

# ON THIS COMPLICATED PLANET

An anthology of stories and poems by the teen writers at StudioNPL and Southern Word



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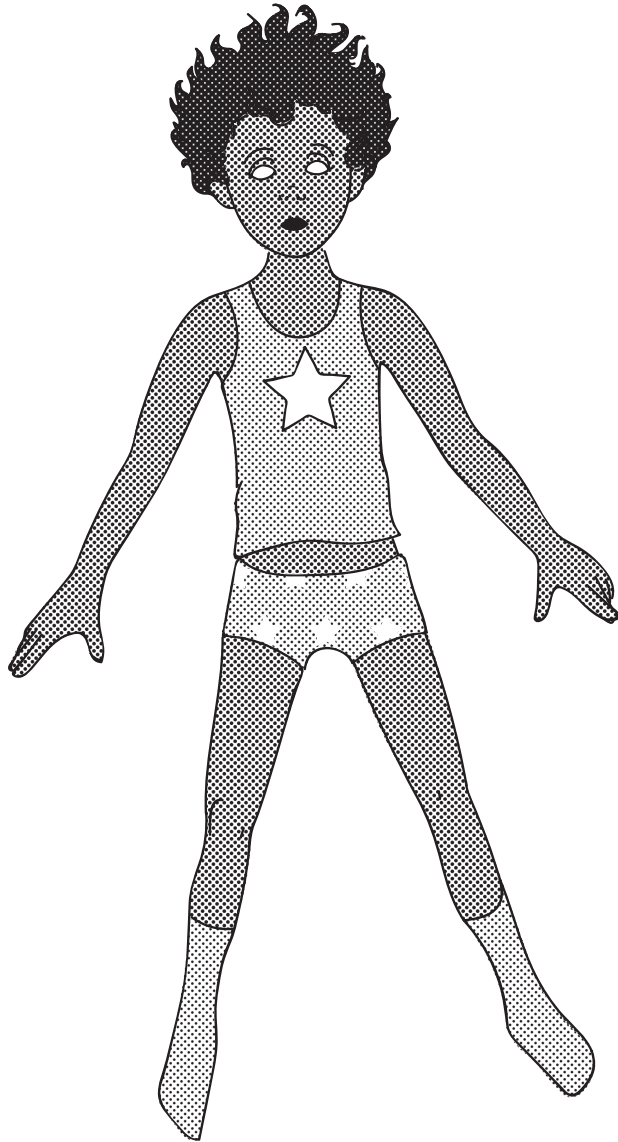
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# ABOUT SOUTHERN WORD AND STUDIO NPL

Through the literary and performing arts, **Southern Word** offers creative solutions for youth to build literacy and presentation skills, reconnect to their education and lives, and act as leaders in the improvement of their communities. We are committed to providing youth, especially in under-served communities, with as many opportunities as possible to develop and publicly present their voices both live and in print, video, audio, and digital media. We believe that through spoken word poetry, creative writing, and music production every student has the potential to be effective communicators, critical thinkers, and strong leaders.

**Studio NPL** is a non-formal educational environment for teens to engage in interactive, technology and arts-based programming hosted by skilled mentors from Nashville's community of makers and artists, and through valuable partner organizations like Southern Word. Daily programming is provided, free of charge, in nine library locations and is designed to give teens the opportunity to learn and practice skills in science, photography, creative writing, music production, 3D printing, poetry, and more. Through programming they are invited to try new things, engage with new people, and build confidence in themselves and respect for their community. As a space housed in the Nashville Public Library, it is an honor to support the work of Nashville's talented and passionate young people by being a supporting partner along with Southern Word to bring this creative writing anthology to print.



# FOREWORD

We live on a complicated planet. It's harder than you might guess to get people to admit to this. Often we don't want to acknowledge the nuances and power dynamics and deep-seated weirdness that make up day-to-day life because acknowledging all that complexity can be scary and difficult. Every Wednesday, though, when I come to lead the fiction workshop at StudioNPL in the Nashville Public Library, I find myself among young writers who not only acknowledge the complexity and strangeness in the world but who also engage this complexity actively in their empathetic, smart, sometimes funny, sometimes irreverent, and often courageous writing.

The stories and poems in *On This Complicated Planet* deal with a range of topics, from gender dynamics to socioeconomics to work place harassment to time travel to Supreme Awkwardness. Our fiction workshops have proven key in cultivating a space where authors feel supported at every stage of the writing process, from wobbly first drafts to finished stories. Every week we write while keeping in mind a specific element of craft, including but not limited to strong dialogue, powerful beginnings, resonant endings, and believable character motivation. At the end of a writing session, authors share excerpts from in-progress work and receive feedback from their peers. By writing together and reading together every week, we've created not just powerful stories but a powerful community of authors who cheer each other on as they forge multi-dimensional characters and multi-dimensional worlds.

We live on a complicated planet, yes, but through their stories and through the community they have cultivated, the writers in this anthology are beginning to untangle some of those complexities and hold them up to the light.

-Lee Conell, Southern Word Writer Mentor

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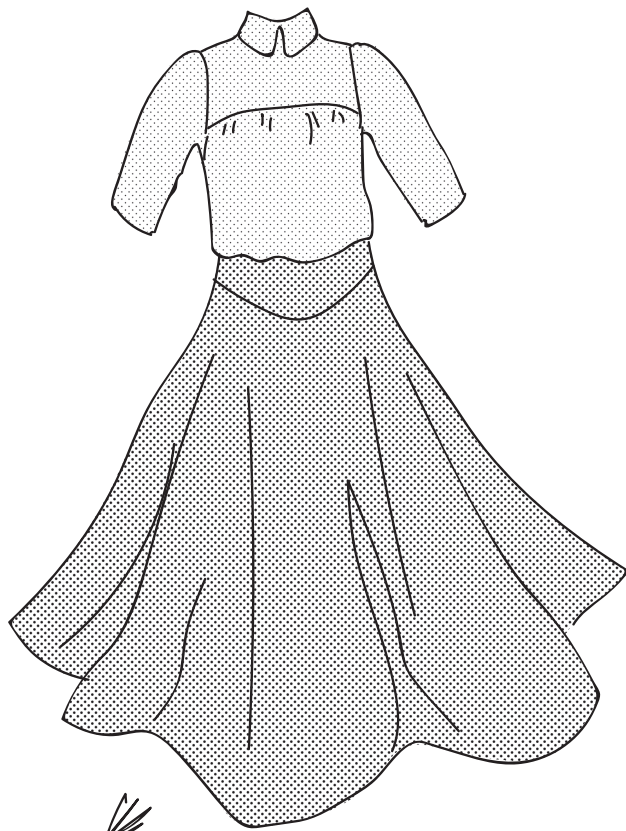
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# PHOTOGRAPH OF GIRL LOOKING AT THE SKY, 1909

KATIA SAVELYEVA

The last day of August dawned no different than the days preceding it, and continued in the same beat. Life held the same trajectories in places too small to move around; Olivia had walked along the same worn dirt road to school every day for the past twelve years. It had remained unpaved, despite the promises to lay some asphalt over it that had been issued every year since she was in fifth grade.

She leaned against the blackboard stiffly and pulled at the hem of her dress; the thick material was even more constricting than usual in the stifling heat of late summer. A fly was buzzing near the rafters, dust dancing on the ledge of the open window. The hinges had rusted three years ago; nobody could have closed it if they tried.

Jamie came in at five minutes to four, as always; the slam of the door sounded with its everyday hollowness; familiar dust covered his shoes, which his older brother had bought glossy and worn down to layers upon layers of dull dark material. A familiar bunch of tiny star-shaped flowers was pressed into his callused palm, and Olivia forced a smile as he handed them to her; both of them knew it wouldn't take over two days for the delicate sky-blue petals to fold like paper and then crumble into dust.

She let him ask her about her day, let him comment on how pretty she looked without pointing out that her curls were damp with sweat and her eyes were tired after months of sleepless nights, let him bury a hand in her hair and kiss her against the blackboard. She had perfected it over the weeks, which repeated in her mind until it was as routine as the steady beat of hammers over in the next town, working on construction projects that would never be completed.

Olivia closed her eyes just for a moment and let herself imagine that their starched dress and khaki shorts were something bright and flaring and fashionable; that they stood in the center of a city, that the weak gray glow of

the sun filtered through clouds was replaced by thousands of multicolored lights. Buildings around them towered skyward rather than needlessly extending the process of crumbling to the ground. People wandered through woods of stone and steel rather than endlessly following the same forgotten roads; the world was so large and so bright that something was different even about the feel of Jamie's lips.

But the bright, roaring collective around them was so much better, so much bigger—so she pulled away from Jamie and he was soon, too, lost in the glittering tide of light and sound. Then she was free.

There was no dimness, no dust, nothing predicted and nothing predestined, no lies told in feeble imitation of truths Olivia thought she'd never reach.

"Livvy," said James, and Olivia blinked. Her feet were on the ground; she was just another dust-covered girl dreaming of somewhere in the middle of nowhere; she'd spent twelve years being strangled slowly by the starched white collar of her dress. She hadn't slept last night, only sat outside in the heat and tried to make out stars in the billowing haze of nothingness obscuring the sky. Dry, hot wind was blowing in more dust through the window; she blinked it out of her eyes and looked at Jamie.

"Was that nice?" he said carefully, and Olivia blinked. He didn't usually ask that.

"Sure," she said. "Pretty nice."

He looked at her through narrow eyes in an expression she, for once, couldn't recognize. He was standing a few feet back, his posture guarded, and somehow Olivia liked him better this way, if only for a moment.

"You were thinking of another boy, weren't you?" he said quietly, and—jolted out of the moment—Olivia shook her head. Jamie let out a strangled laugh. "Sure you were! You were smiling—you never smile after kissing me!"

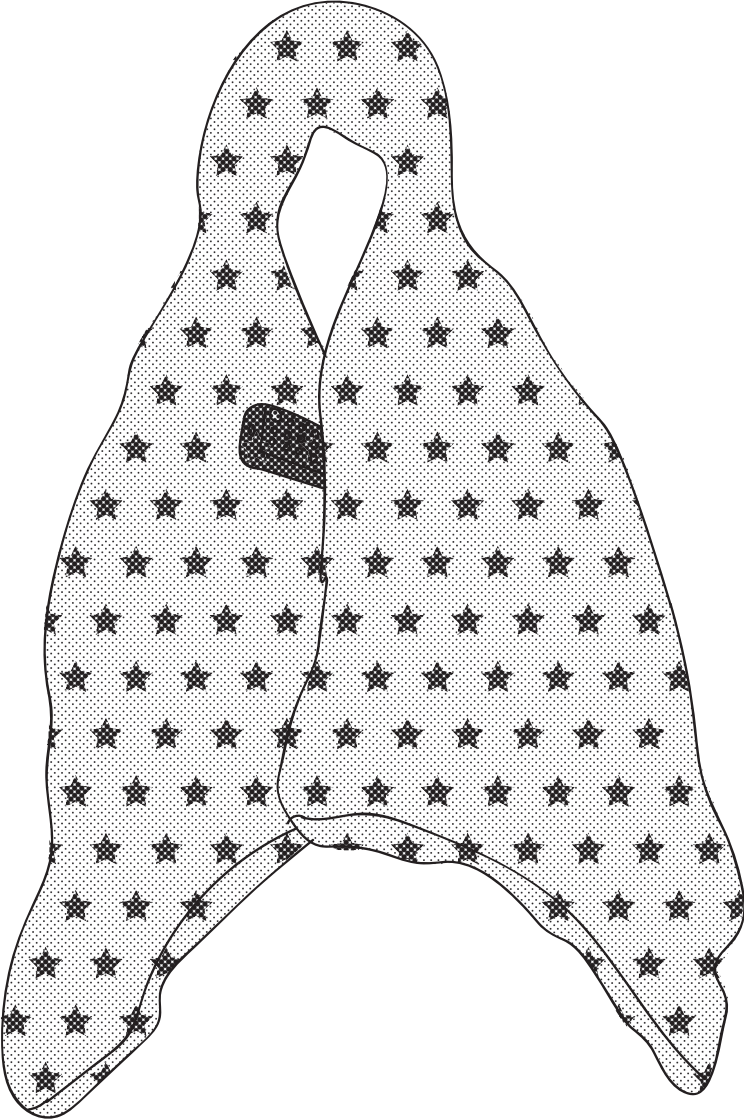
Olivia shook her head again; somehow she couldn't find the words to explain to him that boys were no different from each other but the places one kissed them could change everything. There was no need, though—Jamie had walked out, the slam of the door undermined by the number of times Olivia had heard it.

She scooped the chalk out from the blackboard and ground it under her heel, but there was no pleasure to destruction if all it brought was more dust.

The next day, Jamie came in at five minutes to four with dust on his shoes and flowers in his hands. The first day of September was the same as any other, and Olivia vowed she'd never see another summer in this town

that spun backward in time every day.

*One day he'll come in, and I'll be far, far away,* Olivia thought as Jamie leaned in to kiss her; she didn't smile and Jamie didn't say anything, but somehow she suspected he knew that too.



# PIZZA HAZARDS

KENA CHEATHAM

“It’s getting cold in here,” I said as a shiver went down my spine. It was the middle of winter, and my apartment felt like someone had sprayed antifreeze all over the walls. I was essentially a living Klondike bar.

Any normal person in this living situation would have turned up the heat by now, but I didn’t, due to the fact that I couldn’t even afford heating. When it came to my budget it was either the Wi-Fi or the thermostat, and by the looks of my living conditions, you could obviously see that I chose the Wi-Fi. Who wouldn’t? Wi-Fi is the center of all life. It gives you access to fanfictions, online shopping, videos, and most of all, DIYs. Everything you need in order to escape from the world. Online is the only place where anyone’s opinion seems to matter.

Before then, I’d never regretted having Wi-Fi before, but the ungodly temperatures in my house were starting to make me think otherwise. My situation was tragic, but I didn’t think it could get any worse until the Wi-Fi decided to shut down. Great. Not only did I not have heating, but I didn’t have entertainment either. To tell the truth, I wouldn’t have been in that situation if it weren’t for my cheap boss. I’d tried several times convincing my boss to give me a raise, to pay for some of the “extra necessities,” but he always refused. I’ve always thought that I could eventually get him to change his mind, but ever since last month, there was no way I’d ever get a raise.

\*\*\*

It was the end of the workday and the head, and only, chef had fried his last wings of the night for a customer that was sitting at one of the back tables in the small retro diner. The whole staff was in anticipation as we awaited the moment when the man would finish his food, and we would finally be

able to clock out. Closing time was at 9:00pm, but this man had insisted on finishing his food in the slowest way possible.

*Who eats wings with a fork anyways?* I'd thought to myself.

The room was eerily silent as we all watched him from the kitchen window behind the long bar in front of the entrance. The man who looked to be in his late twenties was about to pick up his last piece of meat until he called out, "Um... Waiter? Can I have a refill of sweet tea?" He waved his hand in the air with the impatience of an elementary schooler in a kindergarten classroom, snapping his fingers like he was entitled to his drink. A drink he would be receiving *after hours, might I add*. He was not even supposed to be here. Everyone softly groaned in exasperation, until we saw him turn towards the small window through which we had been spying on him for the past twenty minutes. Before anyone could make direct eye contact, the staff, consisting of the chef and two waitresses, scattered back into the kitchen, leaving me to be the person who gave the man his drink.

*Typical.*

Agitated, I walked over to the man carrying the huge jug of sweet tea in one hand, supporting the bottom with the other. The man held up his cup as I approached the edge of the table. "Thank you, *Miss*," he said with a narcissistic smirk on his face. People who are around my age and refer to me as "Miss," "Lady," or any other pet name make my skin want to turn inside out. How old do people think I am? I'm not a grandma or a teacher. Honestly, the thought of being old enough to be called by any of those terms reminds me that aging is inevitable. Which I don't like to think about on the daily. I shooed away my thoughts as I finally reached the table.

As I poured the drink, I noticed that this man hadn't stopped looking at my face. *Can I help you?* I thought to myself. My feet shifted uncomfortably as I refrained from saying it aloud. I was already on my second strike with my boss, Mr. Kent. Any other slip-ups or misconduct could lead to a third strike, bringing me one step closer to losing my job. *Apparently it's a health violation to keep your toiletries in the back with the food, but why brush my teeth at home when I can brush them here without paying for the water bill?*

After what felt like forever, I finally finished pouring the man's drink. Before I left the man to finish his food, I asked the required question that all waitresses had to ask:

"Will that be all sir?"

The man stared for a second before a slow smolder drew across his face. He said, "I just wanted to tell you how beautiful you are, and ask if you'd like to buy me a drink some time...?" I paused to think over the words the man



just said. *Me? Buy him a drink? Is this man... serious...? Like hell, I will. Not with my salary of ten dollars an hour.*

I was about to lash out until I reminded myself that I was on my second strike, and after my third strike, I'm out. Just two more screw-ups and it would all be over. I was hoping to use at least one of my strikes for the day that I finally snapped on my boss. It was bound to happen one day. Most likely the day I lost my job. So I took a deep breath before replying, "No thank you... Will that be all?"

His smolder faltered before he finally replied with, "No, just the check."

*Good. He's leaving,* I thought to myself. "Okay, I'll have that right with you, sir."

It only took a few moments of typing a few things into the register until I returned with the receipt in hand. As I handed the man his receipt across the table, he paused. I thought he was looking over the bill to see if the price was right. I would double-check too with the outrageous prices my boss serves up in this beat-up diner. We were just on the edge of being worse than that crusty diner down the street, Waffle House. I'd never been there, but it seems like a food chain that was created by the owners of Seven-Eleven. The only difference between us and them was more space and full bathrooms in the back.

After a few seconds of what seemed like pondering, the man slowly looked me up and down before exclaiming, "Wow, the pricing is impressive for something so delectable—" *That's a lie. The chef literally fried frozen Tyson chicken wings from Wal-Mart.* "—but how much would it cost to date you? 'Cause dang you look expensi—"

I quickly walked away before I went off on this godforsaken man. I didn't need to hear the end of his sentence to know what he was going to say. I headed to the five-person bathroom at the back of the diner so that I could cool off before stepping back outside to go and retrieve the check. Looking into the mirror, I reminded myself of the fact that if I went off on this man, I could end up on probation. *Or even worse, I could lose my job.* This job was literally my everything. It was the only job that I was able to acquire that fit in with my hectic college schedule. Without this, I had nothing.

After a moment of giving myself a bit of a pep talk, I confidently strutted over to the table, and made sure to look everywhere but at the man's face. After I approached the table, I reached over the finished plate to collect the check. Good thing he paid in cash or else I would've had to come back to the table to return with his card. As soon as the money and the check were in my hand, I quickly turned on my heel to make a break for it. More like a

speed-walk for it, since, knowing myself, I most likely would've slipped on the greasy floor before I could take two steps. I almost got away, but not before he grabbed my hand in his fingers, still oily from the grease of the chicken.

*Does this man know what a napkin is?*

"Um...sir?" I asked, glaring at him. Slowly, with his jacket in his other hand, the man swiftly moved in between me and Refuge in the back room. His tall stature stood over me, as he licked the grease off of his lips, staring down at me from above. "Can I also get a bit of..." The man scrolled over my body with his now slightly darkened brown eyes. "...dessert...before you go?" His hand slowly dragged up my arm.

*That was the last straw.*



I kicked his ass that night.

Long story short, the guy ended up filing a lawsuit against the Mert's Wine 'n Dine. It wasn't very successful, considering the fact that our cameras picked up everything he said and did before I took matters into my own hands. The judge said, and I quote, he "let us off easy," and, sadly, didn't send the man to jail. Although the judge didn't formally give us a punishment, in return for my actions the man received a free pass for free food all year long from Mr. Kent to insure that he didn't tell anyone else about our little "incident." Honestly, the whole entire situation felt as if it was rigged against me. The man had obviously assaulted me, and we had evidence to prove it. We could've posted the video online and ruined his life, but Mr. Kent, being the egotistical, naïve and uninformed man that he is thought that I was to blame. I would've argued against him but I *really* needed my job. It was the only way I was paying for my bills on my own. So instead of exposing the man, I just moved on and took delight in the fact that the man would never forget the day that I beat him in front of four HD cameras, and a whole staff of coworkers.

I remembered the smirk on his face as he limped out of the courthouse that night. *I hope he chokes on those free patty melts.* My boss, being the jerk he is, ended up putting me on probation. That means a full month of no pay. He's also suggesting that I work extra shifts, afterwards. It was quite unfair if you ask me, considering the fact that I was acting in self-defense, and had only used my second strike. Plus, who gave him the authority to make me work extra shifts? So I quit, and since then I've been trying to survive on my

small loan of fifteen-thousand dollars from my parents. It was supposed to go towards a house but what kind of house can you buy with fifteen-thousand dollars? A trailer? So I've been using the money for rent and the basic necessities that I needed in my apartment.

And Netflix.

It's better than being stuck with a deadbeat boss who has no respect for human decency.

\*\*\*

Two hours later, and it was still below twenty degrees. In a fruitless effort to gain some refuge from the deadly weather, I decided to put on all of the covers in my house. Well... The ones that I could find, anyways. There may have been more in my front door closet, but it still had yet to be sorted. I was not even going to bother to clean that mess up today. I had other things to worry about, like myself, and I can only handle one mess at a time.

Tragically, the covers weren't enough to keep me warm. For the record, I only had three covers, one of which was just the really thin sheet from my bed. The rest of them were presents I received as housewarming gifts. How ironic.

\*\*\*

I sat there for about twenty minutes trying to think of another way to get even just a little bit of warmth. I was almost on the verge of giving up. I'd tried to think of things that my mom would have done to keep the house heated. She hated spending money.

My mother was stingy when it came to matters such as adding too much laundry detergent into the washing machine, the TV remote, and worst of all, turning up the thermostat. I remember the day when I had finally had enough of freezing in my sleep, and I had attempted to turn the knob all the way up from 62 degrees. But little did I know that it was the biggest mistake that I could ever make.

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It was the middle of the night and there wasn't a soul awake in the house. Well, except for me, of course. *What kind of eight year old could sleep in this kind of weather?* I lay there for seconds...minutes... and then for what felt like

hours until I realized enough was enough. I carefully sat up from my bed, the squeaking sound of the old rusted springs seeming to echo in the eerily silent house. It wasn't like my parents could hear it anyways. They slept on the opposite side of the house. Just how I liked it.

I slowly tiptoed over to the door, the feel of the creaking floor under my feet. I often feared that if I jumped hard enough, I could fall through. I paused to make sure my parents were still asleep. The world stood still as I listened out for any sounds resembling footsteps coming down the hall, but the house was silent until I heard a loud roar from the other end of the hallway.

*Yup. That's Dad.*

I let out a sigh of relief knowing my dad wasn't going to wake up anytime soon because once he starts snoring, he's done for the night. It was my mom I had to worry about. After I heard that the hall was clear, I started to push open the door. It seemed as if the slower you opened the door, the louder the door creaked. I decided to stop when the door creaking only grew louder as I tried to open it. Opening the door this slowly was getting me nowhere but closer to waking up my parents. I realized that there was only one way I was getting this door open with as little sound as possible. I briefly counted to three under my breath before whipping the door all the way open in one fell swoop. I didn't think about what would happen after I swung the door because as soon as I let go, the knob of the door slammed against the wall. I could almost feel the blood pumping in my ears as I awaited my fate. There was no way my parents didn't hear a noise of that volume. I scrunched my eyes shut as I listened for any sign that my parents had woken up. It was silent for a second until I heard the snores of my dad resume. I let out a deep breath as I continued to slowly tiptoe to the middle of the hallway. I stopped after I reached my destination, and looked up at the system mounted in the middle of the wall.

*The thermometer.*

I looked up at the small weird metal box that was positioned at least eight inches above my head. I couldn't see what temperature it read unless I jumped high enough to catch the dull blue screen. After a few attempts, I figured out that the house was still set to 62 degrees. Then, without looking at the screen, I started to turn the knob until I thought that I had turned it enough to get a little bit more warmth to my room. Satisfied, I walked back to my room quietly closing the door before jumping back into bed with a smile on my face.

*This was too easy.*



I don't think I quite understood the concept of how thermostats worked because when I woke up, the house felt like the Opryland's *Ice*. Long story short, my house had basically frozen over. At least that's what it had felt like at that age. I don't know how I hadn't noticed since I usually can't sleep through the cold. My mom was livid. After a long and awkward family conference, I eventually gave in and told my mom that it was me who had touched the thermostat. Who else could it have been? I was an only child. But I should have kept my mouth shut. When my mom was done with me, I couldn't sit in a chair for a week. Ever since then, I never touched a thermostat again.



