



phaethon

2022



Hiromasa Tanaka

Trevor Howard



About Phaethon

The myth of Phaethon is simple. He seeks to know his father. So he asks his mother Clymene, and she tells him his father is none other than Apollo, the god of the sun. Phaethon goes to Apollo and asks for some proof of their relationship, and Apollo says he will grant him one wish. Phaethon wishes to drive Apollo's chariot that pulls the sun across the sky. The only being that can do this successfully is Apollo himself. Not even Zeus can pull the sun across the sky. Knowing this, Apollo tries to dissuade Phaethon from this task. This does not work, and Phaethon is placed in charge of the chariot and its horses that breathe fire. Doomed from the start, Phaethon loses control of the chariot and nearly burns up the Earth. The Earth cries out to Zeus for help, and Zeus strikes Phaethon dead with a thunderbolt. Phaethon, now a falling star, plunged into the river Eridanos still ablaze. His epitaph reads:

*Here Phaethon lies who in the sun-god's chariot fared.
And though he greatly failed, more greatly he dared.*

In the spirit of this figure, we at the Phaethon value bold, confident, daring, courageous, and risky fiction, poetry, and art. Phaethon is not a tragic figure. His actions, that of a mere mortal, for a brief moment of time are equal to an immortal. He did something no other mortal, or immortal for that matter, could ever do. His confidence, courage, and daring are an inspiration to all of us. We too, if we risk our very lives, can be gods.

So we want pieces that challenge, inspire, stump, and move us. We crave new expression. New ideas. New connections. We do not value art that tests the boundaries of expression. We value art that obliterates them.

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on Pandemic**
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Even in Vermontville
Daniel Sargent





Leeanna Bala

Even in Vermontville

Daniel Sargent

Even in Vermontville
The coin is in the air,
Engine of our inscrutable crawl
To one cannot know where.
No hamlet so lonely,
No highway hid so well
In tree-lined, silent, all sign-less miles
Can lie beyond its spell
Of answers intertwined:
This day that is the night;
This marble slab is a lofting sail;
And all this black is white.
These houses on the road,
Blink once, and they pass by
And fade into the darkening haze
That fills the southward sky.
Still the coin turns over
All Redford's rusted cars,
The leaf-strewn porches of Saranac,
And Dannemora's bars.

TWO
PINK
LINES

Jessica Marshall

I hate that I can hear her voice in my head. I hate that it is louder than my own. I hate that it is my constant companion. I hate that it is both heavy handed and powerful in its judgement and in this very instant, hearing its usual contempt, I am filled with rage. I want to shake it out violently. But in this moment, this life altering moment, my mother's voice drags me back to my rightful place in this world. I am once again that poverty stricken little girl, not worth the care, nurturing, or protection my fragile soul deserves. I have to get a grip. I have to stop chasing demons from the past, as doing so will not help me in my perilous present. I force myself to meet my own gaze in the toothpaste spattered bathroom mirror. Inexplicably, the confident well established thirty-eight-year-old woman that I have come to find some comfort in, is now nowhere to be found.

How can two pink lines on a plastic tube shake me to my core? It's absurd to think for \$9.99 and a quick trip to the restroom a woman can be granted either joy or misery.

How can two pink lines on a plastic tube shake me to my core? It's absurd to think for \$9.99 and a quick trip to the restroom a woman can be granted either joy or misery. As if that concept isn't ridiculous enough, either result can accompany joy or misery depending on an individual's current perspective. Even within my limited lifetime, I can remember when those two pink lines brought me joy beyond comprehension. That joy's name is Nathan, he is now fourteen years old, six feet tall and two hundred pounds. I can also remember when those two pink lines brought me misery at the tender age of nineteen that incomprehensibly morphed into an explosion of joy. That joy's name is Kevin, he is eighteen, hardworking and waging a war of self-doubt similarly to the women who brought him into this world. Here I sit once again with

those two pink lines leering back at me. I know that these lines will not transform into joyous life like they did when I was nineteen. I have to tell him.

I decide to take another test, just to be sure that the plastic tube has in fact granted me misery and not joy today. As I impatiently wait three minutes, I stare out the bathroom window and the scene this October day matches my mood. It is pouring rain outside, and the wind is blowing violently ripping leaves from their rightful place in the trees. I can't help but notice that nothing is in its proper place. It's like the whole world has permanently shifted into disorder. Suddenly, I am jerked from my thoughts by the alarm I set on my phone. I am once again provoked by those two angry little pink lines. They are so bright and distinct that they look more red than pink to me. I burst into tears with such violence that I am sure the storm of emotions within me rage with more vigor than storm outside. I try to calm myself while simultaneously trying to work up the courage to call my fiancé. Together we have five kids, five kids. All of which are from relationships prior to ours. I have no idea how he will react, but I cannot bear this burden alone for another minute. I fight off the urge to be sick as the phone rings, once, twice, three times.

"Hello? Hello? Are you okay? Jess are you there?"

Through sobs, "I'm pregnant."

Ryan lets out a nervous laugh. "I didn't even know that could happen?" All three of his children were born via invitro fertilization after years of struggling.

I cannot manage a response, so he keeps nervously filling the dead air.

"I don't know what to say. I didn't even know this was something you were concerned about, let alone that you were actually taking a test. I just..." he trails off lost in either thought or for the right words.

"I know, I know. I just always keep tests handy so if I am ever late, I have the assurance of knowing that I am not pregnant." My voice breaks on the words not pregnant. I can't bring myself to repeat the awful truth.

After a long silence, he says "I have to go into work. Can we talk about

this later?"

I agree and wrap up the call. I am grateful to be home alone this morning, but I have to get myself together and into the office. I'll go mad sitting at home all day left with my own dreadful thoughts.

Once I arrive at work, I barricade myself in my office. I try to get lost in some menial tasks with little to no success. Ryan and I have been texting throughout the morning and decide to take our lunch breaks at the same time so we can talk. Five minutes before he is supposed to call, I hop into my car, drive for a few minutes, and decide on a spot on the outside edge of a plaza parking lot. The phone rings several times before I pick up. I know Ryan, he's a logistical thinker and in my emotional state, I am already irritated by his unemotional approach before he can even open his mouth.

"Hey."

"Hey."

He sighs, "I know you are really upset, but we have to decide what we are going to do. We don't have a lot of time to decide, and I don't know about you, but I don't think this is a good time for us to have a baby...."

He continues with the litany of reasons why it is not logistically a good idea to have another child. It's not that I disagree with him, it's all the other complex and confusing thoughts running through my mind along with a deep sense of shame.

I cut him off. "Isn't it against your religion?" I do this to provoke him. He's what I have heard described as a buffet Catholic, he takes and leaves tenants of his religion as it suits him or his current situation. It also easy for me to say, as I was not raised in any of God's houses.

Ever levelheaded he responds, "I have worked in the medical field for years, I know women who have had abortions and I believe in a women's right to choose." I wince at his use of the actual word. It feels too explicit and raw.

We go back and forth like this for a half an hour or so, in the end, we both know what our decision is. Ryan is going to setup the appoint-

ment to save me the agony of doing it myself. We get off the phone and I find myself staring at a bright yellow Moe's sign and a bustling plaza. So much life right there in front of me, it hurts. Her voice comes back into my head. "If I wasn't pro-life, you wouldn't be here, so you better be pro-life." My mom was seventeen years old when I was born, and I have an older sister. By the age of twenty-three, she had four children. I can never tell her about this.

Two days later, I find myself alone at Planned Parenthood. I am still in disbelief as I walk into the secure vestibule. Ryan isn't allowed to come with me, which is harrowing, but at the same time a relief. Every staff member inside is a female and they have similar dispositions. Each grounded, calm, and free of judgement. It all feels very clinical and like any other doctor's appointment until I get to the ultrasound. She tells me they need to confirm the pregnancy. In that moment, I want to jump off the table and run out the door, but I will myself to stay. Then comes the muffled and unmistakably sound of a beating heart, it's heartbreaking. Thankfully she is proficient in her work and does not make me endure the suffering a second longer than absolutely necessary. They provide me with a rainbow-colored mountain of informational paperwork and schedule another appointment in a week's time.

Over the next week I vacillate between my set path and its alternative, all the while having the muffled rhythmic heartbeat intermingled with my thoughts. I go through the days wholly unaware of my place in this world. I weep at the idea of going to the appointment and in the next breath, weep at the idea of not going. I decide to stay the course and dutifully show up to my appointment that next Tuesday. It is not the horrific stuff of movies or propaganda, its two pills. One you must take in the presence of the doctor, the other at home. The physical pain inconsequential when compared to the mental anguish. Within days I am physically back to normal, but my mind is still foggy. As time goes on, like many tragic moments in life, it hurts a little less than it did the day before.

I still have both of the pregnancy tests. They are hidden in the bottom of my dresser drawer in a Ziploc freezer bag, the pink lines now faded into an undesirable brown. Every now and then, I take them out and imagine what if.



Joshua Parkinson

TALL
CHILD

Madison Rose Campagna

Looking up at the trees above me, they seem to taunt me as I haven't even stepped foot in the woods yet. The trees looked dead, it was toward the beginning of autumn, and the trees looked like something you'd see out of a horror movie as the main character is running from something chasing them. *Why do I even have to go into the woods just because the girls think it'd be good for me now? They don't want me around after everything, huh. Of course, this would be an excellent way to get rid of me.*

Just then, a voice made me snap back into reality. "Hey Korin! Are you scared?" said a girl with a dusty light blue cardigan. I can't look up at people's faces anymore; even if I could face her, all I see now is a gaping black hole. I think her name is Lily; she's been the only decent girl in the group. There were two others in the group, Makenna and Zoey. They weren't as lovely to me toward the end of high school, but I still stick around because I can't risk losing any more friends. I can't deal with that pain anymore.

Lily started to speak back up again. "It's okay to be scared; there's always been something off about these woods... but hey! Most of everyone's who been in these woods have come out a better person, I hear!" Lily said softly as if she was trying to comfort me. I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything, I was already interrupted by the sound of snorting and crackling from afar. From 50 feet away, the rest of the girls were waiting for Lily to come back to the car to leave and **possibly** pick me up later.

"Come on, Lillian! Leave the tall child to cry in the woods! She's big enough to walk the trail by herself. She's a college girl now," Makenna said, snorting as her laugh roared.

"It's getting dark out, Lil. We'll just have to pick Korin up after she walks the trail; she needs to get over herself," Zo said high fiving Makenna as they both snarled in the car.

Lily then started to speak up, but I waved my hand in front of her, cutting her off from saying anything. They were right; it seemed like they were always right. I just need to get over myself, and things will all go back to the way they were. I tried shooing off Lily before I took my first step into the cabin, but before I could do anything, Lily wrapped her

arms around me and squeezed me tight. "You're going to be okay... right?" she whispered in my ear. I had to think about it for a few seconds, but I nodded my head.

"Okay. I trust you; please don't do anything stupid while we're gone." She ran off waving at me, and as soon as she got into the car, the girls sped off into the ever-winding road. After they sped off, I saw it again; it was just looking at me from the same spot the car was. I turned back around, pretending not to see it, and I looked back up at the trees one last time before making my move. They seemed to loom over me closer this time, I still was scared, but I think the girls were right; I just needed to take a walk by myself. I pushed the uh-hinged door open with one heavy sigh and walked into the cabin.

The first thing I saw when walking in was it. The figure was standing again silently, just looking at me from the corner of the cabin. I hate looking at it, it has these sunken eyes, and its presence takes up most of the house. It's been following me for months now. I don't know what it is, but it's getting on my nerves. *Why do you have to follow me everywhere? This isn't a horror movie; you aren't real. No one else can see you, and everyone thinks I'm crazy because of you.*

"Why child, you know why I follow you. You just can't bear to admit it." The figure spoke; its voice was raspy and horse. I haven't heard its agent for the longest time since it first popped up into my life.

"...How did you hear what I said about you?"

"Child, I can hear everything you say in your head. I'm still a part of you whether you like it or not." The room got darker with each word the figure said. "Are you finally ready to accept what happened or are you going to pretend that everything is fine."

I stared at the figure one last time and looked away. "I'm going for a walk. Alone. Stop following me. You're a fucking freak." I stomped toward the door leading to the trail and slammed it behind me, making sure I shut it tight so that I would not see the figure this time. I took another heavy breath and looked around. I did not know the figure anymore; I felt like a weight was lifted off me for the first time in a while. I

did not think that anything was following me this time around. The trees are not looming over me anymore; they look like regular trees this time. "Hello?" I yelled, nothing responded to my call.

"Boo." The figure appeared behind me.

I jumped out of my skin and fell on the damp ground. I started to tear up a bit. "Why can't you just leave me alone? Why. Why. Why. Why can't you just LEAVE ME ALONE? I want to ignore you; I want to forget that you exist. You are ruining my life. No one else can see you, so why do you bother me?" I started to yell with all my strength, "My friends hate me because of you because I tell them that you're real. They think I am insane. Everyone thinks I am crazy because of you. I have not even walked this trail yet, and you just mock me. I just want to feel better, but I cannot... I wish I just died along with Amy."

The figure looked at me with sober eyes; it just stared at me. "Well?? What smart ass thing do you have to say to me now, huh??" I started to sob, the ground getting softer as it pulled me into the ground with each loud sob I let out. Just then, the figure touched my shoulder and picked me up.

"You're a tall child. Even if you've grown up." It put me down, and I looked away from the figure. The figure started to walk along the trail, "Are you coming?" I looked around with tears in my eyes and began to limp over toward the figure. She walked at my pace throughout the trail.

"I don't want to make you feel like shit. I am not trying to make you look crazy. I'm not trying to make you go insane."

"Then why are you even here? I'm over it. Why do you still bother me all the time and loom over me? What even ARE you? You're not me; I would never do this to me!"

The figure stopped walking and pointed to a bushel of green grass out of the depressing trail of leaves and musk. "Go there. You'll find your answer their Child." I stopped walking and turned to look at the figure.

"What is this some sort of joke?" I don't understand why- "suddenly, I saw what the figure was finally pointing to. It was a small flower bed that

glowed brighter than the sun.

I walked closer to where the wooden cross was planted around a flower bed. Ivy vines covered the cross so you could not see the name. There was a beam of light shining on the cross. But why in the middle of the trail, why here? "W-What is this?" I said, trying not to gasp for air.

"This is what you've been avoiding, Korin, you want to forget, but she was your friend. You loved her more than you loved yourself." The figure slowly disappeared, but as it left, it said, "Go say hi to her." The figure was gone, just like that.

