

A Kind of Vertigo

The 2022 Avondale University Writer's Anthology

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ISBN

This book is dedicated to the people who worked on the frontlines of the pandemic, keeping us healthy and protected, at huge cost to themselves. We appreciate and acknowledge the freedom it gave us.

Editor's Note:

What comes after? After a storm. An earthquake. A total change to the order of life? This is what we asked ourselves in 2022. What comes after two years of isolation and separation, unity and care, fear and division, facts and lies? We answered it with our imaginations, grown large in isolation, finding ourselves in stories from our history, our newly found interests, our relationships, daydreams, and our lockdown anxieties. We found that that our new world and our fresh place in it was off kilter and we felt unbalanced.

Unsure of our futures, and still processing our recent past.

... a kind of vertigo ...

- *Lynnette*

POETRY

Ashlee Sugrue

My Mind

In the gouge of night,
I'm kept awake
By the onslaught of my mind.

Overwhelmed by the thoughts
I wish I didn't have.
I'm so lost in my head
I can't find the way out.

And that's when I realise,
Its not just the heart that withers
But the mind as well.

Beware

Beware of damaged people
they make pain feel like ecstasy,
hell feels like home,
and dying feel like living.

Ashley Jankiewicz

Broken Train

The tracks connecting memories and hopes
Hold a broken-down train, wheezing
Steam in an era of electricity
Lazy wisps of waiting,
Curling around my corners,
Softening ambitions and dreams
As I sit static on a lone bench
Wobbling, tipping, back and forth
In rhythm with time's heartbeat
Waiting for a whistle that never seems
to come; waiting for a beat that never
Seems to drum

Chasing Colours

Maple leaves quivering with memory
Thoughts captured by a whirlwind
Spiralling down on an idle breeze
Tripping over rocks and roots
Chasing colours just out of reach
My feet skip through a time
That crackles with the smell
Of a crisp autumn sky
Spinning like a ferris wheel
With a bird's eye view of my mind
Up there I remember who I am
Down here I vanish
Thin air made thinner
By desperate hope clogging the throats
Of all those who wonder
Why life is so fragile yet so free

Bailee McLeod

*the water gleamed,
glistened
there you were.
the current dragged you closer
but slowly
the tide turned.*

*smiling
you called out
your words danced over the waves
to me,
I nestled them deep in my heart.
I sent some out
the gulls guided them
to you.*

*smiling still
you held them close
and drifted off in the
riptide.*

*I let go
the moon sighed, the sea caught my tears
you, forever my reverie.*

*there I whispered to the evening tide
'so long sweet dream,
you were never really mine'.*

— b | never really mine

Bianka Costigan

The Mother's Pandemic.

It began with fear. The kind that holds your throat, arrests your heart, blinds you.
I fed it too. Daily. Sacrifices to appease it. Offerings of my peace, my patience, my presence of
mind. I satiated its appetite until I was bone dry. And so, it was there –
laying naked, parched and empty in a pit of my hungry overwhelm –
where I turned to the fog and whispered
Where are you taking me?
And from the darkness came a reply, hauntingly familiar, for it was from my own mouth. My
voice alone wrapped around me. Her every truthful word licked my wounds, and I was
restored, affirmed, and reclaimed.
For I am a daughter of magic and fire and resilience.
I summoned the power and heat and strength of all the mothers before me. And I roared and
howled until my spirit was once again as strong and proud as the sun. Once more, I stood, I
walked, I ran. I protected my children,
and I braced for the next wave.

Uncle Chris

My earliest memories are of him
He has my father's eyes
my grandfather's kindness
There is mischief in his smile
just for me
He sings his songs
dances around the pool table
hello my darling
I am always his darling
His clothes smell of cigarettes and
his breath of beer yet still –
I will choose him above all others
It is no secret
he is my favourite
but they don't mind
Our family is big enough for favourites

I am grown now with
little ones of my own
My father has closed his eyes
My grandfather's kindness sleeps also
But my favourite is still here
His hair is long
his belly now round
Still the sound of his voice
touch of his hand
the safest home I have ever known

Carlie Kerr

Mother

Two faint lines appear
Heartbeats rhythm as one song
New life buds within

Daughter of Nepal

Daughter of Nepal
Innocence stolen, torn and wandering.
Where is your hope?

Is it in the hills, where ancient songs call the sun to rise?
Or upon the plains where little one's dance and sing at harvest time.

Daughter of Nepal
In strength and in hope.
In each grain of rice and each monsoon shower.
In Annapurna and her strength – see how she stands?
So stand, for this is your hope.

David Blanch

Unchained Borders

What if I told you wings we all do have
we were meant to run
take flight
our fingers combing through the sky,
cradling new air
if I told you this, you would run for the take off to see all this: a world with bated breath
longing to be brought back together
Run for the take-off, see and dream
leap forward
eagles wings, Unchained borders.

Besties

What does bestie mean anymore, When bestie, can mean anyone? A perfect stranger,
welcome
But bestie
different from friends, different from soulmate And yet
They overlap, intertwine. What I know for certain Is that you my friend
Are woven into my life,
My heart with golden thread

Francis Doherty-Bigara

The Mug

How pleasant the warm winter sun Caressing my face in kind affection. The gentle lull of the swishing waves, The silent passing of restful days.
A thud, a kick, a searing pain
Blood drips down like streaming rain. Screams of anguish the peace breaks. For what? A little from me to take?

The Sailor

"We cannot direct the wind but we can adjust our sails" - Thomas S Monson
I have been berthed into this sea of life
Unwilling, unwitting, ill prepared and contrite.
My body the boat
My heart the hope
My mind and skill to keep me close
To the port upon which I dote.
My context the climate, and circumstance the wind.
Mine is not to question why,
Mine is not to do or die,
Mine is not to rationalise, to justify, nor to contrive A purpose that may or may not float.
Mine is just,
To sail.
To navigate
By stars, by maps, by hunch or God divine.
By action or reaction
A decision to make
To trim, to tack, to anchor or open full sail.
And along the way to cast, to haul, to lose or keep, But come what may I hope to lose no sleep. Through winds fair or foul I must sail.
Excuses aside, the hour is now very late In whichever way I can, ill equipped,
I must take the helm
Do my best,
And simply Learn
To Sail.

Heather Rielly

The Early Hours

In the early hours I wake
Only to wish that I hadn't at all
It scares me knowing what's at stake
My thoughts are drowning like at sea
They overwhelm my frantic mind
Will my character fit into this story?
Perhaps it's safer to stay in bed
The mind has a fight-or-flight response
But I've never chosen fight, always fled
One day I'll escape from these walls
But today will not be that day

Addiction isn't Love

Today your love was ice
Yesterday, a candle
I've become addicted to both feelings
This can't be good for us

Jenaya Lewis

Butterflies or Bumblebees

Sitting by the door with net in hand
Waiting for the right time to go out and scour the land
You get up and run with leaps and bounds
Out with your net to see what can be found
It seems as though everyone has found a matching set
So why haven't you caught one of those just yet?
Then one floats on by that is quite appealing
But what do you do now that you have caught a feeling?
Watching it carefully, wary of a sting
Or simply because it is a small and fragile thing
You don't know if you are ready for things to change
So, this secret should not be freely exchanged
But is this really something you have to hide?
Or can you find someone in whom you can confide?
You're scared to touch it in case it flies away,
But if it does, won't another come along someday?
The sound of wings is familiar yet breaks the silence
Perhaps a requited flutter may provide some guidance?
Friends gathered around to pin and prod
Discerning whether the catch is flawed
They say it feels like this, but you don't know if it does
You don't know if it's a flitter-flutter or a busy-buzz
Can someone just help out please?
Because I don't know if these are butterflies or bumblebees!

Halfway Gifted

I am not gifted
Achievement was a lure
A siren song on the sea breeze
Waiting for my all and nothing less
A hand raised was a signal to sigh
On me I felt every judgemental eye
The turn of pages was a familiar sound
Marks and years flipping in the wind.
I am not gifted
I am fighting the tide
Adding towers and turrets to my castle
Knowing they will fade with time
Motivation adrift with compass in hand
Eyes set on camps, plays, badges, and bands
With not much more left to give
And stars in mind but out of sight
I'm not gifted
For all I built would not satisfy
No answers on my many charts and plans
Yet it passed by with a paper and a shake of hands
'Perhaps it was the friends you made along the way'
What an unbearably truthful cliché
The tide took the academic validation
But it left a beacon in its place
I am not gifted
But when my priorities shifted
I realised my sandcastles could wash away
But light of memories would be here to stay
I'm not gifted
And that's okay.

Jerome Afoa

The Law of the Hunt

Tap, tap, tap, tap,
Sneaking, slowly, steady, ready,
Creep, creep, creep, creeping,
Speeding up, leaving the shelter of silence,
The silence grows quieter as she speeds,
Hoping to catch her prey,
The dear dares to flaunt this close,
Knowing the dangers he has entered,
And she,
Heart pounding, pounding, pounding,
Pounces,
Leaps,
Flies through the air,
Lands,
CHOMP!
She eats her heart out,
She eats his heart out,
This is the Law of the Lion,
This is the Law of the Hunt.

Ocean

Tide, high,
Deep, wide,
Blue, sky,
Yellow, sine.

The Ocean,
It calls to me,
Softly, sweetly, calmly,
I walk along the shore,
Sand crumbling at my feet. I leave my marks,
The sea gives me gifts, Shells and seaweed,
I collect them one by one,
Return them in an act of good faith,
The sun beats down on me,
The skies provide no cover as they watch,
I swim,
Water just naturally wants to be around me,
I want to be around her too,
She pulls me in, wanting to play more,
I agree, for a moment,
I go back to land and rest,
Talking with my mind as the sun and sky eavesdrop,
The Ocean is not interested, she just likes to fool around,
The sands aren't interested either, they just want to lie next to me,
I'm fine with that too.

Josh Ibbott

Drive

When all is dark, and the city sleeps
There are those who embark on a perilous journey
Adventure awaits, in that night-time place
Where speed, adrenaline, and motion take pace
The twist, the turns, like a slithering snake,
The flow of the road, like the river rapids
Moving only forward, but never straight
For straight makes sense
And sense prevents
the journey

The Music of Life

The music of life, some say, is happy
It's played through a speaker on a miserable day
Bringing people together, bringing laughter and joy
It's not always perfect and it's often quite simple
But the melodies, chords, and harmonies, unite

The music of life, some say, is sad
It plucks at their heartstrings, like a harpsichord's quill
It reminds those of good times
And constantly pounds, that those days are gone
But no matter how sad, the music still plays
Til all is quiet, as those heartstrings, snap

The music of life, some say, is frantic
It pulls and pushes, and often is messy
It goes up and down, and left to right
Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly
'Til listeners, go crazy, lose their wits
And end up frail, like an overstretched band

The music of life, is the music of love
It tells of a story, of how one lives
Either demanding from above
Or being one that gives
It sings of the beauty
Found within
For love is not roses
Nor is it passion
But a song about
Spending life
Together

Lynnette Lounsbury

--*apocalypse*

my heart has flu, I think. she says
you'll have to go without me
I'll catch up with tomorrow when
yesterday washes off

next week shuffles up the stairs
tentatively holding a small win
I don't believe you. she says
those are for people who wash their hair

there is brown smoke on the mirror
time signs for the package
and drops a fortnite at her feet
I don't need it, I think. she says.
I have enough already.

she eats a raisin from her pocket
this tastes like eternity. she says.

--conversation

I lie in *this park*
two steps from one Westfield
two buses from another
and hear the chirp of
a magpie and crypto bro's twitter
as he eats his banh mi.
I can see the ocean from here
it rises ice blue and expensive
between smudged apartment blocks
I blaze here, on the grass
thinking about the world while
behind me the mothers talk about
bananas and how tired they are.
I know things when I am horizontal
things that vanish vertically.
I know that life is midnight certain
and simple as mud. I know that air is enough
and I should eat less cheese. I know that a good
poem is worth a latte and prayer is anxiety
in church clothes. I know all this till the grass
grows damp and then I'm up and just an
activewear wanderer wondering
what to make for dinner.

Protasio Azaria

Between the Aisles

Gracefully she moves between the aisles
Up and down strolling the electric picker

Softly, calling the bays
Lightly, picking boxes
Gently, placing them
Quietly, keeping to herself
Hardly, approachable
Sweetly, noticeable
Modestly, wearing her safety gear
Humbly, styles her thick brown hair
With her hazel eyes
Perfectly rounded
Friendly, gazing between lanes
Sharply, spots him
Miraculously, he spots her first

Both look away, parting their separate way
He could see her beauty beyond mask
Nothing he could do but let her carry on her task
Thank God the pandemic is over
Face mask are off
Now everyone can breathe
He took it as an opportunity to see her
Now he could see who she is
Now he could see her entire face
He could see her splendid beauty covered in grace
He could do nothing but embrace
waiting for the time and place
Maybe then he'll plead his case
He is mute when she is in proximity
While praying for a divine conductivity
Hoping for a heart-to-heart connectivity
Is this a crush? Or is it love?
Is she the one?

All he knows is that...
She inspired him to write a poem
She inspired him to write a song
She's the type you bring home
She's the type remain for life.
She's the type you call 'wife'

Criminalised

Genuine heart, gentle spirit, humble soul,
Caring arms that stretch recklessly fall
The request of one's constitutional rights, crooked onto substance of control
Then Condemned on grounds of consuming soul
Persecuted for truth
Oppressed for concealing the integrity of one's own home

Acts of entire unselfishness entirely criminalised
Therefore, acts of uncertainty are boldly decriminalised

All civil rights are banned for the sake of friendship doomed to end
Knowingly obstructing the fate of a greatest men
This might be a solid form of wisdom yet a pure wickedness
The desire motherland was the start of bumpy flight that needs land
Acts of entire unselfishness entirely criminalised
Therefore, acts of uncertainty are boldly decriminalised

The calamity of Africa was once known to bring storms,
pain, sorrow, and garden of thorns.

Rachael Thomson

Hunt for the Egg

Pitter patter pitter patter
Go the eager feet on Easter morning
Children young and old gather round
Excitement fills the air
Through the voices of tiny souls

Pitter patter pitter patter
The sound of cheerful hunters
Age is no barrier, all are equal
Ready steady go
The race has begun

Pitter patter pitter patter
White, milk, dark and caramel
Sweet or bitter but always tasty
The prize that all would find
That none would deny

Pitter patter pitter patter
Screams of delight
Baskets and buckets starting to fill
As time flies by
The race is nearly complete

Pitter patter pitter patter
Three, two, one
The count begins to see
Who the winner could be
As we come to a close

Pitter patter pitter patter
Contestants take a seat
While silence fills the air
Content, fulfilled young and old
And a winner takes their prize

The Aunt

Wedding white and pure with the sunsetting in
A day to be happy, yet revenge will make its win.

A joyous occasion for all involved
But the guest uninvited has evil to unfold.

An aunt who moans in bitter pain
Creates chaos for all who disdain

All will suffer her evil surmise
Causing pain and grief as the innocence cries

Revenge and malice drive her motive
To unravel a scared vow, she demands to be explosive

Schemes consume the entire mind
A life worth destroying, to create injustice for the kind

Alas, the plot was unravelled
Leaving her standing alone and frazzled

It's time for you to take your leave
The wedded couple breathing a sigh of relief

The night has fallen bringing much solace to the bride
As the couple seeks refuge in a white chapel on the hillside

A commitment to last a lifetime
A kiss to summon the night-time

Wedding white and pure with the sunsetting in
A day to be happy, as their new life begins

Samuel Shaw

--haiku

Trees sway in the wind

For softly the breeze blows them

They fear not what's next

--limerick

There once was a man climbed a tree

Cause he wanted the whole world to see

But then he let go

And fell down below

And was in the mud up to his knee.

Grandmother

Oh, Grandmother where was the God of which you spoke?

As you lay in the hospital bed to heave and choke

Where was his love that you taught

As you struggled and fought.

Oh, Grandmother where was the God of which you spoke?

When you passed from this world and our family broke.

Where were the loving hands that heal all pain

As our lives were changed and I saw the world with disdain.

Oh, Grandmother where was the God of which you spoke?

he was there all along surrounding my kinsfolk.

Grandmother now I see everything has become so clear,

Why you told me to not be sad why you had no fear.

Oh, Grandmother where was the God of which you spoke?

He was surrounding me as I fell and raised me up as strong as the oak

Grandmother I will aspire to face death as you.

With no hint of fear and my heart true.

Taylor Kelly

Neverland

To float to fly, to be free of lies
And dance within the daises
To never grow old and never be sad
And sing and swim with mermaids and fairies
A glorious tale and pixie dust
Is what awaits in neverland

What's that?
A clock tick tocks
Near a ship in the sea
A childish glee that comes from tragedy
A hook, a ship and a vengeful shriek
Is what awaits in neverland

A lost boy, to forever follow the leader
Stuck as a child, and never to leave
Fairies and sirens, so adept at deceit
Is what awaits in neverland

Peter Pan, you grab his hand
And discover
That what awaits in neverland
Is a lie that'll never end

She

She's hot asphalt in the rain,
Drained and yet separate
Like oil and water
What's happening around her?

Present in person
But the cloud of her mind remains locked
In her room and hidden away

Surrounded
by so much life
And free will
She feels like open windows in a downpour
Nonsensical and illogical

She floats
Tepid tea in a boiling kettle
Listening ears on and blinking
Yet ships crash at the foot of a broken lighthouse

Cut up ties and old damned briefcases
Creak and crack
Her bones ache
Muscles as heavy –
Nail polish on open pores
The floodgates break

Samantha White

Past, My Friend

I say my past is behind me
It's behind me but
It still follows
Tied to me with a red string
And that red string
Is around my heart
Passing through me
It still causes me pain
Every time I try to distance myself
The string tugs
Causing me to move closer
I can never escape
I can never cut
I can never break this bond
Between me and my past
We are forever bound
Forever attached
So, I decided to make it my friend
So, my friend
You can hurt me no longer.