It wasn't until now that I realized another reason my mother hated people touching the thermostat. Heating costs way too much, and so does cooling. Literally any movement of the thermostat costs money. Remembering that I still hadn't solved my heating problem, I sat there trying to recall what my mother said she had done as a child. Growing up my mother's family wasn't able to afford much, but as a result, they had discovered many inventive ways of saving money. Things such as heating the house with an open oven. *The oven.*

After a moment of thought, I decided to give it a go. If my mother was able to use an oven as a way to warm her house back in the day, I should be able to also.



I walked into the kitchen still bearing all of the covers on my shoulders. The tiled floor still felt cold, even through the three layers of socks I had put on my feet before I came into the kitchen. I hastily shuffled over to the oven, examining the circular dials above the stove. I then proceeded to preheat the oven up to about 350 degrees. "That should be high enough to keep me warm," I thought to myself with a nod of approval. I opened the oven door, and then went to wait in my room for the heat to start circulating throughout the house.



It had been two hours, and the house was still a freezing twenty degrees. Even the bottom of my laptop wasn't warm enough anymore. To make matters worse, the weather outside only seemed to be getting colder as, apparently, *our first snowstorm in history* was moving in from the northern region to the middle region. Well, that was what the weatherman on the TV had said, anyways. That was the only thing that could explain the brutally cold weather. At this point, it was so cold that in addition to wearing all of the covers in the house, I was also wearing all of the clothes in the house. I was most likely stretching out all of my clothes, but I really didn't care at that point. I thought back to the oven that was supposed to be heating up the house. "Maybe I didn't turn the stove up enough," I thought out loud. I headed back to the stove in the kitchen and turned the dial about 100 degrees higher. As I turned to leave, my attention was diverted by the bright screen of the TV in my living room. I grabbed the remote that was sitting on the coffee table in front of my couch, and turned on the TV. It was still on the news channel from when I was checking the weather earlier. From the looks of it, the snowstorm was only getting worse. I waddled over to the couch to grab the remote and turn up the volume. I then listened in to hear what the weatherman was trying to say.

"—in other news, the weather seems to be getting worse. As you can see here, the storm clouds are starting to move more towards the southern region as the downpour begins to become more severe." The weatherman pointed to an area in the center of the map.

"That's my county," I said to no one in particular.

"We predict that by the time the weather reaches this area, the temperature will have dropped approximately ten intervals... In other tragic news—" I blankly stared at the TV as he continued to drone on about some kid who stole a penguin from the zoo.

"Just my luck." I turned my head back to the kitchen where the stove was still preheating to the applied temperature, completely ignoring the newscaster who was droning on about some random kid. I stared at the stove for a while until I finally spoke aloud to myself. "Maybe I should turn up the heat a bit more." I lazily scuffled back into the kitchen and turned the knob to the highest temperature on the dial. "That should be hot enough to keep us warm," I said as if I wasn't alone. Afterwards, I settled back down on the couch and started to watch some TV.

It was now 9:00pm, and the house had already warmed up. In fact, it was almost too warm, but I needed as much heat as I could get until this snowstorm settled down. I had taken off all of my clothes, and put them in the dirty clothes hamper in my bedroom closet. I had sweated through most of them, and I didn't feel like hanging the clean ones back up in my closet. Plus it was getting late and I was starting to get really hungry. I had only woken up at 1:00 pm, and I'd spent most of the day trying to fix my heating dilemma, but despite the time, I decided to stuff a DiGiorno pizza into the oven. The box says the oven was supposed to be heated to 250 degrees, but I left it at 500 degrees, anyways. *Double the heat makes it cook two times faster, right?*

I didn't want the heat to stop circulating throughout the house, so I left the oven open. It would only take ten minutes for it to cook, I figured, so the oven wouldn't be a problem. I was pretty sure it took more than ten minutes to start a fire, or anything else of the sort. I plopped back down on the couch in front of the TV, and started flipping through channels to pass the time. After a while, my eyes began to feel heavy as I drifted off into a deep sleep.

\*\*\*

"Crap."

I woke up to the smell of smoke and burned DiGiorno. Quickly taking action, I grabbed my iPod.... and my laptop... and my blankets and headed towards the kitchen. I almost collapsed when I saw that my kitchen was fully engulfed in flames. I hadn't expected the DiGiorno to catch on fire by having an open stove while cooking. Ovens only catch fire when there's a buildup of grease, or if there are scraps of food left on the metal racks. I didn't think that the oven had been that dirty.

*Wait. When do I ever clean my oven, though?*

I quickly dashed out of the kitchen, picking up random personal items as I went. I made sure to grab only the necessities I needed to survive. My wallet, my keys, my sketchbook, some doritos... my phone. Where was my phone. I swear it was just in my hand.

Without haste, I quickly jumbled all of my belongings into a blanket, tying it closed around my shoulder like in that DIY video I'd seen on YouTube. *Looks like those late nights wasted watching YouTube videos weren't all for nothing.* With my make shift bag in clutch, I quickly scrambled over by the couch in the living room and opened the window by the couch to

take deep breath. After I had filled my lungs up to their limit with the cold winter air, I ran back into my bedroom to find my phone. As soon as I got to my bedroom I started sifting through drawers, under my bed, and under the occasional random garbage piles in different corners of my room, but I couldn't find it anywhere. I turned to leave the house in tears until I'd felt something in my pocket. *Oh. Looks like I just wasted five minutes of my life.* Speaking of living, I needed to get out of there. I turned back to my bedroom door in an attempt to escape, only to discover the black smoke slowly seeping from under my door. Just my luck. I frantically looked around my room for an escape, but there was nothing. The door was enclosed by flames, as I could see from looking under the door. The window was nailed shut from when I watched that episode of *Obsession* where that guy would return every night to crawl into this girl's window. I couldn't sleep that night, so I had decided to nail my window shut. *I should really stop watching things like that so late at night. The nighttime makes me do crazy things.* I frantically paced around the room, out of ideas of escape and running out of time. Busting open the window would have been a great idea, but all I could think about in that moment of panic was whether the black smoke might quickly rush out of the newly opened window, killing me instantly. That idea may not have been completely probable but the idea of it actually happening frightened me. Enough not to try. I didn't really own the materials to bust open the window anyways.

Slowly slipping in and out of consciousness from the lack of air, I slumped down to the floor and curled myself into a ball of pity.

*So this is it. This is how I die. From a DiGiorno pizza fire.*

Who knew that my quick breath from earlier would be the last. I slowly started to fade away to the sound of faint sirens in the distance. Only one last thing remained on my mind as my vision finally began to dwindle into darkness:

*Screw you, DiGiorno.*



It felt as if I was in a dreamless sleep after I had passed out on my bedroom floor between my makeshift bag of material items and some empty bags of Doritos, surrounded by other trash left on my bedroom floor. I would have cleaned up if I knew I was going to die here. *Such a dishonorable way to die, lying on a pile of old Dorito bags.*

As I lay there in a dreamlike state, slipping between fantasy and



reality, I thought back on my life. I tried to think about my triumphs, my failures, and other life changing aspects I may have endured, but the only things that came to mind were memes, various Netflix binges, and college. *Oh god, imagine all the late work I'm going to have if I live through this.* At this point I just began to contemplate what would happen if I did die. I wasn't doing anything interesting with my life as I'd thought I would in the past. I had no motivation, no aspirations, I almost never knew what I was doing, and although I hate to admit it, I was too stubborn to get help. At this point, death didn't seem like such a bad idea. There was no one who would really miss me. I had no friends in college due to my busy work schedule. I barely contacted my coworkers unless it was to cover me for being late or some other misfortunate event. Those happened often. All my old high school friends turned out to be *phake* with a p-h. Maybe that guy from the diner would miss me? That thought made me crave death. I never wanted to see that man ever again after our last ordeal.

Lastly I thought about...my parents. My parents and I had always had a complicated relationship. Due to the several mishaps from when I was younger, such as the thermostat incident, they tended to not trust me with anything. This included mistrust of my ability to handle material items, relationships, and most of all, fortune. My parents were cheaper than dirt, but I never really understood why until I first entered college. I remember the look my mother gave me as I waved goodbye and welcomed my new life. And it only lasted for a second, but I swear I had seen the ghost of a smile on my father's face. It was in that moment that I realized something that I had never noticed before. My parents were proud of me.

That was the first time in my life that I could recall my parents showing that they cared about me. I now realized why my parents had made such an effort to make my life feel miserable. All of the birthdays they cheated me out of with that short phrase "your gift was being born" finally made sense. My parents had wanted me to get somewhere in life, and tough love was the only way they thought they could get me there. Maybe this was the reason that they had been cheap my whole life. My parents both grew up in rough living conditions in which most people around them couldn't afford college. My whole life my parents had lectured me on how I always had it better than them and that I wouldn't survive a day without them. For the last twenty years of life, I had always strived to prove them wrong, but in the end, they were right. I mean look at me. I was literally about to die from a pizza fire. Maybe I couldn't handle things on my own. My parents were only cheap to insure that I'd have a future ahead of me, and I ruined everything. And now

all their money was wasted on Netflix and Wi-Fi. My parents only chance at having a successful child, ruined.

Maybe death wasn't so bad after all.



“WHAT THE—”

In a state of shock, I quickly jumped up as I awoke in a place that I had never seen before. Looking down, I saw a strange thing pressing down on my finger. Like a clip with a cord attached. Terrified and disoriented from waking up after thinking I was dead, I quickly ripped off the strange device, throwing it on the floor. As I reached up my hands to touch my face, I realized that there was a breathing mask attached to me. Uncomfortable with the strange object cupping my face, I pulled it off and over my head. As soon as it was removed, the smell of copy paper and rubbing alcohol consumed my lungs as I took in a deep breath, staring at the blank white wall.

*Am I... alive...?*

It was obvious that I was in a hospital because it smelt as if someone had spilled a tub of disposable eyeglass wipes in a Home Depot. I looked around frantically to try and make sense of why I was still alive, only to find balloons and “get well soon” cards surrounding my hospital bed.

*But I don't have any friends... I thought to myself. Well. Any real friends.*

Surveying my surroundings, I decided to get up and walk around. My legs were aching. On the far left wall was a huge window that overlooked all of the town square. *Wow. Seems expensive,* is all I could think as I looked over the large suburban area. Speaking of expensive, I had to get out of here. I couldn't afford hospital bills. It may have been because of the overuse of prescription pain meds that the doctors put into me, or the adrenaline from feeling alive again, but for some godforsaken reason, the only thing rushing through my head was: *I gotta escape before they make me pay the bill.*

I frantically started to look for a way out until I heard the clicking of footsteps headed down the hall and towards the direction of my room. I paused for a second to listen to see if they would pass. *Why does this moment feel so familiar.* I waited in silence until I heard the steps stop in front of my door. As I saw the turn of the handle, I panicked, scrambled back into the sheets, and threw them over my head. Oh boy, they'll never find me now. It wasn't until the door opened that I heard the clacking of steps coming closer to my bedside.

“Miss?”

*Why did this man's voice sound so familiar?*

“Are you okay...?”

The man waited a second for a response, but I kept silent. Suddenly I felt the covers being forcefully lifted over my head and to the bottom of the bed.

*Oh god is that...*

*Restaurant guy.*

“Miss, did you hear me? Are you... *you*...”

I quickly jumped out from under the sheets and grabbed the closest item to me, which just so happens to be an oddly shaped metal pan that I had found on a side table to the left of the bed.

“Get away from me, you freak,” I said, the venomous words seething from my teeth like acid, my eyes piercing through his own. He ruined my life.

“I would prefer it if you put down the... ahem... *waste disposal tray*.” I stopped to stare at him in confusion of what on earth he was talking about, the metal pan still ready to hit someone if needed.

“Okay, fine.” The man put his hands up in a defensive manner. “But if there's any leftover residue from the last patient, which there always is, then *urine* trouble.” He smirked at the last part of his sentence.

*...Oh*

I quickly dropped the tray to the ground with a loud clack. The dropped tray echoed in the silent room as it continued to rock back and forth until it finally came to a stop. It was in this moment of embarrassment that I realized that all I was wearing was a hospital gown. Remembering my last encounter with him, I raced for the sheets at the bottom of the bed and draped them over my body. Looking back in front of me I found him to be staring towards my direction. What was that look in his eyes? Was it amusement? Pity? Probably all of the above. I glared back at him, causing him to wipe that smug look off his face. He quickly turned to the clipboard that was under his arm and pulled it out to look through the pages. I ended up staring down at my feet. Breaking the awkward silence, I finally built up the courage to speak. My demeanor may have seemed brave on the exterior, but on the inside I was still dying of embarrassment. There were so many questions going through my head that I could ask him, but I finally settled on the most important one.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He paused for a second, befuddled by my question, but in a belittling tone, he responded,

“Um? I work here, *Miss?*”

There he goes again with that revolting word. By the way that he emphasized the word, I was 5000% positive that he knew how much that word got on my nerves. God, I hated this guy.

“You work here as what?” I asked. “The janitor?”

I wouldn't be surprised if he was, but janitors shouldn't just go barging into patients room without checking to see if they're still in there. Then again, that seems like something he would do, considering the fact that he's a perv.

“No, miss. I'm the doctor.”

Looking down at his attire, I saw a solid blue button-up shirt, some khakis, some basic sperrys, and a long doctor's cloak with his ID clipped to its collar. I must be on some sort of soap opera, because this feels unrealistic. But then again, doctors usually do get away with most crimes. That would explain why he was still allowed to work here. Like that one female doctor from the 1900s who starved twenty of her patients to death because she believed that fasting was the cure to all diseases. *I should really stop watching those types of videos on YouTube.*

It took a while for me to fully comprehend the fact that a criminal like him could be a doctor. Someone who doesn't have the decency to mind people's personal space shouldn't be able to deal with unconscious bodies. Even with other people in the room. I cringed at the thought of him performing surgery on the poor, unsuspecting and unconscious patients as he wielded the knives that would soon be pierced through their bare flesh.

“*Disgusting,*” I mumbled to myself, thinking aloud.

I paused my thoughts as I realized he was still in the room. Now time to move on to my second most important question: “What happened?” I said, directing my attention back towards his face, which had quickly reverted into a more professional, stern but empty look. A more professional appearance than he had exhibited before.

*He's so fake.*

Looking down at his chart and then back at me he replied, “Well, it says here that you suffered from a minor concussion, some second degree burns, and a few scabs and bruises here and there, but overall you should be fine and ready to leave very soon. And all of this because of an apartment fire caused by...” He paused, re-scanning over the words to make sure that he was reading the papers correctly, “... a pizza fire?”

“Don't ask,” I said, not really in the mood to explain my horrible logic, which led to the destruction of my apartment. Pausing for a second, I

realized I had another question. “How did I survive?” I asked hesitantly.

“That’s what I’ve been wondering myself, actually.” He looked off to the far wall, as if he was remembering something. *Probably remembering how I beat him half to death with a food tray about a month ago.*

After what felt like forever, he finally clapped his hands together as if he was clapping himself back into reality.

“Anyways, you should probably be back out within the next twenty-four hours, thankfully. I came in here to check on a *patient*, but you seem fine to me.” He turned to walk out the door before stopping to turn around and say, “It’s been a pleasure to see you again,” before flashing a smirk, and walking out the door. He never even answered my question.

*Once a jerk, always a jerk I guess.*

Speaking of jerks, why was I still alive? After all of that brooding, it really felt as if that was truly the end. Everything seemed so out of place. There had to be some reason that I survived something so detrimental. I could see no reason as to why I should still be alive.

Slumping down into the matte, sky-blue colored sheets, I looked down at my hands, still befuddled by the idea of surviving a pizza fire. For doing something that stupid, I should’ve died. Fiddling with my thumbs, I looked up at the wall, staring as if the answers would appear to me on the walls. After a long moment of thought, I thought back to that moment when I was lying on the stained, carpeted floors of my... old apartment. I tried to remember my reasoning for why I believed I shouldn’t exist. The first thing that came to mind was friends. I couldn’t think of any friends off the top of my head that would care if I was gone. Looking around the room at the balloons and “get well” cards stacked in a neat pile by my bedside told me otherwise. Picking up the first card in the stack, I opened it to discover that it was from one of my old friends from high school. It was just a generic “get well soon” card you would find in one of those lifetime stores. It’s the thought that counts I guess. I was surprised she of all people even gave me a card. She was the fakest of them all. Setting the card back down on the top of the stack, I tried to remember the other reasons I had argued for death in that time of self-reflection. It was obvious that someone cared about me, so I guessed I could check that off the list for reasons to go. Plus, there was a whole plethora of unopened cards sitting on that side table. Who was to say there was not someone in that stack that actually mattered? The only other reasons I could remember were my lack of motivation, aspirations, and...

My parents.

After I had left them that day for college, we slowly began to drift apart.

Well, I began to drift away. My parents called me everyday in the morning at eleven and in the evening at eight. They never stopped calling, and I couldn't put my finger on why they suddenly cared about my life. I guess I know why they did now, but I let my anger block them out. I didn't want any contact with them after I'd entered college. I wanted to feel like an adult, and to learn new things on my own. Without their supervision. Now I saw where that led me. The only reason for the distance between my parents and I was myself. I was too stubborn. My parents actually weren't that bad as long I wasn't living with them, yet I still pushed them away. There was no reason for them to forgive me. I abandoned them. They were probably at home, shaking their heads at the fact that their child, mind you their only child, almost died in a pizza fire. They wouldn't come back for me. I was officially alone. Congratulations to me.

\*\*\*

Ever since that last ordeal with that jerk, I had been sitting in the same spot. Staring at the same wall. I was still caught up in my thoughts until I was cut off from my thoughts by a soft knock on the door. Thinking that it was that living garbage bin coming back to check up on me, I threw the covers back over my head, facing my back to the door. After a few seconds of silence, I heard the door creak open as what sounded like one, maybe two people walked up to my bedside. The footsteps stopped as I felt a light hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"We were worried—"

My eyes watered at the sound of the two people behind me. I quickly sat up to face the two people I've known for my entire life.

"Mom? Dad?"

Before I could say anything else, my parents embraced me in an unbreakable hug. Feeling uncomfortable, the first thought that came across my mind was to break away. But for some reason, I didn't. The hug just felt so loving and welcoming. Nothing like I've ever received from them before. I don't think I even had any memories of my parents hugging me as a child. If they have, the thoughts were drowned by the memories of them being cruel and restricting. My stubbornness was a weight that dragged down all of the happy memories into the depths of the ocean of solitude. I didn't want to be with my parents at one point because I was too stubborn to forgive them for the pain they'd caused me. I just wanted to be away from them, and to gain

independence by proving I could survive on my own. Obviously I couldn't.

After a while I stopped fighting against the hug, and I just accepted it. I slowly raised my arms to embrace them back.

This is... okay. I guess.

Having my parents here with me.

Here for me.

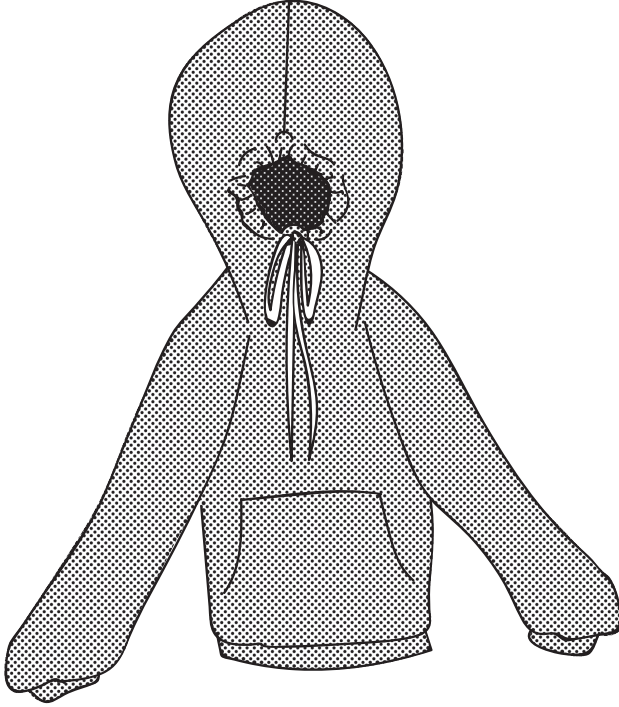
At least my parents hadn't decided to stay home, and let me deal with this on my own. Instead, they were there, in my arms, and for some reason, I never wanted to let go.

This made me realize that with me still being here and alive, I had some time to fix things. I could redevelop my relationship with my parents into something new. We could communicate like normal adults for once, me being in my twenties rather than a hormonal teenager. And I didn't have to stop at fixing my relationship with my parents. I could also try and fix myself. Maybe even find an aspiration or goal to look forward to during the rest of my days on this... complicated... planet.

I could get my life back together.

I could be happy.

Maybe it wasn't my time to go.





# CLASSIFIED

SABRINA LESSLY

R.B. jerked his head up at the sound of footsteps crunching the playground mulch. It was the new girl, the one with the fiery ginger hair and ocean-blue eyes. The really, really *pretty* blue eyes...

That were now glaring at him.

He swallowed the half-chewed chunk of peanut-butter sandwich in his mouth. “Uh... Hi?”

The girl crossed her arms, the look on her face far more intimidating than what a six-year-old should be able to muster. “You were staring at me in class today!”

R.B. fiddled with his hoodie strings, resisting the urge to pull them taut and close up the hood. “W-well, the teacher was introducing you. *Everyone* was-”

“That’s not what I meant!” She pointed at him with an accusatory finger, her eyes blazing. If looks could kill, R.B. suspected that he would probably already be dead. No, incinerated. “I glanced at you at least five times during the lesson, and you were always *staring* at me! What’s *wrong* with you?”

The hoodie strings were quickly becoming more tempting. “I, um... well, it’s, uhh.... I... don’t know?”

Her eyes narrowed, mouth twitching into a sneer. “What do you mean, *you don’t know?*”

“I-I just... don’t know!” This was by no means due to a lack of trying. On the contrary, the larger part of R.B.’s morning had consisted of him attempting to figure out just what made the girl so interesting. It hadn’t been a very effective use of his time.

“Let me get this straight.” The girl reached out and yanked him forward by the front of his hoodie. Despite being somewhat scared for his life, R.B. found himself in awe of her arm strength. “You spent the entire class staring at me... *for no reason?*”

“There’s a reason!” he spluttered, hands held up in fruitless self-defense. “I just... I don’t know what it is yet.”

There was a moment of silence. R.B. felt like the criminal of one of his father’s crime shows, waiting in anxious dread for the jury to deliver their verdict. Only somehow, despite all logic, this was a whole lot worse.

“You’re *weird*,” she finally decided, shoving him back onto the bench where he’d been sitting.

“I get that a lot.”

She was still frowning at him, but now it seemed more out of confusion than irritation. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “It means you’re right. I *am* weird.”

Another silence, thankfully less tense than the last. The girl now wore a more thoughtful expression. It was, in R.B.’s opinion, the friendliest expression he’d ever seen her wear. Even so, her next question surprised him. “What’s your name, anyway?”

“Uh, R.B. It’s R.B.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Arby’? Like the restaurant?”

“No, no, it’s R. B. The *letters*. There’s no food involved.” He’d already had to explain this multiple times to his classmates, and had now grown tired of doing it. Even more tiring was responding to what invariably came next.

“What does it stand for?”

“I... can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“That’s not a good reason.”

“Well, it’s still a reason, and I’m using it.”

“Come up with a better one.”

He flinched. *Dang it, nobody else said that! What do I do now? ...If she thought of that, she must be smart—Focus!* “It’s...” He thought of a word from one of his father’s crime shows. “It’s classified.”

“Classified?”

He nodded with what he hoped was a great deal of authority. “Uh huh. It means it’s super secret and if you know it when you’re not supposed to, you get in *big* trouble.” He crossed his arms. “And you. Are not. Supposed to.”

The girl considered this for a moment, though not with the resignation that R.B. expected or wanted. Instead, it almost looked like she was trying to think of a comeback. That wasn’t good. He was already out of excuses. Maybe a distraction would work instead. “So, uh, what about you? What’s your name?”

She scowled. “You spent the entire class staring at me, but you weren’t even paying *attention* when I introduced myself?”

R.B. didn’t respond. He was far too busy staring at his hands and pretending he didn’t exist for that. The girl sighed and rolled her eyes with more conviction than he thought was really necessary. “It’s Stella. And don’t you dare forget it again, or *else*.”