I slowly walked up to the flower bed to look at the wooden cross. I started to brush away the ivy that fell on the cross, and there it said it. The name that I had been trying to forget for months now.

"Amy."

Looking at the patch of grass basking in the sunlight that lay before me, it was clear that I was not in control of my footing. My feet glided over toward the grass and a disfigured tree stump. I walked closer to better look at what happened to the stump. Putting my hands on the top of the stump, I noticed that the tree had been cut recently. Turning around, I saw that the Shadow following me reappeared, but it was not coming any closer to the light. I looked back at the stump and the Shadow; I started to speak up again.

"Aren't you going to look at this with me? It is not like you have not been to the light before now. What makes this time any different?"

The Shadow just looked at me and then back at the stump. It did not say anything else like it remembered something they forgot. I turned around, looking back at the stump, and noticed a mark at the bottom of the stump covered in thick tall grass. I slowly moved it out of the way and finally figured out why the shadow did not want to come near this thing. The carvings in the wood had letters K + and slightly disfigured A attached to them. Looking at it made my heart sink. All these feelings flooded back into my mind, and I stared bug-eyed at the tree.

"I...I-" I could hardly speak. I was drowning in my own words. I bashed

my fist against the stump as hard as I could. I started to sob again, wondering if this feeling would ever stop; I felt a cold hand on my shoulder.

"You know you can talk to me. I've always been here." My voice that seemed eerily familiar graced my presence. I turned around to see who or what was talking to me. It was still the Shadow, but it had a new face this time around. It looked ... like Amy, the Shadow looked. I stopped sobbing for a second to take a good look; I could not tell if this was real or not anymore. I forgot how to breathe for a minute, and I clutched my chest. The Shadow took my hand and cupped it in with theirs.

"Please look at me. I wish that you'd talk to me." The Shadow said, not only did the face look like Amy's, but the entire figure was also now in Amy's image. Amy sat down on the stump and slowly gilded her hand across the stump with a faint smile.

"Do you know why I did it here?" Amy said in a sober tone.

I fell silent, looking around the woods, thinking that this was some sort of joke from the girls. I stared at Amy for a minute, just thinking about everything I wanted to say to her. That I missed her more than anything or anyone in the world as of this moment. But I was also upset; I just wanted her to be with me. I did not want to go on without her in my life. Just then, she started to speak again.

"Well? I am here for a minute... Can you please talk to me?" Amy said again with a more depressed sigh."

"... We need to talk about a lot of things." I had an angry expression on my face, I do not mean to come off that way, but I am trying to hold it together for her.

"Oh, good! I am glad you can hear me! There is so much I want to say to you. Did you see what they did to our tree? Who would chop down a single tree and not the whole forest? That's just awful, is not it, Kory?"

"Wasn't it your parents who chopped down the tree? Because this is the spot you... you know..."

Amy seemed surprised when I mentioned what had happened. "Well, I mean... sure that isn't a terrible reason but-"

"But what about Amy? They had every right to chop down the tree you hung yourself on! No one found you for days, and then they found your lifeless body swinging from a tree that WE made our own, WE marked this tree, and you are just..." I stopped talking to look at Amy's face. It was all puckered up, and she seemed about ready to cry.

"Amy I-"

"NO!" she shrieked. "This was my call to do this, I'm sorry that I did it, but I didn't see any way out of my household. I just needed an escape, and we were kids, Kory; we were just kids going off into the big world." She leaned forward on the stump. "I'm sorry that I wasn't open about my problems to you. There. Are you happy?"

I looked down at my feet again and back up at Amy. I wish that she had told me more about her family life. She was very closeted from her family about everything. She was hanging out with me all the time, faking being sick so she would not have to go to church. Hell, even I encouraged some of the stuff that she did.

"Can I ask you a question, Amy?"

"Sure, let's hear it." She was still pissed with me.

"Was the breaking point when they found out about us?"

She stayed silent for a few minutes and then nodded her head.

"You don't understand what it was like having those parents, those kinds of parents. You have the luxury of knowing that even when something goes wrong, they will be there for you and accept you. I did not have that. It is not as easy as looking in the mirror and telling yourself that shits are going to be okay. They found out we were together; you knew how they were. They threatened to beat me and send me to "camp" Kory. I was scared, and I didn't want to tell you; I did not want you to freak out, and then you tried to take me to your house and hide me out. I didn't want your help because you always helped me--"

"Why wouldn't you let me help you?" My gut sank, tears started to blur my vision.

"I was there for you; do you know why I'm so mad right now? I could have helped you with all of this, and then you just... You do this!"

"Kory I-"

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Amy! Therefore, I feel like shit." I turned my back to her, looking down at the ground, and I whipped myself back around to face her.

"I wanted to do more for you-" I started to scream, but she was not there. All that was left of her was a note stuck in the tree trunk. Why didn't I notice this before? It looked like a small frog wedged between a sliver of wood chopped off when the tree was cut down. I grabbed the paper, and it had a bit of what I believe was water on it. I slowly started to unfold it. It was a suicide note; I put it down. I did not want to read it. I sat down on the uncomfortable stump and picked up the message again. I started to skim through the tattered-up note with a heavy breath and soon. I read the whole thing. Many of the things said during our conversation prior were right here in the letter. There is a note here for her mom that unpacked a lot of trauma she had told me about prior. Same thing with her dad, some stuff that I never knew about that I wish I had known. And then there was one for me.

Reading it made me feel a bit better; it read, "My beautiful Kory, I'm sorry that you had to deal with me this whole time, your soul was in the right places, but I don't want you to suffer the way I am right now. I know once you'll find out that it wasn't your fault" I stopped reading and felt a chill down my spine. I looked around silently, and then I started reading more. "You are most likely going to be blaming yourself for my actions. Nothing you did was wrong. You made me go a little further than I thought I was going to get. You made this last year one of the best I have ever had. I am glad that you were my partner, and I am glad that you came into my life. I am sorry that I am doing this, but this must be done. I love you, Korin. I will always love you. Goodbye, Kory, you have been good to me. And that's all I could have asked for."

I started to stand up, putting the note in my jean pocket. I looked back up in the dim sky to see that I had spent a couple of hours in the woods alone... or at least alone in my mind. A weight lifted off my chest. Just

then, I heard faint yelling toward where I entered the woods. I started to walk back toward the yelling. I assumed it was the group of friends from before. Before I even went back to the cabin that connects the woods to the outside world, Lily started running towards me. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me until I could not breathe. I began to cough, and she then let me go.

“Where have you been! I’ve been so worried about you, Korin!” Lily said with tears in her eyes

“Hey, hey, hey! It is okay. I’m okay, Lily... hey, where are the others.?”

Lily did not say anything for a second and then just shook her head.

“That doesn’t matter right now. I want to talk to you; it is time that I finally got down to the bottom of this. How are you feeling? Like with everything?”

Looking back at the cabin and looking at Lily, I smiled for the first time in a while.

“We can talk about it in the car. I’ll tell you everything.”



Leeanna Bala

digital photography

spring 2020 + fall 2021



Alexandria Feliciano



Trevor Howard



Trevor Howard



Trevor Howard





Kassandra Garcia



Oliver Roepnack



Anthony Graham



Oliver Roepnack



Anthony Graham



Aubrey Ketcham



Aubrey Ketcham



Nick Grant



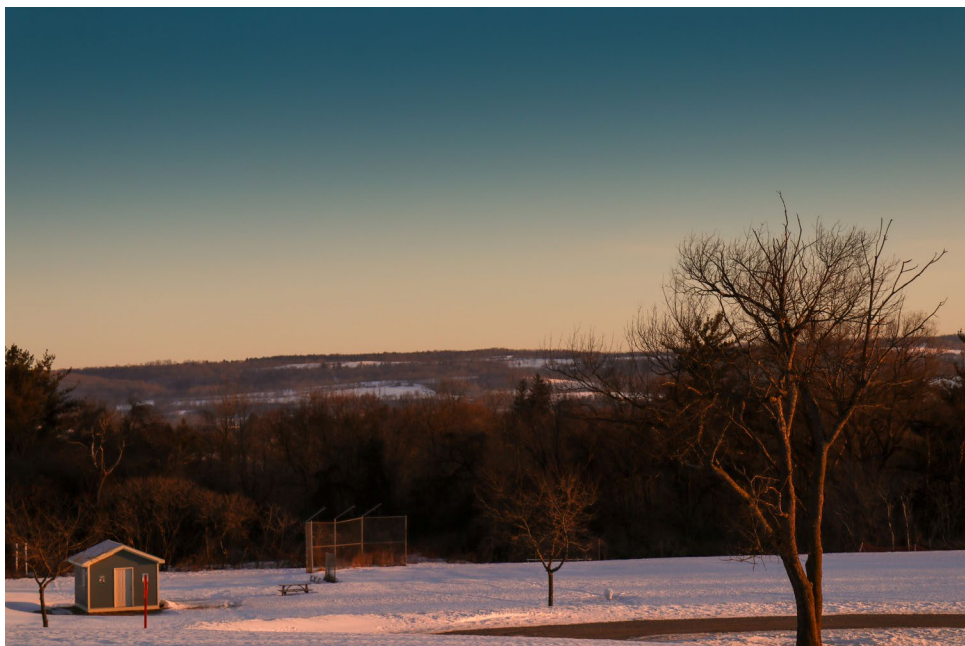
Joshua Parkinson



Mao Fujiwara



Quinton Thorpe



Joshua Parkinson



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Charisma Allen



Joshua Parkinson



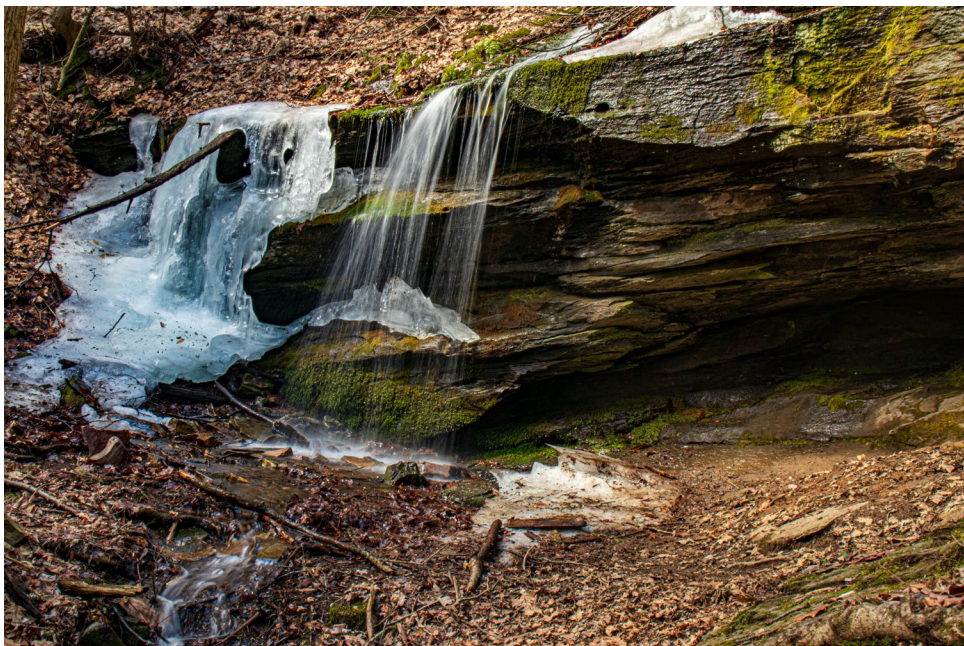
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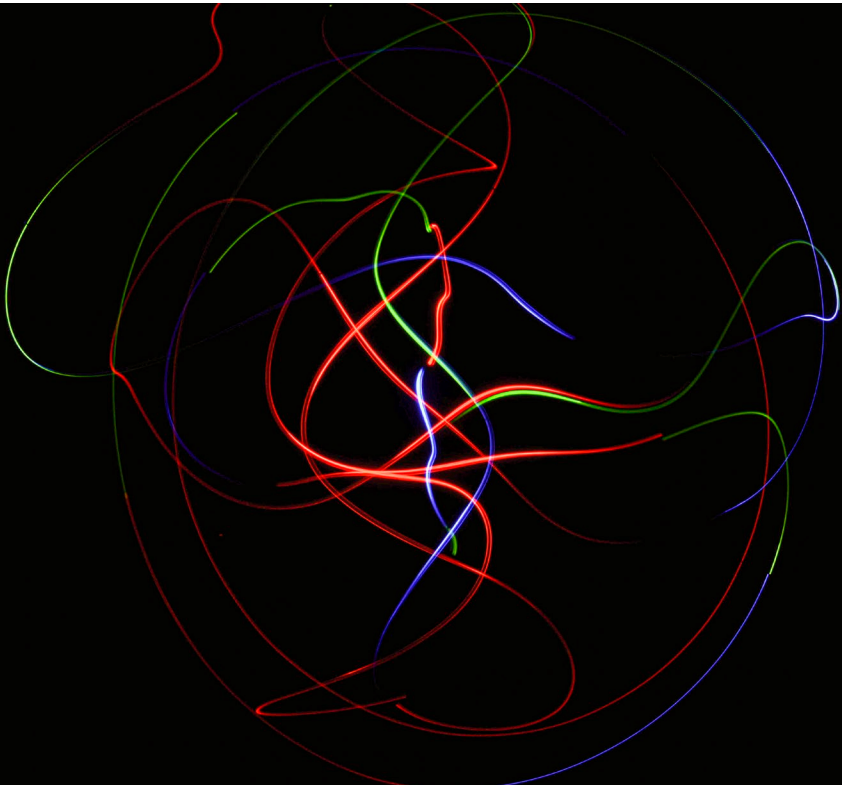


Aubrey Ketcham





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Aubrey Ketcham



Left and right photos by Alexandria Feliciano





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A WALK IN THE OTHERWORLD

Jamie Muir

Where am I?

The forest looked like the Druid Grove, which I had sneaked into as a child, but denser, older. In the moonlight a twisted worn path is laid out before me. Lined by centuries of fallen needles, and leaves. Ancient trees towered, reaching into the sky, branches intertwined with darkness seeping in between, unnatural quiet blankets the land. It can't be the grove, there is no alter, no stones, no glyphs. *Why does it feel so familiar? Which way do I go, how did I get here, and how do I get home? Oh, Gods, help me!*

Walking barefoot in the cool night air my thoughts wandered to home. *Does Father even know I am gone? Would he even care? The boys went to town, Father's on a hunting trip, so I am not going to be missed. The house is cleaned, animals fed, mending done....* And on, my thoughts wandered over the day's events and chores. Wondering if I fell asleep and this is a dream or if the gods are playing a trick on me.

