



Spirit River Review 2021

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2021

Spirit River Review is the annual publication of student creative writing and visual art on the Cambridge Campus of Anoka-Ramsey Community College. Our mission is to create community among student writers and artists and to showcase their work.

The 2021 issue is dedicated to all who have suffered discrimination, injustice, and brutality—and to all those engaged in the struggle for a more just society.
May the arts continue to uplift and celebrate our humanity.

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Poetry

The old barn fell today.
Did it come down crashing?
Splintering wood?
Startling birds from the field?
Did it drop
As though it never existed,
As quiet as the night comes?

The old barn fell today.
Was there one last creak
From thousands of worn boards?
Did dust billow,
Settling ever so slowly?
Mud from the swallow's nests was not enough glue.

The old barn fell today.
Chalmers, International, and Deere
Skeletons are buried there.
Where was the thick frayed rope we once swung on?
Moldy straw, tunneled with mice nests
Now lays its head
Upon the dirt grave.

The old barn fell today.
A hundred years of purpose,
A thousand memories,
The pride from that first full bucket of milk.
The smile from my father,
Who never smiles,
Buried under the pile
Of broken boards and twisted metal,

Standing in the sunlight,
Wishing to be bathed in the barn's shadow
Once more.

I loved the way she fell apart.
Softly, almost with appreciation
for her sorrow. She'd smile
then cry, stitching her heart
with a hair plucked from her own head,
wallowing in the comfort of her own tears.
Pushing the needle through
closing old wounds,
occasionally pushing too far.
Fingers pricked with needle bites,
her lap would puddle with blood.
But this pain couldn't contend.
The track marks would go unnoticed.
If only she could understand
the poetry of her life,
she'd appreciate the rhythm of her smile.

Everyone loves the package delivery guy
when their package is on time.
Running red lights and risking my life,
I'd bring gifts to hollow men and shallow women
who lived in broken homes.
At the last stop of the night,
before losing my will to fight,
came the Rose man. Flowers was his business,
death kept meals consistent, and I like to believe
his flowers kept the love for the fallen persistent.
Behind the counter he would sit.
An old man or maybe young,
it doesn't much matter, the story will soon be done.
"How are you?" he'd say,
the first time someone had asked on these morbid days.
But when I'd reciprocate his gesture,
he'd smile with frown.
"I'm still alive," but he'd say it
wearing a funeral gown.
To this day I'm not quite sure
of his intentions. It was just a moment
of genuine interconnection.
It kept me alive
but I fear it was the reason he up and died.

I shiver, waiting for the knife to pierce.
The artist leans forward, needle on standby.
Can't help but to panic.
Just get up and walk away, nothing will stop me.
Sweat running down my face, stabbing skin over and over.
Feeling every pinch, baring pain.
Nerve's berserk, twitching and tweaking.
I ask myself why, why am I doing this?
But I remember
pain is temporary, art is forever.

Wind like teeth and claws
Burning, tearing through your skin,
Cold enough so clouds freeze in the sky.
Your breath never fades.
The warmth surrenders, the frost conquers.
The black sun calls for the wolves of winter.
Under the firefight of falling snow, the wolves hunt.
Winter's bite stings frost in your veins.
Few left to survive.

Hello, old friend.
Do you remember me?
I was the one who buried my heart
And replaced it with you.
You used to sit upon my brow
And protect the gateway to my soul,
Soaking up the sweat upon my forehead
As my personal shield from reality.

We were free
To tread wherever we pleased
In our quest to find our true persona
But there was one place we never searched:
The chambers where we held my heart captive.
Where we buried its individuality, its hopes, and desires.
We were outcasts there.

We fought monsters together.
With cold, white knuckles
And wet, bloody lips.
The iron tasted better when it was warm.

In the morning, we played
In the smog of monsters,
Dancing around their scorn and their disdain,
Searching for our identity,
Pretending like we were better than them.

But we never approached the chambers
Of my heart.
We were outcasts there.

We fought the demon together.
The one whose eyes glow
Beneath my bed.
The one who seeps like black ink
Into my shadow.

At night, we'd curl up
In the demon's lair,
Covering ourselves with heavy blankets
To hide from its guilt and its grief.
We didn't mind how labored our breathing got.

But we never approached the grave
Of my heart.
We were outcasts there.

Remember when we followed maps to our true selves,
Only to shy away
From a sight that evoked streams of salt
To draw deltas down my cheeks?
The X that marked the spot
Was in the same place every time.
A place we didn't belong.

Hello, old friend.
You used to protect me
From the objects of my loathing,
The monsters that cast judgment over me
With scowls of contempt on their lips,
The demon who would glare at me
In the mirror through my eyes.
All of their burdens were cut in half
Behind soft, worn leather.

Tell me,
Did you find the radiance
Of my true self?
Did you feel its heat
Upon your brow?
Or did you see as I saw,
That deep down,
In the depths of the one place
I would never go,
We were just pretending?

The morning before.

18 days since we arrived,
long enough for my cousins and I to have grown closer than siblings
but not long enough to feel like we don't need more time.
Everyone knows the drill of stuffing your mouth
with positivity, laughter, and banana bread muffins
and that not a single word is to be spoken about
the suitcases upstairs waiting to be packed.
We discuss the day's sacred script
while the classic red silicon coaster gets tossed
like a little frisbee between my older cousin and me,
anything to distract from tomorrow's demon,
anything to keep us from thinking about The Goodbye.

The night before.

The four youngest are asleep a room over
while my cousin and I inflate our air mattress one more time.
We try not to notice the clock as we tuck in,
soaking in the last drops of joy and memories,
knowing each second that passes is one second closer to drought.
At 2 am the laughter and chatter still ring in the room,
but by 3 am it starts to die down
like our spirits.
We know what's coming but refuse to talk about it,
commenting on the comforting hum of the electric fireplace,
the rain sprinkling down the tin roof,
and the hope of a storm delaying The Goodbye.

The morning of.

The clock keeps ticking and taunting us
as we don our forced smiles that make our cheeks ache
almost as much as our hearts do.
Bags and belongings are thrown into the car
fast enough that we don't have time
to process what the closing trunk means.
Walking back inside I noticed a bruise on my shin,
knowing full well the tender purple mark

will serve as a fading reminder of my time here
in the days after we've left.
Inside, music is blasting and boardgames are everywhere,
desperate to keep our last hour from being spent in sadness.

The Goodbye.

Gravel shuffles under our feet
as we gather around the evil car that will take us away from here.
8 hearts breaking at once, tired eyes fighting hard to hold back the tears
that we know make it so much worse.
I hug the youngest two first.
Their bright-colored mismatched clothes
are soft and smell sweet as I hug them with a smile,
and they smile back because they don't yet understand exactly
how long it will be until we see them again.
I hug the oldest four next, our forced laughs and smiles like a knife
twisting in my stomach.
I know the next step must be into the car,
and if I don't move now, my feet will be stuck,
my desperation to stay powerful enough that the mud from last night's rain
would turn to concrete around my shoes.
I didn't realize a car door shutting could be so loud, that it would ache so much
to hear the final barrier lock into place
when I knew it was followed by the slow exit
down the long dirt driveway.

The moment after.

It's quiet in the cab of the vehicle.
My brother and I don't want to put on music yet
so our only comfort is the sound of the GPS guiding us away.
The tears are here now because I have no one else to hurt with them
but myself.
The ache that I know will last days overtakes my chest
as I watch the surroundings pass us by, hating the fact that I am so close
to my cousins, my family, but I'm driving away.
600 miles away.

Fiction

“You think we are going to have another expedition?”

“Quiet! I can’t hear when you joke like that!”

“…”

“He is certainly talking to someone on the radio. I can’t tell if he said, ‘In need of sudden supplies’ or ‘I’ll choose the right guys.’”

I look at the younger kid plastered to the wooden door. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to have him do the spying. He claimed to have the ears of a cat, honing his skills from his own shenanigans. Yet he cannot comprehend the chattering of Mr. Tuttle, the camp leader, speaking to someone on the radio.

“C’mon, Perry. I don’t think he discovered what I did yet. He doesn’t sound all that angry from here.” I could just make out Mr. Tuttle’s radio call. He sounded more concerned than anything.

“Yeah, you better get back in your room before Tuttle comes out with a paddle.” We both snicker as Perry sneaks out of the laundry room that is conveniently next to the radio room. He wheezes a little from his allergies on his way out. I snatch one of Mr. Tuttle’s socks from a clean wastebasket before Perry sneezes.

“You’re so lucky I was able to hold my nose in that long. It’s almost like he keeps a dog in here,” Perry complains.

“How about instead of complaining about imaginary dogs, you bring me some of that hot cocoa through my dorm window before Tuttle-the-Muddle muddles his way out of the radio room,” I retort while we walk in the dormitory hallway. Hopefully, Perry will bring the cocoa, despite Tuttle saying it is off limits for anyone whose first name is Tom.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll slave for you some more.” Perry continues walking when I stop at my door and enter the little bedroom. Technically, I shouldn’t have left it in the first place, but I could not miss the chance of hearing Mr. Tuttle explaining to his supplier how the gas for the snowmobiles has already gotten low, or that the last shipment has a mislabeled packaging. Yeah, me and Perry have already done more than we should’ve in the late hours of the night.

I start to think about what we discovered in those dark hours of the Alaskan moonlight. Originally, we had gone exploring. There are a few sheds, Tuttle’s personal mini-house, the dormitory where us teenagers stay, and, finally, a large building with no windows. I wanted to see what was in there, but Perry wanted to see what was in the smaller sheds away from the main building.

“What do you think is in there?” he asked. I peeked into the small shed window with my flashlight.

“I think this is where he guts and cleans animals. Look at all that fur!” I replied. Weird. In the last two weeks I didn't remember Tuttle hunting at all, but he certainly had gutted something in that shed.

“Let's go peek on his cabin, Tom. I want to see where the ogre spends most of his time.”

“No, let's check out that bigger building first.” I was pretty sure that was the garage and was interested in what... paints I could find in there. When we finally opened the unlocked door, we discovered something far better: snowmobiles.

“Tom, look at the size of that deer on the sled! It looks like a bear got to it.”

“Why would Tuttle snatch a dead deer? He isn't putting that in our soup, is he?”

“I hope not. You think he just wanted the antlers? Maybe he hit it with a car? Whatever the reason, I can't stay in here. Too much hair in the air. My allergies are killing me already,” Perry said. He headed out of the garage to explore elsewhere.

As the days went by, me and Perry had our fun in the night. Mostly, we played pranks for the other tweens to discover. Perry got a few boxes of cocoa and mixed it with the snow to create large brown logs. I set them under some of the dormitory's windows.

“Bet Tuttle will get a kick outta this, eh?” I asked Perry while laying down the brown frozen snow.

“I've done this all the time. Back when I had recess, I'd sneak my lunch lemonade down the slides,” Perry replied while sticking a particularity big one under one of the younger kids' windows.

