I say, more concerned about my skin getting scorched.

“Sydney, take off the sweatshirt if you want your hair to look good. It’s getting in my way,” she ordered. I unzipped the gray Mickey Mouse sweatshirt and threw it on her bed.

“That thing has a million holes in it anyways,” she continues. “I just don’t get it. I come home at a reasonable hour, I’m not getting married. What’s the big deal? I cannot wait to get out of this house.”

“Stop being so dramatic, you’re fine. She just cares about you so be grateful,” I snap, not able to listen to her complaints anymore.

Sometimes I hear myself turning into my mom. I don’t embrace it, I don’t avoid it, I just let it happen. I find myself rationalizing peoples’ problems and convincing them that their life isn’t so bad after all. My sister likes to complain about living at home, even though she is still in college.

“Enough,” I say. “You have parents who love you and a nice house to live in.”

I actually think I’ve heard these words come out of my mother’s mouth before. I think, at times, I reiterate what she says because we spend so much time together. We don’t get our nails done together, or go to the movies. That is what my friends are for. But we have dinner together while my sister is at college and my dad is at work during the week. We ride together on weekends. It is inevitable that what she says sticks with me.

I’ve found that she’s even channeled her high expectations into me. I don’t show her my report cards anymore. I don’t need to.

“Your grades are good, as per usual,” Ms. Mike, my advisor, tells me at the semester meeting.

“Except my bio grade, that can go up. Also my Euro grade. I really need to start participating more in that class. Can you scroll back to Latin for a second? I think that dropped a point.”

My mom doesn’t say anything about my grades or my work habits anymore. She knows she doesn’t need to. I don’t complain much around her anymore because I know the response. But sometimes, to entertain myself, I’ll exaggerate situations to see what she says.

“Mom, I can’t go to school tomorrow. I’ll die,” I say.

“Really? Will you die? I guess we’ll have to chance it, then,” she says, sitting on the couch, not lifting her eyes from her book.

“That’s not very nice,” I argue.

“Well,” she says, “I’m sure you’ll get past it.”

I smile and walk away, knowing I would have given myself the same answer.
An Ice Cream Hunt in Times Square
By Julia Butterfield

Jackson is unhappy. He enjoyed the play we saw but does not want to wander around Times Square. He is complaining about the crowds, the noise, the lights, and everything really.

CJ says, “Shut up and you’ll get ice cream.”

“Oh that’s right,” Jackson never makes any attempt to disguise sarcasm.

“You can’t get ice cream anywhere else.”

“Stop being a sarcastic asshole,” CJ snaps.

When your best friend’s other best friend is also your boyfriend, you stay out of their fights so I say nothing and try not to think about the crowd pressing around me. Although it’s nearly 11 PM, it’s as bright as daylight in Times Square and hot in a way that pins you down as if you had lost a wrestling match.

I squeeze Jackson’s hand because I hate Times Square too. But Jackson hates it and thus, hates New York. I hate it because I love New York so much.

Sarah and CJ also hate Times Square but are willing to tolerate it for ice cream or the Disney Store. Everyone hates Times Square; some people just consider the things in it worth braving it for.

I want Jackson to see more of New York. I’m convinced that if he could see the Strand or the Union Square Market or Greenwich Village, he would like it. The New York of my childhood is exciting. The neighborhood where I used to live had a mailman who loved opera and occasionally you would hear him burst out a few bars of Verdi or Puccini or Mozart and then go back to mail delivery. But Jackson comes here once a year and only ever sees places like Times Square. If it were any other neighborhood, I would want to wander, explore, and hopefully find a hidden gem like a secret used bookstore or a woolen giraffe hat. But this is not my New York, so I just tell myself to shut out everything but finding the ice cream and following CJ’s spiky blond hair through the cloud.

But it could not have only been one block. Two. Three. I am reminded of an acting exercise I have done several times where I have been told to walk as if surrounded by Jell-O. So many people and too much light and the colors of the different advertisements clash horribly. Too many different people are shouting at me about tour buses of Manhattan or the world’s greatest wings.

Finally we see a place where there is ice cream, A Cold Stone.

“Oh boy,” Jackson says, really losing patience now, and I know he’s about to comment that we have a Cold Stone in Pleasantville, but I shake my head and remind him in a low enough voice that CJ and Sarah cannot hear, “It’s Sarah’s last night.”

In two days Sarah is leaving for college in Denmark. She keeps avoiding the subject or joking that it isn’t going to happen. At the beginning of the summer, she had admitted that she didn’t know how to do laundry, and an hour before she had bought the first wallet she’d ever owned. For her, ice cream from Times Square will taste better. So I will say yes to anything she asks for in this New York that isn’t mine.

Cold Stone is painted a deep red and the lighting is a shade of yellow that turns the brown in Sarah’s hair into a five-day-old bruise. Cold Stone is relatively quiet though a little packed, but the line isn’t particularly long so we wait until we get close enough to see the menu. I am too tired for ice cream.

But now it is Sarah’s turn to sigh. “It’s two dollars more than in Pleasantville.” The magic of ice cream in Times Square is gone. She does not look dejected or upset, but the light has gone out of her face. “Do any of you want to order something?”

I shake my head and CJ mutters, “Capitalist scumbag corporations.”

“Oh good.” Jackson turns towards the door. “It’s nice to know that all that was for nothing.” While Jackson does have a sarcastic side it is usually not this prominent and he usually is not one to complain.

We go back into the chaos and start walking towards Grand Central. I take his hand again and remind him, “The play was fun.”

“Yeah,” he admits and then points out the man who is smoking pot in the street.

Sarah turns to us, her face alive again. “Guys, let’s go to the Disney Store.”

“That’s right.” CJ starts bounding forward again. For some reason, the hatred of corporations does not extend to the Disney Store. “I know how to get there from here. It was where the Restore the Fourth Protest started.”

I see Jackson sigh a little but he says nothing.
One block. Two blocks. Crowds. Yelling. Pulling Jackson along because he’s too polite to walk through crowds effectively. I’m starting to have trouble thinking. 

At the Disney Store, a man with a mustache greets us and says, “Welcome to Disney.”

As soon as we are past him Jackson complains, “This isn’t Disney. It’s the Disney Store.”

“You shut up Jackson,” Sarah says, not as angrily as she is pretending to be. “You have no magic in you.”

I am in some agreement with him. The walls are lined with things I have neither the desire nor means to buy so I stand with him by the wall and talk about the corn roast we’re going to tomorrow. At this time of night, the Disney Store is the antithesis of Times Square. The few people there are calm. The colors are subdued and matching. I suddenly realize that my head has been pulsing and my hands are shaking. Everything slowly calms inside me. CJ and Sarah are walking around and looking at things and having a detailed discussion on the history of animation that neither Jackson nor I can follow.

At some point I say, “We really shouldn’t miss the next train.”

As we leave the store, the man with the mustache wishes us a magical evening and Sarah’s face shines as she says, “You too.”

Park Avenue. During non-business hours it is quiet though in the distance we can still hear Times Square. I can think again and my ears have stopped ringing. My grip on Jackson relaxes. I strain my ears for mailmen singing opera. We begin to make our way back to Grand Central. We pass a rickety little convenience store whose doors are open, so I can see the freezers inside, right behind the fruit stand.

“Hey.” I will save this night for Jackson and maybe for all of us even if it is only a little bit. “They have ice cream here. Maybe they sell those little Haggen-Dazs cups.”

They don’t but they sell those Haggen-Dazs stick things, which are better than nothing, and at least chocolate-y. We pass an office building with an indoor garden and stare at it through the glass, as our fingers turn sticky with ice cream and for some reason, to me, this is the most New York thing we find the whole night. CJ asks if any of us want to come into the city next week to protest the anti-gay laws in Russia. At the mention of next week, Sarah’s face falls and the subject is dropped.

And then we are running so we don’t miss the train, because we are just visitors after all. We come to see our own New Yorks. Sarah’s will be the magic of ice cream in Times Square at 11 o’clock at night. CJ’s will be the root of all evil (and therefore the best place to fight the man). Jackson’s will be for special occasions that are absolutely impossible to find anywhere else. And mine will be for surprises and mailmen who want to be opera singers.

On the train back, Jackson reads Into Thin Air and I read his Green Lantern comic. CJ and Sarah talk about animation styles.

Sarah drives us home from the train station. I lean against Jackson in the backseat. And maybe because it’s almost 1 AM or because we have so little time left, we don’t pretend Sarah isn’t leaving anymore. We say goodbye. CJ tells us they are doing a Wiccan ritual tomorrow and would we like her to wish for anything specific.

I mumble half-asleep in the backseat, “I wish that Sarah has a wonderful time in Denmark and makes incredible lifelong friends, and it changes her life.”
Nine Years Later

By Sang Bae

Hyun Jin Hong was the type of girl who knew what she wanted. At the age of four she knew she wanted to go to Cornell. She was the type of OCD perfectionist who used to smack my head for touching anything in her house or holding my chopsticks the wrong way. She used to scream bloody murder at me when I fed her goldfish a few hours early. I was scared shitless of her. But my mom was best friends with her mom, so we knew each other for a very long time.

Thinking back to all those years, I realize that Hyun Jin was my first friend. Even though I was this awkwardly shy boy who never spoke to anyone, she at least made the effort, in her own special way, to get along with me. I like to think that every head smack or nagging remark was a sign of her caring for me as a friend, as no one else in my apartment wanted to be friends with me. I eventually swallowed my fear and warmed up to Hyun Jin's company.

We used to spend a lot of time together in the car, driving to places all over the Korean countryside. My mom used to tell me years later that I would always bring some crayons and a notebook while Hyun Jin brought a book to read. She would always get bored with the book and watch me draw, crinkling her nose at the way the crayons sometimes melted onto the upholstery. She would eventually demand that I draw things in my notebook, either jabbing a finger at something outside or using her hands to describe an animal. I think that was the first time I ever saw her smile in the millions of pictures my mom took of us.

Even after leafing through every photo years later, I couldn't remember much. I vaguely remembered going to Lotte World with her multiple times. From what I could gather, she would drag me to every ride involving suspension cords and roller coasters, have her merry way, and I would be covered in snot and tears by the time the day was over. Every once in a while, I dragged her to take the World Monorail. We always watched the view of Seokchon Lake as the train snaked along the island. Our families took the time to visit the lake during the lake's Cherry Blossom Festival every year. Hyun Jin and I used to race across the crowds as pink blossoms gently drifted towards the ground.

These memories never lasted very long. At the age of five, I moved to New Jersey to chase the American Dream. My mom was still friends with her mom, but Hyun Jin and I grew apart over the years. I didn't see her again for a long time.

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During the sticky month of July, nine years later, my mother sent me back to Korea to live with my grandparents. I used to enjoy those mornings either glued to the television screen, helping around the house or watering the hundreds of plants in the apartment, as I had nothing better to do at the time. Every once in a while, I would go grocery shopping with my grandma or play Go with my grandpa.

July passed by and summer vacation officially ended in Korea. Only three days before August, my mom wanted me to go to school for a few days for some reason. So Grandpa took me to the train station, where I met Mrs. Hong for the first time in years. She looked the same as in the pictures, with her petite face without a single blemish and her hair curled up complete with the same wire-frame glasses. "Oh my god, look how big you've gotten! I was so excited that I just had to take a train to come and pick you up! C'mon and grab your bags. My daughter is so excited to meet you!"

I felt some twist in my stomach at the mention of her. Even to this day, my heart races whenever I meet someone after a long time passes by. It's one thing to meet your grandmother or Mrs. Hong after a long time--adults hardly change. But nine years felt like an eternity for me, and who knew what an eternity could do to a five-year-old girl? Was she going to remember me after all these years? What did she look like? Did she already hate me for moving away? Was I supposed to bring flowers? Were my clothes metro-sexually Korean enough for her tastes? Should I just act like myself? What was I supposed to start the conversation with? Should I pretend to flirt with her just to break the tension? Should I kiss her to have her slap me? Why did I think about kissing her? This conflict was mostly internal, and I didn't dwell on these questions for too long. Still, I saw Mrs. Hong give me an odd look as the train rumbled into Seoul Station.

We took a very short bus ride to their apartment complex and ascended to the fifteenth floor. I honestly don't remember where. It was 3:00. Hyun Jin wasn't supposed to come home for another hour. I sat on the couch in the living room awkwardly staring at the Matryoshka dolls on the top of a wooden porcelain cabinet. Mrs. Hong took me to the guest room shortly after an
especially long staring contest with the dolls. "Iris is so excited about meeting you. She's been talking about you all week."

