

Fine Print

2024

Literary magazine of
Community College
of Baltimore County





Fine Print is made possible through generous funding from the CCBC Office of Student Engagement.

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Special thanks to CCBC Office of Student Engagement and Dell Hagan Rhodes, Director and Professor Sharon Trumbull, Art, Design, and Interactive Media.

After a one-year layoff in 2024, we plan to once again submit *Fine Print* to the Community College Humanities Association Literary Magazine Competition. In previous years, *Fine Print* has garnered the following national awards (chosen from entries across the United States):

Best Magazine — 3rd place (2023)

Photography — 3rd place (2023)

And these awards from the Eastern Division:

Best Magazine — 1st Place (2019 and 2023); 3rd Place (2018 and 2022)

Short Stories — 1st Place (2018)

Creative Nonfiction — 1st Place (2022); 2nd Place (2023)

Poetry — 3rd Place (2019 and 2020)

Artwork — 1st Place (2020); 2nd Place (2023); 3rd Place (2022)

Screenplay — 1st Place (2020 and 2022); 3rd place (2023)

Photography — 1st Place (2022); 2nd Place (2023)

We publish not only the best of what we receive, but also pieces that are representative of who we are at CCBC. Our students are extraordinarily diverse in race, age, gender, intellectual pursuit, lifestyle, and, of course, experience. The 2024 edition of the *Fine Print* is a collection of the pieces we feel best represent those skills and those experiences.

Submissions for 2025 edition of *Fine Print*:

If you are currently a student at CCBC, you may submit your creative work (art, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, plays, screenplay shorts) via email to: Evan Balkan at ebalkan@ccbcmd.edu. Please put "Literary Magazine" in the subject line. Call **443.840.4976** if you have questions.

Do you want to be on the *Fine Print* editorial board?

If you are a student currently enrolled at CCBC and wish to be on the *Fine Print* editorial board, contact Evan Balkan at either **443-840-4976** or ebalkan@ccbcmd.edu.

The editorial board of the *Fine Print* reserves the right to edit submissions for reasons of clarity and/or content. It is understood that all submissions may be accepted for publication and reproduced in all future issues of the *Fine Print* unless author of the piece stipulates otherwise. Students retain all rights to their work.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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RAINA ZACK
Onomatopoeia

There is always something to do at the Barnes' estate. A hallway to sweep, a set of silverware to polish, clothes to wash. I don't mind the tedium—I am well compensated for it. Mr. Barnes pays his servants well.

Although my salary comes from Mr. Barnes, I was approached for this post by the mistress of the house. She is tall, with a severe aspect about her. She bares sharp cheekbones and dark brown eyes, like a hound's.

I am one of only a dozen who mind the manor, and truthfully, it is a most cumbersome task. There are not enough hands. The manor is a stately, meandering sort of place right on the edge of nowhere. The inside and outside both are finely detailed, laden with objects, nooks, and corners that attract dust. Necessity has made me master of many things.

I cannot complain too much. I am in no position to, and as I said, the work does not bother me. Even if it did, there is naught a place within a three week's journey that would accept me after being dismissed without a character. I suppose that is why the Madame sought me out.

She is known for being particular about who she employs.

Scrape, Scrape, Scrape.

The bristles of the broom drag against the tile as I ferry dust out of corners and into a pan. As I am the only one working at present, I have a lot of ground to cover. I am not being as thorough as I normally would. Two sets of laughter filter into the room I am cleaning. One high and feminine, the other deep and booming.

We must have a guest.

Squeak, Squeak, Squeak.

The windows creak under my careful consideration. I look out through the dim panes and that is when I see her, our guest. She looks like a little lamb, with her arms wrapped around Mr. Barnes, sweet and delicate. Her skin is the color of fresh-shorn wool, a stark contrast against the deep, elaborate collar of her blouse.

When I come up from dipping my sponge in the bucket, I catch the tail end of long, nightshade hair disappearing into a copse of cherry trees.

I do not see her again, but I hear her. Her laughter hangs over me while I am doing my duties. I begin hanging up flannel vests next to petticoats and lace stockings.

Knock, Knock, Knock.

I set aside the tub of polish at the intrusion. The spoon clinks as I set it back down into the box of silverware, and I walk to the door.

I open it, and she is there before me.

The guest.

Today her hair is coiffed and shiny, arranged in many painstaking ringlets. The dress she wears is purple silk, and is familiar. I have washed it thrice already. She has a head's height on me.

I had seen her face as I walked to the door. Before, it was smiling, and now it is twisted in a grimace. I tilt my head down as I step aside to permit her entry. In the corner of my eye I see her fine nose as it wrinkles.

"Remove that at once."

I shut the door and in quick order spirit the silverware and the polish away, never raising my head once.

Snip, snip, snip.

I catch the roses in my hand as they fall. They are to replace the wilted ones in The Room.

I look over their petals, searching for brown spots. I pluck them if there are not too many, and discard them otherwise.

Snip.

Mr. Barnes likes things to be beautiful.

Splash.

I drop the dirty rag into the bucket at my side and reach for the second. I pour sudsy water onto the tile. My distorted reflection warps with ripples when I begin to scrub. My hands are slick with soap and bubbles. The smell of lye and oil clings to my skin, I'm sure I'll go to bed reeking of it.

Skritch, skritch, skritch.

I am working my rag against a particularly stubborn stain. The coarse fabric scrapes against the dirt, fighting me with each swipe of the cloth. I hear two raised voices from The Room.

THUD.

I hear a scream.

Skritch, skritch, skritch.

SQUELCH.

Later, I find it with the wash. A blouse, with a deep red stain splashed across its front. I kneel in front of the basin. It smells sweet and metallic. Coppery.

Drip, drip.

Water slides down my elbows and onto the floor.

Hiss.

I feed the blouse into the fire. The flames blaze and snap hungrily around the offering—like the sound of teeth tearing into flesh.

Mr. Barnes pays his servants very well. ■

“NO SWEETIE, FISH CAN’T BE BALLERINAS, *ESPECIALLY* NOT SHARKS,” THE FATHER EXPLAINS. THE GIRL LOOKS AS IF SHE MIGHT CRY AND SAYS NOTHING. RAGE GURGLES UP INSIDE ME. IT’S ONE THING TO HATE ME, BUT CAN HE NOT SEE HOW HE’S HURTING HIS DAUGHTER? HE’S BREAKING HER SPIRIT LIKE THE OTTERS BREAK CLAMS!

CHRISTINA RICHARDSON

Mia’s Story

I swim in circles around the tank, over artificial rocks and fake props. I can’t stop or I’ll suffocate—just a trait that makes me special. Another one? My eyes are on opposite sides of my head. Some think it’s cool; others ... others call me weird. I’m the only one of my kind here. Sure, there are other fish in the “sea,” but they’re not like me.

“Mom! Look! A shark!” screams a little boy when I swim past the glass. Families visit everyday, hoping to get a glimpse into my life. “She’s so pretty!” he continues. Such a sweet boy. He’s jumping up and down, pulling on his mother’s shirt sleeve.

“Billy, no. We don’t like sharks, remember? They eat people,” the mother scolds. And there it is. Gotta teach them while they’re young right? It’s always, ‘They’re the *bad* guy,’ ‘We *hate* sharks,’ ‘They’re senseless *killers*.’ I don’t understand—how did I get this reputation? I haven’t harmed a soul. I wouldn’t even think of eating a human—they’re disgusting. I much prefer sting rays and octopuses, or just plain fish.

My tank-mate, John, receives the same reaction from the parents as I do. He’s an Atlantic Sharpnose Shark. Of course, he doesn’t get the, ‘That one looks weird!’ comments, but he’s still a murderer in their eyes. I swim over to him.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” I ask.

“Oh, hey Mia. Tired of what?” he replies.

“The constant disrespect. The way they hate us, and teach their children to hate us, and their grandchildren to hate us and—” John puts his fin on mine, stopping my train of thought.

“Shh, Mia. Take a breath,” he soothes. “It’s just the way it’s always been. It’s the way it will always be.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?!” I raise my fins in frustration, creating a wall of bubbles.

“I guess not, no. I don’t pay much attention to the humans if I’m being honest,” he answers. And with that, he changes directions and swims off.

“You may be okay with being persecuted, but I won’t swim for it,” I say to myself. Now . . . how to win them over? What fish do they like? The colorful fish are always admired. But I can’t change my appearance. Dolphins are popular . . . Oh! They perform! I just need to learn a trick! I swim over to the glass and flap my fin towards the awaiting people.

“Did she just wave at us?!” A little girl squeals.

“Nonsense, she’s just swimming,” the father says.

I swim back around and wave again, and again.

“See? Just swimming,” he says. The girl frowns. I reach the glass again. This time I swim in a circle, my version of a spin. I splash my fins and bubbles twirl around me. The girl’s face lights up again.

“She looks like a fishy ballerina!” she exclaims.

“No sweetie, fish can’t be ballerinas, *especially* not sharks,” the father explains. The girl looks as if she might cry and says nothing. Rage gurgles up inside me. It’s one thing to hate me, but can he not see how he’s hurting his daughter? He’s breaking her spirit like the otters break clams! I swim to the back of the tank, getting as close to the enclosure’s walls as I can. I change directions, charging towards the glass, as fast as a swordfish. I see the people staring. I see them pointing. I see their faces change from distaste to fear.

“What’s she doing?”

“Can she not see the glass?”

“She’s not stopping!”

I slam into the window—*thrum*. I hear screams and, through my now blurry vision, I see the adults running away, pulling their children along with them. I move aimlessly through the tank, waiting for the pain and dizziness to subside. When it does, I notice: not everyone left. The little girl lingers, her hand on the glass. She’s gazing at me intently, her eyes as big as those of a giant squid. I make my way over to her and flap my fin.

“Hi,” mumbles the little girl. “Are you okay, fishy?” I swim down and quickly back up. She giggles. “Is that how you say



DESTANY WHITEHEAD: Magical Dancer

yes?" I repeat the action again. She giggles again. "Were you waving at us before?" I "nod" yes. "I knew it!" She claps her hands. Her smile lights up the tank. "I don't think you're a bad guy," she says. "They don't understand you. But I do! I wanna study you when I grow up!" She stands up tall, exuding the confidence and intelligence of an octopus. I splash, filling the space with bubbles. She laughs.

"Marina! Where are you?" a voice calls from somewhere outside of the tank.

"Oh! I gotta go! The sign says your name is Mia? Bye Mia!" The little girl runs off, waving as she goes. After she leaves, John swims up from the back of the tank.

"Well, I'd say you did it," he says.

"Did what?" I ask.

"She liked you! She wasn't afraid," he replies.

"It's only one person though. And her dad obviously didn't like me," I counter.

"But did she listen to him?" he questions.

"No," I say reluctantly.

"Exactly. She's decided, on her own, that you're not a monster. She wasn't even scared when you charged at them, which by the way, was not one of your better ideas." John takes a breath. "There's hope, Mia. One little girl at a time, there's hope," and with that he swims off again. I look over and see a new group at the glass again.

"Time to win over more hearts," I say and begin my new routine again. ■

NOAH PETERSON

Fields of Cyanide

Within a cherry orchard, under a beacon
of softened light, a merry fool breaks his fast
adorned in tarnished silver bells that
chime with each bite. He pops in his mouth a plum,
and spits out the seed, pillow lips covet the juice-
steeped in bleeding sweet burgundy.

The fool's king rode to war, holy in mind,
grinding men to mince under his comely behind
as his patron fool reaps his harvest, and sleeps on his dime.
After all a fool has no care or need to do battle—
a courtier should be here playing dice for serf chattel!
Now, under the shades of the king's own trees,
his comedian prays for the old codger to die during siege.
He chortles and prances sweet as potted preserves,
chirping,

Don't fret for your land my liege,
I'm keeping your copse safe here in my belly!



GERRIZA BALMES: **A Strange Dream**



MEGAN DAVIS: **Clown**

MEGAN RAYNER

Butchered Tongue

Mother,
Let the ancestors slit your tongue and drain you of words.
They will bind your throat with barbed wire to prohibit you from
conjuring anything else.
They will carve a curse in the roof of your mouth that will make you
lose your teeth if you were to speak.
You are forbidden to speak.
Forbidden to eat
forbidden to sleep
After slitting your tongue, they will pour salt onto the wounds of
your mouth.
we will watch you bleed out from your mouth.
draining your tongue out of curses that you have conjured.
Jah created the heavens and earth with words.
You created misery with your words.
You are banished from using your mouth.
Let the ancestors wreak havoc upon you if you utter even a sound from
your butchered tongue.
Let your words feel like hot iron being poured down your throat,
when you tried to speak.
You have a butchered tongue.

LILLIAN PELESKY
Sacrificial Lamb

Inside me is a sacrificial lamb destined for an eternal naivete
A little lamb who lives offering herself to hungry wolves
She wanders through minefields of drooling mouths
In search of a jaw to brace her skin tenderly
Like mother.
How she longs for genesis.
Little lamb would let her fine coat fall threadbare
Like that old sweater labeled "Made with Love by Grandma"
To let herself feel the kiss of a mouth's teeth
Let her be the apple.
Inside me there is a two headed calf to be dead by morning
So she spends her whole life looking up at the stars
Are we in Eden yet?



JEREMY NACLIA: **Fish Cloud**



MIRANDA, THE GIRL IN FRONT OF ME, IS WEARING A CREAMY WHITE SWEATER THAT'S SO OLD IT LOOKS MORE YELLOW THAN ANYTHING. OF COURSE, IT'S PAIRED WITH SOME DARK GRAY SWEATS. I DON'T GET HOW SHE HAS A BOYFRIEND WHEN SHE DRESSES LIKE THAT. I'D NEVER BE CAUGHT DEAD IN SOMETHING *THAT* UGLY.

MADISON HARVEY

Amaryllis Belladonna

I seat myself on the barstool in the kitchen of my cramped two-bedroom apartment. Yawning, I take a tentative sip of my morning Espresso. It's really watered down. Mom makes it every morning before she leaves for work.

These days, it's the only evidence I have that she exists; she's like a cryptid in her own home. Regardless, it's the least she can do.

The coffee is almost dangerously hot, scalding enough to hurt my soft hands as they grip the mug's chipped surface and to sear the roof of my mouth when I swallow—but that's the way I like it. I can always depend on the scathing bitterness of my coffee to startle me awake. As much as I want to, I can't sleep through first period. Luckily, that first sip gives me enough to heave myself through the rest of my morning routine.

I always pick out my clothes the night before to avoid wasting time. Today's ensemble is on the simpler side. My phone warns me that it'll be cold today, so I throw on some tights and a short-sleeved black t-shirt before layering it with my chosen outfit: A plain pink tank top paired with a pleated skirt.

After that, I apply makeup. I've perfected this to a science, and I'm proud of it. Once again, I keep it simple. Just some light foundation, blush and eyeshadow. I put on the finishing touches with mascara before I lazily brush through my hair, scrutinizing my reflection in the bathroom mirror. It might be a hassle, but at least I don't look like a bum in sweatpants and some frumpy, oversized hoodie. The thought makes me scowl.

By now, my coffee has usually cooled enough to be drinkable but not lukewarm. I chug the rest of it before brushing my teeth. I NEVER brush before I drink my coffee. The one time I did, I got a gross brown stain on my front teeth that didn't get pointed out to me until I was well halfway through the school day. Freshman year was rough. Anyway. I slip on some cute black loafers, hang my purse over my shoulder, and then I'm out the door.

My school is about ten minutes walking distance from my apartment complex. I do my best to look disinterested as I get nearer and notice other students dragging their feet on the sidewalk. In homeroom, I slouch casually in my seat and wait patiently for someone to greet me, but they all seem preoccupied, talking amongst themselves.

Miranda, the girl in front of me, is wearing a creamy white sweater that's so old it looks more yellow than anything. Of course, it's paired with some dark gray sweats. I don't get how she has a boyfriend when she dresses like that. I'd never be caught dead in something *that* ugly. Speaking of boyfriends, Asher is perched at Madeline's desk next to me. *Ugh*, they're flirting with each other. I've been exposed to this hundreds of times by now, but it's still the cringiest thing I've ever seen. I'll never build up a tolerance. Finally, the bell rings and class starts. I scoff, scrolling aimlessly through my phone. Looks like everyone missed their chance to talk to me. Again.

First period passes by in what feels like minutes. Time really does fly when you're on your phone all class. My math teacher, Mr. Reese, gives us the last ten minutes of the period for free time. He hobbles over to his desk, sighing as if his spirit had just left his body. Honestly, it could be any day now at his age. I scan the room. Madeline and Asher are talking again. They might be annoying, but they're the closest things I have to friends in this class: Acquaintances. I scoot my chair closer to Madeline's desk, and it makes a horrible screeching sound against the tile. My phone finds its way out of my purse and into my hands again as I wait for them to talk to me.

Then, I make the horrible mistake of glancing at their outfits. They're both wearing jeans, which is fine enough, but Asher's wearing a black graphic tee that looks straight out of 6th grade with some slimy cartoon rat on it. Madeline's frayed burgundy sweatshirt that looks like it's at least a decade old isn't any better. They're a match made in hell. It takes a few minutes, but the happy couple finally manages to break away from staring lovingly into each other's eyes long enough to notice me. Madeline shoots me an uncomfortable looking smile. "Oh. Hey, Lily. What's up?"

>>>>>

I shrug coolly. "Nothing, really."

I don't make eye contact with either of them, fixing my gaze on the home screen of my phone. They aren't responding, probably thinking about how much better I look than them, so I graciously pick up the slack in the conversation. "What's up with you guys?"

I see Madeline and Asher exchange looks out of the corner of my vision. Madeline looks like she doesn't want to talk anymore; she's probably realized how lame she looks in comparison to me. But Asher is a people pleaser, so he gives her an apologetic shrug and answers me. "We were talking about the literature club," he says, grinning at me. He should smile less. It looks stupid.

"Oh? Did you guys join?" I do my best to act disinterested.

It works, because Madeline frowns, clutching the pencil on her desk in a death grip. "They aren't taking any more new members. You can't join," she says, and I wonder if she realizes how rude that sounded.