“Too bad you live so far away. I wonder if we'd be able to keep in touch after we leave next week.” I had become fast friends with Perry. We have two things in common: humor and giving Tuttle what he deserves. After all, Tuttle seems to have his own way at getting back at us.

“Why are you all not using the bathroom!” Tuttle roared the following morning. He had taken the bait. Hook, line, and sinker. In some ways, I wonder if this event is what made him wary that we were up and about in the dark hours. Mr. Tuttle had some choice decisions to make after the poop incident. He announced that I was to be in my dorm alone the rest of the stay.

“Why are you separating me and Perry?” I asked.

“Because I need you brats to follow directions. Show respect at this camp. We all know it was one of you sneaking extra hot chocolate. Not to mention a majority of the pranks around here need to stop,” he angrily retorted. Silently, I laughed. Me and Perry had a lot of fun relabeling the canned goods. Especially the canned stew that tasted like dog food.

“Bet he'll have fun finding all that lemonade under his window,” I snickered to Perry. He agreed with me. It may seem mean to do, but we both were running out of pranks.

I was sent to my little prison after that. Not that I couldn't continue jesting with Perry in the hall. Perry hopefully was keeping up with the pranks so that Tuttle thinks he got the wrong person. But, then again, Tuttle seems to know exclusively what's going on between the campers here.

Despite the setback, Perry found another way to sneak out with me at night. No doubt through his window. Out of ideas, Perry dared me to ride one of the snowmobiles. A bit of

bantering and mischief later, we both are cruising the moonlit ice on a nearby frozen lake, talking about how well Tuttle had taken to our little surprises days before.

My thoughts come back to the present when I enter my solitary dormitory room. “Perry better deliver that hot cocoa,” I think to myself while clutching one of Tuttle’s socks. My eye meanders towards a peculiar color. Under my dormitory window, a bookshelf holds a pastel yellow, blue, and red book titled *Anatomy of a Yeti*. Written by one Gregory Tuttle himself. Humorously above the educational *Camp Yeti History* label. Through the bright moonlight flowing from my window, I see the evolution of Tuttle’s books as they crawl up to modern time. Upon the top of the windowsill is a rulebook for the camp. “Wrangwell-St. Elias Alaskan Park’s Yeti Camp – Highest sightings of the legendary Yeti all start right here!” Reads the front. I snort at the 1980’s colors. Mr Tuttle has been here a long, long time.

A light tapping on the window diverts my attention from the book’s terrible color design.

“I brought you some hot chocolate!” Perry beams from behind the icy panes. I slide the window up, letting him pass the warm drink into my moonlit room. I set it on the floor by the door, then go to close the window. I am not all that interested in letting the cold, icy fingers of the Alaskan night steal my warmth.

“Thanks, Perry. I’ll see you in the morning.” I say through the panes. He waves before crunching his way through the snow towards his own dorm window. With everything we’d done these past nights, I know I need the sleep. Too bad Perry had to switch rooms. He brought his personal heater with him.

There is a strong wind coming from the dark outdoors when I wake up. The moon has been replaced with that dark, dreariness only the most remote places experience. There seems to be a ruckus in the hall, like people are moving about at this hour. Maybe some of the other campers want to steal the snowmobiles like me and Perry did?

A loud pounding jolts me from beneath the warm covers.

“I’m coming in, Mr. Reed,” the firm voice of Mr. Tuttle announces. He opens the door, only to knock cold cocoa upon the floor.

“What is this!? Hot Chocolate? Look at the mess you made!” Tuttle complains.

“Look at the mess *you* made. If you would have let me reply before you barged in, I could’ve had time to move my cup from its place,” I retort. Tuttle looks at me weird, then sighs.

“I have an announcement to make, so once you’ve cleaned this up, come to the commons area.” With that, Tuttle leaves to retrieve other campers lodging further down the hallway.

“A perfect opportunity,” I muse as I mop up the chocolate with Tuttle’s conveniently close socks.

“If you don’t hurry up with your little gag, Tuttle will start without you,” Perry comments, watching me “clean” the mess. I smile at him knowingly, then set the socks down on the dresser, figuring to plant them in Tuttle’s clean laundry later.

“Everyone,” Tuttle announces in the common area. “I have a few things I need to tell you. First, many of you will be leaving this morning. I bid you farewell. Second, I have heard from associates that there is a high probability that a Yeti is prowling about.” I roll my eyes. I’ve heard that exact last sentence from Tuttle-the-Muddle multiple times. The only difference is that we never have actually done a hunt this early in the morning—or late at night.

“There are also reports of a winter storm on the horizon, so to make up our lost time, we’ll be taking the snowmobiles. Since we only have a select few, I need those of you who know how to ride them already.” He piques my interest with the word *snowmobiles*. I’m unsure if Tuttle knows about me and Perry’s snowmobile antics, and I don’t really want Tuttle to know what we’ve been doing at night, but I hope I’m one of the lucky few who gets to ride tonight. Whether Tuttle likes it or not, I actually am a little excited for this expedition.

Surprisingly, Mr. Tuttle dismisses the majority of the campers, and brings me and Perry together.

“I know you guys think it is odd for me to get an expedition going at this hour, but I am confident we’ll capture a Yeti. Get your snow gear and follow me. It is a ways out to where we need to go.” Tuttle turns around and start walking dutifully to his own snow gear.

“He always is so different and passionate about the Yeti, isn’t he?” Perry asks.

“Yeah, I think he actually has high hopes tonight,” I reply. “Think he knows?”

“I can’t tell,” Perry replies.

“Spread out. It was here just half an hour ago,” Mr. Tuttle announces in his snow gear. We had just arrived at the base of a small mountain. Pine trees, swirling flakes, foot-deep snow. This definitely is the middle of nowhere.

“The flakes are falling faster and faster, Mr. Tuttle. I don’t think we can stay out here for more than an hour,” Perry states before sneezing in his scarf. Tuttle just grunts, muttering something before leaving to presumably check on his hunting equipment. Me and Perry begin roaming between the pine needles.

“It’s like I’m allergic to him directly,” Perry complains.

“Nah, you’re just upset to be out here. And you’re probably angry that he is forcing us out and about for an imaginary monster,” I say. “He no doubt wants to get the final jabber before we leave. The biggest thing we have to worry about is how angry he’ll get when he finds out the extra gas canisters are empty.” Tuttle would have good reason to be angry with that one. I had been fairly concerned about my own fuel levels on the way here. There should be enough to get back, but in no way enough to carry a quarter-ton Yeti back.

“Don’t be a shrink to me! You should analyze Tuttle instead. We’ll be miles away before he’ll think to check those red gas containers in the garage. Besides, I’m sure he already checked how much gas is in his own tank. And why does Tuttle make me sneeze!” Perry sneezes again.

I’m about to interrupt his complaining when I notice large impressions going up the next hill.

“Tracks, Perry. Tracks! Over there, heading towards where Tuttle was going! They’re massive!” We run through the deepening snow to peer at the large imprints.

“I think we just found Bigfoot,” Perry comments. We both follow the tracks, which lead directly to...

“Ho, Perry, Tom!” A voice not unlike Tuttle’s comes from the trees. Then, in the most comically way, a furry, blue skinned Tuttle lumbers his way towards us.

“You’re a Yeti!” both me and Perry cry.

“You betcha,” Tuttle says.

“No way. I’m just hallucinating! Tom, do you see that?” Perry asks.

“Um, I think you can rub off the light blue paint, Mr. Tuttle. Is that a wool coat? It looks very nice. Say, you don’t happen to know if there’s gas around here?” I drawl the last part of my rambling. Perry looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Dude, like, your gonna give it away!” Perry whispers.

“Quit it with the costume and makeup, Mr. Tuttle. It’s too windy to be tricking us out here.” I think I said that comprehensively. Tuttle just smiles, showing very large, flat teeth from his square shaped face. At that moment, I knew that his face has either turned blue from hypothermia, or he really is a Yeti.

“You two still think I’m kidding around. Look a bit harder: I’m barefoot!” Tuttle begins jumping from one foot to another, showing feet larger than any normal human’s. Perry and I shut up. It’s the real deal.

“You two are the best pranksters I’ve had this season. Now, I need you to help pull off a prank of my own.” Mr. Tuttle sits his now oversized body upon the frozen ground, sinking a little into the pure white snow.

“I need you to share the word that you saw a Yeti. Right here, next to Wrangwell-St. Elias Alaskan Park’s Yeti Camp,” he says. “But leave out that the camp owner is a Yeti,” Tuttle hastily adds.

“But why do you want us share about Yetis? Aren’t Yetis reclusive?”

“Very, but eventually we need to see one another. Your actions will let the others know that I’m still here. Plus, Yeti sightings by campers like you bring in good money.” He smiles.

“I’ve been watching you two. I need only the best tricksters—liars, the kind who would only be natural to make such outrageous claims. Yet, I also need to make sure you keep my little secret. I expect you to be like a friend.” Me and Perry nod gravely. Dark snowflakes hurriedly fall to the deepening snow. The snowmobiles seem a long ways away. Tuttle gets up, with a hairy hand on his chin.

“I hope you understand. It has been a fun group this season. I barely got any hunting done at night with you two prowling about. Other lodgers say I’m a straight-back when I’m angry... Anywho, hurry back to camp before the snow gets too bad. I believe the both of you should be leaving for home soon.” With that, the Yeti lumbered off out of the headlight beams.

“You heard him. Looks like he knew about the snowmobiles the entire time,” Perry says, shivering and sneezing like mad.

Back at the cabin, people are preparing for their own early morning flights home. I briefly wonder if the planes will even take off in the worsening weather as I pack my single bag. When I'm all done, I notice the soggy sock I had meant to plant in Tuttle's room. Thinking back to the day when me and Perry first met at the camp. I had given him a tuggie. He had slipped orange juice into my hot cocoa. We became friends because we both are pranksters. I shiver when thinking about the Yeti's own request to pull off such an elaborate prank. Mr. Tuttle actually really did enjoy our pranks? He wanted to become friends?

"Maybe I ate something," I mutter. "Yetis aren't supposed to be that short." I leave the room with nothing in it but hot cocoa socks in a wastebasket.

“It’s not safe to be out here past dark, Josef,” Sarah whispered. The pair and their baby were wandering down a dark side street, huddled under black coats, creeping like deer with cloven-hoofed feet, careful to not make a sound. Gunfire could be heard in the distance. Shouting echoed throughout the town. Short, choppy German phrases that could not be understood were heard from a few streets over. The words sounded angry and hateful, even from a distance. Snow had begun to fall lightly, large flakes dancing clumsily through the air. Sarah worried they would follow their tracks. They would put them in train boxcars, packed like sardines, and ship them to those slave camps, just like they did the Van Howsons. She could not help to think what had happened to them and their four children. Would she see them again? Sarah’s thoughts ran a mile a minute but were interrupted by Josef.