“I-I won’t! I promise!” While most of him wondered to what the phrase ‘or else’ could possibly pertain, there was still something in him that couldn’t help but admire this new information. *Stella. That’s a really nice name. Way better than R—...R.B. Man, I can’t even think of my own name in my head without feeling dumb. I bet she never feels that way.*

“Children! It’s time to come back inside!” called the teacher from the school doors.

R.B. felt a pang of disappointment. This was partly due to his unfinished sandwich, which had been accidentally discarded in the dirt roughly two minutes ago. Mostly, though, it was because it meant the end to his conversation with Stella. And he had only just learned her name! “Well, I guess lunch is over. Maybe we can talk la-”

She had already left.

He made a small, irritated noise, not unlike the growl of a cat. Yet for all of her brutish behavior, R.B. still found himself hoping that they would indeed speak again. This didn’t really make any sense to him, and he tried to rationalize it away as he walked back to the classroom, but the hope persisted regardless.

Unknown to him, it would continue persisting for a very long time.

### *Ten Years Later*

Stella lay sprawled out on her bed, carefully analyzing the ever so slightly uneven surface of the ceiling. Or at least, if anyone walked in on her, that’s what she’d say she was doing. In reality, her mind was far too preoccupied to perform such a mundane task, or even to come up with a better lie in its place.

She licked her lips again. They still felt all tingly and strange and... unnatural, even though it had happened almost two hours ago. *Had* it happened? Maybe it’d just been some, weird, fantastical dream, or a stress-induced hallucination. Those were a thing, right? Heck, even if they weren’t, they’d still make more sense than it actually being real. After all,

R.B. would *never*...

...

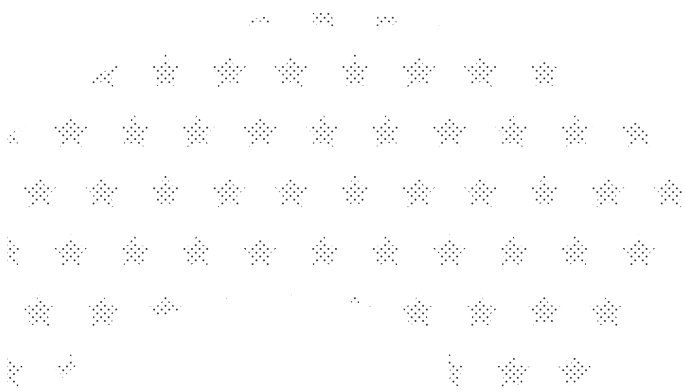
...*Would he?*

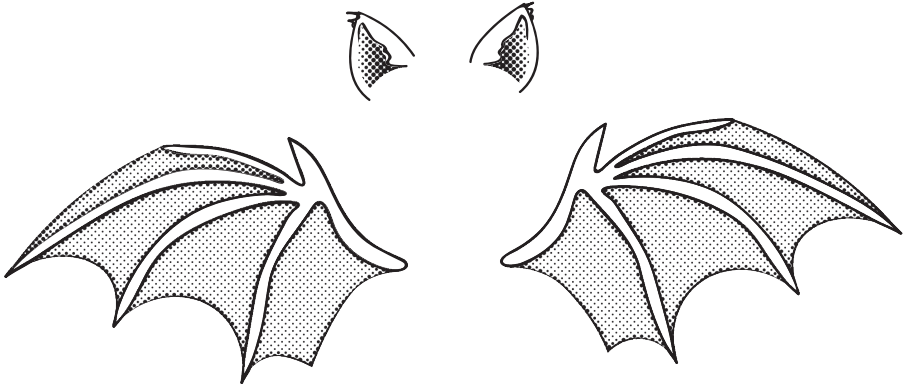
And now that she considered it, *he* hadn't really done much of anything. Well, not the crazy part, at least. That had been *her* doing. *She'd* done it. *She'd* done it. Of all the things buzzing about in her brain, that was the most confusing. Not by a lot, but it was.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and wondered how the air could still be just as musty as ever, now that *that* had happened. Now that *he'd*-

No, that *she'd*-

...*They'd*-?





# DEMONS

*(a novel excerpt)*

BROOKLYNNE SCIVALLY

She's at it again. For the third night in a row, she's left her village and ventured towards the mountain. For a while I'd thought she had stopped coming, but there she is. Carefully, as if she were walking on ice, she walks along a winding path through the woods, slowly approaching the stony mouth of a cave embedded within the towering cliff face. She sits hidden in the bushes just outside that dark, gaping hole, poking her pink nose into it ever so slightly, her turquoise eyes wide and curious. What is she looking for?

I watch her sometimes while I'm out on collection, hidden in bushes or the tops of trees where she can't see my dark fur among the leaves. Her fur is whiter than the snow covered hills, her face and back mottled a light grey. Her long flowing tail twitches when she's lost in thought, waiting for who knows what to pop out of that hole.

She trudges back to her village dejected and empty-pawed every morning, her steps heavy with weariness. I get the feeling that she doesn't want to be seen when she crawls back within her territory, pressed low to the ground and quieter than a mouse.

But one particularly cold evening, for some reason—perhaps something above the trees caught her eye—she looked up into the branches I was hiding in, curled into a dense gray ball. Her fur fluffed up. Maybe she saw my dark fur, easy to spot if you really look. Maybe my azure paws—or my ears—or my stripes—caught her eye in front of the brown wood. Maybe I should have drawn my wings in more. Golden feathers look too out of place against the trees.

I wonder if she spotted my eyes, glowing bright red within the dark leaves. I wonder if she could see them dilate from so far away.

Regardless, I fled.



Translucent red wisps of magic engulfed my father's chair as its wheels spun along the stony path, slowing occasionally as he updated his log of the demons I'd brought back. He paused for a moment, kicking his paw into the air idly, before extending an enormous feathered and leathery wing into my path. I glanced up at him.

"Why do these numbers not match?" he growled, crimson eyes flicking from the contained beings at his side to his clipboard. I looked over at the demons in the cage, scrutinizing.

The tiny beings were all cast in a similar pale orange, with long flowing trails behind them. Everything about them was rounded—horns, wingtips, claws. They screeched in wonder at each other, and at the two of us outside their cage, seemingly fine with their situation.

I recognized the type instantly, but just to be sure, I hovered a little to peer at the log over his dark shoulders. Sure enough, the matching entry read "happiness" in large black print. I realized the cause of the discrepancy, my ears falling flat as I shrank back. My father turned to look at me, his rounded eyes narrowed into slits.

"I didn't put all of them into containment. I ...I kept one," I meowed with a small shrug.

He sighed, placing a giant paw over his face. "You must log these things Midnight. And judging by your recent lack of happiness, you clearly have not been using it." He held out his black paw in my direction. "Give it to me," he ordered, switching to the voice he used when dealing with godly matters.

I hunched low and encased myself in my magic, casting a faint red tint to my gray fur. It pulled away at a single point, like pinching a cloth. It formed a bubble that detached into a clump of reddish magic, within which a single bright orange feline demon floated casually. I stared at it sadly, and it trilled. I looked away.

I extended my paw, pushing the bubble towards my father's waiting paw with my magic. He held it suspended above his paws, inspecting it, before sending it into the confinement with a flash. He recalibrated the container to the new number with a flick of his paw, before returning his attention to the log and starting down the path again. I watched my paws move until he spoke again.

"You know," he began gently, pausing when I didn't look up, "just because you have the capacity to feel an emotion does not necessarily mean you will." I forced my eyes to meet his, staring sympathetically at me. "A



happiness demon is not a sadness cure.”

I shrugged, perhaps a little too forcefully. “I know that now,” I grumbled. My tail twitched, but I resisted the urge to thrash it.

He released his clipboard after a beat of silence, allowing it to disappear into a flash of red before he addressed me again.

“What is wrong, Midnight?” he hummed, slowly sitting up fully in his chair.

I slowed my paws. “What do you mean?” I replied, avoiding eye contact. My gaze met that of a monster’s coming up the path behind him, and we exchanged our hellos as they passed. My father squinted at me, as if trying to read my mind.

“This is about a mortal, isn’t it?” he growled, scowling at me. He folded his paws in confirmation at my averted gaze. “Are they giving you any trouble?” I shook my head forcefully.

“You are upset over a girl, then,” he sighed, swiveling away. It wasn’t a question.

“No, I’m not,” I responded, the force of my voice giving me away. I turned my head the other way to stare at the other array of demons passing by my side. They swirled and hissed in their cages, each one pulsing with a different color and emotion.

“Oh,” he continued, “a boy, then?” He turned his head teasingly to the side, his eyes latched on my form close to the ground behind him.

I flicked my ear dismissively and chuckled. “No, Dad.”

My father snickered, turning to nudge me lightly with his foot, the force sending himself farther down the trail. He grabbed onto a nearby control terminal to stop himself from rolling too far away, into a cluster of stalagmites. He called out to me from the significant distance as I moved to close the gap.

“Come now, Midnight! No need to be so... Heh, cagey.” He laughed, glancing up at the rows and rows of cages. I shook my head. “In all seriousness, what in the name of my brother is making you sound so heartbroken over some mortal?”

“I am not heartbroken over anyone!” I hissed as I reached him, my tail swishing. “I was just thinking, that’s all. Why does everything have to be about emotions with you?”

The joke was not lost on the god, and he laughed to himself. “Heh, all right, all right.” He raised his jet-black paws in defeat and turned back to his work, summoning his clipboard and pen once again.

I wished I could relax, but knowing my father, his curiosity was far from

diminished. I warily eyed the bear out of the corner of my eye, and saw him glance at a control terminal, a gleam flickering in his eye. He rolled over to it, and it pulsed to life as he began typing a command into the panel. I tilted my head.

*Release: Quantity: {1}; Title: {STRESS}; Strength: {POOR}; Form: {CAT}*

“Dad, what are you doing?” I meowed at him, my mind racing to rationalize his actions.

Ignoring me, he turned to a release hatch a few paces ahead of us. A single tiny maroon demon awaited its release within, pushing and clawing frantically at the hatch door. I watched his paw glow bright yellow as he used his powers to open the gate, and shouted as the corrupt being dove for me.

Frozen to the spot, I watched as the screeching demon came right at me, its magic slowly engulfing my frame. I scrunched my eyes shut in anticipation of awful anxiety—but felt nothing more than the usual increase of strength that came with extra demons. I looked down at myself, carefully looking over my wings, paws, and tail. Nothing new. Once my inspection was complete, I stared with an eyebrow raised at the horned bear grinning at me from over his shoulder.

“Now,” he began with a triumphant grin, “tell me about this girl.” He swiveled back to face me in his chair and folded his paws behind his head.

I struggled to keep my thoughts to myself, but the harder I tried, the more my blood rushed and my heart pounded in my ears. I tried to keep from visibly shaking, to no avail. It felt as if the stress of keeping my thoughts a secret was literally eating me alive, tearing me apart from my inside out.

He raised an eyebrow, and I—unable to stand the uneasiness—began to speak. As quickly as air rushes from a punctured balloon, I meowed, “Okay, so there’s this cat from the highlands and she’s really cool and seems super nice and smart and I really wanna get to know her but she’s a mortal and scared of me because I’m a monster but I really, really li-”

I quickly clamped my paws down over my mouth, cutting off the flow of information tumbling from it. I glared at my father, who was chuckling quietly but trying to hide it by covering his mouth with a paw, while I attempted to get the stressful demon under control. He raised his unoccupied paw, flickering red. I shut my eyes as I felt the clinging being detach like a leech, and opened my eyes again just as the screeching demon was forced back into containment. I let out a forceful sigh as my muscles relaxed.

“That is all I wanted to know,” my father laughed loudly, the amused expression on his face a stark contrast to my angry one. Paws to the rocky earth, he quickly began to roll away.

“DAD!” I hissed loudly after him, giving chase.



“You sure you know what you’re doin’?”

A small rasping voice sounded behind me as I prepared myself to fly away. I turned to its owner, a small two-headed puppy. Both of their heads stared up at me with two pairs of red, worried eyes.

“Yeah, Car-son, I think I’ll be alright. This isn’t my first collection, you know. You two don’t have to worry about me.” I stretched my paws out, leathery wings unfurling on my arching back. The few feathers that were there rustled.

All four of Carter and Mason’s eyes widened at me. “I-It’s not us that are worried, no way! Nu-uh!” Their ears flattened. Mason looked away.

I chuckled back at them, “Oh, is your mom worried about me, then?” I glanced over at the enormous dark hound doing her nightly rounds of the cages, sniffing along the ground intently. Her ear lifted a little at my mentioning her, but she didn’t respond beyond that.

“What? No! Our mama’s not afraid a anythin!” Carter, the speaking head replied, Mason simply nodding. They stuck out their dark furred chest in pride, before hunching back in on themselves. “It’s you that should be scared, Midnight! Have you ever seen a Highlands mortal?”

I rubbed my nose nonchalantly. “Yeah, I’ve seen them; they’re not all that threatening. There’s a village full of them close to here that all look kinda like me, actually,” I meowed.

A loud whistle sounded from somewhere in the cavern. I looked upwards, spying a violet canine monster sitting on a dizzyingly high precipice. She leaned forward, having gained my attention.

“Moon’s going down, Midnight! You gonna stand there and talk all night, or do your job?” she barked. Her long tail also yelled something at me, something with a lot of s’s, but I couldn’t hear it. I turned back to Car-son.

“...Alright Car-son, I’d better head off while the demons are still clearly visible.” Mason nodded reluctantly.

I stood from my reclining position and ran through my mental checklist, before preparing again to fly up to the Highlands. As my wings spread, however, I felt something pull my tail gently. I turned around, and saw it

clamped between Mason's jowls, Carter staring at me.

"Be careful," he whimpered, as Mason released my tail, ears back. I simply smiled reassuringly back at them, before flapping my wings once, twice, and a third time before taking off towards one of the gaping holes in the wall that led to the highlands.

Landing carefully on the rocky ledge, I didn't hesitate to trot through the cave, hearing the constant screeching of particularly restless demons die down behind me. I shivered, passing through the midpoint of the passage, and trodded into the mortal realm.

As I grew closer to the entrance, I began to slow my pace. Stealth wasn't my main priority, but it was still very important to stay hidden. The less mortals saw of me, the better. I stopped at the mouth of the cave, where several planks of wood had been nailed up. I figured whoever had put them there was either trying to dissuade the curious, or block in the chaos behind me. Deep down, I knew it was more likely to be the latter.

*Too bad for them*, I thought with a grin, since I bypassed the poorly constructed barrier almost every night. I summoned a thin sheet of paper with a list of demons I was to gather on one side, along with another list of ones I was to release on the back. I looked at the first description on the front list. Fear. *Ooh, I love the fearful demons. They're so easy to deal with once you trap them*, I thought to myself.

Folding up the list, I released it and let it disappear back into my own personal void. Cracking my joints, I located the gap near the bottom right edge that I used to get through the planks, and crawled through it. I took a breath of fresh evening air, and fluttered my wings happily. The highlands were usually so calm and quiet. I often went there simply to relax.

But I was on duty, and needed to do my job quickly, before the sun rose and the demons disappeared almost completely from sight. I sniffed around the trees, trying to catch the scent of a demon. The fearful ones smelled like adrenaline and sweat, so it was hard to miss.

Once I smelled one not far off, I dropped low to the ground. I crept forward, following the trail through the trees, twisting and turning, before I spied a faint glow surrounding a den carved into the base of a tree. I stilled, knowing very well that the fearful demons were always on guard.

And there it was, a bluish little being with rough edges and pointed wings. Curled horns sat tucked against the top of its furry head, emerging just above glowing white eyes that never dared to blink. I watched a shudder travel from its tiny ears, down its back, and to the end of its stumpy tail, curled into a tight coil.

Waiting for its head to turn away, I crept forward a tiny step. It made a chirping sound, and began to float away from me. I peeked out from behind the bushes, and leapt silently over them. With a swift swat, I sent a small rock sailing above its horns to get its attention to a different direction, and pounced when its head flipped around predictably.

I missed it by a mere inch, my paws landing in dirt and grass. The demon's head darted back around, and it screeched in fear. It flapped its tiny wings and gave chase, forcing me to charge after it, cursing the stars under my breath.

We trampled through the undergrowth, essentially scattering any other demons in the area, making my job a thousand times harder. Rather than dwell on that, I turned my full focus to the little mongrel so close to being caught that I could almost feel it between my paws. With one great leap, I landed squarely on top of it, successfully trapping it beneath my magic. I gave a triumphant cheer between heavy breaths, preparing to send it to a cage in my void.

My success was short lived however, because as I reached inside the cage with my powers, I was suddenly hit by something heavy and fell to the side with a loud *oof*. I rolled away and landed on my back, gaining a clear view of the squealing demon flying away, far out of reach. I hissed loudly, kicking out my back paws in an attempt to turn over, when someone emerged from the shadows and began holding me down by my chest.

He was a brown tomcat, wearing a white hood over his head, but I could see piercing yellow eyes staring down at me. I hissed up at him, baring my fangs, hoping he would get scared and flee. It didn't work; he simply dug his claws into my shoulders. I was trapped. I heard voices around me, and looked to see several other cats I somehow hadn't noticed coming out of hiding, all whispering praise to the oddly heavy cat above me.

"Nice job, Charles," said a voice, deep and rasping.

"Very well done," mewed another, more lively sounding. "Page will be so pleased!"

At the mention of Page, my eyes widened, and images of white and grey fur, a long billowing tail, and turquoise eyes assaulted my thoughts. I never, ever, thought I would get to meet her, and just accepted that as fact. I hissed violently up at the cat, attempting once more to free myself.

I brought my legs underneath him, and swiftly kicked him off of my chest. I rolled to the side, preparing to bolt, but I was surrounded. All the other cats in the circle stepped forward, limiting my space. I growled and looked to the sky between the branches, preparing to fly away, but someone

else behind me leapt and landed squarely on my back. I hit the ground with a grunt, and felt something rough wrap around my wings in a painful manner. I could no longer move them enough to fly to safety. Not only that, but the cats besieged me, managing to wrap a metal chain around my neck.

After an embarrassingly brief struggle, it was secured and locked tightly. Finally, they stepped away. I stood up slowly, attempting to shake the chains off, but to no avail. I made a helpless sound, unable to reach any of the locks they had secured around me. My heart raced. I thought about speaking, but my words would be imperceptible to their mortal ears.

“It’s trapped, let’s go,” I heard someone else with a deep voice say. “Cassie, run ahead and tell Page what we’ve found.”

One of the cats, a young pale peach tabby, broke away from the crowd and bounded off into the forest. I silently willed her to come back, but she didn’t. Someone tugged on the chain around my neck, pulling me along, but I resisted. I jerked my head back, but someone else pushed me forward rather roughly, and I nearly fell.

I refused to give in, constantly jerking and pulling one way or another as the cats herded me through the trees and into a clearing of soft grasses lined with trees. They stood behind me in a semicircle as two cats appeared from the taller grasses on the opposite end of the clearing.

The tabby was there, beside a tall, silvery grey and white she-cat I recognized immediately. She also wore a white cloak, although hers had an orange and yellow sun stitched into the center of it, right in the center of her chest.

Page, I thought, internally and externally shuddering in excitement and fear. I lowered my head slightly, while still trying to maintain a threatening appearance with wide eyes. Recognition flashed in her face for a split second, before falling into a clearly practiced neutral expression.

My heart beat wildly in my chest, and my ears flattened against my head. She looked down at me, turquoise eyes judging every hair on my pelt. I swallowed. Perhaps Car-son was on to something.

She leapt onto a large boulder at one end of the clearing, before turning to face me. “Guardians of the Day and civilians alike, look down upon this creature before me,” her voice boomed loudly and confidently, startling me. I glanced around, noticing immediately that more cats had begun to gather, each one bearing a differently colored cloak.

Page continued, gesturing at me. “This creature roams in the night, basking in the darkness. Now it shall see the light of day, and its cold, corrupted heart will be thawed!”

Thunderous cheers sounded around me, and I started in surprise. I felt the demons interlocked with my spirit hiss in warning, alerting me that I might be in danger. The sun was rising, and I needed to get back to the cave to wait for night again. It was simply within my nature as a monster to shy away from the sun, from the symbol of Luca himself. The demons I came out to capture would soon scatter into the shadows, and I would usually do the same, but now...

Page reached into her white cloak and pulled out a thin chain with a golden sun charm on the end of it, similar to the one I saw on the chest of her hood. It glinted in the light of the rising sun, and I stared at it in awe. I heard the cats all around purr and mew their approval.

“This,” she began again, leaping down from the rock, “is an enchanted medallion. It shall tame this beast, allowing it to properly enjoy the light of day. Not only that, it will allow us to properly communicate with it.” With every other word, she took a step closer, and I took a step back. I winced at the word ‘enchanted,’ mortals using magic almost never ended well. Spells done improperly, irresponsibly, overconfidently, causing endless problems for everyone involved.

I stepped back as far as I could, which wasn’t much. Within seconds, I was pressed against the cat behind me as he held the chains keeping me grounded. I turned my head slightly away from Page, but held eye contact. She reached out, necklace in paw, and wrapped it swiftly around my neck, over the metal.

Immediately, all thoughts I could’ve had concerning my safety dissipated as golden swirls of magic rose from the charm. The land grew brighter as the sun rose above the horizon, and my bones felt weak in its presence. I slumped slowly to the ground, barely noticing the fact that I was purring loudly. My surroundings became hazy, as if I were dreaming, and my head lolled to the side in peace. I could feel the light of the sun, and it warmed my fur. Everything felt as if it was getting a massage, and my muscles relaxed. Page reached out and placed a paw on my head, and I purred louder with glee.

“Release it,” she meowed at the cats behind me, but I barely heard it over the steady rumbling in my throat. I felt paws undo the fastenings on the chains around my neck and wings, and they were lifted away. I sighed happily, resting my head on the ground.

“You see? This poor demon has never felt happiness, love, or peace. It shall remain here with me during its rehabilitation,” Page told the others. I tried to listen, but it was just too difficult. She continued to talk, but her

voice faded into a dull buzz in the background. I briefly registered the other cats walking away, leaving Page and me alone. I shut my eyes.

After a moment, she tapped me on the head. "Beast. Wake up, I wish to speak with you," she meowed.

"Mmmn. Lemme sleep," I mumbled, moving my head away from her paw. She began tapping my head more insistently, and I cracked open an eye. The world was much clearer.

"Up," she demanded. She sounded unsettled, and it piqued my curiosity enough to wake me up the rest of the way.

I stood on shaky legs, and then opted to sit down. Once I was comfortable, I looked up at Page as she restlessly flicked her tail back and forth. "Whuh?" I said, my words slurring.

"I'm going to be honest with you. That was not the kind of reaction I was expecting," she said, her voice much less confident than before. "Are you alright, beast?"

Her voice became hazy, and I almost couldn't make out her words.

"Mmmnnnh," came my eloquent response as I wiped my eyes with a paw. I swayed, nearly falling over, and she rushed over to catch me.

"Oh dear, Luca. The spell must be far too strong for you...oh, will you just *stand up!*" She tried impatiently to help me back on my feet, but it only served to topple me back into a sitting position. "Okay. Okay, this isn't good. They might think I've poisoned you," she whispered frantically, her fur rising slightly.

She flicked her tail at a large tree with a grass-covered hole at the base. "You're going to stay in there, while I go find that enchantress again. She should be able to weaken the spell enough so that you don't act like a drunken cow all the time."

I blinked in incomprehension.

She helped me up, and began pushing me towards the hole. "Now go on, get inside and take a nap or something. *Don't go anywhere,*" she ordered halfheartedly. I pushed past the branches and leaves in the way, and flopped down against the side furthest from the entrance. Heaving a sigh, I shut my eyes, letting the light from the rising sun lull me into slumber.



I didn't feel any better when I opened them again. The peace I felt before had faded, and my fur stood on end. Where was the sun? I needed to see it again. Then everything would be okay.



I stood on aching legs, weary from lying around all day. I clumsily made my way to the den's entrance, and nosed partially past the cover provided out front. I heard voices, but was dismayed at the lack of sun in the sky. I whimpered, but perked up a bit at Page's voice.

"So the only way to weaken the enchantment is to counter it. I understand that. But can you do it without completely *removing* the enchantment?" I heard her say. I pushed my head out through the bushes, and saw Page sitting with her back to me, tail twitching. There was another cat sitting in front of her, a calico with stunning emerald eyes.

The calico yawned and spoke up. "I'm afraid not. Counter-enchantments are meant to eradicate the spell completely, and that's exactly what they do."

Page winced, flattening her ears. Why was she upset? I rose from where I was crouched and fluttered my wings. Yawning, I slunk fully out of the branches covering the den, immediately falling on to the ground like a newborn pony. My teeth clamped together painfully. I caught the calico's attention, and she laughed.