"Iris? Is that Hyun Jin's new name?"

"Oh that was your mother's American name when we were kids. You should think of changing your name too. It'll be such an advantage when you apply for colleges."

Mrs. Hong offered me a tour of Hyun Jin's room right across from mine, but I declined--it was hard enough for me to step inside a girl's house, let alone inside her own room. I unpacked my bags before flopping on top of the futon. There was a window looking down at the cityscape, but so on I got bored.

Despite my better judgment, I got up to explore the house, beginning with the room right across from mine.

It was very...neat. Bare walls with crisp yellow wallpaper were neatly matched with a neat desk and a neat stack of supplies neatly organized into neat separate categories. The only thing slightly ruffled was the bed, which didn't look like it had been used in a while. The hardwood floor matched well with the white ceiling, and I couldn't help but wish my room was this clean sometimes. I noticed something thin and pink dangling underneath the bed. I reached down to pick it up, failing to hear the apartment bell ring and footsteps thumping towards this room. I immediately blushed to see that this dangling string was actually a sports bra. Just when I was about to drop it, I saw Iris staring at me at the foot of the door.

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She was a few inches taller than me, with delicate eyelashes and a gently curving nose. Her black hair, highlighted with brown streaks, fell down her slender shoulders, which were draped by a navy blue blazer. Her skirt fit nicely along her body. I only noticed this a little bit later, though. At the moment, I was caught in a woman's room with a pink bra.

"What are you doing in my room?"

"W-wait! This isn't w-what it looks like! I can explain."

"I don't want to hear it."

There was a long silence after that. We had spent nine years apart, gone from each other's lives, and a piece of elastic cloth completely ruined the moment. Not that I would have made it any less awkward.

"So, uhh, how you been?" I asked, dropping the bra on the ground. "Did you miss me?"

"Not particularly."

"Your mom made it seem like you were excited to see me."

"She exaggerates everything."

More silence. She walked towards me to hug me.

"Of course I missed you...But can you please get out of my room?"

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It was already nighttime by the time I unpacked all my things. The city felt like a chain of glow sticks, lighting everything with neon signs and streetlamps. Instead of dinner at the house, the family invited me over to a restaurant a few blocks away. After an hour of small talk over steamed crab and noodles, Mr. and Mrs. Hong went home for the night. Iris and I walked over to a local coffee chain. We'd been chatting for a few hours by that point.

"So do you do anything for fun?"

"Well...I always wanted to be a topologist specializing in architecture."

"Topologist?"

"You know, the study of shapes using math?"

"...No seriously, what do you do for fun around here?"

"That's...what I do for fun." Her eyes sagged and her voice softened as she said this.

"You're telling me that you're more interested in reading math textbooks than hanging out with friends?"

Iris paused for a brief moment to watch cars speed by the street. I remember her hands wrapped tightly along each other as she began to speak.

"I'm good at math. I can memorize formulas and derive them faster than anyone in my school. I've even entered national competitions and won a few of them. I'm good at math. I can memorize formulas and derive them faster than anyone in my school. I've even entered national competitions and won a few of them." She looked down for a moment before looking at me.

"My family wants a better future for me. I've always thought I enjoyed math, but I really don't. But it's not important whether I enjoy math or not. There's only so many spots for scholarships at the top universities, and I need to be the best at something to earn that chance. My parents think I have that potential..." She laughed harshly before continuing. "I was so good at doing those math problems that I was sent to a private school an hour away under a full scholarship. I go to a cram school for seven hours after school and I come home at twelve midnight. All my old friends are in cram schools every day. I'm too busy to make new ones, and I need to study for five AP classes every single moment of my life... Do you honestly think that I have 'fun'?"
I didn't know how to respond. I really didn't. I immediately felt guilty for even asking that question, watching her tired face come close to tears. "Look...Hyun Jin--if you don't mind me calling you that. I absolutely suck at being Korean. I don't go to cram schools for seven hours or get 2400 on my SATs. I skipped assignments, failed tests, got yelled at by teachers, blew off essays, and never went past Algebra 2. I hate reading math textbooks." I stopped to look up at Hyun Jin's face, which seemed to tilt in some sort of expression. I continued. "Remember when we were kids, when you always wanted me to draw something?"

"N-not really...but I do recall my mom showing me your art. You're really good at it."

"Sure, I have something I'm 'good' at...kind of. But I continue to improve as an artist because I actually enjoy doing that. I like seeing the expression on a person's face when I show them something I created with my own two hands. I can't weave a ball of yarn or hammer in a bunch of metal, but I can at least brighten up someone's day with these two clumsy lumps of flesh." I was at least glad to see her smile at that last sentence. "All I want to say is that I work hard at something that I truly believe in. I want to continue what I enjoy doing, and my parents aren't going to tell otherwise."

I saw Hyun Jin's smile grow just a little bit.

"I don't know my own future and you don't either. You're missing the best times of your youth, missing out on just having fun for once. I can't tell you how to shape your future. But we have three days left before I have to strap on a uniform and go down to school with you...Want to catch a late night movie?"

Hyun Jin started to laugh, cracking up with a few tears emerging."Y-you remind me of one of those guys in a drama. Except a lot less handsome and just as sweet. It's really surreal."

"Do you really think that? You sure know how to hurt a guy...you still up for it?"

"Sure! Why not? Hey, let me show you a few places around the city tomorrow! I'll cancel plans."

And that's how we became friends nine years later.
The Only One
By Gillian Goodman

If I ran, I could have caught him before he left. I knew he must have been sitting by the door, long arms draped over the back of his chair. \textit{I should go kiss him goodbye}, I thought. \textit{We are two people who are dating, and people who are dating kiss each other goodbye}. I remained frozen in the hallway, eyes wide and alert to any possible dangers. My fingernails dug crescent moons into my palm, and I bit down on my bottom lip. \textit{Gillian, you are too old for this shit}. I stood like that, not moving or breathing, for years, watching glaciers creep past me mockingly. Only when I heard the door around the corner swing open and close did I unclench my fists, knowing he was safely on his way home and that the situation was out of my hands.

I once confided in my friend at summer camp, on one of those nights where your secrets tumble out like copper coins from an old purse, “It’s like if everyone you knew loved reading math textbooks, cover to cover. And that’s, like, the normal thing to do. Except that you have zero interest in math textbooks. In fact, they kind of make you nervous and uncomfortable. That’s how I feel about kissing boys.” And it was true: I loved the chase, loved the electric feeling of two timid hands brushing on a banister or under a table. But once mutual feelings were acknowledged and further physical engagement was expected, I lost interest. I became frozen, unresponsive, and try as I might I could never kiss them goodbye. I left a parade of puppy-hearted boys in my wake, un kissed and empty handed.

I never wanted to be a heartbreaker and hated it when my parents playfully teased me about it. I desperately wanted to understand my aversion. It didn’t make sense. Spenser was beautiful, with high cheekbones and strong hands, and I knew he wouldn’t hurt me. In fact, he treated me like a bird, stroking my hair and speaking softly. He would tell me about his favorite playwrights and we would sing duets, and life was easy with him. But I still couldn’t kiss him.

One night, while waiting for my parents to pick me up from singing practice, I confessed my sins to another member of our all-girl group. I told her how I didn’t understand why I was so unhappy, and how I desperately wanted to be able to kiss him like it was nothing, like I knew I should. I let a great wealth of pent-up confusion and angst pour over her as we began to walk to our respective rides. She stopped me when we were about twenty yards from the cars and looked at me timidly. She said, very slowly, that maybe I would feel better if I went on a date with her instead. I felt like someone had punched me in the chest, and I burst out “YES!” without thinking. We both stood, stunned in the cold by our own bravery, as two matching grins spread over our faces. I can’t remember a thing about the ride back, except that by the time I got home, my face ached from smiling.

She was a year older than me, tall for her age and pale, with dark eyes and dilated pupils. She was a dancer, with long arms and legs that she held carefully, like fine china. Freckles settled gently on her round cheeks, and I always thought they made her look younger than she was. Her hair was pink when I met her. It was blue by the fall. It was black when I kissed her first, and cropped close to her head by the time we broke up.

I was entranced by her from the moment I met her. She seemed impossibly beautiful, and too regal to live in this time of smog and cars and politicians. Her hands were always cool, and I used to play with her rings as an excuse to feel her fingers. I had never thought of her as anything other than the
cool, older girl, the beautiful one who had it all together. But now it made sense. It wasn’t my fault that things never worked out with Spenser or Jordan or Joe or Brett! It was the perfect scenario; I had a beautiful girlfriend and a cleansed conscience. It was hard telling Spenser, the two of us perched on a windowsill during a break between classes, but I had to do it. I couldn’t pretend that her touch didn’t send shivers down my spine in a way his never did. I was doing him a service, really.

We were in love with being in love, Julia and I. We wrote each other poems and sent mixtapes and had dreamy dress-up movie nights where our legs touched under the blankets. Neither of us had had a girlfriend before, and we were in love with our stereotypes as well. Her hair was buzzed and I wore high heels, and we both had jean jackets with protest pins. We sang together in an all-girls folk group, and we would close our eyes and sing and sway, and nothing made us happier.

Even though she was older and taller and about to go to college, I was bolder and louder and I kissed her first. She had a softness to her, in the lines of her hips and tone of her voice and the feel of her touch. She was kind, and mild mannered, but she laughed at all my rude jokes. I remember I gave her cheap plastic handcuffs one Valentine’s Day, and she laughed her musical laugh like it was the cleverest prank ever pulled. She called everyone dude, and never minded that she was a few decades too late. It all seemed so easy, we almost felt cheated. We never got to play the brave heroes battling a wave of bigotry with the strength of our love. After a brief weekend of fallout from friends who hadn’t seen it coming, everyone accepted us without question. We were sweet and shy and easy to swallow, and no one made any fuss.

I loved her parents: her wild-haired Brazilian mother, who chirped with delight when she discovered my voracious appetite. “Julia is so picky,” she would coo in her soft accent, “perhaps your good habits will rub off on her.” I would run to hug her father when he got home from work, and learned to recognize the sound of his heavy footsteps. He was tall and soft spoken, just like Julia, and watching them together was like some beautiful movie-musical. They let me stay in their golden wooden house that summer, and always let Julia and me sleep in the same room. Whether they were confused or conflicted or content, I’ll never know, but they never once offered me a guest bed. They had no cause for worry: it took me a full hour of whispered forehead-to-forehead conversation to work up the nerve to kiss her for the first time, and it never went too much farther than that. She was timid and I never wanted anything more.

I don’t think I’ll ever know if I was drunk on summertime and the freckles on her lips, or if I really loved her. She was my best friend, and sometimes in the dark of her bedroom I trailed kisses on her neck and told her about my dreams. I think it was more for her, but she was never forthcoming about things like that. All I know is in the fall, after I helped her pack and kissed her goodbye, she went to college and I stayed behind. And after a few months of late night phone calls and drunk I miss you texts and weekly check-ins, I forgot the shape of her nose. Did she have three earrings on the left, or right? Would she love the new Tamora Pierce book, or think it a betrayal of the original series? And then, gradually, traitorously, my fickle teenage heart began to search for another chase. I called her late one night and we promised to stay in touch, and I told people it was mutual. I still call her sometimes. She’s growing her hair out now and has it bleached a peachy-blond. She dropped out of college and is living a life of poetry and mystery in the city, and still calls everyone dude. I have since become a big supporter of the “kissing boys” phenomenon; they’re no longer math textbooks to me. I read Cosmo and wink at waiters, and she has come out to all her friends, and we have grown apart. But there are still nights when I want her to call me and read me stories until I fall asleep. I’ve never found anyone as soft as her, and I miss her, some days.
One of a Kind
By Jazmine Figueroa

It wasn’t like I didn’t have friends, because that wasn’t the problem; I had a ton of friends but Kim was different. She wasn’t too smart, too sassy, or too neat -- all the things people had always hated about me. Kim was the most generous person I had ever met. The difference between the people I called my friends and Kim was that she understood me in ways no one else was able to. I was loud, energetic, but also shy and self-conscious. Sitting or walking anywhere alone was almost always impossible for me, and she never judged me. Our discussion based classes didn’t always work for me because I didn’t want my classmates to think I was dumb. No one really understood any of those things, they just thought I had “issues.” She understood it all.

When she left for the weekend, I was never the same. I spent most of my time in my dorm room. It never occurred to me why I locked myself away, I just always did. She’d only be gone for two days, but in my mind years passed before she’d come back. I’d leave my room, walk to her door and turn the knob only to find that it was locked because she had left for the weekend. It wasn’t until she returned and I was no longer locked away that I would realize how much I had missed her in that short period of time. I would walk to her door and turn the knob to once again find an unlocked door. Her room was messy, and mine was always clean; I wish I understood why I liked hers more.

