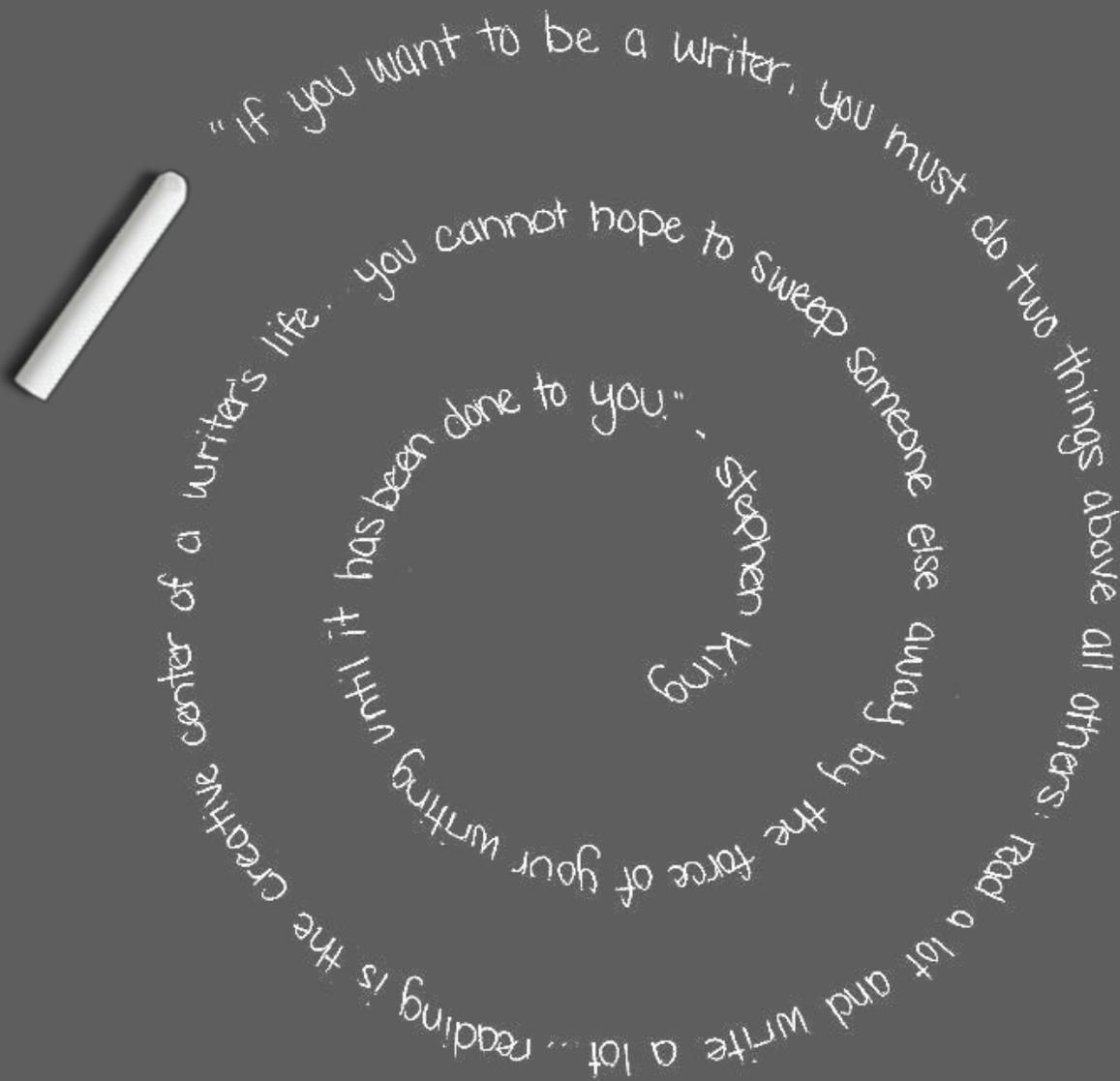


The Story Spinners

2016



"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: Read a lot and write a lot... reading is the creative center of a writer's life... you cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you." - Stephen King

Noblesville Teen Literary Journal



HAMILTON EAST
PUBLIC LIBRARY

Table of Contents

Isabelle Alexander

In Noctem

Keller

Emily Boomershine

Acronym Poems

Ho-Ho-Horrible

Zachary Broyles

The Scream in the Night

Breanna DiPalo

An Empty Skeleton

At Dawn

Is There Somewhere I Can Be Me?

Nostalgia Is A Strange Thing For Me

The Silent Guardian

What Blue Means To Me

Corryn Dunlap

Mark of the Phoenix

Space

Trust

Julie Glover

Take My Hand

Taking the Jump

Lauren Knauer

Crazy Mystery

Leanne LaGrou

Blind

Autumn McConda

Fire in the Sky

Micah Neill

I'm Human, I'm Monster

Love

Cate Patten

The Battle of the Wordsmiths

Waves

Ashley Read

Navya's Knowledge

Suzy Reeves

Red

Nathen Rodriguez

Isn't It All Just Swell?

Marissa Santa-Rita

Sophomore Moment

Alexis Noelle Smith

Ridley

The Test Run

Wooden Heart

Cherie Story

An Awkward Mans Guide To A Proper Apology

Moments of Bliss

Oh Beauty

April Zeller

Rain Rain

Isabelle Alexander

In Noctem

‘I be real. I be alive. I be you, you be me.’ Your favorite saying. Something you said when you were there. Something you said when I wasn't alone. Those days are over, now.

Oh yes, those days are long gone. And I'm wishing for a Time-Turner that you loved, for the TARDIS I obsessed over, wishing on a star like your twin did.

It's painful to look at her, though it's not her fault.

It's all my fault.

Mine.

...