"Is *that* the monster?" she snickered, attempting to cover her chuckling with a paw.

Page's ears flattened and she responded hesitantly, "Yes, that's it." She glanced at me from the side as I lay on the ground. Both cats stood and ambled over to me, one laughing, the other sighing.

Page crouched to meet me face to face. "Are you feeling alright now, Beast?" she asked me.

I blinked up at her pitifully. "I bith mah thongue," I mewed. The calico burst into laughter again, and Page sighed again. She patted me on the head, glaring a little at the calico.

"That's so pathetic," the calico chuckled, "but now I think I see your problem... oh Luca, that's hilarious." She and Page sat on either side of me. I looked up at the sky and frowned when I saw the sun almost completely down. Was it night already? How long had I slept?

Page wrapped her tail around her paws and huffed. "I was hoping you wouldn't have to destroy the enchantment entirely... I don't want it to run off. I need to convince the others that demons can be reasoned with, and this won't help my case at all."

The calico tilted her head. "Why don't you just tie him up again?"

"Because," Page replied, crouching down to my level, "I want it...*him* to trust me." She put a paw on my head, and I purred in delight.

"Sappy, but alright. I've got this, hold on." The calico stood and opened

her dark cloak, revealing rows and rows of pockets. She reached inside and removed a medallion similar to the one around my neck, decorated like the full moon. I hissed quietly at it, my hackles rising. There was something about the magic it held that made me uneasy.

The calico, hearing me hiss, held the chain above my head. “Down, boy,” she muttered. When I didn’t make any move to relax, the calico snorted and put her other paw on my back. She pressed down, forcing me to lower my raised shoulders. I flicked my tail in mild irritation as she proceeded to climb and sit fully on top of me.

I growled at her, and Page swatted me on the nose. “You stop that, Beast. She’s helping you,” she said sternly. I looked up at her and blinked apologetically, lowering my ears.

She smiled at me, turquoise eyes practically glowing, and I couldn’t help but stare at her. Her smile itself was like sitting in the sun and letting its rays shine upon you for hours, leaving you a pleasant warmth in your bones. I felt like if she ever stopped smiling, the world would be consumed with darkness. I was so enraptured by her smile; I almost didn’t notice the enchantment being removed.

Almost.

I had gotten used to the world being like a foggy landscape, the shapes and colors blurring together slightly. When the enchantment was gone, however, my surroundings quickly sharpened into focus. I saw Page looking at me, and quickly registered the cat sitting on top of me.

“And there you go,” the cat above me meowed triumphantly. I unfurled my wings slowly.

“I would wait a few minutes for the sun to go down before we try and cast the spell again,” she continued. I brought my hind legs underneath my torso, eyes locked onto Page. She didn’t notice what I was doing.

She tilted her head. “Why? The enchantment is gone, right?” she meowed. The cat on top of me made a sound that could have been either a yes or a no. I tensed my muscles.

“Well, if you want the enchantment to be weaker, then we should definitely wait for the sun to be—whoa!” she shouted, launching off of me and predictably getting a face full of dirt. I hastily pushed my upper half from the ground, shaking out my wings. She scrambled to stand, and Page rushed to help her, apologizing.

I was tired and confused, but most of all sure that I needed to get away from these cats. I wasted no time getting into the sky, far above the treetops. Once I was far enough away, I turned to look back down at them. I didn’t

care much about the speckled she-cat, but Page...

Page's eyes were wide and afraid, mouth hanging open almost comically. Her eyebrows were knit together at the top of her head, and her ears were flattened in a way that made my heart constrict painfully. My wings faltered for a moment as I hovered motionlessly above the clearing.

Shaking my head slightly, I banished any thoughts of going back to comfort her. I needed to get *home*, to let everyone know I was okay. I had no idea how long I was even gone, after all. With one powerful beat of my wings, I was away.



# STAGES OF LESBIANISM

CHELSELYN VANCE

## Stage #1: Awareness

When I was five, my friend Jolisa told me she had a crush on Pablo. I didn't know what a crush was so I just pushed her and said, "Oh, you." When I got home I asked my mom what a crush was and she said it was when two people *more* than like each other.

## Stage #2: Skepticism

The next day I told Jolisa I had a crush on her. She pushed me and said, "Oh, ew." \*Scoff\* Well I never! What was her problem? "You're not supposed to have crushes on girls," she said. "Boys do that."

Oh.

## Stage #3: Questioning

Maybe I'm a boy.

## Stage #4: Gender Solidifying

I asked my mom. I said, "When I came out, how did you know I was a girl? Maybe the doctor made a mistake and I'm a boy." Mom said, "I know you're a girl because of how pretty you are and how sweet you are." She hugged me and we ate dinner.

## Stage #5: Sexism

When I was in the fourth grade, I had an English teacher named Mr. Gaunt. One day he gave us a quiz that everyone failed. He yelled at us saying, "This is the worst class I've ever had! How come you won't learn?"

I replied, "It's because you're a boy teacher, and boy teachers can't teach. Obviously."

I got in trouble.

When I was in the fifth grade, one time during lunch all my friends confronted me with, “How come you haven’t told us your secret crush?”

I replied, “I don’t have a secret crush on a boy. Boys are not pretty or sweet.”

#### Stage #6: Fitting a Few Stereotypes

One day in the eighth grade, I got four homeruns in one game. And whenever the other girls got home plate, I slapped them on the butt.

#### Stage #7: Learning about the \*vagina\*

My freshman year of high school, my biology class got hijacked by a “sex-ed” teacher. For two days we were shown pictures of diseased genitals and unhappy, lonely pregnant women.

When we got our biology teacher back, Mr. Blister taught us about the vagina and how it works. When class was over I thought, “Wow! What an incredible body part! The ability to birth people, bleed out every month, and still have like, tons of orgasms? I am so lucky to have one of those!”

#### Stage #8: Awareness, Part 2

When it was time to pick what mandatory club we had to be in, my eyes fell upon the GSA. Gay Straight Alliance. I didn’t want to be \*insensitive.\* So I picked it.

First club meeting was full of...diversity! High schoolers from all walks of life were present. I learned many new things. I learned that there’s more than two genders. I learned the meaning of LGBTQQIP. And perhaps most importantly, I learned that the assistant club director was, well, she was beautiful. ... And very gay. I looked at the B in LGBTQQIP and thought maybe I Belong.

#### Stage #9: Bisexuality

Once club was over, I approached her. “Hi. ”

“Hey. ”

“So, you’re gay?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Cool...”

“How about you?”

“!!! Me? I’m not gay.”

“Ha-ha! Okay. That’s fine. It’s fine if you are and it’s fine if you’re not.”

“Hahahahaookay.”

## Stage #10: The Boy Storm

Oh. Claus is \*cute.\* Oooh. Samuel is sexy. \*Gasp\* Look at Lucas. I wanna get in that. Hehehehehe.

One day, Pablo approached me during lunch. We were both sophomores by that time. He said, "So, uh, *are* you gay? You stare at Rebecca a lot."

"I am not staring at her. I'm just... Looking up to her... as my assistant club director."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Yeah, and I look at guys. I look at guys all the time, Pablo."

"Hmm. So you're not gay or—?"

"And besides, Rebecca has a girlfriend."

## Stage #11: The Abrupt End of the Boy Storm.

"Mmm, no, she doesn't."

"What?"

"Yeah, that was just a rumor."

"Oh."

## Stage #12: Questioning Part 2

What should I say to her? When should I say it? How should I say it? I don't want to offend her. When is she busy? I don't want to take up her time. Oh, gosh, how long should I talk to her? I don't want to be annoying. Ugh, what do I do? No, no, it's fine. Just calm down and talk to her. If she's busy, she'll tell me. Oh, but what do I say?

"Hey, Rebecca."

"Oh. Hey."

"Uh. Do you have the chemistry homework?"

"She didn't assign any homework today."

"Oh. Right. Thanks. See you."

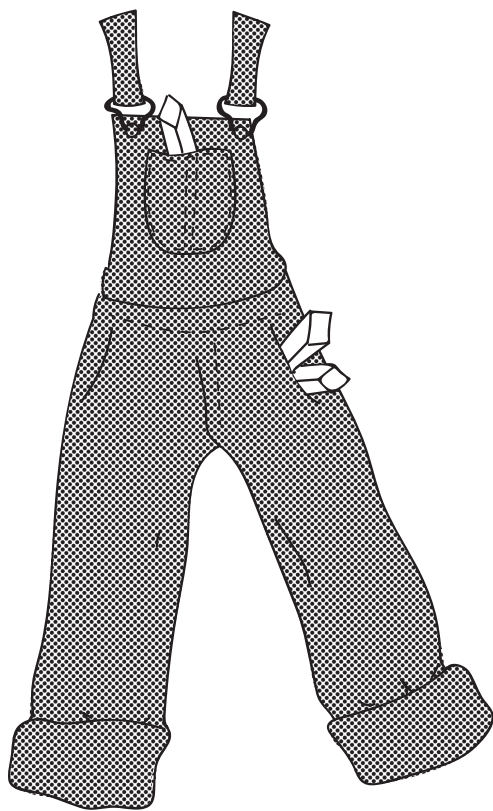
"Hey, wait," Rebecca said.

"Why, yes?"

\*blinkblink\* "Have you thought any more about your sexuality?"

"U-um."

"Because you always struck me as a lesbian."





# JUST OFF EXIT 991

MIKA NELSON

Warren knew they were in trouble when they decided to go to that party wearing a layered jeans outfit, complemented with patches, high tops, and a lime green baseball cap, when they ended up walking out with Kate, who didn't have a car, and didn't know how to get home, when they went to CVS because Kate wanted some beef jerky, when they left Kate at the CVS and started driving down the asphalt road recklessly (their world was ending anyway so why not), when they swerved into that old farmhouse, when they abandoned their car, leaving the keys in the passenger seat, and walked into the woods, when they wondered if they could go back, when they wondered about fixing up the old farmhouse, when they wondered what would happen to their cats, when they wondered if they should have some more red bull, when they took another swig of red bull, when they saw the heaving mass of leaves, when the leaves glowed with an unnatural glow, when they got closer to the leaves to see that leaves were velvety, and dark violet, when the leaves heaved with the force of a tsunami, and Warren tripped past into the darkness, falling into the abyss, gravity enveloping them, and the air was knocked out of their lungs as the world went black.

This was the moment Warren knew they were in trouble.

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A low husky voice woke Warren up. Their chest ached, sore from the impact with the packed dirt. They squirmed and assessed their surroundings. A tall round body stood above them. He was furry, and covered in garments made of dark brown leather. Warren attempted to shift their weight onto their arms but the movement sent a wave of nausea through their body so they just settled on staring at where the creature's eyes should have been, a space that was covered by long brown fur.

The creature stared at Warren for a moment, and suddenly turned and howled, “Hey, Wescott another upsider! Better get the transport charging!”

“Another one? Really, we can do better about monitoring our entrances Vero. We might not have enough power this time,” said a light whispery voice. The voice echoed off the high cave walls, and the speaker was not to be seen.

“I told you we should set up better barriers, the net is still weak, and the upsider’s brains might have ended up on our ground.”

Vero surveyed the human. Warren was still wearing the all-denim outfit, now stained with dirt. Barely 5’2, Warren was no match for the creature before them. If they ran, Warren pondered, he could easily catch up—darn those long legs.

“Vero, be sure to put it out of harm’s way. We do not know what else could come down after it. The surface world is dangerous, and I certainly do not want our new friend to be crushed by whatever else is up there.”

The fog was thinning. Seeing that large creature looking in their direction made Warren want to crawl in a ball, and never look at anything else. But to spite that feeling they took a leap of faith, and sat up. The two pairs of eyes (or lack thereof) bore into each other with interest. Warren swallowed, and tried to think of something to say.

“So...” They looked around at the dark cave illuminated with fluorescent crystals. “Nice digs.”

“Yes, we try to keep our farm looking sharp,” Vero said with a punch of exuberance, his shoulders bouncing jovially. “Ooh, did you hear that, upsider? I made a pun. Was it a good one? I found a human joke book, and it has all of the best. Do you want to hear more?”

Warren winced. They despised wordplay, especially puns. If they had been in any other situation where their assailant wasn’t a seven-foot-tall creature, they would have booed, or at least teased a little bit.

Instead, without skipping a beat, Warren said, “Sure, I would love to,” forcing every syllable.

“Oh, wow.” Vero paused, shifting his weight to his right leg, “I didn’t think you would say yes. I need to get myself together. I have no one to practice with down here, Well, except for Wescott, but Wescott doesn’t understand them. It doesn’t understand the humor. Now that you’re here, and you’re human, I can practice with you now.”

Warren realized they made a huge mistake.

Warren was trapped in what appeared to be a hole. There were creatures unknown to them, ones that *liked puns* for god’s sake. They knew that they

were not going to survive. What wit Warren had left, vanished, and their world went black.

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“Why is it always inactive, Vero?” whined the whispery voice that careened out of the body hovering beside Warren. “The upsider has not woken up once since yesterday.”

“Have you made sure its batteries have been put in right? Because batteries can be weird that way, but if you flip some it might work.”

Warren woke up to the sight of the most unusual thing they had seen, aside from the tall humanoid furry creature that at this moment stood at the entrance of this small dimly lit room.

This creature was not similar to the being Warren had just saw before. This was a machine. It would have looked more impressive a few years back, its round body hovered above the ground. It had no visible appendages apparent to Warren. The room was silent except for an omnipresent whirling of its engine. Warren thought it resembled a sentient Roomba.

“Have you been watching me sleep?” Warren said foggily

“Hmm.” The machine turned around, and considered Warren’s small frame. “Yes, I had to, there have been others, and they tend to run around, and exhaust themselves...” The machine skipped a beat

“I thought it was a good idea to not let you exhaust yourself if you woke up,” it explained. The machine swung back to Vero. “The human is awake. I’ll fill it in. How about you go fill up that pit that the surface cradler made when they fell in?”

Vero peered in anxiously at the human that he had laid down on a low hastily made bed hours before. He had checked into every hour or two since then.

“It’ll be all right with me, trust me,” the bot said, slightly impatient. Trying to catch Vero eyes, as much as a robot without eyes could.

Vero took one last look at Warren, and said, “I—I’ll check in later, Wescott.”

“Good.” The bot dismissed Vero, and glided over to Warren’s bedside. Warren tried to compose himself enough to sit up, and found they had the strength. Warren watched the bot curiously. It appeared to speak though speaker grates that resembled a car grill.

“That was considerate of you,” said Warren. “Do you know where exactly I am, and how to get out of this, this...”

“Cave?” the machine piped in impatiently. “You are in a cave right now, just in case you did not know. A cave where I have limited time, and need to tend to a farm. Now that you’re awake, you need to earn your keep. We have been having a power outage of sorts, and we’ve had to dedicate the power we do use to essential things. So, the transport that we use to get to the surface has not been charged up recently. If we stretch our resources we can have enough power to get back to your home by, let me see...” The machine bubbled in thought. “In three to twenty-one days,” it said. “Tomorrow is our day off so we start the day after that. I’ll have Vero show you around later, to show you the ropes.”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t have you around using up our resources, you need to contribute to our cause.”

“Wescott. That’s your name, right? I really don’t know if I’m in good shape to help y’all out, I just fell down a long way-”

“And whose fault is that? I do not know how you found us, but how do we know you mean good? If you want to get out of here so badly, play by our rules, upsider. If you do this I’ll find a way to conserve our resources to get you back up.”

“If I work for you, you need to keep your side of the deal. I have school to keep up with, and I know my grandma will be worried sick over me. I need to get back safely!” Warren choked up a little. The realization that people could not possibly save them, or be able to contact them for several days, injected itself into Warren’s bloodstream, and settled into their bones. What will people think about what happened to them? They wouldn’t believe this.

“You’ll see them soon enough, if you work,” the bot sputtered, exasperated at Warren’s panic. “If you stay here, you have to work, upsider.”

“My name is Warren.”

“Warren, go find Vero and he will find you jobs that would suit you.”



The mushrooms danced in the unnatural purple light unaware that they were being watched. They shared a hidden, tucked-away portion of the cave. The skinny poles of fungi stood taller than Warren had ever seen. They watched the waxy stems wave at them, and was tempted to wave back. Warren had a job to do. That morning Vero had run through various jobs that Warren could have, but settled on giving vague instructions on how to locate the mushrooms, and how to collect them. Warren looked at the

wire basket they carried, and remembered what Vero had said. "Don't be too loud when you go. They can sense you. Try to act casual. Bring back a basketful."

They approached the field apprehensively and prepared the crystal shears Vero gave them. All the tools on the farm, Vero explained, were made out of a type of rare crystal that was invulnerable to 99.9% of other materials. During that talk Vero talked about the dizzying amount of crystals and their uses. Warren dismissively told Vero to write a book about it. Vero agreed to that idea profusely.

Warren ignored the short scraggles that resided among the edges of the field, and dove into the ocean of fungi. The sickly stalks came up to their shoulders. Their hand reached out to the stalks to grasp the gray flesh, and the sprouts sprang back into the earth. Warren's shock was unparalleled in that moment. The hand that had reached out so eagerly now had a bad case of carpet burn. They swore violently, and put away their shears. Warren had thought this task was going to be simple.

They wiped away the damp dirt off their face, and stared at their left hand. Their irritated skin throbbed uncontrollably. The skin burned and ached.

"Hope Vero has something for this," they quipped. "The easiest job on the farm Wescott said. Wescott doesn't do this work This job was easy for Vero."

Warren remembered the other jobs that had been introduced to them: collecting the crystals embedded into the cave walls that grew back like teeth, shearing the GMO sheep that glow, but also have a stomach for human flesh, or maybe just any type of flesh. Warren grimaced, and looked at where the tip of their pinky should be, and where a badly wrapped bandage was.

Defeated, Warren retreated to the mound of black earth that was at the opening of the clearing.

The greyed, oversized overalls that Vero lent them had to be folded up, and clipped. Warren hastily let the fold out, shaking the fabric violently till the legs were fully extended. They spread out like a starfish and let their eyes wander about the dark folds of the cave.

"You won!" Warren exclaimed at the mushrooms still hidden inches underneath the dirt. The dirt bristled, and it reminded Warren of children hiding underneath covers, trying to stifle their giggling. "I can't even collect some, dumb mushrooms, let alone go to a party, and have it be fun." Their voice quivered. And before they closed their eyes, they looked at the crystals

above. They cast a violet haze on the dim area. The violet light saturated their warm brown skin, and made everything it touched sparkle. There were footsteps approaching, and Warren did nothing but keep their eyes closed. They could feel cold pass over them.

“Warren, you probably know this, but your work clothes are all unrolled. Do you need a hand? Or maybe another finger?”

Warren’s eyes threw daggers in Vero’s direction

“Too soon?” Vero added.

“Yes, Ver that was yesterday,” their voice cracked, and sputtered through the cave. Warren sighed. “Please do give me a hand though.” Warren held their arms out. Vero stared awkwardly, at their short arms.

“Um... What do you want me to do? Thought you were joking about the hand thing,” he said.

“Could you pull me up?” Warren asked.

“Oh, yes, I understand now.” And he reached and pulled Warren back up with surprising strength. And then quickly maneuvered Warren around and put them across his shoulder, and started strolling down the path.

“Oh my god, put me down!!” Warren immediately started flailing to no avail. Their fists could not even bruise Vero’s flesh.

“You have been gone for more than two hours, so Wescott told me to bring you back. I knew you are somewhat...” He paused. “Feisty. So I had to not take chances.”

“That’s not fair. I only tried to cut you once”

“Yeah, you did,” he admitted, “but Wescott needs to see you, so you’re coming this way.”

“Why do you do everything Wescott tells you to do? It’s not your mom. You don’t have to do what it says, or even stay here.”

“Well, actually it raised me so Wescott sort of is... My mom.”

Warren stopped flailing “What do you mean?” they inquired.

“It took me in when I was small, and raised me, and taught me how to work the farm. Leaving would be a bit selfish.”

“With all that you do for the farm, the collecting and stuff, how would taking some extended time off be selfish?”

Vero stopped, and considered this. He put Warren down, and continued walking.

“Hmm. I really don’t know. Wescott gets pretty... I don’t know. I need some time to think about this.”

“Alright man, think it over,” Warren reassured him.

Vero sighed, and continued walking away from the vast field of violent

stems. The path was worn with the rectangular patterns of machine tracks, with tiny glittering fragments of crystal that had fallen from above, mixed into the black earth like pepper in mashed potatoes. The silence that had fallen between them was unbearable for Warren. Their frustration had just blossomed into curiosity. They had spent a massive time and energy into being frustrated, and they hadn't taken the time to consider deeper matters. Warren lingered on how Vero had just dropped that Wescott had raised him. How could that cold uncaring machine take care of, and produce this warm being? Questions that should have permeated their thoughts hours ago were now arriving at the station. Warren's thinking was interrupted by Vero's outburst.

"What do you think I should do?" Vero said.

"Do what?"

"If I take a break," he said as he surveyed the ground.

"Maybe when I get out of here you can come with me, to the surface."

"Wait, I can do that?"

"Well, yeah, if you wanted to. There's more than just glowing rocks, ya know."

"Crystals," Vero interrupted.

"Yes, as I was saying, there's more out there than glowing ionic compounds. So, if you're not allowed to go to the surface, where can you go in your free time?"

"Well, I mean I can go to my area of the cave, or I pretend I'm working and wander—"

"Hey, watch out. Bat!" Vero warned. He ducked. Warren scoffed, and continued walking. Then the bat hit them.

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Like puns, Warren was wary of anything that could fly. But also like puns Warren had never admitted to anyone that they were afraid of bats, or really anything. They thought if they pretended they weren't afraid of something, that they just weren't. For example, Warren thought they could handle going to a party, in theory. They prepared and prepared themselves, thinking of all the stuff that could go wrong. What if they talked to someone and they failed, people staring at them when they danced, people accidentally calling them a "he," then apologizing profusely, and loudly, being generally awkward, and not knowing what to do. The vast unknown was scary to Warren, and they felt alone. They had dug themselves into a hole, and had

buried themselves six feet under in anxiety.

So Warren had to excuse themselves from the party because they were falling apart. Finding Kate outside anxious, and dehydrated, they saw a mirror image of themselves. She was shivering in the cold. Warren asked her what was wrong and she said that she didn't know how to get home. She was tipsy and was barely coherent. Warren assured her they would get her home safely. With some investigating Warren was able to find her home address from Kate's phone. Warren tried calling contacts that looked like they could be friends of Kate's but the ringer kept going until the voicemail kicked in. Warren led her to the passenger side of their pickup, and they rode off into the night. The yellow streetlight illuminated the inside of the car with blue shadows, and it made Kate seem even more distant. She kept on repeating, "Hey, hey, can you get me some jerky?"

Warren ignored her for the first ten minutes then succumbed to her request, and pulled into the CVS parking lot.

"Stay in here. I'll go pick up some, and I'll be right back," they said as they shut off the engine of the car, and lowered the windows. Forgetting to lock the car Warren jumped out and walked into the fluorescent-lit paradise of CVS. They walked past the empty checkout desk to the snack aisle, and surveyed the jerkies. What would she want? Extra Crispy Jerky, Jalapeno Surprise Jerky, You'll Regret This In the Morning Jerky? Warren found the winner: Jerk Beef Jerky. Feeling triumphant they walked towards the counter.

The automatic sliding doors clicked open, and Kate waved dizzily at Warren.

"Hey, Warren!" slurred Kate as she stumbled into the CVS. "Look at me!" She started running towards them.

"Kate, I told you to stay in the car!" Warren said. Something was wrong, very wrong. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and Warren ran toward her, but she collapsed onto the ground before they could reach her. Helpless, they searched for a cashier, but one was not in sight. Panic setting in. She wasn't breathing. Warren tried to remember the 9th grade CPR they had been taught. Warren cleared her airways, and started compressions. They didn't remember hearing anything, at least for a few minutes, they might have been yelling or crying for all they knew. They only remember the desperate compressions, trying to get the girl breathing. Then came the flashing light of an ambulance, and Kate finally breathing, short, shallow breaths. The paramedics asked their questions, and took Kate out on a stretcher. One strayed behind to assure Warren that Kate would be okay,



but Warren would need to follow them to the hospital in their pickup. The paramedic escorted Warren back to the pickup and gave them the address of the hospitable just in case they got lost. Warren shakily started the engine. The adrenaline fogged their mind, and clouded good sense. Warren didn't follow the ambulance. They drove off onto the highway lost, confused, and scared. They pulled out the extra Red Bull that they kept in the car door, and took a sip.



