

The Rapids Review 2022

Late Night Memories By Nancy Martinez

The Rapids Review 2022

A publication of the Anoka Ramsey Community College's Creative Writing Club.

ARCC *Rapids Review* Mission Statement

The Rapids Review, the Coon Rapids Campus student literary magazine, is dedicated to publishing a wide range of excellently crafted work by student writers of any experience and all ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, marital statuses, ages, religions, and abilities.

A note from the editor

Welcome readers to the 2022 edition of *The Rapids Review*! I'm excited to showcase the array of pieces selected thoughtfully by *The Rapids Review* editing team. This year's theme is hope and humanity, and I believe that each of these marvelous works echo that sentiment. I'm so incredibly proud of my peers and am happy to be able to display their talent in this year's edition.

Sincerely, Alexandra Hervig (Editor in-Chief)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all who participated in crafting this year's *2022 Rapids Review*. I would like to express my gratitude to Laurel Smith for being an exceptional mentor and making my editorial debut so incredibly special and empowering. I know that wherever life takes me in the literary field, her instruction and careful criticism will be invaluable. To my section editors, thank you for your hard work! None of this would have been possible without your help.

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A Poet's Pain by Morgan Matthews

I used to bite my black inked tongue
when you gathered in the flesh of my cheeks,
to keep you from seeping into the world,
from staining pages that I believed
were better left blank and empty.
Then you overflowed in my silence,
bled your hot ink into blotted veins
as you spilled into my chest.
You burst through black bones
and seared the cage of my ribs
as you began to spread.
Swelled in my throat,
I tried to swallow you again.
But then I choked on this vomit of words that
caused more pain the longer I kept them in. So
I spit you out, I lit you aflame.
And I let you burn your hot ink on the page.

Air is to Water by Angerise Carter

Precious as any gemstone
The tiny waddling infant in my arms
breathing of life
Air flowing like water around her
Growing like a seed of redemption
for other tiny waddling's lost
You survived, grew, and thrived
My heart beats with admiration
for this small
then tall
person who once inhabited my body
Should I ever lose you
it would steal my breath
and the water surrounding us.

Seventeen, Eighteen, Nineteen by Hannah Flanagan

How can I know everything at seventeen?
But nothing at eighteen,
and even less at nineteen.

At seventeen,
I know my future job,
Destined to be an actress on the big stage.
I have a boyfriend,
I know what house,
and how many kids I'll have,
what tile my bathroom will have.
I am happy at seventeen!
Overtaken by such wild dreams.

Yet a month changes me.
A future dream is swallowed
by a rapid change of events,
diagnosed with a disease which
blurs my future.
Impedes me from pursuing my dream job.
Medically haltered from everything I once knew.

At eighteen,
I know my degree,
Where I will go to college.
(After changing degrees,
and schools, too many times to count).
I am academically charged.
The same loving relationship I had at seventeen.
I am content at eighteen.

Another weekend flips my world around.
He's gone. I no longer have the security I once had.
A main part of my future, driving away in the distance.
Leaving me to pick up the pieces of my dreams.

Almost nineteen,
I am confident, mature.
Meeting people and growing me
Different than I was at seventeen.

Yet I am still unsure of my future,
Walking on the edge of a path,
Questioning my steps but smiling as I go.

I hope I have peace at nineteen.

How can a person know everything at seventeen?

But nothing as nineteen approaches.

I can feel time moving, like a fever dream.

The universe's mighty river sweeping me to new shores,
places I wouldn't have gone at seventeen,
or even eighteen, but maybe nineteen.

Becoming Bare by Morgan Matthews

Before the trees outside become bare,
losing their leaves as they fall,
you said you wanted to take me.

Entangle our warm bodies
and bind our veins,
feel our heartbeats dance together
to a rhythmic song.

I'll shed what has been covering me,
all that you've ever seen,
and together
we'll undo ourselves
to find the people
who hide beneath the flesh
that we've always worn.

Section 8 by Blake Townely

We wake up and fall asleep to the same aroma every day.

The dingy smell of cigarette smoke coming from the floorboards.

The skunky sour smell of marijuana coming from the other side of the wall.

The pumpkin spice candle mother burns all day to battle the smells of our shared home.

It was never easy for her to put us in this place and call it home.

No matter the time, we could still hear hip-hop music bumping from the ceiling above us.

No matter how soft we walked, the old floor groaned with every step we took.

No matter how soft we talked, the neighbors could still hear our complaints of them.

No matter the day, we still wondered if our car would be where we left it.

It was never easy for mother to raise 2 boys in this environment all on her own.

The eldest son looked to his affiliated friends for an escape from poverty.

The youngest son turned to academics and sports for an escape from reality.

The eldest son made regrettable decisions and kept company with no guidance.

The youngest son made lifelong bonds with teammates and had many homes and families.

Yet, the brothers remained loyal to each other because there is no bond stronger than one that comes from struggle.

A Letter to My Mother (called to heaven May 7, 2004) by Angerise Carter

I wanted to be a good daughter, no, a great daughter.
The kind of daughter mothers always dream of having.
You know the one they brag to their friends about.
I fell short, not because I didn't try,
often cried because I saw disappointment in your eyes.
You were the perfect mother in my world,
not June Clever perfect,
but the perfect mother with a heart bigger than this world could hold.

I wanted to be like you,
never have an unkind word to say about anyone.
Sacrifice your last dime for Aunt Gertrude to have that penny purse she wanted so much,
but didn't need.
Love God and walk in his light,
beaming to be his child.
I wish that light was as clear to me as it was to you.
You would laugh when things weren't funny but should have been.
Care with all your heart and puzzle pieces of your soul.
Raise six children like it was as easy as baking a sweet potato pie, but we know it wasn't.
Give, give, and then give some more,
It seems the well never ran dry.
But the toll of it still painted a picture on your face.

The ~~little~~ baby girl born in Mississippi and raised in Louisiana.
College smart but not college graduate.
Married 53 years and counting more to be added,
when you both unite again in heaven one day.
My dearest, beautiful mom, maybe I didn't show I loved you enough.
Maybe I should have,
I know I could have and yet I feel I failed.

When I remember you standing in that doorway
partly disguised by an old scratched and dented screen,
I can see the sadness etched on your face,
hear the heavy breathing of your breath from 8 feet away,
the pounding concerto playing at your heartstrings because we were leaving.
I am forever haunted by that image and how you must have felt abandoned by me.
But I am always with you, and you are always with me.
So, someday, not today but one day the guilt will ease but never truly go away.
To the best mom ever,
I am truly sorry for your loss.
Your oldest daughter.

Spring Equinox by McKenna Wright

Exhale forward fold

Inhale half rise

Exhale bow

Inhale... with intention I rise connecting each vertebra as I come into Mountain

The sun seeped through the open window

giving me a sense of being outside

without the morning

chill.

High up in the trees they sing,

in honor of the warmth.

Their colors soar in the morning light

brown, red, and black.

Scouring the world beneath them,

searching for pink flesh.

plunging down to earth,

She settled gracefully on the cold ground,

pecking at the soft grass.

Her yellow beak plucked

the pink string out from under the soil.

She looked up to the sky,

thanking mother nature for providing nourishment.

She let the squirming flesh slither down her throat

into darkness and flew into the light.

The Urban Roar by Blake Townley

I hear the urban roar.

I hear the mumbles under the roofers' breaths as they labor up their ladders reaching the tops of apartment complexes the color of old-time prison jumpsuits.

I hear the urban roar.

I hear an old couple bickering at the pace they were maintaining on their baby blue bicycles as they rode through the unfinished development on the hunt for their next home, their scowls billowing in the chilling October breeze.

I hear the urban roar.

I hear the neighborhood hounds whimpering for a backyard to graze, while their chains rattle around like unwanted change.

I hear the urban roar.

I hear the Delivery driver's disgust while expediting the 6th oversized package this week in a neighborhood his big burley truck rarely navigates without issue.

I hear the urban roar.

I hear the robotic arm of the grimy blue garbage truck stealing our trash away to bury in earth's backyard for another 164,000 days.

I still hear nature's heartbeat.

I still hear the scavengers with black wings squawking to one another about their next savory snack while gawking at anyone under their perch atop the telephone wires.

I still hear nature's heartbeat.

I still hear the colorful, mindless park birds. From Robins to Chickadees, all singing the beautiful songs of their people to all who will listen.

I still hear nature's heartbeat.

I still hear the squirrels' pointy claws scratching the rigged bark of the last oak tree standing strong- in the center of the park, as if their home wasn't serving as the last little bit of shade.

I still hear nature's heartbeat.

I still hear the crimson leaves barely holding on by a thread as the wind rips and pulls them away from their summer home, for unlike past years, they will not return home again.

I hear the urban roar.

I hear the urban roar.

Spring Rain by Madison Scholl

The first drop hits the bridge of
your nose, just below your glasses. Small, mildly uncomfortable.

The second is a wet freckle on your arm.

Third, fourth, fifth come more quickly, across
your face and shoulders.

The grass ahead of and around you
begins to deepen to a dark, lush green.

You are wet, electric, alone and connected.

Thunder cracks and you throw back
your head and laugh.

Your water-splattered glasses blur the world around you as you spin and dance and are
Free.

The Adventures of a House Cat by Alexandra Hervig

The roars coming from the TV caught my attention and interrupted my cleaning session. The plush rug under my paws made it very difficult not to fall peacefully asleep again, but I forced myself to sit up.

“A lion stalks his prey....” A deep voice announced.

The lion on the screen was stalking a large animal that looked a bit like the neighbor’s horse I’m able to see from the window. Except, this horse has stripes all along its body. *Hmmm what a strange horse.*

“The zebra is unsuspecting.....” The deep voice chides.