“We are almost there, a few more minutes.”

Sarah held Klara close to her chest and trusted that Josef would get them to the cottage safely. Josef was a man of his word.

The snow had begun to fall heavier now. Flakes stuck in her eyelashes, giving the world a blurry appearance. Sarah recognized the street and realized he must be bringing them to Jacob’s cottage for refuge. Initial anger rose up inside, but Sarah kept her opinions to herself. They could not risk being seen or heard. She had Klara to protect. Sarah has never trusted Jacob or his wife, Etta. She was courteous, though, to appease Josef. They had many previous arguments over how Sarah did not like how they treated people, including her and Josef. Josef always brushed it off, though, and would tell Sarah she was overreacting or just didn’t understand their personalities. She could see their destination up ahead on the silent street. Josef grabbed Sarah’s hand and led her behind the cottage. Sarah could feel the callouses from Josef’s hands as he held hers. He was one of the best wood workers in the area. High-quality shelves, tables, and chairs came from Josef’s shop. The rough hands had earned them a nice living in a small cottage in the nice part of town. Although Sarah hated the feeling of his rough hands, mimicking a cat’s tongue, she never complained when he took her by the hand. None of that mattered now though. Their cottage was nothing but rubble after last week’s bombings.

Jacob was a man Josef has known his whole life. Sarah would listen half-heartedly while Josef relished in the memories he shared with Jacob. Josef and Jacob were inseparable since they could barely walk. Josef trusted his life to this man. Sarah, not so much. Jacob was not Jewish, and Sarah knew war could do ugly things to people’s minds. Josef often reminisced about the two boys spending the summer holiday at the lake house. The warm thoughts were shattered by dogs barking in the distance, the reality of the snow a stark reminder that summer was long gone. The only thing that had separated them and Jacob now was that Josef had to wear a yellow star on his coat and Jacob did not.

Josef and Jacob had planned this night out when the soldiers first came around. Sarah was told that everything was taken care of and that Josef had a plan but could not tell her just in case

something were to happen. Sarah listened as Josef rapped on the back door six times, with a delayed seventh knock. Jacob answered the door, his wife Etta close behind him.

“Get in, get in. Welcome, Brother.”

Josef and Jacob hugged. The two looked strikingly similar and could easily be mistaken for brothers. Etta held out her arms to Sarah, beckoning to take Klara from her. Etta and Jacob had tried for several years to conceive a child but were not able to. Sarah was exhausted from traveling but reluctantly handed Klara to Etta.

Etta cooed over Klara and whispered, “What a sweet little *liebe* you are!”

Klara cooed back in response and smiled at Etta. Sarah watched Etta cradle Klara, sing to her, and call her affectionate names in a sort of jealous way. Klara could easily be mistaken for Etta and Jacob’s own child. Her blond hair and blue eyes did not match Sarah’s brown hair and green eyes, but matched Etta’s blond curls and blue eyes. Josef thanked the couple for taking them in and Sarah nodded in agreement, even though there was a slight discomfort developing deep in her bowels, almost signaling that something was wrong.

“We are not like them. We do not condone what those monsters are doing, Brother,” Jacob recanted. “I will show you where you are sleeping. Sorry, it is all we could do on short notice.”

“Anything is better than what is out there,” Sarah said quietly while motioning to the window.

Jacob led the couple to the kitchen and quickly lifted a large rug on the floor, revealing a cellar door. Sarah looked around the room and found it oddly neat. She had made Etta an embroidered tablecloth for her birthday years ago, and Etta had always kept it on the table every time they were over. The wood table sat bare now.

“I put a lantern and oil down there, as well as a pallet with quilts. Help yourself to the vegetables. I am sorry, but food is hard to come by right now.”

Josef nodded in agreement and stepped down into the dark cellar. Even after selling his gold watch and some furniture, Josef and Sarah had been living on cabbage, potatoes, and bread when they were lucky enough to come across some. Josef motioned for Sarah to come down into the cellar. She could see Klara sleeping in Etta’s arms.

“Etta, I can take her from you.”

Etta shook her head no and said, “A cellar is no place for a baby. If she wakes up, I will come get you at once so you can nurse her.”

Sarah wanted to protest but slowly nodded yes.

“You two need rest. I will handle the baby tonight,” Etta said in a nonchalant tone.

Sarah was upset. This would be the first time in Klara’s nine months of life that she would not be sleeping in her arms. She longed to nurse her to sleep and drift off with her nose buried in Klara’s locks of golden hair.

Josef struck a match revealing the layout of the dampened cellar. The cellar was small. The two adults would take up most of the room when they lay down. Shelves were on one side, full of baskets of potatoes and turnips. Josef lay on the pallet and pulled Sarah next to him. They

both fell asleep rather quickly, forgetting the troubles of the last few days and melting into a deep sleep, safe at last.

Sarah woke up to heavy footsteps above her head. Floorboards creaked and moaned from the weight of the men above. She elbowed Josef awake and immediately made a “Shh!” sound to stop him from saying anything. Overhead, a muffled conversation was taking place. Sarah could hear Jacob talking to a few different men. Her German was not that good, but she could make out the word’s “reward” and “thank you.” A deep pit began to develop in Sarah’s stomach. The kind of pit that swallows you whole, like a sort of personal quicksand. The bile was rising in her throat, and she covered her own mouth to stifle a scream. She worried about Klara. She was upstairs with those soldiers. She had heard stories of Jewish babies being thrown in the air and shot at like geese by Nazis. Through the rays of lights coming through the weakened floorboards, Sarah could see that Josef’s face had turned pale with a grimace. Sarah wondered if Josef had heard the bits of conversation that she did. Footsteps continued overhead and stopped, right above the cellar door. The light temporarily blinded both Sarah and Josef as the cellar door was opened.

The noise that Sarah emitted from her mouth was unearthly. It was a mother crying for her child. It was the cry of someone knowing they were going to die soon. She screamed mercilessly for her child.

“My baby! My baby! You cannot do this! That’s my child!”

Sarah looked around for Klara or even Etta as she was pulled from the cellar by two German soldiers, but they were not there. Sarah continued screaming. Her throat burned with rage, the sounds becoming hoarser now. The soldiers were unphased by her screams and carried on like nothing was happening. Sarah looked at Josef. He was motionless and following the directions given. This only fueled the anger inside Sarah.

“How can you not be fighting for our daughter or for me!” Sarah’s screams were directed at Josef now. For a minute, she forgot where she was or that she was being held by two soldiers, in a house of Josef’s trusted friend. “How could you bring us here? You killed us. You did this!” Sarah yelled at the back of Josef’s head as he was being led outside.

A single shot from a gun a few moments later brought Sarah back to reality. The front door had been left open, and Sarah could see a crumpled-up mass laying in the street. Sarah began to scream Klara’s name over and over. She could feel the frozen barrel of the gun in the small of her back. She continued to scream, thinking there might be a shred of humanity left inside one of the soldiers, or even inside Jacob. Perhaps her screaming would make Etta come out of hiding so she could see Klara one last time. Klara never came. Sarah realized she would die without saying goodbye to her child and tears streamed down her face.

As Sarah was being led through the kitchen towards the door, she noticed a pile of banknotes on the table that had not been there earlier in the evening.

Julian my love, where should I start?

As I stared at the words on my phone screen, I tried to form a coherent sentence in my head. How do you tell the person you may love you don't want them to see you? I sat there a while longer until I heard my brother Michael speak,

“Just do it, let him come. You deserve a little bit of happiness during all this.”

I looked down at the IV in my hand puzzled with thought, finally deciding on my text:

Hell yes

I met Julian on Instagram one night around 3am, and we had been inseparable since. Through text, that is. Suddenly, my phone chimed, and the screen lit up once again with his response.

My spring break starts this Thursday, I'll leave then and be there by Friday morning.

I'm having some testing done at the hospital this weekend that has me staying overnight so you'll have to come here.

Anything I should worry about? he asked.

Although it would be a good excuse for flowers and pampering, no there's nothing to worry about. It's just some routine testing to check up on my Arthritis.

In that case, I'll see you in two days :)

I smiled down at my phone despite the anxiety swirling in my gut. I met Michael's eyes with a worried expression.

“It's going to be okay, Charlie. You've been talking to this guy for a year and a half now. It's time you guys meet,” said Michael.

I nodded knowing he was right, but my agreement ended when I remembered what I was wearing and drifted into thought about standing up to go to the bathroom and having my pink lace underwear exposed by the unforgiving back of the hospital gown. I pushed the thoughts away and went back to reading *Pride and Prejudice* while Michael drifted off the room's sofa.

At a quarter past eleven, I placed my bookmark in my book and stood up to change into pajamas. After studying my soft pajama shorts and oversized T-shirt in the small bathroom mirror, I walked back to bed where Binx was waiting for me. Binx had been my best friend since we had gotten him from the breeder. I remember it like it was yesterday, picking up the little black fur-ball pawing at my ankles with his tail wagging. There hasn't been a night since that he hasn't slept next to me. I crawled in next to him and picked up my phone to send Julian a goodnight text, only to find I had missed one of his messages.

Your birthday's on Sunday isn't it? How do you want to celebrate?

I giggled slightly before responding:

It's just a day. It's not a big deal.

You only turn 19 once, seems like a pretty big deal to me. Now tell me what to get you.

A blanket.

A blanket? he asked.

Yup. A big soft blanket.

Omg, goodnight weirdo lol.

Goodnight handsome.

I plugged my phone in and drifted off to sleep with the sounds of Binx snoring in the background.

I woke up to the sun rising over the buildings out the window and shining in my eyes. I checked the clock and noticed it was 8am. Julian wouldn't be up for another two hours. I watched the sunrise and noted the colors it created, then slowly moved towards the bathroom to comb my hair and get dressed. After leaving the bathroom, I saw Michael had disappeared—no doubt to the kitchen—and I settled back in my bed to switch on the TV. Half an hour later Michael returned with breakfast for us both and we settled on watching *Fast and Furious 5*. Around 10am, I got a good morning text from Julian explaining that he'd be packing and beginning his journey here. I felt butterflies in my stomach despite my pounding heart and heavy chest. I thought back to the first time I met Julian.

I was scrolling through Instagram late one night when I couldn't sleep and a follower request popped up on my feed. After scrolling through Julian's profile, I clicked accept without thinking twice, and a DM popped up almost instantly. After questioning his choices in approaching a stranger on the internet and the possibility of him ending up like a *Criminal Minds* character, we talked all night. Eventually, we exchanged phone numbers and continued to learn more about each other, and then one night I realized I was falling, hard. Scared of this fact and unsure of how to handle it, I avoided him for almost a week before he confronted me about it, and I learned he was falling too.

I snapped out of thought to the sound of dishes clattering as my brother brought them back to the kitchen, or cafeteria rather. I had never been honest with Julian about my condition, or that I had been living in a hospital room with my brother for over a year now and knew all of my nurses by name. The most he knew was about the arthritis I had been diagnosed with when I was twelve, but aside from Michael, no one knew the whole truth.