Warren's injuries piled up like snow on a desolate sidewalk. They like to think of their scars as constellations that kept adding stars to their skin. They had become an expert at wrapping their wounds with Vero's help and finding the right type of mushrooms to reduce inflammation, the green brittle ones. Warren hoped they weren't too beat up when they returned to civilization. With the missing fingertip that ensured that an emergency room visit was in check, they hoped they wouldn't have too much nerve damage. After Warren was hit in the face with a cave bat, they only got a few scratches, and a short reprimand from Wescott about being productive. That was five days ago. Over the past five days Warren had been getting slightly better at the jobs assigned to them. Vero gave needed insight over the daily breakfast that Warren would invite themselves to.

Warren lay on their cot in their room. They had found the highest, driest spot in the cave, and set up camp there. Warren's room had a fantastic display of neon yellow crystal hanging from the ceiling. They had placed their low cot into a corner. Next to the cot was the assortment of clothes that Vero gave them to try on. The assortment was all mismatched, but satisfied Warren's eccentric fashion sense. All along the floors, and ceiling were slim lines Warren had carved into the black dirt with a stick. They took crushed pieces, of crystal, and pressed them into the indents.

The small room overlooked the central cave. They could see all the way down into the GMO sheep pen and the further mushroom patches. The central cave branched off into separate paths that Warren had not even explored yet. The central cave was where Vero, and Wescott had decided to live, though they chose rooms that were on the ground floor. At the end of the long workday, they could see Vero, hunched over and fatigued, enter his room. Wescott was almost always out doing something, though at night Warren could see the faint blue light from across the central cave moving about Wescott's room. Warren could hear the faint mumbblings of it. Warren

couldn't make out a word though.

It had been six days since Warren fell down the rabbit hole, and they still didn't have a solid answer on how they were going to get back home. Every time they asked Wescott about it, it would respond, "Be patient," or "In a couple of days." It was always "a couple of days." Every time Warren brought the subject up, Wescott would get more and more annoyed, and Warren had to let their inquires cease for the moment.



The beginning of the workday was always hard for Warren, but knowing that Wescott would come and go through his typical speech, they inched their way out of bed, and put on their ill-fitting overalls, and tucked them into their boots.

Warren thought it would be hard to tell the time in the cave, but a couple nights in they realized that the crystal changed colors slightly throughout the day. Earlier in the morning the crystals would be a deep indigo, and then midday, they would be more lavender, and on to late afternoon, where they would be a dark cyan. The colors would slowly morph into each other as time past, and Warren was comforted by this.

Warren had fallen into a neat daily routine. They walked over to Vero's room to get breakfast, which was usually some variation of mushroom.

"What's it today, Ver?" said Warren as they strolled up to Ver's room.

"Ahh, today." Ver removed the steaming pan from the steaming pile of dark opaque crystal. "Today is mushroom omelet!"

"Aww, but that's what we had yesterday, Ver," Warren whined as Vero sat the dish in front of them.

"Eat your food, Warren," Vero said sternly.

Warren reluctantly picked up the spoon Vero had given them, and they heard a small squawk. They looked around unsure of whether they had heard anything at all, but continued eating. Vero suddenly moved from the task of putting the pan up to moving all of the things in his ingredient pile. Warren bit into the warm fluffy omelet and chewed on the stiff mushrooms.

"Hey Vero, if this is an omelet where did the eggy part come from? I don't know much about cooking, but what could you possibly use as a substi-" There was another squawk emanating from where Vero kept his stores of ingredients

"Vero, what's that sound?"

"Warren, I'm sure it's some sort of bat," he said.

“That bat sounded distinctly like a bird of some sort.”

Vero turned from the ingredient pile and said, “Warren, I’ve lived here all my life. I’m pretty sure that I would know there were surface animals here.”

“Sure, Vero.”

Warren eyed the ingredient pile.

“This needs a little more spice. Gonna go see if there’s... any other kind of mushroom that I could put on this,” said Warren carefully.

“Ooh, there’s a nice kind growing across the cave. You want me to get you some?”

“Please. That would be nice.” Warren tried to smile casually, as Vero took his basket and walked out of the front door. Warren watched him leave. And they pushed their chair out and walked to the ingredient pile. It was quivering slightly, strange. Warren put their hand into the pile, and they felt a soft mass of feathers.

“What the hell is that?” they said to themselves.

They pulled the spices and the bottles out of the way, and there was a fluff of black feathers sitting on the last stores of mushroom.

“Well, I guess that’s where the eggs came from.”



When Vero came back fifteen minutes later, Warren was seated on their chair, with the black chicken on their lap.

“So, there are no birds down here at all, Ver?”

Vero stopped.

“Please don’t tell Wescott,” he pleaded. “He would send her away!”

The bird clucked, and seeing Vero jumped out of Warren’s arms, and flew towards Vero.

“Her name is Georgina, and she’s cool. She fell down here by accident like you and I nursed her back to health. Her wing was all messed up.”

“Why do you not want Wescott to know about her?”

“Wescott would have given her to the flesh-eating GMO sheep. I saved her.”

“Your secret chicken is safe with me.”

“Ok, good, I’ll put her back into her nest. She likes sitting in the ingredients. She feels important.”

Vero placed Amy back into her nest with care.

“Warren, eat your omelet,” he said clearing a spot for himself at the

table. "It'll get cold soon."



When it got later in the day, and all the work was done, Warren reasoned that it was time for another short talk with Wescott about getting home. The path to the dwelling that Warren had chosen was perilous to say the least. The sharp rocky incline was not forgiving. Warren carefully used the footholds and climbed down. They walked across the main floor, past the GMO sheep. They shrieked gleefully at Warren, who waved at them in appreciation. As they approached where Wescott lived. They heard soft, quarreling voices. They hid themselves at the entrance of the room. They could see that Vero sat at the back of the room, talking to Wescott.

"—Warren can't stay here forever, Wescott," Vero said.

"We do not have enough resources to spare for a transport," it said in its same whispery tone. "I thought you liked having the human around."

"I...I do, but it isn't right. It's not right for them to be here. Warren has a family, they don't—"

"Vero, think of it this way," Wescott interrupted. "They are just starting to be a real help around the farm, and they even helped with the sheep."

"This isn't right, you keeping people here," Vero said. "You barely allow me breaks, and now you're keeping a human, who could be easily killed here, just for kicks."

Wescott went silent and the mechanical whirring became louder.

"You are not..." It faltered. "You are not going anywhere talking to me like that. I kept you. I could've picked any one of the others. I saw you lying in that forest, and decided to keep you."

"Wait." Vero took a deep steady breath "I've been on the surface before? All this time, you've been lying about how you 'forgot' about where I've came from? I do nothing but obey you, and this is how you repay me? I'm at rock bottom here, Wes. You need to let us go."

"That's not going to happen. You're dependent on me, Vero. Even if you did try and leave, you wouldn't be able to survive on the surface. You have two options. Stay here and live longer, or go to the surface where you'd have to hide."

"Wescott, I'm done."

Vero exited, promptly running smack dab into Warren who had been crouched next to the doorway. Warren's gasp was suppressed by Vero's matted fur. Vero inhaled sharply and jumped back. They shared knowing eye

contact for a second.

“We need to talk,” Vero whispered, looking back to Wes’ room, “but not here.”

Warren agreed. They climbed back to Warren’s room. Vero carried Warren up piggyback style. Vero sat Warren down on their bed, and sat across from them cross-legged. Warren noticed that Vero had a mischievous look in his eye, like he could steal a school bus.

“I heard everything,” Warren admitted, as they removed excess fur from their mouth.

Vero sighed, “Okay, that just means we’re both on the same page. Wescott isn’t gonna let us go without a fight. Tomorrow I’ll drop a dummy that I’ll make tonight, and make it look like it’s another upsider. It’s a long shot but maybe Wescott will use up the remaining energy to charge the elevator. I could ‘escort you’ and we could both go to the surface.”

“Vero, do you think that’ll work? It sounds a bit simple. If you get caught, things could get worse.”

“Warren, it’ll work out. I promise. I’m going to go get ready.” Vero stood up to walk out.

“Stay safe, Vero. And don’t forget Georgina,” Warren said. “Can’t leave her behind.”

Vero walked out the door. Warren heard lost air whistle through the cavern, and the chill flowed through them, snaking their way down to their core, and sat heavy.



The thump of a large mass hitting the ground woke Warren that night. They jumped up from their bed and ran to their balcony. The profound hole that had welcomed them to the cavern had an unfamiliar shape inside.

“It’s starting,” they whispered to themselves. Warren fumbled with the chrome strap of their overalls, and ran down to the scene. “Gonna miss these when I’m gone,” they said to no one in particular.

When Warren got down Vero was nowhere to be seen. The path was dismantled, and glittering dust rose and surrounded the area with lavender haze. Warren could hear the distant whirring of Wescott. They thought it would be funny to say, “Hey Wes, I think there’s another upsider! Maybe now could we get the elevator running?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary in this case, Warren.”

Warren could see two figures through the mist.

“Why is that, Wescott? Something wrong with the elevator?”

Warren was answered with whirring and wind. The two figures trotted closer and Warren could feel the cold in their core get heavier.

“Wes? I’m getting nervous. I’m going to see what fell down.”

Warren, who was jostled feet away, couldn’t even make out the outline of the thing. Was it breathing? Maybe, but that was not right. It was only supposed to be a dummy.

“Do you have a good look of it?” said Wescott, closer now

Warren continued, and met a pair of eyes. It was Georgina. Her wings were contorted.

Warren knelt beside Georgina’s body. They looked in her eyes. They didn’t touch her.

“I’m sorry, Warren,” said Vero. “I couldn’t save her.”

Warren looked up to see Vero ensnared by chrome chain that flowed out of Wescott’s body. “Who did this?” Warren breathily exclaimed.

“Both of you. I overheard your talk last night, and I interfered. You really didn’t think I couldn’t hear you, in this airy cave? I intercepted Vero at his room, and brought along his chicken.”

“How did you know about-” Warren stood up to their full height to look Wescott straight in the face.

“I heard from a little birdie. It was not subtle,” Wescott intoned.

“You caught us fair and square. Why are you trying to teach us a lesson? What do you need?”

“More power. We are in a heavy shortage period. I’ve been saving up for a day like this for a very long time.”

“What... Do you mean the crystal? Have you been holding the crystal, Wescott?” Vero stuttered.

Wescott considered the question. “I was conserving our last, Vero. We were down to our last fifth. I had no choice. I have one last use before I give out and I need a way to succeed myself. Vero, my battery is at a low. I do not shine as brightly as I used to. Sentience is a blessing I am not ready to give it up. This body will not hold for long. I need a new host. If I used our remaining power I could upload myself to a drive and maybe by chance I could be put in a new body.”

“What happens when you go out? Vero and I are left here?” Warren asked. Their hands searching for their crystal shears.

“You will have to see. For now both of you are coming with me,” Wescott said.

The chains binding Vero loosened. The hint of escape was enough for

him. He jumped up but the chains morphed and multiplied, spreading into a web of confusion and chaos. They ensnared both Warren and Vero. The chains etched into Warren's skin and caught onto Vero's hair. The web was hung from Wescott's under side. It attached to the perimeter of its hull. Warren and Vero struggled against the web, but the spider had already caught them.

The weight of the bag was nonexistent to Wescott. It whirled around making its captives go dizzy.

"If you don't mind, we should go on a stroll."

The robot rose and proceeded down a path that Warren had not explored, winding its way carelessly through the stalactites. It wove its way through the turbulent landscape. Warren rested on Vero's fur coat and was frozen in indecision.

The ropes that bound them to the robot were thick and rubbery. When Warren pulled at the ropes, they bounced back emitting a low twangy tone. Warren knew any plan they could muster would be heard by Wescott. They had to look for alternate solutions.

Warren rustled around in the pockets of their overalls. Crystals shards, an old Swiss Army knife, green grocery twisty things that were bent to say "orbit bats," a pair of crystal shears, and their useless phone charger were strewn throughout the interdimensional fold of fabric. They took hold of the shear, and thrust it at the chains binding them, but the shears didn't not even make a scratch. Vero snatched the shears away from them, unimpressed by Warren's efforts.

"Warren, you know how I told you that those could cut through 99.9% of materials?" he said.

"Yes?" Warren answered.

"It can't cut through a solid lock of this sort of crystal composite. That's the strongest material we have down here. Very rare. Wish you had listened earlier."

"Upsider, you're so dense," Wescott said from above. "We are almost there."

Wescott fumbled to a stop on a high ledge. The bag snagged on the edge, sending its contents rolling around.

"Watch where you're going, Wes," Warren said

"This is our stop," Wescott said.

On the end of the ledge there was a keypad that Wescott aligned with. There was a satisfactory beep and from the stone, a dusty metal door opened. Crisp moonlight shone on the dark crimson soil.

“This is what I have been saving our energy for,” Wescott said.

Inside the doorway were thousands of ships. There were landing pads that could hold up to three ships each and the barracks of them were stacked upon each other. Each ship was ovoid, and flanked with flat angled wings. Most of the rows were empty. The ships that remained were covered with a heavy layer of dust and grime. The room’s walls were covered by sparse vegetation.

Wescott flew to the furthest point of the room. As they kept flying upward, Warren realized they could see moonlight spilling through holes in the dark metal ceiling. A single ship awaited them at the end of the room.

“I prepared one for my flight already. The previous owners abandoned their ships in horrible condition. Hard to blame them though. They were always quick to act.”

Wescott stopped at its chosen ship, keypad aligning with its censor, and again there was a satisfying beep. The hatch to the ship opened. Wescott paused. “This is where we part. Have fun down here.”

Warren could feel the ropes unbinding as Wescott waited for them to detach from its body. The ropes started to liquefy, and Wescott lowered himself to the ground. The ropes evaporated into the cold air. Wescott started to board the ship clicking and beeping happily. Vero unsheathed his crystal machete from his belt, and approached from behind. Warren eyes widened, as Vero took his chance, and wedged his machete into the robot’s bottom panel, pulling it back. Exposing the machinery inside.

“Stop that, Vero. Why you do insist on making things harder for yourself?” Wescott said only slightly annoyed. Wescott whirled and dragged Vero onto the ship.

“You’ve kept both of us down here for too long,” Vero said struggling to hold on.

The machete was wedged deep into Wescott, and it dragged Vero further towards the ships hatch. Warren had untangled themselves from Wescott’s web, which was now the diameter of dental floss, and ran to Vero’s side. They grasped his sides in attempt to help him keep steady, but they could not hold the robot down. Wescott struggled against the machete, while trying to keep hovering. He inched toward the entrance of the ship with the machete still implanted into him. Warren struggled to keep a good hold on Vero. Their grip was failing. They fell onto the ship’s hatch, and held onto the sides for dear life.

“*Power On,*” Wescott beeped at the ship. Wescott dragged Vero like a ragdoll into the ship with him. They wrestled, Vero desperately trying to



hold on. The ship awakened and filled with white light. On the wall there was a cylindrical-shaped hole Wes was heading towards. The ship shook, and groaned, as if waking from a long nap. The engines were on, and the ship was already off the ground.

“Wescott, give up! We’ve got you,” Vero yelled.

“Activate Power Transfer,” beeped Wescott.

Warren could see a port emit green light as the ship came to life. Warren reasoned this was where Wescott was heading. The ship elevated shakily, feet off the ground.

“Goodbye Vero, have fun down here,” Wescott said with a final blast of hover power, and Vero flew into an adjacent wall with his machete, along with a good chunk of machinery impaled on the blade. Wescott’s body fell to the ground and started skidding toward the escape hatch of the ship. Warren flung himself to try to catch it but Wescott fell outside the hatch. Warren could hear the echo of metal body ring through the building. The hatch closed, and Warren was dropped onto the floor of the spacecraft. The ship hung suspended in air.

“What do we do now, Vero?” Warren asked, disorientated.

“Try yelling commands. I’m sure the ship could be voice activated. I think that’s what Wescott was doing.”

“Cancel Power transfer” “Manual” “Help, Maybe?” were all shouted at random ports about the ship. Finally one of the commands worked and the ship intercom announced, “Power transfer cancelled.”

Warren sat up, and stared at Vero.

“Is it over?” Warren pulled himself up. They walked over to Vero, lending a hand.

“The worst is, at least.” Vero considered the hand and grabbed on. Vero, now on his feet, stared at the switches and buttons on the piloting board.

“Do you know how to pilot, Vero? Because I don’t think they included a manual.” Warren sat on the dashboard. Looking out the window, they could see the pinkish purple

of the sky between the ripped ceiling.

“I willing to try, Warren, if you are too,” Vero said.

“Huh. Guess I am.” Warren, entranced by the glowing buttons before them, danced between each switch and dial.

“Warren, don’t touch anything at all before we know what they...” Vero was interrupted by the intercom.

“AUTOPILOT ON” roared the ship. It continued, “You guys are in for a long ride.”



# THE STORY OF PROFESSOR BRENT SHERWOOD

JOSEPH FRIEDMAN

*I am a private detective currently in the employ of Krast corp., a shell company owned indirectly by Gareth Pegasus, the owner of the largest mining company in the galaxy. I was hired to find a missing gemstone. Instead I stumbled upon Professor Sherwood's story.*

*Given the outcome you have yet to read, I must unfortunately inform Krast, and by extension Pegasus, that the gemstone is unavailable permanently.*

*Professor Brent Sherwood, well known for his work in theoretical mathematics, has vanished. He was seen in a bar near his home and a dead old man was found along the road he is known to walk home on. The common opinion is that he killed the as-yet-unidentified man and has fled the area. I, Detective Random Barker, have found the truth about Professor Sherwood. The following is taken from the journal Professor Brent Sherwood wrote during his journeys. It was found in a small hidden compartment under his home shortly after his disappearance from his home time. For the full text please refer to the full published version by the title of *The Journal of Brent Sherwood*. Unfortunately, Mr. Sherwood was not a very organized person—he never dated any of the entries so I have placed an asterisk where I believe he stopped writing and restarted later.*

\*Tonight I went to the bar to hang out with Sal and Jason, two friends I used to go to school with. Unfortunately, I have made practically no progress on my Time Machine. I need something that can handle a massive energy transfer, but I don't have the funding to experiment with the materials I want to use. I decided to walk home from the bar; it's not even three miles away and I wasn't in any rush. However tonight felt different, as if the lights along the street weren't as bright and the shadows darker. As I walked by an alley, a figure staggered out towards me. He was an older man, short grey hair covered his head and his wrinkled skin was dotted with

age spots. He muttered, "You'll need this Brent," as he pushed something heavy into my hands. Then he collapsed and I saw for the first time the knife sticking out of his back. I looked down at my hands. To my amazement that the thing he had shoved into my hands was nothing less than a massive gem. What the hell was going on?

I sprinted the rest of the way, unsure if the people responsible for the man's death were still out there. Maybe, just maybe, the gem he had given me was what I needed to finish my time machine. Time to think about that in the morning... I just ran a mile and a half in seven minutes.

\*There's someone knocking on the door; he's not one of my students. I think there's a gun in his back pocket. Looking back, I can't be sure. My memory of times before I have had my morning coffee are not incredibly reliable.

I believe he was intending to kill me. He yelled for me to come out and that the house was surrounded. I had one chance for escape: finishing the time machine and hoping it works. I plugged in the gem to everything, attached every cord, checked the thingy-ma-whatsit and connected the doohickey. My electric bill was going to be ridiculous.

They broke down the door. It was then or never. I had to trust my own genius to have created a functional time machine to escape death.

\*I totally forgot to include the movement of celestial bodies in my equations. I guess I went back an exact number of years, not more than a hundred or so. The only question is when and where exactly am I? I'm on a green hill, green with grass. That is, the hill itself is not green. In the distance are more green hills as well as groves of trees. They seem evenly spaced... How odd. I must have gone back in time since there are no green hills left in my time.

I found a village, sort of. It's a collection of small huts made of a strange wood the color of cooked kale. Weird. I didn't know that there was intelligent life on this planet before human settlers arrived about two hundred years before my time. I suppose the village is abandoned. The remains of a fire lie in the center and nothing approached me as I walked up to the burnt-out fire.

\*It's been a few days. I found some fruit. I really hope they aren't poisonous. I have seen several more villages all of which have been abandoned. The only things left are the huts themselves and the ashes of

a centralized fire. About a mile east of each village have been groves of trees. They are dark green like the huts and produce an orange, spikey fruit about the size of a grapefruit. The villages themselves are also evenly spaced. Each is one day's worth of walking away from another. I even tried changing directions but the pattern continues in any of the cardinal directions.

\*The pattern broke. I found a grove of trees, or more accurately a grove of stumps, but no village. However, on top of the next hill a few miles away I saw what looked like a city.

It is a city. Not quite as technologically advanced as my home time, but a significant improvement over the abandoned villages I've passed over the last several weeks. The city appears new, none of the buildings are dirty, the sidewalks still has crisp edges and there isn't any garbage visible at all. A man approached me who turned out to be the mayor, a pompous little man with a piggish nose and a British accent. He evidently was of the opinion that I was some savage that had been harassing his town for months. He made it quite obvious that I was not welcome in the town, and dropped some not-too-subtle hints that if I ever were seen again I would be shot. Too bad I need materials that I can only get from the town to fix my time machine and get back to my own time. Luckily for me this town follows a similar layout as my hometown. I found the material recycling center and I should be able to snag a few parts without anyone noticing.

\*I found all I need, I think. Some scrap metal, wires, batteries, silicon and a few other odds and ends that might be necessary. While in my home time I was known for high-level mathematics and theoretical design, I did earn a minor in environmental engineering in my college days. So I should be able to build a solar panel big enough to charge my time travel chair. That has a nice ring to it. Time Travel Chair. I like it.

\*I took a few weeks but I managed to create solar panels. They aren't pretty but they work. The gem has begun to pulse with light so I think it's charged. I messed around with the wires, in a highly intelligent and calculated manor of course, so it should go forward in time instead of back. It's time to test this I guess. Well, not really a test because I can't exactly see if it works without risking myself so instead of a test I think I'll call it a go-and-hope. I really hope I don't die from this.

\*Sixty years. Sixty years short. Sixty whole years. My parents were born a few years ago. Plus, the gem shattered. Meaning I have no way of traveling

forward in time again.

\*I'm starting to wonder if maybe... No, that makes no sense, it would ruin time space, oh but maybe. Anyway, I have work to do, I need to get a job and a place to live now. I can't exactly live in the wilderness in a time with no wilderness.

\*I saw it. The gem. It was in a jeweler's shop. It's been about twenty years since my arrival in this time. I would have written sooner but I did not intend this notebook for taxes and minimal wage jobs. However, I guess now that something interesting has occurred I can give a full update.

At first I slept on the streets but I found a job at a fast food restaurant with ease. Unfortunately, my resume is quite useless in this time period as none of the events have occurred yet, so a higher paying job may turn out to be harder to come by. However, I managed to convince a representative from the tech company Macrodense to let me show him my expertise with machines. He was quite impressed and hired me with a decent wage. I rent an apartment as far from the neighborhood my parents grew up in just in case meeting them destroys the universe or anything. As a tech man I get an hourly wage for being available to provide tech support but most of the time I just sit around tinkering in a small workshop in the back. Unfortunately, I must keep everything I make hidden seeing how they didn't exist while my parents grew up. One of these inventions was a micro camera of sorts. It is incredibly hard to detect and I have placed several around the jewelry shop that has my gem so that I can keep an eye on it. Originally I thought I would buy the gem but when I asked the salesman about it, the price he asked for was extravagant to say the least. I could work for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, with no holiday time for three-hundred-and-fifty years and have about half of what he asked for. Therefore, I will passively watch and wait, however boring that will most likely turn out to be.

\*I receive the gem tomorrow. That is, young me receives the gem tomorrow. Life was quite boring for the last forty years but seeing as tomorrow is the day that all this started I figure I should make an update. Fifteen years ago I retired from tech support and bought half of the jewelry store that owns the gem. I run it alongside the man that forty years ago I asked about the gem. He is an old single Jewish man by the name of Erving Swartz. The gem still lies within the store likely due to the fact that

Mr. Swartz refuses to lower his price.

\*I finally understand. It all makes sense now. I know what must be done.