Asher definitely did; he chimes in with a small "sorry," and waves his hand around. He looks like he's trying to swat a fly. "If you wanted to join a club, though, I think the Drama club is short on members this year."

I roll my eyes, but Asher's too busy proselytizing about the Drama club to notice. "There's an interest meeting today in the auditorium, actually. You should check it out." He looks at me expectantly.

"I guess," I say, my tone dripping with indifference.

Inwardly, though, my interest has been piqued. I'd never thought about joining a club before. It could be a good way to meet some new people. Madeline and Asher are nice and all, but they're kind of boring. The bell rings and they say their goodbyes to me. I don't respond since it makes me look more mysterious.

At the end of the day, instead of making a beeline for my apartment complex, I linger around the auditorium waiting for the interest meeting to start. This was a stupid idea. I'm surrounded by familiar faces; kids I share every other class with or pass in the halls every day. None of them seem cool enough to hang out with me. I drop my purse on the floor and lean against the cold, hard wall of the gym. I glance at the clock—2:43—and then check my nails. They're light pink and slightly chipped. I didn't have time to repaint them this morning, but at least it matches my outfit. I continue studying my nails for god knows how long when I feel a tap on my shoulder.

Someone's passing out a clipboard with a sign-up sheet. Oh right, I'm here for the Drama club. I take the clipboard and pen my name in stylish cursive. Fortunately, I'm one of the first to sign, meaning everyone else will get the opportunity to ogle my flawless handwriting.

The meeting continues on and I zone out for most of it. I manage to gather that we're meeting every week on Wednesdays and since the school's too broke to pay for a production we'll mostly be doing fundraisers for the first few months. Sounds dumb, but the other members can use the opportunity to get to know me, so good for them. No one's approached me yet and it's making me frustrated, but I know it's because they're intimidated. It's okay. They'll get other chances to talk to me.

The meeting ends, and I file in with the other students towards the exit. I'm checking my phone as I walk since it looks a lot cooler than just staring at my feet. I feel a light tap on my shoulder. Finally. I stop in the middle of the hallway to turn around. My eyebrows furrow. I don't recognize the guy who stopped me.

He's wearing a red, low cut canvas jacket, a black t-shirt, and washed-out jeans. A pair of expensive looking aviators are folded over the collar of his shirt. His clothes are a little too bright, but he looks decent enough to be seen with me, I guess. There's a moment before he speaks where we just stare at each other. I find myself anticipating what he'll say. This is the first time someone's initiated a conversation with me since the start of the school year. Outwardly, I stay calm, but my pulse quickens. My nervous energy dissipates the second he opens his mouth, however.

"H-h-hey, uh . . . I th-think you left your bag?"

He's stuttering so much and mumbling so quietly that I can barely make out what he's saying, but I'm tipped off by the fact he's holding my purse. I had totally forgotten about it. Either way, the guy seems like a total loser. Must be too shy to talk to a hot girl. I tug my purse away from his weak grasp without so much as a word, and he looks shocked. "Yeah. It's mine," I snap.

I want the interaction over as soon as possible, now. He seems like a nervous wreck, and it would probably hurt my image to be seen with him, but the guy doesn't seem to take a hint. "O-of course! Y-you're welcome," he says, and I don't know why. It's not like I thanked him.

I start walking away, but the pest keeps following me. "I'm Griffin." He extends his right hand.

It was the first sentence in which he managed not to stutter—if two words even count as a full sentence. I'm almost proud. It takes him a few moments, but he eventually realizes I'm not going to shake his hand and slides his arm into his jacket pocket instead, walking alongside me. I eye him judgmentally. He has a weird name. "*Griffin?* Really?" I ask, letting my blunt curiosity get the better of me.

Griffin anxiously chuckles. I don't know what he finds so funny. "Y-yeah . . . A-and you?" Ah, the stutter is back.

"Lily," I say.

"N-nice to meet you, Lily," He holds out his hand again and this time I begrudgingly shake it, just to save him the embarrassment. It's clammy.

THERE'S A MOMENT BEFORE HE SPEAKS WHERE WE JUST STARE AT EACH OTHER. I FIND MYSELF ANTICIPATING WHAT HE'LL SAY. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME SOMEONE'S INITIATED A CONVERSATION WITH ME SINCE THE START OF THE SCHOOL YEAR. OUTWARDLY, I STAY CALM, BUT MY PULSE QUICKENS. MY NERVOUS ENERGY DISSIPATES THE SECOND HE OPENS HIS MOUTH, HOWEVER.

"I actually just moved here. I-It's my first day. Y-you're the f-first person I've talked to," he overshares, making small, awkward gestures with his hands. I don't get it. Am I supposed to care about his whole life story?

"So you went the *whole* day without talking to anyone 'till just now?" I ask scornfully, as if I hadn't done basically the same thing. It's totally different.

Griffin frowns and looks down at his scuffed-up shoes. They actually go pretty well with his outfit.

We walk outside and the second the sunlight hits Griffin quickly slides his aviators onto his face. It's suddenly a lot more bearable to be seen with him now that the shades obscure his nervous gaze. Not that it matters, since I'm leaving now. He starts to walk away, and I go in the opposite direction even though it's not the right way to my apartment. With any luck, Griffin will take the hint that I don't want to be seen with him.

"S-see you tomorrow, Lily!"
Or not.

A few weeks pass. Griffin's taken to hanging around me constantly. It's like there's a fly incessantly buzzing around my ear, evading my increasingly frustrated attempts to swat it away. Right now, we're eating lunch. I'd normally use the time to scroll through Instagram or touch up my makeup in the bathroom, but Griffin found me again in the hallway the day after we first met and practically begged me to sit with him—*L-lily! H-hey, did you w-wanna sit together?*—And the display was so pathetic that it would have been like kicking a puppy if I had said no. So, here I am now.

Griffin always sits across from me. I'm messing around on my phone since I didn't bring anything to eat. I haven't since middle school. Money's tight, and I don't need to waste it on an overpriced school lunch. For some reason, Griffin seems bothered by that fact. He usually just eyes the empty spot where my hypothetical lunch would sit. Today, however, Griffin tears his sandwich in half—turkey—and offers one side to me.

I shoot him a glare. I'm not even gonna acknowledge his question—it's insulting. Did Griffin really think he was in any place to be pitying *me*? It takes a few seconds, but after he realizes he's not getting a reply Griffin chuckles awkwardly and puts his sandwich back down. "Did... did you already eat?"

I roll my eyes. He's not gonna drop it. I don't get why he cares. "Uh, yeah. Something like that," I say, shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

After that, Griffin says nothing else, and we spend the rest of lunch in silence.

It's a Wednesday, which means we have Drama after school in the auditorium. Today's a fundraising day. We still don't really know what we're doing yet, so everyone splits up into groups to brainstorm. It's the perfect opportunity for someone to invite me into their group, but Griffin pounces before they get the chance. He smiles, brows downturned as he walks over to me and raises his hand out in greeting. "Do you have a group yet?"

He's not stuttering as much anymore, which is less embarrassing for me, but his dopey smile is really starting to piss me off for some reason. I smack his hand away, but his grin widens—dumbass probably thought it was a high-five. "C'mon," I sigh, and lead him over to a table in the corner of the room.

We're not actually gonna do any work. Griffin's not smart enough to come up with anything good and I don't feel like it. So instead, we just sit there. I can always trust my phone to stave away my boredom in times like these, but Griffin starts talking to me before I get the chance to take it out. "So, what production do you think we'll end up doing?"

"What?"

"A-after the fundraiser is over."

Oh. He's talking about the play. I shrug. "I dunno."

Griffin tilts his head. "Well, w-what do you hope it'll be? I've never been in a play before or anything, but I've always liked *Oklahoma*."

>>>>>



TANELLE SCHROCK: **Johan Adam**

That catches me off guard. I actually chuckle. Griffin tilts his head further, if that was even possible. I hope one day he realizes how stupid that looks. “W-what? Did I say something funny?”

“Oklahoma sucks ass,” I say, “I’m just surprised. I’ve never met anyone who didn’t hate it.” Then again, I haven’t met a lot of people in general.

I was expecting Griffin to be offended, but he laughs, leaning his elbow on the table. “And what would you pick, then? If your taste is so much better than mine.”

His tone is almost challenging. I’ve never seen him act so comfortable before. “I never said I had good taste, Griffin. Just that yours sucks,” I retort, smirking.

Griffin startles at my words. He stops smiling for a second, eyebrows raised in shock, and I wonder if I said something wrong. I’ve never worried about something like that before. Suddenly, though, he smiles again, blushing. “Y-you got me there.”

Then it hits me. I’ve never said his name out loud before, either. It’s crazy to think that it took this long, but Griffin’s usually the one doing most of the talking, to be fair. I don’t think it’s a big deal, but *he* certainly does. For some reason, it doesn’t annoy me as much as it should.

Thursday flits by. It’s just more of the same. I feel like I’m getting more stares in the halls, though. Weird, but not unwelcome. About time people noticed how effortlessly cool I am. At lunch on Friday, Griffin tactlessly prods me again about my eating habits.

“I, accidentally—uh” He mumbles, reaching into his lunch bag, “.... packed an extra sandwich, so”

He pinches it by the Saran wrap it’s cinched in and hovers the sandwich in front of me, dangling it almost teasingly. No way it was an *accident*. He’s been getting a bit bolder these past few days. It’s been strange to watch him break out of his shell.

I huff and swat it away with the back of my hand. “No.”

“O-okay. Just, um. Let me know if you change your mind.”

He’s trying to keep his tone lighthearted, but I can tell that he’s worried. He needs to stop working himself up over nothing.

“Why do you have to be such a *bleeding heart*, Griffin? Just mind your own business,” I say, casually rolling my shoulders back to reach into my purse.

Griffin’s always trying to stick his neck out for me. I’m worried that it’s starting to make me look selfish in comparison—either way, hanging around him all the time

isn't great for my rep. He's lucky I tolerate it.

I rummage through it for a second before my hand re-emerges with my phone in its grasp. I need to check the time again. I just want to know how much longer I'm going to have to deal with Griffin today.

I quickly glance at him before looking back down at my home-screen. He's frowning, and a thoughtful look crosses his face. "...That was a *rhetorical* question, by the way. I don't wanna hear about your whole life story," I clarify.

Griffin chuckles softly, exhales some air out of his nose. "I know," he says simply. Still not sure what's so funny.

Suddenly, he leans forward and props his head up against his elbow. "Wh-what, um." He clasps his hands together. Why's he so nervous all of a sudden?

Griffin takes a sharp breath. "I-I mean Are y-you doing anything this Saturday" He manages to speak with a *shockingly* low number of stutters.

I raise my eyebrow incredulously. *The hell?* Is he trying to ask me out? I reflexively scowl.

Griffin waffles on. "I-I don't mean, like—a *date*, or anything I-I just needed some help shopping for some new clothes" He scratches the back of his head sheepishly.

Griffin's skittish gaze meets my own, expectantly. But I say nothing.

".... I j-just I lost a lot of my stuff in th-the move and I" He trails off, and averts his eyes.

I'm caught a little off guard. He's never really talked about his experience moving here before, only mentioning it when we were first introduced. I got the sense he didn't like talking about it, for whatever reason.

Griffin sighs, defeated by my lack of any discernible reaction. "Y-you just y-you have a really good s-sense of *style*, y'know?"

My eyes widen. *Now* I'm interested. Griffin's playing to my ego—he knows me better than I thought.

"That's true" I murmur, egging him on.

"—And—and you probably know all the best places!" Griffin frantically says. I can tell he's coming to understand the best way to win me over.

I give an easygoing nod. "I do, yeah"

"A-and you're r-really cool! And smart!"

Okay, now he's just running out of things to say. Nevertheless, I feel the corners of my lips quirk up into a small smirk. Griffin can be annoying, but he has an unfailing ability to boost my ego. And I appreciate that.

"Sure, whatever," I say, lacing my voice with nonchalance.

Griffin returns my smirk with a beaming smile. I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On Saturday evening, we meet up by the wishing well in Stone City's central avenue. It's got a small collection of

places—mostly just overpriced restaurants, but there's a few shops littered in between them. I always arrive a few minutes late to everything so that I don't have to stand around looking like a dumbass while I wait.

Speaking of, I first spot Griffin loitering around the well. He's got his hands slid uncomfortably into his jacket pockets. He steals a glance around him every couple seconds. I sigh as I approach, quickly nodding my head in acknowledgement of him. Not everyone can be as effortlessly cool as me, it seems.

"Hey," I call out.

I take care to be loud enough so that Griffin hears me but not loud enough that it catches anyone else's attention. The last thing I need is for someone from school to see us.

Griffin cocks his head around towards the sound of my voice and his eyes light up when he sees me. "Lily! I-I was starting to think you weren't gonna show up!" He jogs over to me.

I know Griffin's probably gonna try to make small talk, but I don't want to waste any time. "Follow me," I say, and I start to walk away before he can protest.

I lead him halfway across the avenue until we reach a dingy little thrift shop crammed in between two much nicer looking buildings. Griffin pauses as I push the door open. "Um. I-I'm sure I've got enough to go someplace a little nicer" he says, eyeing the building warily.

Of course. I should have pegged him as a sheltered rich kid. I just thought he was a loser. "I always shop here," I say, in hopes that he'll feel bad.

"O-oh."

Griffin trails behind me in silence for a while as I parse through the men's section. He definitely feels ashamed. It's the quietest he's ever been.

Red definitely seems to be his color. He's always got *something* red in his outfit, usually that faded canvas jacket. I pick out a few things and pass them along to Griffin. Before long, he's struggling to keep up, and I can hardly see him behind the mountain of clothes. I eventually take pity on him and offer him a shopping basket to put it all in. "You could've done that the *whole time*?" he asks. I shrug.

We take everything up to the cashier and Griffin pulls some bills out of a fancy leather wallet to pay. Who keeps that much cash on them? "Don't wanna use your card?" I ask as we walk outside.

Is it because he thinks this place is shady? If I cared I'd be offended. But Griffin sighs and shakes his head. "N-no, I don't have one. My dad— he doesn't really trust me." He frowns and looks at the ground.

I don't reply. I take my phone out but it won't turn on. I must have forgotten to charge it. Great—now I get to listen to Griffin complain about his life. Rich kids must have it rough. I roll my eyes.

>>>>>

"Y'know—I used to do this with my mom," he says instead, gesturing with a nod at the bags of clothes he's holding.

That's a weird non-sequitur. My curiosity gets the better of me. "And why don't you anymore?" I ask.

"... My parents, um," he frowns. "Th-they got a divorce, so—" he cuts himself off.

"Oh," is all I can say.

Griffin starts to ramble. I can tell he's needed someone to vent to for some time now. Probably since he moved here. "A-and it *sucks*, 'cause, like—she gave sole custody to my *dad*. I-I always thought we had a good relationship, but she didn't even *try*."

His story hits a little too close to home for me.

"My dad left," I say without thinking. Griffin falters. He blinks slowly.

Neither of us really say anything after that. We walk back to the wishing well in silence, but there's a sense of understanding that's fallen over us. We part there. I start to walk away, but for some reason, I look back. I watch Griffin toss a quarter into the well.

Hanging out with him today wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be.

Next Monday, I drag myself into homeroom and sink into my chair. I glance around the room until my gaze meets the face of the clock. It's 7:30, meaning I have a ten-minute grace-period before class starts and I actually have to use my brain. I look to my left. Asher and Lin are talking to each other, as usual. Once they notice my gaze, Madeline nods in my direction, and Asher waves. "Good morning, Lily!"

Asher has that same sad smile and downturned brows as always, and it reminds me of how Griffin looks when he's nervous. I don't glare at him as harshly as I usually do. "Morning," I reply.

Asher and Madeline's eyes both flash with surprise for a moment. Not sure why, but I brush it off. It's Madeline who speaks next, shockingly. "How's Drama club?" she asks, fiddling with her pencil.

"Going fine," I say.

Honestly, I'm not sure why they're asking. They've never shown much interest in me before—self-absorbed of them, I know. They share a look with each other before looking back at me. They always do that, and it gets under my skin sometimes. I hate feeling like everyone else is in on something I'm not. Asher speaks again, slowly. "Uh, Lily. We're kind of curious" he trails off.

Now *I'm* curious. "What is it?"

"Did you get a boyfriend??"

Huh? I blink in shock. "W-what do you mean? W-who're you talking about?"

I'm stuttering. Everyone else is turning to look at me now in mild interest. Madeline is smiling for some reason. I think she might be enjoying watching me panic. *Sadist*. "Y'know, that guy you're always with now," she adds.

"I-I don't—"

The classroom door creaks open. Everyone's heads whip around at the noise. Thank god. I never thought I'd be grateful to see Mr. Reese's wrinkly old face, but here we are.

Except it's not Mr. Reese. It's Griffin.

He's holding a brown paper bag in his right hand but still deigns it appropriate to wave at me with it like a total dork. "Hey, Lily!"

He doesn't notice that practically the entire classroom is staring at him. Of course he doesn't. A few kids in the back of the class snicker. I suck in a breath. He walks over to me with confident strides, plopping the bag down on my desk. I notice my name is scrawled on it in shaky handwriting. "I know you don't like to eat lunch S-so I, uh, got you some breakfast."

He's practically broadcasting to the entire class that I can't afford to buy my own lunch. Even worse, this totally seems like something a boyfriend would do.

"So, he *is* your boyfriend!" Asher exclaims. I hear whispers of surprise around the room.

My face heats up. I'm so embarrassed. Griffin stands there awkwardly for a second before Asher's words register, and he starts blushing. He shakes his head and waves his arms around in denial. "O-oh, it's n-not like that, w-we're just—"

"—We're not even *friends*. He just keeps hanging around me," I say in the most disgusted tone possible.

I regret the words as soon as I say them, but I can't sacrifice my image for Griffin's feelings. I push the bag to the edge of my desk, maybe a little too forcefully. It falls on the floor. Griffin doesn't even pick it up. His eyes are watery and after the initial moment of shock, he fixes his gaze firmly on his shoes. The rest of the class is dead silent. A horrible feeling settles in the pit of my stomach.