Faces

Moved houses so much that nowhere feels like home
Began to make a home inside people
Then those homes move away from me
Losing places and people
Faces and names are not what they seem
Because when I see my own face, I can only see
The women who abandoned me
And the women I hope not to be.

Abandoned and stretched to my limits
I try not to complain
I would rather suffer in silence than share my pain.
I know the pain of knowing my sister is suicidal
So I keep those thoughts to myself
To protect the ones I love.

It's not your fault that I'm closed off
It is not your fault I want to die
For it's my pain and it shouldn't be yours
I refuse to be a burden to my father
I know he's struggling deeply
And the thought of him knowing would only harm him more.

I let men sink their teeth into my flesh
Ripping apart the last thread
Of sanity I held onto
Now I have to let go of that too.
My mind is heavy with thoughts
Their sheer weight pulls me down
And I never learnt to swim
Sometimes I manage to kick
Just to be pulled right down to the bottom again.

Short Stories

The summer everyone called her Joey

Heather Rielly

She stared at the photograph in her frail hands, of two people that were barely recognisable anymore. He had a charm about him that could be seen even through the photograph. Tall with jet black hair that sat just above his eyes, which were a warm golden colour and busy staring into hers. She was young, beautiful and her long chestnut hair blew in the wind. Her smoky eyes stared right back into his. They were tightly wrapped in each other's embrace, oblivious to the rest of the world.

Since Josette's husband had died, it was time that she moved into a retirement home. Josette knew it was for the best but was so heartbroken to leave her home. While boxing up all her belongings, she had one last chance to look through everything before it got packed away for good.

The pile of photographs from her film camera was what had caught her eye right away. She used to take that camera everywhere when she was young, it was basically her life support. She loved to photograph everything, in hopes that when she was old she had memories to look back on. With teary eyes she turned the photograph around and read...

"Joey and Hudson, 1972"

It was the summer that everyone called her Joey and she was determined to have the best time ever. The day she was supposed to leave for the road trip along the coast, Joey's best friend bailed at the last minute. Full of apologies and excuses but none were good enough to stop Joey feeling disheartened. She couldn't believe that her exciting summer would so quickly come to an end. So after much debate Joey decided the only thing for her to do was to go on the road trip by herself. She was determined to make the most of her summer, even if that meant doing it alone.

Driving down the road in her kombi van, which was bright like butter, the salty taste of sea was flying through the open windows. With the sun beating down, watching the waves crash into the side of the rocks, Joey felt like she had the whole world at her fingertips. Now that it was just her on this trip, she was able to take every opportunity that came her way.

After driving all day, in the horizon Joey saw the makeup of some buildings, she filled with a sense of excitement, it looked like the perfect first place to stop. She would only stay here for a day or two and then be on her way, she had a long way to go until she reached the end of the trip along the coast.

Once she had checked herself into the only motel she could find in the small town, she placed her bags down in her room and sighed in relief. She had made it to her first destination. Tired from driving all day she didn't even bother to go find any food, instead jumped straight into bed and fell asleep right away.

Joey was suddenly awoken to the sound of the door to her room abruptly opening. Her heart started thumping in her chest and she felt the panic set in. She frantically felt around for something she could use as a weapon, her hand landed on the lamp on the side table. She slowly unravelled the covers and carefully tiptoed out of bed across the room. Joey peeked around the corner, to see a large figure, with no cart, so it definitely wasn't room service. Her mind was racing, there was an intruder in her room! So she squeezed her eyes shut and ran towards the figure. While screaming trying to catch whoever was in her room off guard she threw the lamp towards them with all her might.

Before Joey had the chance to open her tightly fastened eyes, she heard an anguished howl which was followed by the words "Ow! What the heck?!" She took a peek, and crouched on the floor was the most memorising man she had ever seen. His piercing brown eyes looked right through hers, she felt a spark and was frozen in place.

"Why did you do that?!" he cried out at her. Joey was stunned, he had no right to yell at her. She exclaimed back to him "No! Why are you in my room?" He seemed to calm down when he noticed how afraid she was and she could see his eyes start to become gentle. He began to explain that he had just checked in and was given the key to this room and that there must have been some mix up. Embarrassed, Joey picked up the

lamp from the floor and apologised for throwing it at him. He charmingly demanded that she let him take her out for dinner, "To make up for this whole thing. After I get settled into the right room that is." He smirked.

That night, as she opened the doors to the restaurant he suggested, which looked more like a small rundown diner, she couldn't believe she was here. She didn't even know his name! It all happened so fast and he insisted that she come. She didn't know if he had the wrong idea and thought this was a date, but she was determined that this was definitely just an apology dinner.

Yet as soon as she saw him again, there it was, that spark. He had perched himself in one of the booths so she slid into the seat opposite him. He confidently put his hand out and said "Nice to see you again, I'm Hudson." She shook it and responded, "Joey." From there the night flew by, they talked for hours so effortlessly. This definitely wasn't just an apology dinner, the chemistry they had could be seen by everyone in the restaurant. Joey was completely captivated by this man she had just met and she wanted to savour every detail.

The next few weeks flew by, they couldn't get enough of being around each other. The time they spent together was endless. Coffee dates, all-nighters watching their favourite movies, walks in the park comparing their childhoods, to even falling over together roller skating at the rink in town. Their adventures had become a bit of a routine.

There was one particular night that he took her out to watch the sunset that Joey cherished most. As they sat there on the cold sand, he wrapped his arms around her and stared out at the ocean. He started to nervously ramble, "I know I sound ridiculous saying this, because I know that we've only known each other a few weeks, but when I first laid my eyes on you... when you threw that lamp at me," he giggled, "I knew you were spectacular, and you're someone that I would love to spend a long time getting to know." Joey had never got around to telling him that she was supposed to have left on her trip a long time ago, but she was having such a great time with him that a while longer couldn't hurt. So she laid her head on his chest and took in every aspect of this moment together.

But before she knew it, the few days she was supposed to spend in this town turned into the entire length of her trip. Her whole solo trip had turned into the most exciting romance she had ever experienced. They had spent the last two months together and now Joey had no idea how she was going to tell Hudson that she was leaving tomorrow. She had always planned to do it but the right time never came around and now she had left it too late.

As they met for dinner that night, Joey knew that she had to tell him. She took a shaky breath. "I'm leaving", she croaked out. "I'm supposed to be home tomorrow, I'm so sorry Hudson." She began to cry and could barely get the words out, "I have had the most amazing time with you and I will always treasure our time together." Hudson did not respond straight away so they sat there in silence for what felt like eternity.

Finally, he opened his mouth and whimpered, "I can't believe you never told me Joey. I can't lose you, I thought we were just starting our journey together." With pain in his voice he carried on, "But I understand, just know that I'll come to you. This isn't over between us, I know it. I've never felt this way for someone before. You complete me in a unique and wonderful way."

Joey was so touched at how he took the news, she hoped that she wasn't making a mistake by leaving. However, she had one last request for Hudson; to take a photo with her. "So when I'm old I have memories to look back on", she begged.

As the timer on the camera started to count down, he pulled her tightly into his embrace and passionately kissed her. Slowly pulling away from each other, so wrapped up in each other's presence, they knew they never wanted this moment to end. They stared into each other's teary eyes with a love so pure they were oblivious to the rest of the world around them.

The Succubus Curse
Samantha White

The local baker's daughter Lilith was an innocent, sweet girl. Her father had promised her hand in marriage to the King's adviser's young son Phillip, but she was not pleased about this. She dreamed of taking over the family business, not simply becoming someone's wife. Her fourteenth birthday would be the day she would also be married.

"You must marry Phillip, my child. The family depends on it." Lilith's mother shouted through the door her daughter had barricaded herself behind.

Eventually, Lilith's father resorted to forcing the door down with an axe. From this moment Lilith knew there was no winning her argument. Both families, Lilith's, and Philip's, gathered for the dreadful wedding ceremony and the union was official. With nausea in her stomach and rage in her heart, Lilith refused to kiss her new husband. Philip, embarrassed, brushed it off and continued to put on a show of genuine happiness.

When the facade was finally over, Lilith and Philip sat together in their new home all alone. Lilith had still not spoken a word to her newly wedded.

"I do not appreciate the disrespect you have shown me today", Phillip snapped. This caused Lilith to turn a stone-cold glare towards his face. This slight gesture infuriated Phillip to the point of whacking Lilith across the mouth.

"My new wife will do as I ask!" He spat in her face and would continue to beat Lilith senselessly. Lilith was completely helpless and dumbfounded. Whenever the beating would stop it wouldn't take long for it to begin again.

Lilith had nothing to lose at this point. She collected a butcher's knife and in the dead of night, slit Philip's throat. The blood poured out over the bed and his ugly mouth, and the deep cut on his neck gargled grotesquely. Lilith lit the entire house on fire and made her escape into the Frightened Brook Forest. No one ever saw her again and everyone assumed she had died alongside her husband in a tragic house fire.

When Oscar Cavanaugh was a boy, all the girls he would play games with on the streets of Vyberok would whisper of the Succubus curse. Legend had foretold that if a woman was to be wrongfully treated by a man and she was to make a sacrifice, the Succubus curse would take hold of her soul. They would become a demon in search of human flesh and only hunt men. Oscar always dismissed this story as a silly scare tactic for them to have the one up in knucklebones. When he tried to ask his mother about it, she would spank him with the wooden spoon and warn him not to speak of demons and folk law.

As a man, Oscar could not seem to understand the Frightened Brook Forest that skirted Vyberok, or why the seemingly ordinary cluster of cedar trees would strike fear into his heart whenever he looked for a little too long. All he knew was that he wished to never enter.

On an unremarkable autumn morning, Oscar and his horse Caesar were on a leisurely ride when the pair suddenly became surrounded by darkness leaving them completely blind. The darkness persisted no matter how hard he willed it to vanish. In front of him, he saw a woman with hair as white as lilies and pale pink skin. She beckoned him with cat-like eyes.

Help me, oh brave gentleman. I am in utter peril. Find me within the Forest. It is only a few steps away.

When he came back to reality he was in utter horror. Only moments ago, it was daylight, now it was the dead of night. His breath caught in his throat.

“Caesar, where have you taken us?” he shouted into a void, for he knew Caesar was not one for talking.

Oscar pulled on his horse's reins and decided it best to camp for the night. He tried his best not to think about how uneasy the forest made him feel. He began to ruminate about the possible ways he could die in the Frightened Brook Forest and every movement Oscar made felt stiff in his joints. He tried desperately to make a fire and set up a comfortable sleeping arrangement.

Throughout the night, Oscar could not unsee her face. The beautiful woman with hair the colour of lilies. He willed his body to let him remain asleep as his visions would become more and more arousing, as more and more of her clothes were removed.

Come find me, I await your touch on my vulnerable frame.

Oscar woke up with a shiver. His mind felt scrambled like a morning egg. He looked around and everything was silent, the canopy of the forest above his head loomed empty.

Once again adjoining with reality after such a strange dream, he noticed Caesar's reigns dangling freely from the tree that once bound him securely. Oscar's stomach tossed nauseatingly as he could not fathom his stupidity, he must have tied the reins wrong.

Suddenly out of the corner of his eyes, he saw white. Silky hair darted through his peripheral view and then vanished. Instantly, Oscar searched longingly in the direction he swore he saw the apparition. This time his imaginings were proven false as he saw it again. This time, he knew it was her.

“What is your name sweet maiden? Let yourself be seen!” He cried into a vast echo.

Lilith shall be my name to you. Your horse seems to be missing. How we will have much fun with you stuck here.

She giggled enchantingly and Oscar could not help but feel compelled to get closer to Lilith. As he took a few steps towards her she quickly and mysteriously moved further and further away. This continued until Oscar became flustered enough to start running towards the white hue. He ran so fast that he stumbled and cascaded down a slope, his head slamming viscerously against a few scattered logs as he fell.

Blackness ensued. Oscar could see Lilith again and he swore he could feel her delicate touch.

Oscar awoke with a start to find he was in the same spot he awoke the previous morning. Caesar had reappeared, or was he ever gone?

Oscar noticed a dull pain in his head, but in his dream, he recalled being slashed across his skull and hitting several fallen branches as he tumbled.

He groaned in frustration. This woman had to be real. She must be. Oscar felt a dull pain somewhere he couldn't recall injuring. A pain across his left abdomen made itself apparent and when he lifted his garments to take a closer look, he was met with a blood-stained bandage covering a wound.

Panic crawled over him. How did this happen? When was his wound dressed? What felt like insanity began to make its way throughout his psyche. It would infest his last shred of confidence in reality.

Oscar began to cry to Lilith. He begged and screamed for her to reappear, just a glance was all he craved.

The small pocketknife belonging to Oscar made itself useful at this very moment. Without a second's doubt he decided that the only way to provoke her to reveal herself, was to create wounds for her to dress.

Oscar savagely sliced at his arms and wrists with the pocketknife. Wincing and drawing sharp breaths as he cut his flesh like butter and watched the blood instantly pool at the site.

Some time passed with lots of bloodshed. Oscar woke to searing pain running through his arms and legs. He was brought back from his haze and the evidence was in front of his very eyes. His wounds were almost near death - but as he had hoped, each wound had been covered neatly with a bandage.

"I knew you wouldn't let me die!" He shouted.

Oscar laid in anguish once again as he awaited Lilith's reply, but to no avail. She was real and he knew it. He knew she wouldn't let him die.

Traversing the forest aimlessly, mounted upon his steed, Oscar searched and searched for any sign of Lilith.

He happened upon a sharp cliff that overlooked more of the Frightened Brook Forest and Oscar wondered how he was still alive with how many dangers lurked within this forest.

Oscar dangled his feet aimlessly over the edge of the fatal cliff, hoping he could get Lilith to come to him at last.

Lilith appeared clothed in white, but her smile was not how it once appeared, and her eyes were much more sinister.

"Why are you still alive Oscar? Must I push you myself?"

Lilith no longer appeared to be a human girl like he had imagined, she had shadowy bat-like wings protruding from her back and a devilish tail poking from beneath her sheer dress. Horns were lodged in her forehead, and she pierced Oscar with a hateful stare.

At once Oscar realised the Frightened Brook Forest is home to a deadly parasite, a succubus. All those years of people discussing the succubus curse, all along - it was very real. Years ago, he was told of the woman named Lilith and her husband that were killed in a tragic fire. He connected the dots and realised she must have been the one to set the fire and escape.

She licked her lips menacingly while rushing towards Oscar, violently shoving him, sending him off the cliff to his death where his body joined a pile of others - other men who were unfortunate enough to have fallen prey to her.

Lilith hummed to herself as she sensed her next victim caught in her trap, the Frightened Brook Forest.

A Journey Built for Two

Jerome Afoa

"Ohara," Amelia, reached out her hand and waved, "A little help? I know you got the muscles to!"

Ohara laughed, "I thought you had it. It's not that far up." With little effort, he pulled her up by the arm and the rocks beneath him crumbled a bit. Amelia stood up straight and looked out into the Crystal Valley, dumbfounded. She had never seen anything like this before, "Amazing."

"What is?"

"All this! Look at these ruins. These crystals. It's beautiful"

Ohara turned around to join her in taking in the view. Ruins of a city from the old times filled the new valley below them, overtaken not by plants or wildlife, but by crystals of green and purple. It seemed to stretch endlessly, only stopping once it reached the other side of the horizon. Amelia sat down on the ledge, took out a flask, "You want some?"

"...Nah I'm good..."

"Your loss." She took a swig before returning it to her pocket and gazed at the view a bit longer. They could see all sorts of ruins, both from the old world and the ancient world. To them, there was no difference. Amelia stood up, "C'mon. If we reach the valley by sundown, we can camp in the ruins."

"Okay."

Ohara followed her down the face of the cliff, tripping every other step of the way. Halfway down the face, Ohara came across a cave, carved into the cliff. He descended into it and observed the walls. Pitch black. The walls, the floors, the rocks, the stalagmites. All of them were the same shade of black, indistinguishable from one another. Amelia dropped down into the cave's mouth. Clouds of black dust kicked up from under her feet.

"What the?" Ohara wiped the dust off his leg. It wasn't dust. It was ash. He walked up to the wall and polished it. The faded green of his sleeve was hidden behind the ash of the walls. Amelia lit her lantern and walked towards the far side of the cave. It was deep, and the ash-covered walls didn't help. Every divot, every rock was a tripping hazard. Near the entrance, Ohara continued wiping rocks and walls looking for clues. He picked one up. It was surprisingly light. And small. Round. Smooth. He polished it. Grey cracks began to appear. He polished more. Ash and dirt fell from the bottom, and the rock got lighter.

Ohara froze.

At the very end of the cave, Amelia found the potential source of the fire. The back end of the cave was lined with wood, charred by the fire, all collapsed in on each other. It was obvious that the cave continued on the other side. One by one, she removed the planks of wood. She created a small opening and shone her lantern into it. Bodies cluttered the ground, charred and broken. Barely recognisable. This was nothing like what she had encountered before. All the other bodies they passed had died from scavengers or from starvation and disease, but not these people. Never had she ever seen such brutality. One body had three arms protruding from its torso, covering its face. She didn't want to deal with this any longer than she had. She made a dash for the mouth of the cave, almost dropping her lantern in the process. "Ohara!" She gasped for air, "You wouldn't believe what's back there!" Ohara stood there silently. Unmoving. Colour-drained. In his hand, he held a skull with three eyes, the rock next to him was partially cleaned. It was the body, another one with three arms. This was a cave where Mutants were massacred. Many of them. Most died at the back, trapped by the fallen wood. Those that weren't trapped by the barricade died before they made it out the entrance. Ohara dropped the mutant skull and snapped back, "C'mon, let's get out of here."