*This concludes the final entry in the Professor's notebook. The events of the following days have been compiled by myself from the accounts of several independent witnesses and evidence found later.*

*Professor Brent Sherwood left his notebook in a hidden compartment of his own desk in his home—the home he owned before he traveled through time, that is. The next day, the day the younger version of himself receives the still unidentified gem, Brent works as always in the jewelry shop and at closing time attempts to steal the gem. His coworker of fifteen years Erving Swartz stabs Brent in the back in a following struggle. Brent escapes and begins to run towards the street he knows that his younger self will soon be walking along, the knife still deep in his back. When he reaches the alley next to the street leading from the bar to his old home he can see himself walking. The older Brent staggers out forcing the gem into his younger self's hands and mutters with his last breath, "You'll need this Brent."*

*That is the story of Professor Brent Sherwood's mysterious disappearance as well as the appearance of the dead old man found along the same road. Many believed that Brent had murdered the man and fled hoping to evade persecution, but his notebook found in a hidden compartment in Brent's home desk proves that of that murder he was entirely innocent. In fact, strange as it seems, Brent was guilty of nothing but time travel and the strange happenings that occur when one travels through time.*





# VERA

*(a novel excerpt)*

BETHANY REINSCH

## Chapter 1:

You know you've been somewhere too long when you start looking for shapes and pictures in the stains on the ceiling. That's what I've been doing for the past three hours. I think. There is no clock here, so I'm not sure. I don't know how long I've been here either. There aren't any windows, so it is impossible to tell time by watching the sky. Nobody will tell me where I am. Most of them won't even speak to me. They don't leave much for me either. They do bring food often, and every once in a while a puzzle or book to keep me occupied. But they take those away again. The only thing they have let me keep is a small slip of paper. All it says is:

Veronica Smithson

Age: 14

That's all I know about myself. My name and my age. That's all.

\*\*\*

I jump as the door slams open. I turn around, keeping my face neutral in case it's one of the less kind people here. Then I grin. It's Gavin, the only one I've actually managed to make friends with. He tends to bring more difficult puzzles, but then he stays and helps with them. We've gotten to know each other pretty well over the past... Well, however long I've been here. Every time I ask Gavin how long it's been, he glances around and shakes his head, then dashes out the door. I've learned not to ask at this point.

But this time, he doesn't smile back. He looks serious for once, and I see a panicked light in his eyes. That is definitely not normal. Once he is closer I can see there is also a slight mysterious twinkle mixed in with the panic. I wonder what's happening and Gavin glances around, making sure nobody else is coming.

“Follow me,” he says. I follow him. What other choice do I have? He leads me out the door and down a dim hallway.

“Gavin, slow down,” I whisper. “I’m going to trip!” I don’t know why I whisper.

“We can’t slow down! And if you trip, I’ll catch you, okay? Just keep up!” It’s unusual for him to snap at me like this. Whatever is happening must be important. He drags me through a doorway and down another hallway.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying not to fall.

“I’ll explain later. We have to go *now*.” We keep running. I try to keep track of where we are going, but I get lost in the twists and turns. Eventually, we burst out into sunlight and I shield my eyes. It’s been a while.

Gavin tugs on my sleeve and pulls me along as he keeps running. This time we go into a forest. There’s not much of a path, but it is clear enough where to run. Until Gavin veers left into the trees.

“What...Why are you leaving the path? Do you know what might be out there?” I ask.

Gavin stops and grabs my arm, looking at me straight in the face. “Of course I know what’s out here! But I also know what’s back there, and I’m willing to risk it, okay? Come on, we have to go.”

Wow. I’ve never seen him angry before now. As he speaks, I can see fire in his eyes. I’m not sure if it’s anger or terror, or maybe even excitement. But it’s there, and it scares me. Gavin is so much different right now. I just hope everything will go back to normal soon.

We keep running through the trees and I try to ignore the branches scratching my arms as I rush by, trying to keep up. He glances back every once in a while to make sure I’m still following him. Finally, we stop in a clearing. I lean against Gavin, trying to catch my breath. We must have run at least three miles. That’s a lot for someone who has been confined to one room without much space for as long as I have been. Gavin smiles and hands me a bottle of water.

“You haven’t run in a while, have you?” he laughs. I shake my head while gulping water. I make a face when I realize it is empty now. Gavin hands me another bottle. I drink its contents in five seconds flat and grin sheepishly. “It’s okay,” Gavin says. “I brought plenty of water. And snacks.” He hands me a granola bar and unwraps his own. I sit on a log near the trees and chew slowly, thinking. *Why did Gavin bring me all the way out here? Why was he in such a hurry? What is going on?*

It seems like he read my mind, because Gavin answers all my questions.

“Look, I know it doesn’t explain much, but I overheard some stuff back where they were keeping you. I couldn’t let you stay there any longer. You know that fight or flight instinct?” I nod. “Yeah, flight took over. I got kind of an adrenaline rush and...Here we are.”

“What did you hear?”

“Well, first you have to know, you’re not the only one they’ve been keeping. But none of the others are very friendly, and I only had time to save one of you. Otherwise I would get caught, and...” He shivers. “I don’t want to think about what they would do if they caught me. Which means we’ll have to leave soon, because they’ll send out a search party as soon as they realize we’re gone. Anyway, they were saying they were going to put ‘the subjects’—that’s you and everyone else— under different conditions to see how they react. I don’t know why; they never told me much about the experiments. But, Vera, they said you would...You wouldn’t have survived it. They—” His voice cracks and I can see how upset this is making him.

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me any more. It’s okay. We’re here now, so we might as well keep going. You said we’ll have to go at some point. If we leave now, we’ll have more of a head start. They’ll be less likely to find us.”

Gavin puts his face in his hands and takes a deep breath. Then looks up. “Okay, let’s go. I know somewhere we can stay for a while, but it’s pretty far from here. We don’t have to run, but...”

“It would be better. I get it. Let’s go.” We take off again, and I keep up better this time. After a while, I’m fighting against myself to keep going. But every time I look at Gavin he looks perfectly fine. *How is he not tired?* I wonder. I realize that I’m falling behind and run harder. I keep going as long as possible, but I trip. I guess it’s inevitable after running this long. I throw my hands in front of me to catch my fall and protect my face, but still manage to hit my chin on a rock sticking out of the ground and bite my tongue. Luckily, nothing feels broken.

Gavin helps me up and glances around. “We can stop here for a while.” He clears a small area on the ground where we can both sit. Then he pulls moss off of a tree and lays it down to sit on top of. I give a sigh of relief as he pulls out more water and two apples, then hands me one of each. We sit for a few minutes, resting.

“How much...farther...” I say between breaths, “...do we have...to go?”

“Actually, it might be better to set up camp here for tonight,” Gavin answers. I glance up to see that it’s starting to get dark. I nod and he stands up. “I’ll clear another place for me. Here’s some more moss if you want to use it as a pillow. I wish I could give you something for a blanket, but I don’t

have anything.”

“It’s ok. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? It gets pretty cold here at night.”

“I will be *fine*, Gav.”

“Ok...” He walks far enough away to give me some privacy to sleep, but he’s still close enough that if anyone finds me, he’ll be able to help.



Gavin was right; it does get cold out here. I sit in a tight ball, shivering. I can hear Gav snoring a few yards away. I’m about to lie down again when I hear a stick break behind me. I stand up and turn around as fast as I can. No. It’s Wallace, the leader of what Gavin called “the experiments.” The reason I’ve been stuck in that place for so long.

“Gav!” I yell. Wallace already saw me, so there’s no point in keeping quiet. I hear Gavin get up and start moving towards us.

“Vera? Where are you?”

“Over here!” I scream as Wallace picks me up and throws me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Put me down!”

Wallace laughs. “Yeah, right, and let you run off and ruin my experiments again. I’m not letting you go. Now, tell me where little Gavin is, and you might make it through this.”

I stop screaming. I’m not going to risk his life too.

“Veronica! Where are you?” If I could, I would face-palm right now. Wallace starts moving towards the sounds of Gavin’s voice. “Vera!”

I can’t stay quiet anymore. “Gavin! Run! It’s Wallace! Run away from here, and don’t stop, no matter what!”

I hear him start running, but not away. Does he ever listen? A few seconds later he comes bursting through the trees. Great.

“Put her down!” Gavin yells. “Look, Wallace. We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. Wow, that was so cliché. But it’s true!”

Wallace laughs. “What are you going to do, fight me?”

“Um...yeeaaah?” He sounds hesitant.

Wallace laughs again and turns around, hurrying back through the forest. I start struggling again, trying to get free. I feel myself falling and I hit the ground. Ow.

“You know what? We’re going to let you stay out here. There’s no one around here for miles. We’ll see if you survive. We have others for our

experiments anyhow.” Wallace smirks and walks away.

Well. I wasn’t expecting this. I wait until Wallace’s footsteps fade away through the trees. All I hear now is the sound of birds chirping, and the breeze in the trees.

“Gavin!” I scream. “Where are you?”

“Vera? You’re okay?”

“Yeah. Follow my voice!” We go on like this for a few minutes. Then I see him a few feet away and breathe a sigh of relief.

“There you are.” He runs to me and grabs my arm as if to make sure Wallace can’t get me if he comes back. “I was worried.”

“I’m okay now,” I say. “You don’t have to be so worried about me. I can take care of myself.”

“Uh-huh.” Gavin doesn’t sound convinced. “Come on, we have to keep going. Maybe we should keep watch at night from now on.”

We run through the woods, staying as close together as possible without tripping. It feels like we run for hours before we finally stop. I notice a small circle of trees around us.

“Where are we?”

Gavin looks upset. “This is...This is where I stayed for a few days last time I tried to leave that place. They found me eventually, but we’re too far for them to get this far until late tomorrow night.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just...I have bad memories associated with this place.”

“Well... We could move on and find somewhere else if you be more comfortable.”

“No. I doubt that there is anywhere else even remotely safe for miles. We’ll just leave early tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” I give him a sympathetic look. “But if you feel a sudden urge to run in the middle of the night, wake me up first.”

Gav manages a half-smile. “Sounds good. I’ll take first watch.”

I yank moss off of a few trees, then make sort of a bed out of it. Well, it’s better than nothing. “Hey,” I add. “Wake me up in two hours for the next watch, okay?”

“I will, don’t worry.”



As I try to get comfortable in my makeshift moss bed, I feel something underneath me. I push the moss out of the way and find a rock twice as big

as my hand. (Yes, I measure things with my hands. Don't judge me.) I lift it up to see a key.

"Hey, Gav?" I say. "Any idea what this key goes to?"

"What?" Gavin comes over and kneels down, then freezes. "That...No. This can't be here. It's impossible."

"How is it impossible for this to be here? What are you talking about?"

"It's a long story. Are there more rocks? I'll explain everything later, but if there are, we need to find them now. This could be our escape." I glance around but don't see any more rocks. The only thing I see is...Oh. A giant boulder.

"What about that one?" I ask, pointing to the boulder.

Gavin grins. "Perfect." He slowly makes his way around the boulder, thoroughly examining it for something. "Here!" He shows me where to use the key. I turn it and jump back in surprise when a trapdoor opens next to the boulder and I see a stairway leading down.

"Wait...We have to go down there?"

"Yeah, they'll help us."

"But... It's dark."

Gavin looks at me for a second. "Oh. You're scared of the dark. Why did I not know this? *How* did I not know this?" I shrug. "It's okay. It's only dark on the stairs. Once you get past that it's pretty bright, considering it's underground."

"So I'm guessing now isn't such a great time to mention I'm also claustrophobic?"

"Seriously?" Gavin sighs in mock exasperation, then laughs. "Come on, you won't even know you're underground. Ready?"

I sigh. "Okay, here we go." I look down the stairs again. "You go first." I give Gav a tiny shove down the stairs.

"Fine, fine, I'll go first!" He's laughing at me. But it's okay. As long as the stairway isn't too long.



The stairway is too long. After slowly walking down the stairs, trying not to slip, I still don't see any light.

"Gav," I whisper. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

All he does is laugh again. "Yes! I've told you a million times, *we are almost there*. See?" He points up ahead. I manage to fake a smile. There's a slight yellow glow about forty yards away. It isn't as much light as I was

hoping for. At all. But at least it's something.

I breathe a sigh of relief and move a little faster. Of course, it's still pretty dark, so I trip. Oops. Luckily, Gavin is still in front of me and manages to catch me. He laughs at me again and we continue down the rest of the stairs.

Gavin gestures at me to be quiet. We finally leave the staircase and go into a large, brightly lit room. He was right—if I didn't already know it was underground, I never would have guessed. We turn left and go down a hallway, then he knocks on a door. It opens and we go into the room.

There's a woman sitting at a small table. She looks at us and smiles. "I've been expecting you two."

"M-mom?" Gavin looks shocked. "But...how?"

"Don't worry, I'm not your mother. But the resemblance is astonishing, isn't it?"

"But...you...she...who are you?"

"I'm her sister. Your aunt. I do apologize if I surprised you a bit."

"Oh, right, um... Aunt Tanya, right?" Gav still looks flustered.

"Yes. Why have you come here?"

"We...we're running from the...from Wallace."

"Ah, of course." Tanya smiles and rings a small bell.

A short woman steps into the room carrying a serving tray. "Tea?"

"Um...no thank you," I respond. Gavin accepts a cup, but doesn't drink any.

Tanya sips her tea and smiles. "Would you like to stay here for tonight?"

Gavin looks relieved. "Could we?"

"Of course! But remember, you will be indebted to me for a very long time."

"Or until you get yourself in trouble again."

"Now, is it really necessary to attack your dear aunt while we have a guest?"

"No, ma'am." Gavin seems angry now, and I wonder what happened between them before now.

Tanya smiles again. "Good. Janetta and Tyrus will lead you to your rooms." She rings another bell and they enter the room. Janetta is average height and looks stern, while Tyrus is extremely tall and laughing at something. I wave a small goodbye to Gavin as I follow Janetta down a long hallway. At least this one isn't dark. Or enclosed.

"Sorry about her."

"What?" I'm surprised to hear Janetta speak, especially considering

how friendly her voice sounds compared to how hostile she looked around Tanya.

“Sorry about her,” she repeated. “Tanya can be a bit... aggressive at times. We’ve mostly gotten used to it, but when you’re new here, it can be a little unsettling.” I nod and step through the door she opens. It leads to a room with a bed, nightstand, and bookshelf.

“Wait...” I say as I turn back around to face her. “What happened with Gavin and Tanya?” But she’s already too far down the hall to hear me.

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In the morning, I open the door, intending to explore the underground fortress, but I’m stopped by Janetta.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t been outside your door all night.” I let out a sigh of relief, glad to hear that I’m not basically being held prisoner, but then she elaborates. “We guarded you in shifts.” She sees the offended look on my face. Oops. “Don’t worry, it’s for your protection. This place is the safest around here, but we still have our own issues.” I wonder if she’s talking about Tanya.

She leads me to a room with a long table. This is gradually becoming more and more confusing. Is Tanya some kind of royalty? What does that make Gavin?

After a meal of things I didn’t know existed, Gavin asks to speak to me in the hallway. “We have to get out of here.”

“Why? The people seem fine, and it’s apparently the safest place around here.”

“No, you don’t understand. *We have to leave*. It’s not as safe as it seems. Not with Tanya and Tyrus here. They’ve gotten my family into a lot of trouble in the past, and I’m not going to risk more problems because of *her*.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

He grabs my arm as I turn around. “We can’t do that!”

“Do what? Leave? Isn’t that what you just said we have to do?”

“Yes, but...not yet. They’ll notice. We have to wait until a better time, when they’ll have no idea until it’s too late.”

I’m not sure what’s so important about getting away from here, but if he’s this worried it must be bad. “Ok. What do we need to do?”

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1) Convince them that we trust them enough to stay here. Then they won't suspect a thing, and when we leave no one will ask questions until we're already gone. 2) Get Janetta and Tyrus on our side. It will not be difficult. They are not as happy here as they would like for you to believe. 3) Escape. It sounds simple, but it won't be. Not if Tanya has recently taken the precautions I'm suspecting. It will take a lot of planning, a lot of concentration, and a lot of hard work. But we will figure it out, and we will get out of here. Trust me. 4) Destroy this note as soon as you read it. If they find it, we'll never be able to escape.

That's all. The note doesn't say anything else. I shake my head and reread it. There must be something I'm missing. What kind of precautions? How will we escape? I read through it one last time to make sure to imprint it in my brain. I tear the note up into little bits, as small as I possibly can, while glancing around the room. Of course there isn't a fireplace. Why would there be? I was hoping to throw the bits into the fire. Then they would be gone, and I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. But there's no fireplace. The thought keeps running through my head. No fireplace. Why not? There's no fireplace. I need a fireplace. How am I supposed to get rid of the note? Fireplace. There is no fireplace. That's not going to work. This is really repetitive. But I don't know what to do. Why didn't Gav think of this? What do I do with these little bits of paper? I could put them under the bed. No, someone would find them.

Then I realize there are plenty of other things I could do. I stick the shreds in my pocket and step outside of my room. I guess it could be considered a prison cell. It's not that bad, but I am basically being held here. It's comfortable. I can stay here knowing I won't be attacked. But I really can't leave. I have to be escorted by Janetta. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Janetta seems like a good person. But she works for Tanya. It should be okay though. I will convince her to help us. But not yet. First I have to get her to trust me. Then I can get her to understand.

When we reach the dining hall, I reach in my pocket to take some of the pieces out. I was planning to throw away small handfuls in different places, but it looks like that isn't going to work out. There's a hole in my pocket. There are little tiny pieces of paper all the way down the hall, leading straight to my door. Perfect. I point it out to Janetta quickly and quietly before anyone else sees it. Her eyes widen and she leads me the rest of the

way into the dining hall before slipping back out to hide the evidence. Now I know I can definitely trust her. She doesn't even know what is happening and she is helping me. I just hope she doesn't somehow find a way to put the pieces together and see what the note said.

I sit at the long table and wait for a few minutes. I'm about to stand up to see where everybody is when Gavin walks in and sits down. He gives me a questioning glance and I nod. Yes, I got the note. Yes, it's been destroyed. Hopefully. He nods back as Tanya comes in and sits at the head of the table. "Did you sleep well, Veronica?"

I straighten up, startled to hear my name coming from her. "Yes, I slept very well. Thank you."

"You are very welcome. Of course, we must provide the best of everything for our guests. Right, Gavin?"

He forces a calm expression onto his face. "Of course, Aunt Tanya." Wow. I have never heard anyone address their relatives, or anyone for that matter, with so much disdain. It's slightly terrifying to know that Gav can be so different from the way I knew him until recently—an employee who actually treated me like a person. I know he's still there, that it's still him, but it's disorienting.

After breakfast, we are led to a small underground courtyard. It's strange without sunlight coming in. Guards are stationed at each of the four closed entrances to the courtyard. So if we're going to escape, it will have to be another time. We sit on benches surrounding a small fountain. There are no plants. Instead, there are extremely detailed carvings made to look like plants you would find in a flower garden. They're actually more impressive than I expected. I don't know why, but I somehow expected that the people living here would be somewhat primitive. I was clearly wrong. Being here has changed how I think about so many things. I never realized before now how much of a difference certain things make. Things like where you are when certain events happen.

I hear a loud *bang!* above my head. I look up, but there's nothing there. I glance at Gav to see if he has reacted. He hasn't. I manage to make eye contact with him and send him a questioning look. He shrugs and returns to staring at his feet. I do the same.

Then I notice that Gavin is tracing shapes onto the bench with one finger. He keeps repeating them over and over. When I figure out that the

shapes are letters, he sees the realization flash across my face for a split second, then repeats them one more time.

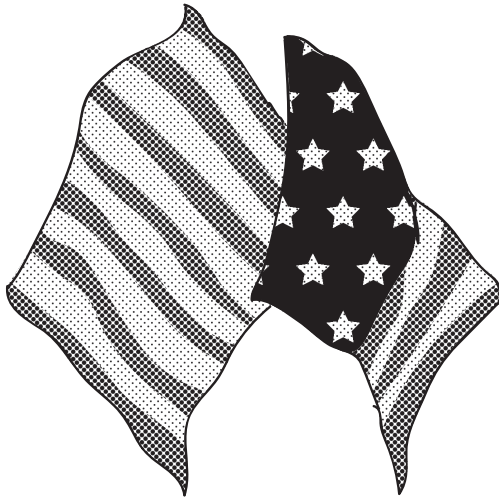
R- There's another *bang* from above.

U- One of the doors to the courtyard opens.

N- Tanya walks in.

I don't hesitate. I run. The door slams shut just as I slip through. I keep going. I try to make my way back to the stairs, but it's dark and I can't see where I'm going. I have no idea where I am. I had no idea where I was when we first went down the stairs. So why would I now?

The walls flash by as I continue to run through the hallways. I don't stop until I'm even more hopelessly lost than before. I realize there's nothing I can do at this point and sink to the ground in a corner. Powerlessness is the worst thing a person can feel. And that's exactly what I'm feeling now. I thought I would be able to escape. I don't know why I thought that. And now here I am. Lost in these tunnels with no way to call for help.



# PLEDGE

LEMUEL ROBERTSON

I pledge allegiance to the banner  
That has held us hostage from 1616 'til 2016  
Of the United Slaves in America  
To the Police for which it stands  
One Plantation under Satan  
With liberty and justice for none  
400 years of slavery and we don't have a clue yet  
Strange fruit crushed and it hasn't even bloomed yet  
Shooting is the new lynching  
And I have a vivid premonition  
That my streets will become battlegrounds  
And the night will be filled with scary sounds  
I see spooky visions  
And the demons look to me like  
Do you know what you doing?  
Slavery was actually an improvement  
More black men in cuffs now  
Than shackles back then but...  
Like Kermit that's none of my business  
Or is it?  
When the cops pay your house a visit  
Because you fit the description of a man  
Who was in violation  
Of the law WWB  
Walking While Black  
That's funny because, Mr. Officer,  
You fit the description of a man  
Who has let off rounds

That have gunned down  
More than a few of my brothers  
And since we racially profiling now let me put you with the others, sir  
Let me take my sir back  
Because I reserve that for people with respect and lately you don't have that  
Sorry I'm being racist  
Because bullets are color blind  
They just seem to be attracted to the brown skin pigment  
Whenever it's you holding it  
RIP to my brothers  
America leaving sonless mothers  
This country is more venomous than pit scorpions  
And it's killing my patience faster than Dr. Kevorkian  
It's crazy how these thoughts are running through my head  
Whenever I walk through the streets of blue and red  
Sirens flashing... These next thoughts keep me from being dead  
So I'm thinking...  
Death in my essence  
I'm leaving your presence  
Homies left in the past tense  
And it leaves me too tense  
Two tints away from pitch-black windows  
Why the black man always suspected of smoking indo?  
Indos before the streetlights come on  
Momma waiting at the front door when I get home  
Home in like these missiles  
I mean pistols  
Pistols popping, cops talking  
Jesus walking, Stephen Hawking  
Type of mind  
Rhythm and rhymes  
Wasting my time  
Dropping a dime  
POP!  
Sometimes I digress from the topic  
Speaking on myself and forgetting that this is a bigger problem  
Voices in my head telling me to stop it  
Dropping too much knowledge they can't process  
But y'all need to be informed

That the black race is under attack  
And we don't try to find a solution  
But apparently genocide falls behind global warming and pollution  
But all I have to say is that we live in a land  
Made by the black man  
For the white man  
Like it is a present for Christmas  
But lately you have been on the naughty list  
So stop worrying about energy  
Because with all the coal you deserve you will be set for centuries  
So stop telling me this is the Land of the Free  
And Home of the Brave  
When we are still slaves  
That refuse to see the chains  
So I must ask you... Why would I pledge allegiance to that?  
I pledge allegiance to the banner  
That has held us hostage from 1616 'til 2016  
Of the United Slaves in America





# DOGGY OLYMPICS

MARION ALUOCH

Last night was really weird and not good weird. I was lying in bed and decided that I wanted some cheese on biscuits, literal biscuits, not that fancy British stuff. I walked over to the kitchen, tiptoeing down the stairs so that I wouldn't wake up my dog. He gets excited about the most random stuff, such as seeing me walking to get some food. I suppose he just has the same qualities as me. He's the reason I found out what the neighbor was doing in the first place.

Anyways, my dog caught me red handed, opening the cupboard. I can still remember the look of betrayal on his face. Maybe that's why he betrayed me. Well done, Fatty, well done. I call him Fatty because he is. I call 'em like I see 'em. He is easily persuaded with food and will probably die one day because of that. So, after being caught taking my food that I didn't want to share, he gave me the puppy eyes. Despite my cruelty, I caved in. Just because I'm mean doesn't mean puppy eyes don't work on me. We ended up sitting on the rug because I could hear the sweet episodes of *Supernatural* calling to me. Specifically, Dean was calling to me. If he weren't fictional, the stuff I'd do... And I should probably stop thinking. My dog is also obsessed with *Supernatural*, and I'm pretty sure it's for the same reason. We've never discussed his sexuality because I fear he might get embarrassed about it. I've been meaning to speak to him and tell him that I don't mind his being bisexual, but I don't know how to approach it. Perhaps I should buy him a stuffed male dog. I don't know how to discover the genders of stuffed animals, but I will find a way.