It begins with you. You used to smile with those dark eyes that no one else had. Somehow receiving the genes that our family didn't know existed. You were young, so young. And your twin—Lena—skinny as hell, just like you. Always so skinny, though you ate a bag of chips at a time.

I can't seem to look at the unfinished bag of potato crisps without tasting the salt. Hearing your crunches, as you ate your way through. Seeing your smile and sharp white teeth, bearing down on the potato crisps. It's too much pain.

My fault. Not those chips.

Mine.

...

I wish we had taken you in sooner. You'd been coughing for a long time before we realized that it wasn't a cold. It was something deeper. The doctor's office was full—it was wintertime. The flu was going around. We couldn't get you in until a week after you coughed up so much mucus you couldn't sniff.

The day after, blood was mixed with saliva. White tank top forever stained with red. I still haven't done the white laundry.

You were named for red—bold as a sapphire, red as rubies. Ruby Nora Olin. Your scarlet hair whipped around as you laughed. Lena's is so painfully scarlet. Just like yours.

It's not the doctor's fault he couldn't save you.

It's mine.

Mine.

...

“Ruby, darlin’,” Teacher would say, “come on, we know you got this, dearie. Say that sentence aloud, hon.”

“I can't. I can't.”

“Okay, hon. How about Lena?”

“The rat sat on the mat. The cat picked up a bat.”

“Splendid! Now, continue on, Timothy.”

You couldn't. No self-esteem at all, the counselor used to say. She just needs time. And we'd always say that we had time. A lifetime full.

And you didn't have time. Not at all. From then on I wished I'd coached you, been a better older sister. You were so young then. Something clicked for you, though, it just took time. By the fifth grade you'd surpassed me reading-wise. And you would read aloud as I did my algebra.

“‘Death’s got an Invisibility Cloak?’ Harry asked.”, you said, as you read the *Harry Potter* series for the first time. And I enjoyed it, though I never said. I enjoyed your sweet voice, reading aloud. I enjoyed the melodic pitches as the action ascended. And, although I never said, the time I loved was when we'd read. I looked forward to when you'd come in, like clockwork, every day, and we'd pick up where we left off.

If Death didn't have an Invisibility Cloak, maybe I would have expected it. All an ironic case of foreshadowing. All something your words taught me: *don't trust your enemies*.

But I did. And it's all my fault.

Mine.

...

You and Lena loved to sing. Pop music, classical, you knew all the words. Like lovebirds together, Ruby and Lena. You wished on stars night after night that maybe, just maybe, you'd be an artist. *The Mystics*, you'd call yourselves. And you'd sing everything from rock n' roll to jazz. And I would sit backstage, controlling the lights and emceeing the concepts. When you were six, you hand-painted custom-made concert shirts. *The Mystic Concert Tour*, they'd say. Mom got so mad. You'd done it on your church shirts. But after we'd gotten out of time-out, we'd laughed. And held a concert in your and Lena's room.

Lena doesn't sing anymore, not even when her favorite song plays. She reaches over and turns off the radio. It must be painful for her to hear those songs, the songs you used to sing. It's even painful for me to watch the shadows across her face.

It's all my fault.

Mine.

...

The emergency room was too bright. The night was so dark. How many others lost their loved ones that night? Too many, too many. So young. So old. So many years to go. And yet your blood was down the front of my shirt, staining that white tank top of yours you loved.

The doctor helped you to the table. By now it was rising up inside you. Blood outside. It's supposed to stay inside, I heard Lena say groggily. You were only thirteen. That was the night I thought I'd lost you. Instead, your sharp, dark eyes blinked open. Closed again.

Internal bleeding. Bad. Surgery. Costly. May not recover. Snippets of the things I heard the doctor say, all mixed with doctor-speak and this-is-my-tired-and-worried-parent voice. We were shooed out of the room. Your white tank top was red. My shirt all soaked with your blood and Lena's sobs.

The last night I heard Lena sing was that night, singing your favorite *Harry Potter* song. *In Noctem*. I still remember every last word. Part Latin, part English. Hauntingly beautiful, it was about carrying the soul into the next life. Lena's sorrowful voice wracked with tears sliding down her face sang, not stopping. She'd once told me that she didn't stop singing because she wanted to, it was because the music told her to stop. The music did not do Lena a favor. It pushed her on until the end of the choral piece. You would have been proud—it was so beautiful. Amazingly, astoundingly, stunningly, brilliantly beautiful. Like the Disney princess voices, except in real life. I can't remember her singing after. Not one song.

Finally, at two a.m., I demanded the nurse supervising us to tell us what was going on. She explained your internal bleeding in sixty seconds, reminding me of your favorite YouTube channel, MinutePhysics. Lena and I broke down. I'd tried to keep my tears inside—*like blood, it's supposed to stay inside*—but at the words little to no hope of survival the dam inside me broke. I sobbed and raged and cursed at the heavens as after the nurse left us to our pain.

Damn you, why did you have to die?

But it's not your fault, it's mine.

Mine.

...

But you weren't dead.

Not yet.

The doctor managed to clamp the vessels that had been bleeding in your lungs. Still, you were weak. We couldn't see you. Mom and Dad stayed by your side as Lena and I watched through the window.

When they finally released you from intensive care, Lena and I could see you again. Lena sobbed over your broken body. I remembered when we had read *The Outsiders* together, when we both cried when Johnny died. Lord, that was just a book. Just a character. And you had cried yourself to sleep that night, and I had fallen asleep listening to your sobs.

Your mangled form was alive. Machines hooked up to it beeped and jangled. Your heart rate was low, and every once in a while the tube that attached to your lung pumped out red liquid. It was scary, seeing you all slumped like that, and for the briefest of seconds I wondered if they'd have to replace your lungs. But then your dark eyes fluttered open, speckled with gold and flashing with pain.

You heaved for a breath once, twice; squeezed my hand and Lena's, and sighed.

Have you ever seen an angel die? You haven't, because you're the angel.