Nothing was said the rest of the way down. Nothing was said during the night either.

A few days passed without mention of what was witnessed in the cave. Both of them had locked it away in the back of their minds. Ohara whipped out a map and laid it on the ground, "According to this, the end of the valley is another three kilometres away. We can make it before noon." He paused. He could tell Amelia was still thinking about the cave. He decided to try and change the subject, "I know you hired me to guide you to Athens, but you never really told me why."

Amelia was caught off guard at his statement, "Well, you never asked."

"So, why do you want to go to Athens? Why would you leave a place as safe as Albania?"

Amelia looked at him, "Well," She didn't know how to explain, "I'm looking for someone. Or more accurately, information on someone."

"Why Athens of all places?"

"Last I heard, they were on their way to Japan, and apparently, the best way to get there was through Athens." Ohara had never heard of someone going to Japan through Athens. That way of transportation was not only outdated, but also dangerous. No one had taken the Athenian Ferry in decades.

The crystals began to fade, and soon the land returned to being barren; void of beauty, void of signs of life. The only thing that laid ahead was a cabin, isolated and alone. "We should probably take a break there" Amelia nodded, and they headed toward the abandoned building. As they got closer, Amelia noticed something plopped down on the front porch. It was a man, leaning against the wall. They moved closer for a better look. It was a dead man, resting against the wall. Another poor soul lost to the brutalities of the world. His head drooped to the side, his skin greyed by the weather, his clothes torn. The man was mummified. A common sight in desolated areas since there were no predators around. The man had something clasped in his hand and hidden in his chest. Ohara tore the fingers off one by one, loosening the grip. A faded red book was exposed. Amelia snatched it out of the poor man's grasp and opened it. The name in the top left corner read *Henricus Veizi*, but the last name was too faded to make out. She stared at the name, then turned the page.

The Diary of Henricus Veizi

April 14, 2032

It has been 20 hours since I left Albania. I'll never forget the day when father burdened me with the task of going to Japan. Apparently, they also have land that can grow food and yield life, much like the lands of home. Currently, I am in Macedonia. It's a far cry from home, and an even further cry from what it was like before The Invasions. These cabins still have its members in it. The one I'm in has theirs stuck to their televisions and devices. Quite literally. It truly was a sight to behold. I think the one attached to the television was the father. He had on loafers and kept his pants up with what looked like suspenders. His left wrist, adorned with a charred gold watch. Let's be honest, what child in their right mind would by loafers and suspenders? No, the child, I suspect, is fused to the couch adjacent to the television with their head tilted down towards their lap. Nothing is in it. At least, not anymore. Such a sad sight indeed. I couldn't leave them like that. Even Albania's enemies deserved a better fate. Right now, they are both resting together, but the more I dwell on it, the less I want to spend the night here.

Amelia turned the page. A few were torn out...

April 17, 2032

It has been three days since I left Albania, and I've finally reached the Macedonian-Greek border. It's approximately ten minutes past two in the afternoon, and the weather is currently cloudy with no rain whatsoever. It's always been cloudy with no rain. Why anyone would willingly live in this desolate yellow zone I have no idea. But I've walked past houses with its members still in it, and not in the same way as the cabins in Macedonia. These people still move, eat, breathe. They still groan in the shadows, and as long as I'm around, I will never feel safe. Tonight, will also be the first time I travel by moonlight. Hopefully, it's safer.

April 18, 2032

It's dawn. I can't see the sunrise like back at home, but a farmer knows when dawn is without looking towards the horizon. Although, to be fair, that just might be me, reminiscing about home. Last night, the darkness had enveloped me, and refused to let go. The air was light, but so was my skin. My senses flew at even the slightest stimulation. During the travel, I hit a rock and stubbed my toe. But I ran and never looked back. I wasn't going to take the chance. Not with the distant howling I could hear.

April 23, 2032

For the last two days I have been constantly on the move, rarely having time to rest. I've been hunted by Marauders and Mutants alike; their faces have forever stained my mind. Every time I think I'm safe, I hear them in the distance. It was always them, howling like wolves on the horizon. Staggering towards me, sometimes on all fours. Last night, I came face to face with one. Her back crooked from hunching over, nails like claws, and a third arm protruding from her back. Her gaze was deafening, and her wailing filled with grief. I could tell she didn't want to hurt me, but she was hungry. Desperate. And desperation breeds madness. I did the only thing I could think of. Something I had never done before, nor something I didn't know I was capable of. I think I killed her. But she wasn't alone. Many of them followed. I hid in a cave, but they followed me in. I didn't know what else to do, so I trapped them in there, tearing down the old support beams on top of them, and before I knew it, I had set the cave on fire. I left and dared not to look back, lest I be filled with grief.

The darkness really wants me. These days, it always does.

Amelia crouched; eyes fixed on the book. At that moment, nothing else mattered to her. Only the untold story of Henricus, whose writing became more familiar and erratic with each entry...

April 30, 2032

If my calculations are correct, then Athens is only two and a half weeks away. It's so close, but at this rate, I don't know if I can make it. Supplies are running low, and enemies are running wild.

May 2, 2032

It has been 18 days since I left Albania. Today is mother's 57th birthday as well as little Amelia's 17th. To think that there would be a day where I would miss my little sister's birthday. Does she miss me? Probably. Can she bare my burden back at the farm? Definitely. Do I wish her to? Absolutely not. Tonight, I head out on another overnight trekking in order to avoid any unwanted attention. Wish me luck, mum. Wish me luck, dad.

Amelia's eyes began to swell. Her suspicions were confirmed. This man was her brother. She continued reading ...

May 8, 2032

Mother. Father. Little Amelia. How are you today? Is the weather as good as it was when I left? Is the farm still operating?

May 11, 2032

I don't think I can make it now. I didn't think I could in the first place.

May 12, 2032

I'm sorry.

May 13, 2032

I'm sorry.

There were a few more entries. They were unreadable. Unintelligible.

Amelia curled up and laid on the floor next to the man, next to her brother, tears staining the hard-wood floor. Ohara just stood there. It was clear to him that Amelia traversed such dangerous lands to find signs of her brother. She had chosen such a dangerous and outdated route - all in an attempt to retrace his steps. Ohara disappeared through the front door and reappeared out the side of the house, shovel in hand. He left Amelia to grieve and started digging. By sundown, Henricus had been laid to rest in a shallow grave. With her mission accomplished, Amelia didn't know what to do next. Should she go back home with her brother's journal? Or should she finish what her brother set out to do? Questions for tomorrow. The two travellers headed into the old house to prepare for another long journey. Where to, they weren't sure of yet.

The night was silent, eery, broken only by the howling of Mutants hidden in the distant. Hidden in the darkness.

Mahi's Heart

Carlie Kerr

The gentle aroma of spices and warm milk filled the tiny brick apartment as the lulling tones of women's chatter embraced the morning air. Samira awoke, startled, to her little brother Imran standing close to her face, his chubby cheeks covered in rice and the remains of breakfast dal still evident. She scooped him up in her arms and entered the kitchen. "Amma!" she exclaimed, putting Imran down in one swift movement to replace him with the embrace of her grandmother. After a long journey through war torn Iran, her grandmother had arrived safely in their quiet Afghani village. A breath of relief released by all who anticipated her arrival. Mother, Aunty and Samira's older sister Myra smiled wide as they placed cushions on the ground and the whistle on the stovetop called for chai to be served.

As they sat, Samira nestled close to Amma, "Tell me Amma, how was your journey? I missed you very much." Amma affectionately stroked Samira's cheek and sighed, her eyes heavy from worry, yet as kind as Samira remembered them. "The journey was long, little one. My heart is full, yet it aches. On my journey I visited our church," her voice hushed, "I saw so many I hold close to my heart from my time in Iran and met with them to discuss a new way to share the love of Jesus. This was the first time I had visited since Grandfather Mahi's passing."

Mother wiped a tear from her eye.

"You see, Samira, your grandfather was a brave man with a good heart – a heart for his people and for our God. I met him at our University in Kabul. I was studying to become a secretary and he, a doctor. But not just any doctor – he had a vision to bring healing to those suffering under Taliban rule in Iran. We were married our graduation year and prayed fervently for God to provide us a place to go. And so, we applied for many agencies in need of a missionary doctor. Samira's eyes widened; such an act of open faith would today be shunned.

May, 1976

"Mahi! You need to come quick! I have a letter waiting for us – I'm so excited but I can't think to open it without you here!" Mahi's eyes grew as he doted over his love and her love for their mission. He held her close as they opened the letter.

"Mr and Mrs Mahi Abdullah

We are pleased to confirm your successful application to Mission in Iran.

We are in desperate need of your assistance as of next week."

Amma let out an excited shrill as their minds raced with joy. With hearts full of anticipation, the young couple packed their few belongings and settled in a small village hut beside a hospital. The humble walls of the standalone brick shelter would nurse more to health than the young couple could ever anticipate. The first few weeks brought many challenges, yet the joy of life surpassed them all. Undertaking many surgeries for burns victims throughout the countryside, Mahi developed a keen eye for both recognising suffering and the much deeper need for healing of broken hearts.

One evening, after a tiresome day in the clinic, Mahi arrived home to his wife making a simple meal in the kitchen. The aroma of the spices brought a rumble to his stomach as he anticipated the meal, yet he could not find stomach to eat without first speaking of his concerns from the day. "My love, I have something to ask of you." He gently pulled a chair from the table and motioned for Amma to be seated. "Today I felt something was different within me. I can heal bodies through my service as a doctor, we know we are called to this mission, but what for the broken hearts who are dying day by day without the knowledge of our saviour? My heart breaks."

Amma wiped a slow forming tear from her beloved husband's eye and prayed. She prayed for leading, and her soul was moved. They were to share the love of Jesus in a nation where persecution for such beliefs were rife.

From that day onwards Amma's days consisted of meeting with women in their homes to share stories from the bible and to pray for revival within Iran; and Mahi's of sharing Christian literature with patients in his clinic.

Two pink lines and a subsequent nine months made for a growing family, as lives were saved daily through the couple's ministry to the sick and hurting; both medically and spiritually.

One morning as Amma prepared roti and curd for her small family, the sound of gunshots firing in the distance rang loud. Mahi hurried the children under the bed where they huddled to pray. What seemed to be hours passed by as they lay still. Training from a childhood in war-torn Afghanistan had well equipped both Mahi and Amma for such situations. The children fussed with the tight arrangement of the under-bed shelter, so Amma sang to them in lulled tones, the familiar words of a childhood song telling of the shepherd who gives his life to protect his sheep. She had many a night been rocked to sleep with this melody by her own mother as gunfire fell, the words bringing comfort to her soul.

Worried about the welfare of his staff and patients at the nearby clinic, Mahi emerged from underneath the safety of their bed to gain a better perspective so he could advise of the situation. He took each step gently to the front door, as to stay as quiet as possible. Sweat dripped from Amma's brow as she prayed fervently for her husband. "It is safe now my love, come out. You stay with the children, and I will return soon. I must check on the clinic." Amma pleaded for him to stay, not yet knowing the nature of the shots fired. He reassured her of God's provision and prayed for their family as he stepped from the confines of the home.

Hours went by and as the sun set, Amma was filled with fear. She called on the women of her underground group to pray. They met in her home and embraced her as tears streamed down her cheeks. A knock at the door soon silenced the group. Amma arose and slowly opened the door. There the pastor stood with a pained look overcoming his whole demeanour. "It's Mahi." He whispered. "I am sorry Amma, but he was shot at the clinic. They found him lying against a closed cupboard." Amma fell to the ground as grief overtook her and she wept. The pastor continued, "Amma, we grieve with you, but you must know, He died to save a small girl. She was found in the cupboard – he shielded her."

As a woman, now a widow, Amma planned to return to her father's home to raise her children. She kissed her friend's goodbye as the taxi driver began their journey. Glancing through the revision mirror, the taxi came to a sudden halt. The driver stared at Amma with surprise, "You are the wife of Dr. Mahi Abdullah! He saved my daughter, and we have been attending meetings." His eyes welled with tears as she began to sob. On her journey home, Amma looked in the faces of her children, doting their fathers' eyes and smiled wide. He was a man with a heart..."

"A heart for God and for His people." She repeated. "Samira, I have something I would like to give to you." Amma unpacked the stuffed linen bag at her side and pulled out a tin of biscuits. Beneath the tin she pried away a book, secured to its base to resist any unwanted attention. Unwrapping the tightly bound cloth she reached out to hold Samira's hand. "My girl, this is your grandfather Mahi's bible. It was found in the desk of his mission clinic on the morning of his death." Humbled by the honour, Samira embraced her grandmother then opened the pages. Imran, curious as to this newfound treasure, climbed up on Samira's lap. Samira's finger stopped on a break in the pages wherein she found a printed photo of her grandmother and grandfather. As if looking in a mirror she saw herself in her grandfather's smile. "A heart like his, Samira, this is my prayer for you." Samira smiled as warm tears flowed down her cheeks.

The Wilderness
Protasio Azaria

High up the base of Mount Kilimanjaro, deep in the African equatorial wilderness, lies a small village consisted of only eleven cottages. Each cottage is a fully self-contained family house that holds about eight family members. The village is surrounded by dense trees, and yet the entire forest is visible to the villagers from every corner. Every cottage is about half a mile apart from each other, situated and designed purposefully for security reasons (in case of an attack from other villagers) and has decent farming space for each family.

One cold, rainy evening while all the adult men went out for hunting, a young mother named Elizabeth Kejee sat with her five children around a bonfire they'd created together. Her children were between the age of eight and thirteen years old. After having dinner and taking a shower with the warm water that they warmed using the bonfire, she started educating them. Waiting for their father to arrive, she taught them about the importance of family and the way of living, all done in a manner known in western worlds as a bedtime story. These teachings are designed to instruct children about the importance of culture, the village rules, obedience of the elders and, most importantly, the ethnic language. At age sixteen, girls are taught farming while the boys are trained to hunt like their fathers.

Due to the heavy rain, the hunters often take longer hunting and it can be a slower walk than usual to get back home. While Kejee and her children are still waiting for their fathers return, the children are starting to fall asleep and can no longer wait up. She notices the fire is getting cold, the wood almost burned out, so she tells them children she is going to the storage to get more wood. The oldest child was half asleep and asked, "Mom, can I come to help you out?"

Smiling at how kind an offer it was, she said no. "You stay here, Anjo. It's too cold out there. I'm just getting few pieces of wood to get us through the night, so your father doesn't have to do it when he returns, he'll be extremely tired from the hunt."

She stepped out of the cottage into the pitch-dark yard, her eyes taking a while to adjust from the fire. Making her way further down a hill, she found the wood storage. It was made with strong wood, about four metres square, one metre high, and covered in a thick protective animal skin to keep the wood dry all season. They also used the storage to keep food and other essentials in. She went in and took a few pieces of cut wood and turned to walk back. Suddenly, she saw what looked like a group of large animals down the hill walking towards the village. At first, she thought they were elephants, but then as they got closer, she noticed they were walking upright like humans, though they were larger and taller. She focused on their footsteps rattling through the bush, but one thing stood out for Kejee – these people-like-animals were walking very slow as if they were extremely exhausted.

She could clearly see what they were as they got closer. Her heart sank, she dropped the firewood and rushed back inside to her children trembling with horrific fear. Likely the creatures had not seen her yet, but they were aware of her presence, they could smell her from a mile away. They continued to walk towards the direction of the cottage, and were approaching the front yard. Kejee managed to get inside to her children, breathing hard and her heart is pounding extremely fast. Anjo noticed his mom's fear and got up straight away. "Mommy, are you ok?" He asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answered quickly. "We have unwelcomed guests. Get up... get up..." She woke all the children up. They were all up and alert, except the second born Kojo. He was so annoyed by the fact that he had been woken and was mumbling words underneath his breath. "One cannot catch a break in this house", he muttered, reluctantly sitting up straight.

Kejee wanted to take the children and run, but the cottage faced the exact direction the intruders were coming from. With five children in the dark, cold, and raining, it would've made an escape extremely difficult - and dangerous. Instead, her motherly instincts kicked in. "Listen to me carefully," she said in hushed tones. "We have unwelcome guests coming up the hill. I will give you instructions as we go. Please follow them to the word, do exactly what I ask, and everything will be alright."

She immediately took a large metal container and covered the fire, whispering to the children. "Ssshhh, we mustn't let them know the fire is here". They all nodded their heads, except Kojo who didn't seem to grasp the magnitude of the danger they were in. Kejee looked at him and whispered harshly, "Did you hear me, Kojo?" Kojo nodded his head in agreement, but turned his face away in rebellion, disapproving of his mother's commands. He continued whispering words of disagreement that no one could hear.

Kejee reassured them their father should be coming soon and that everything would be alright, but just before she finished her sentence - the guests arrived. With smiles on their faces, they all said "Hello". Their leader, Mukkoonngo, greeted Kejee. They were all terrifying in appearance; creatures they had never seen before, and yet Kejee held her composure. She replied, "hello", with a smile in her face. The guests barely spoke the language of the village, but they were clever, speaking the basics.

Mukkoonngo said, "Listen. We come from far away and are very tired from our journey. We just want a warm and dry place to stay overnight. We will be on our way early in the morning, as we still have a long way to go."

Kejee responded. "Sure. We are happy to have you stay overnight but unfortunately, we don't have fire. Don't worry, though, make yourselves at home. I will send one of the children to get us some firewood from nearby neighbours." She added, "Sorry we don't have food, my husband went hunting, but he hasn't returned yet."

As soon as she mentioned food and hunting, she could see one of the guests had saliva dripping down from his mouth. She knew they were extremely tired and hungry. So tired, in fact, that they couldn't attack them at that stage. The walk has exhausted them. Mukkoonngo, a very intelligent creature, noticed that Kejee was looking at one of his men salivating. He rebuked them in their own language, urging them to control themselves and he then smiled back at Kejee. They continued engaging in small conversation, Mukkoonngo asking about the dynamic of the village and the elders, and the lifestyle in general.

