



THE GRAIL

VOL. XV November 18, 2020 ISSUE V

Short Story Special Edition

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FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

The end of our time at Reed this year is nigh. In our penultimate issue, we present your wonderful submissions to our short story contest and provide glory for a few. As you all jaunt off to your far corners of the world, we hope you find solace in these stories.

Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner! Our first place winner Albert K. reminisces on rooftop memories and change with their father (1). Take a look at our two runners' up stories, with Sophie K.'s paranormal piece on abuse and sisterly reconciliation (2) or hop on over through Sky C.'s thumping, gory, and restless story of play yard chases sure to have your heart racing (3).

Orion W. contemplates souls and their connections to each other (4) while antique furniture becomes a vessel for memories in Max N.'s story of remembrance (5). Prepare yourself for two distinct adventures, as Amelia M. draws us a warm, bubbly bath (6) while Ida H. brings us along on a twelve-

month hunt for the gods (7). Sidney F. takes us back to high school agonies over grades (we never worry about those now that we're at Reed College, right?) (8), and Jules D. brings us on-air updates from an inpatient psychiatric care ward (9). Meanwhile, Madi C. answers the age old question of "Where is Waldo?" with a somber twist (10), as Sarah B. lifts our spirits with laughter from the comedy club (11). Finally, Anonymous (vendetta not included) brings back some of the Halloween spirit in ghostly pursuit of home and family (12).

For our next issue, which we present entirely online from the comforts of our various finals quarantines, we remember the Renn Fayre that got away, with our theme, Submarine! Submarine is but a vessel for your ideas—celebratory, memorial, maritime, and otherwise. As with any Renn Fayre, make of it what you will. We hope we can provide a welcome reprieve from the stresses of the holidays and of finals.

Warmly,

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Empty Cassettes

By ALBERT KERELIS

I asked my parents to send me a pair of gloves and my high school bio notebook. When I went to the mailroom, I saw my dad's big-blocky-architect-handwriting in thick sharpie on my package and felt an immediate and inexplicable wave of comfort wash over me.

The first time I watched my dad climb up on the roof, I was 11 or 12. "You stay down there and take my phone, so if I fall and break my neck, you can call the paramedics." I think of that every time I climb up. Who's waiting at the bottom for me?

As I waited for my pan to heat up, my dad hurried me by commenting that this wasn't a union job. I told him that if he threatened my lunch time, I would unionize all lawful child laborers. "We'll demand enough lunch time to cook ourselves all the almond flour pancakes we want." "Good luck with that." I realized that I was now 17, maybe still a minor, but well above the legal age to work a job. I allowed myself to fantasize about my youth uprising nonetheless. I imagined rallies and meetings and conference tables and many children far too confident in their public speaking abilities.

Getting up on the roof was always a delicate affair that had to happen well out of sight of my safety-minded mother. The one hatch for roof access was in the ceiling of a tall stairwell, and to get the ladder to reach it, we had to put a sawhorse on the stairwell's landing, then span wooden planks from the stair directly below the hatch to the sawhorse, then put the ladder on the planks. As you climbed up the ladder, the thin plank it rested on flexed a little. "The tree that does not bend will break," my dad repeated. This did little to reassure me. When you got to the top of the ladder, you had to reach and pull yourself up by the lip of the hatch, and squat on the load bearing rafters in the crawl space as you use both hands to lift the heavy roof cover off. My dad used to do the whole process on his own, but he wasn't limber enough to squat in the rafters anymore and had to send me up on my own to lift the cover. After I scurried up, he groaned and heaved his way up the ladder behind me, doing his best to make it look easy.

I brought my phone up with me this time. Part of the reason I brought it up was because I imagined a scenario in which my mother was in our basement, my sister had her airpods turned all the way up, and there was no one to hear my father and I in case our ladder fell, and we found ourselves stuck on the roof. The other reason I brought my phone with me was that listening to music made squeegee-ing fibered aluminum across the roof as the scorching June sun beat down on me that much more tolerable. As

I turned the volume up on my phone and dropped it into the pockets of my ancient and torn cargo shorts, my father cocked his head.

"Is that an alarm?"

"Is what an alarm?"

"The sound."

"It's 'Cast Your Fate To The Wind' by the Vince Guaraldi Trio."

"Is that your ringtone?"

"No, it's 'Cast Your Fate to the Wind' by the Vince Guaraldi Trio."

"But why is it playing?"

My father did not understand the importance of ambiance.

I found a way to make everything romantic. I imagined myself as some hardened laborer, sweating away on my hot Chicago rooftop, trying to ignore that I was, in fact, a queer, wiry child about to go to a fancy college, probably majoring in comparative literature, but doing my best to convince myself that I was going to be a bio major. As my squeegee ran dry, I leaned it against a yet unpainted section of the parapet and looked up around the block. A cool breeze blew by as if to congratulate me for this bout of hard work and invited me to enjoy the verdant view of my neighborhood: dappled with trees springing up from parkways and between alleys, green tile roofs glinting in the beaming June sun. I tried to ignore the fact that I would be halfway across the country in a few weeks as I soaked in the sprawl of two flats that seemed to extend endlessly into the horizon.

I love working on the roof; there's something about the view that seems like I shouldn't be allowed to take in the neighborhood from that angle. I get to see everyone's crappy roofing jobs, where the tiles on the house down the street are cracking behind their chimney, how the top of the pine in the alley is turning a brownish-red as it slowly dies, hiding its decay with green branches below.

"Aliuk," My fantasy was interrupted. "Help your old man mix this aluminum, will ya?"

"Look at the pretty colors in there, the golds and silvers mixing together." My father tried to appeal to my need to find whatever I was doing beautiful. It was not the Chicago alleyway vista that I had been admiring, but I did my best to stare into the bucket and find it equally romantic. Something about the gasoline-and-paint smell it gave off reminded me of childhood. Filling up with gas on long road trips, coming with my dad to construction sites. I was doing my best to find the beauty he was referencing. I guess I was getting somewhere.

As buckets of fibrated aluminum sit out, a yellowish oil rises to the top, and all the fibers sink to the bottom. Before you can use it, you have to stick a two-by-four in there and get the layers to mix—a process akin to what I imagine restaurants have to do with large quantities of salad dressing. Only this salad dressing has a dull gray shine to it; has thick, hairy goop on the bottom; and is going to put off having to get a new roof for another ten years so my family doesn't have to face any more big expenses until after my little sister has graduated college. I guess there's something beautiful to it after all. Once I was sure that I had reached a stable emulsion, I did my best to pour out another line of aluminum on the roof. I gripped the handle with both hands, put my legs wide like I was about to throw my back out at a kettle-bell class, and started shuffling over to an unpainted section of roof. I heaved the bucket up with one hand and tilted the bottom with the other. As soon as the thick shining sludge peeked past the lip of the bucket, I scurried along the length of the roof, listening to the aluminum fall on the cracking roof tar with a symphony of wet plaps.

I picked up my squeegee from its resting spot on the chimney that got filled with concrete whenever it was that coal burning fireplaces went out of style. The handle of the squeegee was covered in a thin layer of the reflective aluminum paint that was no doubt carcinogenic, but I couldn't be bothered to grab gloves. Well, in reality, it's that I wanted to not be bothered enough to grab gloves. Prior to getting to work, I looked up fibrated aluminum's safety data sheet and was terrified by phrases like "may cause cancer" or "may cause genetic defects." I tried to figure out exactly what the extent of my exposure was, but at the same time I couldn't stop thinking about how much of a whiny bitch I would sound like if I told my dad that, according to "Johns Manville Safety Data Sheet 20000000650", we should both be wearing gloves and eye protection. I wanted desperately to be a teenager who thought themselves invincible, with no conception of their own mortality, so I kept my mouth shut and kept painting.

As I was moving caustic, shining aluminum around the roof, my dad came over to comment on my technique. "If you use the rubber end and push as much paint as you can up the side of the parapet, when it drips down, it'll fall in the cracks." I know he's right, but I have to let him know that when I use the *brush* end instead of the rubber end, the bristles push the paint into the cracks on the *first* pass instead of waiting to fill the cracks on their descent. He'll go on a tired polemic about how I never listen to him; I'll respond by telling him that he never lets me learn things on my own, and when he's not looking anymore, I'll flip to using the rubber side of the squeegee.

We finally clambered down looking like low budget tin men,

and my dad said "Let me clean you up." He took me down to his "workshop," which isn't used for woodworking so much as it is for smoking weed and storing things too caustic even for the cupboard under the sink. He wet a rag with paint thinner and wiped my arms and legs down with it. My skin burned and glowed red for a few hours. My dad said it was better than how raw my skin would be if I tried rubbing the paint off without it. I believed him, even if I wasn't happy about it.

During the month before I left for college, my dad would occasionally realize that I was not going to be around forever, and he would find me wherever I was in the house. He'd wrap his arms around me, breathing deeply as he unknowingly made me feel incredibly uncomfortable and confused as to what I should be doing with my arms. He would say "I love you, you know that? I don't let you know that enough." As a little kid, my parents would always ask me "Žinai ką? You know what?" I would roll my eyes as I begrudgingly responded "Ką. What." "Aš tave myliu. I love you." It was a chore to go through that little play. I never really appreciated its sincerity until I stopped hearing it. Instead, as my dad drove me to school every morning, we would sit in terse silence as we tried to figure out how to talk to each other.

"I was thinking of grabbing food with Sam today after school, I might be home a little late."

"This Sam's a girl?"

Sam's been one of my closest friends for something like a year now, and my father has met her on numerous occasions, so I just kept it to a simple "Yeah."

"She cute?"

"She's gay."

"Isn't that a shame?"

I pretended I hadn't heard that.

Conversations about my friends, or really most of my school life, were never particularly fruitful, so we stuck to conversations about local radio stations and how much we loathed companies like Viacom, because one of the things we shared great concern for was the disappearance of independent broadcast media. Once a conversation about whether Paul Simon supported South African artists with his album *Graceland*, or whether he just profited off of them spanned three separate car rides. Somehow, little bits of sincerity managed to slip into those conversations.

Once I brought my care package from home back to my dorm from the mailroom, I tore it open and found two empty cassette tapes tucked inside the gloves. I had mentioned to my dad on the phone that I had picked up a cassette deck here at a yard sale. This time when I cried, I didn't draw my blinds.

My Sister

By SOPHIE KLINGBORG

CW: Abuse

Her sweater marks her an easy target, fuzzy pink like a child's toy, nails polished and blunted in a salon. My sister would have eaten her alive. Unfortunately, she's my problem, not Mina's. Credit where credit is due—she comes in swinging, brandishing the copper pan like a sword, lipstick smeared on her two front teeth. "I want to return this," she spits at me, literally spitting, freckling my face. I suppress a shudder.