This is when I broke. I became this mess of a person. Our family fell apart, and I can't even get through our pantry without crumpling to the floor like the soda cans you crunched in your hand. Never mind the metal that pierced your skin. You'd laugh and recycle the crushed can, specked with blood.

It's my fault. My fault that you didn't get to the emergency room sooner. My fault for not telling you 'I love you' one more time. My fault Mom and Dad didn't see you die. My fault for Mom's mind, which broke, and her later suicide. My fault for Dad's heart attacks and strokes which took his life. My fault that you died.

The funerals were all filled with fake tears and lies. After, I managed, alone, taking care of Lena, who's only thirteen.

Just like you.

She's dependent on me to come home every day. To not break down. To take her places, like to see that new Star Wars movie you both wanted to see. I took her to the theater, but picked her up a minute later.

We burned the movies, like Darth Vader. We threw them out so we didn't have to live with the constant suffering that came, after.

I couldn't bring myself to burn the *Harry Potter* books, or the TARDIS you'd bought me when you were eight, for Christmas.

I couldn't get rid of everything with traces of you.

It's my fault that you are gone.

Mine.

...

I don't know how I got through college.

Don't know how I paid for Lena's fees and taxes every month.

Don't know how I managed to say goodbye to the only person in my family I have left, who looked like you.

It's still painful to look at her. Still too much to see your smile in her lined face.

I graduated school, became a movie director like you'd always wanted to. Lena made it to Ivy Tech, like you'd wanted to. We both survived after you, because of you. Although you were never there, you were always there. Pushing us on. Making us survive. Helping us through the dark times.

I heard Lena sing in the shower yesterday, before she moved out to college. She was singing your favorite song. And this time, I didn't cry because I was sad. I cried because I was happy for her.

In Noctem. A song you loved. The lyrics about death and carrying on. Representing my struggle. My favorite line? The last one. *I will never forget*.

I will never forget that it's my fault. Maybe it's Lena's fault too. Mom's fault. Dad's fault. Your fault, even.

But sorrow is joys before phase. You helped me find joy and sorrow.

Now it's my turn to sing.

Keller

I am the only living being here.

Everything else is long dead. Long gone. They've fallen into oblivion along with the old house.

The house is in disrepair, too. The boarded-up windows and falling-down entrances make that obvious. I steel myself and step one foot closer to the house.

Why am I here? I ask myself, because this is pure stupidity at its highest. Well, I was never one to turn down a dare...

...

...and that's my fatal flaw. Pride in myself, to the point where if someone said, "I dare ya", I'd already be halfway to doing it. It didn't take much to set me off.

I had friends that dared me to do anything. Kiss a frog, join the Gaming Club, be a prep for a day. Whatever it took. I think they were laughing at me as I rushed off to fulfill their increasingly dumb commands. But I was laughing, too, because *this was my life*. This was the joy, the adrenaline rush, the laughter that most kids missed out on. They were too good to live. You had to take a risk, once in a while!

So this was me. A risk-taking thirteen-year-old that had been dared to do the most unimaginable thing possible—well, to a thirteen-year-old at least—*visit the Keller mansion*.

...

Most thought the Keller mansion to be haunted. Others decided it was fake. Say what they liked, though, no one visited the Keller mansion and came back sane. Most of the time, the unbelievers blended into the crowd. They didn't say one thing about the mansion. We passed it by on a normal basis, and not one paranormal thing happened.

Of course, we were a mile away from it, but still...

Anyways, the unbelievers lived among us. Like aliens. But Keller is not an alien town. It's just what most would consider *creepy*.

With the mists of the morning treading the paths and a mysterious mansion atop a hill, Keller has always been considered a ghost town. It didn't help when every year reporters came and interviewed citizens about the Keller mansion. Every year, the citizens warned the reporters...but every year, the reporters disappeared inside the gaping mansion.

The doors of the mansion, from a mile away, look like a mouth. Ready to swallow anything and everything in its path. And so, Keller the ghost town thrived on tourist attraction and Keller mansion bobbleheads. Even so,

the houses and marketplaces inside the town were falling apart. Some were boarded up. And everyone left was stuck inside the town, with no financial way out.

Until the Day of the Dare.

...

I stumble one more step towards the gaping entrance and find myself shaking. Out of nervousness.

This is dumb, I thought. *Why am I nervous?*

Whatever the reason, my knees knock together and my teeth chatter – not just from the eerie cold that seemed to surround the mansion, but from nervousness – and I wrap my arms around my torso, hugging my body so tight I can't breathe normally.

I take one more step. The echo of Sabine's laughter has long since faded into the mist, as has her shadow and figure. I take another step, and fall flat on my face.

I'm glad Sabine didn't see that. I pick myself up and look back, to see if it was something I tripped on or just my –

Shoelace.

I could have sworn it was tied before I tripped. That's when I spot the hand-shaped hole in the ground.

My eyes widen and I scoot away from it on my butt. When I've gotten a couple yards away from the hole in the ground, I sigh. Then I realize something.

I've gotten closer to the house. And its gaping mouth of a door looks ready to swallow me.

I steel myself and step inside the doorframe.

...

The mansion looks like it used to be beautiful, in a Colonial style, in around 1500. The artwork is shredded like priceless confetti, littering the dust-covered floor. I pick up one of the shreds and immediately drop it again.

Far from being beautiful work, this artwork is of a hand. The hand wouldn't be so creepy if it hadn't had extremely sharp – and extremely dirt-encrusted – fingernails and was exactly the shape of the hand-hole-thing I'd seen imprinted into the ground. The shred itself is covered in blood. How old, I don't know. Could be a century –

Or it could be current.

My hand tingles. I slowly look down to see that no, there's no blood covering my hand where I'd touched the scrap. Nevertheless, I wipe my hand frantically on my jeans. Just to make sure.