We became so close that knocking simply lost all its meaning. I walk into the room where clothing consumes her tiled floor. I am taken aback by the smell of the week-old Chef Boyardee spaghetti and meatballs that were sitting in a bowl on her desk. Piles of papers and books casually float around her desk, making it almost impossible to see. Her wall is jam-packed with the same pictures I see every morning. Some pictures are ripped at the edges; faces of friends who aren’t important anymore have been replaced by the off-white paint that occupied the other 75% of her walls. The room is semi-dark, but the sun is slowly creeping through the same burgundy curtains she’s had since sophomore year. I walk toward them to open them and light up the whole room, but in the process crash into a side table I had forgotten existed. When I finally make it to the window and open the curtain, the sun consumes the room. I sit on her bed and take in the sight in front of me. I try to remember this moment, the sheets, the curtains, her Justin Bieber blanket, and the smell of old pasta because I understand one day it’ll all be gone. My eyes begin to water, and my heart begins to pound faster as I let my emotions get the best of me. It used to feel like we had so much time together, at times it felt like too much time, but now time has passed quicker than I thought it would. I realize her graduation is fifty days away and I become aware of the reason I love this room so much. I look at Justin Bieber to see him staring back at me, and I remember the first day she brought the blanket to the dorms. Back then I thought she was crazy; now I wish I had one of my own. I turn and see a picture of us from our first heads dinner together three years ago. I still remember how stressed out she was because it was her first big dinner with the head of school and she wanted to make a lasting impression and it’s then that I realize how much things have changed, how much we’ve changed.

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This is it. This is what every screaming girl in this arena has been waiting for: Usher’s appearance on that big blue stage 300 seats in front of us. All the lights are turned off except for one bright yellow light that’s hitting the stage. The arena suddenly becomes silent as teenagers hold their breath, waiting for the big moment. They all raise their hands in unison to their mouths to scream as the music begins to play. I can’t hear my own thoughts, all I can hear are the
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constant screams of “I love you Usher!” coming from the mouth of every person here tonight. I begin to stand up, trying to be a typical teenage fan swooning over Usher’s amazing dance moves and flawless charisma, when I feel my phone vibrate from the outside of the brown purse I’m carrying. I take it out to see three missed calls and two text messages. As I unlock my phone, I chuckle at the idea of being so important someone felt the need to call me three times until I open my messages to see what’s waiting inside.

“JAZMINE WHERE ARE YOU?! MOOSE. ANDRE. EXPELLED. CALL ME ASAP!!”

I stare at the brightly lit phone screen in front of me, unable to process the letters that are forming the words that are forming the sentences I was taught to read in the second grade. I reach behind me to find my seat to keep from losing my balance. I look up at Kim and she’s screaming her lungs out. Her hands are cupped around her mouth in a circular formation as if her screams are going to get heard over the thousands of screaming fans around us. Her cheeks are flushed, and there are three small droplets of sweat on her forehead. She notices me staring at her and turns towards me to say something witty, but stops when she realizes my hands are shaking. She takes the phone out of my hand and reads the same message I just finished reading. She looks down at me, then down at the phone and then back at me. I open my mouth to try and say something, but before I can speak she’s running down the steps into the crowd below us. I chase after her, getting some death stares in the process until she reaches her destination: the bathroom. It doesn’t take me long to realize she’s gone there to cry. I run inside and find her on the floor, her face covered by her hands, her knees pulled up to her chest. She removes her hands when she hears the door slam. Her cheeks are bright red and covered with black mascara. Her eyes are red and filled with tears. I make my way towards her and all I can do is hug her. She hugs me back as a single tear streams down my face. I want to be strong for her and for me, but I don’t feel as strong as I thought I was.

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It’s June 7th 2013, and I’m sitting on my bed with no sheets staring at the black and white polka dot dress hanging in front of me. Once I put this dress on, it all becomes real. Kim is really graduating, and I really won’t see her every morning. I decide not to put the dress on and instead walk into Kim’s room and see that she’s already put her dress on. She’s dressed in all white, her long blond hair curled up into a ponytail. She smiles at me, so I smile back trying to hide the pain in my eyes.

“How do I look?” she asks.

“Perfect,” is the only word I’m able to blurt out before I break down into tears.

“I should get going, but in just a few hours I’ll be a high school graduate, crazy right?”

“So crazy,” I say.

I walk back into my room and stare at the black and white polka dot dress for a little bit longer. Finally I take a deep breath, grab it off the hanger and slip it on. As I stare at myself in the mirror, I take another deep breath and tell myself that everything is going to be okay, but I know it’s not true.

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I walk through the door, turn to my left and peek into a room I once called my own, a room once filled to capacity with pictures and posters and unnecessary cheesy dorm decorations, but now it’s just empty. I walk inside towards the closet to find the One Tree Hill quote I had written on the inside of it: “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, day and night, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle, which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.” I go over the writing with my fingers, and it takes me back to the night I chose to write it. I never really knew why I picked that specific quote -- it always just seemed to speak to me. I look around at the bland walls and try to imagine what it looked like just a couple months before, but I can’t. It all just seems like a distant memory now. I walk outside into the hallway and see that Kim’s door is open. I begin to smile at the excitement of being able to see her until I notice the neon green sign on her door which reads “Welcome back Pixel!” It isn’t until then that I realize she won’t be moving back into that room today, or any other day. I find the courage deep down inside of me to walk into her room, because I know it’s the last time it’ll ever look this clean, this...boring. I walk inside and sit on her bed as I’ve always done in the past, except this time there is no Justin Bieber blanket on the edge of the bed, the window isn’t consumed by the same burgundy curtains she’d had since sophomore year. Her floor is empty, missing the huge piles of clothing I’m used to seeing. But her walls are what startle me the most. They are completely empty, not even a single piece of tape to show that they were once filled with irreplaceable memories. I place my head against the wall to see if our darkest secrets and regrets are still safe, only to come up empty. I close my eyes as I turn and face the wall to try and remember what it looked like when she lived in it. When I open them, the wall is once again filled with pictures. I look around the room to see it exactly how I remembered it: messy. I close my eyes and open them once more to find an empty room. I walk to the door, take one last look at a room I once loved more than my own, turn off the light and close her door for the very last time.
Lars and the Woods
By Luke Davoren

Our house phone rang during dinner. We let it go to voicemail and assumed the salesperson on the other line would hang up. But it wasn’t a sales call. The voice of my neighbor Lars boomed from the machine.

“Peter! Stacey! It’s incredible! Maret and I found a rattlesnake by Lake Alice. I have it in my car and I’m bringing it over.”

tick.

There was a long silence at the dinner table. My father looked up from his pasta, exchanged glances with my mother, and laughed to himself. Mom was less amused.

“He won’t be bringing a rattlesnake to my house,” she stated. We all agreed, but I secretly wanted to see what he would bring.

Fortunately for me, fifteen minutes later, Lars pulled his dusty Subaru into our driveway and produced a tied pillowcase out from the passenger seat. It spun and writhed with anger, and I could make out the body of the snake. He held it high and smiled, like a third grader showing off what he did in art class. Much to his disappointment, my parents never let him untie the bag. The snake left with Lars, and we never saw or heard from it again. The next time I saw Lars he told me he found a beaver dam in his lake, and he wanted me to take some pictures.

I think Lars might still believe he lives in Norway. Sometimes at dinner parties he gives toasts in Norwegian—or maybe it’s Swedish. I’m not sure because he speaks both. His children have Scandinavian names like Nils and Karl, he’s 78 years old and plays better soccer than any young American, and when he’s drunk he sings some foreign nation anthem. Whenever anyone throws a dinner party, Lars is always the first one called, although lack of an invitation would not stop him from attending.

“English has four times the words of Norwegian,” Lars always says. I’m pretty sure they don’t have a word for “trespassing,” because Lars definitely doesn’t understand it. He pops out of the woods behind my house a lot. He’ll knock on the door, say yes to coffee, and stay for dinner if he feels like it.

Last Christmas Lars found me after midnight mass. He was still dressed in a choir gown that just barely covered his enormous frame. Every person in the church did a double take at Lars; he had finally shaved his patchy gray beard and exposed the time punished skin underneath. Lars looked at me and smiled, showing me all of his teeth. As he approached he pulled down his choir gown and exposed a fresh six-inch scar that ran down the right side of his chest.

“Double bypass surgery,” he said with a smile. “I’ve never felt better!”

Since his surgery, Lars has made some style changes. He still wears his wool-knit hat, torn jeans, and hiking boots, but he no longer wears Christmas sweaters all year round. Instead he prefers plaid flannels, with the top four buttons undone to reveal his scar.

Lars fell in love with a three-legged golden retriever. He bought it off a breeder for $800 and then drove it to Denver to get a custom made prosthetic leg. To this, my parents rolled their eyes as Lars promised to tell us how the “fitting” went. We learned three days later from our answering machine that it went “satisfactorily,” and then a week later we learned that the prosthetic had fallen off somewhere on the Appalachian Trail during a hike. Lars left a message asking me to form a search party with him to find it. It was supposed to snow, and I wanted to use my skis, so I reluctantly agreed.

I arrive at the trailhead after lunch. Five inches of fresh powder cover the forest. The trees have already lost their leaves, leaving the wind hollow and muffled like a television on mute. And then there is Lars, balancing himself on a terrified sapling, beating his enormous boots into his skis. He turns around, sees me, and waves.

“I think Tessa lost her leg this way.” Lars points generally into the woods. Hearing her name, Tessa rushes from the woods to greet us. She limps and face plants every few steps, but she otherwise enjoys her relative freedom.

“You’re sure you want Tessa walking without her leg?” I ask.

“You’re a good girl Tessa! Aren’t you?” Lars violently pets Tessa’s back, then throws a stick into the woods for her to fetch.

“She’s really a magnificent dog,” he tells me like a cars salesman. “She’s beautiful.” Lars doesn’t see my concern for Tessa.

“Oh yes she is. I don’t know what it is about the golden retriever. But ever since I got Loaky, I’ve never wanted a different breed.” Tessa sprints back with the stick and Lars gives her another violent back rub.

Lars waits for me to kick my boots into my skis, and we are off to find the prosthetic. Lars’s size does not benefit his skiing technique. He skis clumsily and reluctantly and slowly. I wait for him patiently.

“Have you been to the lake recently?” he asks. “It froze over last week and the hockey has been incredible.”
Tessa carries a stick the size of a tree. It hits the back of my leg with every one of her strides.

“Nobody likes the woods in winter,” he continues. “But if you get over the cold it’s definitely the most pleasant.” Lars pushes forward slowly. His does not break his stare with Tessa.

“Back in Norway, we would play soccer and hockey in this weather. All you Americans thinks it’s too cold for soccer, but back in Norway we would play when it was much colder.”

I say I agree and there is some silence. I don’t want to intrude on Lars’s story.

“You know, Maret and I bought our house in Garrison because the hills look like the ones back home.” I should say something but I’m using all my oxygen climbing the increasingly steep trail.

“There’s something special about the land out here.”

“Definitely,” I choke out. Lars doesn’t seem to hear.

“I hope you love the woods as much as I do.”

“I do Lars.”

“That’s good. It’s really just incredible you know? When I bought this land back in 1956, I had hoped that everyone would use it. People deserve to experience this.” I nod but it doesn’t matter, he’s speaking to himself, not me.

“Back in Norway, we had a house and a lake.”

“Really?” I say. I have heard this story many times. Lars does not pick up on my sarcasm.

“It’s incredible really. I got lucky you know? The Nazis kicked us out of Norway. We moved to Sweden, and then I came here and it’s like I never left.”

Lars slows to a stop and scans the white velvet woods. There is only silence.

“Did Tessa lose it this way?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“Should we check?”

Lars hesitates. “No, It’s ok.” He pushes his skis forward and we continue on the trail. Tessa sprints behind us, limping, but easily keeping up. She runs with a smile, with her tongue flapping out the side of her mouth. It hits me that this search party isn’t for the purpose of finding the prosthetic. Lars starts a story about Yale and the Nazis and we continue up the mountain. Lars’s stories make me smile. Everyone believes he is crazy, but I know otherwise.
I am not afraid of spiders. I am not afraid of strangers. I can keep my calm around bees. I am not afraid of heights, small spaces, elevators, public speaking, or loud noises. I am not afraid of identity theft or car accidents or nuclear war. To me, these seem like things that can be avoided and therefore I can control them. As a child, I was never afraid of the dark or the old women next door. I am not afraid of natural disasters; when I lie awake in bed at night every sound is not a rapist or robber. I am not afraid of disappointing my parents (it seems as though I would have to work quite hard to do so). I am not afraid of dying alone, getting lost in the mountains and being eaten by lions, or hearing the word moist. But I am, embarrassingly, irrationally, inexplicably, and unalterably afraid of birds.