"If you've already begun to use the pan, I'm afraid we can't issue a refund."

"It's tarnished," she says, rapping the hated object on the counter for emphasis.

I'm not surprised; she doesn't seem like the kind of person to collect cookware for anything other than making a kitchen look lived-in, but we don't offer refunds for an imperfect image of domesticity. If it works, it works.

"I'm afraid we can't issue a refund," I repeat, locking eyes. *Go on, ask for my manager, do it.*

"I'd like to speak to the manager, then," she announces smugly, like someone who's just played their winning hand.

"I'm the manager," I shoot back. Being able to do this is the biggest perk from becoming store manager last month. Second-biggest is the pay raise, obviously.

Emmy can tell I've pulled another I'm-the-manager stunt by the self-satisfied grin still plastered all over my face when we meet for lunch. "That's obscene," she says, pointing at my smile. I warp the corners of my mouth into an exaggerated frown. "Better. More you." She hands me her sandwich, offering an unasked-for taste. I nibble. "What is this?"

"Curried egg salad," she replies, and I wrinkle my nose. She rolls her eyes. "Whatever, heathen. Hand it back if you're not going to appreciate it."

"We can't all be dating cuisine-obsessed French weirdos," I say and bite into my own food-court fare. The sandwich combinations are weird, but Frederic packs her lunch every day, which is tooth-achingly sweet. I live alone.

I'm reminded of that again as we clean up, me balling wax wrappers in my fist, her winding the little lavender bow that tied off her lunch-sack around her fingers. We stand

up to hug, the fake pearls on her sweater snagging on the rough wool of mine, and return to our designated areas. She gets the designer clothing store, spending the day tripping about in heels and holding daringly cut dresses out for rich women to caress, and I get the kitchen goods store, nauseated by the smell of novelty chocolate-drizzled popcorn many days past stale. People drift in and out, purchasing impractically-shaped cookie cutters and exorbitantly-priced serving dishes, until finally the clock strikes time to go home.

Go home I do, but it looks like I won't have a relaxing night either, because a straight-backed figure is seated at my table, a silhouette in the dark. I close my mouth around a scream, fumble with the lights and Mina is there, drumming her lavender-colored talons on the counter, a color inappropriate for nails that can only be described as clawlike.

"Ami," she purrs, perfectly painted lips pursing in the shape of my name. No one I know has more elegantly applied lipstick than Mina, not even Emmy, whose smile sometimes cracks under pressure, lines of her natural lip showing through the shellac.

"Why are you here?" I ask. To torment me further? I keep the second statement to myself, sick with shame just thinking about how we left things last time.

She folds and unfolds her carefully moisturized hands, runs a finger along the grain of the table. "I need help."

That stops me short. Mina's never asked for help once in her life, doggedly accruing debts and injuries and maladaptive coping mechanisms on her quest to do everything absolutely by herself. I've never met another person who took the adage 'cut off your nose to spite your face' as she does. As I watch, Mina's armor of beauty unfolds, a line appearing between her eyebrows, and her head droops. Instinct moves me forward, until I've got my hands hovering just above her shoulders. "Mina. Look at me. What happened?"

She sniffs. "It's my boss." Of course, Andrew, he of the gleaming pearl teeth and the butterscotch hair, the clean-shaven jaw and the dancing hazel eyes. He has an image just boyish enough to be trustworthy, just manly enough to be desirable.

He's the ridiculously photogenic boss to Mina's unnaturally beautiful assistant, a couple that would almost certainly be on a crash-course for love in a romantic comedy. It's almost too cliché to think they've been sleeping together, but Mina confirms it. I rock back on my heels. "He tossed me aside," she says emphatically, mascara streaming down her cheeks in improbably straight lines.

"Are you... fired?" I ask tentatively. Mina's liable to fits of emotion, bursting through at unpredictable times like a firework, nearly as destructive. But she doesn't react with ire, only nods and slumps a little farther in her chair. Her posture is usually so straight, I didn't even realize her back could bend this way.

There's an awkward spate of silence, and then we speak simultaneously. "I'm sorry we had such a difficult relationship," she tells me, just as I ask, "Do you want some tea?" She beats me to the punch. "You go first," just a little bit of the steely old Mina coming back. I repeat my question and bring her a mug. My one indulgence is expensive tea brands, an unfortunate habit picked up from my workplace. It seems a little dissonant to serve my posh sister posh tea in a Ripley's Believe It Or Not mug, but allows me to set it on the table before her without a word. "What were you saying?" I prompt her.

"Things fell apart between us. And I apologize for that."

I'm dumbstruck. There's blame to share, of course, but I figured Mina would have to be on her deathbed to apologize to me. I did cause trouble last time we were together.

Growing up, the two of us had squabbled like any siblings might. It was only when I left for college that things began to go sideways. For our single father, love (in the form of money) stretched only so far. Her success meant my failure, and vice versa. The two of us were in a race for best daughter, and, with her real estate job, I had about considered her the winner. She wasn't the most gracious about it, deriding the state of my apartment, my love life, my finances, my sartorial choices, anything she could. Eventually, I stopped speaking to her altogether. Until half a year ago.

She'd invited me out for dinner, with a rare offering to pick up the tab. In the past she'd defaulted the restaurant choice to me, claiming I was the 'foodie' of the two of us, but this time she picked a ritzy new Mediterranean place. Over plates of hummus, spiced lamb, and tahini-drizzled vegeta-

bles, I told her the little joys of my life: Emmy, my bread-baking hobby, so on. For all the fancy dinners she must've been having, she'd never dropped the habit of licking her fork's tines after taking a bite, something I found disgusting and slightly endearing. She kept silent most of the meal.

"What's on your mind, though?" I asked, folding a piece of pita in half.

She deflected, giving me a conspiratorial little smile. "Oh, busy, busy. Speaking of, I have to go check out a house near here. Would you mind walking there with me? I'm enjoying this."

"Sure," I said, a little pleasantly surprised. We split an exorbitantly priced baklava, half-heartedly argue over who'll pick up the tab, then head out. I suspected something was up right around the time she started making sweeping gestures with her arms and announcing, "Isn't this neighborhood lovely?" which is almost immediately after we step onto the sidewalk. By the time we reach the new apartment, I'd about figured out her game. She gushed about the place, pointing at the velveteen sofas and flower-patterned wallpaper. "Charming, right? So what do you think? Actually... this is kind of up your alley, right? It's, like, exactly your design aesthetic. It's not on the market...yet...so there aren't any prospective buyers, but there will be plenty soon," she prattled on. "What did you say your budget was again?"

I raised my eyebrows. "You're a terrible actress."

"What?" she asked, smile still lingering around her mouth but already gone from her eyes.

"Are you trying to sell me an apartment right now?" It hit me. "The restaurant wasn't even a sister thing. That's something you do with clients. I'm just another paycheck to you."

"I knew it!" she fumed, composed veneer finally splintering. "I knew you'd react like this. Don't you see I'm trying to help? I'm giving you an out on that little mouse-hole apartment you've got. You could live somewhere actually nice, and I might even be able to haggle the price down special for you. But no, you're as ungrateful as always."

"I don't need your help!" I shot back, anger prickling at my skin. "I'm perfectly autonomous. So what if my apartment's small? So what if I work in a kitchen goods store? I'm doing fine, aren't I?"

"We're family," she whined. "I want to get married someday, and what's everybody going to think when you show up to the wedding with a thrifted bridesmaid dress? None of my coworkers even know you exist, and I want to introduce you to our world."

And you can't really start living until you get a nice home and a real job and an actual life. I just want to help."

"If you think I want the same things as you, you're dead wrong," I seethed. "You're just embarrassed by the fact that I live small-scale. At least I got my job and my apartment on my own dollar, not Dad's." I continued, "You didn't even pick this place with me in mind. This looks like a senior citizen's home."

Her face twisted. "Fine, live in your shithole forever. See if I try to help you again." She stormed out, nearly breaking a heel in the process. With the ornately ugly door's slam, I was alone again. I looked around the hideous room and felt the anger swelling in my chest, a little monster needling at me with its claws. Before I could stop myself, I reached into my bag, prepped to throw something at one of those huge Victorian mirrors, when my fingers closed around a red Sharpie. A bad idea crossed my mind, and without a second, more rational thought, I uncapped the pen and strode over to the wall, scrawling in huge red letters, SOMEONE WAS MURDERED HERE. Might as well warn the poor idiots coming to look at this for-sure-haunted apartment next.

My cheeks burn with shame at the memory. I put my forehead against the cool surface of the table. "I was rude," Mina continues. "I was embarrassed by you, but I shouldn't have been that way."

"I shouldn't have written on the wall like that. It was childish," I answer. "And... thank you for trying to help. I guess I was too stubborn to accept."

She gives me a real smile, not the polished kind she practices for clients. "Maybe I should've offered in a nicer way." We share a laugh, the first together in many months. When she tips her head back, the lamp's shine plays over her face, and I realize something's off about the mascara tears. They look oddly thick from where I am. The low light in my apartment had made it hard to see, but something trickles from her hairline, above her right ear. She flinches away from my outstretched fingers, and I catch my breath. "He *hit* you."

Her silence confirms it, and the old, familiar anger roars back to life. "That bastard." I leap up. "I'm calling 911."

She holds out her palms. "Just... can I have a hug first?" Caught off guard, I embrace her awkwardly at first, but the familiarity returns, her head in the crook of my shoulder, my

chin pressed against her hair, one girl in two bodies. My eyes start to burn with tears well. I hadn't realized how much I missed this. After an eternity, she releases me. I reach for my phone, and she starts toward the bathroom, presumably to wash up. "Tell the police to go to his house," she instructs. "He's there now." I nod and dial, press the ringing phone to my ear. Mina pauses in the doorway of the bathroom, light silhouetting her figure, attired as always in a pencil skirt and blazer. She leans her head against the doorframe. Her features are in shadow, so I can't tell, but I think she's smiling. "I love you."

My heart twists. "I love you too." The operator picks up with a tinny '911, what's your emergency?' and she slips inside, shuts the door.

"I want to report a case of domestic abuse," I tell them. I give them Andrew's address, his description. I warn them he's violent. "They're on their way, Mina," I call to the bathroom. I settle into my chair and sip Mina's untouched tea, pulling a face at the lukewarm temperature. I dump it down the sink and am brewing up a second pot when I get a call. "Hello?" I ask, propping the phone on my shoulder.

"You are the one who called about Andrew Lawson?" asks a gruff male voice.