Kejee answered all their questions, albeit with limited detail. She was buying time until her husband would arrive back.

After a short period of time, they could hear footsteps, heavily stomping though the mud. From quite a distance away, Kejee knew it was her husband approaching. Usually, she would go out to him to help him put away all the food from the hunted, but this time Kejee didn't go out to meet him, a signal of danger. Her husband, a hunter, knew straight away something was wrong. He gently dropped everything and said in calm voice, "Anjo's mum, I'm home." In Africa, mothers are usually referred to with their elder child's name, especially when the child is a boy. Wives may also refer to their husbands as 'papa'.

"Okay Papa! Welcome back. Do you want me to come and help you?" Anjo said clearly.

"No, no, 'manjoura'", his father replied, preparing to walk inside.

He armed himself with some hunting weapons that were small enough to be hidden under his animal skin coat and headed to the cottage. As he entered, he acted surprised. A smile on his face, he greeted them. "Hello?! We have visitors!" He continued, "You are all welcome. It's a pleasure to have you around, we hardly have visitors around here."

He noticed that his wife had covered the fire. *Perfect* he thought in his mind and quickly asked his wife, "Kejee, why don't we have fire today is the firewood wet?" Kejee nodded her head. Her husband angrily replied, "I always tell you if the weather is bad, please, please cover the firewood. Every single time I say this! Now we have guests - how embarrassing?! How can we keep them warm and make them food?"

"I'm sorry, Papa" she replied, "What can I do?"

He paused and thought for a second, then said, "Ok. Take Anjo and go to our nearby neighbours and get as some firewood. Please don't take long; I'm very hungry and I'm sure the guests are too."

Kejee and her older son got up to leave, her youngest child asking to go too. Kejee agreed to take her as well, saying it would help them carry more wood. As they were getting out of the cottage the wife looked at her husband and said: "Leeeee leeeee leeeee?" Which translates to 'Go with no return?' Her husband replied, "Leeeee leeeee leeeee."

Mukkoonngo was curious as he didn't understand all of their language. "I'm a very curious man and I like to learn new languages whenever I meet new people. He asked Papa what his wife had said. Papa replied, "She said 'we won't be late', and I told her 'don't be late'."

The husband and the unwelcome guests waited for about an hour, but the Kejee didn't show up. Keeping up the façade, Papa got up, angrily shouting, "I don't know what's wrong with this woman! she can't take a single instruction correctly!"

Turning around, he spoke to the second older child, "Kojo! Go find them right now." Kojo refused to go saying he was cold and tired, so his father shouted at him. He sent the third and fourth children instead, saying, "Go look for your mother. If you can't find her, just get the firewood and head straight back here." They nodded their heads, and as they stepped out of the cottage, he looked deep in their eyes and said calmly, "Leeeee leeeee leeeee". They looked back at their father and understood exactly what he was doing, and they nodded they heads and left.

Mukkoonngo began to become quite concerned, but he was too tired and sleepy to keep up with Papa's plan. Everyone from his crew was already sleeping. The father waited for another hour and then stood up once, this time even more upset. "I don't know what's wrong with this family today! They are not listening to me whatsoever." He yelled at Kojo, the only child left. "Get up and go see what happened to your mother and siblings!" Kojo still refused to go at all, and Papa realised that Mukkoonngo was starting to piece together his plan. If he pushed hard, the guest would surely realise his game. So, in frustration he said, "that's it. I'm going to look for them myself. They're all in big trouble!". And he left the cottage, sadly knowing the fate of his stubborn child.

Kojo waited three quarters of an hour, then said to Mukkoonngo, "I don't why my stupid father kept saying that all this time. My mother hid the fire under this container, and she went to look for another fire elsewhere. How silly?"

Kojo opened the fire for Mukkoonngo, who finally realised he had been played all this time and wasn't happy about it. He woke his crew up, telling them to gather their strength by bringing up their body temperatures around the fire. When they were warm and felt strong enough, their hunger needed to be satiated. Unfortunately for the disobedient Kojo, he was there to satisfy that need.

Always turns back to you

Bailee McLeod

He was rushing through the airport terminal, satchel in hand and suitcase trailing. It was indeed a satchel - he objected to it being called anything else. She'd have a field day at the sight of it. *Why am I rushing? She'll wait*, he thought. Still, he dashed through the terminal. He reached the electronic doors. They opened and the humidity hit him. Pausing, he composed himself and walked to the arrivals bay. She pulled in as he got to the curb. They smiled at each other. *Perfect timing*, they both said aloud. He went to the rear of the car and placed his suitcase in the back. *Nice purse*, she said. He smiled. Closing the boot, he climbed into the car. They embraced. He kissed her left cheek. Pulling away, they looked at each other. Her hand lingered on his cheek, and she moved back kissing him on the lips. He returned the action. His breath smelled of coffee. Or was that her own? Either way, she had missed it. Now here he was, tangible. She put the car into drive and pulled away from the curb.

Silence settled. It had been two years since they'd last seen each other. Two years, of emails, of being with other people, learning and letting go of what they knew of each other. But the silence that filled the car was comfortable, easy. They gelled as if no time had passed. Like they were back in final year of their undergrad, where it was clear that they were each other's, even if they didn't know what that meant. She thought of the time they played house for the last six months before graduation. He was paying rent at his flat but practically lived at hers.

Olive remembered laying bare in her bed, a few days before graduation. She could smell Lou's aftershave from the kitchen where he was making coffee. Moments later he placed a mug on the bedside table, which surprised her. Stacks of books lay on her side table, some horribly pretentious, others classic, most contemporary. Would they ever all be read? Probably not. Lou placed a hand on her stomach then kissed her forehead, her neck. Sitting up, she grabbed the warm mug of black pour-over coffee – could they *be* anymore gen z – and her phone. She scrolled the internet and finished her cup while he sat in the kitchen drinking his and read the latest article from his New Yorker subscription. She watched him through her legs, scrolling his phone and taking gulps of coffee. *I know you're watching me*, he laughed.

She smiled to herself, now in the car. *I heard Scomo fucked off to Hawaii while the country burned*, Lou stated. Olive laughed, *What was he meant to do? His job?* She pulled into a parking spot outside her place. This was all new to him. New townhouse, new suburb, new roommates. *This isn't your uncle's flat*, he commented. *I can't sponge off my family's money my whole life*, she smirked, getting out the car. He knew that same money was paying for this place but stayed quiet. Olive worked hard, but she never had to think about money. *No one is home this weekend*, she unlocked the front door. Lou followed her inside. He pressed the home button on his iPhone to check the time, while she asked Google to turn off the air-conditioning.

The smell of incense hit him as he entered the kitchen. Everything about her was new to him again. Her hair was different, chopped above her shoulders. Olive stood at the fridge, pulling a bottle of wine from the door. She turned to him, holding up the bottle. He gave a nod. She only drank wine now, apparently. She poured him a glass. It was a deep purple red and he despised it.

Are you seeing anyone? Lou asked.

Nope, Olive was jarred by the question and failed to hide it. This time the silence was not comfortable.

Olive, I'm not sorry I left...

Ouch, Lou, she said.

But, I want to apologise for how I left.

Two years ago, on a hot summer afternoon, New Year's Eve actually, they lounged around the pool at her parents' house. She had many freckles, souvenirs from that summer. He lay beside her on the outdoor furniture while she read, her face hidden from the sun, him fully exposed. Like the whomping willow, the news of him travelling Spain for six months, a year even, hit her across the face. It shocked her, but it was exciting. Then he said he was leaving in one week. By the time she processed she was losing her best friend, she was waving goodbye to him at the departure bay.

I hurt you, Olive. I could feel myself doing it, but I had to get out of here. Out of this goddamn town, this city. It can suffocate you.

It only suffocates you if you let it, she said.

Lou sighed and finished his glass in one action. She watched, saw the slight grimace in his face and remembered how much he hated red wine. This amused her.

You left Lou. To find yourself, escape, whatever... I lost my best friend for two years. And yeah, the emails were nice, the videos and photos, the postcards, were all nice, but they didn't make me miss you any less.

I hope you know I was never running away from you Olive.

How was I supposed to know that? You didn't tell me about this major life choice until it was actually happening.

I know... I think I loved you too much, I thought you would have just known and been okay. You could always read my mind.

I used to be able to read your mind. Olive finished her glass of wine.

Lou paused. *I'm sorry Ol. I was drowning and that was the only feasible option in my head. I should have told you, that I was struggling, that I was leaving. I should have told you everything.*

But you chose not to, she stared at him.

Lou moved uncomfortably in his chair and focused on the coffee percolator on the stove. He wondered what happened to the pour over he bought her. He shifted focus back to Olive. *My anxiety was crippling, and you were so good to me during those times Ol, but this was different, for some reason. I tried to tell you so many times, but I just couldn't. It was fucked up, and I should have told you earlier.* He closed his eyes, ashamed to meet hers.

Olive hated seeing him in pain. She knew him. She could see how each situation affected his mental health. But this didn't make him leaving any less painful.

He continued. *I think, also, for the first time, the world was accessible to me. I had this substance, this money, that was mine and it could take me anywhere I wanted. I needed something different. I needed to miss this place, to appreciate it.*

I understand, she said.

My life here with you was stable, I knew you would always be here because you don't need to care about these things, he hesitated.

It's not that I don't care. Money brings the world to life, I know that, but I don't really ever think about it. She paused, realising the ignorance of her words. *Sorry, I am very aware of the advantage I've had in my life Lou. You had to work the entire way through our degrees while I didn't need to. I see the disadvantage.*

They were both silent, comfortable once again.

Still, I'm really sorry Olive. I'm so sorry.

After a pause, she replied, *I know, I forgive you.*

Lou's eyes started to swell. Olive walked around the kitchen counter and held him. He kept apologising into her. He looked at her, she wiped the tears away from his face, and kissed him. *You're home now, just tell me next time you are leaving the fucking country, okay*, she smiled. He laughed.

Changing the subject, Olive asked about his visit to his mum. She had moved to Melbourne during their first year of university. Her place wasn't too dissimilar to Olive's now. A small townhouse, an open plan kitchen with an adjoining courtyard, three bedrooms, one bath. Lou's mother's place was more glamorous, and she shared it with her partner. Olive shared rent with two girls from Uni, and their frequent Tinder dates. It was an exciting game seeing who they brought home each weekend. Lou asked about her study, and when she thought their inept Prime Minister would be ousted. She asked about Spain, how his writing was going. *Poorly*, he said. She never believed him. *Our generations Steinbeck*, she liked to say. He always scoffed at her. With ease, he could graciously articulate the deepest feelings and place them on a page. Something Olive envied. *Go have a shower and get dressed*, Olive demanded, *everyone is coming over.*

At dinner, six people sat around the table; Olive, Lou and four friends from university. Lou watched as Olive interacted with everyone. How she made everyone feel welcome in her home. She took a load off people. They didn't have to pretend to be anyone. She listened when people talked and responded with unmatched insight. She wasn't what he expected to find in this life, but she was everything he needed. There she sat at the head of the table. Fiery, passionate, loyal Olive; the one he loved, the one he left all those years ago. But the one he came home for.

For the Sake of Humanity...

Joshua Ibbott

"Madness. That is what has become of this world, this joke of a society. How is it that after so long, we still wish to destroy ourselves? After all we have been given, we still cast aside these gifts, and seek for more. More gifts. More energy. More power", Ofrandius paced back and forth, muttering to himself. No, this could not be happening. The government could not be serious in considering such a proposal. Out the skyscraper window, the orange sun bathed the city in fading light, the day drawing to an end.

"This is the only solution to our ever-growing problem," President Julia Stone fiddled with her pen at her desk whilst gazing out the window. The day had been a long and dreary one.

Ofrandius paused his pacing, and slowly turned to her. "The only solution? To sit in our council chambers and argue about the inevitable destruction of mankind? You understand that to even consider us leaving this planet will result in utter ruin for the regular folk". Julia leaned over her desk, cupping her forehead in her right hand, fatigue nagging at her to retire for the evening. "I know that it will be hard for us to manage, Ofrandius. The Techs have been the backbone of our society for decades, losing your magic will set us back quite a bit."

He chuckled as she said this. "Yes, quite a bit indeed". Raising one brow, he inquired "There's a 'but' incoming, isn't there? Also, you should probably use my Nontech name, with social media being so privy to private affairs. Word might get out that not even the president listens to her own rules."

She sighed, "Yes, you're right. My apologies, Samuel. As for the 'but', there would be one if I wasn't worn out from all the meetings today, those never-ending questions from the media..." she paused and took a sip from her tea. "Oh, and Synfra— I mean Simon".

He smacked his forehead, "Ah, of course. That's why this proposal is being considered. He finally injected his poisonous ideals into your mind, right? You do realise that if that lunatic had his way, the Nontechs would be ruled with an iron fist."

With a weak chuckle, she smiled. "Lunatic or not, he's still a valuable member of the council. His studies into the World Technician's abilities have proven to be very effective. Why, it was he who discovered how to create structures out of thin air, giving Techs with that ability the name Buildtechs." She defended him effortlessly.

Ofrandius attempted to suppress his rage at the mention of Synfrandia and *all the good things he had done*. He quietly exclaimed, "Regardless of his achievements, he is still an eel. And frankly, if it were up to me, I'd—"

"Enough!" Julia began to rise. "I think it's time I head home for the evening. I need to rest and sleep on the matter, plus my driver has been waiting in the car long enough. We'll discuss this in a more formal manner at tomorrow's meeting... and when I'm not half passed out on my desk."

"Very well then," Ofrandius replied. "I too shall depart, but know that without our building, healing, and flying, humanity will be ruined, I do not care how many oppose to our existence. This is for the sake of humanity."

"The fate of humanity will be determined by humanity," she said as she left the room, now dark. Humanity. Ofrandius shook his head at that word. Were they not all human? Sure, some of them had magic, but they were all still the same, right?

He took the next elevator down to the ground floor, still in disbelief that tomorrow's meeting would occur. For many years, he had been fighting against Synfrandia's ideas. Ideas of being the perfect human - even going so far as to no longer refer to World Technicians as human anymore. The split between both Nontechs and Techs had only grown worse over the years, with groups of regular folk pushing for the Techs to leave their

country. This meeting would only polarise the world more, especially if the rumour of them leaving the earth got out.

The elevator reached the ground floor, and he walked through the golden lit lobby. A large security guard Gerd (a Protech, proficient in flying) slightly bowed and wished Ofrandius a good evening as he opened the doors for him. His driver, Daniel, pulled into the driveway, got out of the car, and opened the rear door for him. "No flying tonight, sir?"

"I'm afraid not, I'm running low on energy. Plus, flying alone looks bad for someone of my position. I don't suppose you brought any cells with you by chance?" They entered the vehicle and Daniel began to drive. "Of course I did. There's a few cans in the box next to you." Ofrandius opened the rubber box next to him, took out a cell, and wrapped his hands around it. He thanked Daniel and began to rest, letting his body absorb all the energy in the cell, restoring his magic. Though some Techs had one or two abilities, Ofrandius had all abilities, which drained him faster, particularly his immortality ability. Techs with one ability were known as Protechs, two abilities were Bitechs, and three or more were the Grantechs. These last were the rarest type and were all part of the world government.

About ten minutes later, Ofrandius awoke to shouting outside the car. He gazed out the window to see a group of Nontechs beating a Tech. Patrolling Protechs flew in to intervene and started to beat the Nontechs into submission. "Another brawl," Daniel lamented. "These are only becoming more and more common these days. Perhaps it is for the best that you Techs leave." Ofrandius rested his head against the window. "Ah, so word has gotten out about that, then? There will be a formal discussion on the matter tomorrow. I think it's to determine which continent will be ours," he lied. He began to slip out of consciousness again and made out a few words from Daniel, "Which continent... Yes".

When he arrived back at his home, Ofrandius bade a good night to Daniel, and sauntered up to the front door. He had already been awake for the past week, and though he could probably stay awake longer, his brain needed to rest. As he lay down on his bed, he gazed out to the stars and thought to himself, *another planet to call home. What a crazy world we live in.*

The next day, Ofrandius awoke to a fresh, clear sky out his window. It was time to get ready for the meeting that would decide their fate. Daniel couldn't drive him to the discussion chambers, as he was sick and at the hospital under the care of healers. Gregory was his driver today, which was good because he asked fewer questions than Daniel. "Morning, Mr Christianson. Have a good sleep?" Gregory's cheerfulness often frustrated Ofrandius, but today it immediately filled him with anger.

"Yes, I slept well. Now, we must go at once to the discussion chambers, there's a very important meeting happening within the hour," he snapped back.

"Excellent Sir, glad to hear it. I'll get going right away." The smile Gregory gave only further fuelled Ofrandius's frustration. Gregory closed the door for him, then entered the driver's seat and took off down the road.

Upon arrival at the building, the car door was opened by Milligan, a friend of Ofrandius. "Come, we must hurry. Everyone is almost ready to begin. Had another sleep in?" he said, smiling ever so slightly.

"Only because I was up all night dreading this encounter", Ofrandius replied, smiling and embracing him.

"These are difficult times." Milligan released him, "Difficult times indeed. Let's go".

They both rushed into the building, ignoring complaints to slow down. But there would be no slowing down today. No doubt Synfrandia was already spreading more of his promises of a better life amongst the council members. They were the last to arrive, just as everyone began to be seated, and Julia was about to make the opening speech.

While she was speaking, Ofrandius whispered to Milligan, "So, what's the word on the situation? I heard there was a rumour that Synfrandia has discovered a way to produce energy without the help of the Nontechs?"