"O-oh. S-s-sorry. I didn't"

Griffin can't even finish his sentence. He turns on his heel and leaves, pushing the door open with enough force that it continues to swing gently back and forth long after he's gone. Everyone's focus is still on me, with looks ranging from amused to disturbed. I can still hear snickering. Finally, someone speaks up. It's Asher. "... I'm sorry I said anything."

He frowns, and it reminds me of Griffin again. "Just shut up," I say icily.

I realize with a shocking indifference how low my opinion is of practically everyone in this room. I don't even know half their names. Why the hell should I care about what they think anyway? Why did I let them goad me into hurting Griffin?

Except, *they* didn't really goad me, did they? It was honestly a pretty fair question to ask. *I'm* the one who blew it



JEREMY NACLIA: **Thick Water**

all out of proportion. And I'm pretty sure I just drove away the only friend I've ever had. I pick at my nails. They're painted red.

I suddenly stand up, startling everyone in the room, including myself. I'm moving without thinking. I lean over, pick up the paper bag and storm out the door just as Mr. Reese finally enters. He doesn't even try to stop me, just gives me a perplexed look.

I walk through the halls quickly but aimlessly. I need to find Griffin, but I have no idea where to even start looking. After little luck with peering through classroom doors, I decide to head outside in case he's hiding from our power-tripping hall monitor. On my way there I actually pass the hall monitor, and it's obvious I don't have hall pass, but my face must look murderous because they say nothing and avert their gaze. I eventually arrive at the back entrance.

I can see the back of Griffin's frizzy black hair. He's sitting outside on the curb.

I push the door open before I can give myself the chance to reconsider what I'm doing. I'm breathing faster and my hands are shaking, but not because of exhaustion. I realize I'm nervous. Griffin makes no indication that he heard the door open. I take a few steps forward. "Hey," I start, but words fail me.

What am I supposed to say? *Hey man, sorry for being such a cold-hearted bitch! No hard feelings?* So in lieu of words, I silently lower myself next to him. Griffin slowly shrugs his shoulders to acknowledge me. "H-hi," he says shakily.

I'm amazed he can even stand to talk to me after what I just did, but that's just the kind of guy Griffin is. Too forgiving. He's wearing his aviators. I couldn't tell you why—it's not sunny out today, but then he takes them off and I see the redness in his eyes. He's been crying. Now I feel like shit again. I finally muster up the courage to speak. "I'm sorry, Griffin."

Griffin's eyes widen for a second, and he smiles sadly, looking at his shoes again. "I-It's okay. I d-deserved it. I didn't realize I was a-annoying you so much."

I shake my head. "Nah. I was being a bitch. I care too much about what everyone else thinks."

He snuffles. "It's pathetic, but I-I was just *excited*, y'know? 'cause I thought that I f-finally had a f-friend."

I sigh.

"Me too."

He finally looks up at me. "Oh," he says, eyes wide.

Griffin's gaze is searching, looking for confirmation that I have meant what I said this time. And I truly do. We're two halves of the same whole—both losers with no friends, equally as pathetic as each other. I just didn't want to admit it.

I blindly reach into the paper bag I'd been holding and sift through it. The first thing I pull out is a blueberry muffin. It looks homemade. I tear it in half and offer one side to Griffin.

"Well, d'you want any?" ■

Start Again

The stars shine brightly
In your eyes
Such a perfect moment.

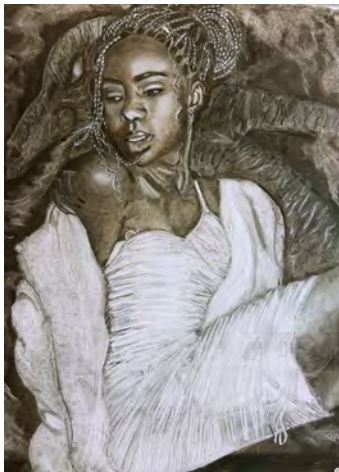
Here on soft grass
You matter to me
It burns in my chest
As I connect the stars
And always lose my place

I want to keep you
Here, like this
I open my mouth
"I love--"

No, stop! Awful thing
The moment freezes. Grass is knives
Look at me, I'll only pressure you
I'll only lose you that way
I'll only trap you that way
Awful, awful thing!

Go back, go back
Do this *properly*

The stars shine brightly
In your eyes
Such a perfect moment . . .



Isabelle Lutz: **My Fears**



Isabelle Lutz: **The Women**

Offal Love

Oh, you're hungry? Well go on, eat!
You're free to me.
If you can take it, anyways

Eat me raw
Tender between gleaming teeth
Iron blooming on your tongue
Just mind the worms

Eat me burning
Roast your tongue on me
Break your jaw against hard meat
An opponent in stomach acid

Eat me softened
Bank your fires to a simmer
Bring your hundred favorite spices
Till lesser meat falls from bone
Till I'm candy in your mouth

Whatever you want.
Knives, kisses, curling smoke
But please, don't leave me alone
For maggots and harpies
In putrid veins and calcium cages
I can do better than me.



Quarn Wright: **Nola in Bath Linen**

ABBY PETERS

A Poem for Bindi

You weren't perfect, but you were mine.
Your innocent face, so angelic and pure.
The sassy attitude and the hissy fits.

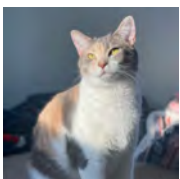
I take a bath and you're not there, my little lifeguard
I can still hear your chirpy chitters that you would make at those stupid squirrels.
The others sniff your spot but you're not there, a bed so bare.

Four years went down the drain in an instant.
My emotions went swirling alongside.

I'm sorry this happened,
I'm sorry you were in pain,
I'm sorry I couldn't save you,
I'm sorry that I wasn't there to hold your paw.

Are you ok, where you are? Lapping up the Milky Way, jumping through soft grassy
meadows, or napping in the warm sunbeams?

We'll meet again someday, I promise you.



*A poem dedicated to Meghan,
Danny, Bindi, and anyone who has
lost a pet so suddenly.*



AS ETHAN DEPARTED, THE OPPRESSIVE AURA OF NEGATIVITY THAT LINGERED IN HIS PRESENCE SEEMED TO VANISH AS IF IT HAD JUST FOLLOWED HIM OUT OF THE APARTMENT. THE COLD AIR THAT HE EMANATED WAS NOW ONCE AGAIN A WARM AND GENTLE BREEZE.

M.L. DAVIS
Gifted by The Wind

As a gentle breeze welcomed itself through the window, Rosa discovered herself ensnared in the midst of morning chaos. The kitchen became the arena where she juggled her children's preparations for school while getting herself ready for a pivotal job interview. "Okay, let's get moving. We need to catch the buses," Rosa directed her two sons. However, amidst the hustle and bustle of her children's playful diversions, a sense of detachment loomed in the presence of Ethan. Initially, Rosa had cared for him, believing his feigned concern for her and her children's well-being. Time had shattered this illusion, and she realized that he was not the man that she wanted in her children's lives.

Ethan, as he often did with an air of entitlement, seized the opportunity to criticize Rosa's appearance and disparage her sons. "You know, Rosa," he taunted, his smirk laden with malice, "I think your oldest son, young Thomas here, is gay. And this one here," he gestured towards the younger child, "never says a damn word. How old is he, nine?"

Frustration boiled within Rosa as she snapped back, "Stop it, Ethan! He's six, and he simply doesn't talk to you. Why don't you just go, Ethan? Find something productive to do."

"I am being productive right now! Who do you think bought this breakfast your weird-ass kids just ate, huh?"

Rosa glanced at him sharply but didn't answer.

Ethan continued his rant. "That's what I thought. And you better start answering me when I talk to you, girl. You better be glad you still got that cute little ass." With a dismissive and foreboding laugh, Ethan made a feeble attempt to kiss Rosa before making his exit. However, Rosa's lack of reciprocation laid bare the absence of any genuine affection in their relationship.

As Ethan departed, the oppressive aura of negativity that lingered in his presence seemed to vanish as if it had just followed him out of the apartment. The cold air that he

emanated was now once again a warm and gentle breeze. This boosted Rosa's spirits as she ushered her children from the apartment and to their bus stop. After watching the bus depart, she had a few brief moments to prepare for her impending job interview. With a flurry of activity, she applied light makeup, donned her second-hand professional attire, and hastened to catch her scheduled bus.

The bus ride once again proved to be a chaotic journey, marred by delays and frequent unscheduled stops. Despite the tumult, Rosa had a glow that everyone around her seemed to notice that morning. She was a naturally pretty woman with a pleasant and nurturing demeanor, and people always responded positively to her company. As she grew nearer to her stop, she made a few final touch-ups in the mirror, determined to present herself in the best light possible. As the bus lurched to a halt, she pulled the stop cord and stepped onto the crowded street. "Good luck!" a chorus of voices echoed from the bus.

Navigating through the throngs of pedestrians, Rosa found herself ensnared in a cacophony of tantalizing aromas emanating from the myriad of food carts lining the sidewalks. She was still slightly hungry, as she had given much of her breakfast portions to her sons. Despite the distraction of tempting smells and sights, she pressed onward, her thoughts consumed by the looming interview.

Arriving at the interview location, Rosa's confidence wavered as she became acutely aware of her perceived shortcomings. The realization that her English skills and experience paled in comparison to those of her competitors cast a shadow over her resolve. Yet, undeterred, she squared her shoulders and stepped through the doors, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Ethan strolled into a quaint corner convenience store, offering a nod of acknowledgment to the cashier as he made his way towards the back room. Within this secluded space awaited

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WITH THE AFTERNOON FADING, SHE BRACED HERSELF FOR THE ANTICIPATED DISAPPOINTMENT OF YET
ANOTHER UNSUCCESSFUL JOB INTERVIEW. AS SHE STEPPED INSIDE HER APARTMENT, THE THUD OF HER BRIEFCASE
HITTING THE FLOOR ECHOED THE FRUSTRATION THAT GNAWED AT HER.

two acquaintances of Ethan discussing a plan to commit a robbery. Both were renowned in the neighborhood as confirmed thieves and stumblebums, engaged in a hushed conversation. Ethan joined them, and together they continued to finalize the details of their plan.

"Don't let us down, Ethan. If we get to that back door and you ain't there, we're screwed," said the man in the red hat.

"I know what I've gotta do. You just make sure that you and fatboy here don't get high and forget you got a job to do," Ethan replied.

The fat man didn't respond to Ethan's insult but chose instead to give him a disapproving glare. It was time to go to work, and they all proceeded to an awaiting van that would serve as the escape vehicle.

Before their departure, Ethan, who had decided to quench his thirst with a soda and indulge in a pack of cigarettes before setting off, found himself embroiled in a confrontation with the cashier. Frustration laced his words as he demanded change for his purchase. "How can you not have fucking change? So, how much is left over?" he barked.

"Two dollars and nineteen cents," the clerk replied timidly. "The manager should be back in a few minutes; he just went down to the Laundromat. They usually give us change when we run out," the clerk added.

"Fuck it, just give me one of those scratch-offs, goddamnit. I'm feeling lucky today. How about you, cupcake?"

"Sure," the clerk whispered, his voice barely audible above the hum of the store's fluorescent lights. When Ethan was out of ear range, the clerk mouthed silently, "asshole."

Back at the apartment, Rosa felt the weight of the day's events pressing down on her shoulders. With the afternoon fading, she braced herself for the anticipated disappointment of yet another unsuccessful job interview. As she stepped inside her apartment, the thud of her briefcase hitting the floor echoed the frustration that gnawed at her.

The vibration of her phone ringing startled her momentarily, and the sound that followed pierced the heavy air, signaling another potential setback. "Ms. Garcia?" came the voice on the other end.

"Yes, speaking," Rosa replied, her voice tinged with resignation.

Ron Felders from United Consumers delivered the verdict, confirming Rosa's fears and leaving her with a familiar pang of disappointment. As she hung up, she resigned herself to continue with her evening routine, all the while reflecting on her journey.

Six years earlier, Rosa had been an immigrant, alone in a foreign land with two children. Her sole confidante had been Faye, a resilient neighbor who had overcome her struggles to become a nurse. Faye had been the catalyst for Rosa's pursuit of her dream to become a college student, offering unwavering support and friendship.

Despite Faye's repeated pleas for Rosa to leave her abusive partner, Ethan, Rosa had hesitated, swayed by his sporadic and ill-gained financial support. However, she knew her time with him was running out, and her determination to break free from Ethan was growing stronger with each passing day.

Ethan and his two co-conspirators approached their target with unwavering confidence, each step echoing their assuredness. "This will be a piece of cake," Ethan mused, his companions nodding in agreement. They divided into two groups, with Ethan positioning himself at the back door to cut off any means of escape for their intended victims.

The shop they had set their sights on had stood for decades, renowned for its vast selection of carpets and rare rugs. Its proprietor, Mr. Munson, was a revered figure in the community, celebrated for his boundless generosity and goodwill. Mr. Munson had cultivated the trust and admiration of all who crossed his path, frequently extending a helping hand to those in need and generously supporting local events, including high school band trips.

As Ethan's associates entered the front of the store, Mr. Munson, already wary of their intentions, greeted them with a polite inquiry. Sensing an underlying tension, he exchanged a quick glance with his wife, stationed behind the counter. Unbeknownst to the criminals, the Munsons were not ignorant of their guests' reputations.

“Good afternoon, boys. What can I assist you with today?” Mr. Munson inquired.

“Looking for a rug for my mother,” one of the men replied. “Something small, you know, for the hallway.”

“Alright, I think we’ve got what you need. Follow me,” Mr. Munson responded, leading the men towards the back of the store.

As Mr. Munson showcased his inventory, he remained vigilant, acutely aware of the potential danger lurking beneath the surface. The criminals, feigning admiration for the establishment’s organization, concealed their true intentions until they reached the rear room. “You’ve got a really nice, orderly place here, sir,” the man who was obviously the ringleader said. “I’d hate to have to kill you or your pretty little old wife today, understand?” Suddenly, guns drawn, they demanded access to the safe and emptied the contents of the cash register into what appeared to be a pillowcase. In a moment of desperation, Mrs. Munson attempted to reach for a panic button, only to be warned against it by one of the gunmen. With trembling hands, she clutched her crucifix as her husband dutifully complied with the criminals’ demands. Once satisfied with their loot, the gunmen ushered the couple towards the back door, where Ethan was waiting for them. His intention was to eliminate anyone who could identify him and his partners.

Amidst the chaos, Ethan’s meticulously crafted plan took an unexpected turn when Mrs. Munson, revealing her hidden firearm, unleashed a barrage of shots, incapacitating Ethan’s partners. In the ensuing panic, Ethan pivoted his attention towards Mrs. Munson, only to be met with another well-aimed shot from his rear, sending searing pain coursing through his backside. Mr. Munson, a war veteran with nerves of steel and impeccable aim, had intervened.

As Ethan staggered into the woods, the lottery ticket slipped from the pocket of his jacket, carried away by the wind. Blood-stained dollar bills fluttered like crimson and green moths falling to the ground. With each faltering step, he felt the tendrils of life slipping away until he finally succumbed to the darkness, leaving behind only a pack of wet ruby-colored cigarettes nestled in the undergrowth—a haunting reminder of his demise and the echoing promise of consequences yet to unfold.

Meanwhile, Rosa maintained her daily routine, eagerly awaiting her children’s return at the bus stop. As they disembarked, their youthful exuberance contagious, Rosa’s face lit up as if the movement of a cloud had uncovered the sun. After a few hugs and a quick recap of the day’s activities, the boys asked if they could go play with a few of their friends in the neighborhood.

With Faye, a stalwart presence on her nearby porch, keeping watch, Rosa granted her children permission to explore the woods until dinner. It was a respite she cherished,

a brief interlude of calm amidst the tumult of her daily existence. Yet, beneath her façade of composure, a palpable dread lingered, fueled by the looming specter of Ethan’s potential return.

As her thoughts spiraled, Rosa sensed an intangible shift in the air—a premonition of impending changes. With a heavy heart, she watched as her children, oblivious to her worries, disappeared into the depths of the woods.

Amidst the swirling chaos of windblown debris, Rosa’s youngest son, Petie, charted his own course, his path diverging from the others. An enigmatic figure, his unconventional behavior had long puzzled doctors who labeled him autistic—an assertion Rosa vehemently rejected.

As Petie wandered through the woods, a vibrant piece of paper caught his eye—a colorful piece of paper dancing on the whims of the wind. Entranced, he pursued the elusive treasure, his imagination conjuring visions of capturing a butterfly in flight. With a triumphant grasp, he claimed his prize—a humble gift to bestow upon his mother, a token of his love amidst their turbulent existence.

As Rosa ushered her children inside for dinner, Faye lent a hand in rounding them up. With practiced precision, Rosa served up a meal designed to nourish both body and soul, her mind drifting to the news story unfolding on the television set—a tale of karma catching up to criminals. It was a story of three gunmen who were killed by an elderly couple during a botched attempted robbery. Good for them, she thought.

After guiding her children through their bedtime routines, Rosa sank into contemplation, another day navigated in the maze of uncertainty. As Petie approached for his goodnight kiss, he extended a colorful offering—the prize he had pursued in the woods had turned out to be a scratch off lottery ticket.

Initially dismissing it as a trinket, Rosa’s curiosity was piqued as she began to reveal the numbers, interrupted by breaking news. The familiar name, Ethan Burns, echoed through the room, leaving Rosa stunned. “Oh my God, Ethan’s dead,” she said to herself. Unsure how to react and assuredly in shock, she resumed scratching the ticket, each revealed digit a surreal countdown to revelation.

One by one, the symbols unveiled themselves, culminating in a triumphant declaration: Grand Prize Winner! \$500,000! Tears welled in Rosa’s eyes as the magnitude of her windfall sank in. And in that profound moment of disbelief turned jubilation, a tender voice drifted from the hallway—Petie bidding his mother goodnight.

Good night, Mommy. I love you. The wind was warm today,” he called out. ■



KHAYRI WILLIAMS: unprofessional

ANEESA MUHAMMAD

Between Worlds, Within

I've always known I was different. My name, Solana Yasirah Moore, was a gift from my parents—Mama chose Solana after the sun, because I brought light into her life, while Daddy chose Yasirah, meaning ease, promising to make my life peaceful.