"Yeah," I reply, catching my breath. "He attacked my sister."

"Would you be willing to come down to the morgue and confirm the body is your sister's?"

Air leaves my lungs. An enormous hand has wrapped itself around my ribcage and squeezed. "The what?"

"The body of the woman we discovered in his apartment. Asian, early thirties, bludgeoned. The face is intact enough to identify, but we'll need a positive confirmation for the eventual trial."

His voice is drowned out by the thumping noise in my ears, growing louder and louder. Dimly, I register that it's my heartbeat. The phone drops to the ground. Moving of their own accord, my legs walk to the bathroom. My hands turn the doorknob; Mina never even locked it. It's exactly as I left it this morning. The only face in the cabinet mirror is mine. My knees give and all of a sudden I'm sprawled in a heap on the floor, my world narrowing to nothing beyond the *th-thump, th-thump* in my ears. A high-pitched shriek cuts through the beating, extending one long, discordant note. The teakettle is boiling.

Jackalope

By SKYE CALDWELL

CW: Body Horror

When I was in the seventh grade I found a scalpel after school.

I think it belonged to my mom. There was nowhere else it could have come from. She was a surgeon, and she worked a lot. Still, after I snatched it off the kitchen countertop, she never asked me about it, never even mentioned it. But I was a twitchy kid, not quite ADHD, but I moved around a lot, mostly when things moved around me. A ball falling from a stray toss in the play yard or the random glint of a far-off keychain made me jump and straighten. And this scalpel almost glowed. The black, black, veiny marble counter it was sitting on reflected a kind of halo around the silver knife, anything but subtle. I halted as soon as I stepped through the door. And just as quickly I was across the room, and the thing was in my hand, a dull ring echoing from where it had bumped the counter when I picked it up. It was exactly what I needed.

I probably didn't need to bring it to my room, I didn't really need to wait either. It wasn't like my mom had been home, she wouldn't have been for awhile. But paranoia threaded hooks into my fingers and pulled me to leave the little scalpel under my pillow and shove my twitching backpack under the bed. Both stayed put until I heard the creak of the front door open. I had made myself dinner hours ago and sat waiting on the bed with my pajamas on, my feet dangling over the floor. She came up to see me after an hour of rustling and clanking in the kitchen, a kiss on the cheek, and it was to bed. It would be a while before I slept.

I wiggled my way across the bed and grabbed around under the pillow until my hands closed around the little scalpel hidden beneath. Letting my feet fall to the floor, I padded across the room to stand in front of the mirror that was propped on my dresser. I jerked my shirt over my head and onto the ground, glancing up then halting under my own reflected gaze. The brightest thing in the room, the little mirror winked at me, and I stood transfixed for a long moment. I watched the way my whole body seemed to move with my breaths, growing more and more rapid, stuttered. I finally began to lift the hand holding the scalpel, and that stuttered too. By now, all of me was shaking. Where the room had seemed to hang in the air moments before, now it was buzzing around me, through my skull. I had to force my breaths to slow,

make my chest fall calm and flat, so I could raise the little knife to the smooth flesh.

I cut in slow, deep lines. They weren't as straight as I would have liked, but they weren't messy. The skin, muscle and fat parted as one. Until there was a crooked rectangle outlined in small wells of blood over the left side of my chest, where I knew my heart was. I pried gently at the shape with my fingernails, lifting and wiggling it out of place little bits at a time until it slid out, like a loose puzzle piece. The little knife cut its way through the ribs just the same, sliding through like wet clay and leaving me with small stretches of bone in a pile with the flesh. All that remained was a rectangular hole in me, beating heart open to see, and I cut it out.

Like everything else, the scalpel sliced the arteries quietly, letting their ends dangle until the last cut was made and I could slip the little organ from my chest. I placed it down on a towel I had spread over my comforter, then folded onto my knees to pull the backpack from beneath my bed. It was still now as I eased it gently down on my mattress, pulling at the zipper slowly to dampen the noise. And with just as much care, I reached in and lifted out a small balled towel. I pulled back the folded corners to reveal the rabbit inside, pure black eyes looking up at me.

I attended a public school, it didn't have a lot of money. No one really cared. It was obvious by the play yard, or the building itself. A cube of grey brownish stucco moored in the concrete of the parking lot, back facing the open desert. That's where they let us play. A chain-link fence stopped our progress into the parking lot, but among the craggy rock and saguaros we had free rein. So the kids made a game. They gathered up whatever sticks they could find, filled their pockets with rocks, and went rabbit hunting.

There were hundreds of them, and I don't know why they stayed. But behind every boulder, under every bush, in every hole that cracked open under the heat, you could find them. They would hide until they couldn't deny they had been found any longer, and then their little gray bodies would streak across the dry earth until they found a new hole. They were so fast, the hunting parties almost never caught them, and never while I was

around to see. But school was out, and mom wasn't home today. She wouldn't be for a while. So I stayed late in the play yard and watched the other children.

I let myself straggle around the back of their little pack, trying to inch in to join the fray, but I never said a word. When someone noticed my advance they would look me in the eye with a kind of question, and I would just stare back, pupils blown wide and black, unblinking. Someone would shrug, turn their back and lead the hunting party on, leaving me to fall back and watch, wait. Until they caught one. It was smaller than normal, a lot smaller, only about the size of my fist. That's probably the only reason they were able to catch it. Weak, with legs too short to make the kind of escapes I'd seen other rabbits make in the past. It got stuck in its mad dash, back leg becoming hooked in a scrap of chain link fence half-buried in the ground. Just as quickly the pack of children descended on it, pulling the wire away from the creature and dangling it in the air by the same foot that had been stuck. A loud bunch of hoots and yells rose up, someone was chanting, but I didn't hear any of it.

I punched through the barricade of people that made up their little hunting party and pushed myself into a run to reach the middle of the group. I grabbed the rabbit with both hands and ducked under a swipe from the kid that had been holding it seconds before. Suddenly the yelling from earlier took on a much different tone, and it was all around me as I weaved between the people on my out and away. And then I ran. It felt like the fastest I had ever run in my life. Everything seemed to blur around me but the motion of the pack at my back and the shiny new metal of the chain link gate that opened to the parking lot. I got pretty close, but as everything blurred I lost my footing, my awareness. My leg was caught on a half buried rock, and it sent me tumbling to the ground, rabbit clutched to my chest in a protective ball. The world was a different kind of blurred now, filled with pain from the impact and sharper pricks of cuts and skinned elbows.

It was nothing like when the pack finally caught up, the first to arrive stomping down on the leg that had become caught, pinning me to the ground. Another wave of jeers swelled in the kids as they made a new circle with me in the middle. And this time faster. All of them seemed to move so fast, every step forward to close the distance made with no visible movement, they were just suddenly there. Everything about them seemed to glint, by their movement and zippers and belt buckles shining in the setting sun. And I was moving fast too. My eyes bounced over and off of each of them in

a way that seemed to layer them together into one looming thing. I could feel my heart in my chest like I could feel nothing else, just the sheer momentum of everything around me. I could move faster. I could race my own heart; I could protect this little rabbit that I felt vibrating at my chest. I could save both of our stumbling pulses if I made it through that gate. So I did. Now I didn't hear anything of the hunting pack behind me. Everything was silent to my ears, but the rapid beating I could feel everywhere in me, and it pushed me on and away. They couldn't touch me. I ran all the way home.

The little rabbit looked up at me and I looked at it in a way that I hadn't yet. I looked at it. I looked it in the eye and stood there in silence but for the sound of its heartbeat. I don't think it was scared, that's just the way we were. It wasn't even scared when I lifted it off the bed and brought it to stand with me in front of the mirror, and neither was I. It didn't squirm when I lifted it to the new cavity in my chest and gently fit it inside, it just looked at me and I looked at it, eyes flooded with black pupils, bodies twitching slightly. I slid the chunks of rib into their place between the wider stretches of bone, clicking and fastening. The little black eyes looked at me from between the bars. It still didn't look scared; it didn't feel scared. Just fast. It began to beat its little feet against the bars of my ribs in a steady rhythm, and for the first time since I had severed the last artery, I felt the stir of movement in my body again, a beating heart. It was faster than the last. This little rabbit was safe behind the bars of bone. The patch of skin and muscle I placed over the open hole kept the beating thing warm. And this little rabbit was fast enough to keep up with me, my darting eyes and flinches and sprints. It kept me quick.

I've lost the scalpel. The organ too, though that was on purpose. I threw it away the very same night. Why should it stay when this little rabbit can keep up with me in a way the original organ never could? But its beats are hard, rapid and jarring. I can feel the ribs it kicks against crack and give a little more every day. More and more I wish I had kept my heart and the scalpel to put it back inside. I can feel myself slowing and settling, but the little rabbit is still afraid.

severed strings

By ORION WINNIER

everyone has a soulmate. we walk this earth not once, not twice, but countless times. each rotation is a unique experience where we meet new people, taste new foods, visit new places, but there are souls that you're destined to meet. destined to love. souls that are inexplicably connected to your own in a way that is almost ineffable. everyone has a soulmate; except me.

i know my soul is old. i feel it in the way i wake in the mornings. in the way i roll over expecting someone else, in the way i walk into rooms reaching for light switches that don't exist, in the way i instinctively know the lyrics to songs long forgotten. my soul is older than the trees littering the skyline out my window, older than each of the buildings i walk past on my way to class. it's not uncommon for me to recognize people—my best friend, for instance. he was there when i was a single dad, struggling to braid the long black locks of my only daughter in our crumbling one bedroom, victorian style apartment. and when i was a reclusive maiden, locked away in my country cottage, afraid of the sunlight. his partner too, his soulmate, always one step behind him in their many iterations.

no matter how much i search, no matter how many times i tug on the red string of fate that is supposedly connecting us through time and space, i feel nothing. it's as if something has been severed. a clean cut that not only cut our connection, but deep into my ability to love. alternatively, and this is a thought upon which i try my best not to dwell except for on my darkest days, perhaps i never had a string to begin with. it's possible i was put on this earth alone, destined to always be the second option to entertain until the right person comes around. i see those around me waltzing through life, weaving delicate, beautiful tapestries with the person or people with whom they were meant to be, and i am alone.

on those darkest nights, i think about everyone i thought could have been on the other side of that connection. i think about dark rooms, 3 am walks on chilly evenings. i think about heartbreak, isolation, despair. i think about the endless and insistent romantic turmoil i face, knowing that i will repeat this process over and over, my physical form deteriorating until it is finally put to rest.

some souls are made to love. you can feel it in their presence. when they walk in, a warmth gradually fills your very essence until you feel full, and then they leave. those people radiate happiness, making them utterly desirable. they're the type of people naturally born to be popular, in the least problematic or toxic way possible. some souls are made to love, but my soul is made to hurt. i am designed to crumble and chip until there's barely any part of me left. giving, giving, giving, in hopes that maybe i too will become someone worth loving.

everyone has a soulmate, someone they are destined to love. everyone, that is, but me.