I take a few more steps out of the entryway and immediately sneeze. *Allergies*. God, it's dusty in here. The floor has at least two inches, could be more. With the amount of dust, it looks like it's just snowed in here.

The dust sort of looks like the dandruff all the citizens in this town get. My mom swears the dandruff has to do with this “godforsaken, filthy, tarnished mansion”.

Her words, not mine.

But I can't help feeling that she's right, especially after seeing this dust.

...

The living room doesn't look very homey. It beats my friend Sabine's place, though. Her house is so small, only a mouse could live in it comfortably. Somehow, she and her seven siblings – five of them younger, two older – manage just fine. Sabine doesn't have parents anymore. They went in the mansion.

I gulp, remembering this. I only have to stay in here ten minutes. Sabine probably already started the watch.

My watch, I remember, is synced to start with hers. I look down. It's started.

9.35, it reads.

Damn.

I've only been in here for 25 seconds.

...

I shove, hard, on the doors that should lead to the kitchen. I have no idea why they're taking me so long to open. Until I look up and see the deadbolt hinge, on the other side of the door.

Why was there a deadbolt hinge? I wonder. What did the Kellers have to hide?

No matter. I was about to find out.

My hands fumble with the bobby pin clipping back my bangs. They fall in front of my face when I hold up the pin, triumphant. My hair, like everyone else's in this town, is raven's black and shoulder-length, with a small section of bangs that hangs in front of the left eye. Everyone's eyes in this town are dark brown, to the point where they almost look black. I know they're not black, though, because the eyes of these people haven't reached total blackness.

I have noticed, however, that the eyes will gradually turn blacker the longer you live in this town. The longer you live here, the blacker your eyes. The blacker your eyes, the closer you are to the Grim Reaper.

My nimble fingers have picked the lock and deadbolt without me even consciously telling them to. The skills you learn in Keller, where everyone has secrets, is how to find those secrets – to discover them for yourself. I've known how to pick a three-gear lock since I was two. This deadbolt is no problem.

The door creaks open. I glance at the watch again.

7:58.

I step inside the kitchen, smirking.

I picked that lock in less than a minute.

...

The kitchen is chock-full of gleaming knives. Somehow this is the one room that isn't covered in a layer of muck, filth, and dust. These knives even looked sharpened.

I touch my pinkie against a particularly scary-looking one. It comes away wet with red blood. Great. Now I just left my mark against a knife in the Keller mansion.

I wrap my pinkie in some loose cloth from my shirt. It's already dusty and filthy, what could a little blood do to harm it?

The floorboards creak as I take another couple of steps into the kitchen, examining it. It doesn't have any modern appliances, but at least this window isn't boarded up. The weak sunshine pours through the glass panes, revealing something I didn't spot before.

On the opposite – and unfortunately, white – counter, there is a wooden cutting board with a knife resting pristinely besides it.

I crept closer to the cutting board, then jump back in shock.

The knife is stained red. And it's so, so, wet.

And on the cutting board is a hand, blood pooling around it.

It wasn't, honestly, that bad. I almost touched the knife. But then I saw what else the light illuminated.

The shadows that hid most of the house in darkness were nothing but swaths of dark cloth hanging in this cheery place. The walls were, after all, painted yellow. If it weren't for the hand, I might have spent the remaining six minutes exploring this place.

The darkness rustled, and a human shadow flickered, like it was on the edge of consciousness. Like it was waking up.

I heard a groan. Then, a louder one.

I crept closer to the shadow. That's when I noticed that it was, actually, a human. Groaning in pain. Starved out of any muscle or body strength. This once-human *creature* was sagging skin and bones. I could *see* the leg bones through that thin layer of skin.

This creature, funnily enough, is dripping.

Splloosh. Splloosh. Splloosh.

The liquid is red.

Blood.

That's when I notice where the blood's coming from.

The wrist.

The person has no hand.

The hand on the cutting board. The wet knife. The bloody wrist.

I scream. Loud.

And get the hell out of the kitchen.

...

The door's closed, locked, and re-deadbolted before I can even blink. My heart rate is still accelerating beyond the normal scared-ness zone. I slump against the wall opposite the kitchen door.

I hadn't even bothered to grab one of those super-sharp knives from the kitchen. One of those would have been good to defend myself against whatever monster was creeping around in here.

Well. What's done is done. I'm *never* stepping foot inside that kitchen. Ever again.

The slightest part of me wonders who that person is. Starved beyond exhaustion, but still not dead. I'd recognized something about the person, and rack my brain searching for who had gone in this mansion last.

It couldn't have been the reporter. Those knuckleheads weren't due for another month or so, so it had been almost eleven months since the last one went in this place. The high schoolers hadn't had a raucous party in maybe a year, and normally at those parties *somebody* got drunk and wandered in here, and was never seen again.

Sabine's parents, though...

They'd gone in here three months ago. That was long enough for one of them to still be alive.

I itch with curiosity. I check my watch.

4:17.

Well, not much longer. Maybe I would peek at the person's face, just to check. Then I would head back to the entrance hall, and wait for the ten-minute mark.

The door creaks open again, and I jump back before I realize that my hand was on the doorknob. *I'd* opened the door.

This time my footsteps are subtle, but precise. I know where I want to go. Pointedly ignoring the cutting board and wet knife, I make my way across the room.

By the time I reach the person again, she – he – it – has stopped breathing. My hand twitches, aching to feel for a pulse like I was taught in health class. Sure, we have a haunted mansion, but that doesn't mean we don't teach lifesaving techniques. But I don't dare touch the person.

The light flickers, getting dimmer as the sun moves behind a thick cloud. There's still enough to see by.

Why hadn't I brought a flashlight?

Well, whatever. I peer at the person's face and I figure out that my guess was correct - it's Sabine's dad. I didn't particularly care for him. In fact, I really didn't care about Sabine's parents anyways. But it still kind of makes my shoulders sink.