The path twists and turns through trees, the branches intertwined like a tapestry. The night feels alive, but the silence deafens. The leaves at my feet don't even rustle. Moonlight shines a beam onto the path. The darkness seeping between the trees, trying to swallow the light. As I go farther down, the branches make a canopy so thick there is no light on the path. My eyes adjust, I can see all the roots sticking up through the dried leaves.

It never occurs to me I should be afraid. Instead, I feel calmness, a feeling of belonging. Peace settling into me. An internal hum seems to resonate with the world around me. As if this was home, the path a part of me. Realizing that this is not natural, I panic, *I need to get out of here, while I can.*

A cry in the tree top startles me, looking up for the cause. Spinning, searching the canopy. High up a large shadow moves, swooping to a branch right before me. A Raven bigger than any I have seen before, stared intensely. Intelligence shines in its eyes. Glistening black feathers make me gasp with awe. With a tilt of its head, it cawed again.

"Hello, do you know the way out of these woods?"

"Follow me and see." I hear in my mind.

The Raven's wings stretch out, and it silently flies down the path. Swooping back once to see if I am following. Stepping forward, I follow the Raven's flight. Glad to have a guide, and a companion on this journey.

Strange that a raven answers when my own father won't... Should I just accept that I will never know who my mother was? The boys at least got some time with theirs before her passing.... Why am I hidden away when visitors come? ... Why have I never seen town... I know from their talk of town other girls my age are getting betrothed, having families of their own, leaving home, but when I ask about my future Father goes silent.... Why is my hair like midnight, and they have hair like the sun? What did my mother look like? Why did she abandon me...? These thoughts circle around in my brain.

In the 14 summers I have been alive, never have I received answers. Never have I had the nerve to ask aloud most of them. Never left the farm or met the neighbors. My stepmother showed me care. My adorable baby brothers used to adore me, became my responsibility when their mother died. Brothers that now tried to hide their curiosity about me after their first trip to town. Now they help Father keep me hidden, up in the loft if someone approaches. Acting like they are the adults now, and I am the child. To be shielded from the world. I hope they have new stories of the outside world when they come home. I hope I get home to see them. I wish they were still little so I could sing of the fairies to them.

Deeper into the forest the trees appear to breathe, to move. The clean scent of the earth, and pine needles soothe my spirit. Following the Raven still the path narrows, seeming endless and ancient. Worn, shadowed, winding, up ahead a bend hides the path. Leading down into a ravine. The Raven swoops around the bend, as I follow the Raven appears to have vanished.

"Where did you go?"

No answer, "Come back! Please!"

Where did it go? How will I find my way now? Do I go on, or turn back? Looking around and seeing no signs of the Raven or any other life. A search of the trees, path, and the sky brings a feeling of loss to my heart. There is nowhere the Raven could have gone, the branches made a tunnel here.

The roots snarled steps in the path, leading around the bend more down the ravine. I continue hoping to be out soon.

A rustling in the woods alerts me to the fact that I am not alone. Stopping, standing still, my eyes dart around. A braying came from deeper in the forest. *I know that sound... so familiar of home!* Stepping gingerly off the path, I search the forest, the underbrush. The canopy opened enough for the moon to be seen again. Its silver rays illuminating the path.

A second look into the forest I see a dark shadow. Stepping closer to the shadow. I see there stands a huge brown cow. *I must be close to the edge of the forest. Cows don't wander far into the forest on their own.*

"Hello, want to walk with me?"

"It would be an honor, my lady."

The cow looks at me with intelligent brown eyes and walks to my side. I place a hand on her side. We head back to the path. Now my heart lightens for surely, we will be out soon, and I can find my way home. The warmth radiating from her warms me. The night dims, shadows seem to reach out trying to embrace us. This path seems to go on forever. *We should have found our way out, at least to her field by now.* The trees start to open, and the cow suddenly disappears.

Startled, I search for it. A snap makes me to quickly turn around. The path has changed, opening to a clearing where trees were a minute ago. Taking a few steps forward, a light appears lighting the small clearing before me.

There a fire burns under a huge cauldron, a maiden, mother, and crone stand around it. The fire light illuminates their faces, ethereal beauty, and power shines there. Like a scene from the stories my father tells. The Raven flies down and lands on the maiden. The shadows curve around them in embrace. The cow appears by the mother. She lays her hand on its head. The crone nods her head at each and whispers in the old tongue. Suddenly there is just one regal, beautiful woman standing by the fire.

That must be the Morrigan. Why has She shown herself to me? Is it my time? Am I to die now? Should I approach or run? That explains the animals I met, the

three women her faces, they are hers... While my thoughts race, the Morrigan tilts her head and smiles.

“Come child, warm yourself and all will become clear.” Beckoning me to a log nearby. *Did she read my mind?*

“Great Mother I am honored by your offer, but I am just a poor farmer’s daughter. I am not worthy of your attention.”

The Morrigan throws her head back and lets out a wild laugh. “Well, I am glad to see your father kept the terms of the qeis, maybe too well. Come sit. I will explain all.”

I sit down on the log, confusion fills me, must be written on my face. Watching as the Morrigan pause to look up at the sky before speaking. Listening to something beyond hearing. Her eyes, seeing things past.

“Long ago your father was a great warrior, he defended the village with such ferocity. When he paid tribute to me before his last battle, I laid with him. This is how you began.”

Dumbfounded, I stare at her. *Is this true? Or a trick of a bored Goddess? What qeis is on my father, and why did she abandon me if this is true?* Thought’s circle and race through me as the Morrigan just studies me patiently. Her eyes burning through me.

Finally, I ask the safest questions. “If you are my mother, why did my father never tell me? Where have you been all these years? Why appear now? Where are we?”

“Hmmm.” Morrigan paces, her shimmering gown catching the moonlight, flowing like water around her “good questions. This starts and ends here.” She gestures to the forest around us. Which appears to reach out and away from her. “The Otherworld, no mere mortals can come here. But somehow your father did. That alone proves he isn’t common.”

Smiling, with a faraway look in her eye. “He came looking for a blessing. I agreed, for I had already decided his side should win. But I give nothing for free. In return he was to raise you, love you, and give you back at your maturity. No one was to know who your mother was. If he broke the

qeis his life would be forfeit. Both for your safety and the world's destiny."

Staring into the fire, *what can I say to that? I always knew he loved me, but seemed lost at what to do with me...*

A qeis, the most sacred and tricky of promises to the Gods... wait, what destiny? Safety yes, a child of a Goddess is a powerful bargaining chip, but I am ordinary...

The time has
come for you
to earn your
place here in
the Otherworld

"As for me I have been doing my duty. I had no use for a small child needing protection. Coddling." She spit this out like putrid food.

"Why now?"

"Now you will come into your powers and need training. Now as a maiden grown you could be interesting. It is time for you to journey through the domain and take your place in history."

Wait, what? Jumping to my feet, "Wait, I am not already here? What journey where? Powers, I have no powers!"

Also, how can a mother not have use for her daughter. I had need of a mother. Thoughts best kept silent; Gods hate criticism. The Morrigan is famous for her temper. Pacing, deaf from shock. The Morrigan just watches smirking.

"Your powers will manifest when you re-enter your body. This is a vision quest; you are here but your body is not. The time has come for you to earn your place here in the Otherworld."

"What place? I am but a mortal girl. I have seen nothing of my town, let alone the world. What do you want of me?"

"I want nothing. If you don't go on this journey, succeed in trial, the

balance will be thrown out. Your mortal world will know war as never before. My minions will run free. Brothers will slay each other; mothers drown their babies. Blood run in rivers across the Earth. Death swallowing whole villages in a moment. Screams will fill the air. Vultures will feast. As my child your choices will decide if peace or war is the future of mankind."

"Succeed in the journey and you will be here. Home forever among the Gods. Learn our ways and live among the Fae. The decisions you make will bring peace or war along the way. The outcome will be out of your control. A result of your choices. Interactions you have along the path."

The gleam in her eye tells me she would enjoy that. That whatever comes will feed her power. War or peace, her followers, and the sacrifices to her will multiply. More with war, but a daughter's success at peace could also cause gain.

"So even if I succeed there could still be death? Wars because I know nothing of the world and its ways? Why tell me this? As goddess of war and death, surely you would rather I stayed in the dark?"

"I am also magic, and the Devine Feminine. I do not answer to you!" Morrigan growls, throwing her hands up, lightning strikes the fire, splitting the cauldron into two.

The thunderclap is deafening. Power glowing from her eyes, hair flying. This is the Goddess of legend. Wind whips through the forest, I fight to stand. Branches bend, trees standing like pillars unbending to the storm. To see and think. Animal's howl screams of pain in the distance. Leaves whipping around in a cyclone, mini tornados flying through the clearing.

Oh, obviously there is more than she will share. But I have the feeling continuing this line of questions will not end well... How can I get answers when she obviously is unwilling to answer?

"I am sorry. The shock of all you have told has left me dumbstruck. Please, tell me what you can of this journey? What should I do?" I scream over the wind, submission in every word. My knees give way causing me to sit back down, bowing my head, I wait for Morrigan to compose herself or strike me down. Weirdly, I am unharmed by the storm.

The sudden storm stops.

“When the Raven comes you follow when the cattle bellow you decide. This is what was foretold this is what I can share.” Is the response seeming to come from afar?

A fog slithers into the clearing, sliding, and tangling around my feet. The air calm again. I look up in time to see the Morrigan floating midair, transform into a raven. Dark as night, eyes like coal, she takes wing.

“Wait! How will I get home? What powers will I have? How do I control them?”

My cries are in vain. The Morrigan flies away into the sky. Cackling is the last I hear of her.

The fog thickens, smothering the fire. Swallowing any light. In the dark I search for the path again. Turning and turning, trying to see the trees, a gap, anything in the dark. The clearing gone again. I bump into something. A stallion appears before me. *Where did this horse come from? Is it the fog or does this horse only have one leg?*

“Are you here to take me home?”

“Yes, my lady.”

The horse neighs, bowing its head. I climb cautiously on his back. “Let’s go.”

No sooner than I spoke the horse reared and flew through the woods. Branches fly by, inches from my face. Hanging on for dear life. Dizzy, my vision blurs. The only sound is the galloping hoof. Clinging to his neck, I give in to exhaustion.

What happened? Was it real?

Waking in my bed, soaked, with branches in my hair. I shake my head to clear it. Looking around at my loft bedroom. *Must have been a dream. I am no one special, just a daughter and a sister. Not a long-lost daughter of a Goddess.* Starting my day, I head down to the kitchen to prime the coals. Heading outside to feed the animals. Fetch water, let the horses out to

pasture. Back inside to stoke the fires. Knead bread, set to rise, dust, scrub, bake, start dinner. This is just another day. Pondering the weird dream of the night before, I wait for my family's return.

Do the laundry. Make my brothers new shirts. Prepare tools to butcher and preserve any animals that my father brings. *Too bad it was just a dream, routine is boring. I hope the stories from town will be as entertaining.* As night falls Father strides out of the woods. A buck across his shoulders and whistling a happy song.

"We will eat well!" his cry upon seeing me. "Girl, clean this deer. I am famished!"

"Yes Father. Dinner is on the table."

"Are the boys back yet?"

"No Father. Why can't I ever go with them?" The dream leaving me feeling emboldened.

"I don't answer to you. Don't I make sure you have everything you need?" His mood suddenly darkens, gone the carefree Father returning.

"Father does the Morrigan have anything to do with that answer?" I press.

Father turns ash white, stumbles back, "Have you seen the Raven?"

It was real! Does that mean I do have powers? As I ponder this, there is a caw from the woods. Turning to the trees, I raise my hands to see fire burning in my palms. Lowering my hands, extinguishing the flames.

"Soon, Father, soon."

Walking back into the house I start packing for the journey of a lifetime. Looking around my room. I find a satchel, throwing my sturdiest clothes in. The drawings my brothers made of me and them. My knives, sewing kit, flint box. *What else will I need... Is the flint box redundant?* I ask myself these things as I light and extinguish my hands a few times. Picking up my only boots, I dress for the journey.

I hear my brothers run up to the house. "Father! Father! The biggest Ra-

ven we have ever seen is in the woods! What does it mean?"

"Should we try to chase it off?"

"Hush! Leave it be! See to the deer! Then say goodbye to your sister!"

The cries of my family waft through the window. Seems it will be sooner than I had hoped. Going down to the kitchen I gather jerky, hard cheese, and a water skin. *Who knows how long the journey will be? Will I ever see my family again?*

Looking out the window, I see my brothers in the barn doorway skinning the deer, quiet and subdued. They have never been that way. Father still standing where I left him. Grabbing my cloak, I head out the door. Nodding to my father I walk over to the barn.

"Boys! I must go, Father will explain. Take care of him. Take care of each other. If I can, I will return."

Their questions fall on deaf ears, as I wrap my arms around them in one last embrace. Letting go I walk over to my father, and he grabs on. Silent sobs rack him as he kisses my forehead.

"Goodbye, my darling. Be careful and remember we are always here for you."

Silently I nod my head. Stepping back, I look to the woods. There on the branch is the Raven.

"It is time."

"Yes, it is."

Following the Raven, I step into the woods. *What will happen next? Who will I become? The past is answered. The future a question. I guess I am just that. An endless question.*

Hereafter

Jessica Bennett

The sky looked bleak as a man laid there, his breath hitched, and his body hurting. His vision of the sky became impaired as silhouettes of people arrived in his vision. Although, it seemed he couldn't make out a single face. There seemed to be far too many voices scattered, he couldn't concentrate on one. Throughout all of this, he couldn't help but feel one emotion, embarrassment. One minute he had been walking to his favorite book store, Dahlia's Books. The cashier always greeted him with a simple, "How ya doin, Quinn?" He loved the idea of being a regular at some place, to be known. Now, he was for sure known, but no one had any idea who he was. To them, he was just a man on the ground who was just hit by a car. To them, he was a dying stranger.