Late Autumn

By MAX G NOBEL

It had been a year since her father had left the world. Right at the end of the month. Without circumstance.

It had been decided that they would find a place for all of his things within that time. They had started with the books, all interrupted at various points in their middles with the printed-out train tickets he used to mark his place, invariably more faded than the stories they were nestled inside. The ones they hadn't read already were paired with the wine bottles in the kitchen, appearing far more aesthetically refined together than anything they could have curated through deliberate selection. The assortment of volumes and reds seemed to speak to each other's significance, to signal a greater meaning being embodied by the space for living the two of them had gradually composed for themselves. Most of the other things went to boxes, to her siblings, to collectors who lived 90 minutes in the direction away from the city, taking up the larger part of multiple Saturdays.

By the time an unusually warm spring had silently given way to an unusually mild summer, they had found a place for everything, with the exception of the oak and leather chair. It was one of those objects that, growing up, had always been more broken in than the rest of her house. Only her father used it, pulling it out to his right as he came to the table and scooting it in behind him as he sat for dinner. Both of these motions were performed without any excess of effort, their rhythm familiar and carefully controlled. The sounds of its legs placed on the floor were an accepted signal that she could begin to retrieve her silverware from the sides of her plate. When guests were hosted, they always volunteered to sit elsewhere along the table. There was a sense that sitting in the chair was a learned activity, something you couldn't fall into absent any assumptions or thought. For all the seamlessness it took on, as part of the scenery of every dinner she had at home, it was clear that her father's manner of being present as he sat there was a conscious practice.

It was a manner of which they both knew acutely they weren't capable. To make no mention of the fact that the chair didn't go with anything else in their kitchen. It threw all the other objects they had accumulated into sharp relief, not able to help but accentuate how designed, how purchased, everything in their house was. Everything was still too pristine, defined by the idea of their life right now, not yet broken in with the textures of its experience. They seemed to have spent the entire year waiting for the point past which this phase of their lives would exist independent of their conceptions. The point past which it would manifest in all the little details they left unnoticed, its material beginning to grow worn, inscribed with creases and tears and indentations small enough to hold ghosts.

Bathroom, my midnight destination

By AMELIA MORIARTY

The room was not all dark. Street lights outside glowed through the blinds. She watched colors grayish purple and grayish blue fade in and out as late night buses or early morning commuters drove past. She watched these colors while lying still and imagining them easing her back into sleep. She would not be eased.

The air was thick with body heat and stale smoke. Her stomach had tied itself in knots. She rolled away from him, loosening herself from the constriction of tangled limbs but carefully. Squirring around on the bed only aggravated him. After running her tongue around the roof of her mouth and the back of her teeth, she sat up. She scratched away at the thin film along her front teeth and between her canines, running her tongue over after to evaluate her progress. She tried to remember the last time she brushed her teeth. It had been the day before, but early in the day, and not again after a late-night ice cream cone and a bag of baked onion puffs in bed.

She reached around to the desk beyond the headboard for water. Holding the tall glass bottle eased her some, but the water itself was tepid and gurgled around in her knotted stomach. "I can't sleep." She said to him. "I think I need to go take a shower."

He scrunched his face without opening his eyes. "What? Why do you get to do this?" "Huh? I can't sleep. My head hurts. Is it alright if I take a shower?"

He shoved her arm mumbling. "Fine. Go."

She lifted herself over his legs to get out of the bed without squishing him. She picked up several articles of clothing on the ground looking for a t-shirt before going to the closet. She slipped into a pair of slides at the door.

"I'm locking the door behind you."

"What?" She leaned back toward the bed to hear him.

"If you go now," he repeated, still without opening his eyes, "I'm locking the door behind you."

"So... I should take the keys?"

After waiting without answer, she slipped into a pair of slides at the door, pulled on a windbreaker and put the lanyard with

the keys in the pocket. She walked quietly down the hallway so as to avoid startling any of the sleeping residents. She took the elevator down to the lobby and exited through the front entryway onto the street.

The night air was cool and the sky was grayish-blue and mostly black but for the light pollution and twinkling stars of nearby planets. This was the time of night when the atmosphere was least clouded by city smog, and the streets were the least clogged with activity. She did not need to maneuver through pedestrians, stumbling over feet and birds, as she made her way to the corner store. Leaves were turning orange and crisp, but she did not need to pull the jacket tightly around her body. The air was warm enough.

She did not think about how, on any other night, she would still be bumping shoulders with strangers hurrying to their midnight destinations on these streets. She would be exhaling a visible cloud as her warm breath met the frigid air.

Full of signs and electrified advertisements, the windows of the store glowed soft orange, tangerine, and other citrus. She opened the door, jingling the bell. Without lifting his head, the cashier acknowledged her with a wave inside. She stuffed her fists deep into her pockets and passed the stocked shelves of the convenience store. Her slides slapped on the smooth floor tiles. Through the convenience store, she entered the dining hall.

The place was called The Fort. The oak walls held several framed newspaper clippings and best eatery certificates. She slid into an oak booth studded with red cushions. An assortment of jams, jellies, and marmalades were stacked in the metal holder on the side of the table beside the ketchup and hot sauce.

When the waiter greeted her with a laminated menu, she handed it back and asked for a glass of orange juice and two slices of toast.

"The bathroom key too, please."

"Of course, I can get that for you right away, ma'am." He bowed gracefully as he left and returned swiftly with the bathroom key. "Here you go, ma'am. And we'll have that breakfast out for

you in just a few moments.”
“Thank you.”

After the waiter disappeared again into the kitchen, she slid out from her booth and walked through the diner, winding around the bar and the spinning stools to enter the lounge in the back.

She passed through this room and up the staircase where a pair of white slippers waited for her. She stepped into them, leaving behind her slides.

The door at the top of the stairs opened into a wide tile hallway, shining a soft shade of white, barely blue. The further she walked, the more bubbles floated past her until the hallway opened up into the welcome desk. Two receptionists ran about pulling towels from the rack and checking guests in. As she neared, one paused his bustling to attend to her. He grinned a welcoming smile and accepted the bathroom key from her, handing her back a stack of plush towels, a terry cloth robe and caddy of shower essentials. “Enjoy your stay!” She thanked her gracious hosts and followed the other female guests through the winding hall, until finding the door with her nametag. Her name was written in an elegant cursive script below a yellow duck.

The small, humble door opened into a spacious, private stall, every corner of tile polished, the walls a smooth, classical marble. Almost turquoise and already steaming, the water in the bath was ready for her. Starlight twinkled down from a large window in the ceiling. The moon peeked in through one of the tall windows paneling the top of the far wall.

Skin prickling in anticipation, she stepped out of her slippers and peeled off her street clothes, throwing them in the hamper. She eased herself into the water and her body shivered in pleasure.

She soaked until her fingers pruned. The water, lapping around her torso, had massaged the knots from her stomach allowing her to nearly ease into sleep at times. She soaked until pale morning light began streaming in through the windows and her appetite returned.

Just in the moment that her mind wandered to the memory of the marmalade from the diner, her door rang. From the other side, someone had given a tug on the string winding up to a small bell tucked in a pocket above the doorway.

A muffled voice then declared, “Room service!”

She waited a moment, then hopped eagerly from the bath. Enveloped only in steam, she padded her way barefoot and nude to peek behind her door outside. She found her breakfast there waiting for her on a tray.

She pulled the tray inside and unfolded the legs onto one of the benches. She sat beside and surveyed her meal. Two slices of humble toast had been joined by two perfectly poached eggs on a bed of spinach and onions, homefries, braised tomatoes, crisp bacon and orange slices. She checked outside the door again and brought in the stand of condiments she had missed.

She took a sip of the orange juice, freshly squeezed, before digging into the meal itself. She burst the yolk of one of the poached eggs and soaked it up with a slice of toast, piled with greens and tomatoes. The other toast she spread with marmalade. She dipped the potatoes in ketchup and finished with the fruit.

Nibbling on a slice of orange, she thought that now would be a good time for a cup of coffee, after waking so early.

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin and underneath found a copy of the laminated menu. Holding the menu in one hand, she picked up the phone handle with the other and placed her order. Finished, she returned the phone to its cradle hanging on the wall.

She wrapped herself in the robe and again put on the slippers. When her coffee arrived, she carried the mug out to the balcony. From this vantage point, she could see now that the steam billowed out from the bathhouse and poured out into the landscape. As far as she could see, the sky shone softly blue from above, and faded into even softer steam below, like a land of clouds. Or perhaps the bathhouse had lifted off as she soaked and now she was looking into only the sky.

She sipped from her coffee mug and sat down at a tall, round table cafe-style. She crossed her legs under her robe and surveyed the landscape.

She did not think about how the bathhouse employees had taken away the hamper for washing, along with the windbreaker, holding the apartment keys.

Godhunters

By IDA HOLCOMB

There were five of them. Heroes, perhaps. Villains, maybe. It could be hard to know. Indeed, little was known about them, save a name whispered, rumors of hard people with sharp eyes and sharper blades. People who saw the world for what it was, and who would break it until it was as they wished it to be.

The Godhunters.

There had been a pantheon, once. Five gods, revered and worshipped across the earth, by pious humans who knew better than to doubt, or to fail in their offerings. It seemed like a thing of ancient days, now, but there were still those alive who remembered praying and sacrificing at the temples of the great gods.

There were none still alive who spoke the gods' names.

Five gods. Names forcibly forgotten, expunged from tongue and ink alike. Still, even now every child knew what they were—or rather, what they had been.

God of Hearth.

God of Growth.

God of Sky.

God of Earth.

God of Death.

Of the five humans, almost nothing was known. People spoke of them—they were feared, revered, despised, loved. No one knew who they were, or how they had done what they had done. It was only known that the five had left, and when they returned a year and a day later, the gods were dead.

Legends abound about these five figures, sensational or demonizing or extolling. But never did any storyteller pry too close to the truth, for they prized their lives too highly to wish to learn what godkillers wanted secret. The true story has only been given once, when the Godhunters united for the last time, and each told the others what they had done.

What follows is that story.

Of five Godhunters, the first had found their way to the hearth of the gods. There, they had found a being of flame,

with warmth so comforting that it was all the fighter could do to not curl up before it and sleep forever.