Specifically, I fear ground-level birds, the ones that, I am convinced, want nothing more than to sink their little beaks into my flesh over and over again. It’s not imagining such a thing that is troubling. I can sit here right now and write about it and not even flinch. But when I am in their presence, something inside of me freezes and I know that they are going to come after me. As a kid, I walked in wide circles around pigeons and seagulls on the beach.

Being a city kid, I saw pigeons all the time. I held my breath and watched them, waiting for any sign of movement, any sign that they were about to launch the grand attack plan in which all the birds of the world would descend upon me. When I was about seven, I tried to scare the birds back. I would chase them through Washington Square Park shouting, wishing I could feel as fearless as I pretended. Eventually I stopped because it didn’t make me feel any better.

When we moved to the suburbs, I was grateful that there would be no more pigeons. I was never afraid of a songbird perched on a high branch or a duck in the middle of a pond so I figured I would be safe from now on, except in the summer when we went to the beach.

But Westchester was not as bird-free as I would have hoped. My friend Amelia used to keep chickens, as her mother wanted them all to eat fresh eggs and live closer to nature. This was the sort of person Amelia’s mother was. Lisa let Amelia roam barefoot through Pleasantville and adopted wild cats to deal with their mice problem rather than call an exterminator.

The chickens lived in a coop in Amelia’s backyard. Out of all of my friends, it was agreed, that though Sophie had a tree house, Amelia’s backyard was the best, mostly because it extended over the wall into Hannah’s backyard, where there was a cool tree swing and the Welch’s trampoline. We were not friends with the Welches but often made use of their trampoline. The grass grew long and free, the trees had wide branches perfect for climbing, and whenever her brother was home from college he would set up a zipline that ran from the trees to the bottom of the sloping hill.

For me, Amelia’s backyard meant facing the chickens. The chickens couldn’t climb over the wall into Hannah’s backyard so we were safe there, but otherwise, when I roamed Amelia’s backyard I watched for them vigilantly. I would convince myself that it was crazy and the next time they came near me, I wouldn’t be afraid of them. Then one would advance and I would stop, unable to figure out which way to go to best avoid it. Then it would waddle off and I would tell myself that I had been ridiculous—this was a chicken. Why was I afraid of it? I would sit in her highest picnic chair or on the railing of the deck with my legs tucked under me (a sitting position I hated) nervously watching my three feathered foes trot around obliviously.
Chickens have a habit of always managing to be in your way. Amelia’s chickens blocked doorways, got stuck under chairs, and stood obliviously in places where they could be tripped over. Amelia, unafraid of chickens, would chase them away, her arms waving in the air like a maniac shouting, “Stupid chickens!”

At Amelia’s birthday parties the lot of us would freely migrate between the kitchen and the 2.5 backyards through the sliding glass door. Her mom kept reminding us to close the door behind ourselves so the chickens couldn’t get in. There were never group activities at Amelia’s parties other than cake so it seemed as if children were constantly streaming in and out of the house.

I was sitting at the kitchen table with Sophie, playing cards, and soon joined in reminding people to close the door behind them, but some of the other children were just so infuriatingly stupid, seemingly unable to follow such a simple instruction. Soon enough, in the kitchen was a speckled chicken, which of course had predictably and inconveniently chosen the moment when Lisa was out of the room to make its grand entrance.

I quickly tucked my legs under me and looked to Sophie, who made a half-hearted attempt to shoo the chicken away, but Sophie had never been of an aggressive nature and was inexperienced with chickens so it was what seemed like an eternity of waiting, an eternity frozen in fear, an eternity of watching this five-pound feathery, speckled beast with barely an ounce of common sense befuddle its way around Amelia’s den before Lisa came downstairs again and shooed it outside with one final reminder to please keep the door shut.

Once one of Amelia’s chickens pecked me. The experience should have made me less afraid of birds; after all, I had learned that the worst could happen and I would not die, but alas, I still made wide cautious circles around Amelia’s chickens (who have since, sadly, gone to meet their chicken maker) and held my breath when passing seagulls on the beach.

Once when heading towards the ocean with my mother, I paused, unable to walk past the seagull that was just sitting there, watching me. My mother called to me from ten feet away, safe on the other side, “Julia! Come on!” There was a pause, and then, “Are you scared of the seagull? That’s ridiculous!”

I took a deep breath and ran past it, watching it carefully, in case it made any sudden moves. It didn’t.

In the spring the geese that live at Nanahagen Pond have babies. Sometimes on the weekend, I ride my bike around the neighborhood, circle the lake a few times, up one street, down another, around the hill by the country club, that sort of thing. Sometimes I reach the lake and see a family of geese trotting across the path from the water to the woods or vice versa. My breath slows, I brake carefully, and wait for them to pass, still worrying that the momma goose might jump up and bite my ankles.

They always pass. The goslings are cute little mushroom fluffs with webbed feet. Their beaks are round and dull.

Normally fear is something I can control or at least rationalize. I was afraid of turning left out of my driveway when driving and not being able to see around the curve, so I made myself practice. Being scared of witches came and went (and then I befriended one but that’s another story). Being scared of those creepy guys at bus stations is rational. Besides, the bus station guys are avoidable and being in their presence doesn’t make me freeze up the way birds do.

I am aware that this is unreasonable. A number of times I have tried to rationally and logically talk myself out of it. Even when I am in the presence of a bird, I am aware of how silly it is, but that does not stop me from being afraid of them. I suppose that’s why they call it “irrational fear.” It’s not a paralyzing fear but it’s strong enough that it can control me, and I hate that something so irrational can control me. I never scream or panic—it’s a nice, secret fear—I just hold my breath and walk past slowly, so as not to startle my temporary captors.
Safe Haven  
By Sabrina Stanich

I stretch my legs out, flexing my feet under three layers of warmth. My toes push against the taut sheet as I pull the comforter towards my chest. It is thick between my fingers, and as I drape it over my body, it soothes me, instantly. It’s the color that your cheeks turn when your dad kisses you in public, the color of the streamers that decorated the handlebars of my training-wheel bike, the color of the vintage Sabrina movie poster (the original, of course, with Audrey Hepburn). It’s funny, of all the colors, my sister really is not a pink person. If I had to color-ify her, I’d probably go with navy. Not in a negative way—she’s just very serious, professional, commanding. Looking around her room, I smile at the irony of pink accents: a magenta lantern lamp, my stolen movie poster, a slouchy monogrammed chair, a flowered headband box, a rosy corkboard. The paint on the walls has faded so that it’s almost an off-white, but if you look really closely, you can tell that it, too, was once pink. I always wondered why she decorated it so…girly. She was never one for makeup or fashion—she prefers Margaret Thatcher to Bobbi Brown any day. I reach for her two teddy bears, Cranberry and Oatmeal, and prop them up next to me as I continue writing. They smell like lavender and Chanel N. 5 and old cashmere sweaters. I close my eyes, clenching tightly to Cranberry and smelling my sister.

A placard of Barack Obama stares at me from across the room, a campaign clipping promoting Change. Next to him sits a family tree of the English monarchy, a crimson and white University of Chicago pennant, scattered postcards from Provence and Scandinavia, and a photograph of Thomas Jefferson captioned, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” I smile as my eyes settle upon her bookshelf. Floor to ceiling, Leading Ladies in History hugs Invisible Man, The Giver wedged in between Too Big to Fail and Anne of Green Gables. Harry Potter embraces Nancy Drew, and Trixie Beldon meets the Hardy Boys. I love that they are almost all hardcover, because they make that firm sound when you shut them. They reek of aged yellow paper, SAT vocabulary words and Maddy’s pedantic mind.

The fireplace across from her desk has never been used, though for years it was embellished with surplus J. Crew clothing and homeless history books. Now, the black brick gapes at me, harsh and empty.

I tuck the comforter under my chin, recalling the night I snuck into her room to have a secret sleepover. It was about eleven o’clock, and my parents had told us it was bedtime so they kissed us both goodnight in our separate rooms, and told us to stay put. Thirty seconds later, I perched myself at the edge of my bed listening to their footsteps against the creaky hallway floors, and staring at my clock. After exactly twelve minutes, I was sure they were asleep, so I spidermanned down my hall and crawled into my sister’s room. I remember tripping as I tried hoisting myself onto the bed. My leg scraped the wooden side and I would have started crying if Maddy hadn’t burst into giggles. We must have laughed about it for at least ten minutes, constantly shushing each other and slapping our hands over our mouths. We buried ourselves under the pink blankets, inviting Cranberry and Oatmeal to our sleepover too. I still remember what I was wearing—my favorite 3rd grade summer pajamas from the Gap. Three small palm trees decorated the tank top, with light green spaghetti straps, and the boxers were adorned with scattered palm trees to match. I remember because Maddy wore her matching set.

Sitting on this bed, I remember her showing me her first bra and telling me that middle school is so much better than fourth grade. And there she stands getting ready for her first day of high school, as I sit on the bed, eagerly rating each outfit she tries on. I told her to strut like Beyoncé on our make-shift catwalk, our creaky wooden hallway, and she rolled her eyes in discomfort, saying she “couldn’t do it.” After a few minutes of confidence boosting, Maddy and I pranced around her room karaokeing to “Love on Top,” swinging our nonexistent hips and giggling until our stomachs hurt.

I can still feel the rush of excitement that rippled through my body when she did her seasonal “closet clean.” This was code for free new clothing for moi. But as we both stopped growing and settled into our various sizes, the closet clean and the excitement that followed became semi-annual, and now it simply fails to exist. I can still see her crumpled on the floor in total hysterics, incoherently whimpering how Ms. Woods told her she “wouldn’t get into college.” I remember how I burst out laughing even in the midst of her manic breakdown because of all the people in the world, there was no way in hell that Madeleine Stanich wasn’t getting into college. And I can smell the fresh rain dripping from her hair as she sits with legs folded, criss-cross apple-sauce style, her cheeks flushing as she tells the story of her first kiss. And I remember our 46,983rd
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secret sleepover, the night before she left for college. I had school the next day, but we stayed up until sunrise, whispering, giggling and crying the entire night.

My dad likes to keep her door closed, but I like it open. Because even if she isn’t actually here, I can feel her presence as I pass her room when the door is ajar. Academia and intellect wander into the hall, warmth and support radiate from within. So, I settle down in her sheets and flip through my Euro textbook because I can envision her standing just a foot away, lecturing me about the Protestant Reformation. And even though that natural rush of defensive aggravation ripples through me as she preaches about Martin Luther, I am desperate to hear her condescending voice. Desperate to inhale the wealth of knowledge and insight that she emanates.

I would never admit this to her because she would blush and reject my compliment, even though she knows that she is brilliant. Her posters and photographs confirm it; each gavel congratulating her on Best Delegate that lines the top of her bookshelf is physical validation of her intelligence. Every political quotation and historical timeline reinforces her passion for politics and love of international diplomacy. It’s funny, because she would never outright acknowledge her academic success, yet she feels the constant need to prove it to everyone around her, including herself.

I guess that I am sort of similar in that way. I’ve always been the more social of the two of us. I’ve always had friends to go out with on the weekends, people to sit with at lunch, boys to text during family dinners. Glossy disposable camera pictures cover every inch of the giant corkboard above my bed—the photobooth from prom, laughing in the McKnight room, July sleepovers, Sushi Mike dinners, April parties. It is a constant reminder that I have friends, that people like me. It is the last snapshot I see falling asleep and the first image I wake up to. It makes me feel wanted, appreciated, loved.

I find it ironic because to a large degree, it seems that the things that we are the most comfortable with are simultaneously our greatest insecurities. I can’t count the number of days and nights when I feel rejected, lonely, and left out. All it takes is an Instagram upload or Snapchat, and the irrational fear that my friends actually hate me creeps in. And yes, maybe excessive estrogen levels are to blame, but it is more than that. Because the feeling happens more than I’d like to admit, and it is in those moments, when I look to my wall and tell myself that I have friends, that I am loved, that I am wanted. I make up excuses, sometimes I cry, and then I move on.