So, we were chilling on the living room floor, soft plushy carpet, Netflix on the screen, box of pizza on my stomach (I'd ordered refreshments), fangirling about Dean, times were good. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a cookie. Since I was lying down with pizza hindering my movement, Fatty got to it first. At first I thought it was just a chocolate chip cookie on

the floor, but when the cookie started to move, I was like what the heck. However, my dog must have been on something else because he started yipping around and wagging his tail while trying to catch the cookie. This dumbass followed the cookie out of the house. I mean everyone knows to never follow anything attached to a string, but it seems like dogs haven't gotten the memo yet. I was frozen in shock, not believing that I raised him up to be that stupid. When I came out of my shock, I realized that I had to get him back. I paid a lot of money for him, even if it wasn't my own money, and I wasn't about to let my investment go. I had great plans for this dog as soon as he stopped being a lazy bum and actually started to train. Because I, I was going to enter him into a doggy Olympics kind of thing.

I ran out of the living room into the outside world where the sun shines and it smells like grass, following the sounds of his excitement, catching him just in time to see that he was about to jump in through the open window of the house of my neighbor's who lived down the street from us. How'd the person who placed the cookie in the house even find a string long enough to stretch from his house to my parents'? Wait, how did they get in? I so do not want to think about that.

To be honest with myself and everyone else, I wasn't going to let Fatty eat that cookie. I was going to eat it. It's a man-eat-dog world and I had to do what I needed to do in order to stay alive. It wouldn't have been that big of a deal if Fatty wasn't about six inches tall and the window wasn't about four feet off the ground. The thing is, he was really determined to get the cookie, and man was he ready to jump. Fatty was running so fast, I realized that my Olympic dreams weren't so out of reach. The Lord works in mysterious ways. So mysterious that Fatty ended up jumping through the window. Like a good owner and friend, I climbed in through the window after him and stepped on soft carpet. As my dog followed the cookie, innocently still thinking that it was his, he ran past a table right into a cage, and the doors snapped close.

"Doggie, no!" I cried.

I ran to the cage and tried to pull the doors open. It wouldn't open. All of this was my fault. If only I had seen the cookie first. I sat down and cried, tears streaming down my face as I babbled incoherently and held up two fingers.

"Two...t-two thousand dollars." I clutched the cage bars in my hands.

"That is the most heartless thing I have ever heard an owner say to their dog." A deep kidnapping, no, dognapping, voice came out from behind me. "Especially after they have been borrowed."

Startled, I turned around, not surprised to realize that I had never seen this guy in my life. Even if I had, I would have only remembered him because he looked like that type of guy you'd run in front of cars to get away from. Honestly, I avoid my neighbors. We are not the type that bring cookies and pies to welcome each other, and if we do, you better throw it away because it's either poisonous or contains bodily fluids. Things can get ugly really quickly around here. I had never seen him around before though, so he must've been new to the neighborhood. Probably got shunned in his last one for dognapping. I quickly remembered to glare at him, not wanting him to receive the impression that I liked him. Plus, he had called me heartless.

Well, said dude had on the dumbest, ugliest hat that I had seen in a long time, probably since my mom had bought me that knitted puke-colored hat which I had to pretend that I loved as I faced the judgment of everyone, and rats, as I walked down the city streets. Except that this guy, this guy was wearing it out of his own sheer will. I studied him, from his scuffed boots to his worn jeans but surprisingly new shirt. I should've known he was psycho because nothing good ever comes from people who wear shoes inside the house as shown by my ex boyfriend who still doesn't believe we're exes.

"*You're* the most heartless thing I've ever seen," I shouted finally. Cue the awkward moment when you have a dumb rebuff.

He stared at me and shook his head, making his sleek long brown hair fly, as he walked towards my dog and untied the string of cookie. The little traitor greedily snatched up the cookie between his paws and went on to scarf it down as if I hadn't fed him for two weeks. I forget to feed him one meal, and he acts as if I'll starve him forever.

"Melodramatic piece of crap," I muttered.

"For the first time since I started doing this, I actually wonder if I did a good thing by leading your dog here. You just seem filled with so much hatred and negative energy. Not good for a little pup like this," the thief had the audacity to tell me while reaching in and patting my dog on the head. Rubbing his ears, treating him as if he was his. And guess who just lapped up all the attention? Fatty even started humping his legs. Humping them. I'm the only one he's allowed to do that to, and it doesn't matter that I don't want him to do that anymore but knowing that he was attracted to his kidnapper made me angry. I swear as soon as I got him out of that cage, I was making him eat the driest dog food that had ever been created in the history of dogkind. And to verify this, I was going to taste all brands that were considered the worst to make sure that he really got the worst. And no more chicken wings for him when I decided to fry them.

“First of all, Rat-a-tat, he’s not a puppy and take your hand off of my dog before I call the police on your deranged ass. Second of all, I will be taking what’s mine and leaving your weird house. Who keeps several cages with little doggie beds in the middle of their room?” I gestured to the mess he had on his floor. All other furniture except for the table by the window was missing, replaced with his psychotic tools. The rug was nice though. Really soft. Probably bought it to distract people from the rest of his furniture.

“And third of all, I think that I deserve to be compensated for having to run here and rescue my dog who wanted to be kidnapped.” I glared at Fatty, then turned around and snatched the whole plate of cookies from the table in the middle of the room. I walked back to Crazy and told him to open the cage. He snarled no and then left the room. I guess he wasn’t strong enough for my burns or threats. Wimp.

If he wasn’t going to open the cage, I was going to go with the cage. In the end, not only did I win by getting my dog back and having discovered his true colors, but I also got a free bed. Sweet! Because that’s what Doggie was going to be sleeping on for a while now. No more sleeping on my bed for him until he apologized and realized the true extent of his crimes.

I left with my cage and plate of cookies through the window we had entered in which was still open. Did this guy honestly never close his windows? He didn’t even have a wire mesh on it for his own sake. He might like kidnapping dogs but one day karma was going to get him by climbing into his open window and snatching him up out of his bed. I took my time walking home, while Fatty looked up at me with puppy eyes to let him out the cage and walk. I acted as if I was punishing him, but it wasn’t like I could take him out anyways because I didn’t know how to open the cage. However, when we got home and I learned how to pick a lock, I decided to keep him in there for a few more minutes to make him sweat. I had him watch the how-to-pick-a-lock video with me so that he could see that I knew how to open the cage but was disappointed in him. He got excited in the beginning, jumping and wagging his tail until we finished, but after two minutes or so of seeing me sitting, he quieted down.

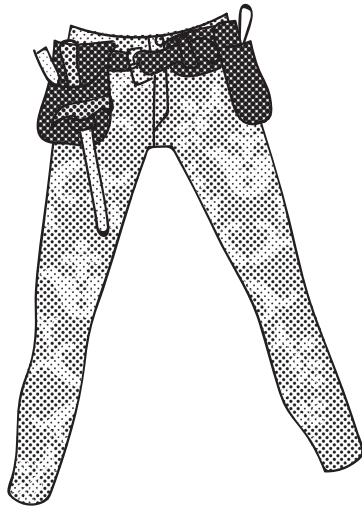
When the timer went off, signaling that my five minutes were up, he looked at me with regret in his eyes, causing me to open the cage. Then I left the room. I heard his little feet following me and felt his nose nuzzling my leg as he caught up with me. I ignored him. I went up to my bed and sat down and he tried to follow me but I told him to get down. He whimpered and sat down and looked at me. I looked away. How was I supposed to resist this?

“This is for your own good, you know,” I muttered. He whimpered as if he understood.

I looked at him.

“You can’t just fall in love with anyone that gives you food, especially your kidnapper. Do you know how hard it is to get rid of Stockholm syndrome?” He shook his head as if he understood.

I sighed and patted the bed next to me. He jumped up and ran around me, eventually falling on my stomach.



# P.O. BOX 109

*(a novel excerpt)*

CARLI FREEMAN

“We’re gonna clear out this place from top to bottom.” I could hear my grandfather’s heavy footsteps as he crossed the porch. Moments later, he strode through the door with a sledgehammer in his hand. “It may be a post office today, but by the end of the summer, we’re going to have ourselves a restaurant.”

“It’s not every day I get to legally destroy government property.” My twin brother, Rand, unlatched the flimsy screen door. It swung open by its one functional hinge.

“The post office isn’t government property anymore,” I corrected Rand. “It’s Granddad’s now.” I was perched atop a ladder with a paint roller in my hand, and the added height was giving me a false sense of superiority.

“Hey, Granddad, can I kick the screen door off its hinges?” Rand assumed his best karate position. It didn’t look like much.

“One hinge,” I said. “Singular.”

“Sure, Rand. Why not? That door’s just going to be firewood, anyway.” Granddad always makes a point of encouraging my brother’s (rare) attempts at physical activity. Just saying, Rand didn’t inherit Granddad’s athletic ability. I did.

“Lacy, get this on video, won’t you?” Rand tried to hand me his phone.

“Too busy to film your epic fails.” I turned my attention back to the wall I was supposed to be painting.

A few seconds later, Rand yelped in pain. I turned to find my brother hopping on one foot—presumably, the foot he hadn’t used to kick the door.

“So, one hinge is slightly stronger than you are,” I said. Rand ignored me.

“Let’s face it, son. Sometimes the old ways are best.” My grandfather reached into his toolkit and handed Rand a screwdriver.

“Arthur, surely you aren’t going to just get rid of those beautiful old boxes!” My grandmother, Gigi, rushed in the room and headed for

Granddad. "Tell me, what in the world gave you a mind to throw those post office boxes in the garbage heap? They could be worth a fortune, for all you know."

"That cluster of mailboxes wouldn't sell for twenty dollars," said my grandfather. "Besides, the thing is as heavy as lead. What did you expect me to do with it? Load it into the truck and take it back to the house?"

"That's exactly what I expect you to do. I want to use the boxes as a shoe organizer," she said. "I have ten pairs of shoes, and there are ten post office boxes in that cluster. Those mailboxes are going right into my closet." Gigi may be smaller than the average fifth-grader, but if she ever wants something, she's unstoppable.

"Georgia Anne, you're out of luck," said Granddad. "Only nine of those boxes open. P.O. Box 109 is missing a key. Permanently stuck. Guess the cluster won't work for your shoes."

"No difference," said Gigi. "I don't *have* to have ten boxes. Nine'll do just fine, considering one pair should always be on my feet."

"But the cluster is just so *heavy*," said Rand. "Trust me. I helped Granddad get the boxes in the garbage heap."

Gigi looked at me and winked, and I knew exactly what she had in mind. It's just something about being a Lowell girl. You know exactly what the other women in the family are thinking without anyone's speaking a word.

"So," I said, "you're saying the cluster would be way too heavy for a girl to lift?"

"Of course." Rand scoffed. "Who are you kidding? You can't paint a wall."

"Can too!"

"How about a wager," said Gigi. "If Lacy and I can get that cluster of boxes into my closet back at the house, without one ounce of help from you menfolk—"

"That's impossible," said Granddad.

"—then you and Rand paint the wall all by yourselves."

"I'll do better than that," said Granddad. "Georgia Anne, if you and Lacy can get those boxes into your closet, neither one of you do any work on the renovation all week."

I broke into a grin. "And if we manage to open P.O. Box 109?"

Granddad looked at Rand. Rand shrugged. "If you two open P.O. Box 109," said Granddad slowly, "neither one of you girls will have to do any work until this renovation is finished."

"But, that's, like, for the whole rest of the summer."

"I know, Lacy. I know," said Granddad. "And, always remember, I'm a



man of my word." He picked back up his sledgehammer. "Have fun, girls, and good luck."

"Come on, Lacy, darling, we've got a cluster to move."

No one had to tell me twice. I bolted for the screen door so fast, I almost knocked over Rand in the process. Gigi was only steps behind. And we just might have let the door slam...

"What do you think you're doing!" Rand yelled. "Just look at what you did to the door."

The screen door's lone hinge had broken away from the wall, and it crashed to the ground with a gratifying thud. A cloud of dust swirled around my brother, the closest person to the impact site.

"Oops," I said. "Sorry to spoil your plans of destroying ex-government property via karate kicks."

"Lacy, you know my kick is what loosened the hinges," Rand yelled after us.

"I can't hear you!" I said. And, really, I couldn't. That's because Gigi and I had now made our way out to the garbage heap. The pile was mostly splintered two-by-fours, plus the occasional piece of scrap metal. And, on the top of the heap, ten metal post office boxes lay glittering in the intense July sun.

"They're beautiful," I said. "To think anyone would ever want to throw these away. What a waste."

"The boxes are connected," said Gigi. "Five boxes wide and two boxes tall."

"The metalwork is gorgeous." I ran my fingers along the lines of brass flowers outlining each post office box. "When do you think this cluster was made?"

"Significantly before I was born," said Gigi, "which makes them very old, indeed."

"Do you think they're worth much?"

"To us, they're worth a week's worth of rest and relaxation," she said. "Reading, sewing, swimming in the lake."

"Stalking celebrities on social media..." A dreamy look crossed my face before I caught Gigi's gaze. You know the one I'm talking about. "And swimming in the lake and all that stuff. Right?"

"Right," she said. But, I could tell Gigi wasn't completely convinced.

"You know, these boxes could be worth a whole summer's worth of vacation, thanks to my negotiation skills," I said.

"Don't count on it," said Gigi. "P.O. boxes are made for security. It's

almost impossible to break into one without the key.”

“What if I find the key?”

Gigi laughed. “Honey, I’ve spent over sixty years of my life searching for lost keys. That key might as well be in Alaska by now. Your grandfather knows it’s impossible to find. So do I. Please don’t get your hopes up.”

“Okay. So, then, back to the first wager,” I said. “How are we going to get this thing in the back of the truck?”

“First, you’ve gotta back the truck up next to the garbage pile.” Gigi pulled a set of keys from her pocket and handed them to me. “You’ve got your learner’s permit. You can do that easily.”

“Sure!” I sounded more confident than I felt. I don’t know if you know this, but pickup trucks are incredibly hard to drive. Much harder than Mom’s Mini Cooper back in the city. I’m pretty sure the turning radius on Granddad’s truck is bigger than the football fields he used to play on in high school.

“But we also need a plan to get the boxes onto the truck,” said Gigi. “Any ideas?”

I pulled out my phone and started to Google *how to get heavy stuff into a pickup truck*. But before I could type *heavy*, my grandmother snatched my phone out of my hands.

“And no technological aids, either. You young folks have got to learn how to use your brains, not just your fingertips.” Gigi put my phone in her pocket. I cringed, hoping it wouldn’t vibrate incessantly. She looked at me, waiting for me to come up with an idea.

“How heavy are these things?” I asked, leaning down to find out for myself. I lifted with all my might, but the boxes didn’t budge one inch. “Uggghr! This thing is impossible!”

Gigi laughed. “Lacy, darling, nothing is impossible,” she said. “Except, of course, for finding lost keys. But you know that now.”

Gigi leaned down to inspect the boxes.

“What if...” I began. “What if we put the boxes on wheels, tied them up with rope, and attached the rope to the four-wheeler? We could run the rope over the top of the truck and pull the boxes up a ramp. What do you think?”

“No need.” Gigi looked up from the boxes with a twinkle in her eyes. “Go ask your grandfather for a screwdriver, will you?”

“Sure. But why?”

“No particular reason. But hurry back quick.”

I ran back to the post office, grabbed a screwdriver, and made my way

back in under thirty seconds. I was seriously excited to see what Gigi had discovered. “Spill it, Gigi.”

“All it takes to move this thing is a little attention to detail,” she said. “If I’m right—be a dear, hand me the screwdriver—these boxes are mounted onto one plate in the back. Remove the plate, and...”

I held my breath as Gigi turned the screwdriver lefty-loose-y. Sure enough, after she’d taken out dozens of screws of various sizes, the back plate of metal came off. We were left with ten separate metal boxes. Each metal box was about the size of a shoebox.

“Still heavy,” said Gigi, lifting one up and carrying it over to the truck. “But manageable.”

“Gigi, you’re a genius!” I said.

“Maybe, but I don’t like to brag,” she said. “At least, I don’t want the boys to know. How about we let my discovery lie low for a while, at least until the week is out?”

“No use spoiling a vacation,” I agreed.

“Help me get the boxes in the back of the truck. The plate, too. We have to put it back together again at the house, or the boys might get suspicious.”

“They’ll be suspicious enough as it is.”

“Hand me back the keys, will you? I want to do the honor of driving these boxes home.”

I tossed her the keys, which she caught left-handed. A few minutes later, we had all the boxes loaded in the back of the truck and were rattling along the gravel road back towards my grandparents’ home.

“Gigi, why is there so much corn around here?”

“Corn Cobb County. At least that’s what I call this place,” she said. “You know, Lacy, I think Outback, Kentucky is the perfect place to retire. It’s got good neighbors, good weather, and a great lake. Soon enough, it’s gonna have a great restaurant, too.”

“I’m not sure if it counts as retiring when you and Granddad are working so hard on your new retro-themed restaurant,” I said. “Have you decided what you’re calling it, yet?”

“No, not really.” My grandmother gripped the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles were white. That’s just how Gigi drives: the steering wheel is her stress ball. “Right now we’re calling it Lowell’s, but I think we can do better. Don’t you?”

“How about the Evening Post?”

“We’ll serve lunch. Breakfast, too.”

“Morning Post?” At least I was trying. “Morning Toast?” I got no

response, which only happens when my ideas are *really* bad. “Seriously, though, why don’t you think I can find the key to P.O. Box 109?”

“Even assuming we win this wager, which requires getting the plate back onto the boxes, you’ll still only have a week before you have to get back to work on the renovations,” Gigi reminded me. “Searching the entire post office could take days. Then you’d have to search around *outside* the post office. Then, knowing you, you’d want to search the whole town.”

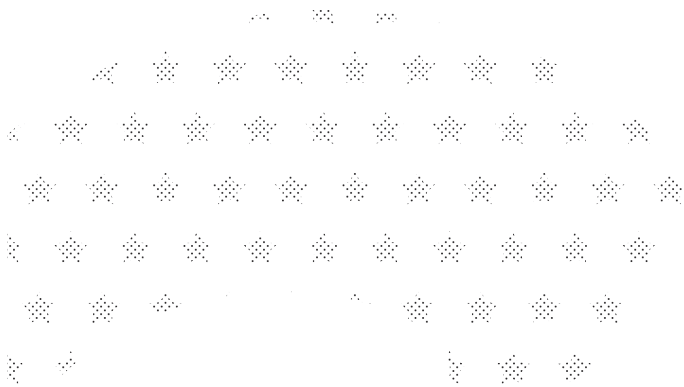
I laughed. “You know me too well, Gigi.”

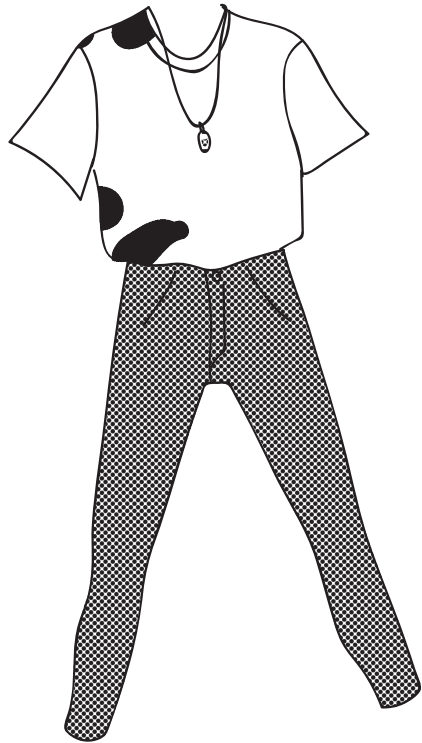
“Which means I also know you’ll stop at nothing to find this key.” She steered the truck into the driveway and pulled up next to the small but cozy ranch house.

“Of course, Gigi,” I said.

“Well, good luck,” she said, “and remember your grandmother’s advice. Nothing is impossible except for what?”

“Except for finding lost keys.”





# IT'S A DATE? PROBABLY. MAYBE. HE DIDN'T SPECIFY

SABRINA LESSLY

Stella awoke, as she always did, to darkness. She pressed a button on her watch. 4:37 A.M. She slipped out of bed onto the ancient floorboards, then across them to her closet. There was no noise. She opened the door, reached for the nearest T-shirt—and hesitated. Despite tight funds and Stella's resistance, her mother insisted on forcing gaudy dresses into her wardrobe. Stella had never felt the need to be fancy, and *definitely* not the need to obey her mother. But this...

Her fingers hovered, twitched. Then:

*Screw fancy.* She grabbed a shirt and pants at random. *Whatever the heck this outing is, I don't need to be fancy for it. Besides, I am not walking the four miles to town in a dress.*

She tugged on her clothes, took the necklace and her lock-picking tools from her nightstand's drawer, and broke out of her bedroom, relocking the door behind her. Each step on the staircase seemed designed to make noise, but Stella had done this before. She crept down to the first floor and paused by her parents' room. Nothing. The only thing between her and the road to town was the front door.

...And the dog.

It wasn't blocking the door, wasn't even *facing* it, but the sight of it lying there was almost enough to send Stella back to her room. Not quite, but very, very close. She tiptoed closer, breath building in her chest, and put her hand on the doorknob. She turned it.

...

She... She *turned* it...

*Come on, just do it already.* Stella glanced at the dog again. *It's asleep. One little door creak won't change that.*

...It won't.

She resisted the urge to rub at the bite mark hidden under her pant leg.

Then, inch by inch, she turned the handle and eased open the door. When it was just wide enough, she slipped out, closed it, and let impulse take over.

Stella sprang straight over the porch onto the overgrown path below. Her feet carried her in long, quick strides, to the driveway and then down it and then to the street. Only when she caught sight of the first suburban neighborhood did she slow to a brisk walk. She checked her watch again. 4:58. Her dad would be leaving for work soon. Or the bar, if Stella suspected correctly. *Seven-day work week, my \*\*\**. Either way, he wouldn't use this road. Her mother would wake up soon after, but nowadays she paid as little attention to her daughter as she could manage. Stella smiled. Another successful escape.



It was 11:23 A.M. when R.B. arrived at the gelato shop. He was wearing his usual blue hoodie and gray khakis, and his hair was its usual fluffy mess, though it was possible that he'd tried to comb it. In spite of herself, Stella relaxed a bit more into her casual clothes. He stopped by the entrance, looked around, then realized she was there and stumbled up to her.

"Hey! You came! Y-you actually—um..." Nervousness and excitement performed their usual dance across his face. "I... I was trying to get here early, but I guess you still beat me, heh..."

Stella shrugged. "What can I say? I like to be on top of things."

"...You're late to physics class, like, all the time."

"I like to be on top of *important* things."

They walked into the shop, accompanied by the tinkling of the bell on the door. The walls were a warm pastel gold, with matching furniture, service counter, and checkered floors. A few people were scattered around at tables; several more were waiting in line. She and R.B. took their place behind a man in a tan jacket.

"That's a nice necklace, by the way," R.B. noted. "Where'd you get it?"

Stella glanced at the fire opal she'd been putting on and taking off for the past several hours. "It's... from my mom."

*Please don't pry, please don't pry, please don't pry please don't pry please don't pry-*

"Oh. Cool."

She bit back a sigh of relief. Just to be safe, she replied, "And I'm guessing the cologne you're wearing belongs to your dad?"

He crossed his arms and pursed his lips. "I don't know what you're



talking about.”

“Oh, relax! You smell fine.” She lightly shoved his shoulder, then squinted at the chalkboard on the far wall. *Raspberry, Pumpkin, Lemon, Mint, Caramel... Pistachio? Why the heck are there so many flavors? What do any of them taste like?* “What should I pick?”

R.B. thought for a moment. “Sam says the hazelnut’s pretty good.”

“Right, so I’m not getting that.”

“Come on!” he scoffed. “I know he can be a bit of a jerk sometimes, but he’s not gonna... kill you with gelato flavors, or something.”

“As an idiot who loves pushing other people’s buttons, he’s bound to end up hurting somebody.” *Not to mention how nosy he is. And how blabbermouthed. If anyone finds me out, it’ll be him, and if he does-*

“You say this as though you two haven’t spent several lunch periods geeking out over *Hamilton* together.”

“Okay, that is an *exception*.”