Of five Godhunters, the second had travelled unseen to the hidden, green places of the world. There, they had found a maze of flowers so beautiful and fragrant that the thief wished nothing more than to stay and dance among them forever.

Of five Godhunters, the third climbed to the top of the highest tree on the highest mountain then existing. The air stretched out forever in every direction around them, and as they looked out into that infinite, ever-changing expanse, the mage very nearly lost himself to their curiosity forever.

Of five Godhunters, the fourth had strode the long earth for many years. They knew the texture of rock and the taste of dirt. Of all their companions, it was the ranger alone who paused, who wondered. Who wished, for just a moment, to abandon their task, and to allow the world to remain as they had known it, forever.

Of five Godhunters, the fifth went to the greatest, most populous of all the cities of humanity. There, they traveled to funerals, to deathbeds and graveyards, and amidst all of that grief, the bard was hard-pressed to do more than weep and weep forever.

In the hearth of the gods, the fighter shook the lethargy from their limbs and drew their axe. The blade turned white-hot as it swung towards the fiery god, but the metal was true and the arms behind it strong. And so the fighter learned that gods could bleed.

In a great garden, the thief slipped beneath lovely, soft flowers to the fruits below. These, too, were temptation incarnate, ripe and sweet. But with dagger rather than teeth did the thief pierce the fruit's exterior. With swift, sure hands, they stole the first seed.

Atop a tree, at the peak of a mountain, the mage tore their concentration away from the infinite expanse of sky. With skill born of years of study, the mage gathered all their magic into two carefully cupped hands. They then yielded to the tugging wind and let their fingers loosen, until like ink in water the magic held within began to spread and diffuse into the whirling breeze.

In the depth of the valley where five had met, the ranger reminded himself of what they had sworn to do. Tears fell from their face, sinking into the ground beneath them. A lingering look, a bittersweet farewell, and the ranger began to walk.

Among the greatest crowds of humanity, the bard dried their tears. At each life's passing, they told a story. One of body's failure and soul's passage. Of the dangers of the final journey. Of the key, the black iron key that opened every coffin as the god of death brought each soul safely to the other world.

The fighter's body was scorched and burning from each of the hearth god's blows. Yet though their arms shook with exhaustion and their skin blazed with fresh flames, they fought on. Their axe swung again and again and again, and with each of countless strikes, more drops of sizzling blood fell to the stone ground.

The thief was slow, and careful. Never did they give any hint of their presence, save for the thin cuts left in countless fruits and pods. One by one, they stole every seed in the deep, lush garden.

The mage sent their mind out to seek their wayward magic, and waited. By the time the sun had set seven times, it had reached the farthest reaches of the endless sky. By the time the sun had risen seven times more, all the air in the world was steeped in it. The mage reached out and gave the slightest of tugs. At the edges of the world, the magic moved, almost imperceptibly, back towards its master's hands. The edges of the sky moved with it. The mage grinned, and tugged again.

The ranger dug their toes into soft loam as they walked. They slept, and lay their head directly upon hard earth. They clung to the walls of deep fjords, form pressed against sheer cliffs. They raced laughing across the tops of plateaus. They sang duets with the echoes in caves, and wrote poems to mountains as they climbed them. Each journey was a return, each return a reunion, and so it was with joy that the ranger greeted every familiar landscape.

The bard spoke. At funerals, in bars, in dark alleys and the brightly lit centers of expensive rooms. They told of a black iron key that unlocked coffins for the god of death. And where they spoke, belief *shifted*, ever so slightly. It spread like ripples in a pond, and the bard knew well how to amplify the waves. They watched with the eyes of a proud, cautious parent, as a new ornament began to adorn caskets: a keyhole, wrought in iron for those who could pay, and painted in black for those

who could not. The bard whispered and shouted their tale until priests of death began to wear black iron keys around their necks wherever they went. Still, they spoke.

For a year, the fighter burned and swung their axe. Drop by drop, the blood welled upon a blade that burned ever hotter for it. Drop by drop, the god's flame dimmed. After a full year had passed, the metal of the axe glowed hotter and brighter than did the now flickering god. As the new day dawned, the fighter raised their now-brilliant axe and swung it down upon the neck of the God of Hearth. The flames flared for a last, brief instant, then faded to ash.

For a year, the thief stole from the god's garden. When a year was up, not a single seed remained to take, and the god had still detected nothing of their presence. As the new day dawned, the thief crept into the heart of the garden, where the god itself sat. The thief's knife sliced through the god's back, just as it had sliced through the flesh of so many fruits. Then, the thief reached out and, with no fanfare, plucked out the seed at the god's heart. The God of Growth fell to the ground, and moved no more.

For the remainder of the year, the mage called their magic back to themselves, one small pull after another. Each time, the boundaries of the sky shrank a little bit more, pulled along with the magic that suffused it. At the end of one year, all of the mage's magic—and all of the sky with it—was held once more between two cupped hands. As the new day dawned, the mage squeezed their hands together, and all the infinity of the God of Sky was compressed down to a single point, and then to nothing at all.

For a year, the ranger reminded the earth of their love of it. With each passing day, the god remembered that devotion. And, such a strange thing for a god, it wanted. It yearned to be seen in truth by the eyes that watched it with such affection. Stranger still, it yearned to know this ranger in return. After a year of waiting, of circling and wishing, the God of Earth and the ranger met. For the first time in all its existence, the great god formed itself into a single being, a form made of dirt and rock and clay. A being the ranger had never before seen, and yet had been looking at all their life. The two figures embraced, one of mineral and one of flesh. They spent hours together, each watching, learning, loving the other. Then the new day dawned, and the ranger leaned up to press a single, gentle kiss to the god's great boulder of a head. The God of

Earth's new form, so fragile and exposed, scattered into dust at the touch. The ranger wept.

Over the course of a year, the bard wove their tale. At the year's start, there were no stories to link the god of death with any sort of key, iron or otherwise. By the middle of the year, every story told how the god of death carried with it a black iron key. By the year's end, the God of Death *was* a key of black iron, finely wrought. In the stories, at least. But the bard knew

stories well. They knew that of all creatures, gods were formed of stories told. If a god's name was spoken, it could bring them back from any annihilation. And if the stories told that the God of Death was an iron key, then the God of Death was in truth an iron key. As the new day dawned, the bard drew from their pocket a key, finely wrought from the purest black iron. They dropped it to the street below and crushed it to powder beneath their boot.

Who Am I?

By SIDNEY FONG

A slave to grades. An addict gaining an injection of satisfaction from the sight of a high grade percentage, pulsing through my veins and arteries to sustain my wavering self-confidence. The permanence of the red-marked number, caged within its oval shape that bled through the lined paper crowded with graphite marks, shaped my mood for the rest of the day. Throughout the school day and after school, I was a gambler swiping my cell phone screen in a downwards motion, like the pulling of a slot machine lever, awaiting the newly imputed grade percentages to load in the online grading portal. Fingers double crossed and eyes sealed shut, praying for the machine to give me favorable numbers I worked hard for.

Cha-ching! Cha-ching!

Eyelids slowly peer open as my dry, cracked fingers release from its tight hold on one another. My heart drops to the floor of my stomach as my pupils rapidly enlarge in size upon seeing the score and percentage of my analytical literature essay on *Hamlet*. It was a 6. **B minus**. I repeatedly blink, trying to shift the numbers into more favorable combinations than the one on the screen. My mind adds decorations in an attempt to dress up the numbers with justifications. A heavy sigh shifts the eyes' focus away from the screen and towards the future, motivated to work towards achieving a higher grade. Ready to throw my precious coins into the slot machine again, dedicating all my efforts to complete other assignments whose higher grade percentages would hopefully outweigh that 6. Craving that injection of satisfaction followed by praise from family and teachers. Ah yes. That's the life of a studious student whose main life goal is to be picked by an Ivy League

college and successfully achieve a high-paying job. A stamp of ideal happiness. A's and a 4.5 GPA are what get you there. After studying for exams and completing homework for the school day tomorrow, I turn off my desk lamp and snuggle beneath the fuzzy bed covers. As my eyes seal shut, I transform into a character maneuvering around the knee-high, bright colored tables, arranged across the carpet covered with numbers 1 to 10 and the alphabet written in italic form. In the back of the room, I see a figure clothed in a cotton, magenta, knee-length dress covered with pink and purple flowers overlaid with an oversized smock. Hair pulled back into high pigtails. Her white velcro shoes planted firmly on the step stool, balanced evenly on the linoleum floor. An easel twice the size of her height held the white paper intact as it was dotted with rainbow streaks from her paintbrush. The brush moved freely, choosing to place the streaks anywhere without any doubt imposed by outside influences or external judgments.

Her eyes reflected the sparkle from the beam of afternoon sunlight entering the open window behind the easel as she intently focused on each brush stroke. A front-toothless smile formed with the parting of her lips upon stepping back in genuine awe to view the clash of colors on the white background, coincidentally matching with the color-alternating, blinking lights arranged across the bottom edges of her velcro shoes. I eagerly reach my hand to touch the back of the familiar-looking easel as my feet stagger towards the easel's edge to sneak a peek of the canvas's front. As my hand approaches the easel's back frame, the easel and the girl transform into a glittering swirl that slowly ascends towards the sky, blurring the image's clarity. Out of my arm's reach. Leaving me in the pitch black darkness...

How did she end up becoming a figment of my imagination?

Ring! Ring! Ring! Snooze button. *Ring! Ring!* Ugh. I'm up. I'm up.

Mr. Persimmon hands back our literature essays on *Hamlet* that are labelled with our final grade on the back side of the paper. Right after each essay descends front side down on each desk, students anxiously flip through the graphite-marked pages to see their score marked in red ink. Whispers ripple across the classroom, forming high sound waves bouncing back and forth between groups of desks.

"I got a 6."

"Hey, me too. We can do better next time! There's more essays to come!"

"I got a 9! That's 110%! I finally got a perfect score under Mr. Persimmon's hard grading standards!"

6. Branded across my frontal lobe. Defined my essay performance. Defined everyone's essay performance by their ability to hit all the standard points of a 5-paragraph analytical essay. Did this determine how sucky a writer I was? Was there anything else that could validate my writing abilities?

Yet, I continued to engage in trying to earn that 9 for my literature essays, yearning for the glory of completing the perfect essay.

The results of fulfilling the usual tasks of completing assignments, participating in discussions, and studying for and taking tests for eleven and a half years all contributed to the shaping of the esteemed Valedictorian trophy awarded at the official graduation ceremony. I continuously stared at the building progress of my trophy daily, with a microfiber cloth and squirt bottle filled with cleaning solution in hand. The sight of a single question on a college admissions application sent an electric shock through trophy making operations, abruptly stopping the final touches to my perfect "Grade A" trophy. "Why should we especially consider you for admission to our college, amongst the rest of the applicant

pool?"