I think it’s the same way for Maddy, with all the Thomas Jefferson and Barack Obama. They tell her what she wants to hear, what she wants to believe about herself. And as I discovered this, I realize now more than ever, why Maddy’s room is so appealing. It provides me with an infinite level of comfort, love and affection. She will never leave me. No matter how many times I spill my midnight bowl of cereal on her sheets or ruin her unworn birthday presents or steal her purple liqui-gel pens, she will always be there. I leave my phone in my room when I venture into hers. Exclusive Facebook pictures can’t hurt me when it’s just me and all her books.

So I snuggle up in her bed and let the Sound of Music soundtrack put me to sleep. But as I close my eyes, Julie Andrews fades out and instead, I hear Maddy’s tone-deaf attempt at “The Hills Are Alive.” I giggle softly to myself, biting my bottom lip from crying. My hand grips the pillow tighter, my mind flooding with memories as lavender and old cashmere sweaters and Chanel N.5 permeate my senses. I shut my eyes tighter, so the tears won’t escape, and I imagine her lying next to me as I fall asleep tonight, Cranberry in one arm, and Oatmeal in the other.
The silky road turned to gravel. The slightest recognizable crunch beneath the Land Cruiser’s hot, searing rubber refreshed memories and excitement grew within me. I had spent every summer of my whole life here, routinely traveling down Daniels Lane, each time rolling down the car windows with perfect timing, just before we turned onto our road of bunny paths and salty air. A breeze occupied the Land Cruiser, grainy and filled with spunk. And then all shades of Labrador Retrievers raced to stick each nose and tongue out into the crisp wind. Finally, the long year filled with taxing elementary school work was over. We would pull up to the Rosen house, a never-ending shell of shingle. The natural gray stain of the shingles matched many other homes in Sagaponack. However, the warmth and character on the inside of the shingled shell seemed utopian to me at the young age of six. I could finally run into the open arms of all nine of my cousins.

I ran through the gates, past the garden of infinite basil and thyme and then the hot tub with an everlasting roll of bubbles. In the pool I would find my cousins afloat noodles and swimmy diapers, reunited each summer. By now my shoes had been thrown to the side and I could feel the scratchy sand in between my toes as I ran to jump in. Listening to the unmistakable sand in between my toes as I ran to jump in. Listening to the unmistakable sound of each ocean wave breaking in the background, I knew I was home at last. Another blissful summer had begun.

The house was like Mary Poppins’ bag, limitless. A family of nineteen under one roof. As we nervously made our way up the dangerously suspended stairs, we weren’t allowed to let go of the railing. God forbid we run right from the pool and slip through the stairs through the gaping cracks. Every head returned to the same pillow each year. The first morning was always the best feeling to wake up to. Every cousin awake at the crack of dawn scurried down to the playroom, eager to awaken the VHS. Shoulder to shoulder we sat on the damp couch, air kissed by salt water billowing through the screen door. Anticipating the race to the endless dining table for breakfast, we disregarded the video on repeat and kept our attention glued to the door, waiting for Poppy to return with freshly baked donuts, velvety muffins, and fuzzy farm stand peaches.

Ready to take on the day, each one of us suited up in bathing suits, and with fluorescent neon goggles in hand, we made our way down the path to the beach. As we ran through the hedges on the wooded walk, our little feet left prints behind. Bunnies scurried to the side and the parents in tow scolded us to stop running. They were always afraid of the splinters that our Play-Doh feet would attract. Suddenly we were transported into the swaying dunes of Sagaponack. We would return covered in a layer of sand and race to the pool to rinse off. But the day had just begun. Those gray shingles vaulted ceaseless fun inside. Tunnels of toys, dances to Backstreet Boys, bonfires of chocolate kisses and marshmallow fingers, and endless love. Secure within the gray shingled shell of Rosens.

I looked forward to each summer I had with my cousins. They lived far away and I didn’t get to see them much. We would choreograph dances and perform shows in our gracious living room. Fly kites and run like birds up and down the beach—though as a little kid, I always felt like a bit of an outsider. They all had the same last name, Rosen, and my last name was Lieber. My mom was the only girl out of the four siblings. At the time, I felt that it was necessary to declare my new and improved last name as Rosen-Lieber in order to fit in with the pack.

Usually, one of my cousins, Hannah, and I would adventure out into the bushes of the driveway and brave our way through the vines. The height of the
overgrown greens was just perfect so that our heads were concealed in this enchanting forest and left our braids untouched. We forged new paths each summer, but each began with last year’s trail. We dragged beach chairs in with us and set them down to do cartwheels in the grassy opening. In a good year, blackberries and raspberries were plentiful and we could pile them into our mouths, and then extra containers. Grandma loved to make fresh jam with the berries we collected and sometimes she would pull out the stepstool in the kitchen and let us stir the pot.

Summers rolled by for six more years. I found myself at the end of August once more. I awoke naturally to the cheery birds and my feet searched for the warm chestnut floors. A layer of salty dew snuck inside and grabbed for each foot leaving a gluey residue in between each step. When I arrived for breakfast all the pastries were present, but the loving vibes were nowhere to be found. Just a ruffled newspaper lay amidst my family’s silence at the table. I grabbed for the paper and each head seemed to turn away. There it was, the real estate listing. Picture and description included, convincing you to buy our house and we’ll throw in some memories at no extra cost. What a deal.

Sold within a short period of time, the Rosen Headquarters vanished. Summers would never be the same and “replacement” beach houses could not compare. As time moves on, I’ve come to realize that our family has lost not only the house, but also the connection. Each summer in Sagaponack had kept our family so tight and the cousins so close. We nine cousins were inseparable at the time. Memories were made every day and each year left me sobbing when we departed at the end of summer. When the house was sold, each family began to grow and develop, but only in separate ways. The complete family can be found maybe once a year nowadays and would never consider vacationing together once more. As I grow older, I realize that ignorance was bliss. Things were not as perfect as they seemed and our biggest family problem was not that we didn’t have enough goggles for each cousin. I still wish for a connection to bring us back and to rekindle the bond that I thought previously existed. You really don’t know what you have until it’s gone.
I ignored the conversation around me by watching the leaves dance to the ground out the window. My parents and twin sister were discussing the next couple of years and I wanted nothing to do with it–planning this far in advance stresses me out. “I want to go to boarding school,” Mackenzie blurted out. Suddenly I was no longer interested in the ballet outside.

“EXCUSE ME,” I screamed, not understanding why she would want to leave after sophomore year.

“Well, if you’re really serious about this, we have to start looking at schools as soon as possible,” my mother added. My eyes began to swell up and my cheeks stung more and more as each briny drop slid down them. I pushed my seat away from the table so that I didn’t make a fool of myself as I sprinted out of the room.

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Three months later, Mackenzie and I were enjoying our favorite concoction of cream cheese and bacon and maple syrup at breakfast when we were interrupted by my mother’s screams. “TODAY’S THE DAY! IT’S NINE AM MACKENZIE! CHECK YOUR EMAIL!” Ugh. I completely forgot. In a matter of seconds the sounds around me went from the clicking of keys to virtual fireworks to shrieks from my mother and father. I didn’t even turn to look at the computer screen— I already knew that she was accepted and would be leaving me for Virginia. My heavy footsteps were followed by the slam of my bedroom door and I was finally alone. I fell onto my bed and began to weep. I don’t want to be alone.

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The thick summer breeze warmed the cold air that my grandfather always managed to bring with him. The song of the crickets around us was much louder than the conversation at the dinner table. “You two really need to start doing things that matter,” he said as he looked at my sister and me.

“What does that even mean?” I asked halfheartedly. I knew the insult was coming.

“All you two do over the summer is go to Long Island and sit at the country club and relax with your friends and none of it is important. It’s all so trivial.”

“That’s not true!” Mackenzie added. “We volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club for four hours every morning. How can you say that that has no value?”

“Get a job that pays, GO somewhere far away and make a difference, DO something that you’re afraid of, TRY something new. I don’t care as long as it’s not on Long Island,” he argued. None of this surprised me. I like living in my bubble. I like being surrounded by familiar faces and doing things that I know how to do. I don’t want to step out of my comfort zone.

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“My NOLS trip seriously changed my life,” Emily blabbed. I rolled my eyes because I had heard this about a thousand times. I couldn’t possibly understand how she of all people could love a National Outdoor Leadership School excursion, or how river rafting and hiking were that life changing. “I want to do another one this summer,” she continued. “NOLS trips are too long, I can’t be gone for an entire month again so maybe I’ll do Outward Bound.” I nodded my head and pretended to be interested. “Do you want to come with me?”
“Yeah, maybe,” I responded, not fully aware of what I had just committed to.

If Emily can do it then so can I. We opened my computer and began looking at the Outward Bound website. We discovered an eight-day sea kayaking trip on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. What the hell are we looking at? Sea kayaking? Really? The end of the course description read: “Through these experiences they will discover their true potential, build trust, physical fitness, confidence, leadership skills, initiative and compassion. No prior experience is necessary.”

When I got home that night, I showed my father the research we had done that day.

“Are you sure that you want to do this?”

“I don’t know. I guess so, yeah.”

“I’m really proud of you, Emma,” he replied. And honestly, I was proud of myself too. I needed to learn how to be more independent now that my sister would be gone. We pressed submit and that was that.

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Summer came faster than my decision to go on the trip and before I knew it, my father and I were venturing out to Eastern Mountain Sports with my packing list. “One Crazy-Creek Chair,” my dad read aloud.

“You say that like I know what to look for,” I responded.

“Two pairs of long nylon pants. Necessary because of bugs.” Bugs? Is this a joke? My dad pointed to a pair of pants that zipped off into shorts, “These are exactly what you want, Em. They’ll be so great for when it gets hot because then you can just unzip!” I began to laugh hysterically. There’s no way that I will be caught dead in those pants. I left the store with two pairs.

Less than a week later, I was taking my last shower and saying my last goodbyes to my family. Jenna, Emily and I found ourselves on a tiny plane with only nine rows of seats heading to New Bern, North Carolina. When we landed, we were greeted by a woman named Susan. Her hair rested on top of her head in a bun and clearly hadn’t been washed in a few days. I can just hear my mom saying crunchy granola. That’s how she’d describe her. We were told that we should get comfortable and wait here for the rest of the group to land. This was by far the smallest airport I’d ever been in. There was one gate, one line for security, two bathrooms, and one small shop to buy rotten food. Where the hell are we? The three of us sat down next to the only other girl there. She has a Vera Bradley duffel! Normality!! Her name was Natalie, and I soon learned that she, like me, had a twin sister who was her best friend. She was from Mississippi, and she loved country music. After three hours of small talk with the other kids around us, we boarded the bus and headed to the water. Where are we? It was hot and the air was sticky and the water that we were given in our designated Nalgene bottles smelled like sewage.

On the bus, we still had access to our cellphones. My phone buzzed in my lap to reveal a text message from my sister. It was a picture of her at home with my best friend, Sophie. They were smiling and laughing and the message that came along with it read “we miss you, have fun!” While I wanted to respond and tell them everything about the people I had met and our plans for the trip, I couldn’t. I missed my family too much already and talking to them only made it worse. I showed Natalie the picture that Mackenzie had sent me. “I sent one like that to Kaela yesterday when she left for her trip,” Natalie laughed. We continued talking about our lives and our sisters. She distracted me from missing my family, and she didn’t seem nervous for the trip at all. I admired that.

When we stepped off the bus, reality slapped me in the face. Eight kayaks were lined up on the ground next to a giant pile of paddles and spray skirts and life vests. Waiting for us at the landing were our two guides Nat and Heather. Holy crunchy granola. Nat stood at around six feet tall, with blonde hair, wearing sports sunglasses, a baseball cap, surf shorts, and those weird water shoes that look like toe socks. Heather was about a foot shorter, with brown curly hair, sunglasses, and crocs. She clearly hasn’t shaved her legs in months. Nat began to give a speech about this experience as a whole, mentioning that it was going to be very tough both physically and mentally, and that we’d have to decide whether we would embrace it or endure it. Definitely endure. Heather began to explain what was inside our “personal kit,” which was basically a large mesh bag filled with what we would need for the next eight days. After showing us how our dry bags worked, she picked up a small blue bag that resembled the sleeping bag. “This is your solo kit which is, well, exactly what it sounds like.” Solo? No one mentioned anything about a solo. A kid named Calvin asked when we would be doing our “solo” and Heather told us that it wouldn’t be until at least halfway through the trip when she and Nat “felt that we were ready to be on our own.” I immediately felt shivers travel up my spine. I grabbed Jenna’s hand as mine began to tremble. I can’t do a solo. I can’t be alone.
“GOOD MORNING! WELCOME TO YOUR FIRST OUTWARD
BOUND WAKE UP. IT’S 6:00, START PACKING UP YOUR TENTS
BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE OUT AND ON THE WATER IN AN
HOUR!” I rolled over, accidentally hitting Jenna in the face. Please be a dream,
please just be a dream. I wanted, more than anything, to be at home in my bed, in
my bubble, with my family.