As the firstborn of two young parents, their love story always intrigued me. Mama, seventeen, full of dreams, met Daddy, nineteen, at Temple University. They were different in every way, but their love was real, always filled with laughter and teasing. But Mama is quiet and reserved, while Daddy is playful and energetic.

Mama's warmth shines brightest in church, a place where she transforms, radiating joy that I rarely see elsewhere.

One Sunday morning, Mama calls me from my dreams, reminding me about church. The smell of pancakes fills the house, a comfort I look forward to every Sunday. I kiss Daddy good morning, teasing him about Grandma's singing, while my little brother, Adam, whines about my advice on his shoes.

But at church, everything changes. The familiar faces greet us with smiles that quickly fade into judgmental glances and hushed whispers. I overhear a comment about my weight, and my heart sinks. Was this how Mama saw me, too?

I've always wondered if she resents me—if my presence reminds her of the life she gave up, the dreams she abandoned when she had me at 18. At church, she's radiant, but at home, I often feel invisible, like a shadow.

I leave the service early, my chest tight as I navigate through the whispers of the congregation. I glance at Mama, her smile glowing in a way I can't touch. Why do I feel so out of place in the place that should be home?

Since it's summer, I'm responsible for keeping Adam and me entertained while Mama and Daddy work long hours. Adam is usually glued to his PlayStation, leaving me with plenty of time for myself. Today, after breakfast, I decide to tidy up the house. As I walk into the living room, something catches my eye: a box wrapped in sparkly purple paper with a big white bow.

THE ROOM GOES SILENT. HAILEY, A GIRL I'VE KNOWN SINCE SECOND GRADE, GLARES AT ME.

"YOU CAN'T BE BLACK AND MUSLIM, STUPID," SHE SNEERS. "MY MAMA SAYS THAT'S HOW THEY ARE IN PHILLY,
BUT YOUR DADDY DON'T BELONG HERE. YOU GREW UP IN THE CHURCH, JUST LIKE US."

Curious, I approach and see the label: "For Rah Rah; From Daddy." I smile, knowing Daddy's always sneaking surprises for me. I open the box to reveal a green and gold book—*Quran*—its letters shimmering like liquid gold in the sunlight. As I turn the cover, an envelope falls out. I open it to find Daddy's neat handwriting.

Dear Solana Yasirah,

Today, I give you your own Quran. Though we haven't spoken much about Islam since you were raised in the church, your mother and I agreed it's time to let you choose your own path. I took my shahada or testimony of faith when I was 20, while your mother was pregnant with you. Though she didn't understand, she never let it come between us. We decided to raise you Christian, but now, at 17, as you enter your senior year, we believe you're ready to explore. Read this book and know I'm here if you need me.

Love you,
Daddy

I read the letter twice, feeling the weight of his words. I slowly flip through the Quran, letting the unfamiliar text wash over me, feeling both drawn to it and distant. This is a piece of my father's life I never knew—something deep and important that's now mine to explore. A new part of myself feels uncovered, like a treasure waiting to be found. How much more complex can my story get?

As summer fades into the hum of Friday night lights, my desire to understand my father's faith grows stronger. Each day, I immerse myself in books, finding peace and a sense of belonging in their words. With every page, I uncover parts of myself I didn't know were missing.

The night before my first day of senior year, I step into the cold bathroom, the flickering fluorescent lights buzzing above me. I face the mirror, studying the lines of worry beneath my eyes and the unfinished edges of my identity. "Tomorrow marks the start of senior year, Solana. Time to be the person you want to be," I whisper to my reflection. My smile is nervous, but beneath the doubt, there's a flicker of hope.

Tomorrow, I'll take another step toward becoming the person I'm meant to be—though I'm not sure who that is yet.

Morning comes faster than expected. I shuffle downstairs in my uniform, the scent of tea filling the kitchen. Mama sits at the table, her hands wrapped around a mug, eyes distant.

"Morning, Mama! How are you?" I ask, trying to sound cheerful.

"I'm fine, Solana. Excited for senior year? Time to focus—no more games." Her voice is steady, but there's an edge to it. As she rises, her gaze softens for a brief moment, almost foreign to me. She looks at me like she sees someone changing, growing.

"Yes, Mama. I think I'm ready." I try to meet her gaze, but something shifts in the air. She wipes a tear from her cheek, and my heart tightens.

"It's nothing," she whispers, voice wavering. "I'm just proud of you." The words hit me harder than expected, and before I can respond, she pulls me into a tight hug. "I love you," she whispers in my ear, her voice thick with emotion.

As I step outside into the quiet morning, a warmth fills my chest, her love wrapping around me like a protective shawl.

Arriving at school, familiar faces now seem different, older, more polished. The air is filled with the scent of new shoes, cleaning supplies, and nervous energy. Conversations blur around me, but my heart races.

During lunch, the talk turns to our futures—dreams of college and leaving everything behind. Before I can stop myself, the words spill out. "My dad's Muslim," I say, barely above a whisper. "I'm trying to figure out where I stand with all of this."

The room goes silent. Hailey, a girl I've known since second grade, glares at me. "You can't be Black and Muslim, stupid," she sneers. "My mama says that's how they are in Philly, but your daddy don't belong here. You grew up in the church, just like us."

Her words strike like a cold blade. Tears sting my eyes as I look around, realizing these people, who have been in my life

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MY HEART POUNDED AS I SLIPPED OUT THE BACK DOOR OF THE SCHOOL. I HALF-EXPECTED SOMEONE TO STOP ME, BUT NO ONE DID. AS I WALKED TOWARD THE BUS STOP, THE AIR FELT THICK WITH ANTICIPATION, AND EACH STEP SEEMED TO BRING ME CLOSER TO SOMETHING—SOMETHING THAT MIGHT UNDERSTAND ME.

forever, now feel like strangers. I grab my things and rush to the bathroom, tears falling as I wipe them away, shocked by Hailey's cruelty.

The final bell rings, and I leave school in a daze, the sting of her words lingering. At home, Adam's voice breaks through my thoughts. "Ugh, can you open the door already, Rah Rah? I need a snack."

I snap at him, but my frustration only deepens. I slam the door behind me and collapse into my bed, tears flowing freely. Why do I have to be different? Is there no place for me here?

As the weeks passed, I found solace in the quiet of the library during lunch. The shelves around me created a bubble of peace where I could read, reflect, and search for answers to questions I didn't know how to ask. I traced my fingers over the words in my Quran, hoping for a sign that what I was feeling was okay, that my search for self-understanding was valid.

Though I overheard whispers and felt the weight of glances in the halls, it was easier to slip away unnoticed. At home, things were calm, but I still didn't quite know where I fit.

Then I read about Friday prayers, and the idea of going to the mosque filled me with both excitement and dread. I thought about asking my dad to take me, but my nerves held me back. How would my mom feel? This was all so new to her, too.

The next day, I did something unexpected—I found a mosque nearby. Suddenly, the idea of going felt urgent. By lunchtime, I'd convinced myself to check it out alone.

My heart pounded as I slipped out the back door of the school. I half-expected someone to stop me, but no one did. As I walked toward the bus stop, the air felt thick with anticipation, and each step seemed to bring me closer to something—something that might understand me.

When I arrived at the mosque, I froze, watching people enter. I wanted to join them but felt rooted to the spot, my palms damp. Just as I was about to walk away, a voice called out.

"Solana? What are you doing here?"

I turned to see my dad, dressed in a powder-blue outfit I hadn't seen before.

"Daddy," I stammered, trying to hide my nerves, "I was just ... um, taking a walk."

He raised an eyebrow, his smile teasing. "Twelve blocks from school? During lunch?"

I looked down, embarrassed, but his smile softened. "It's alright," he said gently, reaching for my hand. "Come on in. I'll show you around."

The mosque's interior was beautiful—intricate gold calligraphy on the walls, soft green carpets beneath my feet, and a calm, fragrant air. We took off our shoes, and I followed my dad into a room where he introduced me to two women.

"This is Sajdah," he said, nodding to the girl with the black scarf, "and Safia."

They greeted me warmly, and I felt an instant connection. Sajdah and Safia were kind and easy to talk to, and I felt lighter in their company. They explained the hijab and gently draped a soft, cool fabric over my curls. It felt strange but comforting, like a hug from something bigger than myself.

They showed me how to pray, and time passed quickly as we talked about everything under the sun. My dad returned when it was time to leave, and as we exchanged numbers, Sajdah smiled.

"Keep the hijab," she said. "You can use it again."

On the way home, my dad and I talked about everything I'd learned. For the first time, I felt a sense of belonging, a feeling that was missing from my church—a feeling of being accepted just as I was.

That night, after dinner and homework, I sat down, folded my hands, and whispered, "God, I don't really know who you are yet, but ... I need a favor. Could you help me figure out who I am? Grandma always said nothing's too big for you. Please, I just want to feel like I belong."

As the words left my lips, a sense of calm washed over me, and for the first time, I felt something truly shifting inside.

As time passed, my journey of self-discovery continued. I stayed close to Sajdah and Safia, returning to the mosque with my dad on some Fridays. Every lecture I heard reinforced the idea that God created me for a reason, even though it's still hard sometimes. I just had to find it in myself to be exactly who I want to be.

But the struggle continued outside of the mosque, especially at school. At the mosque and with the people I met there, I felt whole. But everywhere else, I often felt like someone was watching me with disgust, with resentment.

One day, I hear a voice from behind me in the hallway as I gather my books from my locker.

"Well, look who it is," Hailey sneers, standing with one of her friends, a girl from the basketball team. They both wear distasteful smirks, their eyes narrowing as they look me over.

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore them and focus on my books.

"So, tell me, Solana, what's next? We've already seen you going to the mosque and wrapping that thing around your head. What now?" Her voice drips with mockery.

"Why don't you leave me alone, Hailey? I'm not bothering you," I mutter, turning back toward my locker.

"Aww, am I hurting your little terrorist feelings?" she taunts, her voice sharp and hateful. "Because that's exactly what you are, you know. A little oppressed, bomb-loving, towelhead muzzy."

Her words stop me cold. The temperature inside me spikes, blood boiling in my veins. I slam my locker shut with such force that the entire row of lockers rattles. Hailey's sneer falters, like she expected me to shrink or cry, but I'm done letting her get to me. For a moment, all I want is to knock her flat, to shut her up once and for all. But then I remember what the Imam said during a lecture with Sajdah and Safia just weeks ago: "*Islam is the religion of peace,*" he had said. "*The Prophet Muhammad taught, 'Do not cause harm or return harm ...'*"

My breathing steadies. The anger is still there, but now it's like a controlled flame, not a wildfire.

I turn to face Hailey, meeting her eyes firmly, but without anger. "Look, Hailey," I say, my voice trembling, but with purpose, not fear, "you may not like that I'm different, but that doesn't mean you get to treat me like this." She narrows her eyes, trying to provoke me further. "You've done nothing but disrespect me, and I'm done letting you. This—bullying me, getting your friends involved? That's your problem, not mine. Maybe it's time you did a little self-discovery of your own." I pause for a moment, watching her reaction, before adding, "I'll pray for you."

I see her eyes fill with tears, her lips quivering, and her friend glancing at me in disbelief. I can feel the power of my words, knowing they've hit her harder than anything I could've physically done.

As I walk away, I remember Grandma's words: "No matter who or what gets in your way, you always walk with your head high, and the world will make room." I raise my chin, roll my shoulders back, and walk on. The noise of the hallway fades, and I tune into the steady beat of my own heart. I don't have to apologize for being who I am. I just have

to trust and love myself, and believe that I am exactly who God made me to be.

One evening, as I'm halfway through my homework, my phone buzzes beside me. When I see Sajdah's name light up the screen, a smile spreads across my face. I swipe to answer, and her face appears, her eyes sparkling with excitement and her smile as big as ever.

"Salaam, Solana! How are you?"

"Salaam! I'm good!" I grin back. "What's up?"

Sajdah's smile widens even more. "So, Safia and I wanted to know if you'd like to join us at an event this weekend. It's organized by SIS—the Sisters of Islam Society. They bring together Muslim women for all sorts of activities, and this weekend, they're hosting a carnival fundraiser. Would you be interested?"

My heart skips a beat. A group of women like me, all coming together to support something meaningful? This could be the perfect way to connect with my faith and community. "Absolutely, I'd love to! Do I need to wear something fancy?"

She laughs, her voice light. "It's a carnival, so just come as you are! We're raising money to add a children's room to the mosque. It's all for a good cause, and it's going to be fun."

"That sounds amazing," I say, feeling my excitement bubbling up. We chat a little longer, making plans for when we'll meet, and talking about the games and food they'll have. Then, Sajdah sends me the flyer, and I quickly sign up as a volunteer, my heart racing with anticipation.

Unable to contain my excitement, I practically bounce downstairs for dinner.

"Hey, Mama!" I call out, my grin still wide.

My mom glances up as she plates our food, her eyebrows raised in surprise. "Hey, baby girl. You look happy."

"I am!" I can't help but beam. "Remember the friends I met at the mosque? Sajdah invited me to this carnival they're hosting this weekend. It's to raise money for a new children's room. You and Adam should come!"

My mom pauses, studying me for a moment, her lips curving into a soft smile—one I don't see often, but when I do, it makes my heart flutter. "A carnival, huh? That sounds fun."

"Yes! There'll be games, food, music—I'm even volunteering!" I can't stop myself from grinning, the excitement still humming through me.

She chuckles as she brings our plates to the table. "Alright, we'll go. But only if I get some cotton candy."

I laugh, a sound I realize I haven't heard from myself in a while, the joy in it lighting up the room. "Deal!"

We sit down to eat, and the warmth of the evening lingers, filling the space between us. It's a different kind of warmth—one that makes me feel at home in a way I didn't realize I was missing.

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ISABELLE LUTZ: **Identity**

Saturday morning, I woke up and carefully got ready, knowing today was the day I'd take a step forward and wear my hijab to an event for the first time. As I stepped off the bus, a whirlwind of bright sights, delicious smells, and laughter hit me all at once. The sweet scent of cotton candy mixed with the smoky aroma of kebabs sizzling on a nearby food truck grill. Balloons in every color bobbed in the crisp autumn breeze, strung up along the tents, and children's squeals rang out as they spun around on a small, creaky carousel. My heart raced with excitement.

I spotted Sajdah waving to me, her smile as warm as the morning sun. I walked over, and we hugged before she led me inside the mosque to the women's room to meet the team. "Everyone, this is Solana; she's here to help us! Someone, please get her a shirt and let's get her started!" she announced. In no time, I was surrounded by friendly faces—ten new women introduced themselves, each offering a welcoming smile. One handed me a bright yellow shirt with "Carnival Staff" on the back, and the SIS logo on the front. After a few laughs and introductions, they assigned me to the ring toss booth, where I'd be handing out prizes to the winners.

Back outside, I took my place at the booth. Children ran up, gripping their tickets eagerly, and every time they tossed a ring, I cheered them on. Some won, some didn't, but their wide-eyed excitement was contagious. A little girl with braids tied in pink bows came up, holding her ticket.

"Hello, miss!" she chirped.

"Hello!" I replied, smiling. "Are you enjoying the carnival?"

She nodded with a shy grin before trying her luck. Her rings didn't make it onto the bottles, and I could see her face drop. "Aw, better luck next time!" I said, sliding her a couple of dollars. "Hey, why don't you go grab something sweet from the candy table?" I winked, and her face lit up with delight as she scampered away.

Hours passed, and I started to feel a pang of disappointment—my mom, dad, and brother still hadn't shown up. I focused on helping the kids at the booth, handing out small toys and laughing at their determined faces, trying not to let my hope fade. Then, I heard a voice behind me.

"Wow! Rah Rah finally got her first job." The words were accompanied by a light tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see my family—my mom, dad, brother Adam, and even my grandma—all grinning at me. My heart soared.

"Hey, guys! I thought you weren't going to come!" I laughed, the relief and happiness bubbling up inside me.

"Oh no, I wouldn't miss the chance at a good box of popcorn for the world," my grandma said with a wink, making us all laugh.

"Alright, let's let her get back to work," my dad said, nudging Adam. "Come on, buddy, let's get some tickets and try to win you something." As they walked off, I felt a deep sense of gratitude swell inside me, knowing my family was

THE ARENA WAS FILLED WITH A HUSHED SILENCE, JUST FOR A MOMENT, BEFORE THE CROWD ERUPTED INTO CHEERS, APPLAUSE, AND EVEN A FEW WHISTLES. I CAUGHT MY MOM'S GAZE, HER EYES SHINING WITH PRIDE, AND THEN LOOKED OVER TO MY DAD, WHO NODDED WITH A QUIET SMILE. THEY UNDERSTOOD. THEY SAW ME FOR WHO I WAS.

here, sharing in something that meant so much to me.

In the final moments of the carnival, Safia's voice crackled over the speaker. "Hello everyone! Thank you so much for coming to our carnival fundraiser for a children's room in the mosque. This room will help teach kids about Islam in a fun and interactive way, as well as give parents a break while they pray. Today, we've exceeded our goal of \$6,000 and raised a total of \$10,000! Isn't that amazing?"

The crowd erupted with cheers, and a ripple of joy spread through the air. Kids squealed, parents hugged, and the whole place buzzed with excitement. In the midst of it all, I spotted my mom and dad embracing, giving me a thumbs-up with proud smiles, my grandma blowing me a kiss, and even Adam flashing me a big grin.

Seeing them—each of them—happy and proud of me made everything worth it. In that moment, surrounded by warmth, laughter, and love, I felt like I truly belonged.

Before I knew it, senior year was coming to an end. I was finishing my final assignments, preparing for graduation, summer, and college, and, most importantly, finally accepting who I am wholeheartedly. As a final assignment for my English class, my professor challenged all of us to write a poem that encompassed the ideas of growth, resilience, and adulthood, which would then be shared at our graduation after the closing speeches. I'm not the best writer by any means, but I thought it would be a good challenge to try and get my thoughts out on paper, especially after a year spent finding who I am.