Zebra, what an odd name for a horse. I suppose it can’t be named carrot like the orange pony across the street. I heard my human discussing how the horse got its name because it likes carrots. Humans are such simple creatures. With that logic, why is my name not Catnip? Or perhaps kibble? I roll my eyes at the thought; my human would never. She is much more complex than any of the other visitors. I am named after some musician by the name of Elton. My human even put glasses on me one Halloween, and it took everything in me not to claw her eyes out. How would you like to be forced into some silly outfit by your mother? I much prefer hats to those silly glasses. I’m just glad she didn’t name me some embarrassing name like “Fluffy” or “Whitey.” Both are accurate depictions of me, but quite unoriginal. And I am anything but unoriginal, and my proof came when I saw myself in my human’s mirror for the first time.

I had caught my reflection in a long gold rimmed mirror sitting in the corner of the room, My white fur, immaculate and clean due to my diligent baths that morning. My

stark blue eyes create quite the adoring contrast, my human tells me, "What a pretty kitty" I am, and I am inclined to believe her as I strutted towards the mirror. My long fur blowing all around me from the wind coming in from the opened window. I sat in front of the mirror and savored the warm breeze before investigating myself further. The only part of me that isn't white are the light brown patches around my eyes. I think they make me look kind of like my human when she smears black all along her eyes. Except mine looks much better and is Mother nature given. What a pity for her.

The mutt called me a narcissist quickly after I appreciated myself in the mirror. That mangy mutt would be as vain as me if he looked like this. My human was rather excited about him, and I have no idea why; she says he is a pug which is just as unappealing as it sounds. He unfortunately is one of those dogs that has a smooshed in face and any time he walks at a brisk pace sounds as if he is suffocating; it is disgusting.

I began licking my paw again as I watched mesmerized at the screen in front of me. The lion kept getting closer and closer to the striped horse, and then suddenly it sunk its teeth into the creature. My tail flicked excitedly at the rush of adrenaline coursing through me. I wonder what it would be like to hunt something. Sure, I've pounced on the stupid smooshed face mutt, but it is not the same. I got my kicks from watching the birds come to the windowsill, but I could never do anything except scratch at the pesky glass. I want to be a lion and hunt my very own striped horse. I am a predator, and a lion is merely a cousin to me, if the announcer is to be believed.

"Oh Shit," my human says, looking out the glass door where the mutt is standing, its tongue hanging out of its mouth with a satisfied smile. I sauntered closer and saw what my human was so upset about. His fur was splattered with mud. *Oh, shit indeed.*

The disgusting mutt probably rolled around in it. I can't imagine doing that on purpose to my immaculate white fur, but then again, not everyone can be me. But a lion would not care about appearances, or measly rain. The human opened the door, and before she could cover the creature with a towel it shook, spraying brown across the white walls.

"HANK!" She screamed as she ran her hand through her hair.

The door was still left open, and I made my choice. My human was distracted trying to catch the dog tracking muddy paws all across the wood floor. I dart out the door. *I'M FREE. I am a predator!* I meow at the top of my lungs, my white paws splash in the puddles on the driveway. My heart thundered in my chest; I had never been this far from the house before.

"ELTON NO COME BACK, pspspssps," I hear my human yelling from far behind me.

I do feel bad for worrying her; after all, I'd be sad to lose me too, but I am not meant to be locked up. My claws are sharp due to my constant scratching on the post she bought after I began to do it on the couch, and I am ready to take down a striped horse of my own. The further into the forest I go, the more I notice the little critters running about and the earthy smell of it. I see what can only be described as a weird-looking cat sitting on its haunches eating a nut of some sort. *Must be inbred.* I decide I quite like the forest. It smells a bit like when my human brings a tree home to decorate when snow litters the ground. *Stop thinking about your mother. How embarrassing, a predator who is homesick after two minutes of freedom.* I shake my head and banish the thoughts. I will not be a

mushy, heartsick cat locked up in a cozy house. I will hunt for my meal, not have my human hand it to me with a pat on the head.

I take a seat among some cushy green stuff that feels a bit like my bed and try to absorb my feelings of freedom. For goodness sake my fur is filthy! I resist the urge to have an emergency bath and remind myself that it helps me look the part. I need to look like the predator, and I can't very well do that with puffs of pure white fur.

I look up at the sky; it's begun to turn orange with a hint of pink. It's quite beautiful, but all I can think about is the mud on my paws. *My god this stuff is disgusting.*

A bird breaks me out of my prissy thoughts by waving out its wings, probably about to fly. Poor little birdy won't know what hit him. I crouch low and make my approach, I stalk closer and hide among a big bundle of green plants. The bird is unsuspecting. *What a moron.*

I ready my haunches and pounce. *Oh, my I am really going to do this. I AM A LION.* WHAM! I slam face first into the mud. Embarrassment floods me as I lift my head from the sludge; the bird is sitting in the tree above me mocking me as it sings.

I'm immediately glad there are no mirrors out in the wild. My human has a rather large one in her bedchamber that I use to smooth out my luscious locks on the daily. I can't imagine the mess on my face. This was a mistake, I was not born to be a hunter, I am no lion with massive claws. I am simply Elton the house cat. How foolish of me to think that I, a cat who enjoys curling up in the warm sun on my human's lap, could ever be a lion.

The light begins to drain from the sky, and I know I need to begin to head back. She must be worried sick. I start back on the dirt path, no longer caring whether I get any

more covered in brown. I hear heavy footfall somewhere to the side of me. I look over to see in the distance something that looks like a dog, but has a feral way about him. *Bloody hell.* This is most definitely not a canine like Hank who simply wants to piss me off; no this one is licking its lips and eyeing me like I am the striped Zebra. I run as fast as my paws will take me, heart pounding in my chest. In the distance I can see my house. My home. My human will rescue me; I am sure of it. I hear the footsteps slow the closer I get to the black topped road. Dogs bark all around me at the creature. *What do you know, perhaps dogs are useful after all.* I spot Hank in the yard growling ferociously at where the creature still lurks in the woods, and I am grateful. This mangy mutt is a complete idiot to think he could make it out alive against that beast, but he did it anyway. I launch myself over the bushes and up the steps. And yowl at the top of my lungs.

My human comes running. “Elton!” she screeches, yanking open the door to let me in. She reaches down and roughly picks me up. Normally this sort of treatment would lead to a punishment of nails into her arm, but now I am simply happy to be back inside where she and my bed are. Being a predator is overrated.

We Call Him Richard by Natasha Brady

Seeing our property for the first time was like walking into an antique shop. You could look but were cautious to not touch the trinkets crammed on the mountains of shelves. Afraid a gentle touch might break them under pressure. Each trinket is well worn; stained from use but noticeably cared for and loved. They didn't hold much meaning to a passing stranger who takes a glance, but they once held the entire world to their original owner. Our new home was like this. Built a few years after World War II ended. A war veteran used his pension to start a dairy farm. The silo is long gone, nothing left but the round foundation. White paint curled and peeled off the sides of the barn. The wooden support beams and loft flooring took corrosion damage from neglect but remained structurally sound. It wasn't pretty. The property had sat untouched for six years before my fiancé and I stumbled upon it. Nature had begun to take back what once was its domain. We were awestruck. Our dreams began to unravel and entwine with the potential the property held. We envisioned the possibilities and saw how beautiful it once was and could be again. It was our first home and ours to shape. When it came to signing the deed, no one warned us the property came with a *nisse*.

A *nisse* is a Scandinavian folklore creature. Due to its appearance, it is often mistaken as a garden gnome. They are hardy and immensely strong despite their size. They are found living on farms bringing good fortune and caring for your livestock. Do not be fooled; *nisse* have an ill temper. Once angered, they destroy farm equipment and bring calamity. The easiest way to infuriate one is to neglect your farm. I will never understand why the creature turned his pent-up rage upon us. We wanted to restore the

property. Perhaps we weren't progressing quickly enough. So, it was no surprise one frigid January morning I found myself peering over the edge of our well. I glared into the abyss, secretly hoping my sheer frustration would thaw the frozen pipe.

Not unlike the rest of the farm, our well was ancient. A dug well specifically. As the name implies, it's a hole in the ground dug six to eight feet deep. Two feet in diameter but instead of a bucket on a string, there was a pump at the bottom. I was comically too familiar with this hole in the ground. Knowing I had descended into it once before for a frozen pipe, I was not a willing volunteer to do it again. John, on the other hand, was more than willing to make the sacrifice in my stead. Unfortunately, John is six foot and three inches while also being broad. I couldn't manage a full twirl when I reached the bottom, and he was more than double my size. When it came to the well, I had to take the plunge. I descended into the well by a poorly made ladder, remembering it was missing a step at the bottom. With each step, darkness began to engulf me. My mind raced at the thought of the plank that hovered over open water would break under my weight. I would plunge into the dark water never to surface. I stepped on the plank that did not break and tried to brush the foul thoughts from my head. John must have shouted down to me, but I did not hear because he was gone when I looked up. Now I was truly alone aside from the *nisse* who snickered at my misery. I shut my eyes tight and tried to imagine myself anywhere but here.

I could only think of the first time we met the *nisse*. We had been living in our house for a month when a summer thunderstorm tumbled its way in. The wind rattled the house, seemingly to blow through the walls. John and I had been sitting on our couch playing video games. He teased and poked at my side, trying to distract me from the

storm. There was the loudest pop, and the house went dark. Not usually vocal when frightened, I screamed. My left ear rang and throbbed. I tried opening my eyes but could only see specks of distorted light. John scrambled his way through the dark for a flashlight. I was left dazed and confused, the ringing in my ear worsened. I felt a trickle of something down my cheek, and when I reached for it, I winced. When he returned, he flashed the light in my direction. Sure enough, there was a large scrape along my cheekbone, and it was blood that trickled down my cheek.

Our house was struck by lightning. It left scorch marks down the wall to our internet modem that exploded. I was only a foot away when it had happened, and it was a shard of plastic that struck my face. While waiting for the electrician to make his repairs, I plucked plastic from my hair. It was then discovered one of the two grounding rods was tampered with. The copper rod was painted yellow, leaving it non-conductive. I remember thinking it couldn't get worse. The *nisse* found that to be a challenge. Over the next three years, our house was struck by lightning twice more. It flooded three times, and multiple small fires had started from faulty electrical work. I would see the *nisse* stalk around the property. Another accident would occur, and his face would appear. The stress of it all sent my mind down a dark rabbit hole.