Our first day of kayaking was brutal. Blisters formed on all of my knuckles
from packing the group kit and personal kit into small holes in the front and
back of our kayaks. The rudder on my kayak was broken, which meant that I had
more trouble turning left or right than others. I couldn’t keep up everyone—I
paddled in the back of the group, my face extremely salty from sweat and water
and tears. I felt small and weak and destroyed. In moments like this, I missed my
dad more than anything. Kayaking was something that the two of us did
together, and never once did I feel like this while I was with him. It would all be
better if he were here. When we reached our final destination, Shackleford Island,
Nat gathered the group and gave us another speech. She found a stick and
engraved a circle in the soft, white sand. “This is your comfort zone,” she
started, “and I know that for many of you, today was extremely tough,” she
looked right at me. She then drew another circle outside of the first one
“These are the things that you are willing to do even though they make you
uncomfortable,” she drew another circle, “and these are the things that are so far
beyond anything that you’d ever do.” She looked around to see what kind of
reactions she was getting. “While you all may not agree on which circle you stand
inside of right now, you NEED to step outside of that first circle that I drew in
order to survive this trip. It’s okay to be afraid, it’s okay to feel uncomfortable,
I’m sure most of you do, but just remember, embrace or endure, embrace or
endure.” This was probably the tenth time I’d heard her say that. Still enduring.

During our “siesta” time, Emily and I walked along the skinny beach,
avoiding piles of wild horse poop, until we reached a boardwalk that led to a
bathroom. Not exactly the kind of bathroom I was hoping for, but better than none at all.
We sat down on the splintered wood, and I immediately collapsed into her arms.
“I know that I have to branch out more and try new things, but this is so far
beyond anything that I’d ever do and I just want my sister and my family and I
want to go home I can’t do this.” She told me more about her NOLS trip, about
how she cried for the first week, and about how leaving her twin for a month
was also very hard for her. Although this made me feel a bit better, I still spent
my time brainstorming different ways to get home. When we were making
dinner, they told us about a girl who accidentally spilled the boiling pot of water
on her body and had to be medivaced off of the island. At one point, I
genuinely considered it.

Five days passed and things started to get easier. I was able to pitch a tent
in a matter of minutes, and pack my kayak in even less. I no longer paddled in
the back of the group or cried myself to sleep at night. On the sixth morning,
while we were eating our Grapenuts with powdered milk, Nat and Heather
announced that we would be doing our solos. After breakfast they would spread
us out along the beach in the dunes so that we could not see or hear or speak to
each other. I’m still not ready. They would bring us dinner but take away our
watches and tents. They gave us each three tent poles and a kayak paddle so that
we could build some sort of shelter using that and the solo kit, which included a
tarp and a bug net. What the hell am I supposed to do with three tent poles? “Oh, and be
careful of rattlesnakes,” they added. Excuse me? When the time came to be
separated, my heart was pounding. We split up into two groups, and Nat walked
my group down along the beach. She began to point in between dunes and label
that as someone’s “spot.” We had just left Gordon when Nat turned to her right
and pointed between two large dunes and beach grass. “This looks good for you,
Emma. I think we’ll leave you here.” I threw my personal kit on the ground and
put my water in the shade. What am I supposed to do for the next eighteen hours?
I could feel the sun burning my skin as I paced around my eight by twenty foot
area, hoping that I would be able to see Emily in the distance. No such luck.
Behind me was a pathway that led to the sound, and in front of me was the
ocean. Gordon was somewhere to my left and Charlie was somewhere to my
right, but all I could see were mounds of sand with the occasional beach grass
protruding from the sand. I could not hear any voices aside from my own. The
only other sound was the consistent roar of the crashing waves. I found a shell
that seemed big enough to use as a shovel and began to dig a hole in the sand.
First build my shelter, then relax. The shell was not big enough but there was
nothing else to use. This is so difficult and I’m so hot and I just want a break but if it
rains then I’m screwed. Hours later, my bed was done. I forced the tent poles
around the hole and used the kayak paddle as the fourth pole. Nothing would
stay put because the sand was so dry. I tied my tarp to each pole so that it would
cover my small sleeping area. I looked down at my wrist to see what time it was,
only to remember that I no longer had my watch. “Time is irrelevant on your
solo.” I took out my Crazy Creek chair and set it down facing the water. I began to accept the silence. I had never felt so free—free of communication, free of technology, free of noise. For the first time, I was completely silent. I began to think about a question that Nat and Heather had asked us the night before: what makes me, me? What defines me? Kenz. There’s no way that it could be anything else. SHE is what defines me. I’m not just Emma, I’m Mackenzie’s sister, Mackenzie’s twin. I’m A twin. We are The Cunningham Twins. Emma and Mackenzie, Mackenzie and Emma, and that’s how it’s always been. We are part of that smaller population of twins, part of the population that shares a kind of bond that the rest of the world will never fully understand. And we will always have that even if we’re apart. Which is why it’s okay for us to be apart. Because everything happens for a reason and I have come to realize that while I have always been raised to believe that I go to high school and then college, not everyone has this same plan; Charlie’s mom works behind the counter at the local YMCA and his father passed away two years ago and with that he lost his chance of going to college. Gordon lives with his grandparents in North Carolina now because he can’t stand his parents. He was never planning on going to college to begin with. And that’s why leaving Kenz is okay, because it’s all going to be okay. There is a greater plan for all of us and none are the same and that is okay because that is life. This was the first time that I ever truly appreciated being alone. 

Later that night, I could not sleep. As expected, I was extremely claustrophobic in my small ditch and had never felt so sandy. I removed myself from my bug net to search for my Nalgene bottle, and as I did so, a flash of lightning illuminated the sky. I remembered what we had learned on the first day—if there’s lightning, our legs must be crossed so that the shock will not reach our heart, our butt must be elevated by our Thermarest, and if lightning doesn’t strike for fifteen minutes, you’re safe. I looked down at my wrist to check the time, only to realize, once again, that I was in fact, watchless. No worries, I’ll just count to 900. I did that six times.

“HELLO? EMMA? GOOD MORNING! YOU COMPLETED YOUR SOLO.” As I emerged from my shelter like a true survivor, I saw a smile grow on Nat’s face. “You’re the only one that was dead asleep when I came to wake them up,” she told me.

“Probably because I was up all night in lightning drill,” I responded.

“You know that the storm you saw was 50 miles out at sea, right?” I was completely unaware. I didn’t mind though.

Once I returned home, I was showered with lots of “I missed you’s” and “I’m so proud of you’s.” My summer went back to normal—spending time with friends, volunteering in Long Island, and sleeping in my own comfortable and clean bed. However, one thing was different. I started to use a previously foreign phrase when asked if I needed company. “No, I just want to be alone.”
High Anxiety
By Olivia Mason

In her essay, “They All Just Went Away,” Joyce Carol Oates says, “The house contains the home but is not identical with it.” I respectfully disagree. I have lived almost my entire life in one house and I could not consider anywhere else home, not even with my family. My house is a colonial, over a hundred years old, with khaki colored shingles, two magnolia trees out in the front yard, and a large black front door with a gold knocker. Our asphalt driveway that always has too many potholes after winter leads to a garage with a rooster weathervane on top. Off the driveway is a small red brick path that leads to a back door that never closes all the way. Everything creaks and moans in our house. The floorboards squeak, the radiators clang and every storm the whole house shudders with the wind. I don’t mind my rickety old house. I think it has character.

My parents have somewhat over decorated much of the inside. My dad used to bring home a new piece of furniture or art almost every weekend till my mom yelled at him to stop. The walls are so covered with art that we have next to no wall space left; art posters, signed photographs, oil paintings, pastels, and my step grandfather’s sketches line the walls creating one enormous collage. My favorites are the Beatles poster signed by Paul McCartney with a smiley face and the painting of my sister playing in the ocean in South Hampton when she was little. The shelves everywhere are filled with my dad’s mystery and photography books, and every once and a while we wipe the dust off them. My brother, Nick, and I have utilized every single piece of furniture at one time or another for our games, such as throwing our large collection of stuffed animals at each other from either ends of the couch in the TV room. My mom says that I wrote on the wall once behind the TV set but felt so guilty that I went and told her and showed her the tiny dot I had made. Somewhere in the floor are the wings of the house has been stripped to the bare minimum amount of furniture, our family and dining rooms have been switched and my room was painted white. It had been lavender since I was five. I had picked the color myself. My dad had it painted while I was away. I never got to say goodbye to my room. When I came home my room was covered in a thick layer of paint dust and all my stuff and had been moved out. Nothing was where I’d left it. I curled up on the floor and cried, clutching my dusty teddy bear. My brother’s room had been repainted too, but his was still mostly the same color. For a while I considered clawing that layer of toxic white off until I could see the purple, but I gave up the thought. I tried to picture what it looked like before: the footprint where my foot kicked the wall by my bed, the posters taped to my walls, the friendly crack in my ceiling. The fact that we were moving hadn’t really sunk in for me until that day. I could tell it was going to be really painful. Not like quickly yanking off a Band-Aid, but slowly ripping it so that each and every hair gets pulled and snapped leaving your skin sore, red and exposed.

I hate the way the whole house echoes now. All the walls are bare and the shelves are empty. All the magnets are gone from the fridge. I can’t find any of our family photos. It’s lonely and it’s cold. It feels white. I’ve had to hide my things in corners and closets; make my presence scarce. Taking our personality out of the house has made it feel alien. While this is still my home it is no longer our house. They had been one and the same for so long, I couldn’t believe it possible for them to be separate. As my family will unpack our lives into the new home, I will be packing mine to leave. As I navigate college in a foreign country, my family will go through something similar as they settle into Manhattan. They will get months to adjust while I barely get one. When I come back I will never be coming back to my home; I’ll be coming back to theirs.
Sometimes fear is buried so deep we can’t shake it. I am not a fearful person, but I am absolutely terrified of change. My fear bullies me into a corner. It makes me hide. It makes me weak. I’ve skipped classes in school to go to the nurse. I call my mom and barely get out the words “I don’t want to move,” before choking on sobs as my chest heaves and the warm tears roll down my face. My eyes roll around in my head as I stare up at the white ceiling of the sick room. I cry silently till I fall asleep. I leave the nurse’s office empty and meet my friends at lunch. Some of them can tell that the smile on my face is only temporary and that I’m trying too hard to laugh at whatever they are saying. They send me weak smiles of acknowledgment.

My mom is thrilled that we are moving. She’s wanted to move for years. Westchester is too stuffy and boring she says. It took a while to get my dad to come around to the idea. Mom says that’s because he sees the house as his “man cave.” He’s spent the past sixteen and a half years arranging and adding to it and he doesn’t want to see his “work of art” dismantled. However, once we found the new apartment he was sold. Mom keeps trying to make me feel better by saying “I’m so sorry that we are doing this now right before you go to college. I know how hard this must be for you.” I hate hearing those words. No Mom, you aren’t sorry because you are getting what you want. And no you don’t understand because your parents still live in the same house they brought you home to from the hospital. Dragging me through our new neighborhood on the Upper West Side trying to sell me on all the cool stuff that we don’t see in Westchester doesn’t help either. And being cross with me for not keeping a permanent smile on my face and light-hearted attitude isn’t fair. I’m allowed to be grumpy if I’m quiet and don’t bother anybody. I’m a teenager for Christ’s sake, it’s what we do anyway.

I’m heartbroken to leave my brother. He’s grown an inch since Christmas. I’m afraid that when I come home from college he will all of a sudden have grown a foot and actually look more his age (fourteen). I can see Nick walking around the Upper West side with his headphones strapped tightly over his ears. The buildings don’t seem so huge to him anymore and the crowds less intimidating. He dances slightly as he crosses the street near the apartment. His phone rings and he answers. It’s Mom telling him that after dinner they are going to pick me up from the airport. He plans on leading me around our new neighborhood and showing me the best places to eat and hang out because I wouldn’t know. I see his arm stretched high waving to me from the other side of baggage claim. He pulls me into a warm hug as I notice his head doesn’t fit in my shoulder anymore, mine fits in his.