Late one night, after saying my evening prayers, I sat on my bed in the soft glow of my desk lamp. Outside, the night was quiet, but within me, there was a steady hum of excitement and focus. The year's struggles, triumphs, and reflections began to form into words. My pen moved slowly at first, then with growing certainty as the lines began to flow:

Through fire and shadow, I've walked alone,
In search of a place, a truth, a home.
Lost in the echoes, I wandered afar,
Chasing my pieces, like scattered stars.
Bruised by words, scarred by fear,
I've grown from whispers I used to hear.
Each trial a chisel, each loss a guide,

Carving the strength I hold inside.
Now, like dawn, I rise, fierce and whole,
Wearing my skin like armor and soul.
I am all I am, without disguise—
A journey, a truth, beneath open skies.

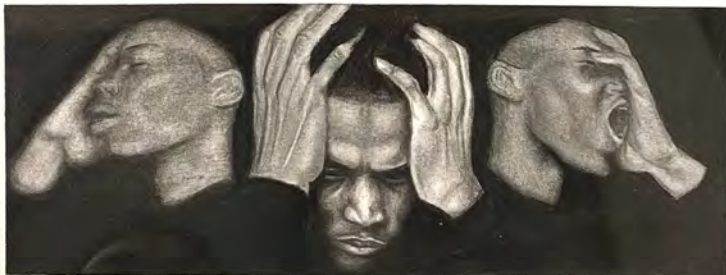
Writing those final lines, I felt a surge of peace, as if I'd captured a truth that had been waiting inside me all along. I folded the paper and placed it gently on my nightstand, a quiet smile on my face. I had found my voice.

Graduation day came quickly. As I stepped up to the podium after the final closing speeches, my heart raced. I looked out at the sea of graduates, families, faculty, and staff filling the seats in the arena. There, a few rows back, was my family—Mom, Dad, Adam, even Grandma, each of them smiling and waiting to hear my words. Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself and read the poem aloud.

When I finished, I looked up. The arena was filled with a hushed silence, just for a moment, before the crowd erupted into cheers, applause, and even a few whistles. I caught my mom's gaze, her eyes shining with pride, and then looked over to my dad, who nodded with a quiet smile. They understood. They saw me for who I was.

As I walked back to my seat, the principal instructed us to turn our tassels. I took a deep breath and lifted my hand slowly, savoring this moment as if it were happening in slow motion. Turning that tassel felt like lifting a weight off my shoulders, releasing years of questions, doubts, and insecurities. The realization settled over me like a warm light—I didn't need to fit into a box or hide parts of myself. I am a blend of all I've been given, and I can hold it all with pride.

I am Solana Yasirah Moore, the daughter of a Christian and a Muslim. I am a Black woman who treasures her culture and all it has to offer. I don't have to fit into a single identity or a single story. I am, simply and completely, me. And for the first time, I feel like that's more than enough. I am ready to embrace the journey ahead, knowing that I carry a world within me and that I belong to myself, just as I am. ■



QUARN WRIGHT: *It's Okay to Cry*

A Grave for Two

Lay me to rest in a bed of poison ivy,
where the serpentine vines may lick
my pale skin with their toxic tongues.

Place in my hands a bouquet of roses,
so that the adorned stems may pierce
my cold fingers with their sly spines.

Crown me with a wreath of nettles,
whose bristling leaves may prick
my dry scalp with their hollow hairs.

Dance as the droning insects swarm,
as the butterflies squirm in my gut
and in my mouth, the maggots feed.

Cackle as the fervid animals feast,
as the crows plunge for my eyes,
and the rabid foxes gnaw on my feet.

Rave as the proud weather erodes,
as the rain drowns me in jealous tears
and the heat blisters my rotting flesh.

Do all this, and I will smile grimly
from split lips and cracked teeth,
for the mosquitos still thirst, unsated.

Do all this, and I will laugh heartily
from the pit of my infested stomach,
for the cats still cry, unsatisfied.

Do all this, and I will sing blithely
from the chaos of my ragged throat
for the winds still howl, unfulfilled.

For you cannot ignore the ivy's kiss,
the thorn's pinch, the nettle's touch
that tortures your crimson hands.

Crawling, consuming contagiously.
Pulsating, pounding perniciously.
Burning, boiling bitterly to the bone.

Snakes slither and sink their teeth
into your skin as they did mine.

Say It

Fissures along the spine,
fallen one too many times,
the vase on the desk.
Say, patch it up.
Say, out of tape.

Yellow rings stain the glass:
water long since evaporated
into the cold, cold air.
Say, fill it to the brim.
Say, faucet's rusted.

Hanging limp over the lip,
a small bouquet,
heavy and tired.
Say, help it stand.
Say, allergic to pollen.

Pale stems, pale leaves,
golden in color,
but used to be green.
Say, move it to the sill.
Say, the moon's out.

Brittle thorns, broken petals
litter the worn carpet.
Muffled crunch under feet.
Say, paste it together.
Say, glue melts.
Wilted flowers and buds
tied together with
threadbare thread.
Say, they're lovely.
Say, they're dead.



AMANDA GOUGH: **The Ancestors**

In Due Time

Summer.
I cut my hair short.
It was an accident.
I cried.

Fall.
Frizzy, curling down,
past shoulder blades.
The mirror shows me again.

Seventeen.
Long, too long
for my towel.
Shampoo runs out quickly.

Eighteen.
Inspired but a coward,
I sit in a chair, thinking three,
wanting more, saying two.
Snip. Snip.

Afternoon.
No one noticed
though I run my fingers through,
down the strange length.

Morning.
Reflection shows me
again.

Winter.
The ends dead,
I ask for a trim.
Snip.

Spring.
Seventeen, Eighteen,
afternoon, morning,
winter, sometimes fall,
but most certainly,
never summer.



SHE MOLDED A MAGNIFICENT BEING, FULL OF MAGIC AND OPPORTUNITY. THE FIRST FORM OF LIFE IN
THE UNIVERSE WAS AN ELF. A BEING MADE TO BE IMMORTAL, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE.

JASON HOSSFELD

The Eternal Dance of Light and Dark

Blinding Light, endless effervescence, there was only that never-ending oppressive shine. Nothing stirred, and nothing could. It was an empty existence for Light, who desired more than simply expounding her brilliance upon an empty theatre. She wanted color. She wanted to create things she could mold in her will. She wanted something that wasn't just her image. She made a small object using simply the will to change and the desire for something, anything, new. She created a small, perfect ball, one made of titanium. It was heavy, a new concept for the universe. She became Creation incarnate, as well as Light. But with creation, often unintended consequences come into play.

Behind that ball was a shadow, a blot of dark ink in an otherwise irradant universe. Darkness was born. Creation was instantly infatuated with this new phenomenon. She began making many objects and casting them randomly throughout the universe, each of which cast its own shadow. Dark became more empowered and began to spread farther than Creation could have ever imagined, creating space, an endless expanse of dark that would rival the brilliance of Light. Part of her was relieved that she would have something else with her. But she still wanted to exist as Light as well as Creation. So, as the darkness enveloped her, she made the first star, and many more followed that, creating a bastion of Light to counter Dark. Such started the eternal battle of Light and Dark, each fighting for their space in the universe, each trying to blot out the other.

Light and Dark found this to be an interesting challenge, and would intertwine their beings with each other, dancing with each other, and eventually falling in love. There would be no Dark without Light, and Light would have no beauty without Dark. They found each other enrapturing. This dance went on for quite a while until Creation became bored. She no longer felt the need to create new things, to make beauty. Dark found this incredibly upsetting, as that's why she fell in love with her in the first place. So she decided to give her motivation by adding a minor flaw in one of her suns. A simple thing, just a finite source of fuel that the sun would

eventually eat through, over an unfathomable amount of time. At the end of its rope, it would be destroyed in a breathtaking explosion. Creation noticed this but trusted Dark.

She waited, watching the sun expand over time, and eventually get cooler and cooler, the pressure keeping the sun alive dwindling. Until, in a moment, the universe stopped, and the sun exploded in a blast of fiery light, something more beautiful than either Dark or Creation had seen. The supernova became a mass of pure black darker than even the darkest shadow, and the two beings noticed all of Creation's objects moving toward this black hole. After a while of watching and waiting, that titanium ball that Light created all that time ago fell into the hole and was destroyed. It was then that they realized Dark had become something else. She had become Entropy, as well as Dark.

Creation was sad at first, mourning the loss of her creation. But in that sadness she realized something. She wanted to create again. That loss inspired her to make a planet, then another one, far away from that black hole, even though she knew it was impermanent. It was a beautiful planet, filled with land, water, mountains, and sprawling caves and cliffs. It was a masterpiece. She felt further inspired, she wanted to make something entirely new, something novel, something that would ripple across the universe and sing a song of creation at the top of their lungs. She wanted to make life. So she did; she molded the first ever living being upon this planet, billions of years from destruction. She molded a magnificent being, full of magic and opportunity. The first form of life in the universe was an elf. A being made to be immortal, at least for a while.

The elf's name was Byrja Burjana. Light and Creation had a new and final form, Life. She finally had found her sense of self and a true purpose. So, she gave herself a name. It was Ljoss Skapa Lif. Byrja was a kind soul but had no purpose. She had no real reason to create anything. The light quickly faded from her eyes as she could not see the path forward. Ljoss felt deep sadness as she watched her greatest creation weep, not knowing what to do. She made beautiful sights, made animals to keep her company, and

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GIANTS ROSE FROM THE MOUNTAINS, DRAGONS WERE BIRTHED FROM LIGHTNING ITSELF, DJEVELSKATE WERE CREATED BY THE DEEP DARK OCEAN, AND MANY MORE MYTHICAL, MASSIVE CREATIONS AROSE FROM THE MATERIAL ELEMENTS.

gave her endless magic to use as she willed. Nothing worked. She knew she had to call upon her lover for help. Dark and Entropy gazed upon this new creation with a smile. She knew her purpose. No matter how melancholy it was. She gave the elf the capacity to die, allowing her to reconvene with the universe in a beautiful matrimony of cosmic energy when her time was up. Thus Dark, Entropy, and now Death's purpose was found, and she found a name for herself. It was Myrkr Chaos Hel.

Byrja would now age, albeit slowly. She would feel the need to eat, and she would feel thirst. She would now find her purpose, now that life was impermanent too. Ljoss and Myrkr felt satisfied, felt each other's embrace, and sunk deep into the fabric of the universe, surrendering their control and allowing Light, Dark, Creation, Entropy, Life, and Death, to take their course. The First Age began.

Nature began to grow and thrive, molding itself over decades into something magnificent. Many biomes sprouted from the earth and made Riven beautiful. It gained so much texture and life and became something of its own, not crafted by something else. It was just nature. Elements of nature began to form sentience, much like Ljoss and Myrkr. Forests began to breathe, rivers carved their paths into canyons, and the soil remembered the footsteps of the life above. Material elements were born and began to blossom, each creating habitats and creatures, expanding what each element meant for Riven.

Byrja explored this world with gleeful abandon, soaking in every tree, river, and little critter, while she still had the time. She grew lonely though. Nobody was around to keep her company besides the mice and fish. She realized she had magic, the magic of creation. Byrja wanted advice on how to move forward from Ljoss. She couldn't reach out to Ljoss, so she meditated. She looked deep into the weave of life and light and scoured Riven for any clue of how to connect to her creator. Finally, deep in meditation, she felt the light of Ljoss everywhere around her. Channeling Ljoss' brilliance suddenly became as easy and natural as breathing. She instantly knew what Ljoss felt, desired, and commanded. Not through words, but a feeling, a shared understanding of the universe. She felt as if she was one with the elements of light, creation, and life, and in fact, she was. Byrja became the first arbiter, a being destined to be the only one who could understand their

chosen element, enacting the element's desires, channeling the element's power for the arbiter's gains, and shaping the world to benefit their element.

With Ljoss' guidance and power, Byrja used the full extent of her magic. Becoming a conduit for the very power of creation itself, she birthed a second elf, appearing from nothing from her bosom, a glowing, blinding light heralding his arrival. He looked around, at first confused, but quickly gained his bearings as he looked upon his creator. Neither could speak, but they were tied unendingly to one another, so they understood perfectly what the other wanted to say. The male elf wasn't as interested in the world around him, and he stayed in a log cabin the two of them built together. He was most active at night, spending long evenings simply staring at the dark woods and the moons.

He took a particular intrigue in death, understanding it as a natural and a necessary fact of life. He didn't cause it unjustly, by any means, and he never enjoyed seeing death, but whenever he hunted, or witnessed a fatally wounded animal, he would tell stories of grandeur, explain the universe to them, or even just sit with it, letting it die with company. He always knew exactly what they needed in their most vulnerable hour and gave the animals a peaceful death. He began to feel more connected with death each time he eased creatures into the afterlife, until it became an inexorable part of him, as easy as breathing. He, now named Frior Hoden, became the arbiter of death.

Frior and Byrja lived peacefully in the cabin, growing older and older, each communing with their element, creating new things, and then letting them pass with peace and dignity. They began to conceive more elves, who grew into a nation, Echgrove. It would stand the test of time. Many of the first arbiters spawned from this place. Emotional elements were born out of individuals' feelings, wants, and needs.

The energy of creation became incredibly high, starting the Age of Great Magic, and constructing lifeforms of legendary proportions. Giants rose from the mountains, dragons were birthed from lightning itself, djevelskate were created by the deep dark ocean, and many more mythical, massive creations arose from the material elements. They experimented with the elements they were born from, finding ways to utilize each one, through magic or innate abilities. Dragons could breathe lightning, giants could bend the very

earth they stood on, and sylphs could control the weather. They would teach the elves how to utilize the elements as they did, and the elves would innovate and expand upon these abilities.

However, one creature, born from death and life, could kill or resurrect anyone they desired with a simple glance. It was Jormungandr. It took its role seriously as the only being in existence with such an ability, and it never abused it, only taking lives when necessary, and never once did it provide a rebirth. It knew better than to interrupt the cycle of life and death more than necessary. As it traveled, it created massive crevasses in the ocean floor, once even on the mainland continents. This creature formed a bond with Frior and Byrja, who found common ground in their abilities and connection to the fabric of the universe.

There comes a time when everything has to end, as Myrkr once decreed. Byrja and Frior were growing old. It was their time. Frior wanted to be first, he was ready. He knelt in front of Jormungandr and asked for release, and a quick and painless death, as he had provided to so many. The serpent obliged after reminiscing with him about their time together. As Frior died, he gave his status as an arbiter to Jormungandr, who humbly accepted. It was Byrja's turn. The serpent asked if she was ready or if she wished to wait a few more days. Byrja smiled and told him she wanted more time to look around and admire the scenery. She lied. She wasn't ready, and she was never going to be.

Over the past thousand years, she developed a hatred for the dark, entropy, and death. She forgot what gave her purpose. She was going to be immortal. Byrja had been working on a ritual allowing her to create and ascend to another plane of existence. A domain preventing her from being eventually destroyed. She would also construct a prison for Jormungandr, another plane of existence, a domain filled with desolation, keeping him locked away and miserable forever, never to feel the natural release of death. Byrja found the process of death and entropy unnatural and cruel. She found it unnecessary. She couldn't stand up to Myrkr, so the plains Byrja made also served as an afterlife, the good, kind



AVINOAM DRABKIN: Pull Your Pants Up

souls appearing in Ljoss' domain and the cruel, evil souls residing in Jormungandr's prison. Byrja wanted immortality for all people, not just her. Ljoss screamed through the universe at her not to betray her love, but she didn't listen. She pushed forward with the plan, succeeding. Ljoss was upset, but stayed by her side, refusing to part with her first living creation. Myrkr was furious with Byrja for deceiving the natural order. Myrkr also felt immense sadness and betrayal at Ljoss for keeping Byrja as her Arbiter. Myrkr tore herself from Ljoss, refusing to spend another second intertwined with her.

Byrja, having lost her purpose, fell into a deep depression, the magic of creation died down in Riven, no more epic beings were born, and soon they began to die out. Save for the elves, who remained. Jormungandr, on the other hand, was not so lucky.

He began to spiral, betrayed and broken, he devolved into madness. Good, healthy creatures with long lives left to live began to die, mountains crumbled, and societies broke down into senseless madhouses. This drove Light and Dark farther and farther from each other until they could barely remember what they meant to one another. The world fell into the Age of Fallout for thousands of years. In this age, other creatures began to emerge. Humans, orcs, goblins, and many more began to fill the shadow of the great beasts. They all began to form societies, alliances, and rivalries, leading to the emergence of constructed elements. They were elements that represented the facets of society. Arbiters were chosen from all walks of life to the point where no elements were left unrepresented.

Soon the arbiters all came together with a scheme, one to put Byrja and Jormungandr to sleep. They had the full support of every arbiter and fulfilled that plan, easing the pressure the world had felt from their conflict. If Byrja and Jormungandr had been at their full strength, it would not have been possible. However, they were husks of their former selves, and part of them wanted to rest, so they let it happen. Thus, the Age of Fallout ended, and the Age of Reconstruction began. ■

NIAMH ARCHER

21st Century Adaptation of Hamlet's 'To Be or Not to Be'

To cancel, or not to cancel, that is the question ...
It may be better to remain silent and ignore what ails us,
Bottling up our emotions for better or for worse,
Or to instead release our petty anger,
Fueling widespread hatred for whosoever falls victim to thy ratio.
We slay reputations,
Wreck friendships and other familiar relations,
But after the dust clears
And consequence has taken its toll,
Wherefore hath we taken such action of mortality?
Yet after we pay our debts, the cycle repeats itself,
Burning like wildfire through the realms of contact
Used by so many across the planet,
And abused, its citizens' intents
Inevitably becoming intertwined with
Human concepts of luxury and warfare.
For once in this crooked tale of woe,
Why dost people hate and hate upon those
Less fortunate compared to their own comfort.
Or, perhaps, within their self-perceived image of perfection,
They are the ones who underbear the grit of their performance?
Cancel, and generate the birth of further
Verbal violence sprouting from both sides of the battlefield,
The plains of distant human society
Lathered in blood constructed from machinery and human tears.
Unless resisted, signing truce and eliminating
Tension between those who may rather suffer.
Choices impossible, outcomes uncertain,
Phenomenal impasses that could be broken
And plunge interaction into utter chaotic anarchy.
What is right in this cacophony of emotion?