Yes, I am hard working and always give 110% effort in each assignment no matter what, but a lot of my classmates also put lots of time and effort into their work too. I have a 4.5 GPA, I took AP and Honors classes, I completed community service hours, and I participated in a number of extracurricular activities...

which everyone else has also done.

I followed this path meticulously, focusing on achieving the "Grade A" trophy that would supposedly open doors to any top ranking or Ivy League college and a guarantee of high-paying jobs to secure a comfortable lifestyle. A display of pristine accomplishment. One of the largest injections of satisfaction. Yet, why do I feel lost? Who am I?

With the guidance from college counselors, who questioned my current aspirations and goals and withdrew the cell phone screen loading the grade portal from my raw, peeling hands for six months, plans for my future became clearer. My attention was now directed towards looking within myself for what I truly wanted: to be free to exhibit my skills without being tethered by grades. My cracked skin peeled off my fingers and body, revealing a tiny girl dressed in a magenta dress and white shoes tucked under the folds of a large, deflated balloon that had once formed my physique for eleven and half years. A balloon that had brimmed full of injections of satisfaction from receiving high percentage grades. A balloon that formed a person who believed grades were necessary for encouraging and motivating better personal future performance. The tiny girl stepped out from amongst the piles of dead skin, ready to re-assume control of my body.

Self-Defensive Defenestration on a Tuesday at 12:30

By JULES DUBEL

CW: Mental Illness, Violence, Self-Harm

“Don’t touch me! I’m God!”

The girl, a molehill of late teenager, lopsided in form and gait for no apparent reason other than innate constitution, brandishes her razorblade like a Wall Street banker gives you his card. She’s backed into a corner, you see, dear listeners; a frothing, desperate corner at the end of the third floor therapy unit by the overlook window with the out-of-season paper snowflakes still taped up. Petition: we should take those down. It’s August. This girl in the hallway, she’s got a wild look in her eyes. They’re gleaming brown like a bottle cracked open along the ocean’s spine, and between that and the signature jaw clench of Nurse Simons (he’s standing far right, for those of us lucky enough to have a visual) I’d say we’re in for a good solid tussle, folks. In setting the scene, I’ll tell you all I know so far, but keep in mind radio is an imperfect art and I, despite having seen this event from its poorly conceived genesis 20 minutes past lunch block, know barely more than any of you. Keep an ear to the wall for more.

Ana Luiguy is the 17-year-old daughter of a Mr. Patrick Luiguy and a Mrs. Alice Luiguy. The former finds employment as a local realtor. The latter is listed as a homemaker, probably because she cares for Ana’s two siblings. Oh, and a dog, Bongo. It’s funny though, because Ana’s listed as having a dog dander allergy. They need to update these intake forms. Or maybe Bongo’s hypoallergenic. Anything is possible in the infinite expanse of our impossibly complex, existentially indifferent universe, listeners. Bongo could indeed have no dander. And speaking of pet ownership, Ana has been a resident inpatient at our very own Red Rock Resort and Mental Hotel since March 3rd, 2019! Wow! Let’s give her a hand, listeners. A five month anniversary is no scoffable feat. Not anything close to the record of Old Screaming Abby, but if we do not take the time to celebrate the small moments in life, then I’m afraid I will simply go mad. HA! Look!

“Where did you take him, you fuck-rats? Where did you put him? He wants to be with me! I’m The Absolute! Stay away! I can smite you with one glance! I am faith incarnate! You can’t deny me this!”

Update on the current scenario: Ana, a stringy mess of brown hair and blood dressed in white has begun vocalizing threats to some of our favorite assistants. Speaking of the nurses, remember to pick your number for the tackle pool, folks. Those of you just tuning in may want a refresher on numbers: Johnson 15, Simons 60, Lazlo 23, and Whetter 46. A reminder that Nurse Grommel has had a knee injury since October and will NOT, I repeat, will NOT be eligible for flight-risk- tackle-pool voting until her meniscus surgery in August. That being said, the question any reasonable listener (along with irrational listeners, delusional listeners, or otherwise undecided types) is begging for the answer to in this situation is “Who is Ana talking about? Who is this mysterious He?” A close friend? A fellow patient? Or perhaps even a lover locked away from her grasp by the cruel chains of institutionalization? Oh my heart skims to see the youth love harder than life itself! Speaking of life, Ana’s is running out onto the floor quite quickly; a neat little pool of dark red is soaking her bare feet and our patented Red Rock sky blue linoleum. How did she get to be like this? Bleeding out and in desperate need of an unknown person, backed into a corner and in possession of a razorblade? Why, I’d say we’ll probably know more after this short commercial break:

Want to get in touch with a loved one who just won’t come to visitation? Tired of the butterless noodles from the cafeteria? Have a sneaking suspicion that people are calling you paranoid on your evals? Contact 1-800-233-GNITS for all your mental hospital contraband needs! No need to call, I’m not allowed to have a phone so just yell for me in room 238 on Floor 2. We carry letter stamps, ramen, razors

(non-reimbursable), fuzzy socks, medical forms, crocheted hats, assorted pills (must not be squeamish about other people's spit), pencils, candy, hamsters (also non-reimbursable), and more! Whether you're a manic who needs a good compulsive shopping spree, or a desperate depressive trying to write a legible last note, we've got prices so low you'll be able to afford anything and everything you never knew you needed to make your stay here absolutely starched lovely! For sale today, one time only, Ana Luiguy's chart once I'm finished reading it: swiped straight off Simons' desk as this situation first began and available a limited time only until the narcs notice I've got something I'm not supposed to have! I don't know why you'd want it, but the price has never been lower. Now only one single puzzle piece, yes, the missing one from the teacup puzzle in the rec room. I know everyone claims William ate it but I don't believe that shit. I know one of you has it stuck to your armpit or sock or pushed it under the couch, so if anyone has it externally on their person, please return it to the puzzle and this wildly intriguing, potentially terrible medical chart and a whole bunch of HIPAA violations can be yours today!

Welcome back listeners! More is unfolding at the current scene on Floor 3 that simply can not be missed.

"What happened to the man in room 90? What did you do with his stuff?!"

Ana is quite distressed now, panting and backed up against the large, bright window at the stub end of the hall. She uses the razor to make small cuts against her skin, popping off hostages, that well red like Kool-aid as she switches back, brandishing her metal threat at the semicircle of peppermint-clad nurses who warily try to approach her.

"Ana, Mr. Peterson from room 90 died last night. He'd been very sick. I'm sorry to have to tell you that."

Whetter going in with a soothing reality check. Classic move from our favorite beefy, blonde heartbreaker in charge of Ward B. Anyone would be lucky to be calmed by his silky voice.

"No! NO! His room! I know he died, I'm God! I hold life and death like marbles underneath the wet sandpaper of my endless tongue! I want to know what you did with all the

stuff from his room!"

She's getting blood all over the floor, kicking her feet like that. That's gotta be a hard mop for whoever's on janitor duty this evening. Oh? Here's the ever-reasonable Lazlo now to deal out a proposition, "Unfortunately if you left something there we can't get it back. Mr. Peterson's belongings have all been returned to his family. I'm more than happy to help you purchase a replacement of whatever you feel you've lost. You can even get extended internet time to find what you need."

Whetter and Lazlo have done a premium job in distracting our program's current protagonist, and for our more astute and seasoned viewers, you may notice that Simons has been increasingly quiet, sneaking up on the side there like that. A classic Ward C nurse trick. The old talk and tackle, get them explaining what it is they want, and then boom, right out of left field. Oh, oh, oh! Here he goes now! He's got her pinned from behind! And Ana's screeching.

"The respirator! I want the respirator! He was in love with me! I could feel it in the plastic. I could smell the beeps of his oxygen. It was all a code, he said he wanted to be with me, not that gross old man! I was going to take him back and make him divine! I can see into the machines and they feel more than the people! You're heartless people! He loved me and you took him away! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

Why, would you listen to that folks, Ana's got her heart set on a life support lad! Can't say I haven't had weirder crushes, but this is quite out there. I won't pretend to understand it, but I don't understand a lot of things. Life is complicated. People fall in love with medical equipment. However, it's not over yet, not by a long shot. Simons has got size and weight on her, but we all know the tackle isn't valid until they're on the ground and Ana is not going quietly. She's got the advantage of fervor. Simon's isn't fighting for true love, he's just got a paycheck and paperwork in this stock. My advice? Go for the eyes. Our nails are one of the few sharp things allowed to us by god and the safety management committee, so, pro-tip my fellow hooligans and nutcases: grow them out. They are incredibly useful in the gouging of fleshy parts when needed. And would you look at that? She's got the right idea! Go, Ana! Right in the sockets! Make his back hit glass! Oh? Oh! Oh God, the window! WATCH THE WINDOW!

Due to technical difficulties, our current programming is unavailable at the moment. Please check back in later for more Red Rock Radio and TV, brought to you by the independent work of Sole Atksy, resident and self-described lunatic of the highest order. If you enjoy your modern day asylum with 24/7 entertainment and professional narration, than please consider donating to room 238 any extra metallic candy wrappers or shiny foils as our next project will be a limited release docu-series following the paranoid schizophrenics from Ward D and their thoughts on alien life among us. Thank you for tuning in to our station, even though we don't have dials or radios or TVs except the broken one in the rec room that William sat on. Now back to our program.

Oh listeners, my voice is getting hoarse, but after the tragic event that has concluded on floor three, I have been told by the staff and the voices in my head that I simply must inform you of a couple of very urgent notices before signing off:

1. Craft therapy is postponed from Floor 3 indefinitely. There is broken glass everywhere and the area should be avoided by the general populace for the time being.
2. Ana's chart has been sold back to the staff for the low

price offered by Nurse Johnson of "Stop being a little shit and give that back or I'm frying your brain with the EC machine." Sorry for those interested in the deal, but I would still like that puzzle piece returned regardless.

3. Simons did indeed win the flight-risk-tackle pool as he and Ana both did make it to the ground. Unfortunately, this was a couple of stories higher than a usual tackle, so Simons has also won the very newly formed falling-from-great-heights pool. The prize for that, since no one was able to bet on it in time, goes to Ana, who is currently set to be reunited shortly with her beloved respirator, or a version of it anyways. Simons, however, will not be returning to work in the near future, or ever, as he is quite dead. However, if you are prone to hallucination, you may still see him anyways!