I felt despair and defeat from the *nisse* creeping up my back. He dug his dirty claws into my shoulders. A tear fell and I could feel myself begin to weep. There was a shout, it cut through my mournful thoughts, and I looked up. I was back in the well, and John had returned. That moment I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I was not going to be trapped in the well forever. This was yet another prank the *nisse* was playing, and it wouldn't be his last. I pushed the *nisse* off my shoulders, my thoughts going with him. John handed

down the hairdryer, and I began to work on the frozen pipe. Moments passed before I heard a soft crackle then a low moan. A smirk crept across my face. The pipe had thawed. Filled with overwhelming relief, I rested against the wall of the well. I had lost sight of our dreams. Consumed by the pranks from the *nisse*, I had forgotten the joy our home has given us. The *nisse* could bring me heartache, but I controlled how I handled it. I controlled my happiness. At his next appearance, I would smile because this ratty farm brought John and me together. I would mock the *nisse* with the name I designated for him. We call him Richard because Richard is a dick.

Caramel Popcorn by Rachel Hettiarachyhy

She smushes her face into the screen door. Her lips quiver, and her big blue eyes start to fill with tears.

I know that I only have a few seconds before Evie launches herself into one of her famous full-blown screeching tantrums that will send my dad and my stepmom running. First off, I don't feel like dealing with this. Once Evie starts crying, it can take a long time to quiet her back down. Secondly, I'm trying to sneak out of the house without my dad and stepmom knowing. They like knowing where I am and think it's too cold for me to just wander around outside for hours. Or one of them will try to come with me to keep me company, but I don't need any company. I just want to be alone with my thoughts for a little while.

Evie whimpers as I reach back inside to close the heavy wooden front door. She attaches herself to my leg as quickly as she can.

“Evie no!” I whisper-yell, but it's hopeless. Evie's outside on my leg, whimpering my name

“Lo, Lo, Lo!” Evie cries. That's her version of saying my name, Willow.

I try to shove Evie back inside with her still clinging on to my leg. The screen door slams into my back, so I'm sandwiched in the middle of the doorway.

Desperately I try to untangle myself from Evie, prying each of her tiny toddler fingers off me. She's like a little leech, clinging on me with all her strength.

I'm prying her legs off me with one hand while simultaneously holding her away from me so she can't latch on again with the other hand when the screeching tantrum

begins. With only seconds to spare before my dad and stepmom come running, I shake Evie off me and drop her inside. Both doors slam as I take off in a run to the side of the house. The heavy wooden door doesn't do much to conceal Evie's scream. It grows in volume as Evie gets louder and more upset. Her screams are pulsing from inside and fighting their way to be heard outside.

I hear the front door slam open, and Evie's screams triple in volume. How can such a small person make so much noise?

I listen as my dad and stepmom comfort Evie, and the screams gradually lessen in volume until they are just whimpers. I hear my dad let out a big huff of breath. "She's gone again. Jess, do you see her anywhere?"

My stepmom's gentle voice carries to where I'm hiding along the side of the house. Evie had to have inherited her dad's voice because I don't think Jess is capable of being that loud. "Nick, just let her be. Give her some space. She obviously doesn't want to be here right now."

My dad mumbles something that I can't catch, but he must've agreed because a few seconds later the sounds of the doors clicking back into place echo in the neighborhood.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. A little stone of guilt lodges itself deep in my stomach. I feel bad about hiding from them, but I just need some air to clear my head and think for a bit. There's no privacy or quiet with Evie in the house. It's just too much for me to handle right now. I need to get a grip on myself before my mom comes to pick me up later.

I wait a couple more minutes to make sure that Jess and my dad aren't coming back to look for me, then take off down the street. I don't really know where I'm going

yet, but the pounding of my shoes on the sidewalk and the fresh air helps clear my head a bit. I'm not surprised when a few minutes later I find myself in front of the little park Evie always asks to go to. It seems like my feet take me here a lot. It's a good place to think and be alone with my thoughts. I always have a lot to think about on the Sundays I'm with my dad. It's the day I go back with my mom, and she's not an easy person to be around.

A couple little kids are running around; their moms are keeping a close watch on them while having a conversation at a picnic table nearby. I make my way over to the swings, shuffling through those wood chips that get stuck all over in your shoes. I sit on the old rubber top of the swing and grip the metal chains. They're colder than I thought they'd be. It's a reminder that as the weather keeps getting colder, it will be harder to escape outside. What really sucks is that I won't be able to drive for another two years. Driving means being able to go wherever I want. Driving means freedom. Until then, I'm basically trapped.

One of the little kids falls off the end of the slide and starts crying. He looks a little older than Evie, maybe three or four. In seconds, his mom has rushed over and scooped him into her arms. She tells him that everything will be alright, that she loves him, and keeps holding him until he stops crying. When was the last time my mom comforted me and told me that it would be alright? Usually, she was the reason why I was crying. Or when was the last time she told me that she loved me when she wasn't drunk? Or even hugged me? I honestly can't remember.

I'm thrown out of my thoughts by my phone buzzing in my pocket. My heart seems to freeze for a second as my mom's contact appears on the screen. That little stone in my stomach is now a big stone, and it's filled with dread instead of guilt.

I let the call ring all the way through, then go to my messages where there are nearly thirty new texts from her. Before I get a chance to read them, she's calling again. I take a deep breath and muster all the courage I can before hitting the answer button.

"Hi Mom—" I start but am immediately cut off.

"Willow Juniper Kingson! You'd better be at your dad's house ready to go in the next five minutes or I swear!" She sounds furious, which doesn't make sense because it's not like I ran away from her house this time. Usually, she could care less about what I do when I'm at my dad's house.

I try to judge if she's drunk or not. Her words don't seem slurred, so probably not, which is usually worse.

"Don't worry mom, I'll be back by five for pickup." I try to keep my voice calm, but just thinking about going back over there makes a little tremble sneak in and makes my body quiver.

"No. I'm here now. You'd better be running back here to grab your things. You have ten minutes before we leave, with or without your stuff and if you don't show up, I'm calling the cops."

That's always her threat to me. It's pretty much an empty threat at this point because she's never actually done it. I don't think there's anything the cops could do anyways because I don't think I've done anything wrong, but it sends a sharp shot of panic through me anyways, and I stand up from the swing quickly. "Okay mom, I'm already on my way back, I just need to grab a couple things. I'll be quick I promise."

"You'd better be." She snips and hangs up.

I sigh but am grateful for my preparedness. When your mom is as spontaneous as mine, you learn quickly to have a packed backpack ready to live out of for a few days at all times. I hadn't even taken my old blue backpack off when I sat on the swing. I pause to tuck my phone back into my pocket so it's safe and start off at a run down the street.

My footsteps on the concrete echo around the block and through my ears. My breathing becomes heavier as I continue, and I slow to a jog and eventually a walk as I get nearer and nearer to the house. Sure enough, mom's little silver Hyundai is sitting in the driveway. It's still running like my mom can't wait to speed away and forget that my dad even exists.

I approach the driver's side window and try to swallow down my nervousness. "I just need two minutes, promise." I turn away as quickly as I can and start running for the front door.

"Two minutes! We'll be talking about your carelessness and irresponsibility in the car!"

I know she says something else too, but I'm far enough away to block out her voice. As soon as my old, ragged tennis shoe steps onto the top step, I notice that dad and Jess have been watching the entire exchange from the doorway. I feel myself blush, and guilt fills me.

"I—I'm sorry for leaving, and that you had to deal with her. She's in a mood I guess."

My dad's face hardens, like he wants to say something about my mom, but Jess's softens. She seems almost sad, or maybe it's a pitying look.

“I just have to grab a couple things quick.” My voice is quieter, and I wiggle between them to get to my bedroom. I can tell that they’ve followed me, but I only have a minute.

I hastily yank my phone charger from the wall, rip a few shirts and pants out of my dresser, and grab a blanket from my bed.

I take a deep breath and cross my fingers that my dad and stepmom won’t follow me as I rush into the kitchen. Thankfully, Evie starts crying from another room, and I hear footsteps breaking off into that direction.

I feel guilty every time for doing this—raiding their pantry—but I’m not sure how I would survive at mom’s if I didn’t. Sometimes she orders dinner in, but most evenings she just disappears and I’m pretty much on my own, and there isn’t much in the house. Those nights are the best anyways, even if it means being hungry because it means she won’t be getting drunk and lashing all her anger out at me.

I grab a handful of fruit snacks from a drawer, and another handful of granola bars gets shoved in my backpack afterwards. I already have a bunch of other snacks in my backpack, but I’m always so hungry that having extra definitely can’t hurt.

“Here.” I jump when I look up to see Jess looking down at me sitting on her pantry floor. I glance around for my dad but don’t see him. Weird. He must’ve gone to comfort Evie and Jess must’ve followed me. She’s holding a bag out to me filled with some caramel popcorn. I don’t know where she got it, but I smile and squish everything harder in my backpack to make it fit.

“Thanks, Jess.”

“Of course.” She smiles a little, but it fades quickly, and I realize she’s twisting her hands around each other. It seems to be her nervous habit.

“Well, I should get going before she gets angrier.” I try to make my voice lighter and happier, but I can hear the dread seeping in. Dang it, Jess doesn’t need to think any less of me than she already does.

“She’s not supposed to be here to get you for another three hours.” Jess’s voice is calm and steady, forcing me to look into her big blue eyes, just like Evie’s. “You don’t have to go yet if you don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I do.” The steeliness in my voice surprises me. “It’s worse if I don’t.”

I hear the car horn from outside and wonder how long I’ve been inside. Longer than two minutes for sure. “Shoot, I have to go, like now.” I tell Jess.