TRENT RENSMITH

These Streets

Four hours ago the streets
were jammed with revelers.
But I'm being kind.
Drunks is a more fitting description.
Plastic cups of various hues
spilling drinks of different colors
and viscosity onto the street.
The liquid slowly creeping
toward the gutter,
mixing with trash and beads.
The lights from the bars and balconies
giving the slurry a strange glow.
The smell,
like a bar rag that's gone unrinsed for weeks
rising through the humid air.

Now,
the sun rises.
The blacktop is wet.
An occasional string of beads clings
to the curb.
Many more dangle overhead,
from street signs, trees, traffic poles,
power lines, and branches,
but the street is clear.
The stench of the bacchanal is gone,
replaced by the eye-watering aroma
of bleach.

I stand alone,
soaking in the scene.
Knowing that the debauchery
will repeat itself in a few hours.

Rinse and repeat.



NANCY NOLET: Clockwise from top left. LEO, LOCUST, ROBAT, RED

I AM NO LONGER THE TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD WOMAN THAT STOOD BROKEN ON THE BRIDGE,

I AM NOW THE ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD VERSION OF HER CURRENTLY HIDING ON THE BRIDGE.

ASHLEY ROGERS

Remembering Your Roots

It is a nice sunny fall day in the middle of October. The trees are bursting with life and light. Orange, red, and yellow leaves lay around the base of the trees, where their stems were once attached but are no longer. They were blown by strong as well as gentle breezes and now separate from the place where they once grew. I sit on a park bench outside trying to clear my mind. I haven't talked to you for several months and I wonder if I should reach out. I pick up my phone, but I can't bring myself to dial. I don't know what to say or where to start. I wonder how you and your family are doing. I try to rehearse the lines in my head, "Hey how have you been? You'll never guess where I am." A few moments later I look at the bridge that we used to walk across when we were young. It's as if my eyes deceive me and I see you and me from years ago walking across the bridge together. Each holding a pile of coins in our hands, we chucked every quarter one by one into the water. On every individual coin we made a wish, until our number of wishes and change ran out.

Do you remember what it was like to be young? Do you remember what it was like to dream? If I'm being honest, I have kind of forgotten. I enjoyed the times when I didn't have to call or text just to reach you. We used to be so close, but now we are separated by distance.

I get up from the bench and walk over to the wooden bridge. My feet feel heavy as I kick up the leaves around me, while the others crunch under my shoes. I finally make my way over to the place where our two shadows were previously standing. The bridge still stands tall, but for some reason it doesn't feel as high as it used to. I guess everything looks bigger when you are younger. The water is beautiful, and it glistens as the sun beams upon it. A blend of pink and orange paint the sky. Gentle currents run between and over the various sized rocks. I always loved the view and the familiar breeze that ricochets off the river.

I now stand here alone puzzled because I don't know how to tell you that I haven't been honest with you lately. My life is changing rapidly. I'm not sure of what I should do. Have you

ever come to a point in your life where you wonder if you are heading down the right path? Have you looked at your life like it's a game of chess and wonder, if I had just made different moves maybe I would have played a better game? It's been so long since I called you, Zac, but I don't want to bother you. You are starting your own family and moving on, while I feel like I can't move past my own past.

Staring out into the river, I fish around in my pocket and retrieve a coin. I close my eyes and make a wish. I throw the quarter over the rail, and I wait about five seconds as I watch the silver sink in the water. I see a slight glimmer of light bounce off the coin before it submerges. Who knew that something so light could sink so fast. My wish and all my other wishes from years past, along with everyone else's sat at the bottom of that very water. In these seconds, I notice that the value of the currency in my hand could not compare to the value of the wish my heart desired. My whole action, solidifying that statement. I threw away money in hopes to bargain and exchange for a wish. Sometimes money can't buy everything. My eyes fill with water as if I have thrown every ounce of my hope away along with the coin itself. I wait for some time on the bridge, my whole body leaning on the rail of the bridge, still trying to track where the coin may have planted itself. The ripple from the throw disturbs the once calm body of water. I look at the water until the swirls dissipate and become still, but I no longer see my same reflection. A gust of wind whips through my hair and I feel a shiver run down my spine. The clouds cover the sun and the sky's shade transitions to light gray. Snow falls from the sky and the cold snowflakes break upon my face and dance upon my eyelashes. The trees are bare and for a moment all I hear is the wind rustling the naked branches. I look back toward the water, which is now strangely coated with ice and see a familiar but distant reflection. I can barely make it out because of the lack of sunlight, but I believe it is one I haven't seen for quite a while. One that I almost didn't recognize until I hear someone yelling from a distance,

"Olivia!"



GISSELLE ALVARADO: Connection

I turn around to see someone running toward me, but I can't make out the figure.

"I found her, she's over here," the figure says.

My eyes adjust and now focus, "Mom?"

"Your father and I were worried sick about you, we looked everywhere for you. What are you thinking running off in this weather!"

Her tension shifted to relief as she wrapped her arms around me. I glance down at my outfit and see my brown snow boots, thick black snow pants, heavy purple jacket, black gloves, and pink scarf, that I now recollect matches the pink hat on my head. My mind floods with questions, until it doesn't. Somehow, I already know the answers. I am no longer the twenty-two-year-old woman that stood broken on the bridge, I am now the eleven-year-old version of her currently hiding on the bridge. I have returned to the time I first ran away from home eleven years ago. Some things never change, I guess this park was always the place I ran away to.

Not quite yet letting go of me Mom says, "Come on, let's go home Olivia". And I hold on to her a bit longer too. The

park is not far from the house, so Mom, Dad, and I walk home together. Our feet crunch through the white snow, and I step into the same footprints I previously made. The same steps that brought me here are the same steps that take me back. Mom and I walk hand and hand. When we arrive at the house, I see Jared and Sofia through the glass storm door and standing behind them I see you, Zac.

Before today I have never had much faith in wishes, but I am starting to change my mind. Little did I know my wish I made would be granted. Earlier on the bridge I wished for something, but not something superficial or materialistic. It was something that money couldn't buy, I wished for time. Time to see the parts of my childhood that I missed and to transport back to a time when we were all kids. I did not wish to change the past, I just asked to see it again through new eyes. I wanted to see us all in the same place at the same time. I wanted to hear the six pairs of footsteps in one house. You, me, Sofia, Jared, Mom, and Dad. I longed to be reminded of our innocence in the world and to hear our childlike laughter. I wanted to be reminded of how our stories each began. Now I stand on the front lawn staring at my own

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HOW IS IT THAT I AM STUCK IN MY PAST, BUT AT THE SAME TIME I DON'T EVEN MIND?

HOW CAN SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE AT ALL, JUST MAKE PERFECT SENSE?

THE SAME PAST THAT HAS BOUND ME FOR SO LONG IS NOW RIGHT BEFORE MY EYES.

history. As if I have just walked into one of our old family photo albums. How crazy it is to think I would have ever wanted to run away in the first place. I'm home, we all are.

Mom, Dad, and I walk through the door. I take off my wet gloves which have snow that resembles mini snowballs all on them. I pry off my boots and the fur on the boots that line the top around my calves are stiff with ice. After I pull them off, I take off all the rest of my winter apparel until I reveal a damp long sleeve shirt and pajama pants underneath.

"Zachary, do you have anything you want to say to your sister?" Mom says.

"Goodnight, I'll see you tomorrow," you say as you attempt to climb the stairs.

"No chance, get back down here," Dad says.

"Okay, okay... I'm sorry."

I stare at you blankly.

"I'm sorry I left you today. It's just ... a few of my friends wanted to go sledding together and I didn't think it would look right if I brought my little sister. I really am sorry though, I shouldn't have just ditched you."

"You're right you shouldn't have ... but I get it. You're a ninth grader now, you can't ruin your reputation," I say mockingly and start to laugh.

You start to laugh too, and I realize we have just made up in our own way.

"Alright, now that we're all home safely, you all better hurry upstairs and get to bed, Santa is coming," Dad says as he winks at Zac and me to clue us in that we have to play along for Sofia who is seven and Jared who is three. We all run up the stairs together.

I walk to the bathroom to change before bed and then look into the mirror, and I am reminded of my strange 11-year-old obsession with stripes. My bright purple and pink long sleeve nightgown now blinding me. I brush my teeth and then walk to mine and Sofia's room. I turn off the lights and lay down in my bed. I lay still on my back as I attempt to process everything that has recently occurred, then I turn over on my side and I look over at Sofia, her eyes shut as she lays in bed. I can't help but think of all the nights she and I shared the same room. Sometimes it was a pain, and I got mad at her because I didn't think I had enough space, but

all I can think about now is how in reality she is going off to college. Right now, I am thankful to be in this small, confined room with her. Those walls I once hated I now love because for now those walls are what keep me and her together.

As if this year couldn't get any stranger, now I am transported into my eleven-year-old body. These past couple of years have been difficult. I've been trying to get used to not seeing you, Zac, since you moved away with your family, but it hasn't been easy. Jared is starting 9th grade and Sofia is about to go away for her first year of college. It's as if we are all in different stages of life. And sometimes it's difficult to get us all on the same page anymore. Maybe I needed this wish more than I knew. How is it that I am stuck in my past, but at the same time I don't even mind? How can something that doesn't make any sense at all, just make perfect sense? The same past that has bound me for so long is now right before my eyes. Maybe what I am nervous to tell you Zac is that I'm scared to move forward because in order to move forward sometimes that means you have to leave something behind. What if I'm not ready to leave this childhood behind? What if I'm terrified that in the process of moving forward, we may even accidentally leave each other behind?

In the morning I am awakened by Sofia tugging at my shoulder.

"Get up, get up, Santa came!" she says.

I rub my eyes and try to wake myself. I miss the times when I believed in Santa like her, when I used to not be able to fall asleep because I was so excited. Now the only thing that would excite me that much today is an extra hour of sleep.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!" I say.

You, Sofia, Jared, and I all wait at the top of the stairs. You and I look at each other as if to nonverbally communicate we are equally exhausted. Mom and Dad tell us to make our way down the stairs and Sofia rushes down first.

We make our way to the living room and see presents under the tree, which are wrapped in all different color wrappings. Each of us open our gifts that have our names written on them. Jared opens his gift and uncovers a box that holds a toy car. Sofia tears open her wrapping and displays a beautiful Cinderella princess doll. I open my gift and reveal a pair of tennis shoes and I look over at you holding a new

baseball glove. We continue to unwrap all our gifts until one by one the pile under the tree fades. After we sit there admiring and playing with all our gifts, you walk over to me and hand me a little box.

"I wanted to get you a little something. Merry Christmas, Olivia."

I open the tiny box and inside I see a little note; it reads, "1 free ticket to sled with your favorite sibling."

"Aww, it's a shame Sofia looks like she's busy playing with her doll. I guess you'll do," I say.

You smirk at me as if to say, "I deserved that".

Later after breakfast, we make our way to a hill that is perfect to sled on. We stand there, side by side winded from trekking up the hill both holding our sleds.

"I'll race you!" I say.

"I guess you can try," you say with a sly smile.

We plop down on our sleds. You go face first lying on your stomach. It isn't even close; you beat me by a landslide. We went back up the hill and did it again. I now implement your method and slide down face first, but still don't win. After that we decide to share one sled together and see if we could hold on as we fly down the hill. The ground is icy, so we glide straight down the hill, picking up more and more speed as we go. I fall off on one side and you fall off on the other. We lay on our backs laughing with snow covering us. You stand on your feet and discreetly pack a snowball that you throw at me.

"Hey what was that for?" I ask.

You shrug your shoulders. "Just seemed fair since you made me fall off the sled."

I pick up some snow. "You were the one who tipped us both over." I toss a snowball at you.

You quickly dodge. "Did you just try to hit me?"

"No?" I say as I try to avoid eye contact.

"Okay, you asked for it" you laugh as you pick up more snow.

We both now grab more and more snow trying to throw snowballs at one another. I run from you, and you run from me. We laugh as we chase each other around.

We make our way back and finally return home. We see Dad and Jared playing with his new toy car on the living room floor. Jared is trying to push the car forward, but it doesn't move too well, and he begins to get upset. He is three and doesn't understand how the toy car works. Dad shows him how since it is a pullback car. Instead of just moving the car forward he makes the car backtrack its previous movement. And just like that the car goes in the direction it was intended to go. Sometimes one must go back to eventually move forward.

All the fun I've been having recently has distracted me from the fact that I am still eleven years old. To be honest I haven't thought much about if I should go back or even how



ZAINAB ADENEKAN: Untitled

to. I can't help but ask myself, do I even want to go back? Part of me wishes I could stay here forever. Zac, I miss these times when I didn't have to worry about the future; all I knew is that we all had each other and that was enough. I want this all to be real, but is it? I know it is, but in all actuality, this has all already happened and no matter what I do I just see it; I can't change anything. So, am I really living at all or am I just reliving? Is there any harm in reliving though, especially if I am happy here? Maybe I can stay here a little longer. I mean, it can't hurt can it?

The sound of birds chirping wakes me as sunlight breaks through the glass window. I look over to Sofia's bed as she sleeps holding on tightly to her princess doll. I get out of bed and make my way over to the window. As I stand to my feet, I look down and see my white and pink striped short sleeve shirt with a yellow sunflower, light pink shorts, and my little socks. I glance out the window and take notice of the trees. The trees have buds on them, and most of the flowers are starting to bloom. Nature illuminates how time changes all things. It is now mid-April, and I am in no hurry to return to my twenty-two-year-old self. I wake Sofia up and we both get dressed and walk down the stairs. Jared, you, Mom, and Dad are all at the dining room table. There you are in your baseball cap with your new glove on, as you hold my helmet in your other hand. Our first games of the Spring are today. I had never played softball before, and I remember how scared and petrified I am. You see the fear written all over my face.

"I think you forgot this," you say as you shove the helmet on top my head.

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ASHLEY JONES: Self-Portrait

I let out a little giggle.

“Ready?” you ask.

“Ready.”

Ever since I was little you have been there for me. That’s part of your job though as my big brother. You gave me the courage to try, and I went to my game and had the best time. Since I already know how part of this story ends, I also understand now that you are the reason I played for several years after.

After the game me, you, Sofia, and Jared go to the playground near the field. We both look over at the swings.

“Race ya!” you say as you point to the swings.

I finally get to test out my new tennis shoes I got for Christmas. I try to run after you and catch you, but I can’t catch you. Lately that’s something I have been feeling a lot. I feel as though I am always just a few steps behind. You get on the swing first and I take the one right next to you. I push off the ground and drift into the rhythm of swinging my legs back and forth so I can go higher. I look over at you and you are going forward as I am going backwards. We just can’t seem to go in the same direction at the same time—only for a slight moment are we in sync; When we meet each other in the middle.

I look over at Sofia, playing on the playground. She stands on a platform clutching her princess doll in her hands.

I watch as she looks down at her doll and then looks up toward the monkey bars, as if she is weighing a choice. She wants to leap up and grab the monkey bar, but she knows she must set her doll down. The doll that she has held so closely ever since she received it, she must let go. I watch as she sits her princess down and steps off the platform. She leaps up and grabs the monkey bar. Sofia hangs on the jungle gym and for a moment I see her worry as she realizes at any second she can fall. She gathers herself as she swings forward and makes her way around until she finds her footing on a new platform. Sofia glances over at her doll on the other platform that is now even further from her. Though today I know she will return to her Cinderella doll, there is a day to come when she will no longer return to her. Sofia will grow up and the fairytale she held so close will become a memory.

After we all finish playing on the playground, we make our way to the car. You and Sofia get in and sit on opposite sides in the back row, as Dad drives and Mom sits in the passenger seat. I sit in the middle row on the opposite end of Jared, who is in the car seat. I remember what it was like when our car felt full, and we were all in the same place going in the same direction. This cloud of grief covers me reminding me that the present time is so different from what I am experiencing now. I peer out the window at the passing trees that come into view, just as suddenly as they vanish from my sight. I look at all the old buildings, remembering how they no longer stand and drift away into my nostalgia. My daydream is broken abruptly, and I am pulled away from it due to the noise in the car around me. Mom and Sofia sing along to a song on the radio. I smile as I notice that sometimes noise can be beautiful, it reminds me that I have something to fill the silence.

When we arrive home, all of us climb out of the car.

Before we go into the house, you walk up to me.

“You’re it” you say as you tap my shoulder.

I try to tag you, but you dodge me and start running and I run after you. I have always run after you. Anywhere you went, I wanted to be right there with you. I run faster trying to chase you but there is still a gap between us. We run and run, until somehow, we end up at the park. You crouch down with your hands on your knees trying to catch your breath and I walk up next to you breathing heavy.

“I got you,” I say as I tap your arm.

“You got me,” you say, letting out a little laugh.

For once I finally have caught you and we stand side by side on the bridge, now embodying the shadows I once envisioned before. You reach into your pocket and retrieve two coins and extend your hand to me.

“Mom gave me some money for the concession earlier, but I didn’t buy anything,” you say.

I look in your eyes as if I am no longer aware that you are still handing me a coin. I see the fourteen-year-old boy who I shared my childhood with, who has always been by my side.

THE TRUTH IS I MISS OUR PAST ZAC, I MISS OUR CHILDHOOD.

YET I KNOW I CAN'T KEEP RELIVING THE PAST SO MUCH, THAT I MISS THE PRESENT. I HAVE REFLECTED SO MUCH ON WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED, AND IN THE PROCESS, I HAVE NEGLECTED WHAT COULD BE.

"Here, you want to make a wish?" you ask.

I half-heartedly take the coin.

You throw your coin as far as you can, and I see a splash in the distance. I stare at you as your gaze is fixed on the water.

"What did you wish for?" I ask.

"You know you're not supposed to say, or else it may not come true," you say letting out a little laugh. "Seriously though, what are the odds it would actually come true?" you ask.

"Better than you think," I mumble.

"Did you say something?"

"I was just saying that you didn't answer my question . . . what did you wish for?"

"You really want to know huh?"

"I do."

"I wished to have more moments like this. I hope we always have each other to turn to," you say.