One sound soon became clear throughout the chaos, sirens. Perhaps he would be okay. The pain soon subsided, he believed it was the adrenaline finally working its course through his broken body. Though, when he suddenly felt a large rush of pain through his body before his vision became blurry, his mind panicked. He was going to die. There were far too many things that the man still had to do for his life to be cut so short. He had to quit his job for the better promotion he got, he needed to start a family, and he desperately wanted to go to Dahlia's once more. It felt like the force of nature did not care what he wanted, as his body took one last breath before darkness took over his vision entirely.

It was always a mystery as to what the afterlife was like. He wasn't sure if a man who created the universe was ready to judge everything he did in life would be there, if he would be reincarnated into a squirrel, or if he would just be stuck in a black void for the rest of eternity. No one ever knew confidently, not even Quinn. The thing people least expect when they open their eyes after their final breath is to be sat in an office. An office with a far too cheery man on the other side of the desk with his hand held out for a greeting.

"Good evening, Quinn. Sorry to make your acquaintance. I'm Seth."

Seth. The guy who would be the first person someone saw after they died would be named Seth. It felt like a slap in his face. He had so many high hopes in his life about how the afterlife would be, but never in his life did he think this was how. Quinn sighed, and took the other man's hand, shaking it. He had to be the one to let go or else this exchange would be far too awkward.

"Hi Seth. Could I ask you something?" Quinn asked, moving closer to him in his seat.

"Of course, Quinn! That is why I'm here, of course. To give you all the answers of life, and why yours ended." Seth spoke, his voice seemed a bit too happy.

"Well I know why mine ended, I was hit by a car."

"I bet you don't know the events that led up to that though." He spoke, Seth's voice finally became more serious.

"I do though. I was crossing the street, then this doucheba-"

"Quinn, did you have a question or could I show you the event that led to your death day?" Seth spoke, it seemed his patience was growing slimmer.

Quinn raised his eyebrows, he had thought the reason he was sitting in this room was because some guy was texting while driving, and Quinn was now another statistic. Something he didn't even bother to explore was that there was an event that would've led up to that specific death. Yet again, he was also far too busy trying to stay alive.

"N-no questions. Can I see the event?" Quinn asked.

Seth nodded and stood up, walking over to Quinn's chair and turning him around to see a large presentation screen. His eyes widened at the sight of it, it felt like he was at the movies except the plot was to see how dumb he was in the past. He looked over to see Seth hold a remote up to a projector, and with one push, a bright video was now being played. It took a minute for his eyes to get used to it, but once they did, he was stunned.

In front of him was a third perspective video of a young boy wearing a blue shirt with a design he couldn't make out, black jeans, and beaten up converse. He was inside of a classroom, sitting down on the floor where pillows surrounded him. As he viewed the classroom more, he realized he was in English class. He realized that the boy he was viewing was him.

He looked at Seth for a brief moment, he seemed to be enjoying the video ahead more than Quinn was. Quinn shook his head in disbelief before returning his attention to the big screen.

Quinn had to have been 13 years old in this video. He was staring ahead in an area called the 'Reading Corner' with a book grasped in his hands. A displeased look was plastered on his face, almost as if he despised the class he was in. Quinn didn't have many memories hating English class though, he was always fond of it. Soon, he saw a teacher make her way over to Quinn, Mrs. Joy, he always thought 'Joy' was a unique last name. Mrs. Joy soon knelt down next to Quinn, a sad expression sitting on her face.

"Hi, Quinn." Mrs. Joy started, "I see we haven't touched our book once since the period started. Care to tell me why that is?"

Quinn looked at her and held the book up, "I'm not too fond of The Giver, Mrs. Joy. I can't get into it."

Mrs. Joy's eyes widened, "Oh, well I love *The Giver*, Quinn. It's a classic. They made a movie about it, you know."

"I read one line and then I have to read it again, and again before understanding what is even going on." Quinn stated, "It's exhausting. I got to page three and gave up."

"I see. I've had that problem myself sometimes. I have a trick for it though." Mrs. Joy grinned at Quinn's immediate engagement. "Simply don't read it. Skip past that part. If the book is good, it'll summarize it later in some way. Once you get what's going on, I bet if you went back and read that passage again, you would connect to it instantly. You're lucky all the books I show the class are good, including *The Giver*."

"Oh, kind of like context clues?" he asked.

"Kind of. I'll leave it to you though. Have fun reading, Quinn." She spoke before walking away from Quinn and helping another student.

The boy watched her walk away as he looked down at the book again, and returned to the part he was at again. He skimmed past that page and moved onto the next. His eyes read the page, and it was almost like something had clicked in his brain. He finally understood what was going on. Jonas, the main character, wasn't quite a fan of the cargo planes above carrying supplies to the community below he resided in. He feared them.

After reading the page, Quinn went back to the sentence that was bugging him to understand, and just like Mrs. Joy had stated earlier, he finally understood. There he sat, flipping through the pages and soon was among the first people to finish the assigned three chapters to read by Mrs. Joy. It was an ecstatic feeling. and it was the last current Quinn saw before the screen went black.

Quinn's eyebrows furrowed. He expected something more, something a bit more dramatic in a sense. Not advice from a middle school teacher that led to the reason he died. It was too confusing to him, how did that lead to him getting hit by a car? The reason was far too little than the outcome.

"I can see it written on your face, Quinn. I'll explain how this led to your death day." Seth spoke before inhaling briefly, "When you heard that tip, you used it for all the books you read causing you to become a book fanatic. Even in your thirties. You were going to Dahlia's Books before your passing, the book store you adored so much, but as you were crossing the street you always took to go there, a man named Davis Smith hit you and took your life away." Seth spoke quickly before exhaling. "Just the way life works. Don't feel bad though. I once had a guy who dropped his ice cream on the floor and that led to him being

He wished there was a way to tell the living people of Earth to cherish every moment like it was their last because that is exactly what he wished he had done.

drowned.”

Quinn stared back ahead, his confusion faded away once Seth explained, and the only feeling left was pity for himself. Why was he the person who had to have died? There were much worse people on this planet who Seth believed should be in this office more than him.

He wished there was a way to tell the living people of Earth to cherish every moment like it was their last because that is exactly what he wished he had done.

He looked back up at Seth as he started to speak.

“I suppose I’ll be telling you what you’ll be doing now. Here, everyone has a role. They can work in the office, clean up around town, work at the shops located around town-“

“Is there a bookstore?”

“There is, but I have you assign-“

Quinn interrupted him again. “I want to work there,” Quinn spoke quickly.

Seth sighed, “I had you assigned in the office, but I think you would be a good fit in the bookstore. Wonderful people working there as well.” Seth said, “Well come on then, let’s get you settled in.”

Quinn nodded and stood up. The afterlife was something Quinn never imagined meeting so soon. He never expected himself to become engaged in it so quickly either. It seemed like his brain finally came to terms with the fact that his time on Earth was up, there was no changing that now. He didn’t know if the afterlife was like this forever, he hoped there was a chance to be reincarnated. He wanted to have a chance to live life again. As he walked besides Seth, he wondered if he had been here since humanity started. He wondered if he was just a random

guy, an intern, or the God everyone praised was some guy named Seth. That would've been one hell of a slap in the face.

Quinn wondered if there was a way to fulfill the rest of his life here, find a wife, start a family, and luckily for him, he was on his way to the job of his dreams. He wondered if he would meet any of his friends, or family that had deceased in the previous years. He would do anything to hug his Mother again. He also wondered if he would have the chance to change his career if he didn't seem to like it.

Luckily for Quinn Ashford, he had the rest of eternity to figure everything out.



Leeanna Bala

INTRO TO CERAMICS



Jugad Boparai



Katherine Jantz



Angeline Montanez



Isabella Smith



Katherine Jantz



Natalie Sagatis



Shuta Nishimura



Trey Mariano

The Third Time's a Charm?

Jessica Marshall

I take one last look in the visor mirror; I am not thrilled with who is staring back at me. The anticipatory stress of today's event, or maybe my two previous divorces, are making me look well beyond my thirty-two years. Sleep was transient last night, at best. I hope I did enough to hide the bags under my eyes along with my other less than desirable traits. I flick the mirror up, take a deep breath and try to gently slide out of the car, not wanting to disturb the ornately wrapped gifts or their perfectly placed bows. The presents are safe, but my head takes a good thump against the doorjamb. Smooth as usual. Coordination and I have never been friends so why should today be any different.

As I cross the street, I take one last pleading glance at my car, feeling exposed now that I am moving away from it. In that last glance, I see my prehistoric, faded grey Chevy Malibu disrupting a line of sparkling white SUVs.

What am I doing here? I shake my head, more visibly than I would like, then avert my eyes and thoughts towards the festivities.

If the air is crisp this early November afternoon, I don't notice it. I take a moment to survey the scene, even though I have been here many times before the house seems more imposing today. It is usually just Ryan and I, not seventy-five people. The trees are the beautiful band of colors you come to expect during autumn in the Northeast. I stretch to look past the flawless landscaping, over the pristine white picket fence, to see farm animals haphazardly placed throughout the backyard amongst a throng of party goers. The scene before my eyes is in sharp contrast to the four-year-old birthday parties of my childhood, which seem dull and washed out in comparison.

I exhale, not realizing I was holding my breath in either anticipation or to save myself from the aroma of manure that comes along with those coveted pony rides. I grab the gate latch, plaster a smile on my face and push into the fray. I immediately begin scanning the crowd for him but can't seem to find any heads lacking hair within my sight line. Why did we not plan for this? Maybe I should have come earlier? No, that wouldn't have worked. I decide to try to get myself settled on the periphery and disappear into the din. Despite my best efforts, various sets of eyes scrutinize

"Wow you're really somebody...aren't you?"

me and move on. Oh, the joys of going to a party where you only know one person, who you can't seem to fricking find! This was a terrible idea, our lovely little plan to introduce me, but not in a one-on-one setting, or more appropriately a one-on-two setting. We both thought this would be less pressure, but sitting here all alone, among the oppressive hoard of unfamiliar faces does not put me at ease.

I am summoned from my thoughts by a loud and clawing voice. My eyes settle on an older woman, maybe sixty or so, overweight, and plain. Despite her average appearance, she carries herself with the assurance that we are all here to entertain her, which is disconcerting.

Her mouth opens and she demands, "Who are you?" Before I can say a word, she continues, "How do you know the family? Are you from around here?"

For some reason her probing renders me momentarily speechless. It takes me a beat to get my wits about me. I tell her my name is Jess and that I am a friend of the family, which comes out more like a question than an answer; this earns me a peculiar look.

She then repeats herself, "Are you from around here?"

This time I pick up on her accent, she is definitely from the city. I tell her I am a local, born and raised in Rensselaer County, never having lived outside of its limits. She seems to be losing interest, but fires another question at me, "What do you do for work?" I tell her about my job.

I am a Human Resources Director at a Bank. This seems to grab her attention. Her mouth opens to assault my senses once again

"Wow you're really somebody...aren't you?"

Growing up the daughter of a convenient store clerk and a tractor me-

chanic, I don't believe your job makes you "somebody." This comment combined with her demeanor and voice, make me contented to never see this woman again. Everything about her rubs me the wrong way and I am at a loss for a polite response.

I finally decide on, "Everyone is really somebody regardless of what they do for work. You shouldn't judge anyone by what they do for a living, it's rude." I abruptly excuse myself, leaving her slack jawed. I decide to make a renewed effort to find Ryan.

I spot him happily guiding a pony back through the gate from its loop around the house. I am cautious in my approach, but he leans in and gives me a kiss hello. His face is shaved but gruff. He smells of the outdoors and toothpaste. It is strangely intoxicating as it reminds me of some of our more intimate encounters. He is always so self-assured and confident. I am filled with admiration and envy while I look up at him. I ask if the cute little girl on the horse smiling at me is Leah or Samantha. His response, "Neither." I am at once disappointed and relieved. Mostly disappointed because this little girl smiling at me is not one of his twin daughters who I am here to meet and hopefully get to fall in love with me through my presence and extravagant presents.

After months of dating and a few more months of him convincing me that its time to meet them, I want to make a good impression, which I don't know exactly how to do with four-year-old girls. I'm a boy mom, they are already thirteen and eight years old, so I am a bit rusty on what is appropriate and enticing to the four-year-old age group. I should have called my sister, she has a six-year-old daughter, but she's also judgmental and commanding. I am not sure my frayed nerves could have handled the litany of "you shoulds" that would have been launched my way.

Ryan releases the reigns of the pony and passes them over to a woman who I assume is responsible for the array of ponies, goats, sheep, and chickens. "That was my niece Brooklyn. Let me introduce you to my cousins." The next two hours are a whirlwind of faces and names, that I would be hard pressed to remember by days end. It is interesting to observe how Ryan mingles with the party guest he knows well versus

those he doesn't know well. The party guests that he is less familiar with face a string of questions as he tries to get acquainted with them quickly before moving on to the next grouping of guests. It's definitely not his most redeeming quality, but it's certainly not a deal breaker.

As the afternoon advances, some of the younger guests and their minders start to filter out, looking satisfied with the day's activities and the goody bags clutched in their hands. After a string of nice to meet yous and we should do this again sometime, Ryan and I head inside. It is a totally different vibe. It is quiet and there is a comforting familiarity in its contents and aromas. It's a bachelor's pad for sure, which is at odds with the grand exterior. The walls are bare with the exception of some dead animal trophies and sporadic family pictures.

My eyes find the two little girls digging through a rainbow of wrapped gifts, bows and bags at the far side of the open first floor. They could not possibly look more dissimilar. The first with chestnut ring curls, freckles, and chubby cheeks. She is wearing the cutest little red cardigan, a denim skirt, and thick grey knit tights. Ryan points and says, "That's Leah." I shift my focus to the second child. She has stick straight blond hair, porcelain skin and angular features. She is wearing an oversized sweatshirt, black leggings, and hot pink crocs. Ryan says, "That's Samantha, would you like to meet them?" I respond with a timid "Yes" as I focus on quieting my mind and its worries.

"This is Miss Jess," Ryan says in that singsong voice you use with young children. They both smile up and say "Hi Miss Jess," in unison, which melts my heart.

Now that the moment is here, all my worrying seems futile. I feel lucky to be beside this man, meeting his lovely children, family, and friends. The girls hold their father's full attention as they negotiate how many presents they are allowed to open and which ones they can use first. The normal business of being a child under the watchful eye of an entangled parent. Once the mediation is complete, the girls quickly disappear into the mountain of gifts. I gush to Ryan about how sweet, tiny, and adorable they both are. He teases me for all of my worry leading up to the effortless introduction. Just one small step of many in our budding relation-

ship. We leave the girls with their dotting aunts and head back to the other end of the house.