“Did you get enough food?”

I would normally think that Jess is mocking me considering half my backpack is filled with just about everything I could find from her pantry, but I’m still looking at her and can see her eyebrows crunched together in concern and know that it’s a genuine question.

“Yeah?” My voice quivers. It hadn’t meant to come out as a question. I break eye contact with Jess and start walking towards the door.

I start walking down the hall towards the front door but can hear Jess trailing behind me. Her quiet voice reaches me like a soft, comforting hand on my back. “If you run out, or just want some different snacks or dinner or anything, just text and I’ll bring something over.”

That freezes me mid-step and Jess crashes into me a bit. Something pinches in my chest and tears nearly spring into my eyes, but I'm not sure why. "You would do that? Actually?"

Jess gently reaches out and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Of course. I know it doesn't actually fix anything, but maybe it will make the day easier to get through. Caramel popcorn can change your entire outlook on the day."

I love how she didn't try to tell me everything would be fine. That's what grown-ups always try to tell you.

"Okay." I feel less quivery, a little less nervous.

"I know this isn't the best time, but your dad and I have been talking about having you stay with us permanently. Only if you want too of course. It would probably mean a lot of lawyers and courts, so think about it for a while." Jess looks nervous and wrings her hands again.

The car horn honks again, but I'm frozen, staring at Jess. "I want that," I say with more certainty in my voice than ever before.

"Think about it." She insists, but pulls me into a hug, and I hug back.

Then I hear the car horn again, and this time it's much longer and feels angrier. I break apart from Jess and run to the door and down the steps.

I brace myself for the wrath of my mother that's about to be launched at me as I open the car door. As I'm sliding into the passenger seat, it begins. The lectures, the yelling, the complaining, the insults. I just nod along and watch the houses go by, trying to block it all out. I know that I don't need to think twice about the answer I gave Jess. It's not going to change. I'm more than ready to be done with my mom. Mostly, I'm

thinking about that caramel popcorn squished in my backpack and hoping that my mom leaves tonight so I can enjoy it in peace.

Elevator by Tony Schoeller

“Floor one going up,” the elevator voice announced as I stepped inside. A gust of air hit me as I entered; it reminded me how much I hate the smell of hospitals. I was sick in the hospital with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or COPD from age five until I was ten or eleven, I can’t remember. All I know is I’ve hated them ever since, and when I heard my mother was at Southdale Hospital, my heart sank to my stomach. It had been a while since I’ve seen her. I was still debating on whether I should see her today. My mother had a drug problem while I was growing up, and it wasn’t easy on me. There were many times when her drug addiction got in the way of her being a mother, and growing up, all I wanted was for her to be there for me. When I got older, I left her behind and didn’t help her in her time of need. It had been a while since I had seen her, and I knew it was going to be hard looking past everything she put me through.

“I have to face my childhood nightmare and see mom all at the same time. Great,” I said under my breath.

“Floor two going up,” The elevator announced as a man stepped in.

“Morning,” he said with a nod and pressed floor 8.

“How’s it going,” I said, keeping the conversation short.

He stood in front of me as the elevator carried us from floor to floor. He was dressed in a seemingly expensive monochromatic black suit, black lace-less shoes and a wooden cane to support him. The black hairs throughout the sea of white on his head

suggested he may be in his higher fifties or low sixties by my guess. I started to wonder why he was here, making up scenarios and stories about the man.

“This elevator looks like it’s seen better days,” the man said, still looking forward.

He snapped me out of my daze of observations, and just as I was about to open my mouth and respond to his elevator small talk, the elevator came to an abrupt stop. The lights turned off, and the screen above the buttons went black. Panic set in, and I felt the walls closing in on me. My legs became weak as the floor seemed to be moving under my feet. I couldn’t see in any direction.

“As if I didn’t hate this place enough already, now I’m going to die here stuck in an elevator,” I thought to myself.

Right when my claustrophobia forced me to accept my premature death. The man’s cell phone screen lit up the room.

“There must be a power outage, no Wi-Fi and no service in the elevators. Just great,” the man said.

“Same here, I can’t get a hold of anyone,” I replied.

After about ten minutes of the man and I frantically trying to reach someone and pressing elevator buttons in the dark, the lights suddenly re-illuminated the elevator. I noticed the elevator screen and the lit-up buttons didn’t come back on. We were still stuck.

I checked my Fitbit watch for my heartrate. One hundred and thirty beats per minute it read. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath trying to ignore the stale hospital

air, my legs still weak under my body. I could hear my own heartbeat; it felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

“Claustrophobia?” the man asked.

“Claustrophobia and hospitals. Spent way too much time in one as a kid, never really got over it ya know,” I said with closed eyes.

My usual shy self would've preferred not to interact with pointless small talk but seeing as I had to spend some time with the man, I welcomed it. I needed a distraction rather than all of my worst anxieties ganging up on me. I finally opened my eyes, and the man was sitting on the ground with his cane in his lap and head resting against the wall. He seemed relaxed, unbothered, but I was on the verge of a panic attack.

“Bad knees. Might as well sit here while we're stuck. Someone is going to figure out it's stuck, and we'll get out. Don't worry,” the man said.

I took another deep breath, finally opening my eyes.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“I'm David,” I told him.

“Nice to meet you David, I'm Craig,” Craig said.

Some time passed before anyone spoke. I ran out of things to do on my phone without service. I started to look around the elevator and noticed the details. The floor was carpeted with a terrible dark green color. The walls looked like wood with grain

running up and down, but they were smooth on my hands, clearly fake. There was a metal railing all around us covered in finger smudges.

“He’s right. It has seen better days,” I thought. Now I started to notice the floor had a dark mysterious stain in the corner, presumably blood I figured. The screen telling us the floor number had a crack from corner to corner.

“You know my son’s name is David. You remind me of him and how he used to hate hospitals too,” Craig said interrupting my boredom.

“How old is your son?” I asked Craig as I sat down across from him finally feeling a bit more at ease. There was something about his demeanor that was welcoming and warming.

“He’s about your age. He spent a lot of his childhood in a hospital too before the cancer took him.” Craig said, looking down.

“I’m sorry for your loss; I can’t imagine losing a son. I just found my mom’s in here again. Her second heart attack in three years and I’m scared it’s too late,” I told him.

“I never know what to say. I shouldn’t have brought up my mom. He has his own problems,” I thought to myself. Something about being stuck in an elevator with a stranger was making me talk. Maybe it was my empathy trying to relate, or a distraction from my irrational phobias. Whatever the reason, I felt like I had said too much.

“What do you mean? Why are you too late?” he said while looking directly at me. I could see it in his eyes; he already knew what I was talking about.

“My mother and I never got along well. She had a drug problem, and I was on my own most of the time as a kid. She got clean and tried to reach out but It’s hard to forgive,” I told him. The man paused for a moment before speaking.

“I don’t know if I’m the right man to give advice or if it’s my place David, but when we get out of this elevator, talk to your mom. Forgive and forget,” The man’s face was serious as he spoke.

“I didn’t have the best relationship with my boy. I was always busy with work putting all my effort into being a successful man. I wasn’t there for him when he needed me. Looking back now I get it. Success isn’t about money or what you have; it’s subjective. Find what is most important to you and be successful in that. I would give anything to have more time with my son, you still have time with your mom, whatever happens, make sure you don’t regret it,” he said to me. His gaze didn’t break my eyes. I felt like he was staring into my soul. I broke from his gaze and just stared at my hands.

“Just an old man’s thoughts,” the man said.

“Thank you,” I responded.

I didn’t know what to say. He was right, I only get one mom and of course I loved her but sometimes she could be overbearing. I was stuck in my head, processing the past having an existential crisis.

“Who am I? Where am I going? What am I doing?” I thought. After college I found the first job I could at a payroll company and worked there for the last four years. I didn’t have many plans or aspirations like I did as a kid. I realized I was like the man. I

thought making money was going to make me successful and happy. I wanted to give myself everything my mother didn't when I was a child. I hadn't stopped to think about what I really wanted, let alone that my mom won't always be there. I should've felt sad, but I didn't. In that moment all I could do was say thank you to Craig. It took a stranger trapped on an elevator in a hospital to wake me up. I started to think of all the ways I was going to apologize to my mom when I saw her. I started thinking of all the things I was going to try.

"I'm going to finally get a passport and try skydiving," I thought. The feeling of relief rushed over me. I still had time to change things.

"How much longer before we're saved, you think?" Craig said to me.

"I almost forgot we were stuck," I said. We both laughed.

"So why are you here?" I asked.

"My friend's in here. I'm just visiting. Nothing serious," he replied.

I gave him a nod of understanding. We sat for a while in silence. He had said something I needed to hear, but I had nothing to offer. My mind was focused on my mom.

"Floor 3 going up," the elevator voice said.

The screen turned on, and I jumped up. I helped the man stand up, and the elevator started to move again. The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. I had reached her floor, and it was time to see her. I stepped out and turned to the man.

"Thank you, Craig, I hope we meet again," I said.

“It’s not too late,” he said smiling.

I started on my way to the nurse’s desk.

“Hi, I’m looking for my mother, Shelly Crooks,” I said.

“Hi, she is in room 412. Just sign in over there,” she said pointing to a small desk with a piece of paper and some pens. I started writing my name down by the number four hundred and twelve. I wasn’t nervous anymore. I started striding towards my mom’s room and made my way down the hallway to her door.

“Here I am,” I thought.

My heart started racing again. I looked around trying to distract myself from my anxiety. The hallway floor was white with a layer of fresh wax that reflected the fluorescent lights back. The doors were a light brown and lined the long hallway. I thought I was ready.

“I am ready,” I said.

I closed my eyes and took in another deep breath. I noticed the air as it rushed into my lungs. It didn’t feel the same. It didn’t make me feel sick; the memories didn’t come back. It just felt like air again. I opened my eyes and turned to the door.

“I can do this; I escaped a broken elevator. I can speak to mom,” I said in my head.