He's dead.

I take a shuddering breath and go to move away from him.

3:02.

The longest ten minutes of my life are almost up.

But before I can step away, a hand – with bony fingers – seizes my arm and clenches it.

Welcome, sister Adaline, whispers the I'm-pretty-sure-is-dead dude that I thought was Sabine's dad.

I scream. Again.

Yes, he hisses, *scream. But your precious cries only motivate us* further. Come, join us, and we will spare your sanity.

...

Some, some like Fred, are not so lucky, he says. I thrash wildly in his grip, but it's no use. Hard as iron.

The ghost that I'm pretty sure is Fred glances at me with wide eyes. He mouths at me *purple oceans*.

My eyes widen like his.

He's insane. And if I don't join Sabine's dad and his spirit army of lunatics, I'm gonna go insane.

I manage to squeak, "Couldn't you just let me go?"

He laughs.

That would defeat the point.

I curse.

I wish I had a knife on me. But the knives are so far away, and I have no way to get to them.

My watch reads 2:19.

If I delay long enough, it's possible that Sabine would come in to check it out, see where I was.

But then I remember that she would just die in the same predicament as me.

Too late, I realize that the very thing that gave me a pumping heart was going to kill me.

I curse again.

The ghost of Sabine's dad laughs.

Join us, he cackles, *and haunt Keller Mansion with the rest of the spirits.*

“What if I say no?” I ask, voice cracking with fear.

He laughed again.

You die, he stated plainly.

...

Well, actually, he said, *you'll die either way. One will be less painful. That's if you join us voluntarily. But if you try to escape...well, Maureen here hasn't missed yet.*

I glanced at the reporter from last year. Maureen Shlum-Stacy. She was holding two wickedly sharp blades, and apparently she threw them at people.

Well. These guys looked ready to throw a party.

“So, uh, how did you guys end up, um, as spirits?” I ask, in a trembling tone. Maybe, if I could distract them, I could run. I could grab Sabine from where she was still standing and get the hell out of this town, city, *life*.

God, I wish I could do that.

It obviously didn't work. Sabine's dad just stared at me.

Adaline, Sabine's dad said, *if you don't want to become a spirit, you can choose the painful route.*

The spirits surround me, breathing their awful, musty, dead breath on me. I glance at my watch again.

1:00.

I have one minute before my watch bleeped. And it was going to startle them. They would probably attack. And I would probably – actually, not probably, definitely – die. I had one minute to escape.

I catch glance of myself in the oddly placed mirror at the back of the kitchen. I look awful. My hair is disheveled and sweat is streaking down my face, clearing paths through grime.

Worst of all, my eyes are Grim Reaper black. The statue of Death himself unfolded his wings and moved towards the huddle of spirits. And towards me.

I take a shuddering breath. And open my mouth.

There's one more thing. Sabine's dad smirks. *If you choose the painful route, you will release us from the mansion. We will be fully fledged humans. And we will take over the world.*

I didn't want that. But I had no choice. If I choose the non-spirit route, I'll unleash them. If I choose the spirit route, they'll kill me and make me unleash them.

My watch bleeps. I should be running out of the mansion by now. But instead, Death's clammy hands grip my shoulders.

The spirits surround me, growling, hungry for blood and freedom. Sabine's dad grins devilishly at me. His lips form the word kill.

I don't protest, but slump in Death's arms. Giving up.

And they close on me.

I realize, quite suddenly, that if this plan succeeds –

I will no longer be the only living being here.

Emily Boomershine

Acronym Poems

Sweet as her apple pies
Outrageous sense of humor
Never dull
Joyful
A granddaughter's best friend

Mom's shadow, my playmate
Overjoyed when I come home
Licking my face with her puppy kisses
Loud enough to scare the neighbors
Yapping, playing, cuddling

Always willing to help
Profoundly caring
Ready to fight for her family
Irreverent joke teller
Lady Liberty, accepting of all

Kind-hearted
Afraid of nothing
Tells the most hilarious jokes
Intelligent
Embraces others, no matter what

Jokes around
Empathetic and sentimental
Fine line between "nutjob" and "cyclist"
Favorite 'adventure in dining' buddy

Joyous
Artistic
Nice as can be
Excellent friend

Enthusiastic
Mentally tough
Imaginative
Loving
Young at heart

Ho-Ho-Horrible

(One Act Play)

Characters:

Santa Claus, the man who brings gifts to children all around the globe

Dr. Baker, a therapist who is unaware of her clients' actual identities

Turtle, one of Santa's many helpers with a sour mood

Dove, another elf; slightly kinder than Turtle

Scene: *A therapist's office. An overweight middle-aged man with a long white beard and a Santa hat sits by two young women dressed in green and red. The therapist sits off to the side. She holds her notebook and looks at her clients. The older man is worn-out, while his companions are irritated. The therapist is concerned about her clients' attitudes.*

Therapist: So how did last week go for everybody?

Santa: Awful, just like the holidays always are. Not to be a Scrooge, or anything.

Baker: What makes you say that?

Santa: The monotony's killing me. Everything's the same: the songs, the decorations, the T.V. movies... even all of the holiday treats taste bland! You think you'd never grow sick of cookies, but believe me, you do.

Turtle: Tell me about it! If I hear ONE more rendition of "Jingle Bells", I'll punch a reindeer.

Dove: *(singing under her breath)* Dashing through the snow...

Turtle: *(glares at her)* Don't test me.

Santa: The pressure is excruciating, too. I've got to make the holidays perfect for everybody.

Baker: Trying to please everyone will drive you mad; cut yourself some slack.

Dove: I keep saying that we've bitten off more than we can chew, but no one seems to agree with me. Once, I'd like to take it easy.