"He believes that we could be self-sufficient on our own with this new discovery of the builders' abilities," Milligan calmly whispered. "We could theoretically create infinite energy, meaning that for the Techs like us - we could live forever. He'll no doubt bring that up shortly when it's his turn to speak".

"No doubt about it. This is not looking good for our cause, I'm sure there are many Nontechs who will back him up too," said Ofrandius.

Julia took a deep breath. "Now that introductions are out of the way, it's time to discuss the matter we've all heard so much about. Mr Simon Peterson? Would you like to talk about this solution of yours?"

Everyone quietened down as a tall, slender man with long white hair rose from his seat. "Thank you, Madam President. Yes, it is time that we discuss this idea, well and truly." Synfrandia smiled wryly to the council members, lingering on Ofrandius for a moment. "But before I do, I have some important news to share." Ofrandius held his breath; he knew what was about to come.

"My fellow Technicians and I have discovered that not only can we generate our own source of energy, sufficient to feed all of us. With such amounts of energy, we could even create our own planet." Stunned silence filled the room. Ofrandius stared at him in disbelief. Synfrandia continued, "Yes, I'm sure most of you are aware that for the sake of humanity, we, the World Technicians, would best serve humanity by leaving it, and I hereby propose that we create a new earth, and live independently from the Nontechs. This world will contain ideal living conditions and the perfect society. Amongst the stars, we will become gods!"

Ofrandius abruptly stood and countered, "We are not gods! We will never be gods! We are just as human as every Nontech on earth! You would—"

"SILENCE!" Julia yelled. Then, in a calm voice, "Mr Christianson, please give Mr Peterson a chance to explain himself. You will have an opportunity to raise your thoughts on the matter afterward." Ofrandius, still shaking with rage, turned to her, and said, "Very well. My apologies, Madam President." She gave him a knowing stare as he sat down, but he just shook his head.

"Thank you, Madam President. Now, I have spoken with most of you already, but we cannot stay here any longer. Too many of our people are being murdered by the hands of Nontechs. Too many times we have given them an easy life... caring for the wounded, the sick, building their shelters, even cleaning their own atmosphere from the toxic waste of their energy production. We give them work, paying workers to generate energy for us. Yet still, they treat us like common trash, always wanting more from us. To that, I say no more! They want to live proudly and be independent from us? They want us to leave? Well, I say let them have their wish!" A large portion of the room erupted into cheers. It appeared Synfrandia had indeed already spoken to most of them. Julia quietened everyone and began to speak.

"Indeed, as a representative of the Nontechs, I have shared these ideas with my people, and we have agreed that it would be in humanity's best interest for us to go our separate ways. We have relied heavily on the Tech's abilities for many years now, but once, there were no Techs, and during those times we managed on our own. Indeed, the fighting between our two people have caused much loss, for both sides. It is not mine nor my people's concern what you Techs do once you leave, whether that be building a planet or anything else. But as long as both sides agree to this, then I too agree with this proposal."

Milligan grabbed Ofrandius by the shoulder before he could stand up again. "You know her stance on the matter, this is just the decision the Nontechs agreed on," he whispered. "Don't let emotions cloud your judgement". Ofrandius shrugged him off, stood and began to speak.

"I think it is time that I said my piece." Everyone quietened again and Julia seated herself, nodding towards him. "You speak like we are two different species, two different animals fighting over the same territory. You speak as if our abilities are both a blessing and a curse." He turned to Julia, then to all the

Nontech representatives in the room. "Do you know what would happen if we left? First, all your sick and injured would start to pile up. Your doctors are sparse and could never keep up with the number of patients. Yes, all the energy you generate will be yours to use. But the means of creating that energy will cause your atmosphere to clog up with carbon since there will be no Buildtech here to extract and store the carbon for building. This world will be destroyed." He turned to the Techs, staring at Synfrandia. "We can save this world. Yes, the Nontechs treat us like garbage. And yes, they are often ungrateful for our services. We act as though we are better than them, but are we really? Are we not just humans who were given gifts? It is our duty to help our fellow humans, not leave them here to die. I support the idea of having our own country on earth, so that we may live separately to reduce the fighting... at least that way we can still help people." He pointed an accusing finger at Synfrandia. "Synfrandia only wishes to leave this world to achieve his own ambitions, to create his own society that he can rule. For the sake of humanity, we must stay. For the sake of humanity, we will stay!"

All were quiet in the room. The silence was only broken by Synfrandia, who began to laugh. "I'm sorry Ofrandius, as noble as your cause seems to be, leaving this world is our only option. This is for the betterment of both our people" he paused, pointing at Julia, "...and theirs."

The back and forth the arguing continued until Julia called the vote. "All those in favour of the Techs remaining here, and of relocating to another country while continuing to support the Nontechs the way we always have, raise your hand." Ofrandius and Milligan both raised their hands, and so did a few of the other members, but when she called on those in support of Synfrandia, most of the room had hands raised in the air.

"It is settled then. The Techs will leave once preparations have been made." Ofrandius slammed his fist into the table and stormed out of the room. Milligan ran after him.

He found Ofrandius huddled in the hallway, head in his knees, rocking back and forth. He raised his head as Milligan approached. "How could they do this? They've effectively doomed humanity, and for what? Their own selfish ambitions." Ofrandius continued to weep as Milligan joined him on the floor. "We must have faith in humanity. They can survive this; they have survived worse in the past. We should move on, perhaps this is for the best."

"No. Nothing good will come from this. I will never be able to live with myself knowing that these people will die here, and that we could have stayed to prevent it. I will stay behind, whilst the rest of you leave. I cannot support everyone, but I can save a few." A determined look came over his face. Milligan thought for a moment, then said, "Now that's just the grief talking. Come, let's go for a walk to clear your head."

They walked out of the building, ignoring the cheers and celebrations of the other Techs, and exited the grounds. Ofrandius looked up at the clear blue sky. Soon, such a sky will no longer exist. The world would become a desolate wasteland, people would suffer, and many would die. All this, for the sake of humanity.

Threads of Blue and Yellow

Ashley Jankiewicz

Really, he was still a boy. When he enlisted, surrounded by his childhood friends, he felt unconquerable. They winked at each other, grinning as they passed each examination and stood proudly in a line. The officer paraded before them, bellowing about their dedication to the Soviet Union, filling their imaginations with visions of returning alight with grandeur, their battle blazoned uniforms hidden behind swirls of confetti and rose petals.

Her tears didn't even deter him. They said goodbye at the train station. She patted his crisp uniform, stuttering to find the perfect last words to say to someone you loved who was leaving. He reached under her silk scarf to tangle his fingers in her hair as he kissed her one last time, the steam of an impatient engine curling around them. The whistle blew and he pulled away from her, climbing onto the train.

"Wait!" She ran after him as the train started to move. She pulled the scarf off her head and pushed it into his hands. "Promise you'll come back to me." He started to respond, but she was jostled aside, and the train pulled away, leaving her on the platform.

That moment was stamped in his mind, as if it were a photograph, the ink clear and vivid. The weeks following blurred, strange and menacing, as they revealed the truth. But now, it was too late. Now, the world was lost. He was lost, trapped in fear and mire, his heart running the opposite direction to his feet. Warsaw was broken. The resistance fighters were dying, bands of white and red wrapped around their arms and helmets, fallen after attempting one last stand. Polish pride never stood a chance against the German onslaught as the Russian army waited on the other side of the river for Warsaw to bleed out.

His country had wanted this. His hand lingered in his pocket, longing to hold onto memories of his girl, of tundra eyes laughing from beneath a fur lined hood. Memories of days spent strolling through snow touched streets, hand in hand. Days he couldn't get back. He pulled out the scarf and held it to his nose, breathing, imagining, remembering her face as she said those last words to him. He wished now that he had listened to her, and never come here, to this place where the pain leached the colour from his vision. He never even heard the explosion.

The sky had rained sound waves and fire. But it was over now. All that could be heard was the lamentation of dying men whose faces furrowed with wrinkles while their souls became boys again.

She picked through the wreckage, her once white uniform limp and smudged. Only her starched hat with a red cross held the remembrance of who she was meant to be. The oblivion was suffocating. There was no joy, not where the sky hung so low it had lost its hue, the smog of desperation choking the breath of each fraught soul as they fought to end this nightmare. She wondered how long it would take until she lost all sense of who she was. Now her days were focused on one goal, holding onto life: stitching, washing, bandaging. Of holding a hand as she failed once more, and life shuddered and winked out. Of keeping her shoulders sharp and square and her chin above the line of fire. But at night she sat in the stairwell and sobbed into her chafed, swollen hands, trying to relive every argument with her sister, every page read by candlelight, every pinprick through a broken thimble. To see the filthy potatoes grubbed from the ground, the sooty rug that lived by the hearth, the cat with the twisted ear. Because it was all better than here.

Her foot caught on some debris, and she grimaced as her knee slammed into the ground. As she sat back to catch her breath, she saw it – threads of yellow, shining through the dusk. Flickers of hope. Intertwined in the fingers of a fallen enemy soldier was a silk scarf, untouched by the carnage around it. With shaking fingers, she pulled it free and tucked it into her own pocket. A memory, she thought, of better days. Days before there was more to life than death. Days before her people walked in search of a land that didn't shatter under the footprints of its enemies.

The nurse felt helpless as the people streamed through. There were no words of comfort to offer those who had no hope, only steaming cups of water. An exhausted mother trudged through, her gaunt face void of light. Her young daughter managed to reach for a cup before sagging to the ground.

The nurse's heart splintered, but she forced herself to smile as she knelt in front of the girl. Pulling the scarf from her pocket, she folded it into a triangle and tied it beneath the girl's chin, covering her ears from the stinging wind. The blue in the material matched the girl's eyes, pools of fear and fatigue, yet still clear in her face. A face which had so brutally met the face of war and lost. The girl touched the scarf reverently, turning to her mother, who's mouth pulled upwards, slightly. The girl's face lit up, and for a moment, the nurse thought she knew what hope would look like if it were a person.

The girl had found comfort in watching her feet step, one foot in front of the other. At least it meant they were going somewhere. The long lines of refugees they had joined walked mostly in silence, eyes cast to the grey washed road, littered with bundles and family members that people had had to leave behind.

One foot in front of the other, she had reminded herself, over and over again.

It had been a couple months now, since the bombings which shattered her family and broken her mother's mind. Her father had disappeared in the explosions, and the image of her mother's face, warped in a way she'd never seen as her mother reached towards the churning dust and flame, was engraved in her mind. Now, her mother trudged as if she dragged the weight of an enemy tank behind her, and hardly noticed her daughter.

She didn't feel like a little girl anymore. If she had stayed in their village, she would just be starting fourth grade. The girl closed her eyes as she imagined herself running outside for recess with her two best friends, skipping rope in hand as they giggled and tripped and hogged the best shade.

She wondered where her friends were now, and if they'd shriek at the sight of her face, healed now, but ugly. She touched her cheek gently, her skin as potholed as the road they walked, and her fingers brushed the silk scarf tied around her head. It was a reminder, that they were walking towards better days, a better life. One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other. And so, they kept walking, through the destruction of their country.

The golden waves of wheat, once bordered by crimson poppies, were muddy and trampled. The villages smoked. And the refugees trudged on for what seemed like decades. Years of never-ending misunderstanding between countries, running deeper through their veins than the blood they shared. Years where the shelling ceased for blessed moments before starting again once more, crushing hopes of change.

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The city the refugees walked to was whole, the snow touched by car exhaust but not by blood. Warsaw was rebuilt on haunted bones but it had chosen to forgive, and now was ready to help those in need. The donut shop was closed but the people's hearts were open. Thrice daily, a train groaned into the station, leaving masses of stunned people who were ushered to tents and handed hot potato soup and buttered rye bread. Children with nothing but phone numbers scrawled across their forearms stood uncertainly amidst the rush, rescued by social workers who listened to their confused tales.

A group of women were taken into a kitchen of unimaginable warmth and light. *Pierogi*, made from a recipe lovingly handed down generations, sat on the stove. Piles of warm clothing filled the couch as they let themselves be taken in by kind, old hands who had once known the same ache. One woman collapsed at the table and wept into her hands for a husband and a life left behind. Wept because everything had changed so suddenly; the work of one man pitting countries against each other. The others milled around gingerly, silent and unsure of themselves. One, barely out of girlhood, stood back from the others, her cinnamon eyes casting shadows of a horror she could not speak of. The old woman who had opened her home dished out food and set plates on the table before pulling the young woman aside. She unbuttoned a pocket on her jacket and pulled out a scarf. It was faded and worn, the silk snagged here and there, but it was beautiful because it held a story.

"Sometimes the scars we carry are here," She touched her damaged, gravel cheeks, her blue eyes seeing a time existing only in memory. "And sometimes here," She continued, touching her heart. "But we can choose to hold onto even a little bit of hope." She shakily folded the scarf and tied it beneath the young woman's chin. "There will always be better days ahead."

"It's like our flag, blue and yellow," said the young woman flatly, words of hope unable to reach her. "They've hung them all around the city." She looked down, tentatively touching the knot. "I want to go home." She shuddered with inner grief; her numb mind caught in a loop as it replayed the death of her family. The old woman had no answers and no more words. She held the girl close as they mourned together.

Trust nobody

Samuel Shaw

It was a very unassuming day in England. Droplets of rain hit roofs and the sky was slightly darkened by clouds, a typical day in the English countryside. But it was peaceful and open. The only blemish in this picturesque area was the maximum-security prison that sat atop a hill in the middle of nowhere.

This was no stock standard prison. It was home to some of the deadliest criminals in England, some argued worst in the world. The men that had been sent here had committed crimes so numerous, so heinous, that they would never see freedom. A sentence handed down in this prison was a prolonged death sentence. And the conditions within made a man wish for the sweet release of whatever might come after life; which for the monsters within these walls, meant a reserved place in Hell.

The date was May 6th 1935. The guards at the prison were celebrating the silver jubilee of His Majesty King George V. The country of England was alive with celebration. It was great day for the nation, the people were drunk and merry across massive events around the country. The guards of this prison, not wanting to miss out on the festivities, decided to have a small party themselves to celebrate the momentous event. They had put all the prisoners in their cells and locked up for the night thinking there would be no harm in a little celebration. They were boisterous well into the night.

While the guards were preoccupied with their celebrating, they failed to notice a shadow passing the guardhouse. A few small thuds rang through the courtyard, however guards were talking so loudly they failed to hear them. A figure cloaked in darkness slipped through a hole in the wall; the celebrations effortlessly disguising his escape. Looking back at the high walls and hearing the sounds of the guards laughing, a wry smile came across his face. "*Impossible*, they said," he whispered to himself, before turning and fleeing into the darkness.

Two months later and the news was still terrifying the country; a convicted murderer was on the loose. The horror and fear had been enough that some parents decided to constantly keep their children home. The police had followed several leads in vain, but had been unable to turn up anything of consequence. The fact of it was: William Morgan was now long gone, and the gossip about what had happened to him would vary depending on who was asked. One of the prevailing theories was that he had somehow died following his escape. Though whatever had happened to him, fear from the very mention of his name was very much alive. He had been convicted of a quadruple homicide, having killed four party guests that he had invited to his house.

This was the main topic of discussion at the Maynard estate. The debate over the fate of William Morgan had drawn quite a crowd. Two main instigators of this debate were Thomas Stokes and Charles Maynard; the latter being the son of the elusive host Richard Maynard, who had yet to even make an appearance at the party thrown in his own home.

"I've made it quite plain, Thomas. The man is no longer with us. He no doubt found his demise at the hands of some other vagrant in a dark alleyway somewhere," stated Charles, a hint of frustration in his voice.

"Nonsense! He is most certainly still at large! And our police have done little to nothing about it, which frankly, is unacceptable," retorted Thomas. This claim had not fallen on deaf ears, as many in the gathered crowd muttered their agreement with Thomas' theory. However, there was one dissenting voice within the crowd – none other than the chief inspector himself, Frank Langford. Langford was an older gentleman, with greying hair and a coarse disposition. He had been inundated with interview requests over the last couple of months and was the lead investigator on William Morgan's case. It was he who had discovered the evidence which had led to Morgan's conviction years ago.

"The Police are, in fact, doing everything humanly possible to bring this scum to justice. The implication that we are inept is ridiculous! Mr Maynard is most likely correct, and Morgan has likely been dispatched by some other criminal. But - if this is not the case - we will find him, and then find an even deeper darker cell in which to throw him in and lose the key," he explained, a great deal of venom in his tone.

As the debate was about to reach boiling point, a scream cut rung out through the house. It was coming from the direction of Richard Maynard's study and the three men rushed quickly to investigate. Unbeknownst to them, a hooded figure who had been watching them through the window disappeared into the darkness. As

they entered the study, they were confronted with a horrific scene. Their esteemed host lay draped over the desk, bloody. Richard Maynard had been murdered.

"I saw him only a few hours ago and nothing was wrong," sobbed a distraught Charles upon being questioned about his last interactions with his father. The chief inspector knew one thing for sure: the killer had been here at the party. He immediately had Thomas instruct the guests that no one was to leave the mansion. As he investigated the scene, it became clear that Richard had been stabbed multiple times. Looking upon this scene, chills travelled down his spine. This murder reminded him of something horrible he'd seen before. This is how he had found William Morgan's victims. A most terrifying realisation dawned on him: perhaps Morgan had come for his revenge.

The two men left the study and returned to the main room. The inspector thought he would share his concerns with Charles, as he believed he should be informed. He soon regretted his decision.

"What do you mean William Morgan might be here?" Charles loudly exclaimed, sending an instant and intense panic through the room. The guests began to scatter, terrified by the prospect that the vicious murderer might be present. Before the inspector could regain control of the crowd, several members of the party had fled into various parts of the house.

"Everyone, we must remain together in the main hall. That's the only way to stay safe," shouted the chief inspector over the top of the chaos. The remaining members of the party slowly came back and began to listen as the inspector as he explained his plan. "I will go search for the other party members. I need a volunteer to come with me," commanded the inspector.