As we turn the corner into the kitchen, I see the rude and off-putting women from earlier and strikingly a man who looks like an aged version of Ryan, handsome, but droopy. Before I can open my mouth, Ryan opens his, "I can't believe it! With all the busyness of the day, I haven't introduced you to my parents. Mom and Dad this is Jess. Jess this is my mom, Bonnie and my dad, Pat." I exhale, not realizing I was holding my breath, plaster a smile on my face, extend my hand and say, "It's nice to meet you."

THE 888

Jason Belisle

Streetlights flickered; their pale-yellow light casting shadows on the walkway to The 8 8 8 restaurant. The lights glowed, spilling out on to the side of the street with the green and yellow neon 8 8 8 sign, bright. The day had yet to begin, still early was the morning. So early as that only a few were awake. John, barely awake. Dave wide awake. Mary Lou? Well, she was Mary Lou. It'd been 37 years since Mary Lou came to him. Still, she kept him on his toes; yes, she did.

"You can't really change your stars. Life doesn't work that way. Not in real life." Dave wiped down the counter with a worn red rag that was frayed around the edges. His thick brows bending up like McDonald's arches and the wrinkles on his weathered face popped like a child's picture book. He wasn't as old as his body acted or looked but his years had been long and rough. Almost from the get-go he was set on a path of hardship. But it never kept his spirit down. He wondered sometimes, where he got such a bubbly personality considering his ever-dwindling wealth. But only sometimes. He didn't care to give much thought to things you couldn't change. Just keep trucking along. Life will find its way.

John nodded, his belt buckle nearly popping from its fastener. His worn Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt tucked into his widening pants. A worn button up dark blue work shirt, like a blanket pulled taught around him, the barely legible name tag announcing his name to the world "John" if you got close enough to read it. Though, then his breath might nearly knock you out. His dark jeans failing to conceal the oil stains and dirt. "Doesn't mean you can't try." John declared between bites. Over easy eggs dribbled down his graying beard. "But you can try". He took a bite of over buttered toast with a chaser of black coffee that was strong enough to surely put hair on the chest of any being that was in range to even smell the dark roast.

Laughing, Dave moved down the line to rinse the rag out. "That there is the definition of insanity, my dear friend." The hot water quickly built up steam as it filled the sink. "Doing the same thing over... well you know how that saying goes anyhow." Wringing out the dirt, the water blackened nearly as dark as John's coffee.

The bell above the door rang as a new customer came in and sat down at the counter a few seats down from John. He was a short fella with curly hair that draped his face like a ragged tablecloth. A dark black suit, crisp and wrinkle free belied his ragged hair.

"What can I get for you son?" Dave asked half full pot of coffee in hand; he flipped the cup over in front of the stranger and with a nod from the man filled his cup. "Can't start the day without some coffee, I do say."

The stranger didn't laugh but his gaze was warm. His soft deep voice was out of touch with his body so small and short. "I'll take an eggs and bacon." He glanced at Dave quick, then back down. He eyed the coffee, steam dancing above the dark liquid. He pulled a long sip from the hot cup and set it down. "That's good."

Dave laughed loud. "The best in town, the best in town. Eggs and bacon it is." Dave slid over to the small window, jotting the order down on a small pad and slipped the paper through the window. A feminine hand snatched it quickly and sounds of cooking came to life from behind. "Thank you, Mary Lou." Dave mumbled, barely audible. His smile almost faltering. Almost. But he kept it going; a smile kept you on the right side of the day. "Do you hear that fellas?" he turned, smiling. John and the stranger stopped mid bite and mid sip. They mumbled "no" almost in unison and finished the bite and sip as Dave laughed again. "Caught you unaware, did I?" he leaned on the counter between them, his head swiveling back and forth as they looked at him in wonder. "Don't right remember what that sound was, but I heard it." He looked back and forth at them.

John set his fork down. "Dave, you smoke the funny stuff this morning? What the hell are you talking about?" John sipped his coffee waiting for Dave to answer. John glanced at the stranger who wore a nervous grin.

Dave laughed, "Don't smoke the funny stuff Johnny, not this early." He poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip. "Maybe it was just the world turning. Maybe." He sipped the coffee again. "Maybe, but I heard it." Dave tapped his nose; he rubbed his bare chin with a finger and then his lips before catching himself and stopping.

Plates clanked onto the small windows counter, Dave smile spread ear to ear. "Foods ready!" he grabbed the plates. "Thank you, Mary Lou. Thank you." He nodded and tipped his head forward in thanks. Dave set the two plates in front of the stranger. His delight was overwhelming, it flooded the room and the two men smiled not knowing why but feeling the joy in the air reverberating through them to their bones.

"Enjoy, Son." Dave handed the man a fork and knife wrapped in a napkin. "Best in town this is. Best in town."

The stranger took a bite hesitantly. He was filled with a wonder and delight as he chewed the bites "Wow, this is absolutely delicious!" The stranger's enthusiasm brought a smile to Dave's face. John smiled as he chewed his bacon, his head nodding in approval, knowing.

Dave's eyebrows rose again, the wrinkles strong across his forehead. "Best in town. Best in town. Right Mary Lou?"

Yes. Less a sound and word, she confirmed it with a passing of feeling and a fluttering of warm colors in which how she saw the world and shared with him. Yes.

Someday I might just tell you about the day I met Mary Lou. Just maybe I might.



Leeanna Bala





Photos by Leeanna Bala

LOVE
LOST IN
REALITY

Abigail Gouldin

I'm staring into my vintage black leather loafers hanging off the side of this shrink's olive-green couch.

"Who was your hardest loss?" they ask.

My eyes follow the wood along the walls up to the ceiling, my thoughts wander around me, and I cannot get myself to look at them while I respond,

"I'm not sure."

The room is surrounded by bookshelves on the wall, filled with colored books in alphabetical order on psychological disorders and therapeutic bullshit. I vividly remember thinking I wouldn't be coming back. Time went by slowly, and I spent the session fixated on the colorful necklace my shrink was wearing. I looked at the clock that hung crookedly over the door, and as soon as it turned the hour, I was up and back into the real world. I had the overwhelming feeling that I was missing something or that the therapy sessions made me lose betrayal in my feelings. As I walked down the recondite streets in the Upper West Side towards my studio, I looked around me and realized I wanted to call her.

I can still remember how she smelt the first time we fell drunkenly onto the red sofa. A mix of red wine, cigarettes, and I vividly remember the smell of sex for some reason. It was late one Friday night in December, a few months back, as it is the spring now. We had gone out like we usually did when our eyes met, ever so gently gazing into each other a few too many times just to be considered friends. But that's what she always said to me. The words "We're just friends" were engraved into my memory at this point. It wasn't heartbreak, it was just extreme disappointment.

I turned my phone off and went back into my thoughts. In my melancholy, I decided to take the hottest shower I could get from my decrepit tub that looks like it hasn't been updated since this building was built in the '70s. As I am in there washing my hair, I stare out the window into the skyline. I hear cars honking, live music playing from a restaurant below me. The sun sets into the night, but the nocturnal city is just waking up.

The world seems too colossal for someone to fall in love with me, but I was destined to have my heart broken once. That week turned into comprehensive research of what slam poetry readings, bookstores, or cafes in Midtown I would run into my soulmate at. Every day I took a different route to work. Sometimes I walked. Other times I sat on the subway, hoping that my presence walking past or riding next to someone would be enough for them to ask for my name. Walking in the city is easy if you know your way around, which I do. I went to the coffee shop that seemed the quietest on my way as I had some time to kill. I order an espresso and sit companionless by the window staring out at all the

strangers rushing past.

Most of the city is often a rush, and I like these moments where I can stop time, and people watch. I sip my potent espresso and write in my journal about what I see outside. The music in my headphones is playing smooth jazz, and I wonder if that changes my view of these people walking by. If I played something different, would it change my opinion of them? Maybe, I do not know, but I start to wonder if I listen to love songs, would it manifest in my real life. I created a “falling in love” playlist featuring Elvis Presley, The Temptations, The Beatles, and other older musicians.

Back en route to work, I play these “love” songs and feel no different, if anything, lonelier in this big city. The buildings tower over me, blocking the sun from directly hitting my skin. One time a girl told me on the street I walk with confidence only seen by models. I am not a model, but I carry myself well. I walk fast with good posture and let my hips take over each step. I have always done this, but no one notices me on my way to work, except my friend Josh. Josh and I coincidentally bump into each other on my walk to work almost every day, sometimes I order an extra espresso for him. But not today, and before you start to think anything, Josh very much knows I am desperate for a woman in my life, we’re just friends, the city would be depressingly lonely if I did not have platonic friendships.

“So how does it feel to be in the city where no one sleeps but you couldn’t meet me at the bar last night for drinks? Do you know how many beautiful women were there waiting for a lady like you to come in and sweep them off their feet?” Josh joked.

“Josh for your information I had a very depressing night and turned my phone off. If I had gone out, I am pretty sure the smell of my lavender bath of tears would have literally made them all pity me not sexually aroused by me, but thanks.”

“Therapy?” Josh asked,

“Yeah, my therapist thinks I need to let go of my “past relationships” and move on with my life, and I sort of agree. Something about it makes me disgustingly sad though,” I told him while rolling my eyes over the thought of moving on and sipping my espresso.

“Listen, I know your last relationship sucked but it was a year ago, you should at least put yourself back out there,” Josh always encouraged me.

I believe him, I am a 24-year-old living in New York, it shouldn’t be this hard to find my soulmate.

"I know I deserve another chance, but I feel like no one wants me so what's the point of trying," I sigh.

I complained as we pass people who all look like they have their lives together as I feel like mine is crumbling apart, all over a girl? This wasn't me, I needed to get my head out of my ass.

"You don't even know if anyone wants you because you're too worried about your ex; if you would allow yourself to move on then life would seem easier." Josh always gives me advice, today I could either listen to his advice and put myself back into the dating world or keep being a sad lesbian mess. To distract me from the decision, I showed him my playlist.

"You seriously think Elvis will sing some sex into your life?" Josh said while scrolling through it on Spotify.

"Oo you even added some Finneas, a truly sad, romantic girl at heart. Are you manifesting losing your next lover already?" I pushed Josh and laughed.

"Shut up, it's a start, right? Usually, these songs repulse me." I joke.

We split paths at West Broadway, I told Josh that he and I would go out some night this week and start looking at my options when I have free time.

"See you later Joshypoo," I joked.

"Toodaloo," Josh walked away with a skip in his step. I noticed he was wearing a nicer navy suit than usual for his meeting. I bet he is trying to impress the secretary he has a work crush on. "I need to be more like Josh," I say to myself under my breath.

I put my Air Pods back in my ears and decided I'm over the playlist I made, I switched back to my normal jazz music. I make it to work and before going in I adjust myself in the camera of my phone.

I work as a journalist at a magazine for Women involved in sustainable businesses in Soho. When I arrive at work every day, I have to check-in at the front desk. The secretary often asks me about my day and is intrigued about my endeavors. The workday is about seven hours, but it's not grueling. I spent a lot of the day talking to my coworkers about the gossip in the city, as I never really knew what was going on. On the white walls, my boss had hung some of my art as office decorations. I like feeling noticed by her. She often read my poems and writings or asked to see more of my art. Her name was Ellie.

Ellie had this glow to her like she knew she was successful, starting a company from the ground up by herself. She went to Columbia, where she studied busi-

ness and minored in writing. She had a desire to be more successful in the future. She was truly inspiring but also her personality is encapsulating. We talk a lot at work because we share many interests.

One night after my workday, Ellie asked me to grab drinks with her. I said yes as I had not gone out for drinks in a few weeks, and I was due for it. We sat down at some bar where the atmosphere was loud but with people talking, not music. There was a live band in the back, but we could hardly hear the music over all the voices. Ellie immediately made her way to the bar where somehow, we found two seats. She ordered us both vodka cranberries. Ellie, of course, knew the bartender, so our glasses were never empty, and we probably spent \$200 on drinks that night, except I never saw the check.

We spent the night bonding over our favorite views of the city, our favorite writers, our desires to escape the city. Ellie felt trapped in the city because of her successful business in journalism. Being someone who influences the views of so many people can get exhausting, she told me. She wished to run away from it all to be a ghostwriter. I told her to go for it.

This became a routine, drinking after work. I would bring more poems or writings I was working on, and Ellie would read them. A few times, she would rest her knee on mine and start to move it so gently her leg caressed my leg. These minor flirtations were making me wonder if this was more than a friendship with my boss.

“Why do you write so beautifully for no one to see?” Ellie asked me.

“You get to see it,” I responded while taking a sip from my cocktail.

“But you have this vision whenever you write – I feel the words and stories you are telling,” Ellie ponders.

Her hand softly holds my thigh as she says, “You deserve to have the world see your work. Stop pretending you don’t. The power you encapsulate in your work is beyond the realm of art.”

I ask Ellie to come back to my place after we finish our last drink for the night. She invited me to hers instead since I lived in a small studio, it was probably better we stayed at hers. We drunkenly walked ourselves from Soho to her apartment, which was only a few minutes away in the Lower Eastside. Still, we managed to take almost an hour getting there, stumbling, talking, stopping to enjoy the views of the buildings. We finally got to Ellie’s. As I made my way to the lobby of her apartment, I checked myself out on my phone camera like always. I have the heavy eyes of someone drunk and sleep deprived. I do not look as sexy as I felt at the bar when I confidently asked Ellie to hang out. I try to fix my

hair and the little makeup under my eyes. Ellie doesn't notice, she is in her own drunken world.

Ellie is right next to me; our eyes are locked, staring into each other. Her brown eyes were the only thing I could keep my gaze at. She was enticing me. Her body was irresistible. I felt this wave of desperation for her. I went to lean in and kiss her, but the elevator rings as we reach the 20th floor where she lives. Ellie took my hand in hers and led me to the door. We stepped into her large urban studio, where the views prevailed city lights and tall skyscrapers that reminded me of concrete heaven. The apartment was as expected, artsy with modern accents with many plants. But a studio? This place was bigger than all the apartments I have been to in the city. It was practically a bachelor pad and I hoped that meant we would be spending the rest of the night making love on all the furniture in every room as a bachelor would do.

Ellie was clean, neat, and had exquisitely good taste in decorations. She had many art pieces—sculptures, paintings, books about art; I envied her collection. She sat down on the couch that peered directly out the window to the skyline—tapping the spot next to her, her way of asking me to sit with her. I sat so she could lay on my chest as we watched the city lights flicker.