We are selling our house to a builder and not a family. He says he will renovate and expand the house because we have plenty of land. But there is a chance that he could knock the whole house down and start from scratch. In the hopes that he doesn’t, I picture myself older driving by my town and walking up to the front door. I ring the doorbell and explain to whoever answers that this was my childhood home and that this door is where we hung our advent calendar for Christmas and those were the stairs that my brother and I rode a mattress down into a pile of pillows. And the closet under those stairs held my dad’s baseball cap collection and the best hiding spot in the whole house. The young person lets me in and I walk around and feel somewhat melancholy, but also lucky to have so many happy memories. And I finally agree with Joyce Carol Oates. That this was once my house and contained my home, but I couldn’t feel this content had they forever been identical.
We Regret to Inform You…

By Bennett Saltzman

Ms. Rechtman, my 9th grade World History teacher, first introduced us to Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero’s Journey” on a cold and blustery day late in November.

“Isn’t that just when you have a hero and he goes out, kills the bad guy or gets the gold, and then comes back?” I put forth, proud of my answer and smiling.

“Not quite,” she laughed, “While you identified some major elements... you forgot about the journey!”

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When my mom knocked on my door at 6 am one day in July, at first I resisted, but then pulled myself from the sheets, dressed in the athletic shorts, T-shirt, and sweater that I had laid out the night before, and accepted the call to adventure. Grabbing bags and moving out of the house, groggy, as only a hint of light began to rise from behind the mountain range, we piled into the waiting car. Our trusty Jeep, which we kept out at our summer house in Idaho year round, had broken down due to a computer malfunction, and the repair shop had misplaced orders and shipped parts to the wrong stores. As such, they had agreed to compensate us for a rental car, which we would then proceed to take on a road trip across the western United States. As we drove off, I reclined, leaning against my pillow, which cushioned the door, and went back to sleep. Later, settled in for the ride, I watched as the city turned into suburbs, which soon gave way to vast fields of hay, interrupted only by rotating sprinklers and the occasional cattle ranch. The pavement glistened under a sun now climbing to its apex in the sky, and its shimmering surface, as reflective as a calm lake at sunset, contrasted beautifully with the golden hay flowing in the breeze.

The minutes began to melt into hours, and we soon pulled into the Salt Lake City airport parking lot and found my dad waiting by the rental car desks. He had to be approved as a second driver, and thus had to sign a series of liability releases. Throughout our journey we had been giving him updates on our rental, which we had convinced him was a red convertible Mustang. They ranged from believable texts like, “The wind feels so nice with the top down” to overt lies.

When he called during his layover and asked how we had fit all the bags, I, jokingly, concocted a story about how we were pulling a tube behind us that had all the bags tied down to it, before laughing the question off by saying, “We managed, you’ll see.” He didn’t press anymore. Because of all the buildup McCall and I sat back eagerly awaiting the moment of truth. As the Hertz agent gave us the go ahead, we walked out to the garage, and, as my mom unlocked the Xterra, my dad let out a howl. Just like a wolf must when his prey outsmarts him and escapes, the howl grew in pitch as he came to realize that he had been fooled. Soon, however, the howl turned into laughter—laughter that would continue throughout the rest of our road trip.

With my dad with us and the crew fully assembled, we drove on to Mesa Verde where we spent three days. Finally accustomed to the heat and altitude, on our third day we hiked out to the balcony house where a ranger would take us on a tour. As he saw us approaching, he walked over to us and looked down at me. “You look to be of a good marrying age,” he began. I stood there stunned, but my father took up the conversation and replied, “I agree. It’s about time he should make his own house.” With that, I had been signed up to be the focus of the day’s tour, and all of the ranger’s stories about the lives that the Anasazi lived ran through me. After we had climbed down the ladder into the dwelling, and stood on a platform overlooking the canyon’s valley, he began to talk. “There used to be a kiva here,” and turning to me continued, “now, can you guess how much work it took to make this one kiva?” I stood there completely clueless. Guessing, I put forth, “perhaps a couple days?” He smiled and proceeded to correct me. “Perhaps if everyone worked together and forgot about feeding themselves, they could dig out the kiva in a couple days, but the logs that made up the roof had to be cut from the forest dozens of miles away, dragged here, and lowered down. Now that took a long long time.”

Standing there it struck me. These cliff dwellings did not magically appear. They were not carved in a single day, either. The homes took lifetimes of hard work to build. That was hard work. However, with the hard work, they had successfully created something amazing.

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In the hero’s journey, after the call to adventure, the hero progresses from the known into the unknown. Often he is helped by a supernatural power. For
example, in *Star Wars*, Obi-Wan Kenobi trains Luke, molding him into the Jedi that he had the potential to become, and continues to provide classic snippets of wisdom in the most trying moments. During this part of the journey, the hero experiences challenges that test his mettle as he determines his own boundaries, limits, and potential.

As we discussed this stage of the journey back in Ms. Rechtman’s class, I spoke up. “But what if you don’t have any supernatural mentors? Say you were actually a real person… Wouldn’t that put you at a pretty big disadvantage according to Campbell?”

She replied, “Any piece of wisdom can be super if given at the right moment. It doesn’t take a god or wizard to do that. You just need good mentors.” After a pause she continued, “After all, one of Campbell’s main points is that in this stage the end result of each challenge does not necessarily matter. Rather it’s the journey that teaches and builds the foundation for future success… and you most certainly don’t need a supernatural mentor to go on a journey.”

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After we got back from our road trip, McCall and I began to prepare for the cardboard boat regatta. The regatta was a fundraiser for Adaptive Wilderness Sports program in town, and all the advertisements around town read, “Build a boat and be a hero.” We were going to build a boat, be heroes, and win the race. Competing in the regatta was a family tradition; we had competed before and had thought about competing every year since. As always, we planned to win. We entered as a team of four, the two of us and two local friends, and began to build our craft. Carefully selecting the stiffest and thus most waterproof cardboard from the pile designated for boat builders, we labored through the sun’s heat rushing to build her up to a state of perfection before the 2 pm competition deadline. I was in charge of design, and this year we had decided to go with a classic four-man shell, with each man pulling an oar instead of propelling ourselves with double-sided kayak paddles (we had gone the kayak route in a previous year and had almost sunk due to excess water take-on from uncoordinated paddling). I had gone into this year’s competition proposing a single mission. “If we build a kayak replica then I could beat all of the awkward multi-person crews!” In response, McCall reminded me that it took a crew to win a boat race. One man pulling strong can help, but four pulling in sync will win out any day. When we were about to push off into the water, I turned around on the dock and said a few words, paraphrased unabashedly from George Yeoman Pocock, arguably the greatest rowing shell designer and builder the world has ever seen.

“It is hard,” I began, “to make the boat go fast. On this journey we will face many challenges. The water will resist our every forward motion, and so the water is our enemy… but that very water supports us and thus that very enemy is our friend… This race will not be easy. There are no timeouts, no substitutions, if we begin to sink, only we can save the boat. From the first stroke all thoughts must be directed to your oar. They must be positive, and you must pull your own weight. You must lose yourself to the crew as a whole, and only then will we win, and boys…let us win.”

With that we entered the water, and after a few pulls promptly sank. It wasn’t for lack of solidarity, however, and before we took a nose dive and split the bow, we pulled out to an early lead as our teamwork leading up to the moment of truth paid off.

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Later, back on dry land (aka the golf course), I faced another challenge. Dissimilar in nature, but to my mind equally daunting. I stood on the 9th hole of Aspen, the effective front 9 of the public course in town, the night before the amateur tournament was to be held there. The sprinklers were running, trying to soothe the pain inflicted on the grass by the day’s beating sun, and as I waited for them to pass over the tee, I planned out my course of action. The hole was my nemesis. I knew that the tee shot demanded a left to right ball flight, but when I approached it that way I always seemed to end up in the houses or trees to the right of the fairway. Once, however, I had hit the perfect drive. It had cut the corner and left me with only 140 yards into the green. That memory tempted me, but as I looked out again memories of my coach popped up in my mind.

“Play smart golf, Bennett… play smart.” With this mantra in mind, I reassessed my options. If I hit it to the corner of the hole, a shot that I could pull off consistently with an iron, I would still be able to hit it close, if not on, the green in two. There was no need to trade a slim reward for a huge risk. Pulling a 4 iron from my bag, I grabbed a ball and teed it up. Swinging freely, I hit the ball, and it took off piercing through the air like a hawk diving for its prey. The perfect shot.
In the tournament the next day I channeled that moment. I hit the perfect tee shot again, knocked it right over the green with my second swing, and got up and down for par. Smart golf.

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According to Campbell, in the hero’s journey, after he overcomes all the challenges in his path, he is presented with a supreme ordeal. He must draw on all of his training, and all of the lessons that he learned, as he faces what is the ultimate challenge.

As a 9th grader, my only reaction was, “That sounds like fun!” Ms. Rechtman smiled wryly.

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As it turns out, facing what seems like an ultimate challenge isn't fun. Like many seniors, my challenge presented itself in the form of college. Throughout high school, many of my actions had been undertaken with the understanding that they would either prepare me for college or would allow me to get into college. Despite this awareness, I was never one to go to extreme lengths. In other words, I never did test prep for the mundane standardized tests and I never joined a club just because I thought that it would get me into college. That said, behind every action I couldn’t help but think that it would help build my college resume. I took all Honors and AP classes, and I took as many classes as possible, even getting special permission to take AP Music Theory as a sophomore, and I lived with one free period a week up until junior year. How could this not differentiate me? Similarly, I grabbed every leadership opportunity that I was presented with. At the end of junior year, Ms. Woods, my college counselor, had me fill out a brag sheet listing all of my activities so that she could write the counselor’s college recommendation. It read like this:

Senior Class Co-President
MUN Co-President
Head Peer Leader
Captain HiMCM
Captain M3

Varsity Golf Captain
Writing Center Tutor
Guitarist - 12 years

She looked at it, said simply, “This will be easy!” and we moved on to other topics. Given my almost perfect SAT score and a solid GPA, I was under the impression that the college process would indeed be easy.

As with all rising high school seniors, I was constantly asked the traditional question, “Where do you want to go to college?” So many times I had replied with my top choices, Pomona and Williams (followed by Brown, Amherst, Duke, Dartmouth, Middlebury, Northwestern, and Bates). And so the last week of March, when most college decisions would come out, loomed large.

I had to get away from waiting, and thus when the opportunity presented itself to spend the weekend before that last week of March up in Boston skiing, I seized it. Bates released decisions on Saturday, but I had been assured I would get in. Saturday morning, I opened the email linking me to the letter at 9 am, still lying in bed, and read what thankfully was an acceptance letter. Relieved, I went back to sleep.

The cycle of eating, sleeping, and skiing repeated itself up until Sunday night when my fingers inevitably typed a c into my browser. This immediately brought up the Pomona college confidential page. My heart rate picked up as I slowly scrolled through the page reading and rereading the ecstatic messages proclaiming that the decisions would arrive in the mail the next day. On my Monday morning train back to New York, I texted my mom and asked her to bring the decision envelope to the train station when she picked me up. I remember thinking, as I looked out at everyone else on the train, my life is about to change, one way or the other, and they have no idea.... When I got off and walked over to the waiting Prius, I made every effort to be normal. Going to the trunk first, I put away my bags. Walking back to the passenger’s seat I peeked in, craning my neck in hopes of spotting an acceptance envelope. I took a deep breath.

“How are you Mom?” I asked.

By this point, I knew I was rejected. Bad news comes in small envelopes. Nevertheless, my hands shook as I tried to open it up. Failing to break the seal, I ripped the edge off, realizing that I wouldn’t need or want to save the contents.

“We regret to inform you,” stared right back up at me. I took another deep

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breath leaning back in my chair, and looked back up at my mom to tell her about my weekend.

This story was mirrored in effect each time I opened a new email or letter from a college. I coped by not addressing the rejections. To be frank, I eventually came to expect the rejection. It was understood by all parties involved that I was not fit to go to their college, and that was that.

It was easy to appear nonchalant externally. I found it much harder to actually accept the rejection and move on internally. I could get over my friends’ reaction, commonly characterized by silence followed by a “I’m so sorry....”

“Don’t worry,” I would reply. “Bates is going to be great!”

What I couldn’t get out of my mind was the pervading thought that this was not how it was supposed to go. Rejection was never supposed to happen to me. I felt devalued because I had never accepted that this was a possible outcome. I was calm on the outside, but constantly seething inside.