Dr. Herman walked in, interrupting my thoughts. She said the vitals the nurses collected overnight were concerning and she wanted to run more tests. Michael, being the natural-born worrier he is, bombarded Dr. Herman with questions. With the sound of Michael and Dr. Herman's voices fading, I affirmed to myself that it was just a bump in the road while pulling out a piece of stationary and a pen.

The day passed quickly with a flurry of doctors, nurses, and surgeons coming in with questions and different machines and tests. Between each visit, I finished off my favorite James Patterson novel and rewatched *Pride and Prejudice* on Netflix despite Michael's protests for a different movie. I texted Julian throughout the day until I drifted to sleep around 10pm. In my dreams, I am always Elizabeth Bennett, talking to a Mr. Darcy with Julian's face and flouncing around an estate with my family. All of my family. But each morning, I awake to the sun shining over the rooftops out my hospital window and continue to memorize how the pink fades into

orange and into blue and then purple and back to pink, convincing myself I'll paint it whenever I get to go back home.

As I get up to go to the bathroom to change for the day, I can feel my body screaming. "This is going to be a bad day," I think to myself as I wobble towards the bathroom past a loudly snoring Michael. Holding onto the safety bar next to the sink, I comb my hair. I decide this will be enough for the day and open the bathroom door to find Michael awake with a worried expression on his face. I turn to see what he's looking at and my eyes land on Dr. Herman once again. She's explaining what I'm feeling is normal considering my overnight vitals and yesterday's test results. She later leaves the room and Michael helps me walk from the bathroom to my bed.

I napped a lot that day, texting Julian on and off when I could until I got the confirmation that he was ten minutes away. Seeing that text gave me a brief second wind as I made Michael help me get to the bathroom so I could quickly change and wipe the sleep from my eyes. Just as I hobbled back to bed, one of my favorite nurses, Carrie, ushered a blonde-haired green-eyed boy into the room.

Within minutes, he's at my side for a hug telling me I don't need to walk with my arthritis. I felt guilt wash over me knowing it wasn't just arthritis and that he didn't know how bad things really were. We talked for hours. I introduced him to Michael and we had an amazing time after we clarified why he'd never meet our parents, starting with how our mom left when we were young, how we were both the product of drug-induced hookups, our father got clean and took care of us, which naturally resulted in our mothers disappearance, how Michael is my half-brother, though you could never tell from the outside, and how years later, my father and I were in a car accident, causing him to leave us indefinitely. This, however, also caused my second diagnosis, which could be easily confused with a death sentence. A large sarcoma which had attached itself to the joint of my knee. This quickly spread across my body, and I was admitted full-time to the Graceland Hospital in my hometown. Michael lived with me in the hospital, sleeping on an uncomfortable cot every night and waiting on me hand and foot. We were the only family the other has left.

The boy I had spent months talking to every day and falling in love with was finally next to me in person, but I could feel the exhaustion creeping back in as Julian said he was going with Michael to get us all lunch from the cafeteria. Nurse Carrie came in to check my vitals again and asked how long the purple rash had been under my shirt on my arms and stomach. I looked at my hands as I told her it had been there since the night before, and I felt my eyelids falling again. The sound of the monitor beeped slowly until I drifted off, and then I was gone.

I've often thought about how I'd pass, although for a long time it didn't involve you finding me. A day before you arrived, I'd settled on a scenario. With three turkey sandwiches and three juices in hand, you and Michael would saunter back to room 303 to reunite with me. As the elevator reached the third floor, the doors would open to reveal a flood of noise. Staff

crying, monitors beeping wildly and then shutting off, and doctors consoling the disrupted staff. You would joke unknowingly with Michael:

“Damn who died?”

After being met with silence, you’d turn to see his face. Pure terror. Sandwiches hit the floor as he takes off running. You would follow after him and pass the nurse who led you in earlier, crying into her hands. Eventually, you’d stop at my room and feel your body go cold. Michael would hit the floor, reduced to a puddle of tears and you feel confusion wash over you as a heavy sick feeling follows. You’d peer in to where you both left me sitting not even ten minutes earlier, with only a white sheet lightly placed over me. As you sat in shock, you’d hear the far away sound of a doctor explaining my condition was too severe, and they were unaware it had developed so quickly overnight. You’d hear them talk about a purple rash called mottling that I had tried desperately to hide, and how it’s often an indicator of the final week of life. Suddenly, you’d realize you’re on the floor too, crying into your hands.

You’d learn about my sarcoma, a type of cancer that develops in the collagen holding your body together.

I’ve only a few requests of you, place pink and purple gladiolas on my casket for the sunrises I never got to paint. Be there for Michael—he’ll need someone. Know that I love you more than words could explain. And after you’ve grieved, keep me in your heart while you search for your new forever.

With all the love in my heart,

Charlie <3

Curtis Tweedy never intended to marry Nora Roberts. In truth, Curtis had no intention in marrying any beating heart. He was content moving between female conquests with little concern for the trail of bad karma that would inevitably follow. To Curtis, Nora was just another in a string of women to satiate his desires.

Nora, on the other hand, was absolutely smitten with the man. He was noticeably handsome, something many women in their town acknowledged frequently. Curtis stood over six-feet two-inches tall, broad shouldered with a head full of black, silken hair and forest green eyes. His cleft chin was the cause of frequent comparisons to Douglas Fairbanks, a budding movie star of the day. Despite his charming appearance, Nora focused on Curtis for less superficial reasons. To Nora, Curtis was a more robust soul than the typical men her age. Not only did Curtis agree with the woman's suffrage movement, of which she was a staunch advocate, but he was a teetotaler himself, and just like her he had never taken so much as a sip of alcohol. To Nora, Curtis was the perfect man, and she intended on being his wife one day.

Nora's older brother, Tristan, did not share her admiration for Curtis. He knew Curtis from their school days together. Even then, Curtis would use his indelible charm to sway all takers into his grasp. Tristan was modest in his approach toward potential suitors, but just as handsome. Tristan's family taught him the benefit of respect and chivalry, and he followed these lessons impeccably. Tristan was, in a sense, the anti-Curtis. He was similar in physical stature, but loyal and endearingly kind. Being the antithesis of one another logically led to a rivalry, one that would never quite dissipate into the ether. The fact Tristan's first girlfriend left him for Curtis only solidified this acrimony.

The fact Nora, eight years his younger, had fallen for such an obvious ruse of charm concerned him greatly. Tristan was open with his dismay in his sister's poor judgment, telling her on more than one occasion, "He will eventually break your heart, and don't come running to me when he does." Nora opted to ignore the brotherly warnings, typically responding with an "I know better" guffaw and swift exit.

It was because of his history with Curtis that it came as no surprise when Nora crossed the threshold to their family home with tears streaming down her cheeks. There was a hint of joy in his modest eyes when Nora finally admitted to him that Curtis had left her. Indeed, his poor, naïve sister fell for the transparently false charm that Tristan had long warned her about.

When her sobbing subsided enough for her to tell him the details, he listened intently. A growing rage bubbled inside as Nora explained to Tristan how Curtis discarded her like some piece of rubbish. She begged Curtis to keep her as his, sobbing and hanging on him in the middle of the town square. And when Nora attempted to embrace Curtis, he pushed her to the ground and walked away. It wasn't so much that Curtis had broken his sister's heart, as it was him laying his hands on her. Seeing red, Tristan decided to act in haste. He decided he was going to be the judge and jury of this playboy's punishment, and his Colt pistol would serve as his gavel.

Tristan arrived at Curtis' home minutes later. He noticed Curtis bent over, clearing the yard of fallings from the willow tree adorning the lawn.

"Tweedy, you're a dead man," Tristan exclaimed with a voice trembling in anxious anger.

Curtis turned toward the commotion with a perplexed look. Standing upright, he approached Tristan slowly.

Tristan began the inquisition: "Is it true? Did you break my little sister's heart?"

"You act as though she's so innocent, like she's some virgin or something," Curtis chuckled. "Trust me, she ain't neither of those things."

Tristan's fists tightened as he began to lose restraint. He grabbed toward his waist band for the pistol. He pulled it out swiftly, brandishing it at his side. Curtis took notice but remained steadfast in his calm.

"I've been threatened before, but never with a gun," he stated plainly.

Tristan raised the pistol, waiting for Curtis to back down and grovel for his sins. He was surprised to see the man stand there tall, with not a hint of fear or remorse. In a show of force, Tristan cocked the hammer with his trembling hand. Curtis became much less flippant toward the matter.

"Look, I was just joking. I didn't mean anything by it. I mean, come on, did she really think I was going to marry her?" he exclaimed. "Sure, she's a peach to look at, but we both know she's not very bright."

It was this final disgrace toward his sister that caused Tristan to do something he had never intended. His finger hugged the trigger tightly and the pistol discharged in a violent flash. Before he could recognize what had happened, he looked down at the still body of Curtis Tweedy, a trickling of blood seeping from the side of his head. Tristan fled.

He arrived home shortly after. He was rattled and disbelieving of what had just occurred. He had never intended on shooting the man. He had only hoped to strike fear into an otherwise fearless human, teaching him that stepping all over people had repercussions. Yet here he was, a murderer, all because of his stubborn principles. The thought of being incarcerated the rest of his life cycled endlessly through his head, and after an hour of this unnerving prospect, Tristan decided there was only one option. He raised the recently used pistol from his waist, placed it tightly to his temple, cocked the hammer, and pulled the trigger. What followed was the silence and still only death can bring.

Curtis began to rustle on his lawn shortly after Tristan ran off. The event was a blur, but he recalled the pistol being raised and a loud noise. He could hear the ringing of voices yelling in confusion nearby but could not discern what was being said. He raised his hand to his head, brought it to his line of sight, and watched in disbelief as streams of blood ran between his fingers. Curtis fainted, fading into a dark abyss.

Slowly rousing himself to a conscious state, he peered through squinted eyes to see the town doctor staring down at him.

"Son, do you know what happened?" the doctor asked.

“I...I think I was shot in the head. How am I alive?” Curtis muttered weakly.

“We’re trying to figure that out ourselves. The damndest thing is that there is no bullet to be found. You’re lucky the man was a bad shot. It appears the bullet grazed the side of your head and disappeared,” the doctor explained.

Curtis shook his head in disbelief. This wasn’t luck, he thought to himself. This was divine intervention. “Doc, I know who did this. I know who did this, but I think I deserved it.”

“Kid, no one deserves a bullet to the head, not as far as I’ve witnessed. Let’s get you in touch with the police and you can sort this out,” the doctor replied.

It was two days later that Curtis was discharged from the hospital with nothing more than a sealed wound. The police had arranged to meet Curtis at his home. After scouring his property for the bullet, the two officers sat down with the visibly shaken man and asked him a list of questions. Quickly, Curtis admitted who the guilty party was. The two officers looked quietly at each other as they heard Tristan’s name.