“Do you need anything?” she asked,

“No, I'm comfortable. You?” I said softly while playing with her hair.

I craved Ellie's touch. She felt like the sun. Her skin was golden and warm pressed up against mine. I wondered how long until she would begin to make a move. She never did.

We woke up to the sun rising through her sheer white curtains onto her bed, which we had somehow moved to in the night. The touch of the sun on my skin felt like a gentle hug from the universe. I had been told “you still got it” from the light. The beams of the yellow sunlight made me realize I was going to be late for work. Ellie's eyes opened slowly. She peered around the room, then looked up at me and giggled.

“What?” I asked while laying my head back so she couldn't see my smile,

“I had a nice night with you,” Ellie said, “Do you want to borrow clothes and a toothbrush?”

“Only if it means I can stay here with you longer,” I say while trying to hide my blushing cheeks with my hand.

Ellie somehow managed to look like Aphrodite even in the morning after a night out. The light touched her soft skin so perfectly and reflected the different shades

of brown in her crystal-like eyes. I could get lost in her forever.

After laying together on her bed for a little longer, Ellie gets up and starts to make us homemade lattes from her espresso machine. The smell of the espresso lingers with the fresh flowers that sit on the marble counters. The scent makes me feel divinely alive.

I walk to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. Her bathroom was organized and clean. The drawers were all filled with skin oils and masks, make-up; her bathroom is feminine and has anything and everything you'd expect of her. After I search to find an unused toothbrush, Ellie calls over from the kitchen,

"They're under my sink in the black bin,"

Opening the cabinet, I found the toothbrushes. I also noticed Ellie's cleaning supplies were color-coordinated front to back. For having such an organized life, I knew there was more to Ellie. The reality was Ellie kept her life a mystery, she had got to her success in life alone, and to my knowledge, she wanted to keep it that way. She is perplexing, and not because of her obscure organizational methods.

I remember thinking to myself, she is the perfect woman to fall in love with. I look myself in the mirror and whisper, "Day 373 without sex."

The warm water refreshes my dehydrated skin. I finish fixing up myself and meet her at her kitchen table to share our warm vanilla lattes together. Ellie pulled out a sketch pad that seemed full of drawings, sketches, oil paints and began to sketch a view of what she saw out her windows. I watched, amazed at how effortlessly she scribbled the city. Her hands held the pen in such a delicate and feminine way, the way I wanted her to hold mine.

We didn't make it to the office that morning. Ellie decided she wanted to take me to her favorite museum instead. We spent the day at the museum aimlessly wandering and talking about the different art. It was not exactly a date, more like two friends enjoying exquisite art.

Around 2 pm on his lunch break, Josh texted me "Missed you on our morning gossip, you ok?"

I replied, "My boss and I skipped work to visit a museum, sorry! Catch up soon, I have so much to update you on"

Josh answered quickly, "Sounds intriguing, have fun. Talk to you soon."

It became routine for Ellie and me to spontaneously go on new adventures. The city had endless options for us to escape together: museums, botanical gardens, coffee shops, and rooftop bars. Walking down the dim-lit streets after another adventure with Ellie, we had been drinking, but it was nothing new. The only new thing was Ellie wore this delicate black dress. It fit her body elegantly, she looked stunning and her skin glowed under the street lamps. I was wearing a pair of slacks that flattered my curves with a black cashmere turtleneck and my favorite vintage loafers. I never really dressed up for our dates, but tonight I felt like my all-black outfit was sexy. Ellie loved my outfit. She said it made me look like a milf. I'm not sure if a milf is what I wanted to look like, but I think it was Ellie's flirtatious way of telling me she would fuck me.

"I should be going back to my place. It's almost three in the morning, El," I said.

"Ahh, Liz, come on, stay over again. I sleep better next to you anyways." Ellie begged.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" I ask.

Ellie took my hand, and we began to head back to her place in the Lower East Side. At this moment, I did not know what Ellie and I were, lovers or friends. All I knew was I could get lost in this reality of mysterious lovers in my head for a while.

When we got to the apartment building, my head was a little blurry from the wine. I remember getting into the elevator. Ellie lightly grabbed my sexy black sweater to pull me in and kissed me, this was our first-time kissing, and she made the first move. We kept kissing until the bell rang for her floor. Her lips were soft, and she kissed me perfectly. She took my breath away. Something about kissing Ellie felt so natural, she was like water, and I felt like I had been stranded in a desert without her for days. She hydrated me. She made me feel alive. I could not keep my lips off her. Walking into her apartment I pulled her dress up over her head and threw it to the couch.

We got to her room, and the rest of the night we spent learning each other's bodies. Her skin felt like clouds on mine. She was soft and light. We were like magnets. After the first kiss, we could not keep our hands off each other. Everything about her just felt too good. We made sure we both were satisfied. She made my heart race every time her lips touched my body. The adrenaline I felt while making love to Ellie was unmatched. I felt this wave of emotion and passion. I wanted to make Ellie forget she had ever been with anyone else. I wanted her to feel my love, not just my touch.

We fell asleep holding each other, and before Ellie woke up, I slipped out. I could not just miss work again, unfortunately whether I am fucking my boss or

not, I am still practically living paycheck to paycheck. I rushed to my apartment to get ready. I had this overwhelming feeling that I needed to look extra enticing at work today. I wore my favorite black Levi's that made my ass look good, and this casual but vintage checkered sweater vest, still enough to get someone's attention because I did not wear anything under it. I knew Ellie liked the tattoos on my arms. She said that in bed last night, so I had them out today to remind her.

On my walk to work, I felt this smooth confidence like never before, walking down the streets with my jazz music playing in my ears. I knew I was hot, but what Ellie said yesterday stuck with me. I am a sexy milf, minus the children, of course. This was my new affirmation. 'I am a sexy milf.'

I stopped at my favorite coffee shop with Josh to catch up after not seeing each other for a week. I got myself the usual, a coffee with a shot of espresso, and got Ellie a raspberry vegan danish to say, "Thank YOU for having sex with me." Kind of silly, kind of romantic. I wrote her a note on the napkin, asking her to grab dinner with me this Friday. Josh obviously noticed and began asking questions.

"I didn't even know she was into women, we literally just got drinks one night and all this sexual tension came out, it was so new. It's exciting for me, don't you agree!" I excitedly told him.

"Ellie sounds perfect for you, I'm just happy to know you didn't ghost me because you were drowning in a puddle of lavender bath tears."

Josh is being sarcastic, but I can tell he's happy for me.

"For the first time in like months, I suddenly feel like me again," I tell him. "The sex was literally amazing"

"I am glad," Josh said.

"You should be." I laugh as we walk through crowds of angry New Yorkers who have not yet had their morning cup of joe.

"I am reborn," I say confidently.

If you do not believe in your own sex appeal, sex will never be good with you, Ellie had told me one time before we were even flirting with each other. I guess she had an excellent point. The morning after amazing sex, I feel sexy, I want to do it more often, this feeling is amazing.

"You're glowing Liz," Josh said as we parted ways for the day.

The sun was shining on my skin in a way that complimented the detailed doo-

dles all over my body. At work, Ellie loved my outfit. She immediately grabbed my arms in a more than friends' way, gracing her soft fingers over my tattoos.

"I absolutely love this vest Liz, you need to tell me where you got it!" she said.

At work, we try to keep our relations professional. No one there knows the journalist for the queer sustainability column is hooking up with the CEO. Ellie brought me into her office to "show her" the website I got my sweater vest from. I knew this was code for alone time in her office. We shared our breakfast and coffee together, and she appreciated the Danish gesture. We agreed we would meet at this French restaurant in midtown on Friday for dinner. This would be our first actual romantic date.

I honestly do not think I could focus the rest of the week. I knew Ellie and I had been going out to bars and coffee, but something about a planned dinner date made me more nervous than usual. For the first time ever, I was overthinking her intentions. I knew she would blow my expectations out of the world. She was perfect to me. But did we want the same thing? I knew I wanted more from her, but I hoped she was not just using me as something fun to do in her spare time.

The anxiety leading up to our first actual date had me reminiscing on my past. Friday morning, I decided to visit my therapist to talk about everything as I had ghosted them for a few weeks. This was normal for me to do, the ghosting. I just knew I could not ghost Ellie.

After an hour gossiping with my shrink about the hot sex Ellie and I had, and how it made me feel, they brought up how I should feel free to love and not stress over things like a dinner date since Ellie has already been making me feel so wonderful, why would going out to dinner change that? I explained to my therapist after being hurt by someone I thought I had fallen in love with, I did not know how to love anymore.

"Love does not have to be a scary thing. It is a simple emotion and feeling. If someone is making you feel these emotions and feelings of love, you should pursue them," they said to me.

While my shrink sometimes gave me the best advice, it was always easier said than done because my trust issues ruined everything in the past.

For some reason, this time felt different. I knew my therapist was right about taking a chance on love. Ellie was perfect and had never made me question myself.

After our little hour-long catch up, I felt better about the dinner date. I knew

Ellie would never intentionally hurt me. She was too sweet. Our date was nothing new for us. I had to stop getting in my head. If anything, it could be the best night of my life. I just needed to believe in myself. I needed to be more confident.

I planned to take Ellie to dinner at this restaurant in the East Village that had a live pianist playing since we both appreciate good music, and I wanted Ellie to think I was romantic. Ellie called me and let me know she would have her driver come pick me up around eight, I have never had anyone send a driver for me, but it was kind of hot.

I had to figure out something to do for the rest of the afternoon until dinner to seem busy. I didn't want Ellie to think I was just waiting around all day. So, I decided to go for a run to clear my mind. On my run, I picked out the most beautiful bouquet of flowers for Ellie. They almost smelt like the perfume she wears.

When I got back from my run, I had four missed texts from an unknown number on my phone.

"Hey, I know this is random, but I'm in the city tonight" 5:45 pm

"I've been thinking about you so much recently" 5:50 pm

"I hate how we ended things. Please call me" 5:55 pm

"It's Carmine, by the way" 6:00 pm

After reading the texts, I dropped my phone on the floor.



PAIN TI



Xueli Wang

ING 1



Kaitlin Dodge

LOVING TRAGEDY

Kiley Wren

“Ma’am, we are about to close...would you like the check?”.

“Yes please, thank you,” I said with a bit of a strain in my voice.

The time was now quarter to twelve. The once packed bar was completely empty, just me and whatever workers were still here. I had gotten here at eight forty-five on the dot (I like to be punctual). When I first got here, my palms were a bit sweaty, and I had that pit feeling in my stomach like always. As I entered the restaurant, I was hit with the smell of greasy food and beer. I was greeted by the hostess who brought me to a table, and I sat here and waited and waited. Eventually, I just ordered a vodka soda for myself. I had a feeling this would happen again, but I wanted to be wrong. I sat and waited. I watched everyone else with their friends and significant others having fun, drinking, dancing, as I just sat there, waiting. Now, here we are. Everyone is gone, and you never showed. Josie: 0 Men: 7....

For a while, I never really cared for relationships or whatever. I was actually repulsed by them. Of course, I still had my fair share of fun, but overall I just did not care too much, I wanted to focus on college and achieving my dream of becoming an interior designer. After getting accepted into the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and working my ass off for four years, I reached a point where I wanted and needed something more in life, love. I know I am only 22, but sometimes it feels like I am running out of time, at least in that department.

That is why I have been trying to put myself out there more. I started using Tinder, going out to bars, and even just slightly flirted with guys at work. I currently waitress at a restaurant called Mustang Harry’s. It is right near Madison Square Garden, which is cool and helps bring in a lot of people which means a lot of tips. It is also right near FIT so I can just go right into work after my classes.

After another unsuccessful mission of operation boyfriend, I ordered an uber and went back to my apartment, The car ride felt longer than usual tonight. It is only fifteen minutes away, but it felt like two hours. Probably because I just wanted to be home. It was a long night for me and all I want right now is to lay in my bed and listen to Fleetwood Mac records for the rest of the night.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I arrived at my apartment complex. I thanked the driver and got out of the \$30,000 white tesla...talk about riding in style.

I walked up the couple flights of stairs to my apartment with the red door. I unlocked my door and was greeted by my two black cats Charles and Pearl. I don’t know what my deal with black cats is honestly, but I love them both dearly. After greeting them, I head on over to my room on the other side of the kitchen. I throw on a black crewneck and some Nike sweats. I then walk over to my re-

cord player and turn it on. Next to it is all my collection of records. I pull out my rumors vinyl and place it on the record. As Second Hand News starts playing, I walk over to my bed and get under the blankets. I just lay in my bed, soaking in the music and my thoughts. After a couple of more songs, I begin to feel my eyes get heavy, and then I quickly fall asleep.

“BANG BANG BANG!” I jolt up out of slumber.

A few seconds later, I hear more loud banging coming from outside of my apartment. I look at my phone to see the

“BANG BANG BANG!”

I jolt up out of slumber.

time, the screen reads 3:30am. I don't know who the hell is making all this noise at this time, but I am going to find out. As I am exiting my room, the noise gets louder and a bit clearer, I realized someone was pounding on my door. I have no idea who could be here at this time, and honestly, I was a little on edge. I decided to just open the door anyway, because who knows if they would ever go away. In front of me stood what seemed like a 4'9 buff white guy with a mop of hair on his head.

“Uhhhh...can I help you?”. I have never seen this guy in my life.

“Heyyyyyy Jos-Jo-Josie! Josie! I'm so so sorryyy abo-ab-about tonight. Hahah!”

It then finally clicked, Chris. Chris was the guy I was supposed to be meeting up with tonight. Not only is he a dick, but apparently a catfish too.

As he spoke, his breath reeked of Jack Daniels. He was obviously plastered.

“Chris, save it. I don't even want your apology. Just go home.”

Chris' smile quickly faded, and his face turned angry.

“You're telling me I came allll the way here, at almost four in the morning for you and you won't accept my apology?”.

“First off, I didn't even know who you were at first. You look nothing like your pictures! Also, I never asked you to apologize or come here at this hour. That was all your own decision bud, maybe make better choices and don't catfish someone then show up at her door after standing her up completely wasted.”

The second after those words left my mouth, I felt a warm stinging feeling against my cheek.

“What a pathetic bitch you are. How dare you even think to say such words like

that to me!”

I could begin to feel the tears well up in my eyes, mostly from the slap. He was about to get closer to me until we heard the door a few apartments down from me open.