It was not until later that week on Friday night, after my last rejection had arrived, as I lay in my bed trying to fall asleep, that I realized I had fallen into the same trap that 9th grade Bennett had stumbled into four years ago. I had come to focus too much on one major element, in this case a college acceptance, and had forgotten about the journey that had gotten me to that point. Nothing in me had changed. Despite that one grade and my collection of rejections, I was still the same kid who had learned the meaning of hard work. I was still the same kid who had felt the power of teamwork in a cardboard boat. I was still the same kid who realized that as long as I hit the green in two it didn’t matter how I did it, and I was still the same kid who has the respect of some amazing friends.

Perhaps my high school story could have had a different ending, but that doesn’t change the fact that I loved and am incredibly proud of all of the chapters.

Now, in no way am I saying that I am a hero. My cycle, however, taught me a lesson. It is not the end of the journey that should teach or inspire, but the journey itself. In my mind, each journey is but a stepping point to the next. In this view, each major element can be a new borrowed beginning for the next story, and the next story promises to be rich in its own right.

As George Pocock wrote about rowing: “In a sport like this—hard work, not much glory, but still popular in every century—well, there must be some beauty which ordinary men can’t see, but extraordinary men do.” I believe that it is the same with the journey of life. Perhaps the man whose life follows set guidelines, and who is never forced off of that path can’t see the value and beauty in every step, but if you’re forced to adjust course, then the beauty becomes apparent.
The Fading Memory Book
By Sabrina Stanich

Sticky floors, gilded with spilled Budlight. Crushed aluminum cans and plastic red cups, littering stained wood. Sloshing golden brown liquids, swirling to their brims and catapulting through the air as the blurry red and silver containers are thrown up with waving hands.

“Okay now ladieessss
Yeaaaaaaahhhhh
If you know you bad
Yeaaaaaaahhhhh
If you a top notch bitch
Woollllll
Lemme hear you holla
Woolllll

“Sorry, what did you say?” I turn back to catch the movement of his mouth, the audio drained out from the blaring music. He leans over, his collar brushing the top of my bare shoulder, his whisper tickling my ear and neck. His fingers press gently against my lower back, guiding me forward. As we make our way down the hall, the thumping of heels against the wooden ground fades out with the rest of Travis Porter’s degrading lyrics.

He pulls my hair loose, and it brushes my shoulder blades as it falls down. Soft whispers, lonely buttons, rumpled denim, recycled oxygen, crinkled polyester, heavy carbon dioxide. My eyes flicker open in a desperate attempt to mentally Kodak the moment. With each breath, I add a picture to my internal scrapbook: the glimmer of incoherent karaoke, the warmth of his chest against my palms, the jabbing of the desk against my hipbone, the faint murmur of a crowded intersection eight stories below, the curvature of my spine, the quickening of my pulse, his dimples.

Each detail is crammed into the pages of my secret memory book. It is the book that comforts me when I have trouble falling asleep or when I stare out the window during a long train ride. Sometimes, I like to stare at the pictures and other times, I try stringing them together to form short movies. The sound of a fizzing Coke bottle splashing against a table transports me into the DSL, and I begin to hear the chorus of laughter reverberating through the basement. The isolation of one laugh track throws me back to the courtyard outside Masters Hall, where I stood recording the results of an utterly ridiculous physics lab. We were calculating the speed of different balls dropped from the third story of the building, and we must have spent more time almost shattering windows and doubled over in hysterics than writing down any of the “important” details. The sound of the tennis ball smacking the pavement places me on the courts of my first (and only) tennis camp the summer before sixth grade. Scorching sun seeps into my skin and blisters my shoulder blades, and the terrifying thud of the lime green bullet echoes in my mind, how it slapped the hot concrete a split second after it grazed my cheek.

The sound of my shrieking shoves me onto cracked pavement, and I can feel myself falling from the bright pink seat of my first bicycle. Desperately, my hands claw at the glittering violet and magenta streamers swinging from the handlebars, but instead of a miracle catch, I collide with the ground. Soon, small fingers inspect the fresh blood, and I begin crying more at the slow journey of dark crimson dribbling down my shin than the actual pain of ripped skin.

The heaving groans fling me under the floral comforter of my bed, and I can taste the salty water at the corners of my lips as I suffocate the crumpled rejection letter in my fist. My head begins aching in response to my erratic intake of oxygen and the muffled wailing escaping from my drenched pillow. Slowly, I sit up and take ten deep breaths as I stare at the collage of pictures that decorate my wall. Cracking a smile at Sophie and Susie mid-dance move, my eyes shift to an edited picture of the infamous Soviet leader with the caption, I’ll Quit Stalin, Wanna Go to Prom? Choking on a burst of laughter and lingering tears, I recall standing in the girls’ bathroom with the mirror covered in history puns inviting me to the spring formal. I reach down to send an “I miss you” text, and am suddenly overcome with the scent of Obsession by Calvin Klein as I re-read my most recent text thread.

The toxic penetration of Calvin Klein diffuses into my bloodstream as I think back to quasi-regretful Friday nights. Wild giggles erupt as I flip the page in my mental memory book. I can feel the cracked sidewalk beneath my 3½ inch pink pumps and the cold brick against my arm as I throw myself at the wall for balance. It scrapes my skin, and I turn to find its invisible scar. I can still see the blurred Christmas lights of the intersection mingling with mustard taxi cabs and I can feel the wind infiltrate my underwear as my dress balloons next to the homeless veteran.
A lingering scent of *Chance* by Chanel brings me underneath a plush comforter, staring at two bright green eyes. The kitten cocked his head at me, then arched his back and I can still feel the abrasive fur as I brushed upwards and the line of velvet as I brushed down. And I can hear the scathing sas of Tai blaring from the television as she delivered her infamous, “Well, you’re a virgin who can’t drive” line, and now, alone in my room, I can still hear the corresponding high-pitched cackling of her sixteen-year-old audience.

And I smile, recalling the first time I shifted my gears from park to reverse, all by myself. And how at .05 miles per hour, I crawled my way down the driveway, spastically turning the wheel to ensure that I adhered to the invisible midpoint line between the rectangular stones that lined both sides. Once I cleared the finish line and made my way onto the street, I spun the volume dial up, pushed the stick to “drive,” shot down the windows, and floored it down the street, singing along to “Our Song” by Taylor Swift. Never mind the fact that it was December in New York or that it was a 30 mph residential zone, the 900 feet between my driveway and the crooked stop sign at the street corner gave me a visceral rush of independence.

It was the same rush of excitement that flooded my body when I went running on the first “warm” day of the season. I had left my phone at home, and I’d clipped my iPod to my leggings. My skin tingled in the sunlight, physically attracted to the warm golden filter of spring air. Inhaling deeply, I smelled bright hydrangeas and freshly cut grass. My sneakers played tag with the pavement, tapping the ground just for stability, then leaping up to embrace the abundant oxygen. My legs began moving faster, without the active decision to do so. My arms stretched outwards, and a light breeze rippled through my spine, chilling my ribcage and electrifying my pulse. There was no adult, no buzzing cellphone, no crossing guard or electronic sign dictating where and when I could move because the streets were empty at seven a.m. on a Saturday.

Tim O’Brien once wrote about those moments, the fleeting ones, the moments that bid goodbye before they finish pronouncing hello. He described them as a point in time where everything is “purely living” and how “the aliveness makes you tremble.” And it’s true, I did tremble in all of those milliseconds. I shivered from an overwhelming hit of vitality, where everything in the universe proved to me that I was alive.

And it is those moments that I try to capture, that I try to Kodak. The ones that no matter how many times I flip back to in my secret memory book, will shower me with that same feeling of aliveness. Whether it is tracing the life line on someone’s palm, or hearing bubbling champagne tumble into a glass, or the clacking of size 7½ stilelletos down a hallway, or a tennis ball smacking pavement, or the touch of rumpled denim or cold brick or hot pavement or goosebumped skin or sticky lemonade fingers or popped bubblegum, or the way the sun dances upon the constellations formed by birth marks and how it glimmers off of the Hudson at sunset, I squint my eyes and snap them shut, trying to save the moments to my internal hardrive.

I heard that every time you revisit a memory, your mind alters some aspect of it so it is never the same as the original. And the more you try to recall those moments, the harder it is to find the real details—were they stratus clouds or cumulus, was it Taylor Swift or Tim McGraw on that first drive down Edgewood Avenue, did my right or left ankle falter on the uneven concrete, were the streamers magenta or rose, did he have freckles or dimples? As I finish my last year of high school, I’ve lost track of the number of pictures that I’ve taken, because I have grown increasingly desperate to preserve them. The older movies have begun freezing at all the wrong times, every handshake and wink and smile is disrupted by incoherent snow. The bridges that connected the intersection at 61st and 3rd with *Obsession* have begun falling apart, and I can’t seem to remember just how cold the brick was against my arm or how warm the sunlight felt on my face. Pages are missing and no matter how much time I spend gazing out car windows or staring at my ceiling, straining my mind to recover the details, I can’t. And I am scared, that one day, I will lose them all.
Notes on the Contributors

Reincarnated from the frozen corpse of Walt Disney, Sangjun Bae was raised in an incubator for a month until his biological mother and father brought him home. He eventually moved to New Jersey, but chose not to associate himself with any anthropomorphic mice until much later. Sangjun Bae also chose to shorten his name to Sang Bae, which is catchier. He carries a pencil in his pocket at all times. Bae will attend New York University as a journalism major.

Julia Butterfield lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan until she was nine and now lives in Westchester, in a town whose claim to fame is that once Tobey Maguire pretended to visit. Her favorite books are All the King’s Men and To Kill a Mockingbird. Next year she will attend Oberlin College where she will fight the power and study broadly.

Anthony Cao is an avid musician and fencer and is fluent in English, Chinese and sarcasm. He enjoys historical fiction and spends his free time dueling Johnny Depp over a pit of lava.

Meet Emma Cunningham: she has attended The Masters School for eight years and is looking forward to heading down south to Wake Forest University this fall. You can usually find her killing it on the tennis courts, dancing in the DSL, or in the pages of the newest Vineyard Vines catalogue.

Luke Davoren lives in Putnam County and has two (inferior) siblings and a beautiful yellow lab. His favorite hobbies include hiking, wearing plaid, and attempting to make the perfect barbecue pizza. He wanted sunglasses for his birthday; his parents found him a broken kayak instead. He spends his summers paddling on the Hudson River, bailing out his sinking boat, and contracting nearsightedness from excessive UV exposure. Luke will attend Wesleyan University next year where he plans to study chemistry and biology.

Jazmine Figueroa was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and currently resides in Bronx, New York. She loves to read and enjoys late night Ramen eating sessions with her best friend Cassie. She is attending the University of Kansas in the fall and majoring in English.

Gillian Goodman is sweet seventeen and lives just outside New York City with her three beloved cats and a dog she usually ignores until it barks loudly enough for her get up and let it outside. An aspiring poet, she looks forward to many fruitful years of waitressing. She plans on attending college only if her circus gig falls through.

Christina Guarin is a senior at The Masters School. She enjoys running and arguing with people about environmental issues. Christina currently resides in Westchester, New York, with her two older brothers and her pet cat. She will be attending Green Mountain College in the fall.

Meet Sydney Lasala: Big Squid or Squish, as she is often referred to by close friends, is excited to attend the University of
Wisconsin next fall, though she is heartbroken that she will be leaving the deer-ridden grasslands of rural New York.

Meet **Sophie Lieber**: one of the original coiners of the endearing name, "Squish(y)" that is applied to close friends, cute cats and small children. Sophie plans on continuing to rock pearls, cardigans, and everything J.Crew at University of Southern California next year. Though incredibly excited to become an official Cali babe, Squish will miss her two cats Sugar and Clyde more than any sane human should.

**Olivia Mason** is moving from Westchester County to New York City this summer and will be attending University of St Andrews in Scotland in the fall. She enjoys playing tennis and spending quality time with her family and friends.

**Bennett Saltzman** is a senior at The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Golf prescribes many of his life choices, as does his love for Idaho. He has a butter phobia yet enjoys cooking. He fears missed opportunities, and thus (almost always) will take up a call to adventure. He is graced with some of the best friends in the world, and looks forward to making more stories and relationships at Bates College next fall.

**Sabrina Stanich**, the Queen of Sass, resides in Westchester County, New York. Next year she'll attend Pitzer College where she and her roommate will grow kale in their dorm room and ironically karaoke to Taylor Swift music. Though California is far, she has reassured us that she will most definitely be keeping in touch with the history department (and her friends).

**William Stanton** is currently a senior at The Masters School. He plans to enroll at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore in the fall but has not decided on a major. He was born in 1995 and enjoys long walks on the beach, German rock bands, and baseball caps without the baseball team on them.