I reached out for the doorknob; my fingers wrapped around the cold metal handle. I slowly opened the door to her room. I stepped inside and saw my mother laying in the

hospital bed. Her eyes opened, and she turned toward me. Everything I wanted to say and yell at her for started racing through my mind. She sat up and smiled at me.

“Hi mom,” I said.

She reached her arms out signaling she wanted a hug. I was dumbfounded. After all this time and anger that had built up, all I wanted to do was hug my mom. I embraced her in my arms, and my eyes began to tear up. I had so much I wanted to say but all that came out was

“I missed you.”

“Me too,” she replied.

All I could think about in that moment was the man in the elevator. He was right; it wasn't too late to make amends and to forgive. I sat by her bed, and we talked for hours. She told me not to worry about her and that she was okay. It had been so long since I heard my mother's voice and laughter. I left the hospital after my mom fell asleep, making sure I used the stairs. I got into my car and looked at the hospital.

“Thank you, Craig,” I said out loud.

A White Rose by Amelia Bowers

When I was young, my mother would always ask me to help her tend the gardens. My mother was a gentle woman, as compassionate to her plants as she was to me. She repetitively said that she cared about all her plants equally, but I knew this was a lie. In my mother's garden, there was a small white rose bush. It was lovingly kept, each individual petal was a symbol of love and complete compassion. My mother adored these simple roses. Something I never understood when I was a child, how could she care so much for something so basic?

I remember one instant when I was with my mother, helping her pick the weeds from her perfect garden. I was young; I had never touched her roses before, as I knew they were special to her. But on this one cloudy day, I had grasped for a weed too close to the rose bush and pricked my finger.

I let out a wail, grasping the finger that was slowly dripping red down my hand. The ruby droplets had fallen onto the crisp white petals a few times before my mother reached me.

"Oh, my love, don't fret," she said, taking my small hand into her own and carefully wiping the blood away. "It's just the roses trying to protect themselves from our cruel world."

I cried, pointing at the roses, saying something unintelligible but surely incriminating as I made a move to kick the bush.

“Darling, no.” My mother held my arms and forced me to look at her. “It’s not the roses’ fault you were hurt; you simply tried to touch something that refused to be touched. If you look, it is your blood staining the perfection of the petals, not the other way around.” She placed a kiss on my hand. “Sometimes we get hurt by the things that we love,” she said and stared so painfully at the flowers that I knew, even then, that she had meant something else.

I was too young to really understand what that meant, but as I got older, those words tended to stick with me. I took another spin on it, however. I began to see people collectively as the petals, and the trials we go through as my tiny ruby droplets on the beautiful basic flowers.

As I grew up, my mother did not take walks through the gardens with me quite as much anymore. I was not as good of a gardener as she was, but I had done my best and no matter how busy my life got I always made sure to tend to her white roses.

Each day that passed, I saw my mother begin to fade away. I could hear her in the night, ragged coughs and wheezes echoing through the halls; she had to call her sister in from the city to take care of me once she finally became bedridden.

I did what I could to keep her happy. I put on shadow puppet shows, and I sang her the new songs I learned. She always smiled and laughed, she told me she loved me, but this moment would be short lived as soon she would fall asleep again.

I was old enough at this point to realize it meant she was slipping away. So, one day I decided to pick one of her beloved roses and give it to her. Somewhere in me, deep

down, I had hoped the sight of it would wake her up inside. I hoped it would make her better.

When I had handed it to her, her face lit up and she smiled more than I had seen her smile in almost a year.

She opened her mouth to say something to me, that smile stretched across her face. But instead, a ragged cough escaped her mouth; she convulsed so hard that a spray of tiny red droplets splattered the perfect white flower.

We both stared at the rose, now speckled red, like it had been when I was very young.

And I watched as the tears welled in my mother's eyes and as the flower fell to the ground. I had picked it up off the floor while my mother sobbed and explained to her as she had explained to me when I was little, this time however I told her," It's not your fault mama, you're just a pretty white petal, but sometimes stained you with red too, just like the flower."

That was the last thing I had ever gotten to say to her.

That next week they had lowered my perfect mother to the ground with a handful of her lovely white roses.

Now I cannot stand the sight of a white rose, I would rather see them red because the red is more accurate. I will never be a white rose again.

A Conversation Between Friends By Angerise Carter

The first words to come out of her mouth were “I want to die.” The first words to come out of my mouth after that statement was “I won’t let you.” I threw a few clothes into an overnight bag and headed for my front door. I could be there on her doorstep in an hour in a half. An hour in a half that could be too late but never was. I’d made this trip before for various reasons: children’s birthday parties, anniversaries, high school graduation, girl’s getaway weekends and yes for cries of desperation. But the tone in her voice this time, the inflection in her statement made this time more relevant than ever. We had played catch and release too many times before but something about this time was different. I kept reciting in my head the mantra we always repeated since high school. She would say, “If I fall,” and I would respond “I will catch you,” and on it went.

“If I’m hurt?”

“I will heal you.”

“If I feel alone?”

“You are never alone with me around.”

“If I want to die?”

“You will save me and in doing so save yourself.”

“Okay?”

“Okay!”

There was an unusual amount of traffic on the highway, making the trip seem longer than it should be. However, I knew I would get there in time. It was not her time to go, this could not be the end. The day was sunny but cold. It was a beautiful day with clear blue skies, too beautiful to be clouded by ugliness. That's why I knew I would get there in time. No Grim Reaper would appear today. He would have to find someone else to haunt, to steal away a forging, beating heart. A heart that was kind and generous to others. No, it was not her time.

"Crap!" I snapped my attention back to the present moment. Then, I realized I hadn't checked my oil and was in imminent danger of running out of gas. The sign on the side of the road read gas and food 3 miles just off the highway. My heart started to race. Any delay and the tables could turn. Any delay could mean the end to the mantra but not by good means.

Our mothers had been best friends and were pregnant at the same time, so Lauren and I grew up together. I've often wondered what my life would have been like if she wasn't a part of it. The pregnancy pictures of our mothers made us laugh. There was always laughter growing up in both our households, but at one point, the laughter ended. Why did it end again? Oh, I remember it ended when Lauren's mother died of ovarian cancer when Lauren was in high school. After that, sadness was a cloud that covered our lives and never went away. Lauren changed from being a happy, socially apt, straight A student to someone I didn't know sometimes but needed to be there for. She skipped class, started smoking, and took on a gothic appearance. For her wearing dark makeup, dark clothes and hair dyed black was all the rage. Occasionally though, I'd find her in the girl's

bathroom in a stall crying her eyes out. It was there the mantra was first recited. She became a shell of herself being a mixture of sunny one moment and shadows the next. This continued until in college where she met Stanton and he gave her love, children, and a life worth living again. But even fairy tales end.

I thought back to a couple of years ago when Lauren had found out that I had an affair with Stanton. Although it was brief, it was stupid. “Cassandra what were you thinking?” I cursed myself. I knew I was the one who had caused this episode. I erected it all on my own, being selfish, and insensitive to my best friend’s needs. I knew I should have chosen Lauren, my best friend, our bond, the love that flowed like a river between us. God help me! I should have chosen Lauren over an affair with her husband. But that was the past. Lauren had forgiven me. However, I had to live with the mistrust that was always standing between us like the columns of a colosseum. Lauren would never trust me the same again.

Finally, I arrived at Lauren’s house. The front door immediately flew open. She was standing there looking stoic, staring out into the night. She spoke only one word, “Cassandra,” then offered me some hot tea to ward off the cold winter air that was breathing down my back. The house was warm and cozy with the fireplace flames dancing a ritual.

“I need to use the bathroom and freshen up,” I told her.

I skirted past her and ducked into the powder room off the entry hallway. The truth was I needed a moment to compose myself so she wouldn’t see I was falling apart. Then I

stared into the vanity mirror and let out a slight whisper of a prayer of thanks to God that I had made it in time.

When I came out of the bathroom, she was standing by the window staring out. I walked up behind her and gave her the hug she so desperately needed. Her cheek was wet from tears of bearing too much pain.

“If I fall?” she whispered.

“I will catch you,” and so it began.

“If I’m hurt?”

“I will heal you.”

“If I feel alone?”

“You are never alone with me around.”

“If I want to die?”

“You will save me and in doing so save yourself.” Tears now glistened my eyes.

“Okay?”

“Okay!”

We both stood watching the snow falling lightly, silently, breathlessly in the night.

Going Until I'm Gone By Maria Gleason

I'm trying to push away the thought of the wrestling season. It's only a week away, and it has been on my mind whether I try to push it away or not. I like to say I am popular, but the truth is that I don't have any friends; it's just that many people know me from wrestling. Sports get in the way of my school a lot, so I never really have had a passion for academics. My parents shaped me into who I am today, and deep down, I feel like I could have been shaped better. My Mom and Dad made me do wrestling, even though I am good. I don't love it. I am honestly depressed when wrestling season comes around. I know that I had to eat less to cut weight and burn more calories. I am always angrier and more annoyed when wrestling season comes around. They know this, though, and most of the time deal with me.

Today is the first meet of wrestling season for senior year, and one of the biggest things in wrestling, keeping weight, was what I hated most.

"Better win this match tonight. Scouts coming," Dad says in an excited yet tired tone.

As if I wasn't already having the stress of my parents now, they are even more controlling with the scouts coming to this game.

"I packed lunch for you today," Mom says sharply.

"Mom, you know I always eat the school lunch and still watch what I eat. I have never overeaten," I say, annoyed; the day isn't off to a good start.

"Well, today is different; you are going to take this lunch and eat it," Mom says.

I looked inside the bag, and there were carrots and cheese with crackers. *Yum*. I just grab the bag with my backpack and head to school.

As soon as I walk into school, a giant banner reads, “Good luck, wrestlers!”

School goes by slowly, but eventually, it’s the last period.

After the last class period, I go to the gym and start practice with a few buddies.