“Mr. Tweedy, Mr. Roberts shot and killed himself shortly after firing upon you. It couldn’t have been more than a couple of hours after the incident in your front yard that he did it,” the younger of the two officers exclaimed.

Curtis stared blankly at the officer’s face as the news circled through his throbbing head.

“I guess that about ends our investigation then, huh?” the elder policeman inquired. “Listen, the bullet is gone, and the guilty party took care of the punishment himself, so unless there’s something else you need from us, I think we’ll let you rest.”

“Uh...yeah, okay. I have nothing further for you. Thank you, officers,” Curtis slurred through his lips. He shut the door behind them as the look of confusion remained tattooed upon his face. Moments later the trauma of the recent events caught up to the typically stoic man and he dropped to the floor in a pool of tears. For the first time he could remember, Curtis felt guilt, and the pain struck deeper than any bullet possibly could.

For the next 20 years, Curtis devoted himself to the greater good. Two years after the incident, he married a nice, albeit plain, woman. They lived alone together for the next ten years before his wife died of pneumonia. Instead of moving on to another woman, Curtis decided to remain alone.

Each fall he would spend hours cleaning the brush that had fallen from the willow tree in his front yard. And each fall, he was reminded of the fateful day that changed his life’s path. As his body aged, so did the willow tree, and it was twenty years to the day of his being shot that he decided it was time for the old thing to come down.

He searched his shed for a sufficient tree-felling apparatus. His eyes struck a lonely stick of dynamite and a hundred yards of wick gifted to him from his neighbor, an ex-miner with a penchant for explosions. Curtis had become cautious in his old age, and although he acknowledged the dynamite to be excessive, he figured there was no more efficient way to get the job done.

He carefully tied the dynamite to the side of the tree facing away from the home and laid a path of wick to the front of his house. A childish excitement gained in Curtis as he grabbed his

book of matches. He scrapped the sulfur of the match against his canvas pants, igniting the miniscule flame, and raised it to the tip of the wick. He watched with gleeful anticipation as a sparkle of fire trickled down the line toward the tree. The lit wick finally disappeared behind the mass of the trunk, and he brought his fingers to his ears to mute the imminent racket. In a sudden burst of carnage, the dynamite exploded. Within seconds, the willow crashed to the ground in a defiant manner, limbs and leaves splintering from each side. Finally, the dust had settled, and amidst the wooden slaughter lay the once majestic willow tree, as well as the lifeless body of Curtis Tweedy.

The coroner established the cause of death swiftly—fatality by gunshot to the head. As he poked and prodded around the cavern in the back of Curtis' skull, he met a discernable resistance. Tapping his tool against it, he heard the clinking of metal on metal. He opened the cavity further to investigate, and as he dug his tweezers around the object and pulled, out came the bullet from a Colt revolver.

After much investigation, the police had finally pieced together an improbable end to Curtis' now tepid life. For twenty years, Tristan's ammunition lay dormant in the willow tree, until one fateful day the man it was intended for decided to rouse it back to its intended target.

“What a wonderful day today. Don’t you think so, Daya?” Clay exclaimed with excitement.

Daya couldn’t help but fear for her safety after Clay told her not to leave him, or else she wouldn’t be there, in the lake area where nobody goes to, all green and brown water lurking all around the boat, and the smell of rotting fish lingering through the air.

“Yeah, it is a beautiful day today. Thank you for taking me out on the boat, especially when the sun is out today.” Daya couldn’t help but wonder what she did to deserve this. Was it to scare her, or was it Clay being superior?

The boat was an old rowboat that Clay bought for twenty-five dollars, and it was the last of the money they had in the bank. Daya sat there, with her hands in her lap, wondering if their son was doing okay with Clay's parents and if they had enough formula to feed Dean. Even though Daya could still breastfeed Dean, she knew her body could not take any more because Clay was too busy playing his Xbox, partying with his friends, and making Daya feel as worthless as a piece of garbage.

Swish swish...SPLASH.

The boat was rocking back and forth in the waves that were made by two jet skis. Daya could barely breathe; she felt like her heart was about to beat right out of her chest. While her stomach was rolling around and soon it hit her, the mouth-watering fear of throwing up and disappointing Clay. Clay put an overbounding fear in Daya, the fear of getting a bruise again and having to wear a sweatshirt in ninety-six-degree weather. But it wasn’t just the beatings but the fear of what he had to say about her while she has to bow down to whatever he wanted at any specific moment in time.

“Why are you quiet? You should be thrilled that I asked my parents to watch Dean because you needed time away from him.” Clay was all smiles, not knowing all the emotional abuse that he is doing on Daya.

“I am having fun,” Daya said with a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“Well, the way that you are speaking makes me think that you are *not* having fun. You should thank me for asking my parents to watch our son.”

“Trust me. I am having fun. I am just a bit nervous because of our talk earlier. When we talked about how I felt.” Daya prayed that Clay wouldn’t just dump her body right there in the lake, as he had mentioned before.

Clay rocked his head back and forth: “Yeah, but you *did* threaten to leave me if I didn’t treat you better. ‘Like a person,’ you said. Now how is this...” Clay swarmed his left arm over the lake to show Daya. “...not treating you like a person? Maybe we should get back, so you can go to Dean and not hang with me!”

Clay started to row the boat to the left and ignored Daya and the tears rolling down her face. Their tension could have been cut with a chainsaw. Daya was just a teenager when Dean was born, and she wanted to wait to have kids. Their son Dean was not a miracle that was bound

to happen in a loveable way but a miracle that occurred after a fight for life that Daya had to face, the one thing that made Daya snap and bow down to Clay. Daya wanted to be the girl from Colorado, the headstrong type who doesn't take any crap from a guy. But why Clay? Ever since the rape that happened, Daya shut her emotions off and now lived her life with Clay's fear, the fear of not being a great mother to a handsome, big blue-eyed boy, and the fear of being alone with Clay.

"Thank you again for the fun boat trip. It was relaxing, and it shows just how much you care." Daya hoped she could get off the boat quickly.

"Hmm-hmm, yeah." Clay stopped rowing the boat and looked toward Daya with a stern look. "Now, look here! You better be grateful for what I had done for you today! I didn't have to do this for you, especially with you being so ungrateful today. You better pray my parents want us to stay tonight because if we don't, you will regret how you acted today! So help me, God, Daya, you better have more respect for me from now on!" he said as spit was spraying from Clay's mouth from the anger that he was portraying.

"You are correct. I should have been more grateful. But..." Daya stopped talking because she knew the consequences if she disobeyed again.

"Good that you stopped. I was a bit worried about you because you do not want what happened last time."

Daya was thrilled to be close to the shore. She could see Dean and the grandparents playing out in the front yard. Her heart had become whole, with the warmth of knowing that Dean was right there and not in harm's way. Mark and Tessa waved to Daya and Clay in excitement, then Tessa grabbed Dean's hand and made him wave towards his parents. The big smile that came from Dean could light up the whole world, with his chubby cheeks would make any grandma want to squeeze them. From what Daya could see, they were playing with little tennis balls, throwing them and watching their German Shephard named Chalksee fetch it and bring it back. Watching Chalksee fetch the ball had Dean gut laughing, and it brought tears to Daya's eyes, seeing Dean happy with his grandparents while not having a care in the world.

The boat crashed to the shore, making Clay and Daya jolted back and forth. Daya got out of the rowboat, and then as all could not get any worse, Daya slipped and fell into the muddy shoreline.

"Crap! Now I can't just run to see my sweet boy," Daya cried out loud.

"Oh, knock it off. You are making a scene. Just go wash off, then you can see Dean," Clay whispered aggressively.

"You're right. I'll go inside and wash my hands."

Daya ran inside the house to wash her hands, the minty scent of the soap replacing the fish's rotting flesh that she had just encountered a few moments earlier.

"Finally, I need to see my baby," Daya spoke to herself. She rushed through the back door to see her handsome son. Daya couldn't hold back her excitement.

“Oh, my handsome Dean. Mama is here.” She picked up Dean. “Yes, who is Mama's most special little boy? Yes, you are, Dean! Mama loves you oh so much!!” Daya kissed Dean's cheeks, and the smile on her face put all that happened earlier in the rearview mirror.

As Daya was kissing her son, she couldn't help but look at Clay and forcefully look towards Mark and Tessa. She was trying hard to get Clay's attention and hoping that they could stay with them for the night because she was afraid of what would happen if they had to go home while thinking about what Clay said and not being grateful for what he had done.

“So, Mom and Dad? We were wondering if it was okay if we three stay here tonight to hang out with you guys?” Clay looked towards his parents with his hands folded.

“Yes, dear. You know you don't have to ask, but it is appreciated.” Tessa looked at Clay, then at Mark with fear in her eyes.

Daya was so grateful that they got to stay with Mark and Tessa, but she couldn't help but wonder if Tessa also got the punishment, not from Clay but Mark.

Creative Nonfiction

INT. MARY QUEEN OF ANGELS CATHOLIC CHURCH

The church is silent. A line of sinful men and women await their chance for absolution as they lean back against the cold, whitewashed brick wall. ABBY stands in line, her head bowed reverently as her heart seems to be beating out of her chest in anticipation. She raises her eyes to observe those around her. For a brief moment, she catches sight of the painted statue of Mary displayed high above the altar in front of the church. She feels as if the Holy Mother is watching her, waiting for her to make a mistake. She puts her head down again.

ABBY (to herself)

Lord, help me call to mind my innumerable sins.

The door of the confessional opens. ABBY is startled, though she attempts to hide the reaction from those present around her, both physically and spiritually. She steps out of the confession line, walking towards the aisle between the pews.

ABBY (to herself)

I am ready to be free of sin.

She genuflects before the crucifix, then rises and proceeds to the confessional, quietly closing the door behind her. She kneels in front of the small screen, ready to begin her confession. She is alone in the confessional, physically. PRIEST sits on the other side of the mesh confessional screen. He makes the sign of the cross.

PRIEST

In the name of The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

ABBY *mimics his motion.*

ABBY

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been...

She pauses, shamefully doing the math since the last time she has received the sacrament. She wonders how long has it been since she knelt in a quiet soundproof room. Seven years? Eight? She couldn't remember exactly.

ABBY

Father, it has been a very long time since my last confession.

ABBY realizes she now must improv her confession. Pressure suddenly erases every wrongdoing she's ever done, and she finds herself fabricating sins in her panic or stretching her minor sins to make it seem like she's not just filling the time so she doesn't walk out of the confessional too soon or after too long.

THE HOLY SPIRIT *enters.*

Suddenly feeling a great sense of peace, ABBY takes a deep breath and is able to step out of her panic for a moment. The stained-glass window above her brightens when the sun comes out from behind a cloud, warming the confessional. The stiff kneeler begins to feel like home, and she realizes this is exactly where she is meant to be in this moment.