Turtle: *(cynically)* Please, like we'll ever catch a break. In fact, at the rate things are going, we'll have to get ready for the holidays before Halloween!

Santa: She's not joking. I've seen Christmas lights go up mid-November. All of this eats into my personal time, not that I had a lot to begin with. Right as I start to relax, busy season begins, and I'm scrambling to get everything together in time.

Turtle: You think you're scrambling? For us, it's downright hectic! There's clutter everywhere, and I can barely hear myself think. It's hard to repair toys when you have a massive headache.

Dove: Well, I don't mind starting earlier. It means less work later.

Baker: You don't have to buy into all of the holiday hype, you know. Stick to a schedule that feels comfortable for you.

Santa: (*sheepishly*) ...We don't exactly have a schedule. It changes every year. Kids we always give toys to drop off our list without any warning, and the ones who do get toys keep changing their minds. It's tough for us to stay flexible during the holidays.

Baker: Could you try talking to the kids about what they want?

Santa: Yes, but they're so rude! When I see them in person, they scream, cry, and pull on my beard; and when they write to me, they never tell me please. It's the least they could do.

Baker: You don't think that the kids are thankful?

Santa: It's not just the kids who don't appreciate me. Their pets hate me too. I can't tell you how many times I've been bitten and scratched. Oh, and they don't know how to stay quiet. I can't have a peaceful evening with all that howling!

Baker: Have you met any friendly pets?

Santa: Mine are the only ones I can think of, but some days, I feel like even they're against me.

Dove: Nah, don't worry about that. I talked to Comet the other day, and he says he likes you.

Baker: (*puzzled*) You talked to one of his pets?

Turtle: Oh, ignore her. She thinks they talk back.

Dove: But they really can-

Turtle: I said ignore her, doctor.

Santa: (*sarcastically*) You know, telling me about Comet made *everything* better. I'm so glad to know that all of one person cares about me. Comet's not even a person!

Baker: Pets might not be able to talk, but they can still be close friends.

Santa: Well, we were close at first. In fact, they played a huge role in helping me get through the holidays. It's just that I've been around them so long that I don't care if I ever see them again.

Dove: (*panicking*) Oh, please don't tell me you're getting rid of them!

Santa: (*trying to calm her down*) I'm not, I'm not. Besides, I figure they've been with us so long that giving them up would be pointless.

Baker: So you don't care about your pets anymore, but you don't want to get rid of them.

Santa: It's because I'm too attached to everything! I honestly don't know why I'm so invested in other people. Some of them don't even think I exist. That hurts me even more than the rudeness. I'll take poorly behaved people over ones who don't acknowledge me at all.

Baker: It doesn't matter how many people believe in you. What matters is that you and your friends believe in yourselves.

Santa: Okay, that philosophy might have worked for me years ago, but now, it just seems impossible. How can I believe in myself?

Baker: Well, you can focus on what makes you happy. That'll bring you some Christmas cheer.

Dove: Ooh, I'll start! I like drinking hot chocolate. (*turns to face the other elf*) What about you?

Turtle: Eh, the food's nice, but my favorite part of the holidays is the movies. As long as they're not too cheesy, I could spend days watching them!

Dove: And how could I forget the carols? I wish people would sing songs like "O Holy Night" and "Carol of the Bells" all year round.

Turtle: Even the plants are fantastic. There's nothing like the scent of a fresh pine tree. They're even better when they're decorated for Christmas! You've also got holly, poinsettias, ivy... and who could forget the mistletoe? As soon as we get back, I'm hanging a bunch of it up.

Baker: (*looks at Santa*) What about you, sir? You've been quiet this whole time.

Santa: I don't know... If I had to pick something, I guess I'd pick that letter to that one girl. You know what I'm talking about, right? I think her name was Victoria...

Baker: Virginia. I'm glad that somebody told her that there was a Santa Claus. He might not be real, but he represents the spirit of giving. Isn't that something we can all appreciate? In fact, if you guys focus on being more charitable –

Santa: (*quietly*) But that's exactly it; I *am* Santa Claus.

Baker: You're kidding. Santa's fictional.

Turtle: No, he's as real as you are, doc! My friend and I are two of his elves.

Dove: We build the toys, load up the sleigh, and care for the reindeer. We're every bit as busy as Old Saint Nick himself!

Santa: Keep in mind, "Old Saint Nick" is in the same room as you guys. You've only been a member of the crew for a few dozen years; I've been doing my job for centuries.

Baker: (*burying her face in her hands*) Oh my God, um, wow... I thought you were a mall Santa, not...wow...I've spent the past three weeks treating *Santa Claus*?

Santa: Hey, even the jolly guys feel blue sometimes.

Baker: Why didn't you talk to me earlier? You and your elves aren't the only professionals here.

Santa: Actually, I've been stressed for a while; I only thought about seeking help recently.

Turtle: Funny. As I recall, **we** dragged **your** fat rear end to therapy.

Baker: Please, now's not the time to be rude.

Santa: I'm sorry I didn't see you earlier. I figured the elves and reindeer were the only support I needed, but that clearly isn't the case.

Dove: Mrs. Claus was right. The three of us needed way more help than we thought. She recommended you to us since she heard you were skilled at treating people with anxiety.

Baker: Yes, I treat people with *anxiety*. I've never treated elves or Santa Claus.

Santa: Person or not, I'm still overwhelmed. Therapy's only helped a little.

Baker: Is there anything else I can do to help you?

Santa: Whatever you can come up with. At this point, I'd do anything to get my holiday cheer back. (*A long pause hangs in the air. After a while, a faint chime comes from outside.*)

Turtle: (*curious; tilting her head*) Do you hear that ringing outside?

Dove: Yeah, and there's people too. Want to see what they're doing?

Turtle: Sure! (*Both elves walk up to the window and peer through it*)

Baker: (*firmly*) Excuse me, we're in the middle of a session.