They are excited about tonight; it’s against our rivals, the Huskies. After we warm-up, the gym gets cleared for the matches. The stands are packed. The mats are set up, and it is time to wrestle. I want this night to be over. I keep telling myself, push through, it’s only one night, *make mom and dad proud. Make mom and dad proud. Make mom and dad proud.* That is all that rings through my ears every day and even more when wrestling comes around. For them, they weren’t popular, didn’t have a sport they were good at, and my dad didn’t even finish high school. They put all they wanted to be on me. I guess that’s why I keep going; I want to make them proud, but I want to make myself proud at some point.

When I see my parents in the stands, my stomach starts to hurt. They have been waiting for this game since the first day I stepped onto the mat to wrestle for the first time. I don’t care about the scouts here, so I try not to think about them and focus on the match. Wrestling in college would be something I would never want to do, but I know my parents would.

I got into the gym for my first match. The piledriver was my kind of move. It always worked for me; either that or I scared people enough to give up.

“Our next match coming up is Grayson against Tommy,” said the announcer.

I walk up to the mat and meet my opponent, and handshake him as usual. He seems like an easy win from what everyone is telling me. I narrow in and only focus on him and myself. I tend to zone out and forget about everything but my skills and opponent when I wrestle.

The intense heavy breathing from the opponent and I as we begin the match and start to wrestle could be heard across the gym. I could tell he was nervous. His hands firmly gripped my body when he attempted a move. I do that, too, when my hands are getting sweaty from the nervousness.

“And Grayson is bringing Tommy into his piledriver move! This kid is a beast at accurately doing the piledriver to trap the opponent. Let’s see if it will work on Tommy,” the announcer went on saying.

I got him pinned. He can’t get up.

“That’s a win for Grayson!!!!” The announcer yells.

I won the match.

I could breathe.

As the season went on, stress kept rising inside me, with scouts contacting me from all over, trying to get me to join their team. I keep telling myself that it will be over soon, but it is eating inside of me. I want it to stop. I want my parents to let me do what I wish to: quit wrestling.

Before I left for school, I got the lecture from my mom to win again for the match tonight, my dad said he wouldn’t start coming anymore if I started losing. The 5th match

of the season began after school, and I was tired. I hadn't eaten at all today. My stomach is starting to turn and ache.

"Our next match of the meet is Grayson against Henry. Grayson has been having a terrific season this year. Let's see what he will bring for us tonight," the announcer states.

I went onto the mat to meet my partner. I felt my hand start to shake as I reached out to shake my opponent's hand before the match officially began. I began to get extremely dizzy.

I couldn't see his hand....I couldn't see him.

"Grayson!" was the last sound I heard from my mother yelling in the stands.

I blacked out and fell onto the floor.

The next moment, I opened my eyes to a hospital room.

".....wrestling is a very intense sport. It can damage the growth of a teenager with the strain it has on their health. Grayson blacked out from not drinking or eating anything today, and I believe he has felt very stressed as well." The doctor went on to say how stress is a significant factor in a person's health.

"Oh, Grayson!" Mom said as she hugged me when I woke up.

The doctor was still in the room; I must have interrupted a conversation. My dad wasn't saying anything to me.

"Grayson, it's so good to see you up. Though this might not be the best news to wake up to, I have to make it clear before sending you home. Wrestling season will have to come to a stop. It is putting a huge effect on your health, and anymore cutting back on calories could end up doing way worse than just a blackout," said the doctor in the calmest manner.

I understood now why my dad was quiet.

We eventually went home, and my mom looked sad, but she told me earlier she was glad that I was okay. I could tell both were so disappointed, but today, I chose to care for myself for once and chose not to let their disappointment get to me. Wrestling season was over. My health comes before anything, and this was finally my way out.

I got my senior year back. No wrestling, no cutting weight, no stress. I was the happiest I had been in a while.

Wylan The Courageous by Alexandra Hervig

All things are difficult before they are easy. At least that is what Wylan chants in his head as he passes by the warriors each morning, lugging water pails. If he weren't quiet as a mouse, he would be wearing the precious water he spent an hour carrying up the steep mountain from the lake at the bottom. Wylan couldn't understand what the hell their problem was. Sure, he called them illiterate idiots once. Okay, more than once, but they deserved it. Wylan could only take so much teasing about his appearance and throwing his books around before he used the only weapon in his arsenal. His wit was sharper than any blade and cut just as deep. He sharpened his favorite weapon often by reading his beloved books. When the other kids his age started training to be soldiers Wylan was exercising his mind. Much to his warrior mothers' displeasure, Wylan was nothing short of incompetent with a sword. She had tried to remedy that by making him train with the others, but eventually gave up. He wasn't blessed by the gods with her coordination or strength. So, Wylan did what he was good at; he spent his days helping with chores and reading while the others beat each other bloody in training. And in a village that valued brute strength and weaponry, Wylan was an outsider. Outsider isn't the correct term. Laughingstock was a better one. Wylan wondered if the hate they felt towards him drew from the fact that they themselves were unable to read. He had said as much, and it landed him face down in the mud in the pig's pen. The one thing that kept Wylan's mother from being ashamed of him so completely was his courage. That same courage landed him in a lot of unfortunate situations, but he did not mind. Not if it was at the hands of Cassian.

Avoiding a ginormous fallen tree, Wylan began walking down the steep mountainside in search of some peace and quiet at his favorite spot by the lake. He did not mind the walk down shadowed by great pines on both sides. In the tunnel of the pines, he dared to wish and dream. Most of the time, he wished simply to be accepted. But on days like today when he spent a good hour watching Cassian in the training ring, he wished the universe would just shut the hell up and stop mocking his most hidden thoughts. Wylan never told anyone besides his best friend Lea these thoughts. She would sit there giggling uncontrollably until the red on her cheeks matched the hue of her hair.

The massive lake was blinding to look at where the evening sun hit. He leaned against a lone birch beside the lake's edge. On hot days, he would sit with his feet in the water and imagine he was in one of his favorite books. The beautiful, bright blue lake was the stuff of fairytales. Colorful fish swam in its depths, and flowers of every color lined the lake. He would shut his eyes, breathing in the smell of lilac and imagine he was a prince waiting for his knight to come home from battle.

“There you are little Wylan,” a familiar voice said sitting beside Wylan on the mossy ground.

“I'm older than you.” Wylan opened his book trying to ignore the speeding of his heart. But it was hard to squash the feeling of fantasy when the knight was always around to make his mind race.

“Yeah, but you are tiny, so I forget.” Cass grabbed Wylan's gangly arm.

Wylan could not argue with that; they were around the same age, but could not look more different. Cassian had a deep tan that soldiers got from training under the hot sun and bulky muscles you could see even through his loose tunic. His wavy dark hair was

tied with a leather strap at the nape of his neck. Wylan, on the other hand, was lanky with pale skin that freckled in the sun and a mop of auburn hair that fell into his eyes when he read.

Wylan rolled his eyes at Cassian's comment. If he had meant to offend him, he was much mistaken. Wylan never wanted to look like the others; he just wanted to look at them.

Cass was still gripping Wylan's arm with his calloused hands, and his skin began to warm. He smirked down at where their bodies touched and then met the warriors' tawny eyes. A brief flicker of emotion flickered in his eyes as he looked at Wylan's lips before he took his hand away. Wylan smirked looking back at his book, his heart doing cartwheels in his chest.

Cassian went on a long explanation of how he had just wanted to go for a walk and Wylan had just happened to be here. Wylan sat here every day, but he did not make light of the fact that Cassian knew that. He nodded along to the excuses and pretended to be immersed in his book. Cassian made himself comfortable beside him reaching into Wylan's bag and ripping a hunk of cinnamon bread in two. They sat in comfortable silence beside each other looking out at the water as the sun began setting.

The sounds of footsteps and hushed voices burst through the trees behind them. Wylan turned to ask Cassian if he heard it too, but Cassian covered Wylan's mouth with one hand, and in the other he unsheathed his dagger. Wylan's eyes went wide; he briefly thought Cassian was going to stab him, but the thought fell away as Cass pointed to the tree line. Wylan could see a few fires and what sounded like a whole army talking and laughing. He could just make out the words "siege at dawn" before Cass threw Wylan

over his soldier and bolted towards the mountain. His steps were surprisingly soft and light; he cut through the forest to avoid the main road until they were far enough away. Cass continued his steady run, and Wylan's mind raced with scattered thoughts. *Cass's hand is on my ass. That was more men than their soldiers could take. They were all going to die. Cass's hand is REALLY on my ass.*

Cass would not set Wylan down until they were at the edge of town at the top of the hill. Cassian ran to sound the alarm. An alarm that was just a boy by the name of Wren who was the town gossip and had lungs like you would not believe. Wylan looked out to his town sitting on the fallen tree. All he could hear were screams and babies crying as the soldiers began forming a line at the top of the hill. Cassian returned and told Wylan he had to go hide with the others, grabbing Wylan to shove him behind the line of soldiers. Wylan ripped his hand away and sat back down on the fallen tree. This could not be it. He looked up into Cass's tawny eyes and couldn't fathom him dying at the hands of the enemy. He dug his nails into the tree beneath him. An idea came to him. A plan. A scene flashed across his mind from a book he read not long ago. A boulder chasing the protagonist down a hill. That ended well for the hero. Wylan hoped these villains had no such luck. And so, he began spouting orders to the reluctant warriors. And with some convincing on Cassian's part, they all formed a line around the fallen tree. Wylan stood in anxious silence beside Cassian.

"It will work, " Cassian whispered in his ear, taking Wylan's hand.

Wylan let Cassian's warm hand sooth his doubt, and when dawn came, the enemy army had nowhere to run as the warriors threw the tree down upon them. Cassian took Wylan's shocked face in his calloused hands. Wylan's racing heart seemed to stop

completely when Cassian leaned in. Cheers broke out around them as no enemy was left standing. The town chanted Wylan's name as they celebrated.

Wylan the courageous was never made fun of again for having his nose in a book.
And The Prince and the Knight lived happily ever after.