"I'll come. I'm not scared of a copycat imitating a dead man," exclaimed Thomas Stokes, still convinced of his theory.

"Ok. In that case Mr Maynard, I would ask you to stay with the rest of our guests and remain here. Morgan will not attack a group; a coward only attacks the vulnerable," claimed the inspector. The three men all agreed, and Thomas and the inspector headed further into mansion in search of the remaining guests.

The two men had searched unsuccessfully for ten minutes, then resigned to split up and cover more of the gigantic mansion. The inspector would take one wing, Thomas the other. Thomas began his search looking through various rooms, finding no one. Then, hearing a noise down the hallway, he peered into the dark and saw a figure. He began to walk towards it. "Hello. Are you alright? The inspector wants us back in the hall," he spoke softly, trying not to scare the person as he approached. The figure suddenly fled down the hallway, disappearing into the dark. Thomas thought about giving chase when he heard a noise from behind a door beside him, he opened it finally he found one of the guests. As he did, he felt a sharp pain in his back, then another and another.

Screams of pain rung out, echoing through the house. The inspector ran towards them, and when he arrived he found Charles Maynard standing over two corpses, knife in hand. He immediately questioned him.

"I heard the screams and came running. I found the knife sitting beside them and picked it up," he claimed, petitioning his innocence.

The inspector took the knife from him and took him into custody immediately, leading him out the front of the house where other officers had arrived to take him away. He handed him over and stepped away from the party into the shadows. The inspector then took the murder weapon out of his pocket, a malicious smile on his face as he wiped the knife on a handkerchief, cleaning the blood off the blade. It may be evidence, but he wasn't about to give away his favourite knife. After all it had helped him frame someone before. He could not believe his luck. Twice now he had gotten away with murder: *pays to be chief inspector* he thought to himself. As he turned to return to the party, his past suddenly caught up with him. He himself felt a sharp stabbing pain in his back, as a hand covered his mouth so he wouldn't be heard. He turned his head to see his assailant. He stared into the eyes of the last person he would ever see.

"Hello inspector," whispered William Morgan.

Port Foy
Rachael Thomson

The pressure in Laurie's chest heightened. She had to slow her breathing down if she had a slither of a chance at untangling herself from the leather bounds tightly wrapped around her chest and arms. Laurie shuffled her body as close to the wall as she could get. Her eyes did their best to adjust to the dim light around the small room which she assumed was Darryl's boat shed. Living in the small seaport town of Port Foy off the coast of England, meant that nearly everyone in the quaint village owned a boat shed of some sort. However, these one-roomed shanties weren't normally used for such criminal activities.

"Aaahhh." With a sigh, Laurie tried to right herself up, using the wall for a support. Hopefully the upright position could help with her breathing. Darryl had bound these leather ropes quite efficiently. *Darryl aye, who would have thought he would be the one trying to kill that precious little baby? He was the constable of Port Foy - why was he trying to kill the baby? And why had he tied me up too? What is his plan?*

Two weeks ago, a little bundle of joy mysteriously appeared on Laurie's doorstep. Wrapped up in white mesh and engulfed by a pale blue cloth, it was the most precious thing she had ever seen. Laurie thought it was strange that the baby was wrapped in mesh, since it added little to no warmth. Printed on the tiny pale blue cloth were tiny song books and a few Christmas trees, which was extremely odd, as it was in the middle of August. Since Laurie was a registered midwife, it made sense as to why the baby had been left on her doorstep. However, the law in 1963 was very strict, if a mother abandoned her child and was discovered, she would either be sent to prison or placed in an institution for wayward girls (which was just another form of prison). Laurie and her superior and mentor, Dr Richard Hardcastle, had been doing their absolute best to try and find the mother before the senior constable did, but had been coming up short. It didn't help that their associate Carol had just gone on leave three days prior, so they were short staffed when the baby arrived. However, much to Laurie's surprise, local villager William Carter, had been helping her search for the mother of the child.

Since Laurie seemed to have a lot of time on her hands while she waited for Darryl to turn up again, she thought she might as well try and figure out how she truly felt about Will. Maybe, just maybe, she might make it out alive and it would be helpful to have her feelings all figured out. Laurie had always been wary of William; he had gone out with nearly every single woman in the village. Everyone knew that he had been through a lot of pain in his life. His mother died when he was just a boy and ever since then his father had just kept drinking. Will's aunt eventually moved into the family home and did her best to take care of him. His aunt allowed Will to have his fun to a degree, however she insisted on him learning a trade. Hence, he became a fisherman. He excelled out on the sea and brought back to the village a substantial catch weekly, keeping the money coming in. However, he still liked the ladies, and every weekend you could catch him in the local pub chatting up some young woman. Lately though, it seemed like a switch had turned for him, he had done a complete turnaround. Ever since the baby arrived on Laurie's doorstep, he had taken a keen interest in the whole situation.

A sharp thud brought Laurie back to the present.

"How do you want to do this?" A raspy voice asked his companion. Laurie didn't recognise the first man's voice, but there was no hesitation, so she assumed whoever he was meant business.

"We have to be efficient this time. You messed up big time with the last one. How could you get it wrong? It was a simple plan for a simple man, yet you still messed it up."

"Aye, you didn't tell me what I was meant to do with the iron chains - how was I meant to know to put that round tha' body?"

Laurie knew exactly who had spoken then. Darryl was back, and it seemed like he was working for someone else. The first voice spoke up again.

"Think with your head man, why else would I of put chains down next to tha' other supplies? Do better this time, aye? I don't wanna hear 'bout a body floating to the surface. If that stupid fisherman hadn't of found her floating, we could 'ave made it out clean as a whistle."

"Oh yeah, and what 'bout the baby?" Darryl's voice grew in intensity, obviously not liking being accused of messing up the first time.

Their voices drowned out as they walked around to the back of the shed. Laurie tried to stretch out her legs, but it was hard to do since the ropes were tied down to her knees. *I just need to stand up, then maybe I could walk around the room and try and find something sharp to cut the ropes off with.* With a low groan, Laurie rolled up onto her knees, the rope digging into her flesh, cutting off the circulation to her legs. She shuffled her knees backwards until her back was firmly pressed against the wall. *Okay, just push yourself up onto your feet, Laurie.* Laurie pressed her back into the wall whilst trying to lift her bottom off the ground. She felt her feet slipping out from underneath her. "Stay firm Laurie, remember you are a strong capable woman," she whispered to herself. Alas her feet continued to slip. Thud! Her bottom hit the ground. She winced in pain, trying to stay quiet. Who knew when the men would return - she had to move swiftly.

Sweat was pouring off her. Her heartbeat quickened and she started to breathe heavily. She had been reasonably calm before. She knew Darryl personally and didn't think he would actually hurt her, but now it seemed like he was going to kill her. And, it sounded like he had already killed someone before, possibly the baby's mother. Somehow after looking after the baby, she had become caught up in the middle of a much bigger situation then she realised.

I have to get out of here. I need to find William and figure this out with him. Pushing herself back onto the wall, Laurie tensed her legs. "Okay. One, two, three." Forcing her body upwards, Laurie started to move. Slowly her bottom came off the ground. Shuffling her feet, a bit more underneath her, she inched further up the wall. Using her back to leverage her feet up and underneath her, Laurie finally stood to her feet.

Oh, thank goodness! She started to shuffle around the room. There was no moon out tonight, so the entire boat shed was pitch black. Using her hands that were tied around her back, she felt the walls. *Surely there is something sharp enough to cut the ropes on around here, I need to move into the middle of the room.*

"Ouch!" *What was that?* Looking down Laurie squinted to make out what she had just run into. *Is that a...* Laurie bent over to take a closer look. However, with all the leather ropes bound tightly around her down to the knees, she was quite top heavy. Leaning forward Laurie started to lose balance. She tried to right herself, but overcompensated. She started to fall, moving her legs out a little she tried to rebalance. "Ahh, no, no NOOOOO!"

Losing all control, Laurie crashed down to the ground. *All that effort just to end right back to where I was,* she thought. Feeling tired and defeated she laid her head back and closed her eyes.

"What was that?" Her head touched cold metal.

"Oh my goodness! A fishing knife." Laurie scooted back up and shifted her body so that her hands could reach for the knife. Grasping a hold of it, Laurie got to work at cutting herself free. Tilting the knife backwards she hacked away at the leather ropes. After a few minutes, her hands were free. Now for the rest of her body. Starting with her chest, she worked her way down to her knees cutting herself free from the leather bounds. As the last strand came loose, Laurie jumped straight to her feet. *Okay, now I need to find a way out of here.* Heading over to the door, she grasped her hands on the knob, twisting it back, the door released and swung wide open.

You would think they would have at least tried to lock me in there. Glancing back and forth, Laurie crept along the edge of the building. Still holding the knife in her hand just in case she ran into either Darryl or the other man, she reached the road that led straight to the village. *I've got to make a run for it, once I've reached the village, I can find William and we can work out what we need to do together.*

"Hey! Not so fast!"

"Ahh!" Laurie whirled around. Darryl was running up from the boat shed towards her.

I won't be able to make it back to the village in time, Darryl will outrun me for sure. Quickly, Laurie scanned her surroundings. Maybe William had stayed in his boat shed? It was worth a shot; it was her only hope at getting away from Darryl.

Turning back around, Laurie sprinted for William's shed, she could just make it out through the trees. Clutching the knife in her hand she ran as fast as she could. Her heart pounding in her chest. Darryl was gaining on her, swearing his head off.

"Stop right 'ere, aye! Come back up here. Ughhh."

Glancing behind her for a quick second, Laurie watched as Darryl tripped over a tree root. Darryl's fall gave her just a few more seconds to get to William's boat shed. She was almost there. Jumping onto his small deck, she reached his front door. "William! Open up! Are you in there? William!"

Laurie quickly peered through his window. It was dark and she couldn't see anyone. Spinning around, Laurie drew her knife and held it out in front of her. *I'm going to have to get out of this on my own.*

Darryl finally sprinted onto the deck. Puffing and out of breath, he keeled over.

"Can ye just hold up? We need to talk."

"No... you hold up! I have the knife. So, you need to talk." Gaining courage Laurie moved towards Darryl. "Why did you tie me up? Who are you working for? Why are you trying to kill me?" Shoving the knife towards Darryl, Laurie stood up straighter and moved her right leg forward, bracing for a potential fight.

"Look lass, I'm just doing what ma boss paid me to do. We ain't gonna kill ya though. We just want the baby. When we grabbed ya earlier, we 'oped you had him with ya. But ya didn't, so we 'ad to go through with it, otherwise you would find out who we are." Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Darryl leaned up against the wall, tired from his run.

Moving closer, Laurie shakingly kept her arm raised, knife straight out. "Look, I want you down on the floor, sit down and don't move." Laurie's voice cracked, but she tried to stare him down.

"Oh yeah, and how ya gonna make me?"

Not knowing what else to do to make him listen to her, Laurie's survival instincts kicked in. "Like this!" Before Darryl even knew what hit him, Laurie thrust the knife straight into his gut.

"Ahhh!" Screaming in pain, Darryl dropped to the floor. "Ya killed me, ya killed me!"

Laurie stood staring at him; her face was as pale as the bleached floors in the nurses' quarters back home. She glanced down at her hands, shaking like a new baby goat trying to stand up. Splatters of blood were up and down her arms and skirt. She couldn't seem to move; shock overtook her body. Darryl moved forward to right himself up. Moaning in pain, he placed his hands protectively over the gaping slit in his stale green shirt.

Darryl's moan snapped Laurie back to reality. She needed answers, fast. "Darryl, you need to tell me what's going on, I need to get you help, but I can't do that if you don't tell me the whole story."

"I don't wanna tell ya. I got to keep secrets." Darryl's eyes started to droop.

"Start talking Darryl, you need to stay awake." Laurie was thinking that once she got Darryl's story straight, she would tie him up with her nurse's belt that was sitting around her dress, and rush to town to get help.

Grinding his teeth, Darryl pushed his words out, his eyes staring straight up at Laurie. "Ma boss is Daniel Tailor. He lives over in the next village. He promised me a quarter of the income for this job." Moving his hand to his tummy, Darryl groaned in pain. "Am aye gonna die?"

Laurie leaned down to look at his wound. "Just keep talking, you'll be fine if you stay awake and talk to me."

"Ye can't be serious," Darryl grimaced.

"I am very serious, I need answers." Laurie stood back up, pacing back and forth in front of him. "Keep going."

"Daniel and miss what's her name... Carol, they... ahhh, they... look, he was the father, you see. Ahhh, I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, can I get some help here?"

Laurie's brow furrowed, "The father of who? Carol? No that's not possible. Wait, the father of the baby! "The father of the baby?"

"Yeah, now get me outta here, aye? I need help"

Laurie knew this to be true, he did need help, but how could she leave without drawing attention to Mr. Daniel Taylor? And wasn't he married with three children - why would he give up the baby? And what on earth did this have to do with Carol?

"Ok, I need a few more answers before I try to find help. How is Carol connected? And why does Daniel want the baby killed?"

"Killed! Haha! Killed? He don't want that baby dead. That baby is our pay off!"

"What?" Laurie was extremely confused. She grabbed a rag lying on the ground next to one of William's potted plants. Leaning over Darryl, she handed him the rag. "Here, press that into your wound, it will help slow down the bleeding. Now, explain how Carol's baby is helping you lot make money?"

"Stupid girl, it don't matter. I need ya to 'elp me, that's what matters."

Coming to a halt in front of him, Laurie narrowed her eyes. "You had me tied up, planned to kill me, and now you are upset because I need to help you? I need a few more answers."

"Okay, okay." He replied. "But please 'elp me afterwards. Look, Carol's the mum, he's the dad, he killed her to get the baby - so he could get the heritage."

None of that made sense, Darryl was starting to slur his words, it was hard to piece what he was saying together.

"So, are you telling me, Daniel had an affair with Carol, she fell pregnant, and he then had her killed for the child to gain an inheritance? What inheritance? Is Carol alive?" Laurie was trying to piece it together as best she could, adrenalin and shock curbing her ability to process the whole situation.

Darryl's breathing was starting to become shallow. He pulled his feet underneath himself and curled himself into a ball. He started to whisper. "Daniel hired me to kill Carol. Her father is Lord Nicholas Sherman. He is currently lying on his death bed. He 'as cancer and ain't gonna make it. It's taken 'im a while to kick tha bucket, though. Daniel decided to seduce Carol. He convinced her that he left his wife for her, got her pregnant and once she had the baby, he told her he don't need her no more, so he got me to top her off."

Laurie gasped. "You killed Carol?" *Oh, my giddy aunt, it now makes so much sense. The blanket with Christmas trees and song books, she was telling me it was her baby.* Carol had just disappeared, not told anyone anything and the following day Laurie had received a letter of leave, but now it all makes sense. *How could I not have picked up on her hints?*

"Ahhhhhh," Darryl was crippled in his position, his eyes tightly shut, moaning. There was no way he would be chasing her, so Laurie decided to make a run for it. Now that she was free she could run, then race to tell Dr Hardcastle where Darryl was, so that he could get the help he needed.

"Darryl, I'll be right back, you just hold on now."

Laurie turned around and raced towards the village.

"So, Laurie, how are you feeling after your near-death experience?" William had taken Laurie out to the pub for fish and chips. After helping Laurie with the baby these past couple of weeks, he may have fallen for her, a new feeling for him.

"I'm feeling ok." Leaning forward, Laurie placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. "I can't believe I actually stabbed Darryl! At least he's going to make it, I couldn't stand to have his death on my conscience."

"Yes, well he will be out of hospital in the next week or so and heading straight to jail along with his mate Daniel." William shook his head. "I'm still struggling to believe that our local copper is a cold-blooded murderer."

"I'm struggling to believe Carol is dead! We were friends, how come she never told me about this guy, and her baby? She did hide the pregnancy well though. I'm a bloody midwife, how'd I miss all the signs?" Grabbing a chip from the bowl on the table, she sighed. "I guess there are a lot of secrets in the village of Port Foy!"

The Babysitter

Ashlee Sugrue

My eyes flick to the moor rushing past, the wind galloping over it forming green waves in its wake. I drive down a desolate road, the beginnings of a fog appearing, as though the clouds had decided the heavens were on the ground today. The seemingly endless expanse of flat, lonesome land holds no structures or any indication of man's touch in its midst. The GPS sounds, interrupting my futile search for signs of inhabitants. It shows my destination is fast approaching. The mist, which had first been gentle hands reaching down, is now gripping my car in a vice, suffocating colour, and vision to leave a sheet of white in its place. I rumble down the road, squinting into the thickened fog, all to little avail. Suddenly, large black, wrought iron gates appear, stark against their ghostly surroundings. A notification that I have arrived reaches my ears.

I slow as I pull through the gate. Figures climb its frame. Delicate fauns playing their flutes and cherubs drawing bows, all stare down at me as I drive past. The gravel road crackles under my tyres, the only sound to be heard. Hedges line the road, filling my peripheral vision with dull green hues. I pull in front of the house, if it can be called that, it is so immense I have to strain my neck to see all of it. Ornate balconies line its walls, windows are coated in mould, and dark towers jut from its roof, where shingles are losing their battle against the onslaught of lichen. The mansion is enveloped in an eerie air and stands ominously, as if awaiting a fool to dare enter its depths.