ABBY

I am sorry for these sins and any sins I may have forgotten.

PRIEST

Well, thank you for making a good confession. For your penance, just say one Our Father and three Hail Marys. I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

ABBY

Thank you, Father.

ABBY exits the confessional with a warm smile on her face, confident she made a good enough impression to make the cut. Her family waits for her outside the church. She exits though the large wooden doors. She sees her cousins and her little brother playing tag in the grass. AUNT ANGIE comes to greet her as she walks down the concrete steps.

AUNT ANGIE

How did it go, sweetie?

ABBY pauses for a moment, reflecting on her spiritual experience in the confessional, hope beginning to blossom in her chest. If the Lord was willing to reach out so clearly to her in comfort while she knelt with such doubt in her heart, she thinks, surely there was a bright future on this path. She smiles at the thought.

ABBY

It was amazing.

AUNT ANGIE *smiles, pulling her in for a hug, overjoyed at the answer.*

AUNT ANGIE
I'm so glad.

End scene.

The memories I have from my childhood are muddled. Like water over an oil slick. The rainbow sheen intertwined with the thick oil, the metallic rings rippling over the surface. There are things I do not want to recall, causing me to shield my eyes like on a sunny day after a snowfall, the contrast of white on white too much to take in. Things I witnessed and experienced seem so unreal at times that I question whether they really happened. Almost like an out of body experience. Like I am watching someone else's life story, not my own. So foreign, the dialogue can barely register at times. I like to make jokes about my childhood, and people think I am joking. They laugh and I laugh. It is a defense mechanism. Childhood trauma unfortunately made me quite the comedian.

I broke my mom's crack pipe when I was seven. She would take it into the bathroom and disappear for hours. I made dinner, cooked, cleaned, and changed the diapers on my three little sisters. I was seven. I swear her pupils flashed red when she discovered what I had done. That was also the first time my mom hit me. I watched the black eye turn from purple to yellow, like a sunset on another planet. I didn't go to school that week. I also never touched anything of my mom's again.

I had lice so bad at one time my hair would move on its own. Choppy waves on a sea of brown hair. Meth meddles with the mind. The bugs in my hair became FBI informants. My mom took a can of Raid Roach Killer to my hair to kill the lice. The chemical burns on my scalp resembled a burn victims' skin. Pink, red, bloody swirls like a Van Gogh painting. I lost all my hair to a can of Raid. All the mirrors in the house were lost that day too. They were all two-way surveillance mirrors according to my mom. I was nine. I still do not cut my hair to this day or even my daughter's hair. I do not buy Raid.

I grew up in a house with no running water. We hauled our water in an old Ford with a rusted water tank strapped on the back. We had an outhouse and a shower room outside. The fridge was often bare unless it was the first of the month when the food stamps came and the child support. Once the child support was spent on drugs, the remaining food stamps would be traded or sold for cash to buy meth. I slept on a porch with a tin roof, dirt floor, and screen windows. I wasn't allowed to have sleepovers or friends over for that matter. The house was overrun with cats. Spaying or neutering was not an option when meth was needed. My two cats were siblings and had a litter of kittens. All the kittens were stillborn. I still think about the white kittens from time to time. Born asleep, like sometimes I wished I were as a child.

When I was fifteen, I left. I left my sisters behind with the meth monster and moved 1,500 miles away. I returned seven years later with a husband and a toddler in tow. I found out from my sisters that my mom was working at a Taco Bell in a neighboring town. She was working the register and took my order while stuttering and handed me my food. She was still on meth. She stutters when she is high. Her teeth now black, resembling the scorch marks on her pipe. Cheekbones sunken in, as sharp as knives. She did not recognize her own daughter. I threw my burrito across the lobby at her. Watched it hit the wall and the beans streaming down as if the

wall was crying for me. I screamed at her for not recognizing me. I looked like a mad person. And then I left. Another eight years passed. I had zero contact with her. I wiped her clean from my memories. Like yesterday's homework on a chalkboard.

Two years ago, I learned my mom had been clean for a few years and wanted to move to Minnesota to start her life over. It took six months of begging, pleading, and apologizing, but I finally let her meet her grandkids for the first time. Fast forward to today and she nannies for me during the week while I work. My kids love her unconditionally. They are unaware of her past and unaware of what I went through as a child. My children know that I grew up poor and that is it. I do not think I will ever tell my kids about her past. It is not my place. She tells me she loves me. I cannot say it. I am a mute. She tries to hug me, and I shy away, like a child would do around a stranger. I have no feelings towards her, and it makes me think I am broken inside. Like a music box with its gears ripped apart. Forgiving her and letting the past go is something I am not ready to do, and I am not sure that I will ever be able to in my life. I can offer her respect though. She is the grandma to my children like she should have been the mother to me. I respect that she is clean from drugs, that she goes out of her way to help me when I am in a bind for childcare, that she never complains if I am late or am unable to pay her for the week. I respect the love she has for my children. Having respect and having love are two separate things though. I am oil. She is water. The two do not mix.

It is hard to describe the feelings when someone close has died. The shock of that fateful moment, the regret for lost time. It is all such a mixed bag. Some are more experienced with death's touch than others, and it never seems to get easier. How can one put into words the thoughts that run through the mind as one looks down at the dead husk that was once a wild and rampant soul?

My mother had come to my place of work with the bad news that night. I was a meat cutter at a grocery store, and I was getting ready to close. I had recently gotten a haircut the day before and felt quite satisfied with how I looked. I had gotten a lot of nice comments throughout the day, and there had not been too many customers making foot traffic that day. All in all, it had been a quiet evening. I was in a pleasant mood when all of a sudden, I saw my mom come in. At first, I thought she was just in to pick up a few groceries, and I smiled and waved when I saw her down across the meat aisle. She came toward the meat counter where I worked. I was quickly thrown off when I saw the tears in her eyes.

Both of my parents are deaf, and American Sign Language is the chief form of communication between my deaf parents, my hearing siblings, and me. It was just something we took for granted, not much different than any audible conversation one assumes to be the norm.

"I have some bad news," she signed to me, and I asked what was wrong.

Her eyes looked swollen, and her countenance was pale. I could guess how the news would fall.

"It's your Papa..." She struggled to sign the words but continued. "Grandma recently called... Russell, your grandfather..."

"...He's dead."

I had no words to say. I was in a state of total shock.

I immediately called for a manager and asked to be excused so I could accompany my mom to my grandma's. My manager was kindly understanding about the situation, and he gave me the okay to go. Like a madman, I wrapped the meat case, quickly clocked out of my shift, and followed my mom to the car. My heart was thumping in my head as the cavalcade of thoughts raced through my mind.

Growing up, we called our grandfather, my mom's dad, "Papa." It was the name he had given to himself, and we had always called him that. I still do not know why he wanted to be called Papa, nor do I know why the name stuck. It was another one of those things we never questioned. All my life, he was a scruffy guy, whose appearance I can only lovingly compare to that of a hobo. His face was often scratchy, and he never dressed too extravagantly. His voice was gruff, but you could often hear a hint of endearment in his words. My grandfather had been struggling with many problems throughout his life. He suffered from intense depression and would often stay in bed for days, if not weeks at a time. This was a problem I would later come to relate to, and he would later help me to navigate my unchecked emotions. When I was younger, on the cusp of becoming a teenager, I would often visit my grandparents' house and stay a few days occasionally throughout the year. I enjoyed spending time with them, especially my grandfather. He was not like the other members of my family. He always had a very direct way of talking, and rarely used a filter for his words, letting the coarse bitterness to come cleanly through, like dark ground coffee without a strainer. He would often swear and make dirty jokes, but there were times he showed a softer side. Some moments he could get really serious, philosophizing about life, love, and religion. My grandfather always put up a masculine front, but inwardly he was a sensitive person with a deep love for God. I remember how he showed me with such excitement one of his many Bibles (he had a

whole collection of them). He even had one with multiple translations in one volume. So as rough as his exterior was, you could tell that he was still a good guy inside.

As I got older, I visited my grandparents less and less. In recent years, my grandfather's depression worsened, and he would just stay in bed more and more. He began missing all the big events of my life, like my graduation party, my twenty-first birthday, and even the family Christmas get-togethers. He was missing every important moment in my life, and it made me angry with him. I slowly felt callous towards my grandfather, and I soon gave up on talking to him. I thought, "how could he treat his grandson like this?" Although I was angry with him, I knew how alike we truly were. Deep down, I knew, yet I still held it all against him.

On the ride to my grandma's house, I had been listening to readings from the Bible, and I began to think back more and more about the good times I had with my grandfather. I had not yet come to terms with what had only half an hour ago been revealed to me. I thought that perhaps there was still something that could be done, perhaps even a miracle. "Maybe it's not time yet for me to say goodbye to my grandfather," I thought. "Maybe I could be given another chance to patch up our relationship." Most of the time though, the plans of God do not coincide with the plans of mortal men and women. We do not get to choose when a person's time comes to leave this Earth.

When we got there after the hour-long drive, it all felt so much stranger. I had not visited my grandparents' house in years and yet, instantly, I felt those familiar feelings as their little dog, Sparky, ran up as I opened the door. My grandmother, my aunt, and her two oldest girls were in the living room. They all stood around, some crying, some drinking, some reminiscing. Everyone was quiet, as if the place was a church. My grandma pointed us to the bedroom where my grandfather's body was still lying, and we went over to see him for what would be, for myself, the final time.

Growing up, I had been to only a handful of funerals. It always felt strange, looking into the casket where the body of an old family member lay. They were always dressed so nice, and they looked so clean and proper, almost as if they had only fallen asleep and could wake at any moment. I had never experienced true death before then. Here I saw the raw material of mythic Epimetheus' neglected creation, the husk of a former man.

My grandfather's body lay on the floor beside the bed. A few hours earlier when my grandmother came home from work, she found him unresponsive. She had pulled him off the bed and attempted CPR, to no avail. Knowing there was nothing else to do for him, she left him lying there. My grandfather had died in his sleep, and so, was not dressed properly at all. There he was, lying on the floor, in his boxers, with a blanket that my aunt had thrown over the cold cadaver. It was the least dignified a body could be.

It was like looking at a wax figure. The lips were turning purple, and the body was icy-cold to the touch. I looked down at the person my grandfather had become before his untimely passing. What used to be a decently maintained short head of hair had become a dark mane. He had clearly been growing his hair out, and his facial hair was unkempt. I knelt to feel his face that still felt scratchy, just as it did when I was a little kid. He looked more akin to a biblical figure than to my grandfather, with the light olive skin and the long dark hair. For this being my last moment to say goodbye to my grandfather, this was not the way I would have liked to see him.