The Meet Cute by Megan Campbell

“There is never a time or place for true love. It happens accidentally, in a heartbeat, in a single flashing, throbbing moment.”

– “The Truth About Forever” by Sarah Dessen

I wrinkled my nose as I stepped out of my roommate’s car. Six years of living in the Valley wasn’t enough to get me used to the rotten egg smell that permeated the air. Not that it mattered much; in only a few more semesters I would be going to New York City, leaving the stink of the local paper mill, and the town it supported, behind. I looked around at the run-down cars lining the street and the flat-black and chrome motorcycles parked on the crispy grass. A few months couldn’t come soon enough.

My roommate, Lyn, led me around the low brick building, her spiky black hair bobbing along in front of me, and through an archway of deep green ivy valiantly trying to camouflage the rotten trellis underneath. It would have been charming if not for the spartan disrepair of everything around it. As we descended concrete steps to a red basement door, I sighed and tried to remind myself that being hauled along on this errand was worth the free ride to play practice afterwards. It would have been nice if she’d given me more notice, though.

Lyn knocked, and I could hear a muffled voice telling her to come in. As we walked through the door, I could tell this was the place everyone liked to gather. Several computers and an expensive sound system rested on makeshift tables along one wall where a couple guys laughed and eyed us. The room stretched out into a long rectangle with dark wood paneled walls and a threadbare carpet rolled out over the concrete floor. It wasn’t

thick enough to warm things up and mostly seemed to serve as a dirt catcher for the shoes shuffling across as an older, cooler girl left.

Moving out of the way, my roommate stepped further into the dim basement. Looking to the right, I could see a mismatched couch and loveseat set up to section that part of the room into a TV area. A bulky coffee table sat in front of the couch: ashtrays, coins, and opened soda cans scattered across the glass top. The sticky-sweet smell of lukewarm Mountain Dew mingled with the scent of stale cigarettes in my nostrils.

Better than rotten eggs, I thought.

As I listened to Lyn sing out a greeting to the guys in back, I quickly realized that everyone here was a handful of years older than me and knew each other well. The longer she chatted with them, teasing, and laughing over inside jokes, the more uneasy I felt. I became acutely aware of the disparity between my outfit and my surroundings: a baby doll t-shirt with a cute cartoon monkey, near a pack of Camel cigarettes; a powder blue handkerchief pulling back my hair, in front of a yellowed poster of John Wayne; my high waisted Levi's drifting past a television displaying an adult comedy show. I felt like a giant, blinking, neon sign screaming, "19," had been strapped to my forehead.

Act cool, Megan. Just. Be. Cool.

Like I knew what that was.

I shifted my weight between my legs, trying to adopt a natural pose, when I noticed movement to the right of me. I turned to see who it was as Lyn called out a "hey there," and immediately froze. A man had just entered the room through what appeared to be his bedroom door, and he was attractive; extremely attractive.

Gulp.

To say time stopped would be an understatement. I could feel my blood thicken as it chugged through my veins, pulsing one heartbeat at a time towards my ears, which were suddenly ablaze with heat. I couldn't hear anything past the roaring thud of my heartbeat, and breathing became a conscious thing—inhale, exhale, pause, repeat. My feet were frozen; I was a tree, stout and grounded, immovable from my concrete base. How I could feel simultaneously rooted and adrift was baffling.

He looked between Lyn and I, and a small smile crept up the corners of his mouth. His full lips parted, and words began coming out.

“Hey. We should get started,” he said to her then, “grab a seat,” to me and nodded towards the cushions. I didn't hear any of it, though. I saw perfect lips moving with no sound emitting. He and Lyn were moving towards the center of the TV area, and I leaned heavily on context clues to figure out what I should be doing. She had missed a few Jitterbug dance classes and was here for her dance partner to catch her up. I was here to... Why was I here?

I was here to wait for my ride to practice. Right. I looked at my seating options: a 1970's fabulous couch in cream, deep brown, and mustard yellow tones with one arm that looked to have been obliterated by a shotgun blast, or a slowly collapsing loveseat. I sank into the loveseat while Lyn and the man caught up. He turned off the TV and put on a CD for them to dance to. Lou Bega's raspy voice introduced the lively swing music of “Mambo No. 5,” and they began walking through their steps.

Left, right, step back, step together.

I knew it wouldn't take Lyn long to catch up on whatever she'd missed because she and I were both top dancers in our classes. In fact, that's how we had met and ended up

roommates, so I was sure we would be out the door, and on our way, quickly. I consciously soaked up the man in front of me. Tall and slim, but clearly strong, he looked relaxed in his jeans, throwback camp t-shirt, and Army-Navy boots. They laughed as he spun her around.

Tattoos were sporadically spread across his arms: a sword, a gear with angel wings sprouting from it, and what looked like part of a four-leaf clover peeking out from his sleeve. He clearly worked out, as his arms were defined, but not overly so. Scanning up, I could see red-brown facial hair following the line of his jaw and encircling his mouth in what could have been a goatee, if not for the dashing mustache on top. Above that rose his nose in a strong line leading up to two beautiful light blue eyes set underneath slashes of expressive, dark eyebrows. Chestnut brown hair worn short, but still long enough to be mussed up, topped off the vision.

After twirling her out, I watched him pause and adjust his glasses. They were as unique as he was, thin wires of gold encircling the small rounds of glass over his eyes; in other words, they were grandpa glasses. Was I panting over grandpa glasses? I then noticed each of his ears held a small, golden hoop earring. Putting together the facial hair, glasses, and earrings I was left with the conclusion that I was falling for a sexy Mr. Smee.

Mentally, I slapped myself. Who the hell thinks the doddering Mr. Smee from Peter Pan is sexy?

What about a young Mr. Smee? He could have been hot when he was young.

I was sick. Something was seriously wrong with me. A flush of embarrassment was creeping up my neck, hot and prickly, as I wrestled with my self-image, the strange setting, and my new pirate fetish. Thank God no one could read my mind right then

because there would have been no coming back from the shame. I was squirming on my lopsided loveseat, longing to stay, but aching to leave, when he stopped in front of me, and we locked eyes.

“Would you like to dance, too?” he asked.

“Uh. Me?” I responded. “I mean, yes. Of course!”

Then, I giggled; the high pitched, bubbly sound serving to lift me off the couch.

God! Don't sound desperate!

I was serious. I was stone. I was as cool as the river in January. I was so much older than my nineteen years would have him think. I did things like this, in basements *just like this*, all the time. He held out his hand, and I settled my delicate fingers into his callused palm, promptly melting into a puddle of hormones.

No! Miraculously, I was still standing and moving. Thank you, motor memory! He guided me in and out, back, and forth using his strong hands to gently move me to the next step, and it all felt so incredibly natural. It was easy to follow his lead—swaying, twisting, spinning, so I was able to focus on the places his hands touched me. My waist and hands lit up from each point of contact like a static electricity ball, zinging out arcs of light when his hands drew near.

I couldn't stop smiling. This was not a small, polite smile, either; it was a full-toothed Cheshire cat grin that made my cheeks ache, and my lips dry. He smiled back with perfect teeth that made my carefully-constructed-by-Doctor-Olson tooth-layout remarkably jealous. Then, he dipped me, and I was ready to die...or make out. Whichever came first. There was no way I was the only one feeling this.

The music stopped, and I awoke to the room around me: my friend staring at me with a knowing smirk, a bald guy sitting with his belly bumped up against the computer table loudly talking to a wiry guy loafing nearby, and the fact that we needed to leave or be late suddenly in the front of my mind. We had to go, and I had no good reason to stay, but that's all I wanted. I could feel my entire body sighing as Lyn said her goodbyes, and we stepped out the door.

I squinted into the bright sky while climbing the crumbling stairwell back towards her car. The cool March air felt good against my heated skin, but my stomach wouldn't settle. As we passed under the trellis, I grabbed her hand and blurted out, "Lyn, we have to find a way to come back!"

She turned and, shaking her head, said, "So. Dustin, huh?" Then, she quietly laughed and walked away.

Dustin.

Dustin.

Dustin.

Goodbye, New York City. Hello, Dustin.

That First English Essay by Pamela Gilbertson

Growing up in Brazil, with Portuguese as my mother tongue, I didn't start learning English until fifth grade. Ah, the verb "to be." I think we reviewed it every single year in middle school. I couldn't understand how people didn't get it. I thought it was straightforward compared to the Portuguese version, which has two different verbs for that purpose, and they are not interchangeable! There are so many different tenses, moods, aspects, and voices in Portuguese verbs that it requires a complicated mathematical equation just to figure out how many forms it can take. One of them is the "future of the past" tense, which I still don't know how to conjugate. But, yes, it is real; you can look it up!

A native speaker would laugh at my attempts, but I always felt like English was my thing! I loved it. From the year I started learning the language in middle school until I graduated high school, I was always at the top of my class. I could speak, I could read, and I could write. Sentences. A paragraph here and there. Other than the verb "to be" and some simple grammar, they never taught us all the rules of the written language. It is understandable. The most helpful thing about a second language is to use it to communicate, understand, and be understood. Grammar can wait, always wait. Who likes grammar, anyways?

In eighth grade, my friend Daniele would always come up to me for help, but I had no idea how to explain the concepts to her. English just clicked in my head, and I didn't know how to explain how it did. It just did. While trying to explain, I would always solve

the work for her. She didn't seem to mind. I guess that is kind of what she wanted to happen anyway.

The English teachers loved me. I was always the teacher's pet. English always seemed to be such a scary subject for everyone else that having someone who truly enjoyed learning it was an exception to the norm, and I got all the attention. I loved the attention. They enjoyed chatting with me in English and how applied I was in their subject. One of my teachers complimented me on my verbal abilities, suggesting that my spoken English was better than hers, and that was true. She had the degree, though, and I bet her writing abilities were lightyears ahead of mine. She probably never had the opportunity to practice on online voice chatrooms as I did.