"I like that wish, Zac; I promise we will."

"Well, I guess it looks like it's your turn now."

I wonder what I could possibly even wish for, I feel like I have everything I could ever want. Don't I? I mean I did already wish for what I have now. I fidget with the coin in my palm and think about my other life. The one I chose to leave behind so I could return here. What happens to that life? What happens to your family, Zac? What happens to our family? What happens to our future? These questions consume me and remind me that I am reliving a part of my story that is already complete and avoiding the parts that are left unanswered.

"Zac..." I say as I turn to you. I look down at the coin in my hand and remember Sofia's predicament earlier on the playground with her Cinderella doll. I now find myself in the same situation.

"Yeah?"

"I love you." I meet your eyes and smile. I toss the quarter into the water and my eyes follow it until the quarter disappears from my vision.

I finally pry my eyes from the water and look to my side, but you are no longer there.

"Zac?"

The trees are bare again and the flowers are no longer blooming. I pan around and watch as a leaf slowly falls off a tree. The leaf falls from the place it once bloomed and now it's on its own. I'm on my own.

"Zac . . ." I say as if I know that the time is gone and I can't return from where I left.

The truth is I miss our past Zac, I miss our childhood. Yet I know I can't keep reliving the past so much, that I miss the present. I have reflected so much on what has already happened, and in the process, I have neglected what could be. Something that has scared me is that people don't always choose to grow apart; they just do because they simply no longer seem to have to grow together. Maybe that is why I was running, because I didn't want that to happen to us. Yet, I have learned that could never be us because I will never let that be us. No matter how much time passes or how fast it moves I will need you, and deep down I think you need me too. You wished that we would always have each other, and I promised that we would. So, we will.

It was scary to leave that stage behind, but I think there are exciting new stages to come. I think it was important to understand sometimes there is a reason people move to different stages in life. Maybe sometimes there is a reason I wanted you to slow down so I could catch up, but maybe sometimes I'm not meant to catch up. I'm grateful for our childhood, I'm thankful I got to grow with you for the time that I did. I love our childhood but maybe it's important to realize that it was a season of our life that we no longer possess. It is said there is a season for everything, "a time to plant and a time to uproot." It's difficult to come to grips with the fact that nothing can last forever, especially when I really wanted our childhood to. Yet, I couldn't stay there Zac, because to stay there would mean I gave up on everything that is to come. To stay there would mean I gave up on you. Still, I will always remember what it was like to be young, and always remember our roots. ■



MATTHEW VALENTI: Mothership

WOODEN NICKELS

Written by
Joey Kirby

FADE IN:

EXT. BALTIMORE - DAY

A normal day in a busy city. People walk up and down sidewalks. An access card station is on the corner of every street. The sign on one of the stations is visible. It lists the State Subscription Prices: \$50 per month: Medical and Store Tier. \$100 per month: Medical, Store, and Entertainment Tier. \$200 per month: Full Access and 20% discount on all purchases. \$500 per month: Full Access and 50% discount on all purchases.

MONTAGE:

- A small child tries to walk into a convenience store, but does not have an access card and can't get in.
- A person wearing fancy clothes swipes a card to get into a movie theater.
- A person who is seriously injured tries to access the hospital with their card, but it is rejected because the subscription was not renewed.

END MONTAGE

Most people walking around have either headphones, ear buds, or some other kind of listening device on their ears. Vehicle traffic is heavy. A radio broadcast can be heard in one of the cars. The DJ, OMARIO NICKELS, early 30s, black, Jamaican, male, talks as the city continues to move.

OMARIO (FILTERED)

You're tuned in to 109.5, The King,
Baltimore's one and only stop for
reggae along the airwaves. I am your
host. I am your guide. I am DJ Wooden
Nickels.

As more and more cars drive by, it is obvious that every person listens to this broadcast. Omario's voice seemingly takes over the city.

OMARIO (V.O.)

Another beautiful day in Baltimore.
The sun is shining. The people are on
the move. The pollution is a
beautiful aroma that reminds me I am
awake and I am home.

Every traffic light suddenly turns red. As all the cars come to a stop, police officers bring large barriers and completely block off traffic, leaving a large opening in the intersection.

OMARIO (V.O.) (cont'd)
 However...you know as well as I do that our home is not perfect. It is coming apart at the seams. They won't fix the crime. They won't stop the murder. They aren't...awake just yet. And you know who "they" are.

A helicopter flies over the open intersection carrying a piano. A Man sits on a bench at the piano playing a melancholy melody. He wears a tuxedo. The Piano Player is securely strapped to the bench and the bench is securely strapped to the piano using metal bars and seat straps used for roller coasters.

OMARIO (V.O.) (cont'd)
 Can you hear the beautiful music, my lovelies? It is the sound of change. It is the sound of revolution. Today is the day we begin to take back our city. But to do so, I will need your full cooperation.

A Man inside of the helicopter slides open the side door. He is dressed in a full hazmat suit, complete with a gas mask. He carries a large pair of bolt cutters.

OMARIO (V.O.) (cont'd)
 The show on the outside is about to begin, and I require full audience participation. We'll get those pesky station adverts out of the way, in the meantime. Remember, don't pick up any wooden nickels...unless it's me.

The broadcast goes to commercial, and the Man with the bolt cutters cuts the cable holding the piano. The Man playing the piano does not flinch and continues to play as the piano plummets all the way down to the ground. The piano crashes through the ground, leaving a massive crater. Everyone gets out of their cars and joins the people on the sidewalk in a massive riot. Vehicles are turned over, light poles are toppled, and fires are set on buildings.

MATCH CUT TO:

>>>>>

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

The riot appears now on a TV Omario watches at his desk in a white room. The desk is a wide circle with Omario sitting on an ornate looking rolling chair in the center. There is a main console that controls the radio broadcast and playing of the music, along with other desk sections to store music and house Omario's personal effects. Omario is wearing a purple pinstripe suit. He slices an apple as he listens to the broadcast. The reporter is ASHLEY DAWES, white, American, female, 30s, live on the scene wearing a chicken costume.

ASHLEY (FILTERED)

This is Ashley Dawes, reporting live from the insane riot happening in Baltimore today. Forgive my strange attire, ladies and gentlemen, I was supposed to be involved in a special parade to commemorate the newly finished Chick Fil Avenue intersection, but more serious tidings must be reported on. The parade has been postponed due to a piano being dropped right where the parade was supposed to happen.

OMARIO

Chick Fil A is nothing to celebrate, baby girl. Especially when I need to pay \$50 a month just to walk through the door! My city is being bled dry, and the corporations want to swoop in and act like they're stopping the bleeding. Not on my watch.

ASHLEY (FILTERED)

The cost of the damage so far in this riot is expected to be in the millions. Strangely, not a single person has been hurt outside of the mysterious piano player that dropped from the sky. No one is attacking each other. In fact, they appear to be working together!

OMARIO

You're damn right they're working together. My audience wouldn't hurt a fly, much less one another. The police won't be hurting them either. In fact, that reminds me.

Omario reaches over and grabs a CB radio receiver on his desk and pushes a button labeled "Police". There are other labeled buttons, including "Fire", "Medical", "Taxi", "Ajani", and "Vinisha". The knuckles on his right hand glow, highlighting scars on them.

OMARIO (cont'd)

All units, establish a perimeter around the riot. Do not let anyone through and do not engage the rioters.

OFFICER (FILTERED)

Copy that.

Omario smiles and puts the receiver back on his radio.

OMARIO

Some people use a lint brush to remove the fuzz. I use a radio.

Omario focuses on the television once again and listens to the news report.

ASHLEY (FILTERED)

An armed police response has arrived on the scene and they appear to be forming a perimeter around the riot. I hope this means peace will be restored soon.

OMARIO

My dear, you will see peace. Perhaps just not in the way you have in mind. Allow me to open your mind to the possibilities. You see...sometimes, we get what we need in life, but not where we expect it.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. NICKELS MANSION - DAY

A young Omario, 5 years old, is in the backyard of his family home in Kingston, Jamaica. It is a lavish mansion in an upscale neighborhood. Omario plays catch with JOHNSON, 50s, black, Jamaican, male, the family butler.

OMARIO

Johnson, I'm glad you could play with me today.

>>>>>



ROBERT CREAMER: Artist as a Swimmer

JOHNSON

Master Omario, we all need to take some time for fun. I am happy to spend time with you.

OMARIO

I wish mommy and daddy would make some time for fun. Daddy is always working and mommy is always with the new baby.

JOHNSON

Ah, but it's important for the baby to be taken care of. Young Ajani needs to be looked after as you were as a baby.

OMARIO

I guess so...

JOHNSON

And one day, Ajani will be able to play with you as well. Perhaps the three of us can play together.

At this point, a door slams shut and Omario's father, ADIO NICKELS, 40s, black, Jamaican, male, approaches.

ADIO

Johnson, I've had an absolute pisser of a day and I need some refreshments. Go to the bar and make me the hardest drink I own.

JOHNSON

Of course, sir. Let me just finish this game with Oma...

Adio's knuckles on his left hand glow a green light.

ADIO

Get your ass inside and make my drink, Johnson.

Johnson's demeanor completely shifts. He is now submissive and stoic, almost robotic. He drops the ball on the ground.

JOHNSON

Right away, sir.

Johnson immediately leaves and goes inside. Adio picks up the ball.

>>>>>

ADIO

You want to play catch with the hired help, son? That's the job of your father.

OMARIO

You're going to play with me, daddy?

Omario jumps up and down in excitement.

ADIO

Yes, Omario. Let me teach you a new game.

Adio pulls a scalpel out of his pocket and pops the ball. Omario immediately gets tears in his eyes.

ADIO (cont'd)

The name of the game is "don't piss off the surgeon". You win by going to your room and leaving me alone.

Omario cries and runs into the house.

ADIO (cont'd)

It's a good thing the little brat listens to me since my... "gift" would have no effect on him. But speaking of which...

Adio pockets the scalpel and pulls out his phone. He scrolls on his screen and pushes a button. The phone rings.

ADIO (cont'd)

Hey, Candy. You busy? The hell you mean you're getting married tomorrow?

Adio's knuckles glow once again.

ADIO (cont'd)

I'll be there in an hour. I want you waiting in your bed with nothing on but the blanket. Got it? Good.

Adio hangs up and quickly makes another call, knuckles still glowing.

ADIO (cont'd)

Johnson? Yeah, I'll take that drink to go. Get the car ready and take me to Candy's house.

Adio pockets his phone and starts laughing.

CUT TO:

INT. NICKELS MANSION - DAY

Johnson makes a drink at a huge bar area with a blank expression on his face. AMANCIA NICKELS, black, Jamaican, female, late 30s, Omario's mother, approaches while holding Omario's little brother, AJANI NICKELS, black, male, 1 year old.

AMANCIA

Ah. I see Adio is home.

Johnson remains stoic and does not answer.

AMANCIA (cont'd)

I know you're in there somewhere.
Come on. Talk to me.

Amancia gently rubs her left hand down the side of Johnson's face as she cradles Ajani in her right arm. Johnson does not react and finishes making the drink.

AMANCIA (cont'd)

I hate seeing people like this when they are being controlled. I promise when you get back, I'll make you a drink. How does that sound, my love?

Johnson brushes past Amancia's hand and leaves the room to go to Adio's car.

AMANCIA (cont'd)

Maybe one day we will all be free of that man. Until then...please be careful.

RETURN TO:

EXT. BALTIMORE - DAY

The area surrounding the destroyed Chick Fil Avenue is heavily damaged at this point. The rioters, Ashley, and the police all stop in their tracks and form a circle by joining hands. There are still enough cars left untouched by the rioters that Omario's radio broadcast could still be clearly heard.

>>>>>

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Good people of Baltimore. The radio station executives all agreed my Jamaican accent was perfect for this reggae station when they hired me. Indeed, you all have grown to accept this voice as your truth. So hear me and respond. Where do we go to achieve peace?

EVERYONE

109.5, The King!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Who has the good word to lead you all to the promised land?

EVERYONE

DJ Wooden Nickels!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

We have matched the ugliness of the world with more ugliness. But we have also shown what love and peace can bring. There is only one thing left to do.

EVERYONE

Sing!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Beautiful. I will show you the way. Stay tuned to 109.5, The King. I am your shepherd, DJ Wooden Nickels. Stay right by my side, my loyal flock, and I will not lead you astray.

A song plays on the radio, and everyone in the circle of people sings along with it.

CUT TO:

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

Omario mutes his radio microphone and picks up the CB radio receiver once more. He presses the "Vinisha" button. VINISHA BLANKENSHIP, half black, half white, female, American, early 30s, answers the call.

VINISHA (FILTERED)
 Omario, I told you to stop calling me
 at work. What do you want?

OMARIO
 I trust you saw my concert
 commemorating the grand debut of
 Chick Fil Avenue today?

VINISHA (FILTERED)
 It was very hard to miss. You're
 getting international coverage. Well,
 the riot is. As usual, you are not
 even a blip on the radar.

OMARIO
 Did you notice the gentleman playing
 the piano?

VINISHA (FILTERED)
 Don't tell me...

OMARIO
 Yep. I took care of another one. He
 actually was a concert pianist. Ol'
 Adio would've been furious about
 that. He wasn't a fan of music...or
 anyone that plays music on the radio.

VINISHA (FILTERED)
 How many of my father's one night
 stand souvenirs are left?

OMARIO
 That was the last of the ones I have
 tracked. Only you remain.

VINISHA (FILTERED)
 But there could be more?

OMARIO
 I suppose it is possible. That man
 coerced countless women to become
 mothers with this "gift" I inherited
 from him. No...that I took from him.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. NICKELS MANSION - DAY

A teenage Omario, 16, stands over his father, Adio, 50s.
 They are in a lavish dining room in the Nickels mansion in
 Kingston, Jamaica. Omario holds a gun.

>>>>>

Adio is on the floor with his arms tied together and bullet wounds in both his legs, unable to move.

ADIO

What are you gonna do, Omario? Kill me? You know what happens if I die with this thing inside my body.

Adio wiggles his left hand to bring attention to his knuckles. They have distinct scars on them.

OMARIO

According to you, all of your living relatives, both by blood and by marriage, will die.

ADIO

Yes. So your mother and Ajani will be dead. Not like I care, but I suspect you do.

OMARIO

So callous. Did you ever love any of us?

ADIO

I gave it a shot, but nah.

Omario shakes his head and puts the gun on the dining room table.

ADIO (cont'd)

That's a wise decision. Now help me up.

Omario picks up a sharp knife off the dining room table.

OMARIO

Also according to you, a successor must be chosen before death.

ADIO

I'm sure you know that isn't happening. You think I'm going to give this incredible power to you?

OMARIO

No. I'm taking it.

Omario jams the knife into Adio's hand and slices a large gash into it. Adio screams and writhes on the floor, but is unable to fight back. Omario digs an object out of Adio's hand and examines it. He holds a tiny gem around the size of a pebble. It is shaped like a spider.

OMARIO (cont'd)
 How appropriate. A mischievous little
 spider used to trick others. Mommy
 used to tell this story to me and
 Ajani when we were little.

Adio continues to scream in agony and writhe on the floor,
 desperately trying to hold the gaping wound on his hand
 closed.

OMARIO (cont'd)
 You know, you always told me not to
 take any wooden nickels from people.
 But now here you are with only a rock
 to offer me.

Adio, with the look of a wild animal on his face, spits at
 Omario.

ADIO
 You might as well just kill me. You
 can't use the family heirloom to
 control me. I am your blood!

A small cut on Omario's hand opens up and he bleeds on the
 gem. Upon contact with the blood, the gem glows intensely in
 Omario's hand.

OMARIO
 No...I don't think you are. But allow
 me to test that theory. Pick the gun
 up off the table, and point it at
 your own head.

Adio's demeanor completely changes to become submissive and
 stoic, almost robotic. He stands up easily, even though he
 previously could not, as if an unseen force drives him. Adio
 obeys and holds the gun to his temple.

OMARIO (cont'd)
 My theory was correct. Looks like I
 was the lovechild of mommy and the
 butler. You aren't my father. Now
 look into my eyes, filth.

Adio complies once again.

OMARIO (cont'd)
 You don't have much time left at this
 rate. Patch yourself up while I talk
 to you.

Adio grabs the fancy tablecloth and some napkins off the
 table and performs some makeshift triage on his wounds.

>>>>>



AVINOAM DRABKIN: **Mother Vase**

OMARIO (cont'd)

It appears the deal your great grandfather made with the devil didn't cover him from theft. I took this power from you. I will now take everything else you hold dear. Rewrite your will and leave all the money and the house to me. Then fully unlock your phone so I can learn all your secrets. After that, use that gun to end your pathetic life. Do you understand?

ADIO

Yes, I understand completely.

Omario grabs Adio by the hair and drags his face closer.

OMARIO

Call me sir.

ADIO

Yes, sir.

RETURN TO:

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

Omario has an intense look on his face. He grips his CB radio receiver hard. The plastic creaks a bit. He is still on the line with Vinisha.

VINISHA (FILTERED)

Omario, I need to go. President Barnes wants to have an emergency meeting about the riot in Baltimore.

OMARIO

As her Chief of Staff, I think it is important to make sure she is aware who helped avert this crisis.

VINISHA (FILTERED)

Even if I do that...what do you think will happen?

OMARIO

All I need is one phone call. Then I can show you everything else.

CUT TO:

>>>>>

INT. WHITE HOUSE - DAY

Vinisha is in her office holding the CB radio receiver in her hand. She whispers.

VINISHA

I'll do what I can, Omario. For now,
I need to go. I'll report in later.

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Have a good meeting, then. Until next
time, don't pick up any wooden
nickels...

Vinisha angrily presses the receiver closer to her face so she can whisper aggressively.

VINISHA

I don't listen to your god damn
reggae station!

Vinisha ends the call and hangs up the receiver. She then gathers a large binder of documents and walks down a hallway to the Oval Office where PRESIDENT BARNES, black, American, female, late 40s, waits.

INT. WHITE HOUSE, OVAL OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The room is empty except for Vinisha and the President. Vinisha stares at President Barnes, thoroughly confused.