Santa: (*to the elves*) Can you guys tell what's going on?

Turtle: Well, the ringing sound came from the Salvation Army guy. People are giving him lots of money.

Dove: And there's also a bunch of people donating to Toys for Tots!

Turtle: (*points in another direction*) Look over there; someone's giving to Riley Hospital. Who knew that so many people would be willing to donate?

Baker: You see? Even if people don't believe in you, they still admire what you do. They give to others the same way you do. That's what fuels the Christmas spirit.

Santa: You really think those people care about me?

Baker: If they did, they wouldn't be giving away all those items.

Santa: They must really care, then...

Dove: Aw, don't get teary-eyed, Santa! (*walks over to him, dragging the other elf*)

Turtle: Wait, what are we doing?

Dove: You don't mind being part of a group hug, do you?

Turtle: We're going to hug everyone?

Baker: No thanks, I'm good.

Santa: I wouldn't mind though... *(the two elves hug Santa. Everyone sits back down)*

Baker: Are you guys feeling better?

Santa: Yea, the holidays don't seem so terrible now.

Dove: I'm glad we could talk to you about things.

Baker: And I'm always happy to help.

Santa: Thank you for reminding us why we do this. Who knows, you might even get something special underneath your tree this year! Now, let's go and get back to work.

Baker: Merry Christmas to all of you!

Elves: *(together)* Merry Christmas!

Santa: Merry Christmas, Dr. Baker.

(The three clients leave the therapist's office in high spirits. Shortly after they leave, her phone rings. She picks it up.)

Baker: Hello? Oh, hi, mom. I heard that you needed help decorating and baking... Wait, how many guests are coming? That sounds like a lot! Don't worry, I can totally help you out with all of that. Trust me, the holidays can be stressful for anyone...

Zachary Broyles

CHAPTER 1: THE SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

It was a day I would never forget. A day I would fear for the rest of my life.

10:00 PM

It was the middle of September in Indiana. The air was cool and crisp, and made for perfect camping conditions. As we began to lay down for the for the second night's inescapable slumber, we all talked between our two tents; I couldn't help but fear something devastating would happen that night. And it did.

2:53 AM

We all woke up to the sound of a blood-curdling scream. It was a scream of terror. It was a scream of pain. It was a scream of separation.

"Fi- Finn! She- She's gone! Gale is gone!" my mother screamed tearfully; my heart sunk and shattered. My only sister was gone.

"It's - It's uh- It's uh gotta be a dream... Thi- This can't be real. This can't be happening," I whispered to myself as tears began to drip from my eyes, hitting the ground with a hard splat.

"Why the hell was she out of your tent?! And who the hell took her?!" My dad Finn thundered, probably terrifying all the animals out of the forest.

"I don't know Finn! I don't know! Maybe she had to use the campground restroom, or maybe she just wanted to look at the stars and then got swiped! I don't know why she left, and I don't know who took her!" My mother replied in her "momma" voice that she usually uses to scare us half to death.

"Maybe we should just sleep on it! Maybe, she is at the restroom and will be back soon!" I hollered, interrupting my parent's argument.

"Yep we should just sleep on it! Maybe we should just sleep when our daughter is somewhere in the freakin' forest!" Mother boomed as I crawled back into my tent to grab a flashlight.

"Sweetie, sta- stay in the tent. get back to sleep. We'll search for her tomorrow," Dad said as I began to crawl out of the tent.

"Alright. I'll get some more sleep," I said spoke as I crawled back into the warm protection of the fuzzy sleeping bag.

4:00 AM

I woke to the sound of my parents arguing as if they were in a presidential debate. It was so tense, even the past and the future couldn't compare.

"Listen to yourself Sarah! You want to go out looking for your daughter when there is a mad man on the loose! For all we know, she could be dead right now!" Dad roared at Momma.

"Finn, have you lost your mind! Our daughter is somewhere in the woods, and someone has taken her!" Momma thundered back.

"Listen honey... Do you remember when we first met? Remember that girl who was kidnapped in the woods? It took five days to find her. What's to say it won't be different for us?" Dad spoke softly as he began to hold Momma's hand.

"Finn. That was ten years ago. Do you remember what the police found, aside from that girl?" Momma question her husband. "They found fifty tortured children. Somewhere missing their fingers. Some their toes. Some entire legs and arms. The man who captured them was an insane, and a lousy excuse of a human," Momma said as she began to cry that I had never heard before.

"Sarah. It's going to be okay. We will find our daughter," Finn softly spoke as he hugged Momma.

8:21 AM

We found the ransom note on Mom and Dad's tent. The kidnapper wanted three-hundred-thousand dollars, and an apology.

"Why do they want an apology?" I asked Dad, who was just as confused as I was, until he read a symbol on the bottom of the note.

"We need to leave now. We need to call the police and leave now," Dad said in an incredibly worried tone.

"Finn? What's wrong I thought we were going to find her?" Momma question in a puzzled manner.

"The symbol on the bottom of the note... It's the same as the one on the ransom notes ten years ago," Dad choked, beginning to cry, something I'd never seen him do.

"Holy hell. That crazy madman is still alive," Mom spoke, widening her eyes to the size of volleyballs.

"Wait! She still has her phone on her! I remember her complaining that she only had

3G when we first arrived!" I shouted, feeling fairly proud for remembering that.

"Well, call her then!" Momma hollered back, causing me to force my phone out of my pocket.

8:23 AM

We heard the phone ring just a few feet away from where we were standing. I began to march for it, being cautious not to step on it. What I found scared the living day lights out of me.

"D- Dad... Her phone is- over here... The screen is shattered and is covered in- um- bl- blood," As I said that, I ruptured in tears. I knew she was gone. I knew she was in pain. I wanted to find her. I wanted to find the kidnapper and pound their face in.