She decided to play it safe and chose chocolate. *I know what that tastes like. Probably.* R.B. got raspberry. They took a window seat, where he opened and closed his mouth a few times before digging into his ice cream. Stella took a more cautious spoonful of hers. Then she stopped and stared at her spoon. *Huh. That’s... hm.*

R.B. smirked. “You look like you’ve never had ice cream before.”

*Frick.*

“... You *have* had ice cream before, right?” The smirk was replaced by a raised eyebrow.

“Y-yeah, of course.” Stella drummed her spoon on the table. “It just... tastes different, I guess.”

“Hm.” He stared down at his bubblegum-colored scoop. “Yeah, a little bit. I think that’s because—I looked it up, and apparently gelato is churned differently, so it has a higher density. There are a couple of other things, too: fat content, serving temperature—Oh! There’s also this stuff called ‘hot ice cream’ that’s made with the compound methylcellulose, which forms a gel that melts when it’s cold and freezes when it’s hot, so the ice cream actually has to be served *warm*, and—and, uh...”

R.B. seemed to realize that he wasn’t talking to himself and focused his attention on fiddling with his fingers. Stella smirked and took another spoonful of gelato. “Keep going.”

The conversation continued in a similar fashion, with R.B. either stumbling and stammering or launching into long scientific tangents and Stella offering input and attempting to follow along with questionable

success, respectively. At one point, they tried spoonfuls of each other's gelato; she wondered if raspberries were as sugary as the flavoring suggested. Or maybe that was how ice cream was supposed to taste. Then they were both scraping at empty bowls and trying to think of what to do next. She knew that the answer was probably leave, but that would mean wandering around town until dark, when her parents wouldn't notice her return. Even if *they* were asleep by then, the dog might not be. Avoiding it would require waiting even later. She glanced at her watch. 12:01 P.M. *That's a lot of time to burn.*

"Um... so, I, uh..." R.B. twiddled his spoon between his fingers. "I guess we've both... finished our gelato..."

Silence.

"Although if... Well, I was kind of wondering, um... Maybe we could do... something else?"

*Thank God.* "Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"O-oh! Well, I..." R.B. did an excellent imitation of a fish, then muttered, "I really should have thought this through..."

Stella smirked. "How about we just take a walk, then? See if anything catches our interest."

"Okay, yeah!" He grinned a lot wider than he probably intended to. "It's a ni—no, wait- an *afternoon* on the town!"

She bit back a giggle. "All right, you goofball, let's go."



Thus the hours that would have trickled by instead passed in a rush. The two perused some stores without buying anything and ran into a few fellow students, though Stella didn't know most of them. (She *did* know Sam, who had given R.B. a knowing smirk before leaving without a word. Stella decided not to acknowledge it.)

Mostly, though, they just walked and talked, wandering from the streets to the park to the beach, until suddenly the sun was sinking into the horizon and stars were winking into existence above the ocean. They stopped and watched the progression of day into night, their words replaced with the murmur of the waves. Stella willed the sky not to darken, for R.B. to not need to leave any second now. Time did not seem interested in heeding her.

"So..." R.B. made small, slow circles in the sand with one foot. "Do you have to go soon, or...?"

Stella raised an eyebrow at him. "Don't you?"

"I mean, yeah. I—" He frowned. "I was actually supposed to be home for dinner. Now my mom's gonna be mad..."

"I can't imagine your mom being mad at anything." *Lucky him.*

"Stern, then. She's gonna be stern."

She half-forced a chuckle. "Well, I wouldn't want to make your mother any more... *stern* than she already is, so I guess I should go..."

"W-wait." R.B. grabbed her arm, then realized that he had grabbed her arm and quickly removed his hand. "I, uh, I just wanted to say that—um, well, it's... I—the reason I-I called you, and-and did this...er, it was, uh..." He bit his lip, fiddled with his hoodie strings. "I... I like you, Stella. A lot. In, you know... *that way*. A-and I know that's cliché, and maybe a bit predictable, and k-kind of.. stupid, but I—"

Stella didn't realize she had leaned forward until she was already kissing him. For a few seconds, that was it: the feeling of their lips on one another's and nothing else. Then her emotions came back with a vengeance, and thoughts about all of the possible ramifications, and R.B. hadn't prepared for this, and really, neither had she, and she was leaning too hard and not balancing hard enough and sand was a lot more slippery than she remembered—

Then both of them were sprawled on the beach, and to some extent on each other, and then they were scrambling apart and crouching in the sand and staring, mouths unable to decide if they should be open or closed. Against all odds, or at least most of them, R.B. found his voice first.

"I, um—I guess... I should probably head home now, u-uh—"

"Oh, yeah, um, m-me, too." She didn't have to head home, but what was she supposed to say?

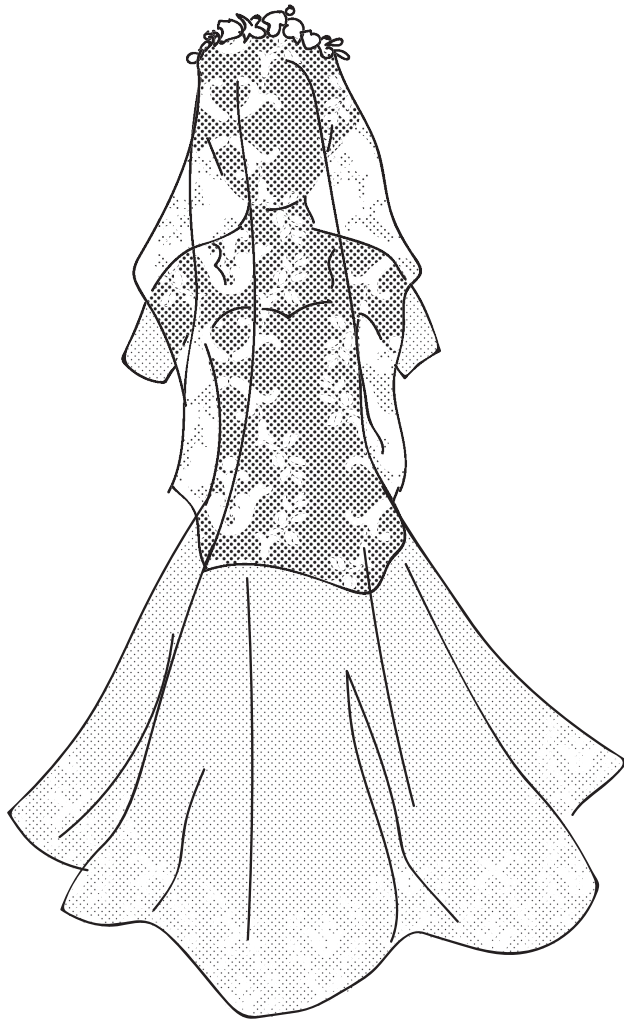
"So... See you on... on Monday. A-at school."

"Yeah, uh, s-see you then."

They stood, too fast, and looked at any part of the other except for their face. Then R.B. stumbled, or shuffled, or *somethinged* away in the general direction of his house. He could've been trying to make it seem like he wasn't hurrying when he really wanted to. Or maybe he knew he *should* hurry, but felt reluctant about it. For once, Stella found it hard to tell.

She stood there for a while, pretending to stare at the night sky or the waves or the smattering of seashells along the shore, as though any of those things were interesting at this point. Then she began to walk towards her own house, a little over four miles away. She'd still have to wait a while before she could go in, but that didn't seem like much of an issue now.

There was a *lot* to think about.



# DOOMED

KATIA SAVELYEVA

i learned at age twelve that lesbians exist, and at that point i knew that they were doomed.

i'm twelve years old and i think i'm not a lesbian, because if i was i'd be young and confused and full of shame, in love with a girl who's in love with her boyfriend and never really looks my way. lesbians are doomed. my girlfriend would be dying in my arms, sad music swelling in a tragic sacrifice, lesbians are doomed. i'd end up sleeping with a man, a woman i claim to once have loved a throwaway joke, lesbians are doomed. i'd foster my own self-destruction through some kind of topical tragic gay pain, lesbians are doomed.

i'm not twelve anymore, and i see you watching the movies that formed my fear, even if the character names are all different; you walk out of the theater and you feel *so very sorry* for me; i disgust you, but in a pitiable way—sympathetic enough for you to cry when i die but not enough to fight for my life. i am doomed.

lesbians are predatory, looking at the innocent straight girl protagonist in the smoky bar with narrow wolf-eyes inciting repulsed fascination, and we are *doomed*. lesbians are funny when they're your quirky best friend, but never funny enough to be the protagonist because love is apparently so individualized that we will never share a universal experience as long as this fine divide exists between us, and we are doomed. lesbians are hot until they look at you with living eyes and real opinions, and then all they are is doomed.

lesbians are doomed because once upon a time it had a moral significance

to show us surviving and unashamed; once upon a time you'd hand me happy endings and I'd hold them filled with terror that they'd break before my eyes; once upon a time every movie with a gay protagonist engendered a fragile, gentle sort of hope—and once upon a time is still happening, and i am still here after centuries of hiding and evolving from poems written in the dark and gentle kisses in the sunlight, light touches concealing feelings broad as horizon lines.

lesbians are doomed, that's what *everyone told me*. multiple times, people have said that my sexuality would make my life difficult—because that's what lesbians do, make their own lives difficult. you are making your life difficult by refusing to be silent, by refusing to pretend—you're making your life difficult—don't you know you're doomed?

lesbians are doomed, everyone's told me, but i am six years old, and i am asking a girl for her name with a clumsy childlike wonder at never having seen someone with such a pretty laugh. lesbians are doomed—i am thirteen, i hug my classmate and i wonder why i can't help noticing the scent of her perfume, feel around in soft, unexplored air about what it would be like to dance with her, but lesbians are doomed. i am fifteen, and a girl from florida just sang me a song she wrote as the full moon hangs in the sky and the skype camera tries to capture the scope of my smile, and all around me everyone feels the need to remind me that lesbians are still doomed.

i go to the library and i check out every young adult novel with a gay protagonist. i search up sappho and virginia woolf and lesbian pulp novels and boston marriages and marvel at the hidden histories we've preserved despite their best efforts, the happy endings they hid in the shadows. i watch and read and listen and research and the first time i finish a book with warm sunlight and a gentle kiss and a *romantic resolution* i can see myself in,

i'm the one who's breaking down in tears.

because straight people get to cry when the lesbian dies, but lesbians cry when the lesbian survives, and maybe making my life difficult is still easier than living a lie -

so you tell me lesbians are doomed and i will show you the ring an old

woman's worn since the sixties that only became a wedding ring last year, and tell me lesbians are doomed and i will read you every story that they wouldn't publish but that we wrote anyway, tell me lesbians are doomed and i will show you myself, fifteen and radiant and bursting with words i will learn to use to create bridges to build and fires to burn. tell me we are doomed and i will scream that can't you *see* it doesn't matter if i die at twenty or a hundred and twenty because i will not be your doomed lesbian, i will not make *your* pity my goal, i will write a hundred stories where the girls ride off into the sunset and i will leave their shame and death and guilt for someone else to write.

i want to tell my twelve-year-old self that she's going to be okay; i want to make the sort of world where girls that wonder about perfume aren't scared to ask; I want us to scroll through gay Netflix movies without being met with a barrage of tragedies and affairs and glorified pornos; i want to let us ask for names, not let us hide in fear - every last one of us, we will no longer let them believe we're doomed for their own peace of mind.

nobody in this room is doomed. doom is a lie they told to keep us silent.





# FEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

BROOKLYNNE SCIVALLY

You walk down the street, tiny iPod shuffle in hand, compulsively pausing and playing your music. You listen to your friends' conversation, verifying that they haven't been kidnapped or something.

Play. The music starts again. You pause before switching to the next song, the voiceover telling you the song's title with horrible pronunciation. You don't like not knowing what song comes next. Besides, it's easier this way. Play. You haven't checked for your friends in a while. Pause. You hear their voices, previously drowned out by your music. Play. You glance at your shoes, still double knotted. You lift your head slightly, surveying your next chunk of steps. There's a grate up ahead, covering basically the entire sidewalk. You cringe, stepping out of the way almost unconsciously. Pause. You look up at the upcoming traffic light; you have this one memorized. Green for oncoming, arrow for parallel. You'll be able to cross in a moment. You step back to the center of the sidewalk, having passed the grate.

Pause. They're still behind you. You're momentarily distracted by a small bird pitter-pattering up ahead, so you almost don't catch yourself when your shoe wedges itself between the slabs of sidewalk. You tip forward, swinging your other foot up just in time, just like you'd practiced. The fall lasts less than a second, but it feels like years. You catch yourself, taking a moment to re-stabilize your weight.

You take several deep breaths, heart racing, multiple averted disasters flashing through your mind.

You imagine falling and breaking your neck.

You imagine splitting your skull.

You imagine falling into the road and getting hit.

You shut your eyes.

When you open them, the traffic has stopped and the pedestrian light blinks at you mockingly. Flashing a quick glance behind you to ensure your

walking companions haven't left, you step off the sidewalk. No cars in the turning lane, go go go!

You hop onto the pavement, relieved, your friends ambling not far behind. You turn to face them—this is where you part ways. They accompany you this far, but your bus doesn't come for another hour or so.

"See you guys on Monday," you call out, heading down the street and into the library. A chorus of "byes" follow you inside.



Someone checked out your book. The book you always read—you'd lost your card a month ago—when you waited for your bus. You checked up and down the aisle, but to no avail. It's gone. It shouldn't be a big deal, you've read it a hundred times already. You know the first two chapters by heart. The thought of finding a new, different book makes you cringe so forcefully it hurts you physically.

Finding a *new* book, reading it, being disappointed, you just... you don't want to take the risk. Even if you already know the ending, you loved reading *that* book. It gave you peace of mind, knowing who did and didn't make it to the end, who to trust and who to look out for. It takes away the guesswork and anxiety.

You sigh, straightening some stray books that had fallen over like a cascade of dominoes. Couldn't you just find a book, look up the ending, and *then* read it? Your face twists into a pout.

*Why am I this way, you groan internally. Why can't I just pick any old book and enjoy it? I did that before. What changed?*

You take your things and walk out of the aisle. You meander through the other aisles, skipping any with people in them, making a mental note to loop back around later. You don't like strangers. They're too... unpredictable.

Rounding the corner, you step into the next row of shelves. They're all informational texts. You give the aisle a quick sweep with your eyes, about to give it a pass, when you nearly trip over a black book on the ground that wasn't there before. You'd checked.

A sound of indignance escapes your mouth, but you pick it up. You feel the covers, turning it around and around in search of the tag. No dice. No ID, no call number, no barcode. It doesn't even belong to the library, someone must have dropped it.

It's a black book, with a hardback cover. You flip it to the back inside cover, where author information usually hides. Instead, however, there are

words written. Your eyebrow quirks at what it says.

**“There’s nothing I don’t know.**

**If there is, I don’t know it.”**

No citation. Just the quote, in regular black, Helvetica. If it’s meant to be physical clickbait, it works really well, as you are suddenly consumed with curiosity. Glancing at the time, you stuff the book into the miscellaneous section of your backpack, alongside your art binder. You heft the bag again, taking a second to adjust to the new weight, and set off to your stop.



This book is really weird. First off, it isn’t even really a book—it’s a large journal, filled with things actually *written* in it. It starts out with writing from what you assume to be a middle-aged homeless man, who can’t seem to hold a job. You pity him. After gaining the journal, he starts... hallucinating? You struggle to understand what he’s talking about, rambling of a voice talking to him in cryptic ways. He consults this voice in his head really often, and it—shockingly—aids him in winning the jackpot lottery. Suddenly his life is perfect, and he doesn’t have to lift a finger.

Then the entries end, without warning.

There’s a blank page, a coffee cup stain, then the writing starts up again, with a vibrant blue pen.

The handwriting is messy, almost too much to read. At first it seems the journal exchanged hands, but this new author doesn’t mention anything about it. She seems to have found the journal herself and decided to write in it.

She’d recently turned 19, and by the way she writes you can tell she knows everything. Not even in a sarcastic way, she really seems to know *everything*. She talks about how she’s able to predict things, but really only things she knows about. Forecast says 30% chance of rain? She knows it’s going to rain and brings an umbrella.

She mentions how strange it is, how she can just *feel* when she’s wrong about something. A sixth sense, she calls it, the ability to sift through an array of answers like panning for gold.

She decides to take a risk. She requests to appear on a trivia show, knowing immediately after submitting it she was accepted. When you read that she doesn’t actually know much trivia, you begin to cringe in second-hand embarrassment. You’ve seen this scenario before. It’s like not studying for a huge exam and expecting to pass.

Even still, reading the final sentence of her entries, you are filled with pity.

“I lost.” It reads. Depressing.

*She didn't understand how it worked, you think to yourself, leaning your head against the bus window. The sense doesn't just give you answers. It tells you if they're right or not. You yourself have to have the answer. It's like having an idea of how a book's going to end, and not being able to find out until you've read it. It's like a...real actual 8-ball. That works.*

Now the writing in the back makes sense. You have to have the knowledge to know if it's right or not. If you don't know the right answer, you might never find it, lost in a sea of fallacies.

After all, you can't ask about what you don't know, right?

**Yes.**

Ooooooooooh what was that. You look down at the journal in your lap, your mind screaming “hallucinations!!” repeatedly. You wonder if the journal spoke aloud.

**No.**

...Oh. You're hesitant. Is the voice coming from your mind?

**Yes.**

Huh. That explains why you could hear it over your music. You pause the music, focusing on the voice. You try to think of something else to ask, but the familiar scenery outside tells you that the bus is nearing your stop. You pull the signal, and the driver slows.

You rise from your seat, beginning the short walk to the front. You wonder if you'll fall.

**No.**

Perfect. You lift your head a little, striding confidently to the front, stepping off and onto the pavement. There's a man standing a little ways away, smiling feverishly, and he makes no move to the bus. It pulls away, and you consider the guy. Is he going to hurt you?

**No.**

You smile, making a point to wave hello, and he returns the wave. You practically skip home, filled with a sort of confidence you haven't had in awhile. You hop onto the porch, patting your pockets. Oh god, did you forget your keys?

**No.**

Hah, just kidding, you knew that already. You never forget your keys. You pull the lanyard from your pocket and jam it into the knob. You step into your house, relishing the sound of the door clicking behind you. Finally

home, where you belong.

\*\*\*

You wonder if your answers are right.

**Yes.**

You know that. You'd checked several times, but you can't help checking again. Even if the journal has reassured you, somehow making its monotonous replies sound exasperated, you feel the need to check again. You need the grades! You ask if you're even passing the class.

**Yes.**

...Is it above 95?

**Yes.**

*Oh snap!* You shut the textbook. If you're passing, you can lay off the extra credit for now. You slide your papers away and grab the journal. You'd been attempting to talk to it, but conversations made entirely of yes/no questions are extremely difficult to maintain. You wonder if it's even sentient...

**Yes.**

You freeze mentally, gripping it tighter in your hands.

"...You're sentient?" you ask it aloud.

**Yes,** it responds mentally.

"Like... is your body the book?"

**No.**

"It's somewhere else?"

**...No.**

"You hesitated."

There's no response; it wasn't a question. It didn't have to be. You knew it happened.

"Could you maybe elaborate?"

**No.**

"Please?"

**No.**

"Alright, alright! Fine. Okay. Sure. Alright."

**No.**

"I didn't say anything!"

...

"I felt that! I felt that ellipsis! Is that what it's called!"

**Yes.**

“I didn’t mean to ask—never mind.” The journal is *sentient*. You repeat the phrase over and over in your head, trying to make it make sense. It feels incorrect.

The *journal* is not sentient, right?

**Yes.**

The *voice* is the sentience.

...

Ugh, yes/no questions. “*Right?*”

**Yes.**

Is the voice... trapped in the journal?

**No.**

Oh. You’d assumed it was some sort of... helpless and cursed soul forever trapped inside an inanimate object for all eternity. Did the voice... put itself there?

...

“Answer me,” you urge, shaking the journal slightly. For a moment, it doesn’t respond.

**Yes.**

“Why?” you ask, already knowing it won’t answer the moment the words leave your mouth. You put your head in your hands, trying to think of a reason. If you can come up with something, anything, you might be able to figure it out! Many possibilities swirl in your mind, and you whip your head up in the direction of your clock. It’s almost midnight. You push the journal off of your lap and climb into bed, only feeling a tiny bit of regret when it thumps on the floor.

\*\*\*

It spoke to you. You didn’t ask it a question. You did a double take, staring at it still sitting in the corner. “Could you repeat that?” You regret the words before you’ve finished the sentence—

**Yes.**

“Ha ha, cheeky. You know what I mean.” You pull it closer, away from its time-out.

**Ask me something,** it says.

You glance at the book you were reading for class. You’d like to know why the author keeps using apostrophes instead of quotation marks, but that isn’t a—

**The British style of writing uses single quotes (‘) for initial**

**quotations, then double quotes (“) for quotations within the initial quotation.**

--question? You gape at the journal. “Wow... Thanks? I wasn’t expecting you to answer...”

**Ask me something**, it insists again. You wave your arms around, trying to find something to ask it about, but come up empty.

“Sorry,” you begin, “I can’t think of any more-”

**Ask me something. Anything.**

Its voice might just be in your mind, there but not really, but you could swear that it sounds desperate. Frustrated, even.

“Alright,” you chuckle, thinking of a pun. “Here’s one you’re *bound* to know.” You feel it sigh. “Why are you in there, anyways? What reason would you have to put yourself in there?”

**I was seeking knowledge. Answers.**

“Oh really. How does being a journal do that?”

It sighs again. **I didn’t... quite understand what the spell meant. I saw that I’d become a being with the answer to every question and went for it.**

“And? Did it work?”

**Yes. I have all the answers...**

You feel a “but.”

**But...**

There it is.

**I don’t have the questions.**

Oh. What was with your yes/no deal before? Did you just assume that you could get all the questions that way?

**No.**

You glare at it; you can feel its non-existent face twist into a cheeky grin. “Why, then?”

**Yes or no questions are concrete. You don’t have to consider outside options before making an answer.**

“What if it’s not? What if there’s a gray area?”

**There’s only a gray area if you don’t know the answer. I have all the answers. I just don’t know what they’re answering yet.**

“I guess that plan kinda backfired on you, huh?”

**I got what I asked for. It just wasn’t what I wanted.**

“Hmm,” you flip through the pages, contemplating another question. “Did it hurt you when these people wrote on you?”

**I can’t feel.**

Oh. “So it didn’t hurt you when you hit the ground the other day?”

**No, but I appreciate your concern.**

“How many people have you given answers to?”

**Thousands. Only those two wrote in me.**

“How come they left you?”

**What makes you think *they* left me?**

You pause. Again, you assumed it’s helpless. “Okay,” you start again, amending your statement. “How come you left them?”

**They wouldn’t ask me questions, and I became impatient waiting.**

“Do you pick and choose who you ask, or is it the first person you come into contact with?”

**A bit of both. I choose where to be so that the right person *just happens* to be the first I come into contact with.**

“I’m flattered. How do you know where to be? And when, for that matter?”

**Like I said, I have all the answers. I can ask *myself* questions too, you know. You’re down to seven more before the lightning round is over, by the way.**

“Aw, what? When did we establish a lightning round?”

**I get tired hunting for answers. Six more.**

“Tired? Do you have to search for them, like a dictionary?”

**Kind of. More like Google. That’s five.**

You’re surprised it knows what Google is. It talks in such an adult way. “How old are you?”

**The journal is several millennia old. Four.**

“Arg! No, no, I meant you. How old are you?”

**A couple thousand years. Three.**

Your mind reels. That’s really old. You’re about to ask it another question—something along the lines of ‘are you even from earth, the real you and not the journal’—but the thought of having to go back to yes/no questions when you have so many that require complex answers makes you anxious. You don’t want this to be over.

**Are you going to ask me something else, or can we end this now?**

It interrupts your train of thought. You glance down at it, the peculiar little notebook that shoved its way into your private life.

“...why me? Why would you pick me?”

**You possess a quality that can be difficult to find in humans, a quality I once had myself. That’s two—you have one more.**

“What’s the quality?”



**The fear of uncertainty. After all, who better to have ask you thousands of unique questions than someone who fears the unknown?**

That's a good point. Even things you know to be true, you still ask about. Even if you'd won the lottery, you would fret over it daily. Even merely practicing for a trivia show would provide you with questions to ask. Help with school, help with your mind over-complicating things, help with your mind's late night existential wanderings.

Instantly knowing the outcome of any situation you find yourself in.

That's an ability you wouldn't mind having yourself. You run your hand over the front cover of the journal.

"Do you think it was worth it? Putting yourself in there?"

**...Yes.**