My mother hated it, but whenever I was home, I would be glued to the computer on Paltalk, a group chat software. I would join voice chat rooms in English-speaking countries to talk about all sorts of things teenagers like to talk about, and Hanson, my favorite band. Paltalk had this unspoken rule: you had to "raise your hand" to talk. A tiny hand graphic would show next to a person's name, and everyone would wait in line to speak. The slower conversational pace was helpful in giving my brain the time to assimilate the words. I also had the time to practice what I wanted to say while waiting in line for my turn to speak. My mom still hates that I spent so much time on Paltalk, but she recognizes how it helped improve my English verbal skills.

I loved the language so much that I decided to move to a country that speaks it. It was supposed to be for two years, but love changed the plans, and for the past sixteen years, I have spoken English daily, and the United States has become my home. I learned a thing or two or a million while living immersed in the language. My pronunciation

improved, and my vocabulary did too, but not my grammar. Let's say that I didn't do much other than an online post here, an email to my kids' teachers there. Grammar was not on my radar. People can understand me just fine.

I read a lot. Books, um, not so much. But many online articles about children, animals, and the human brain and body. Sometimes I would read even a recipe that I thought I would make someday, but it ended with sandwich night instead.

When I decided to return to school, so many years after graduating, I was terrified when I saw that I had to take an English class. In an English-speaking country! In all my years living in the United States, I never felt too insecure about having a conversation or writing an email. I was never graded on my abilities to use "in," "on," or "at" correctly. I could still get my point across if I had mixed tenses in my sentences or placed an apostrophe incorrectly. But for the first time, I was not confident that English was my thing.

My professor speaks English, AS HER FIRST LANGUAGE! Most, if not all my classmates, have been speaking this language since birth! Sure, most native speakers would laugh again. I have no business taking a college-level English class. I would not be able to turn in college-level papers without learning the basic steps of the written English language. Those things are taught in grade school in America, and I never learned that. My classmates, in comparison, have been dishing out essays for years!

I decided to take the "fake it until you make it" approach. Wait. Oh, no! Who first said that? Do I have to cite it? I think I don't; many people say that, right? All these citations and worries about accidental plagiarism. What am I doing here? I have never done any of this before! I had so many options of professors, so I chose my class by the

name of the book assigned to it. The book sounded fun and less intimidating. Maybe this book and this class will teach me everything I need to know. All the assigned readings were engaging, and for a moment, I started believing that I could do this. I can blend in with the native speakers and get some work done, some basic level college stuff. I have horrible attempts at writing eloquently in discussion posts while butchering the language. I try hard to make it seem like I am in the right place, that I belong. I try to channel that inner confidence I had when I was younger and lived in Brazil. That English is my thing, and I got this.

The excitement and confidence wore off when I had that first essay assignment, my first English essay. I watched every assigned video, I read every assigned chapter, and I typed and deleted and typed again. Everything felt just too informal, just too immature. Were the sentences even coherent? I kept doubting the process repeatedly because I couldn't possibly be able to do this, but the word count kept going up, and while the inner me tells me to delete it all and start over, I am too deep in this. So, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for reading my first English essay. And thank you for never laughing.

Just Go with the Snow by Morgan Fritch

When I took my first ambitious step into the soft, bright snow, I knew it was going to be a vibrant day for snowmobiling. Even though it was the beginning of January, the usually freezing northern Minnesota weather was more than bearable. The blinding sun reflecting on the white snow made it glisten like the moon shining on crystalline water during a clear night. While wearing multiple layers of clothing to prepare for the exciting ride, I felt like a jumbo-sized marshmallow with my bleached-white snow pants and winter coat. Despite the fact that I resembled a puffy polar bear, I was more than eager to begin my first journey on that brand-new, white snowmobile.

There were four Polaris sleds – a red one, an orange one, a white one, and a yellow one. I chose the white one to complement my colorless attire. Only three snowmobiles were going to be used at the time. My friend Paige accompanied the orange one while her father, Charlie, operated the red one. Paige was dressed in all-black winter attire with a long, single braid slung over her left shoulder. Charlie, looking like a lumberjack with his short yet burly beard, was the type of person that loved fishing and other outdoor activities, like snowmobiling.

While Paige and I were impatiently waiting for Charlie to finish getting ready, I scooped up some clean snow, formed it into a sphere, and launched it at Paige smacking her upper back. Some jokingly vulgar language was directed towards me slightly before she chucked a snowball at me for revenge. It struck me in my right shoulder, and I let out a loud, unattractive laugh.

The small and immature feud was over once Charlie appeared outside, hyping himself up, stomping through the snow, looking exhilarated. He proceeded to ask Paige and I if we were ready for snowmobiling as if we weren't just waiting for him during a span of over ten minutes. Whilst approaching the snowmobiles, Charlie asked me a few questions.

“Have you ridden one before?” he asked me.

“Nope,” I said.

He then began to show me the simple procedures of riding a snowmobile. He showed me how to brake and accelerate. He pointed to the yellow reverse button. He also taught me how to turn the headlights on and off even though it was the middle of the day. After giving me a small yet informative lecture on how to ride a snowmobile, Charlie pulled the lever as hard as he could at a rapid pace to turn on the snowmobile.

My thoughts were racing while I concomitantly was just praying to God that I didn't crash this expensive motorized snow vehicle. At the same time that Charlie was getting Paige's snowmobile ready, her mom came outside and started taking a few pictures of Paige and me on the snowmobiles, looking so proud and excited for us as I was sitting there about to crap my pants from anxiety.

“Okay, I will be in the front. Morgan will be in the middle, and Paige in the back,” Charlie ordered.

“It's like riding an ATV. I think you'll do great, Morgan. Just go with the snow!” Paige told me.

Instantaneously, Charlie sped off like a bat coming from hell, wind blowing, engine roaring, snow flying. I had to as well to catch up to him, but he was going so fast that I

felt like I was losing him. We had to make a sharp left turn to get on the path right away, and I was inches close to hitting a tree already. For the first few minutes, my body was riddled with perturbation. Especially when we needed to cross a road to get to the trail. Luckily, there was not a car or truck in sight. I crossed as quickly as I could to get on the pathway. We all continued on the side of the road until we turned into a street surrounded by frosted pine trees. The narrow dirt road was only faintly covered with snow. As we went on, I was amazed by the street being surrounded by beautiful snowy pines all lined up parallel to each other. It was a blissful winter fantasy. I felt euphoria throughout my bones because all I could see was snow-covered nature.

Once we kept getting further and further away from the cabin, I started to hope that Charlie knew his way back. I had no idea where we were going or how to get to the place we began. But then I remembered what Paige had said to me right before we left and reminded myself to enjoy the ride and to just have fun.

Succeeding the prolonged zigzagging road, we headed into a sketchy trail that explores into the forest. This trail was far more slender and limited than the street we got off from. As my helmet's shield began to fog up like a car's windshield on a freezing night, it appeared to get more difficult to ride the snowmobile. Charlie was accelerating in speed as if he was being chased. There were more sharp twists and turns, along with plenty of uphill and downhill. The trail was almost a rollercoaster. Suddenly, Charlie executed right to go into another trail. But this trail had virgin, untouched snow. We all stopped for a quick minute to take a break because we had been going for over an hour now.

“Do you guys want to take a picture with the snowmobiles here?” asked Charlie.

Paige removed her phone from a zippered pocket of her red and black trail jacket to give to Charlie. We were in a nice, open spot surrounded by wilderness. We pried our helmets off and grinned as we were photographed.

Ensuing the break, we continued to the even more terrifying path. Enduring fresh snow compared to a used trail was tremendously unpleasant. My snowmobile kept tilting and leaning left and right. It felt like I was going to flip over. I had to go slower to ensure I wouldn't crash into a tree, like a drunk driver. I was only hoping that we would get back onto a used path when it seemed like it had been forever leaning left and right anxiously.

We eventually got near a frozen solid lake. Charlie was determined to find an entrance to get onto the frost-covered ice. When he finally found one, it was short but a very steep hill to get on the lake. We all managed to get on and stopped.

"This lake is called Twin Lake," he said.

The lake was completely empty, like a snowy desert. Evergreens were bordering the whole perimeter of the glacial pond. We decided to not stay on the lake for long and find another trail to enter. As we continued, Charlie had a puzzled look on his face. He was trying to find another path to get off the lake, but he didn't think that there was one, so he started to go back to where we came in. I had worry written all over my face because the entrance we came from was extremely steep like a BMX jump. I didn't think I could do it, but I finally found the courage and pressed firmly on the gas lever. It felt like my snowmobile was at least two feet in the air until I landed into some weeds. After I got out, we went the same way we came from until Charlie chose a different way and attempted to make his own path. We were surrounded by skeleton trees and five-inch-deep snow.

Just as I was starting to get more comfortable driving the snowmobile, Charlie took a swift right turn to avoid a tree. I had to follow him, but I was unable to steer fast enough, and I collided with the tree softly. There was no damage, but I was indeed stuck. Paige barely attempted to assist me and gave up. I had to sit there and wait for Charlie to come back and help me. He got off of his snowmobile and lifted the snowmobile's ski runners like Hercules to adjust the snowmobile away from the tree. I was more than surprised he was able to lift the snowmobile with me on it. However, he was able to get me unstuck from that wicked tree and carry on.

By that time, we had been riding for over two hours, and my arms were getting sore as if I just finished a lifting session at the gym. I predicted we had started going back to the cabin when we went back on the trail with the dreadful fresh snow. Riding on the way back was a breeze. I was able to go the fastest I'd ever gone exceeding forty miles per hour. However, it felt faster than that. I felt like I was flying through the clouds. The wind was pushing against me expeditiously as if it didn't want me to end this journey. It was the first time after an extraordinarily extended period where I actually felt wild and free. A burst of serotonin filled my body. Exhilaration pumped through my veins, and I finally learned to let go. I realized there's more to life than staying inside your comfort zone and playing it safe.



Spring Dance by Vivienne Ly