As soon as the door opened, Chris was gone in a flash. From the apartment, out walked a young man. He had dirty blonde curls, and brown eyes which looked at me, concerned. This unknown man looked like he just rolled out of bed, with no shirt on and just in his sweats. “Is everything okay out here? Who was being so loud? You?” he said groggily.

“Everything is fine. I’m just going back inside now, sorry. Have a good night.” I immediately rushed back into my apartment and shut the door.

I don’t know why, but I was really embarrassed. Probably because he was very attractive, even though he quite literally just rolled out of bed. Me on the other hand, my hair was one big giant mess, my sweatpants were all rolled up, and I was about to cry. I never realized I had such an attractive neighbor...maybe he just moved in? I had no clue, but I hope to see him again. For now, I am going back to bed to get some more rest.

I slowly began to open my eyes and could see the daylight peeking through the window. I looked at the time on my phone, it was three o’clock. Good thing it is only a Saturday, I usually never sleep in this late, but now I wasted my whole day, especially since I have work at four o’clock. So I quickly hopped into the shower. Then I grabbed my work clothes, threw my hair up into a bun and put on some foundation and mascara. I made myself a quick sandwich and was out the door. As I was leaving, the guy from last night was also leaving his apartment. I was going to say hi, but I decided against it and focused on getting to work on time. When I arrived at work, it was already pretty busy. We open at 3 on Saturday’s. I got clocked in and immediately went at it.

The time was now about 9:30. It was still quite busy, but it was not as bad as it has been. Nobody has been seated in my section for a while, so I was kind of relaxing, helping out other staff and the bartenders. Finally, our hostess Casey told me I had a party of 1 seated in my section. I begin walking over there to greet them, and behold, it’s the guy from last night who lives in my apartment complex. When he realized I was going to be his waitress, he kind of smirked at me and chuckled to himself. I on the other hand was not as thrilled. I was embarrassed more so.

“Long time no see huh?” he says to me with that smirk on his face still.

“Can I start you off with anything to drink?”

"I think I'll just have a vodka soda with some nachos please".

I couldn't help but scuff at his order. I wrote it down and told him I will put it in, and it should be right out.

"Sounds good, thanks love," he said as he winked at me.

I couldn't tell if he was just a flirty person, or actually flirting with me. Whatever his plan was, I was totally okay with it.

As I brought over his drink, when I was about to walk away, he grabbed my hand to stop me.

"Hey, why don't you take a little break, sit down with me for a second."

"If you couldn't tell, you aren't the only table I have anymore, so I still have a job to do when I'm not attending to you sir."

I didn't mean for that to come out so snarky, but it did anyway.

"Sheesh, I guess you always got a little spice to you huh?" I couldn't help but lightly smile and blush at his comment.

"We live like right next to each other...we could totally hangout and talk any-time, not while I'm at work," I said with a smile.

"Alright, when you get out then why don't you come over and have a drink?"

"Sounds like a plan to me." He looked at me and smiled

"Perfect, darling."

"Could I get your name though? Given I'll literally be in your apartment and have no idea what your name even is."

He chuckled and said, "Casper. My name is Casper."

I usually don't take a liking to guys this quickly, especially ones who are very flirty. But there was something about this guy. I knew there was something different about him. After Casper got his food and paid, it seemed like my shift flew by and I was off to my apartment. When I got to my apartment, I immediately went to my closet and tried to look for an outfit. I wanted something cute but not over the top. I just decided to put on a cream colored turtleneck with some black leggings. I took my hair down and put it up in a half ponytail, and then I touched up some of my makeup and made my way over to Casper's apartment.

He told me before I left, I could just walk in, but I still felt weird doing that, so I

still knocked first. As I stood and waited for him to answer the door, I could hear the slight tune of Little Lies by Fleetwood Mac playing...I could tell I was really going to like this one.

I was too caught up in my nerves to realize it had been awhile since I knocked on the door, and I haven't gotten anything back.

"Hello? Casper? Are you there?" I said while knocking again. Again, I got no response.

I decided to just open the door and walk in. When I walked in, the lights were kind of dimmed. He had a small dining area next to his living room, where he had two plates along with a glass of what looked like vodka and some red roses in the middle. To the right of the table was a record player, which was still playing Fleetwood Mac.

I began to walk around, trying to see any sight of Casper. Still nothing. Out of stress, I just took a sip out of the glass. It was definitely vodka, a vodka soda. A few brief moments after that, I couldn't breathe. My throat began closing up. I fell to the ground, trying to grasp for any air I could.

After facing defeat, my eyes became heavy...this was my time.

Right before my final last waking breathe, came out Casper looking down at me with a devious smirk on his face.



First Frost by Vicki Brown



Morning Glow by Vicki Brown

PUNISHMENT

Elijeanah Monroe

I hadn't been home for more than ten minutes when my phone started ringing. I sighed, knowing exactly who it was. The screen lit up with the words "My Love."

Was he my love? I had questioned myself several times every night. I wanted to decline the call and go back to planning my Sweet 16 that was a few months away so I could finally relax, but it was Jace... if I didn't answer I knew how bad things could get. Picking up the phone I spoke, "Hey."

"Hey baby," I could hear the sound of his shoes hitting the floor. He just got home and just had to call me instantly. "What're you doing?"

"Homework... well at least I was."

The conversation that wasn't really a conversation lasted for what felt like hours, which it was. He hung up finally to shower at 7:30 PM. We talked on the phone for three hours about nothing. And no that wasn't supposed to be cute like when couples say "I can talk to you forever ever about nothing".

It was supposed to be a warning. It should've been a warning.

"You're a horrible girlfriend, you don't care about me, nobody does, I might as well just kill myself," he yelled into the phone.

Jace had called me back after his shower. At the moment it was 10:00 and I had been praying to finally get some sleep. We had been trying to find things to talk about around 8:40ish when things took a turn for the worst. I told him I didn't really want to talk, and I just wanted to sleep. This of course led to him getting angry. So there I was arguing for hours over nothing. Jace was like the Hulk. As Bruce Banner he was sweet, dorky, and shy. But once you give him any negative feeling, you got the Hulk, an angry, terrifying, and disgusting monster. These were the moments I wanted to just end the relationship. The moments he yelled into my ear and threatened to end his life. The moments he made me feel so small.

"You're a piece of shit you know? I'm your boyfriend and you're supposed to be helping me!"

I tried to not let the tears come out but I couldn't help it, they all came pouring out, "I-I'm trying Jace, I'm just exhausted, and my mom is being my mo--"

"Oh so you don't care about me? See, all you care about is yourself, this is just like on my birthday last month when you brought up your Sweet 16 instead of talking about me almost being an adult."

“What’re you talking about,” I said, my anger getting the best of me and my tone being very loud, “Are you stupid? Sean asked me about it, that’s why I was talking about it! How could I possibly only care for myself, when I am liter-“

“Calm down, why the fuck are you yellin-“

Before he could finish, I hung up, I couldn’t deal with it.

Hopefully one day I’d learn to be better, I thought as I woke up. My parents had always encouraged me to do better for myself, to always be pushing myself harder and going for the goal. To the outside world it looked like I was doing just that, but I knew I wasn’t really doing it.

My eyelashes were crunchy from all of the tears I cried to get myself to sleep. I yawned as I checked my phone, and the next thing that happened was my heart dropping. My notifications were blown up with messages and voicemails from Jace. As I read and listened to them, they tell me I’m a horrible person and that my girlfriend skills are far from perfect. I opened our Facebook messages, and my heart finally breaks, so much blood, so many cuts... and it’s all my fault.

“I hope you’re happy now,” his final text read.

For some reason, Jace was okay with hurting me. He didn’t care what hurt my feelings, especially if it was him doing it. As we sat on the bus together, I stared out the window, he had his arm around my shoulder and was talking to his friend. I kept thinking about if I would end it. My romantic love for him was no longer there. He changed that when our relationship turned into what it is now, I knew I cared for him but I also knew that I couldn’t continue this relationship. But I thought I couldn’t be alone. I had already lost so many friends because of him. He hated the majority of my original friends. My friends I walked into high school with now were no longer by my side and they hang out without me. I didn’t blame them, whenever we had sleepovers Jace would call me every ten minutes to see what I was doing and who I was with, at least he cared about me, or so I thought.

The bus stopped and we got off. I held his hand as we walked into the school. As we walked into the cafeteria, I watched my former friends laugh. I watched as Danielle snorted, which made Danna laugh harder than what she was. I smiled softly, wishing I was with them again.

“You alright princess?” Jace asked, making me look up at him and smile softly, “Yea, I’m just hungry.”

“How about we skip the first period and get some real food?”

I shook my head, "I can't, you know what my mom wi-"

"Yeah and my dad would do worse. Stop acting like you're the only one that goes through shit Elizabeth."

"I never said that Jace," I stepped out of his hold, "Why do you always make everything about you?"

"I make everything about me? You're the one that cries about everything."

"And you don't?"

I watched as his jaw clenched and it was as if his eyes darkened because of the anger coursing through him.

Bye Banner... Hello Hulk.

"How fucking dare you? I'm a good boyfriend and do so much for you and you have the nerve to say shit like that to me?"

The semi-empty hallway made his yelling echo, making me feel small all over again. I felt myself panicking and my heart racing. I hated when he was like this. I looked around us. We were in front of my locker and there were only a few people in the hallway. They looked like they were minding their business but I knew they were listening to this. The whole world was listening, *I want to run and hide*, is all I could think.

"Babe can we just maybe talk about this later?"

"Later? No. You're the one always complaining and saying that we need to talk shit out so let's do it right now," he yelled angrily at me. I felt tears coming to my eyes, I hate being yelled at.

"N-No not at sc-school, not with p-people listening," I stuttered as tears built up more and next thing I knew I was balling my eyes out. I slid down my locker and was now sitting at the bottom of it and crying. I felt everyone in the hallway, including Jace's stare on me. His stare always made my skin crawl, from the moment we met, I just used to think it was a good thing. Jace then spoke, "I'm sorry baby, I'm a terrible boyfriend," he sat next to me, "You deserve so much better."

I wanted to tell him to shut his damn mouth and to just leave me alone for good because what he was saying was true, but I didn't want to hurt him. Every time I wanted to end things, I remembered what happened the last time things did, and that was even worse than this morning. I just couldn't have something like that on my conscience.

My day went by slowly, like it always had and it was finally time for lunch. I bit

into my pizza while I sat alone at a lunch table. I stare down at my phone reading on Wattpad. I loved reading, it helped me escape into a different world that wasn't my own. As I read my book, Zoey Kott sat down across from me. We were good friends, after I lost my best friends and didn't have the soul in me to sit with them, I sat with Zoey. Jace liked her, which is good.

"Hey Elizabeth," she smiled. Zoey is a very nice girl. We met in French on a field trip and we shared a crepe because I had dropped mine.

"Hi," I smiled back. I looked back down at my phone as Jace sat down next to me.

"Hey babe," he said, giving me a kiss on the cheek and taking my phone. I looked at him and he gave me a stern look, "You're on your phone too much, we need to spend time together."

"I know," I say and I put my pizza down. I didn't want to fight. We already did too much this morning.

"Good girl," he said, patting my head.

"She's not a dog you asshole," Zoey said and I looked at her in shock. And then I look back at Jace. *Shit... we just got good again after this morning*, I thought.

"Excuse me?"

"She's not a dog. Nor is she your pet, she's a human being, don't treat her like she's a dumb animal."

Jace's jaw clenched and I frowned. I was happy she was standing up for me but I doubt Jace would like her after this. Which meant no more friendship for us. Jace got up and I could feel his dark energy blaring off of him and towering over me. "Let's go Elizabeth."

"Alright," I say, getting up and walking away with him. "I'm sorry," I said to him as we walked into the hallway.

"You should be, we're boyfriend and girlfriend, you're supposed to defend me."

"I-I'm sorry, she was just defending me. I didn't see anything wrong with it. You have to admit you were kind of treating me like an animal."

He glared at me and I flinched thinking he was about to yell at me but he surprised me, "I'm sorry."

I smiled at him, "I forgive you."

I walked over to him and put my arms around his shoulders, bringing him into a hug, he rarely apologized unless it was after a long argument

Maybe, just maybe he was finally turning around, I thought.

“Just promise me something?” He spoke softly as I stepped a little out of the hug, still holding him close.

“Of course,” I kissed his cheek.

“We’ll stop sitting with Zoey.”

It was like a record scratched and ruined my moment. *“Nope, he wasn’t changing. Not at all. Am I going to be stuck in this cycle for the rest of my life?”* I think. That wouldn’t be fair, I’m a good person, so why am I being punished?

When I got home I immediately took off my shoes and bag before sliding into my bed. I pulled the covers over my head and let myself sit in darkness. Today in my health class we talked about abusive relationships and how things escalate. We watched a short film based on a true story. This girl, my age, found herself hopelessly in love with this guy who slowly took her away from all her friends and drained her from any other contact with the world outside of them, when she finally broke it off, he killed her with no hesitation.

If that’s how the world is and how things work, how could I possibly leave Jace. He was everywhere and knew how to break into my room, could I be safe if I did? Would my family be safe if I did? Jace has access to his father’s guns, he showed me them. What if I get the courage to do this and he kills me or worse, himself? He told me time and time again that he would die by his own hands if I wasn’t in his life.

Maybe I could do it and then just block him, so he couldn’t find me or harass me. That would be a good idea.

Before I could think about what I was doing, I was typing it out.

“We’re over, don’t call me, don’t text me, just leave me alone.”

And with that I blocked him on everything I could. My stomach had turned and I felt sick, but nothing could overpower the relief I felt with him out of my life for good. I smiled to myself before going on my Xbox and putting on Netflix. Maybe if I blocked him Jace would realize I wasn’t joking and leave me be for good, I had hope that by doing this I wouldn’t become a victim.

After a good while of watching American Horror Story, my phone went off with

a call and the sounds of notifications going off echoed throughout my room. I looked down at it and looked at the Caller ID, *Danna*, I answered almost immediately.

"Hello," I asked, confused. I hadn't talked to her in months.

"Hey Ellie, I know my call is a surprise but it's important."

"Okay, what's up?"

"You got to check Facebook."

"Wha-"

"There's pictures up there, I don't think you would've posted them."

"Pictures," I questioned and then my heart and stomach sank, "Wha-what kind of pictures?"

"Picture pictures, okay? Just check."

"On Jace's?"

"No, on yours."

Before I could say anything my mind and hands seemed to go faster than I actually could, I was shaking so hard that I thought I would've started seizing. As I opened Facebook and checked my profile and I felt darkness take over my world.