Weeks later, I still haven't gotten over the shock of the event. That night they carried his body away, and my parents and I went straight home, where I immediately went to bed to think about the events that had just occurred. Life is like a strange dream now. I feel as though my grandfather is still lying there in bed at this very moment, watching television, just waiting for me to come and visit. Part of me is glad that he is no longer suffering, and my family feels confident that he is in God's hands now.

Still, I cannot help but feel that there is a hole now in the world where my grandfather once occupied. His body was recently cremated, and a service will be held for him soon. All I am left with are all these strange thoughts and feelings, so where does one go from here? I still have other grandfathers, but I only ever had one Papa.

Sometimes, when I'm in the front seat of my grandpa's truck, I stare at the sky of pink, purple, and orange melted together, blending in with the thin clouds that look like cotton balls someone stretched apart. I let the window roll completely down and take in the warm yet comfortable heat that follows sunsets in west Texas. Kermit, Texas, to be exact. My grandparents have been living here since they moved from Minnesota a few years prior when I was only six. Now, I'm eleven, and I visit every summer and spend it when them since they've moved. I lived there when I was in fourth grade for a summer and few short months into the new school year when my mom decided she was unhappy in Minnesota and wanted to live there with Grandpa and Grandma, bringing my two sisters and I with her when my dad was at work.

My dad won custody after a few months of living in Texas, so now I visit Mom and Grandma and Grandpa with Sophia, my little sister, and Madison, my older sister in the summers and on certain holidays. I'm comfortable in Minnesota, but Texas has its good days, just not good enough that I want to live there.

"What slushie do you want from Sonic, babes?" my grandpa asked.

"The blueberry coconut one. Thanks, Papa," I said, though he should know by now considering it's the one I always get when we come to Sonic.

As we wait for someone to come out on roller skates with our slushies, I rest my head on my arms out of the window, immediately smelling the humidity in the air that indicates it's going to rain. I love when it rains, especially in Texas at sunset. It's warm and humid but not enough to overwhelm you, and the rain is almost warm, unlike the rain in Minnesota. Rain brings a sense of calmness to me, setting aside any worries I may have at the time. I love the chaos of it all.

I hold my arm out the window, feeling distant, tiny raindrops land on my hand every few seconds or so, knowing in five minutes it will go from soft pre-showers to heavy rain that falls fast, feeling as if pellets are being shot at your arm. Then, a few minutes after, it will soften once again. Rain in Texas is funny—it has a consistent yet unique pattern it follows every time it pours.

It's strange how rain can go from lightly sprinkling to downright pouring within the blink of an eye. It's kind of like life. Things are light and simple like gentle drops of rain when you're younger, but once you open your eyes to a new maturity level and realize everything falling apart around you, it's like pellets of rain attacking you. It's weird to miss being young at such a young age already, but the happy moments ended quickly when my mom and dad fell out of love and my mom spiraled off into addiction after fleeing Minnesota. I don't blame her for running. Some think it's the only solution, but consequences were met, and lessons were learned.

"Here is your strawberry slushie, watermelon slushie, and blue raspberry coconut slushie. Have a good night y'all!" the waitress says, handing my grandpa the tray of slushies for my sisters and I and skating off to bring the next car their order.

I take the tray from Grandpa so he can drive, putting the tray in my lap while also removing mine. I undo one of the straws and taste the tropical blue coconut, a taste that always connects me to Texas in a way. I look forward to it every time I'm close to coming down. I let the taste of the sweet coconut blue keep a grip on happy memories from Texas, not times when things got rough.

We get home quick considering Kermit is a small town and we aren't very far from the Sonic. My grandpa brings in the slushies for my sisters, but I choose to sit out on the front step and watch the rainfall. It's getting heavier, an orange tint coming from the sunset hiding behind rain clouds, making the world feel orange and warm. The comfort of the sound of rain against rooftops while the humidity that follows every rainfall here wraps me in a comforting hug makes me forget about the things in my life that aren't so perfect. Grandma says Mom is working on getting better, but I'm not dumb. I know healing takes time and walking away from addiction isn't easy. I had to be patient and hope things heal in time for my own sake.

The rain falling hard fits well with how I'm feeling. Things aren't bad enough to feel like my life is a never-ending tornado, but bad enough for it to feel like hard rain that never stops falling. I love rain, but when it rains for long enough, it starts to make you feel depressed, as if the world was tipped the wrong way. Everything just feels off. There is no new normal to conform to, nor will we ever be able to go back to how our normal used to be. All I can do is be patient until the rainbow comes and the worries go away, even if the rain comes back one day.

I wish my mom was happier with my dad. Then my life might be sunshine and rainbows. Living states away from my mom is hard, but it's even harder to watch the dark cloud of mistakes that hover over her, drowning her in her own misery. I feel as if I've been struck by lightning watching her fall deeper into a hole of addiction. I feel nothing but pain knowing I can't help her, only she can help herself. My mind is full of fog, my thoughts consumed with confusion, desperate to understand how life can go so downhill in the blink of an eye.

Sophia comes out with her strawberry slushie to watch the rain too, sitting one the step below me. I stare at the chalk Sophia and I played with days prior washing down driveway, making a colorful puddle on the sidewalk.

"I miss Mom. We haven't seen her as much this summer," Sophia says casually, taking a sip from her slushie.

"Me too, but we'll see her soon enough," I say, though I'm entirely sure I'm being honest with that last line. I have no idea when we're going to see Mom. I just know I have to keep Sophia optimistic. I don't want her to suffer from this bump in the road. She's too young to understand it all.

I wish I could provide Sophia with more comfort, but I'm emotionally distant from people and like keeping things to myself in order to keep strong. Instead of indulging others with my personal feelings about topics I don't feel comfortable talking about, I focus on other things as a distraction and hold onto hope things will eventually get better.

My distraction at this moment was the sun uncovering from the rainclouds, warming up my skin, the sound of rain slowly dripping from trees as the rainfall drastically slows, the feeling

of orange and peace I absorb from the light the sunset is giving off, the sight of the rainbow reflecting from the shallow puddles, the taste of blue raspberry coconut that locks in place my memories of Texas. To me, that is good enough to feel okay and content. In a world of orange, where the rain no longer harshly falls, the darkness of the past has no grasp on me. The clouds have lightened, and the rainbow is present. The storm has passed.

I go back inside, Sophia following, and go to the room in my grandparents' house that I share with my sisters to change into pajamas. Once I change, I go back to the living room and claim my spot in the rocking chair, ready to watch a movie with my grandma.

“Do you want some moose tracks, honey?” my grandma asks. I nod and smile as a thank you. Grandma can have her moments, but she does her best to make sure my sisters and I are well.

Eating moose tracks frozen yogurt while watching some dramatic movie on Lifetime with my grandma helps me understand that, though I have bad memories in Texas watching my mom struggle, I have good ones too, one being this very moment. Coming down to Texas and dealing with my family is like dealing with the bipolar weather, but every storm will pass—it may just take some time, and I have the patience.

My mom will get past this bump in the road, and I won't let it impact me too harshly. Memories shall remain as nothing but that. I need to let go and, in times of struggle, remember my world of orange and blue raspberry coconut slushies.

I once held a door open for a woman at the bank. I can remember her face vividly: her lips curled into a sideways 'D' shape, resembling the very mouth of Emperor Zurg from *Toy Story*. I had no clue why she was so repulsed, and her revulsion looped back around into self-resentment. As a result of this incident, I never held a door for another person for several years and rarely went out of my way to do anything kind for anyone else, though I never registered why until it was pointed out to me. It is a memory that I will never forget, as I still suffer from its side effects, but my mind does not have room for every memory I've ever made, and some are damned to fade from my very being.

I'm speaking, of course, of the random memories that are all but forgotten until suddenly resurfaced. The ones that bolt forth from the depths of my mind at the slightest stimulus but are otherwise overlooked in the vast expanse of my conscience, shrouded behind a veil of impenetrable fog that prevents me from willing them back to life again. One such memory of mine is from my childhood, the place where memory has all but faded into zeros and ones in my head.

My childhood was a long strip of VCR tape that I relentlessly tore from the little black box it had lain so delicately within. I took that film, though it was abnormally long already, for granted, and when the tape was all used up, I asked for more.

It was a time of ignorance, when my memories did not weigh upon me like a necklace of lead beads and when flash images from my past would not send a jolt of embarrassment and force me to curl up in the fetal position with my teeth clenched.

But most importantly, it was a time of pillow fighting with my dad and brother when we were still ignorant little boys, my parents still lived in the same house, and I was still taller than my brother.

My dad sat on the couch where the pillows lay at his sides like boulders making ready for ballistae. We kept a close eye on those pillows. Our small bodies tensed as we pinched scratchy tufts of carpet between our toes, ignoring the beads of sweat that dripped past our temples. Those pillows were our lifeline. But first, they'd be our demise.

Without warning and with such swiftness that my eyes could not follow, my dad pelted my brother with a pillow, knocking him to his knees with a thud, thus beginning the fight of our lives. My brother quickly regained his footing as my father sent a volley of pillows my way. I dodged one, caught the other, and prepared for an onslaught of my own.

It was then, when the adrenaline had corrupted the veins on my forehead, that my imagination took over. My brother and I were the knights in shining armor who fought valiantly to... rescue a princess or something... and my father was a hungry-eyed, ferocious beast.

The beast would occasionally raise his claws and halt, brandishing a discouraging boulder, but not moving. When he did, we would follow suit, waiting for him to move. He gazed at my brother, who raised his silver shield to prepare for the oncoming blow as the beast pulled the pillow back. I could smell the thick of the beast's malice in the air.

That's when it hit me—the pillow, I mean—in the face.

Barely missing the brick fireplace behind me with my head, I collapsed onto the carpet. I shouted, my brow furrowing from my agitation. It was at that moment I shaped the course of my life through the memory of an immature unwillingness to accept defeat: a memory soon to be covered up by countless others until all that was left of it were the strings pulling my heart.

“That’s not fair! You can’t just—” I started, but my words were cut off as I caught yet another pillow with my face.

It was clear to me at that point that the battle was an uphill one. Every time we threw a pillow, the beast would catch it without effort, and he would throw them back with double the force.

That didn’t prompt me to give up, but as I regained my footing, I heard my brother squeal with dismay. I watched as the beast dragged my brother into his jaws. My brother shouted harsh protests as he was eaten alive, until it stopped, and the monster set my brother’s mangled corpse aside and cast his gaze at me.

As our eyes met, a shivering jolt of revulsion raced through me. I instinctively threw the pillow in my hand at him, but it compressed against his chest and fell aside, just as limp as my brother.

My father backed me into the corner of the room, a shadow stretching across his body. The only light that shined upon him turned his face into a crescent moon, sparkling from the sweat on the side of his head. As I backed into the corner, my arm pressed against the walls that surrounded me. They were cold to the touch but more welcoming than the embrace of the beast that towered above.

With a single rapid movement, he descended upon me, grabbing me by my thin waist and lifting me into the pedestal of his large, hairy arms. Every attempt to break free was futile, but in my childish ignorance, I attempted anyway.