This cannot be the right place; it looks abandoned, I think to myself as I collect my breath and get out of my car despite all signs pushing me to flee from this gloomy homestead. I approach the door. Paint is peeling away to expose its bare weathered oak beneath, each stair wailing as I walk up them. I stand at the door and reach out a hesitant hand and knock hard. No voice and no shuffling of steps can be heard. I knock again and call out but receive no answer, so battering my fearful reasoning aside, I open the door and walk inside. The inside of the mansion is bigger than I had anticipated, the ceiling so far above it could have been the sky. All around is an assortment of trinkets and furniture, some covered in fraying sheets. Pictures hang on the walls proudly, their frames mostly tarnished, encasing faces that smile through their yellowing varnish. I wander through the room, my hand brushing a massive table, its heavy spiral oak legs embossed with intricate impressions of foliage and chimeras. A singular oblique sunbeam alighted on the floor tiles, besmirched in dust and grime, this yellow light seeming to be the only lively presence around.

"Is anyone home?" I cry out. I am only met by unbroken silence. *They must have sent the wrong address* I decide as I turned to leave.

I yell as I come face to face with an old woman glaring down at me. Her face is gaunt and sunken, the warmth of her skin long since drained, leaving only a sickly pale stain to decorate her decaying flesh. A skeletal hand clutches a crucifix hanging around her frail neck. Her eyes are stiff and devoid of emotion as she stands solemn.

"I was sent here on a babysitter job request, is this the correct place?" I ask, trying in vain to hide my trembling. She looks me over as one might a cockroach, her disdain clear.

"My name is Ms. Banshee. The child in question is called Violet, you are expected to keep watch of her until I return at midnight or else no pay will be given." Ms. Banshee has a surprisingly firm voice for such a fragile frame.

Attempting to ignore the ghastly state of the woman, I nod my acknowledgement, words appearing to be too difficult for me to form. She motions for me to follow her up the staircase, and as we climb higher, warmth begins emanating from the higher rooms. We reach the second level, vastly different from the first, with lush carpet trailing the middle of the hallway. There's vivid wallpaper, so elaborate the flora and fauna depicted seem to prance and sway as I make my way past. The old woman hobbles on, aiming for an open doorway ahead. Entering the room, I am hit by the scent of plums, cardamon spice and something a little foul. Ms. Banshee gestures towards the cot nearby, I look in and there, nestled in blankets, is a sleeping baby.

"Be sure you do not lose sight of her, young lady," Ms. Banshee states again, glaring at me with her disturbing eyes. I looked around the room, the fire on the left side of the room roared, casting flickering light across shelves of books and a brilliant chandelier hanging proudly above my head. I look back to the door and startle, for Ms. Banshee had vanished. I peer out the doorway but see no sign of her. *To think I could have been*

home at this hour, I sigh but conclude that money was of utmost importance to me, despite the increasingly alarming surroundings I was in.

I fall back into a dark crimson chair to try and settle my nerves and gaze into the cot at the creature inside. Its features are soft and rounded, thus far the only thing that evoked tranquillity in the disconcerting place.

"Hello Violet," I whisper as I gently pat her ruddy cheek.

I pull a book from the small table beside me and admire the gilded cover. I flip through its pages, nervously glancing up every few moments, as I engulf myself in crimson and printed words.

Time creeps by until darkness starts to settle upon the mansion, I light a candle to fend away its encroachment. My limbs, feeling stiff, urge me to walk out into the hallway. The carpet sinks under my feet and the wallpaper, delightful during the day seems twisted now. Prancing has turned to stalking and swaying to violent shaking. Disturbed by the sense of doom I turn back to the room. But when I look in the cot there is no baby, only an imprint of its small body left in the blankets. I frantically search the room, throwing pillows, shoving my face under furniture but there is no sign of the little one.

I burst into the hallway, scouring the length of it. Seeing a door left ajar slightly I rush into the room. My nose picks up the scent of plums, cardamon spice and a foulness that I recognised from the baby room. I lean over to check behind a couch but then hear a rustle behind me. Snapping my head round, I spy the baby and fall back in terror. She is standing on legs, chubby and weak. She should not be able to support her body yet. *Surely she is too young to be standing.*

"Hello Mary"

I crawl back further in horror. *How does she know my name? How can she talk?!* I scramble to my feet.

"How... How can you talk?! You're too young!" I manage to blabber out, unable to discern if I am in fact awake or not.

"I know more than you think, Mary" Violet garbles, flashing a grin. She takes a wonky step towards me.

I bolt for the door, tearing down the steps and leaping over the banister. Darkness has enveloped the room and I blindly part my way through couches and boxes. *Where is the door, where is the door!*

"Mary, I just want to show you something! Pretty please?!" Violet calls, her voice bouncing through the room as though she were in every corner. I press on, shoving past sheets and clutter. Spying a dim light nearby, I rush towards it.

The room I had enter is just bright enough for me to be able to see a large canopy bed, which I hide under and force my breathing to slow.

I wait for some time. No sound coming, and no voice to be heard, only my panicked heart. I let my face press to the floor and try to hold back tears. I swipe at my eyes and turn my head, blinking away the residue.

There, through blurred vision I spy brilliant teeth and a small, pudgy hand reaching for me. I scream, her little hand is dripping in a liquid thick and dark. *That can't be blood, can it?!*

I go into a frenzied craze, clawing my way out from under the bed and running into the darkness once more.

"Please Mary, don't run away from me! Please play!" I hear Violet call out - then sobbing all around me, her pitiful cries echoing. I desperately clamber over furniture until finally I see the door, moonlight shining under it. I turn to look behind me and see a dark silhouette making its way towards me, something clutched in her hand, scraping along the ground, sparks flying from it.

I barge my way through the door and rip the door of my car open, jump into my seat and skid out onto the driveway. I tear down the road, glancing back at the mansion one last time. I think for I moment I see a small body perched in a window up high, a glowing smile and a small waving hand.

Easy Target

Taylor Kelly

How the world kept spinning, unchanged by the tragedies that had befallen its people, was a mirror of the dismissive nature of man.

The single streetlamp on the corner next to the coffee shop showed a warm orange and buzzed if one got close enough. The rest of the street was silent – very telling of the area of town she was in. Only the rich could afford the quiet after all.

She stood in the shadow cast by the light and watched. Waiting. Reflecting. Pondering. Feeling nostalgic, without the pleasant hum of good memories often accompanying that feeling.

It was a sunny day that day. People chit-chatted and drank their coffee, sitting in the plush chairs and picking at their pastry. Everyone was right when they told her to save up to afford a GAP year here – it was worth it for the experience but costly for the wallet. One day, she found this coffee shop while exploring the town and seeing the sights. Walking in, she had smelt the most pleasant of aromas and immediately fell in love. The workers seemed lovely, and the customers were friendly. Although, the price was steep, but what wasn't in this area? Coming in every afternoon for about a week, she made herself a little routine. Not enough to be a regular, but enough to gain a smile and a greeting by the girls who alternated their shifts.

Not enough to be considered missing when she stopped showing up.

They had a cinnamon smelling candle burning at her table. She had been there so long that she smelled like the candle. But when she reached the dregs of her coffee, she decided to order a cake as well.

She had never done that before.

Standing up and aiming to throw her cup in the rubbish bin partially on the way to the counter, it hit the rim and fell to the floor. She had grumbled to herself, bending down at the knees to pick it up, and when she grabbed it and stood back up, her head knocked against a person who had appeared from nowhere. A mix of “sorry” and “didn't see you there” blended into each other, and she looked up sheepishly. Her eyes had grown comically wide, as though she had seen an angel. But she had not. Instead, she had met someone who clearly belonged to the guy with red skin and horns. She just did not know that yet. He was stunning – all angles and expensive coat, just the type of man found around these parts. Styled with dark hair, even darker eyes, and a trimmed beard, he could be a model. His voice was low, and he knew its effect on others. He offered to make it up to her by buying her the cake she had wanted. She accepted, and he had smiled, a dimple the only asymmetrical feature on his otherwise perfect face. His teeth were blinding, straight and surrounded by full lips. He was a local, she could tell, he fit this area more than she ever would or could hope to.

He was charming, holding doors open for her and picking her up in expensive cars. Smelling like costly cologne and listening to her replies and rambles when he asked her questions. They were always simple questions but when she responded, he had an intelligent, charming reply that made her opinions and thoughts seem more extraordinary than they were.

“So green is your favourite colour? Ah, the colour of spring and renewal – rebirth! It also pairs well with grey... my favourite colour.”

Comparatively, she felt like she was dressing up, often wearing a beige trench coat that looked fashionable but really had been found in an op shop. Her hair parted, crisscrossed down the middle, the roots dark and dirty but transitioning to blonde at the tips. Wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, she was sure this outfit could be found on Pinterest (perhaps without the ratty sneakers). She was tall enough to touch a doorframe with ease and be asked if she played basketball but stood comfortably under his chin. She was initially happy about this observation – she had always found it hard to receive the right kind of attention from those taller than her. Two men, in particular, came to mind; one of them was comparable to a prince, the other most definitely a pauper.

Maybe that made her an easy target. She was so swept up in its fantasy – a whirlwind romance during her year away. Perhaps her apparent child-like naivety calling out – like a pure soul enticing the devil to destroy it. A meet-cute at a coffee shop – the cliché of clichés. It was days of fun and sweet open-lip kisses, picnic dates and shopping trips where he refused to allow her to pay a cent. Her days were filled with holding hands while watching movies, giggling at inside jokes and everything one could imagine from a romance novel.

Until it wasn't.

And now she stood in the shadow of the streetlamp, staring up at the building that housed her when one willing year turned into many unwilling years. The room inside the building with the creaky floorboards and the soundproof rooms so no one could hear when she desperately cried for someone to come and save her.

Only the rich could afford the quiet after all.

The broken skin around her wrist and the chronic pain in her ankles she'd have to live with forever. Things that could be healed with money but that initial year – one that was meant to be fun and exciting – had taken all that she saved.

And that's why everyone said to move on. To let go of the past when escaping had only been the beginning. Sure, people were sympathetic. Listening ears and compassion served on a silver platter the first few months, but now everyone around her expected her to move on and forget it had ever happened. He was too rich and powerful, and she would never be able to hit him where it hurt, not with her lack of status and meagre funds. So why even bother?

Living well and forgetting him was the best revenge out there... right?

As if she could. As if she could leave it all behind. Every step reminded her of when she wasn't allowed to walk. That whenever a door shuts behind her or the scent of matcha lattes wafts around her, she freezes and wants nothing more than to run away.

It wasn't fair for her to have to move on.

It isn't fair that he is alive when she feels like dying every day.

It was cold. The air felt like ice, just like his hands did when he caressed her cheek in a mockery of affection. Hands in her pockets with fingers clenched around a handle, she waited with the patience of someone who had nothing to lose.

Footsteps.

One after the other in a heavy thud, the heels of his shoes clicking in that awful, familiar way. She was sure he hadn't noticed her, and she was right. He passed the streetlamp without a second glance. Pulling the weapon out of her pocket, she flicked the safety off and stepped out of the shadows. There would be no confrontation; she would give him no chance at escaping or calling for help. She raised the gun up as he kept walking, her footsteps matching his as she held the distance. Her heart raced. A smile stretched across her face. It was her flawless victory. He stopped. She stopped. He raised his matcha latte to his lips to take a sip – steam barely visible in the low light. But there was just enough for her to see him and for him to see her. She watched as he swallowed and watched as his eyes flickered towards her silhouette.

Bang.

Straight through to the other side of his head. She followed the downwards trajectory of his body, internally screaming with a sense of victory. *Timber!* The matcha latte spilled all over the sidewalk, mixing in with the blood that was starting to pool. Lights began to flicker on in the apartments surrounding the scene, and she scurried in the dark, leaving the body and the cup on the ground.

She'd make up for littering later.

She felt colder than she was while she was motionless in the dark. The type of cold that makes you want to boil yourself in the shower or burn your tongue on flavoured hot water. It was a bitterness that seeps into your brain and stops you from caring. And she didn't care, not one bit. Because finally, she could walk the streets of life without an eye watching her back. She could sleep on her side without thinking that she'll be forced onto her back. She was free.

Freer than the birds that fly in the sky because they still had a duty, an imprint from mother nature dictating what they could do and where they could go. She killed her mother nature and left him lying in his own blood like he left her lying in hers.

The Storyteller
Francis Doherty-Bigara

The Storyteller, a very short, short story.

"Okay, okay! I have one," she says. "I'm not sure how this will work out but I'll give it a shot. It's my first time... at short stories, so please be gentle with me." She cocks her head to the side, flutters her eyelashes several times and smiles at her friends, dimples pulled in for maximum effect. Mischief is written all over her face at the virginal reference. Honestly, it gets me going when she plays like this! I could take her home immediately and fix up a few things.

"Aaaaah, I'm so nervous!" she continues, swishing her gorgeous mane of hair around. "Nervous excited. Nervous and excited. Nervous, excited, and scared!" Still smiling, dimples still pulled in, and wide-eyed with excitement, she clears her throat for a strong beginning, and to buy even more precious seconds while her story constructs in the background of her mind. Big breath in through the nose, hold, aaaaand... out through pursed lips. It's always the same. "Okay, here goes..." She downs the last bit of her wine.

"A donkey walks into a bar and the barman says, 'Why da long face?' He has a speech impediment, you see. Several speech impediments actually... and not much smarts. Unlucky fellow."

"So, the donkey says, 'I'm glad you asked actually. I am so depressed. I met this filly, she's beautiful, a racehorse, practically a unicorn, legs that go on forever. FOUR of them, perfectly slender and chiselled, big brown eyes that shine brilliantly, and teeth to absolutely die for! A gift horse, actually. It turns out though, she's a bit of a night mare; a chronic insomniac! Never ever sleeps. Stands around all night long, eyes half open, braying and flashing her teeth. I don't know what to do with myself anymore. That kind of behaviour night after night, week after week, all those teeth flashing and neighing and braying... it does something to you after a while, man, gets you going you know, makes you weak at the knees; even for a jackass like me. It's really messing with my head and, to be honest, ...', the donkey leans forward and whispers, 'it's beginning to hurt a little, down there... at the back, between the legs (if you know where I mean)... and I'm exhausted! For the love of Centaur, I must do something to relieve myself, of this plight!' ". She swoons, her head back aghast, and hand to forehead in dramatic mock desperation.

" 'I get you, fwend. Quite a pwobwem you got going. Spoken to anybody else about it yet?' The barman's impediments come and go randomly", she excuses apologetically. "It's just how his condition works". She's never been able to hold an accent. "The donkey replies, ..."

" 'No, no I haven't. No one has asked me really. They're all being sheepish and bleating to themselves about God knows what. Baa baa. Or clucking around like hens. So busy clucking, all day long, but really busy doing clucking nothing at all, useless animals. I'd turn them all into food if I could!' She rolls her eyes mimicking the donkey's annoyance at the absurdity of his social context. She is so absolutely cute when she gets into character like this and turns the play on.

'So, I thought the sow would have something to say and boy did she ever. Pig-malion, that one, falls in love with every idea she creates and snorts about it all day long. I couldn't get a word in edgewise.' She rolls her eyes as if she was the donkey, 'Stitched me a few solutions to nothing, that sow did. And patched up just as much. Also, some pigeons flew into the coup the other day.' She halts, some time passes in absolute dead silence until it starts getting a little awkward. 'Well, that's all there is to say about them really. Coo coo, coo coo... they're pigeons!'" She raises both her arms at the elbows and spreads her hands in explanation to her audience, as if the donkey could have done this too.

" 'Quite da dilemma. Fought about puttin' her out to pasture sometime, 'en?' asked the barman who is now also occasionally Pommy. God, forgive me." She says, "The donkey continues..."

" 'Funny you should say that, Mister. I have actually, now that you mention it. I've heard the grass is greener on the other side, sweet as lumps of sugar. Just walk down the garden path and cross over to the other

side, it is pure heaven. All the cows have done it, the sheep too. They're always out to pasture. I get a little jealous sometimes, feeling rather singular and left out. I hear though, from the rooster, you just have to pluck up some courage and actually do the deed. BELIEVE you're a colt and pull the trigger! The rooster says. I mean there are worse things one can do, right? I don't know, sometimes I guess you just need a little help to overcome the uncertainty; the fear and trepidation of life's subtle consequences, you know? The finality of it all, once an action is done, it can't be undone.'

"The barman nods softly. 'ight. I see', he says, eyes slightly drooped and squinting as the cogs start to turn... ever so slowly, and carefully. 'So, what will it be?' "

" 'Oh, yes of course. I'm so busy monologuing about my self-indulgent troubles I forgot where I was or why I came. Hmmm okay let me see... chardo-neigh, please? Double, I think. Yes, double. Double, or nothing. Is that ok? I hope I don't make an ass of myself.' " A soft chuckle makes its way around the table at this carefully placed cliché. Her audience is deeply engaged, carefully hanging on every word. I am even more deeply engaged.

She continues, "In painfully slow contemplation the barman's lights start to turn on, very dimly at first and then it stops there. 'Double, ya say? Well, dat is a bit of incentive for a man behind bars. Saaaay, you got me finkin' like a piwate. I know dis guy, he might be good fo ya, ya know... wiff your nightmares. Da boys in da back call 'im Da Vet. 'e's an animal once he gets workin'. Won't stop till da deed is done, everyfing is weigned in and da wace is won, guawenteed! Surgeon's pwecision an' all, an' he knows how to deal wiff a horse wiff a bwooken leg, I tell ya, he sure does. Seen it a hundwed times meself. One to da head and dey don't feel nuffin. Nex fng you know, 'e's gent'y walking 'em down cobble stones to 'em pearly garden gates an' onto gweener pastures. Wight as wain on a sunny day you'll feel once 'is work's all done. Y'll see. Y'll be chompin' at the bit, I tell ya, an' your nightmare will be over, pushin' up 'em daisies. Da Vet, he will fix things up fo' ya, fo' sure' "

" 'Oooo daisies, I do like daisies!' "

" 'All da daisies you want. Saaaaay, you got some fodder for Da Vet, mate? He won't do nuffin, for nuffin.' "

" 'Fodder? Bails and bails! Don't you worry about that, hey, so long as the sun is shining!' "

" 'An' da sun will be shining, my fwend. You can bet on Da Vet. 'e ne'er fails. Not once yet, ne'er 'erd of it. 'e's a sure win, each way! Double or nuffin like a sweet duet, all up and not a twixie in sight. Jus say da word, mate, an' I'll get 'im in the stalls for ya. Soon 'e'll be off, an' y'll bof be in pawadise.' "

" 'Actually, yes, I know the vet, quite intimately. Checked my temperature just the other day, he did, and a deep cleansing.' " She holds her rear end and pauses slightly to allow the imagery to wash through.