PRESIDENT BARNES

You missed the entire meeting because
of how chronically late you are to
everything. Shame, shame.

VINISHA

I'm sorry, ma'am.

Vinisha smirks at the President after calling her ma'am.

PRESIDENT BARNES

Eww! Stop with this ma'am crap! I
told you to call me Rita when it's
just you and me. Stop pretending we
haven't been friends for the past 10
years!

VINISHA

Well tell me, friend, why is no one
else here for this emergency meeting?
I know I wasn't THAT late.

PRESIDENT BARNES

I already briefed Defense Secretary Billingsley on the phone about deploying the National Guard to Baltimore to secure the riot area. He was going to be early to the meeting, so I canceled it. I don't want to be alone with that creep.

VINISHA

I doubt you have anything to worry about. I don't think you're his type.

PRESIDENT BARNES

Intelligent? Powerful?

VINISHA

Black.

PRESIDENT BARNES

He takes his coffee that way, at least.

VINISHA

Oh yeah? Did he ask you to go make him some?

PRESIDENT BARNES

You're lucky I like you, Vinisha.

VINISHA

Hey, Rita, have you ever heard of 109.5, The King?

PRESIDENT BARNES

I hear 109.5 is a popular reggae station in Baltimore. The Maryland Senators talk about it with me a lot. They're obsessed! You a fan of reggae, Vinisha?

VINISHA

It's ok, I guess. I ask because the rioters were all listening to that station. Didn't you find it odd that everyone suddenly joined hands and sang together? It was in perfect unison.

PRESIDENT BARNES

It's hard to say. Perhaps they were moved by the words of the DJ? March of Dimes or something?

>>>>>

VINISHA

Wooden Nickels.

PRESIDENT BARNES

RIGHT! That's the one. Anyway, are you worried he might be a cult leader or something?

VINISHA

One could argue he is the savior of the city because he stopped the riots. But one could argue perhaps he helped start the riots in the first place. I'm wondering if we should bring him in and question him?

PRESIDENT BARNES

You might be right. But we can't make him think he's being questioned. If he thinks he might be under our suspicion, he could run. I'll have to bribe him.

VINISHA

Are you going to send him a lovely fruit basket?

PRESIDENT BARNES

Even better. I'm going to give him a medal for peace.

VINISHA

You can't be serious.

PRESIDENT BARNES

I am, but obviously he isn't really getting a medal at first. I'll use it to lure him here. Then we can detain and question him.

VINISHA

And if we find him to be innocent?

PRESIDENT BARNES

Then I will legitimately give him the medal. Helping to stop a riot is no small task.

VINISHA

Do you think that will go over well?

PRESIDENT BARNES

With who? People always complain.
Giving a popular radio DJ a
presidential medal will send a
message about how anyone can be a
good citizen at any time. As a nice
bonus, it'll also piss off my cabinet
of crackers. Minus you, of course.

VINISHA

I'll remind you that you appointed
those mayonnaise-tinted people to
positions of power.

PRESIDENT BARNES

ANYWAY, Vinisha, let's call up the
radio station now. I will speak to
him personally and tell him I will
send an Agent to pick him up. That
should be enough to incentivize Ol'
Fistful of Dollars to drop by.

VINISHA

You mean Wooden Nickels?

PRESIDENT BARNES

I...sure do!

VINISHA

You need to learn his damn name if
you're gonna bribe him, Rita!

CUT TO:

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

Omario's desk phone rings. He hesitates a second, but
answers it.

OMARIO

Thank you for calling 109.5, The
King. I am DJ Wooden Nickels. How may
I help you today?

VINISHA (FILTERED)

Please hold for the President.

Omario can barely contain his surprise and excitement.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

(beat)

Hello, Mr. Nickels? How are you
today?

>>>>>

OMARIO

Please, call me Omario. How can I be of service, Madam President?

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

You already have been, Omario. I was calling about the riots in Baltimore today. I have heard we have you to thank for putting a stop to them.

OMARIO

Little old me? I'm just a humble radio DJ, ma'am.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

You have a large platform. Your words reach people all across Maryland. I hear The King has become a top 5 radio station in your state.

OMARIO

Is that so? Well I am honored to hear you say that, Madam President.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

I was wondering if you would mind coming to the White House today, Omario. I would like to present you with a presidential medal of peace. Countless lives have been saved because of your efforts to promote peace, and I would like to publicly recognize you for that.

OMARIO

Madam President...I am so honored. I don't know what to say.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

The honor would be all mine if you say yes.

Omario gives a sinister smile as his knuckles glow.

OMARIO

I accept. But here are my terms.

CUT TO:

INT. WHITE HOUSE - DAY

President Barnes and Vinisha stand in the Oval Office. The President has the phone in her hand.

PRESIDENT BARNES
Terms? I don't understand.

OMARIO (FILTERED)
Listen very carefully.

President Barnes' demeanor completely changes to become submissive and stoic, almost robotic.

PRESIDENT BARNES
Yes, please continue.

OMARIO (FILTERED)
I am well aware you were luring me to the White House with that carrot on a string to detain me. Isn't that right?

PRESIDENT BARNES
Yes, we were going to detain you. We are not sure if you are a cult leader that started the riots, or a good citizen that stopped them.

Vinisha looks at the President with astonishment.

OMARIO (FILTERED)
What a careful plan. However, I am too smart for that. So I have a better plan. Are you listening, Rita Barnes?

PRESIDENT BARNES
Yes. Please continue.

OMARIO (FILTERED)
You are still going to send the car over to pick me up. But I am not your prisoner. I am your guest of honor. When I arrive, we will immediately have a meeting about the Corporate Adoption Program and how we will put an end to it. And then after the meeting, you will still give me the presidential medal of peace.

PRESIDENT BARNES
Of course. I look forward to our meeting.

OMARIO (FILTERED)
Call me sir.

>>>>>



QUARN WRIGHT: Teagan on Halloween



QUARN WRIGHT: Teagan & Lisa

PRESIDENT BARNES

Yes, sir.

Vinisha is visibly afraid.

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Now put Vinisha on the phone.

President Barnes hands the phone to Vinisha. Her hands shake as she holds the phone up to her ear.

VINISHA

...Omario, what did you do? The President, she...she...

Tears start to well in Vinisha's eyes.

OMARIO (FILTERED)

I told you. All I needed was a phone call.

VINISHA

What are you?

OMARIO (FILTERED)

I am the only hope for this world.

VINISHA

That isn't what I asked you!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Yes it is. It's just not what you wanted to hear. You see her standing there, right? You saw what happened to her? I can do that to whoever I want to, whenever I want to. All they need to do is hear my voice and they belong to me.

VINISHA

I always thought everything just goes your way because you are lucky. I had no idea you were like this...

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Nothing in my life has been lucky, Vinisha. I make my own fate. I stopped letting people get in my way when I was a teenager.

Vinisha takes a deep breath and wipes tears away from her eyes.

>>>>>

VINISHA

What do you plan to do with the President now, Omario?

OMARIO (FILTERED)

I'm not going to hurt you or your friend. I just want to talk to her. And don't worry, she will snap out of the stupor in a few minutes.

VINISHA

A secret service detail will be at your radio station within the hour.

Vinisha hangs up and looks over at President Barnes. She still stands completely still. Vinisha walks over and hugs the President. Vinisha leans her head on the President's shoulder and cries heavily.

VINISHA (cont'd)

I'm sorry, Rita. I'm so sorry...

CUT TO:

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

Omario picks up his CB radio receiver pushes the "Ajani" button.

OMARIO

Dear brother, you will not believe what kind of field trip we are going on today.

CUT TO:

INT. HELICOPTER - DAY

The Man in the bio hazard suit takes his gas mask off, revealing himself to be Ajani, late 20s, black, Jamaican, male.

AJANI

Are we finally checking out one of Baltimore's many strip clubs?

OMARIO (FILTERED)

For the last time, no. And anyway, we can afford a much better club once we go back home. I'm not paying \$100 per month to upgrade my card to access entertainment.

AJANI

Aww come on, bro. Why the hell are we in Baltimore then if we're not going to immerse ourselves in local culture? There are bars and strip clubs EVERYWHERE here!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

You know why, Ajani.

AJANI

Yeah, yeah, the Corporate Adoption Program. But this program is happening in cooler cities than Baltimore, Omario. We could save the world from greed in Boston! I hear they have really good soup!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

They have perfectly good soup here, Ajani. You can order some at the White House when we have dinner there tonight.

AJANI

...say what now?

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Vinisha came through for us. I am going to receive a presidential medal of peace for stopping the riot today.

AJANI

You started the riot today!

OMARIO (FILTERED)

Both of those statements are true, you know.

AJANI

And I'm coming too?

OMARIO (FILTERED)

You can't have a medal, but yes. Of course you can come with me. Get over to the radio station right away.

AJANI

With bells on!

CUT TO:

>>>>>

INT. RADIO STATION - DAY

Omario sits at his desk, turning off his radio equipment for the day. Ajani walks into the radio station. He wears a white pinstripe suit.

AJANI

BRO! On the way here, I looked up some pictures of President Barnes before she was the President. You never told me how HOT that lady is! Holy SHIT!

OMARIO

Nice to see you too, Ajani.

AJANI

Bro, can you please get me a date with her?

OMARIO

Ask her yourself. She's like 20 years older than you though. I doubt she'd be interested in a kid.

AJANI

She doesn't need to be! You can, shall we say, inform her that she is interested in me.

OMARIO

Ajani...

AJANI

Aww come on, man! It'll be super quick and easy. I'll take care of the rest. Just get me in the door!

OMARIO

Our repulsive ancestors used this power to manipulate women. I am trying to redeem us from garbage like that, and you want me to throw that away because you are hot for the President?

AJANI

Please?

OMARIO

Ajani!

Ajani uses "sad puppy eyes" to try and convince Omario.

AJANI

Please, bro?

Omario smiles and gives Ajani a hug. He then smashes his knee into Ajani's stomach. Ajani yells and doubles over in pain.

OMARIO

I love you, Ajani. I would do anything else for you. But for you to ask me to stoop to the level of our father is disgusting. I will not tolerate it.

AJANI

Our father? Fuck you, dude. He was MY father. I can't believe you hit me, you butler baby!

OMARIO

For 16 years, that man pretended to be my father. I suffered under his roof just as you did. Forgive me if I slip up and call him that occasionally. And anyway, Johnson is married to our mother and lives with her in our house back in Kingston. Calling him a butler these days is not even true. He is my father and your stepfather.

AJANI

Oh yeah, he makes mommy so happy and treats everyone so nicely like we matter or something. SO COOL!

OMARIO

...how is that a comeback?

AJANI

I dunno, man. I'm just sore, hungry, and I miss home. And I'm BORED! You get to have all the fun hypnotizing people. I want freaky ass quasi-voodoo powers like you do. I feel like the regular human character in a superhero movie. It's frustrating!

OMARIO

What I have is a family curse by the devil. It's a burden I bear so you don't have to. I don't want your soul corrupted by it.

(MORE)

>>>>>

OMARIO (cont'd)

With any luck, I will be the last person to ever use it.

AJANI

You don't want to pass it on?

OMARIO

No. I swore to never have kids. There will be no heir. This dies with me.

AJANI

You know the rules. I would die too.

OMARIO

By the time we're both old? It would hardly matter then.

AJANI

Speak for yourself! I wanna get all the fine wrinkly honeys at the retirement home when I'm an old ass man!

OMARIO

Jesus Christ, Ajani.

AJANI

It's the little things in life that matter most. We haven't gotten a lot of those little things since we've been so busy with world domination or whatever the hell this is. Oh, and don't forget killing people. I'm tired of killing people, man. A lot of daddy's extra kids weren't even bad people!

OMARIO

They know what I am. Your father couldn't keep his mouth shut and told them all about the power and how it works. We couldn't let them live. Sooner or later, they would have all come after us.

AJANI

You gonna kill Vinisha too?

OMARIO

No. I made a deal with her. And I trust that she will not come after us.

AJANI

Why? Because you got to know her?
Because she's pretty?

OMARIO

That isn't...

AJANI

What if you got to know the other
people? What if they were pretty too?

OMARIO

Enough! I know what I'm doing.

AJANI

You're paranoid, Omario. Not everyone
is out to get you. Not everything is
doom and gloom...even though you make
everything seem so damn dire.

OMARIO

Everything will get better tonight.
And again, you can ask the President
on a date. I'm just not hypnotizing
her.

AJANI

Yeah, yeah. Maybe she'll like me for
who I am. You think the President
likes terrorists?

OMARIO

The world will see things our way
soon enough. We will be the heroes of
the story.

AJANI

You're a broken record with that,
bro. But whatever. Sorry for
besmirching your morals and shit.

OMARIO

I'm sorry for hitting you.

A Secret Service Agent walks into the radio station.

AGENT

Omario Nickels?

OMARIO

Yes, and this is my brother, Ajani.

>>>>>

AGENT

Come with me. The limo is waiting outside.

AJANI

Is it one of those limos that can take a shot from a rocket launcher?

Omario glares at Ajani. The Agent lets out a deep sigh.

AGENT

...yes, it is.

AJANI

Badass. Let's get going then!

The Agent shakes his head and leads Omario and Ajani out of the room to go to the limo.

CUT TO:

INT. PARKING GARAGE - DAY

The Agent leads Omario and Ajani to a black limousine in the parking garage. The door opens and a second Agent, ABISAI BARNES, mid 20s, black, American, male, emerges from the car with a gun drawn. He is very tall and muscular.

AJANI

WOAH! What is this about, Agent Steroids?

Abisai tosses handcuffs at Omario and Ajani and glares at them. Omario smirks and his knuckles glow.

OMARIO

How about you put that gun down and we can talk about this?

Abisai's demeanor does not change at all.

OMARIO (cont'd)

Did you hear me? I said put the gun down.

Abisai grins and taps his ear. A look of terror washes over Omario's face.

OMARIO (cont'd)

You can't hear me...can you?

Abisai ignores Omario and points at the handcuffs.

AJANI

What do we do, Omario?

OMARIO

We need to listen to this guy for now. We'll sort this out later.

Omario and Ajani cuff themselves. Abisai points at the car and Omario and Ajani get inside and sit down. Abisai waves at the other Agent to go get in the front seat, which he does. Abisai then gets into the limo and sits down, shutting the door behind him.

AJANI

How are we supposed to communicate with him if he can't hear us? Do you know sign language?

OMARIO

I'm afraid not.

Abisai pulls out his phone and pushes a button to start playing a recording.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

Hello, Omario. Madam President here. I thought I'd check in and see how you're doing. I hope the handcuffs are nice and uncomfortable. I want to introduce you to my son, Abisai. He was born deaf, so your powers will not work on him.

Omario and Ajani look at each other apprehensively.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED) (cont'd)

That was really clever hypnotizing me on the phone like that. I bet you thought you had me right where you wanted me. There's a big problem though, champ. I already knew about your powers. Adio Nickels told me all about them back when he hypnotized me. Yes...Abisai is the child he forced me to have with him.

AJANI

Oh eww! I don't want to date this lady anymore, Omario. She's daddy's sloppy seconds!

OMARIO

Ajani, shut up and listen!

>>>>>

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

So here's the deal, Omario. You're still coming to the White House today. But this meeting is going to go far more differently than you anticipated. We're going to discuss how you can help me spread the Corporate Adoption Program all around the world. We'll start with somewhere familiar, like your home in Kingston, Jamaica.

OMARIO

The hell we will! You won't touch my home!

AJANI

Omario, shut up and listen.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED)

Since you can't help but spoil him, I'm willing to bet you brought your little brother along for the ride. Hi, Ajani! I'm looking forward to seeing you too. So listen carefully, Omario. You're going to be a good boy and not use your powers on ANYONE from this point on. If you do this even once, Abisai is going to kill Ajani while you watch. And it will not be quick or merciful. Do you understand?

Abisai's watch vibrates as a signal. He presses the pause button on his phone and glares at Omario, who nods solemnly. Abisai nods and presses the play button. The recording continues.

PRESIDENT BARNES (FILTERED) (cont'd)

Good. You probably have a lot of questions. Don't worry, the answers are coming soon. But until then, you can't pick up any wooden nickels. I already did.

Abisai's watch vibrates again, and he puts away his phone. He then knocks hard on the glass separating the front seats and the large back area of the limo. The limo starts to move. Omario looks over at Ajani, who glares at him and then looks away. There are tears in Ajani's eyes. Omario sighs and looks over at Abisai. The two adversaries stare at each other as the limo leaves the parking garage.

FADE OUT.



Blue

A MOTHER GOOSE-INSPIRED COMIC BY: EVE MCKNIGHT

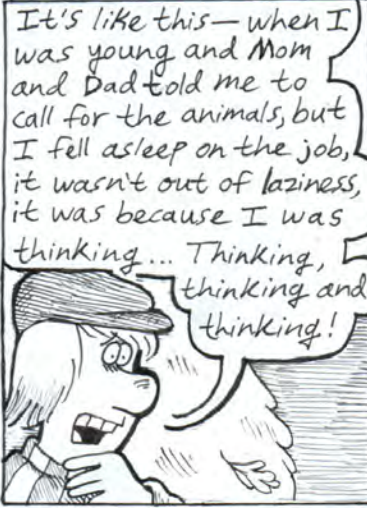
Blue! I thought Mom and Dad told you to shear the sheep and feed the cows, but you're sleeping! C'mon! You're 20 years old, but you can't even do a simple task? You're just lazy!



I'm not lazy, I swear!

Okay, if you're not lazy, then explain to me why you're lazing!

Well...



It's like this—when I was young and Mom and Dad told me to call for the animals, but I fell asleep on the job, it wasn't out of laziness, it was because I was thinking... Thinking, thinking and thinking!



I was thinking for hours about how I could call the sheep and the cows perfectly as possible. Later on, I became so overwhelmed by the thought of doing so, my mind just froze up! All I could do was sleep. That's what happened to me today.



Okay, so you're not lazy, you're a Procrastinator!

Oh! Right, I'm a procrastinator! Or maybe I'm an overthinker... or a perfectionist... well, maybe it's all one in the same? Hm... I think that's what it is.



You know, I think I'd better sleep on this for clarity.

END.