And that, my dear, crazy listeners, is all for now. Keep an ear to the wall, and remember: the damned souls you hear at night aren't truly trying to haunt you. It's just the sound of your own blood screaming through the endless cycle of torture that is circulation. Your heart will not stop beating and you can't do anything about it. You're an abomination and the world is a fake. Death is merely an illusion and God is now in a coma. See you next time!

Where is Waldo?

By MADI COLEMAN

It was a sad affair. All the pews were filled, leaving everyone else to squeeze in together. They were careful by the stained glass windows. The family didn't recognize many of their guests, but then again, their boy had picked up crowds of friends in his life. The minister nodded at two altar boys who then struggled to close the doors.

"Please be seated."

The family hugged each other close as they prepared themselves for the tearful ceremony. A couple of guests saw that the hug left some room on the pew and quickly slid in.

"So, where is Waldo?" the minister began. "We've been asking that question his whole life. But now there is no need

to search. His body may be going six feet under the ground, but Waldo lives on in each of us. We may have found him too late to save him, but he always found a way to make us smile."

The room shifted, as they remembered their various misadventures with their late friend.

"Ma'am?" the minister addressed Waldo's mother. "I am aware that the family wants to say a few words."

"Yes," she declared, and she tearfully made her way to the podium. "Hello. Thank you for making time to see my son off. Waldo was a bit of a character, wasn't he?" This got

knowing chuckles from the crowd. Even the uptight minister's straight line of a mouth ticked upward.

"I remember all the times I lost him in the supermarket or at the carnival," the mother continued. "Whenever I found him, though, he wasn't afraid. He wasn't crying. He just smiled, waved, and said, 'You set a new record, Mom!' God, I just wish... that I had found him earlier that fateful night. My son... why did you have to get lost in the railyard?"

At this, Waldo's brother jumped up and led his mother back to her seat, pushing off some guests to give his mother more room. Then he addressed the church. Nostalgia washed over him. "I was there when my little brother was born. He was late. The doctors had to perform a C-section. It was as if he wanted the doctors to work to locate him."

A couple of doctors in the corner exchanged amused glances. Waldo had almost made them lose their medical licenses. They were mad that day, but they would lose a million medical licenses for that boy.

The brother continued, "My brother and I looked so alike, my mother dressed us like twins for a while. She put little hats and striped shirts on us. As I grew up, I didn't want to dress like my little brother anymore. But he never stopped wearing his 'traveling clothes,' as he called them. And yet, our resemblance is still uncanny. I can't bear to look in the mirror because all I see is him. That's all anyone sees. In job interviews, I don't even get interviewed! The boss just looks at me, laughs, and calls in his associates, saying, 'Hey, I found him!' They laugh until I have to see myself out."

Waldo's sister spoke next. "Before he got glasses, Waldo would look in the mirror and panic. 'Where's Waldo?' he would shout over and over. When his glasses came in the mail, I put them on him and smiled. 'Here's Waldo,' I said. 'Here's Waldo,' he nodded. My brother was so friendly, too. I would take him to the park and he would run off and immediately make between 300 and 500 friends."

"Ol' Wally never did tell me where he was going. Sometimes he would leave the house and not come back for days," Waldo's wife, Wenda, said, smiling ruefully. "I would text him, asking where he was, but he would always respond saying that he couldn't tell me. Wally, our whole time together, I wanted to know where you were. But now I know where you are, and I would give anything for you to text me and keep me in the dark."

As Wenda took her seat, a man in a top hat rushed to the stage. "I know I'm not family," he conceded, "but I spent more time with Waldo than I did with my own family. We used to stand next to each other in the bazaar. He never bought anything. But he noticed me. And then people started noticing my vacuums because of him—especially after I started making my vacuums red and white striped. Thank you, Waldo." He then took off his top hat in mourning and squeezed into the front pew.

Suddenly Waldo's dog—Woof—howled, sensing danger.

"He was my best friend!" cried out a man wearing a yellow and black striped sweater. The room gasped. "Calm down! Yes, it's me: Odlaw." He stalked from the back of the room toward the podium. "Waldo was my nemesis. But he... he..."

Woof fell silent as he heard Odlaw shedding tears at Waldo's passing. "He gave me purpose, damn it!" The crowd turned to the minister and he waved it off. Grief manifests in different ways for different people.

"I never caught Waldo or his magical walking stick. But those days chasing him were the best of my life!" Odlaw fell to the ground in tears. Quietly the minister slipped something into Odlaw's hands. "His will dictated that you have this."

Odlaw felt power in his grasp as he held the smooth wooden cane. This only made Odlaw cry more. "Waldo!" he sobbed. The minister picked up the nemesisless man and carried him out of the room to the lobby to lie down.

Waldo's mentor and friend Mr. Wizard Whitebeard wrapped up the ceremony: "Waldo did a noble thing. He made people feel like they had a friend wherever they went. There was no moment of realization that he was waving at someone behind you. He was always waving at you."

"Rest in peace, my friend. May your ghost get lost in the graveyard every night."

Pre-Show Jitters

By SARAH BROWNLEE

Hannah felt alive when she was onstage. A sea of people in front of her, all hanging onto her every word. She was worth their time, their money. She lived in their heads rent-free. But she needed them, too. Their energy fed her, validated her, sustained her. And, of course, without them, she wouldn't have a career.

It was more than the people, though. It was her. When she was onstage, she was alone. She had no safety net. Sure, everything she said and did out there was carefully scripted and rehearsed, but there was always a possibility that she would forget the words. Maybe the lights would get in her eyes. Maybe a heckle would throw her off. Maybe her opener wouldn't get the laugh she wanted, and it would throw off her whole vibe for the night. It had happened before, and it would be stupid to think that it wouldn't happen again. Her hands trembled with anxiety, just like they always did. She had been performing for, what, fifteen years now, and her hands had never been steady leading up to a gig. That was why she never held props during her routines. *Comedy tip #1: Audiences can sense fear.* Don't let them think they can humiliate you.

She was supposed to go on in fifteen, so she was in the club dressing room. It was some shitty attic in Indiana, but everyone had performed there. The stairs you walked up as you entered the building had all these posters of comedians everyone knew, but from way back, before they were famous. These future celebrities had watched her as she had walked into the club for sound check earlier. A baby-faced John Mulaney had looked her dead in the eyes and whispered, "You're not good enough." Mitch Hedberg nodded in agreement. This happened every time she played here. It used to throw her off, but it didn't anymore. *Comedy tip #2: Don't compare yourself to them.* They were here, and now you're here.

Hannah was looking in the mirror, making sure her makeup was perfect. She hated makeup, but she wanted to be seen. In high school, she had been in a play without wearing makeup, and her mother had told her that her face looked like the moon. She had never gone onstage without makeup again. It was always like that with her mother. There was always that one little thing she would point out,

and it would stick in Hannah's brain for the rest of her life. Her eyeliner was a little crooked, but the audience wouldn't notice. Besides, at this point, her hands were too shaky to properly apply it. Her lipstick had faded, so she dug through her makeup bag for the right tube. She wore a neutral shade for this show. *Comedy tip #3: Your appearance determines what the audience expects from you, and you can get laughs by subverting expectations.* Don't get gimmicky, though.

She was supposed to go on in fifteen. She was supposed to be using this time to go to the bathroom, warm up her voice, hydrate. But she wasn't doing any of those things. Instead her shaky hands grabbed her phone and opened Twitter. She needed to see whether people were talking about her. Her tweet from earlier, the one about Stevie Nicks, was still getting noticed. Hannah thought Twitter was lazy comedy, thoughtless, even, but it was a good way to be seen, and, underneath it all, the likes and retweets made her feel good. *Comedy tip #4: Cast a broad net.* The more places you show up, the more people think about you.

She typed her name into the search bar. A few tweets from earlier popped up, stuff about being excited to see her tonight, here, in Indiana. One from that creepy guy, the one who came to both of her nights in Boston and wouldn't leave her alone after the shows. He never said anything mean, but his tweets made her feel gross. The fact that his compliments made Hannah feel good made her feel even worse. She put down her phone, annoyed.

Hannah's vibe was off. She couldn't be feeling gross right before she went on. She needed a distraction. Fortunately, Caroline, an employee at the comedy club, poked her head in the door. "Hey, you're on in ten."

"Ten, thanks," Hannah replied automatically. Then she looked up at Caroline. Caroline was pretty. Hannah had noticed that the minute they met. No ring on Caroline's finger. And she had blue hair. In Indiana, that meant something. "Hey, Caroline," Hannah said, before Caroline's head could duck back out of the doorway, "are you busy after the show? I haven't seen much of Bloomington."

Caroline smiled. "Well, it's no New York," she said.

"I'm sure we can find something to do," Hannah said.

Caroline looked at the floor, breaking eye contact. "Yeah, I'd love to show you around."

"I'm looking forward to it." Hannah smiled.

There was a pause, then Caroline took a step back. "Well, I have to—"

"Yeah," Hannah said. "I'll see you after the show."

"Yeah." Caroline said. Her head disappeared from the doorway.

Hannah closed the door and took a sip from her water bottle. She was feeling better already. She looked at the notes she took last night, right after the show. There was a part that she tripped over pretty badly the night before. It was a cheap shot at Ohio, which always worked. Hannah was from Dayton, so she figured she had every right to make fun of her home state. She had done it up in Ann Arbor the previous week, where, of course, it killed, but she had ended the joke with, "It could always be worse, I could be from Indiana." Got a lot of laughs. But now, Hannah was in Indiana, so that wouldn't work. She had changed the punchline to be about Michigan, which was a nice segue into her section on the Ohio-Michigan football rivalry, but last night, she almost said Indiana.

She recovered, but it was a close call. *Comedy tip #5: Never be mean to the whole audience at once.* She stood up and started pacing the small dressing room, holding an imaginary mic, repeating the lines over and over, barely louder than a whisper. "Everyone in Ohio wants to leave Earth. But hey, it could be worse. I could be from Indiana." The same mistake again. "Shit, ass, fuck, shit. Everyone in Ohio wants to leave Earth. But hey, it could be worse. I could be from Michigan. I could be from Michigan. I could be from Michigan." Her stomach was clenching up. "Oh, fuck."

She sat back down, took another sip of water. The bottle was almost empty, so she filled it up from the sink in the bathroom. She chugged about half the bottle, then filled it back up again. *Comedy tip #6: Hydrate.*

Her leg was bouncing. Her throat was dry, despite the water. Her hands were still shaking. This was good. This nervous energy was good. Pure adrenaline. She needed that. *Comedy tip #7: Don't get complacent.* If you're not nervous, you're not doing anything interesting.