Those pictures Jace begged me to send him were all over my page. Every. Single. Fucking. One. They were there.

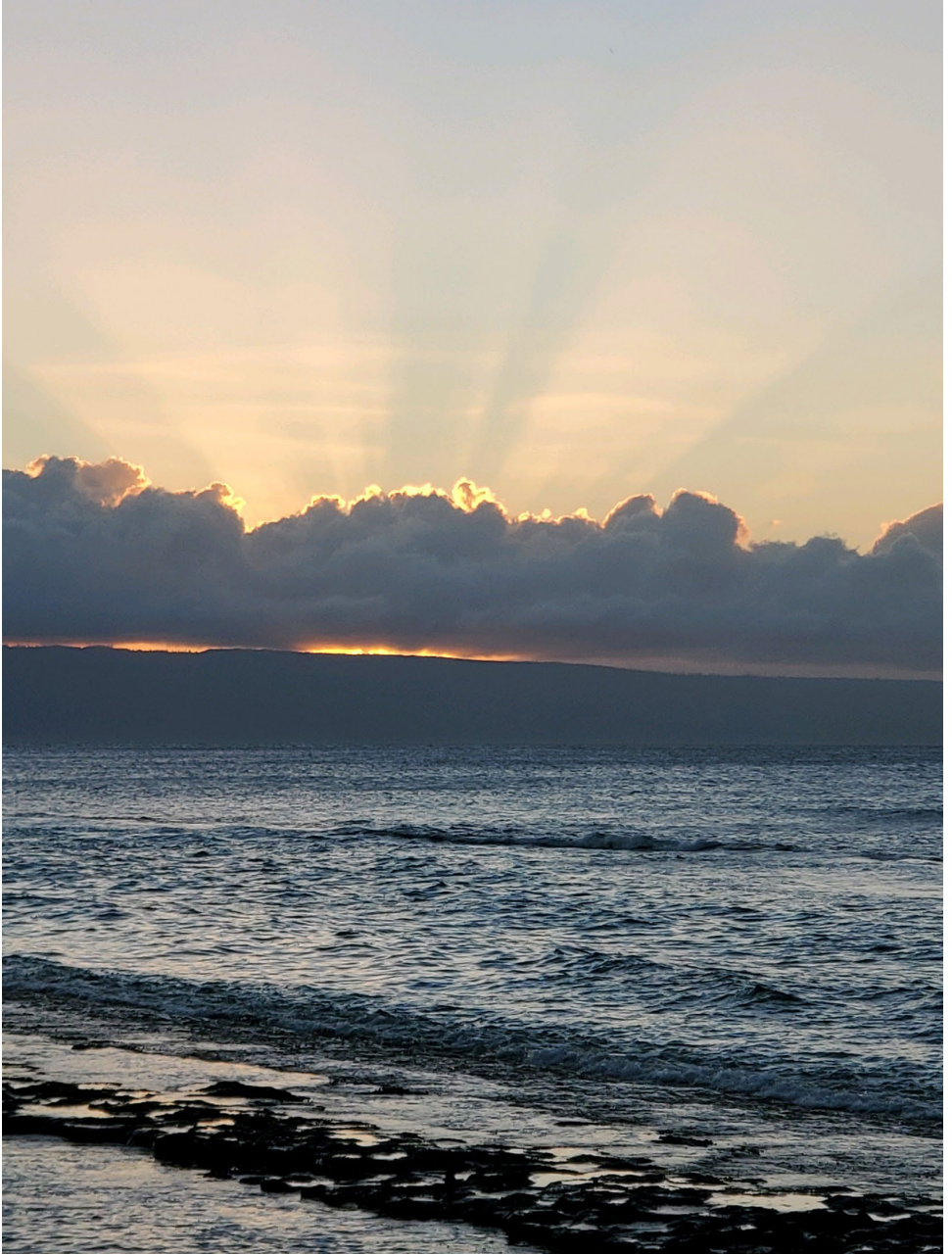
'20 minutes ago,' The posts read.

My entire world was on Facebook for anyone to see for a solid 20 minutes. I checked each photo and I deleted each one almost as fast as I had logged on. I looked at each one and the comments left on them, a comment authored by me stated: *I'm a whore so I want the entire world to look at me. I hope you're happy.*



Nick Grant





Left and right page photos by Cindy Brewer

SUFFERING
INSIDE

Shaquan Rayshawn Myers

Lock, a skinny young man stood in his kitchen wearing his bright white lab coat, cutting away at fruit. The sudden sound of music startled him before a stunning woman hugged him from behind. With that his face changed to pure excitement.

"There's that smile!" The two shared a passionate kiss before she took his hands and spun him around.

He nervously chuckled. "I'm gonna be late and you should be in bed."

She grabbed his hand as he didn't pull away but moved in and in seconds they started to dance their hearts out. The slow and passionate movement and the love in their eyes. Her long white hair flowed in the air as he spun her around. They placed their hands together with their rings shining in the light. Her eyes lit up as they leaned in for one more kiss.

Slam, he stood there frozen in horror before she fell down, "Don't do this to me please It's not enough."

Within minutes, over the cry of the ambulance roaring, Lock found himself inside the hospital with tears flooding his eyes as other fellow doctors watched him from afar. He sat there as others watched while whispering. The head doctor exited the room behind him and put his hand on Lock's shoulder, "I'm sorry but Eve didn't ... your lack of health should be your top priority now."

Lock started to chuckle as his sadness began to crack. "She needs another three pints today, right doctor? Maybe some more bone marrow... Just tell me what she needs... A heart, that would fix things, wouldn't it?" Lock finished rambling and gazed up at the head doctor.

The doctor nodded a slow yes before glancing into the room as the nurse covered her body with the sheet.

A bulky man ran down the train tracks while carrying a woman who illuminated his eyes and surroundings with her glowing long white hair. With every footstep her hair moved along his shredded body causing him to tense up. A gunshot echoed through the distance as he fell forward. His glasses were the first to fall, then his white jacket now stained in blood followed.

Footsteps vibrated the tracks beneath him as he used his arm to crawl towards her. Using that same arm he dragged her over to the wall, laid beside her and gently touched her face. Blinding, a light shined in his face revealing his damaged body covered in scars. A quick glance caused him to squint and chuckle as his severed arm rested across from him with a pair of legs standing behind it.

The man raised his head and stared down the barrel of a gun and a boy dressed in all black.

"That's right. kill me, kill me ... don't you dare lay a finger on my precious queen!" He screamed as he frantically threw his body in front of hers, "Spare her ... she did nothing wrong."

Tears rolled down the boy's face as he grabbed the man's head and shoved his gun into his mouth, "She's not They're not your-," The boy stumbled his words as he looked into the man's eyes and saw nothing but a broken man on the other side. "Yes I'll spare your wife."

The sound of thunder came before rain drenched them, almost as if it had come to cover up the tears, "If only she didn't-." The boy's blood sprayed into the air as a loud bang filled the area.

Chains dragging against the tracks causing the startled man to turn his head before looking down at the boy's lifeless body.

An old man is revealed by flashes of lightning. "He was lying ... children these days ... very naughty brats. Name's Zero by the way." The rain started to cleanse the woman's hair as it changed slowly back to black while Zero grabbed the man's attention and turned his own attention elsewhere, "They'll never lay a finger on your precious wife with a group behind you... we'll keep you both safe." The old man turned his gaze towards the boy. "These Assassins have nothing but numbers. they're nothing but blind soldiers while we move with freedom." a sadistic smile stretched across his face. "Run wild with us Lock and she'll live by your side forever!!"



Leeanna Bala

College Students Reflect on Pandemic

by *Kassandra Garcia*

Most could agree that this pandemic has impacted all of us, more than we really wanted it to. From the very start of the pandemic, people's attitudes on themselves and the world changed for better and for worse. But with anything in life, it's all a matter of perspective. I was curious as to how other college students, like myself, have felt about this pandemic. So, I interviewed nine former college students and asked them the same questions. Most of the responses weren't as optimistic as I thought they were going to be, but who am I kidding... What's positive about going to school behind a screen?



Makiya

If someone were to ask you to describe your quarantine experience using only one word, what would you say?

For me, it would be "enlightening."

For...

Makiya McKenzie, "pain"

Meraly Garcia, "patience"

Ellis Say, "distant"

Madison Carmody, "depressing"

Natsumi Oda, "breakdown"

Chase Halstead, "introspective"

Klaw Paw, "complicated"

Better Ketsia Iratonesha, "growth"

Anthony Graham, "rollercoaster"

Makiya McKenzie, a first-year college student at MVCC, explained that the transition was "pretty hard" and that he found it difficult "learning outside of a school setting." The number of individuals I saw struggle academically and mentally due to this transition is saddening to see. Unfortunately, Makiya wasn't the only student to express this lack of motivation. Seven out of the nine students I interviewed reported that they struggled to find that drive to keep working.

"I've noticed my motivation for many of my hobbies slowly go down as quarantine went on," Makiya says. Whereas Madison Carmody, a first-year student at MVCC,



Anthony



Meraly

and Chase Halstead, a second-year student at HCCC, explain that they were excited about the transition. For Madison, she "... had more time to work at her own pace without really having to deal with the stresses of going to school every day." And for Chase, it helped his motivation, and it also gave him extra time to work on his responsibilities with time saved from not having to commute. But as time progressed, most of the students realized that procrastination was easily fallen into in a remote setting.

The world before the pandemic, our society would have thought things would have been better for students, but as Meraly Garcia, a first-year student at Clark State CC, explains "since we're in the comfort of our own home, we tend to have that lazy mentality leading to procrastination." Procrastination, something many of us know all too well. According to a study by The Daily

Collegian, 80 to 95 percent of college students suffer from procrastination. Why is this so? "Gathering up the motivation to do something is harder these days." Ellis Say, a second-year student at MVCC expresses. She has been "finding it harder and harder to finish everything," including "logging on the school website."

A lack of motivation is a big factor of procrastination. Anthony Graham, a second-year student at HCCC, says that remote classes "...changed my motivation to the point I hit rock bottom. I failed all my classes in Spring 2020." Anthony didn't allow that lack of motivation to catch up to him again. "Fall 2020 I was determined to pass all my classes, showing that Covid was just a virus."

I was happy to hear how Anthony overcame that difficult milestone; not many students find the strength. Being a college student isn't easy — there are a lot of challenges that they have to face not just academically, but mentally as well. Natsumi Oda, a second-year student at HCCC from Japan, found it hard to organize her schedule. Natsumi explained that "most of the classes turned into TBA classes..." (meaning information whether the course will be face-to-face or online will be announced). Those TBA classes had many assignments, more than Natsumi anticipated. On top of that, she had to participate in her remote classes at midnight due to the major time differences.



Natsumi



Better

Better Iratonesha, a first-year student at HCCC from Burundi, could relate. Better had to wake up at 5am to get ready for school every morning. There were even some obligations and responsibilities she had to unexpectedly take during the pandemic. “My father suddenly fell ill and even had to get hospitalized for a while. My mother working abroad couldn’t come because airports were closed.” This all occurred in one day. “I went from being a basic teenager to being a fully responsible adult as I had to take all my parents’ responsibilities for months,” Better explains. But Better took this challenge and used it as a learning lesson. She expresses that she “gained maturity” and is “extremely grateful for that.” Many students believed at the start of all of this, we would have more free time on our hands... to relax, to do fun activities or revisit our old hobbies. Which some might have done in the beginning, but we failed to notice that anxiety, procrastination and



Klaw

the feeling of isolation and exhaustion exists. It slowly crept up on all of us without warning or notice.

How did this anxiety and isolating feeling appear? A big part of the college experience is gaining connections. During the interviews, I asked whether anyone was able to connect with others. Unfortunately, all of them said no. Meraly even explained that not being able to connect with others triggered her anxiety more, and that she feels like she isn’t getting “the full college experience.” Other college students agree, like Klaw Paw, a first-year student at HCCC, who feels like she really missed out on connecting with people and experiencing what it is like being a freshman. Being new to a school is hard enough, but to add a global pandemic... isn’t the ideal college experience anyone would picture.

It feels as though we’re all disconnected,



Ellis



Madison

in this connected world. Media and technology, that most people are able to access, allow people to keep in touch with their peers and far-away friends and family. But connecting, in a physical setting, is just not the same as connecting remotely. Physical communication is truly something not just students cherish, but what human beings value (unless you're in that anti-social teenage phase). As Madison explains, "it's definitely harder to make friends over a Zoom meeting than it is in person."

It's the sad truth, digital life just isn't the same as real life. "I could FaceTime with my friends, but it wasn't enough for a true connection for me," says Natsumi. However, even though the interviewees all individually had to face struggles and challenges during the pandemic, they all also showed endurance and patience.



Chase

As we reminisce about how things used to be, we must reflect on what we learned during all of this. Chase couldn't have said it better: "being locked up in such a stressful situation made me take a step back."

I learned to value time and people more. Like the garbageman that comes by during the morning to pick up your stinky trash, they definitely don't get enough recognition. Or how you realize you have time to beat that old video game you have been putting on pause for

a while or try a new recipe. Quarantine has taught us to value our time and ourselves. As corny as it sounds, we only live once, so let's make the most out of this *not so great* experience and see what good we can make out of it!

Phaethon Submission Guidelines

Deadline: End of fall semester.

We have the right to reject any submission. Submissions must be previously unpublished. To submit, please e-mail litmag@herkimer.edu and type "Fiction Editor," "Poetry Editor," or "Art Submission" in the subject heading. Include the following in the body of your e-mail:

Title of Work

Full Name (no pseudonyms)

Current Address

Email

Phone Number

If you are a student or alumnus, please include your major and graduation year.

Format for Short/Flash Fiction, Creative Nonfiction & Scripts:

Typed + double spaced

12 point font

Title on upper left of each page

Email as .rtf or .doc

Limit 10 pages

Format for Poetry:

Poems of any length are considered, but please do not send more than five poems. All submissions must be typed in twelve point font, with the title in the upper left corner of the page. All poems must be in one document attached to the email, and poems should be separated by titles or page breaks.

Format for Artwork:

All artwork must be submitted in a digital format. Examples of acceptable artwork include, but are not limited to, photographs, illustrations, graphic designs, and paintings.

Files should be emailed as an attachment, and in JPEG format. Vector-based artwork and images with a transparent background may also be submitted as a 24-bit PNG file. Send a separate email for each individual artwork entry. Please do not submit more than ten artwork entries.



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