" 'Hmmm... I'm liking the way you think, barman. She won't even see it coming. It will be like a mega super grand surprise birthday party!!! I know, I'll invite everybody to come along. This is so exciting; she will be so happy! And maybe I can get me some mare afterwards... wink wink, nudge nudge. I could explode all over the place, with excitement. You're right! I can't wait. This is so exciting! Hmmm... ok! The donkey nods. 'So, how about that drink... neigh-bour?' "

She curtsies, the plot left hanging. I excuse myself from the table, walk over and whisper in her ear. She also excuses herself. We have our own story to conclude... in the other room... behind closed doors.

The Cliff Experience

David Blanch

As I roamed the land to observe its wonders, I found what I saw to be truly fascinating. Enamoured by the numerous entities that it could form, the variability of what it could offer. The observation of many different actions projected through different people. How their emotions are associated with their actions, and how cataclysmic those said emotions, could be affecting the action. The ambiguity of what I felt differed, subject to the thoughts I had created, so I believed. As I roamed the land, I found myself wandering back to locations where memories reside, perceiving them with new angles. However, when visiting a location where I was the spectacle as much as the area where I stood, within solitude. Those were when my deeply enrooted thoughts stirred. Wracked with what I believed to be infallible concepts and different ideas of what I thought of my own self. How I reacted to those around me. Those ideas, those perceptions that would remain stagnant, unchangeable. Did I not find myself as wonderful to the wonders which surrounded me? I was trudging along, with a heart deeply weighted. Searching for answers for that sole question. I eventually found myself on a cliff. A place I had visited before without knowing. With the same question time and time again without realising, I felt that the answer sought was at the edge, but I was afraid. A deep innate fear of what lies beyond. So I looked from a distance, a self-made barrier. An area viewed from the border I put around myself, daring never to go beyond.

Would the answer I am seeking lie there?

This place. The place I had always chosen to walk away from. Without knowing, without realising. Refusing to observe it's wonders. Afraid to observe its fascinations., How I felt remained, dull, melancholic, I knew what would happen next as I have done before. able to turnback, to go through the rounds, to repeat history, to be chained by self induced shackles. Yet the desire to know what lies beyond burned like small embers within, that fire grew, fire that sought out cracks of hope, of change. What was beyond the cliff, it had taken hold of me, yes! A catalyst strong enough to stir my bones. The winds of change stirred, it howled with the night skies, begging to match the night's glory. The fire within, what once was small embers screamed into a daring flame! My mind screamed resistance, all rational thought told me to walk away, like I always had, to douse the flames which burned within.

I took a step forward.

Like putting a hand on a hot stove, each step burned. Every ounce of my being shrieked to stop. But I embraced the hot metals searing away at the palm of my hand. I accepted it with newfound will and pressed forward. Already a bit closer, the previous boundary shattered. Shattered thoughts. Shattered concepts. They dissipated into the night, leaving scattered remains. Step by step they were scattered, boundaries concreted now becoming sand. The shackles slowly burned away, melting on my skin. My yearning to discover what lies beyond dwelled deep within me. The fire within roaring out of control, no longer chained. Overpowering any sense of hesitation I had once before. I made a final step forward. As I looked out in front of me, My knees buckled and I fell...

Was this it? Regret washed over me, enveloped me. As the wind screamed and howled. I clung onto the cliff. Dark clouds grew within my once burning heart. What lay below me was the broken shackles that I had thought I had casted off.

I had dared to hope...
look where hope had got me...

My fists clenched upon the cliff-face in burning white. Nothing had changed. There was no answer. I laughed but nothing was funny. The air tickled my feet as they hanged lifelessly. Defeated and dejected should I let the waves welcome me? But something inside me still burned, something the ocean had not touched. A buoy of hope filled my heart. Dare I take it? Dare I trust it? I closed my eyes and pulled. Like gears grinding my muscles moved. Inch by inch I clambered up the cliff. There was no room for doubt. Tears rolled through my face. I could hear the roar of the waves as if screaming at me to let go. I dare not open my eyes to see what lurked below. As chaos circled me as I pulled. It suddenly stopped.

My eyes were finally opened.

Endless ocean reflected the moonlight.. As I looked down, I saw the tide that greeted me before, endlessly ramming away onto the beach, with a force I could never meet. As I looked up I saw the stars in the starry night skies. A spectacle unmatched.

I found what I observed to be beautiful.

The night and the ocean complimented each other's existence. Creating a display that an eye could gaze upon forever. They were alive, and they lived in co-existence. A sight to truly behold. Involuntarily, more tears rolled down my cheek. Unable to no longer control what I felt, no longer able to predict how I would feel. Melancholy burned away. As a feeling that deeply resided within me, slowly but surely rumbled to life once more. I hoped that one day, I could become the night, to become the moon, to become the stars, so I could find the ocean. And live in harmony with them. To live beautifully and experience life abundantly. I doubted myself, I was afraid of the dream, of hope. But even so I dared to dream. Fists closed. If I could not become the night, then I would become the ocean, the battering waves, reflecting the moon's light. Living in perfect harmony with the night, the stars provide little spectacles upon the surface. As endless as time itself. What was once a fist became an open hand.

Once again, after a very long time, I dared to dream. To hope. To learn if I could love again. The wind still howled, and the world did not change. My emotions remained, but how I perceived myself started to change.

Had I found the answer which I sought?

The answer didn't exist, but I learned the question did not either, like apparitions in dreams, they faded away out of existence. But I was met with a new question. This beautiful world, its beautiful surroundings. I was a part of it too. I had to find out why. Embers burning within, palms open wide, I continued further into existence with a newfound fire.

Land of Oz
Jenaya Lewis

*You can let it go
You can throw a party full of everyone you know
And not invite your family, cause they never showed you love
You don't have to be sorry for leaving and growing up.
Matilda ~ By Harry Styles*

She stood at the top of the stairs. Her big toe poked through the end of her sock and her hair was making an escape from her bun. Her heartbeat pulsing in her ears was reminiscent of a knock at the door. They said one step at a time; that's how she would do this—one step at a time.

Piper hadn't known that The Great Depression described the economic decline of the world; rather, she used that term for the state her mother had been since the morning she stopped making Piper's school lunch. No help with lunches turned into not being picked up from school, which turned into not buying food at all, and then never leaving her bed. A mother entrusting their survival to a ten-year-old while living in "the Great Depression" was not normal. But does a ten-year-old know that?

It took eight years for Piper to work up the nerve to walk away from the battlefield at home. She stepped on the stair she knew would creak so that her arrival in the kitchen was announced. A public announcement of sorts, "Please be advised, Piper is entering the kitchen". Her mother sat, a cup of lukewarm tea held loosely, dark, outgrown bangs, and a glazed faraway look. Her stare was unflinching.

"What use is seeing when there is only grey to look at?" Her mother had said to her in a moment of clarity years ago. Perhaps some people are born without colour and have to learn to see it; Piper had justified. But she remembered seeing life behind her mother's eyes; she remembered playing with her and her brother, not noticing every colour brightening their lives until it was gone. Now it was only a breath of memory. Now their life was the two of them in a limbo of compromises and convincing to live life. She would let her rest one more day. Then she would get her mother some help. *One more day. One more day, then help. Just wait until Monday, and then we can start the week by getting some help.* Monday never came.

She put her backpack down at the door and sat across from her mother, the loose laces of her worn boots dragging on the ground. She manoeuvred so her eyes were in line with her mother's.

"Mum, I want to tell you a story." The woman's eyes seemed to click in place, a sleepwalker breaking from their slumber. The silence lingered like an old friend before a final goodbye. A draft whistled through the floorboards, filling some of the dead quiet. The kitchen was barely liveable, with two tables, one a makeshift bench, the other where they sat now. A sink that spat brown water, an unkept trundle bed in the corner under a haystack of patched up blankets. Her uncle paid the menial rent in exchange for Piper doing the books for his auto shop.

"Do you remember the worst low you had late last year? That started as the best day of my life. I sat at my usual spot in the school courtyard, a nook along the side of the PA Centre, reading a book from the library. Not so much a page-turner as something that filled my pages with something other than my life," she faintly smiled, remembering the morning well. "Then, he bustled around the corner, trying to get away from a friend he had played a joke on. He bumped into me and squatted down, peering around the corner of the building, a rebel anxious to see if their ingenious plot had succeeded". A full smile now, the memory momentarily filled her with warmth...

"Don't worry, darling," he had said to her, "I won't be here long." He must have spotted the person because he lunged back again, knocking the book from her hand and making her lose her place. He sat, still hiding from the line of sight, scooped up the book, apologised and thumbed through it.

"Do you actually like this stuff?"

"In a way, yes," she replied, taking the book when he offered it back.

"What do you mean 'in a way'? Surely that's a sure yes or no." He slumped against the wall next to the girl. It seemed he couldn't care less about the prank now.

"People don't always read because they like the book. Sometimes it's not the specific story, but any book that can be used as a doorway out of their world and into another. Like The Wizard of Oz."

"Well, that was awfully wordy for 8:30 in the morning. The name's Riley. What's yours?" He reached his hand out for a shake.

"Piper," she had said to him. "And I know who you are, Riley Jefferson. Mr. Patricks tells you off enough in geography that I think his shrill rendition of your name is engraved on my brain forever!" she says, taking his hand and shaking it.

"Okay, Piper What's-her-name, enjoy your trip into the Land of Oz. I should be going." And after a quick glance to check if the coast was clear, he ducked back around the corner.

After that he sat next to her in geography. Much to her dismay, she didn't want to be considered an accomplice, but it was the best geography lesson she'd ever been in. He made her laugh and splashed some colour on her cloudy skies. But when she returned home, her mother had spilled sleeping pills all over the floor and proceeded to have a breakdown. Piper promptly forgot all about it her wonderful morning...

Piper looked at her mother, who sat looking out into nothing. "He sat beside me the next day. And the next," she searched for any reaction from her mother as they sat in the dark, damp room. She continued.

"Mum, he started to rip my little sketches out of my notebook at the end of class and come back the next day with them stuck in his sketchbook as part of a scene. He used my doodles of random eyes or paisley flowers as a drawing prompt to open his own portal to Oz.

He became my best friend, and I became friends with his friends. They included me in their joking lunch breaks and started to invite me to the movies and to dinner, but Riley started to notice that I always said I was busy or tired when there was a cost involved and so shouted me a few times," Piper took a breath. Recounting those moments were difficult.

"I remember when he asked about it. We were sitting in the car park after some movie or something, I was procrastinating going home. I asked him what he was thinking.

He asked me why do I never let him drop me off at my house. He questioned why I never talk about my family. He didn't understand why I work so much but never have any money?" Another deep breath, another big swallow, another moment to be brave and tell her story.

"I felt okay, mum. I felt like I wouldn't endanger myself or you by telling someone the truth. He wasn't the school counsellor who could take me away from you. So, I told him. I told him about you, about us. About our greyscale life. Do you know what he said, Mum? Mum!" Piper raised her voice slightly to make sure she was being heard. She gently touched raised a finger to her mother's chin, tipping her face upwards until their eyes met.

"He said to me, 'Piper. You showed me a power that is strong enough to bring sun to the darkest days.' He told me that I was a source of light and colour, not shade over a rainbow," her voice caught in her throat as she finished.

Piper's mother had a single tear running down her left cheek. Her cold tea forgotten before her on the table. They held each other's eyes. Piper's rehearsed story had gone off the rails a bit, but the context was there.

"Mum. I'm leaving." She breathed. There it was. The first weighted drop from heavy storm clouds that had been growing for years—next, the downpour.

"The social workers are going to come and check on you and get you the help you need because... because I can't do this anymore. Mum, I have worked my ass off to keep us alive." Piper's carefully controlled tone began to slip, so she paused and took a deep breath. "I know you got money from places I don't understand, and you had good days. Hell, you had good weeks! And every time... every time you did, I thought I had gotten my mother back. But look around, mum." Piper's mother removed her gaze from her daughter, looking around the room. Her eyes started to dart around the room as she rubbed her skinny arms, her spindly hands seemed to barely hold the blue veins under her thin skin.

When her mother spoke, it was like listening to music from another room – it was difficult to pay full attention to the disjointed and disengaged disposition.

"What do you mean? Where will you go?" Her watery grey eyes fell on Piper, washing away layers of resolve her daughter had built up over the years, starved for a moment of true affection.

"Riley and our friends have helped to find a share house. Some of us are going to live in it together. Most of them start Uni in a few weeks. They said I could have a room until I can earn enough for rent. Riley already has the rest of my stuff."

She stood up suddenly and reached for her daughter's backpack, but Piper got there first.

“Mum, I love you, and I will visit you, but I can’t do this a moment longer – my life didn’t seem alarming until I met Riley. Aunty Kathy is coming around with the workers. They are going to get you situated in their house. She didn’t know. Now she does. I’m done keeping our life a secret for you.”

At that, they both began to cry. Tears followed Piper out the door and onto the street. She set off on her bike, part of her wanting the two wheels to lift off the ground and take her away. Somewhere where she didn’t have to feel sorry for leaving and growing up.

As she pulled into his driveway she saw him smiling to hide his worry. He moved closer to her, and she could see the hope he exuded. She took a breath and whispered to herself,

“Happy birthday, Piper.”

The Authors

Jerome Adonikam Afoa

Yo! I'm Jerome! I'm 23 and am in my final years as a secondary education student here at Avondale University. For as long as I can remember, I've had memories, and one of the ones I remember having is the memory of writing these stories and poems. So, enjoy!

Protasio Azaria is a Visual Art, Communication, and Graphic Design student at Avondale University Lake Macquarie. He enjoys driving that's why he got a position to drive buses for CDC NSW, when not driving he usually finds delight in quality time playing dominos on Sundays after church with his best buddies, enjoying food, tea, and non-alcoholic beverages! Protasio is a creative thinker, who loves stories and creative writing.

Francis Doherty-Bigara is a Master of Teaching (Secondary) student at Avondale University with specialisations in Math, Commerce/Business Studies, and English.

Francis has only recently embarked on a journey of creative exploration in image and written text as a means of personal expression, inner reflection, self-acceptance, and a richer, more deeply engaged, quality of life.

David Blanch is an English and History Student at Avondale University.

"If you ask Rick Astley for a copy of the movie "UP", he cannot give you it as he can never give you up. But, by doing that, he is letting you down, and thus, is creating something known as the Astley Paradox."

Bianka Costigan is a writer, educator, and mother from the Central Coast, currently studying her PhD. She is a stickler for good grammar and is fluent in FRIENDS quotes. When Bianka is not writing and editing her thesis, you can find her working hard in the gym, drinking an over-priced almond flat white, or laying on a beach.

Joshua Ibbott is a student at both Avondale University and Hornsby Tafe and an ICT Support Technician for Adventist Schools Australia (Greater Sydney). He studies Music and Communications at Avondale and Software Development and Programming at Tafe. He loves stories from any medium being books, movies, games, and especially music. Likewise, he loves to share stories of his own through such mediums and will often be found in his room composing orchestral music.

Ashley Jankiewicz is a high school teaching student at Avondale University who is majoring in English and Religion. She's had a passion for writing ever since the teddy bear series she wrote when she was five. She can usually be found off in a quiet corner reading a book, drawing, or taking care of her 22 plants (which all have names).

Taylor Kelly is a Visual Arts and History student at Avondale University College. When she's not in constant regret due to overloading her subjects, she enjoys looking at Pinterest images of Chris Evans shirtless and expanding her knowledge on any sort of niche and incredibly un-useful topics.

Carlie Kerr is a student at Avondale University studying IPDS and Communications.

Jenaya Lewis is an English and History student teacher who loves all things stories. She constantly has something running through her head, whether it is the same riff on loop, an idea, or a new obsession, condolences to anyone who is around when she can't seem to keep them inside.

Lynnette Lounsbury is a writer, lecturer and film maker from Sydney, Australia. When she is not indulging her love of science-fiction, she might be at the beach with her dog Ziggy, drinking a coffee, writing a poem, and lamenting the low temperatures of the water this year.

Bailee McLeod is an English and Visual Arts student at Avondale University. If she's not drinking a green juice after yoga, she's having a concoction filled with adaptogenic mushrooms - or a coffee if she can't get shrooms -, while she writes poetry and takes film photos of the ocean. I guess she is your quintessential gen z arts student.

Heather Rielly is a New Zealander studying across the ditch at Avondale University, majoring in Communications with a double minor in Graphic Design and Marketing. She is often found listening to music, drinking Chai Lattes, and going on adventures.

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Ashlee Sugrue is a Secondary Education student majoring in both Visual Arts and English at Avondale University College. She generally spends her days painting and drawing and always seeking out a new secret beach that she can claim to herself to spend hours reading and lounging around in the sun. She adores being active, often getting quite passionate in her touch footy games and sometimes you may even catch her skateboarding down college drive at ungodly hours.

Rachael Thomson is a Bachelor of Arts student at Avondale university. She loves travelling and photography, so any chance to do both is a win. She also considers herself a major connoisseur of Chai lattes, unable to resist a smooth, creamy mug.

Samantha White is a BA Counselling student with a Minor in Communications. Reading and literature are a frequent hobby for Sam however counselling is her true passion. Her writing style has been influenced by her deep fascination with the human condition and what makes us emotional beings.