Hannah looked at her phone. Four minutes until showtime. What if she utterly failed? This was a game she played often, running through every possible outcome. If she went out and didn't say anything at all, just stood there for a moment and ran off, what would happen? Or worse, if she was straight-up mean to everyone in the audience, everyone

who had paid money to see her. What would happen? The club wasn't huge, and it was in Indiana. Nobody important was going to be there, right? Right? Bloomington was only three hours away from Dayton, and what if someone she knew had driven down? She had done that, once, in high school. What if her parents had driven down? They would have told her, right? They would have said they were coming. Unless they were trying to surprise her. But why would they do that? Oh, fuck, what if her parents were here?

What if they were outside, right now, and after the show they would want to talk, and her mother would say something about her eyebrows or her stomach, and her father would say it was a great show, but, and give her some advice that proved how little he understood her. Or what if he didn't? What if he got mad at her for insulting Dayton, where he, like her, was born and raised? What if neither of them said anything at all? What if they just left and drove back home to stupid fucking Dayton, because, in their eyes, Hannah had failed so miserably it wasn't even worth it to lie? What if she had finally done it, confirmed to her parents that they had raised a failure?

Okay, this was bad. Hannah recognized this anxiety, the paralyzing kind. She took a few deep breaths, trying to rationalize her way out of this spiral. Her parents weren't going to be here, and if they were, which they weren't, they would love and support her even if she bombed. But she wasn't going to bomb, and even if she did, her parents wouldn't know, because they weren't here. No big deal.

Hannah's leg started bouncing again. She sighed, relieved. Back in the sweet spot. She looked at her phone. Two minutes until showtime. She drank more water. No big deal. No big deal. Michigan, not Indiana. You got this. You got this. You got this. She took a few deep breaths.

Someone knocked on the door. Hannah stood up, opened it. It was Caroline.

"It's time! Are you ready?" Caroline said.

"Let me just check everything," Hannah said. She looked in the mirror. Hair was good, makeup was good, outfit was good. She ran a hand through her hair, falling into her stage persona. The nerves were still there, but she hid them beneath a brash, swaggering exterior. "I'm ready."

"You don't need to check, you look good," Caroline said.

Hannah smiled. "So do you. I'll see you after the show."

Hannah cracked her neck and stepped out into the club. The lights were bright, just how she liked it. It helped, not

being able to read the expression on anyone's face. She sauntered onto the stage. People clapped. She set her water bottle down on the stool and took the mic out of the mic stand, wrestling with it for just long enough to pull a face and get a quick, cheap laugh. *Comedy tip #8: In for a penny, in for a pound.* If they laugh once, they'll do it again.

She put her left hand to her forehead and squinted, scanning the crowd. The room was almost full, pretty much what she had expected. Hannah had played this club a couple times before, always to a much emptier room. "Well, shit, looks like we got a crowd tonight. So, uh, I'm from Ohio. Dayton, to be—"

Sitting at a table, about halfway back, were two familiar faces. A tall man, salt-and-pepper hair, horn-rimmed glass-

es. A short woman, hair dyed brown to cover the gray, strong eyebrows. Her parents. Fuck.

Hannah could feel her facade start to slip. She dropped her hand a little, then raised it back, then dropped it all the way. Definitive moves were good. Audiences can smell fear. She forced her face back into an assured smirk. "-to be exact, so it's great to, great to be here." She wasn't in it anymore. Shit, shit, shit. "Actually, it's great to be anywhere that isn't Dayton, Ohio." Solid laugh, but she could feel herself floundering. She turned to grab her water bottle, but it was too soon. She hadn't built up enough momentum.

As she turned, she caught sight of Caroline standing in the hallway. Caroline was laughing.

Hannah was alive, and she would be okay.

The River

By ANONYMOUS

*Oh, I beg of you,
Give me one more second,
One more moment of breath with you.*

It didn't take Allison long to realize time was like a river. The same water coursing through the same veins, the same people growing up and dying in circles; it was a wonder that anyone got anywhere at all. She'd spent the first few years obsessing over the people who came to visit her. She laughed when they laughed, sat with them, and even laid her head on their shoulders. There was just one problem: she hated when they cried. Maybe that's how she'd ended up so jaded. She simply couldn't understand it. Even when she sat right next to them, it wasn't good enough. No, somehow she needed to be more. It was hard not to take it personally. Over time, they visited less, and then disappeared completely. Sometimes Allison wondered if something was wrong with her. She'd always expected that she'd spend a little more time smelling the roses, and then go and join her mother, play checkers, talk about the weather, maybe get married. When it became clear that was never going to happen, she tried taking up a hobby.

For a few months, Allison tried living in a sorority's attic. She had never gotten a chance to join a sorority, but her sister was once part of one, and she'd always been jealous. She spent most nights banging some dusty chairs together. She tried to figure out how to play Beethoven on the upright piano, but she never got much farther than "dying bee run

over by several unicycles in quick succession". Unfortunately, Allison was quickly evicted. Turns out, Catholic priests and holy water are pretty effective after all.

After that, she tried hiking. She waited at the foot of a mountain for tourists to come, and then she joined any group that didn't look like it was full of serial killers, triathletes, newlyweds, or vegans. Unfortunately, Allison had never quite gotten over her fear of heights. She was fine for the first couple of miles up the mountain. The trees were perfectly pleasant, and she saw new kinds of butterflies each time. She especially liked it when the hikers had picnics. Of course, they never saw her or offered her any food, but Allison liked trying to guess what someone might eat for lunch based on their appearance. Her favorite picnic was the time a burly, lumberjack-looking fellow ate only marshmallows. Allison laughed about that for weeks.

The views from this mountain were supposed to be spectacular, and Allison wanted to appreciate them so badly. She was fine, so long as she didn't look, but once she heard the group oo-ing and ah-ing, she couldn't help but try and see for herself. Naturally, whenever she did that, she would start screaming uncontrollably. The hikers would run in a panic back down the mountain, and she'd never see them again. After five or six of these incidents, the hiking trail closed for some kind of investigation. Allison missed those hikers, but she went home and gave up on hobbies.

Now, Allison spent most of her time relaxing in the graveyard. It was a little cold at night, but it was peaceful. Lonely, but peaceful. Allison still didn't feel at home in the graveyard and wished she had someone to keep her company, but at least it had been a few months since the last attempted exorcism.

This was Allison's third November since giving up hobbies. She didn't quite believe in days or nights anymore. Maybe it had been too long since those things mattered. Today was November 13th. What used to mean her birthday was only a few days away. Allison didn't see much point in celebrating it now. After all, she wasn't getting any older or younger these days. She had a full 72 hours of staring at her own headstone planned, which was almost a celebration, so long as you don't believe in any part of the word 'celebration'. Allison settled into the grass and fixed her eyes on her own fading name. Not five minutes later, she heard something.

"Who's there?" She asked. She was cheerful, not scared. A visitor would be a welcome change of pace. "Are you here to talk to me?"

Something rustled in the bushes a few feet away. Allison tiptoed over to the bushes, and looked inside. A little, brown tabby cat with green eyes and a white spot on its chest stared up at her. It began purring as soon as it saw her.

"Oh," she said. "I wasn't expecting—wait. You can see me?"

The cat purred louder, bumping its head against her hand and twining between her legs. It looked up at her with an affection bordering on worship. Allison noticed the way the cat's image wavered around the edges, and how it seemed to walk above the ground instead of on it. Suddenly, Allison understood.

"You're a ghost too, aren't you?" She asked. The cat's eyes twinkled as if to respond. "I've never met another one. I started to think it was only me."

The cat blinked, as if criticizing her stupidity. How could she have possibly thought she was the only ghost?

"Why are you here, though? I always thought ghosts happened because they had some unfinished business on Earth or something. I mean, what kind of unfinished business

does a cat have? Didn't hunt enough mice? I guess I don't know what kind of unfinished business I had either, but..."

Allison sighed and took a deep breath. Sure, she'd had some regrets at her funeral, but who didn't? There was no point worrying about it, anyway. Death was death. That was it. Allison was done, over, nothing at all. She just wanted to go home now. The only trouble was, she didn't quite know where home was. For a time, she had tried to go to heaven. The day she died, she expected to leave right away. When that didn't happen, she figured there must have been some kind of delay, and it would happen at the funeral. She distinctly remembered standing in the rain over her grave that day, tapping her foot and staring at the sky, occasionally checking an imaginary watch. Everyone else was at the reception. After waiting for 15 minutes, she shrugged and joined them. Allison wondered if maybe she was supposed to look for hell. She waited for a few days, thinking the evil-est things she could, but her application to hell must have been rejected too. So maybe Allison didn't have a home. Now, though, starved for conversation, cold from the elements, and with the first company she'd had in years, Allison had to know.

"Cat, can you take me home?" She asked. "I'm tired, and I want to go to bed. It's been so many years now. I'm ready to go."

The cat turned away from her and started walking. Allison followed close behind. The cat didn't stop to groom itself or wind off course. It walked all through the night and the next day. Allison wondered more than once if she was just getting played by a cat, but it wasn't as if she had anything better to do with her birthday than follow a random phantasmal cat through the woods. After a couple of days of walking, the cat stopped in front of a pale yellow house with a white picket fence and a well-manicured garden.

"This isn't quite what I meant," Allison said. She realized she wasn't actually disappointed. If anything, she was a little relieved. "Um, do you know who lives here?"

Allison didn't have to wait long. A woman in her late thirties with long brown hair and pretty green eyes opened the front door and walked out into the garden. Her belly was swollen with the promise of a baby soon to come. Allison caught her breath. The woman looked so familiar to her, but different after so much time. She hadn't seen her sister for ten years. Eva had stopped visiting once she finished col-

lege. She'd moved for work, and maybe after that she simply forgot.

"Oh," Allison said, choking on her words. "She's beautiful. I don't know how you found her again, but thank you for showing me one more time. I'm glad she's happy. I was worried about her after I left."

The cat sat silently, but looked from Allison to Eva pointedly. It seemed to expect something from Allison. When Allison didn't comply, the cat twitched its tail and wandered to Eva's feet as she watered the roses. Allison followed, bewildered. She reached out towards her sister's belly. In that moment, she wished her hands could touch her sister. She

wished she could give just one more hug, and go to one last birthday party, and try high school a second time. Maybe if she had one more chance, she would make it through. Maybe if she just—

On November 15th, a baby cried for the first time. She was born a healthy eight pounds, six ounces. Her mother named her Elizabeth Alise Brown. None of them noticed it, but a small tabby cat looked on the birth from the window, before disappearing to continue work on its unfinished business.

As the baby forgot its last words, the cat heard them. At last, it was time to return home again.



Student studying on a deck above the canyon lake