My squirming grew more frantic as he opened his jaws, revealing a set of imaginary fangs coated in blood fresh from his last kill. His breath was rancid with the flesh of my brother, and I could feel its heat against the tender skin of my belly. It was this signature imprisonment that signaled one thing: it was my turn to be eaten alive.

The words “Daddy’s going in!” sent cords of terror through my innocent mind as memories of the last utterance of those words resurfaced and I released a squeal of discomfort as he devoured me like a starving wolf, howling like one in tune with my frenzied kicking and screeching. His jaws were the most uncomfortable tools for tickling I’d felt.

And then, like the night before, and every night prior, when he was done kicking our butts at Pillow Monster, our dad leaned back on the couch, a grunt slipping between his lips, and the same words would conclude the fight.

“All right. That’s enough rough housing for tonight,” he would say, and my brother and I, still energetic with adrenaline, would groan with dismay at the end of our ecstasy.

I miss the days when Pillow Monster was a family tradition of ours, even the times I cannot recall. Without a doubt, those days are what hold the fundamental pieces of who I am, despite being lost to me now. Since then, my family has been split apart, moved into the country, and witnessed the addition of an even taller younger brother. All of these events contributed to the memories that morph into the amalgamation of who I am.

It is my belief that rather than being born naturally good or evil, a human being is made completely out of their memory. I am under the pretense that the human mind can be codified into a systematic set of millions of trillions of numbers, all locked away inside our memory. Such musings have me convinced that memories hold power over our every move. They drive our every move as we subconsciously go about our lives, unbeknownst to the fact that they are pulling the strings above our heads. We wouldn't act the way we do without the experience we've earned over the years, whether those experiences are bad or good.

When I try to find answers to the big questions, like what I want from life, or who I am, or whether I should cut my pizza in two halves at work today and eat it like a sandwich or just cut it into slices and eat it like a normal person, it's those memories that provide the answers to those questions.

And it only took me two decades, an edgy teen phase, and a certain pillow monster to make me realize that the memories are all I will ever have.

Two days at the beach! I was so excited. The hotel reservation was made and then the first compromise of many to come. Okay, Tarpon Springs first. Then we go to the beach! The hotel room opens right onto the beach. The children and I are so excited—we get to spend a whole day at the beach! My whole day is less than that in the end.

When making plans to go to the beach during our vacation to Disney World, I had to agree to the stop in Tarpon Springs. See, John, my husband, hates the beach. He grumbles about the sand getting everywhere and itching, the salt drying our already dry skin, the sun burning, ending up looking like a strawberry patch in late June. I agreed to the side trip to Tarpon Springs, thinking we would spend the morning there, have lunch, and then head to our hotel. John dragged out the morning reminiscing about his childhood vacation there. He tried to remember which restaurant they ate at and was thrilled to see the old museum still open. He told the kids all the history of the original Greek sponging town he could remember, and we had to go to the old museum. Alright, it was more interesting than I thought it would be. The kids liked it and they each got to buy a sponge. The day was breezy, churning the waves to the shore and rocking the boats gently in their moorings. The sun shone brightly in a cerulean blue sky. A few fluffy clouds could be seen, like at the beginning of *The Simpsons*. A beautiful day to spend at the beach. We were not at the beach. Finally, after a midafternoon lunch at a lovely Greek restaurant, we headed to our hotel. Nope, one more stop, groceries so we can eat the next three meals in.

Yea! The hotel, six stories high, and pink, like a salmon's flesh. I go to check in, leaving the kids and John in the car to wait. And now there is a problem with the room—it got switched to one on the second floor. I am extremely frustrated and trying my hardest to stay calm. The desk person is genuinely nice. I get the room I want on the first floor and letting out onto the beach. On top of that, the manager gives me a twenty-five percent discount. Okay, I am getting happier. A nice room, but the best part is the double sliding doors that lead out to the beach. The first thing I do is take off my sandals, go out those doors and walk onto the beach. The sand is so warm, it feels like silk as I bury my toes in. I am ecstatic now. Okay, swimsuits on and out to the beach!

Brrr! The water is cold! *Nooo!* I want to swim. Extremely sad faces among the children and me. The sand is warm, so I suggest a walk along the shore for about a half hour. There are only a few other people walking along the shore. I guess since it is March, and mid-week, not many people venture out to Clearwater Beach. The waves splash against my legs as I walk, and my feet get a little used to the water. I take the kids back to the room, and we have pizza for dinner.

Time for the next thing I am looking forward to, sunset. I want to sit on the beach with blankets to watch the sun slowly sink into the water. As the sun sinks, I can make out the half round shape of the galaxy's largest star. It is goldenrod yellow, sinking into a deep red orange, then garnet-like reds. The sky is so blue, but it slowly gets darker blue as the sun continues to set. The horizon is red and then just the deepest blue of the sky. The sunset is unlike ours, where it

seems to be dusk for so long. It just suddenly slips below the horizon between sea and sky. The sky is dark now. Stars slowly start to appear and—it seems like I blinked—the sky is full of stars. I help find the Big and Small Dippers, the extent of my star knowledge. The kids and I want to swim now, and the kids ask to check out the pool.

If I cannot swim in the ocean, at least there is a pool. The pool is beautiful, like a setting out of a movie. It is surrounded by palm trees and large planters with tropical flowers. The water is almost as warm as bathwater. I jump in. *Oh no!* CJ, my five-year-old, is sitting on the steps crying. When I ask what is wrong, he says, “I’m scared the coconut will fall on my head.” I try awfully hard not to laugh and ask, “What coconut, honey?” He says, “The ones up there, like the island ones,” and points to the palm trees. Now I get it, I watched *Gilligan’s Island* with him, a couple months before coming to Florida. CJ thought the palms were just like the ones on that island. “No, honey, there are no coconuts in these palms. You do not have to worry about anything dropping on your head. Come on now. Mommy will help you float.” I swim and have water fights with the kids, splashing, diving, and playing in that beautiful, warm water for an hour or so and then it’s bedtime.

“Ten o’clock,” John says. “Time for bed.” Early the next day, around seven o’clock, I get everyone up. No time to waste, this was the last day at the beach and I am going to go swimming! Out the door the kids and I go with cereal eaten, swimsuits on, sunscreen applied, towels grabbed, sand shovels and buckets in hand, lunch fixed and in cooler. Yep, water is still chilly, feels like Lake Superior in the summer. I bravely, albeit very slowly, walk in, feeling the sand sink beneath my feet, the waves splash against my legs, then hips. The water is now up to Ali’s chest and she is bouncing with the waves while holding onto my hand. Jenni, my oldest, dives into the waves and under the water, she comes up, dripping wet and grinning ear to ear. CJ is holding my other hand and the water is up to his shoulders. He is floating and bouncing, at least trying to bounce like Ali. It is cold, but I am loving the buoyancy of the salt water and the waves as they push us to and fro. I try to show the kids how to body surf, but the waves are not quite strong enough.

We swim and splash each other until my lips are as blue as blueberries. Getting out, I wrap us up in towels until all of us stop shivering and our “chilly bumps,” as Ali would say, go away. More sunscreen and now to lay on my towel with my book and just soak in those sunny, hot rays of sunshine. Jenni joins me on her towel, and the two little ones go off to build a sandcastle with their buckets and shovels. John has joined us on the beach at some point and watches from a short distance away, separate, yet nearby. He tries to be happy for us, never truly succeeding. He complains on and off all morning: “I am getting burned” “The wind is blowing sand everywhere.” “I am too hot.” “Are you guys ready to go yet?”

“Put on sunscreen, jump in the cold water,” I say. I also respond with, “Why don’t you go into town and walk around? You would have more fun.” Nope, he just stays at the beach. I mostly try to ignore him. I swear it is like dealing with a bored child. I get into the water with the kids one more time. I don’t last as long this time and leave the kids to play while I watch from the shore. After a while, CJ comes running up, crying. “Mommy, they’re gone, they’re gone!” he

sobs. “What’s gone?” I ask, thinking his bucket and shovel had gotten pulled into the Gulf waters. All he can say is, “They’re gone.” I then noticed he is cupping himself and trying extremely hard not to laugh. “Oh, well. You know how a turtle pulls his head inside his shell if he is scared or cold?” I ask. CJ nods and I continue. “Well, that is what is happening to you. Your balls got really cold, so they are up inside you, and when they get warm, they will come back out.” “Okay,” he says with trembly lips. I wrap him up in his towel and cuddle him, chuckling to myself. What will this child come up with next? The other two kids come up to see what happened, and we all have a rousing good laugh at my poor son’s expense.

Time to warm up and play in the sand some more. The sandcastle is looking surprisingly good. It has a wide moat all around, five turrets, one in each of three corners and two in one corner. The walls come about a quarter way up the foot-tall turrets and there is no doorway. I think the moat is the castle’s only protection because anyone could easily get over the walls. The kids play in the water one more time, Jenni reluctantly watching them. I sit on my towel, the warmth of the sand seeping into my legs and the sun warming my face and arms. I thoroughly enjoy watching my children playing in the waves, just like I played as a child. Too soon, their lips looking like purple tulips, it is time to get out of the water and eat lunch.

After eating, we go back to the room. Showered, dressed, and packed up, I am ready to leave when John realizes he really is sunburned. I brought green After Sun along, so I apply it liberally to his stomach and chest. The kids and I tease him about being an old man when I find some gray chest hairs. I have to reapply the After Sun several times before he finally feels like he can put on his shirt. As he starts to put on his shirt, Ali points at him and says, “Look! Daddy looks moldy now!” Jenni starts laughing and says, “He’s a moldy-oldie!” John’s chest has turned very green from the amount of After Sun applied, and it does indeed look like mold. All of us are laughing and chanting, “Moldy-oldie, moldy-oldie!” everyone, that is, except John. He does chuckle a little. From then and forever after, he would be referred to as a “Moldy-Oldie” while we laugh all over again.

We get the car loaded with all the luggage, sandy wet towels, wet swimsuits, buckets, shovels, and cooler. After checking out of the room, I ask, “John, please let’s walk along the beach to the pier.” He agrees and off we go. My sandals swing from my hand and my toes sink into the sand once again. As I walk, I pick small pretty shells. The kids dart here and there to see what they can find. Suddenly Jenni comes upon a stingray washed up on the shore. She almost steps on it. At first, I think it’s dead but, then I can see it move a little. It’s silvery-gray, triangular, a tail like a rat’s, with small, golden eyes on top of its head. Its tail swishes back and forth as the waves gently pull in and out. I take video and pictures as we stand worriedly watching, hoping and praying the water will rise enough to pull it back out to the ocean. About fifteen minutes after spotting the ray, the water does rise enough, and I joyfully watch as it swims back into the ocean. I watch the ray swim away, and I sadly realize that my time, too, is done at the beach.



Spirit River Review 2021



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