9:53 AM

My heart was racing after my nervous breakdown. *My only is sister is gone.* That was all I could think. That was I all I could see, plastered over every inch of my vision. *It's your fault she got kidnapped! It was your idea to go camping!* My subconscious tortured further.

"Shut the hell up! I've had it with these thoughts! I've had it with you! Stop it! Stop the pain now!" I roared at myself, causing Momma and Dad to rush over.

"Lexi? What's going on? Are you alright?!" My parents both shouted as they held me together.

"I don't know anymore. I can still feel her, like she's near. But I know she isn't. And I know it's my fault. We shoulda just gone to Disney World like we always do," I spoke softly as tears rolled out my eyes.

"Oh sweetie... It's not your fault... No one could have known this was going to happen to us," Momma said as she wiped the tears from my eyes.

*****END OF CHAPTER ONE (PREVIEW)*****

Breanna DiPalo

An Empty Skeleton

Your family was the skin that draped your bones, but now they're so far away that it's hard for you to know if you've stopped living or if your heart is still beating.

You're just bones now.
Just an empty skeleton that can barely keep it all down.
Your heart is hurting.
It's bleeding, leaking through your ribcage and spilling out your mouth.

Your heart feels more than you can explain, so you use music to convey all of the pain. It's your escape.

Your heart must still be beating, because you still feel the sting from the years you let go to waste.
And you're still here waiting for someone to take your place. For someone to leave you in the dust, so you'll have a reason to turn to the drugs.

And those drugs you take to numb the pain, their effect is wearing out.
The words come up your throat, but you swallow them down.
You're not ready for them to hear it.
You're not ready to admit it.
But the day will come when you'll have to face your demons. You'll have to address the skeletons in your closet.

You should let them know, because they deserve to know. Before you become just a pile of bones in a coffin.

Because you're not just a skeleton.
There's more to you than just bones.
You can be alive again.
You don't have to be alone.

At Dawn

The sun had just barely started to rise, yet December already laid wide awake in her pile of blankets. She had stayed the night at her friend Aria's house, but sleeping in any house that wasn't her own always proved hard for her. It always took her forever to fall asleep and when she finally did, she would awake earlier than normal. This time she had awoken in the early hours of dawn.

After several failed attempts at going back to sleep, she pushed herself off the floor and carefully stepped around Aria's pooch, Annabel. Awaking Annabel would shatter any chances she had at going down to the stream that flowed just down the little hill from Aria's house. She figured if she couldn't sleep, she might as well explore,

so she laced on her shoes and threw her jacket over her shoulders. She slowly walked over to the living room screen door and quietly slid it open.

It was early March and the mornings still clung to a streak of winter chill. She headed down the hill towards the creek, her shoes squishing in mud thanks to last night's rain. The air was cold but refreshing; a slight wind blew from behind, throwing her long locks astray. Causing silky streaks of auburn to invade her vision. She tugged her black hairband off her wrist, pulled her hair up and twisted it into a ballerina's bun. Smoothing the loose strands behind her ears as she continued down the hill slope through the tall hay-like grass before arriving at the banks of the water.

She crouched at the edge of the grass and rested her finger tips on top of the water. She lightly pressed down, letting the icy water spill into the cracks between her fingers. She closed her eyes and just focused on the feeling of the water. December always had an appreciation for the way things felt. She always noticed the things no one else did and too often she pondered on the little things nobody wasted their time thinking about.

Suddenly her reverie was disturbed by the piercing shriek of a creature crying out. Her eyes whipped wide open at the sound. The cry lasted two full seconds and slowly silenced in a whimper of pain. The sound had come from the cluster of forest just beyond the stream. December rushed to stand up and almost lost her footing on the edge. She braced her palms on the wet ground behind her, caking them in mud. She steadied herself before slowly standing up. She glanced down at the water.

"It can't be more than mid-calf deep." She whispered to herself. She stepped into the shallow water; it rising just to her mid-calf. She smiled inwardly at her little success. She began trudging her feet through the water, taking care not to slip on the rocks at the bottom. Reaching the earth on the other end of the stream, she lifted her feet out of the water and onto the grass; water trickling off her shoes as she continued in the direction the cry had come from. But as she arrived just in front of the trees, her feet stopped short. She stood immobile facing the tree line of the small forest. She couldn't quite understand why she'd stopped.

It was as if her legs had stopped working. She tried to urge herself forward, but her feet remained firmly planted on the ground. Ignoring the strange urge to turn back and leave, she pushed herself forward; her legs finally listening and walking her into the forest. It was silent as she glanced around, trying to locate the hurt animal. Walking a little deeper into the trees she spotted a lump of fur in the distance.

Its coat a deep reddish-brown. Jogging towards it, she tried to think of how she would be able to help the animal. It's not like I'm a veterinarian or anything, she thought to herself. She slowed her jogging to a halt as another thought occurred. She hadn't stopped to think how the animal had gotten injured in the first place. There might be a predator nearby. And if that was true it probably wasn't very safe for December to be in the forest at the time. Once again the sense to turn back tugged at her.

And again, she ignored it and moved forward. As December inched closer to the creature-standing about five feet away now-she became even more puzzled as she tried to figure out what the animal was. Its coat is too dark to be a fox, and its too red to be a coyote or wolf, but its body frame was similar to all three, she inquired. Just then the animal gave a small whimper as it shifted slightly on the ground. She still wasn't sure if she should interfere, but the creature seemed so helpless that December pushed her thoughts aside and carefully continued until she stood just a foot away.

She crouched down and timidly reached her hand out towards the mysterious creature. Her fingertips gently touched its fur; despite it being extremely soft and silky, the minute her fingers made contact, a burst of panic flared in her chest.

She snapped her hand away as the anxiety spread, making her palms shake. Not a second later, the creature began to growl deeply. Lightning quick, it spun its head around. Its eyes turned from a light hazel to a ghastly

pitch black. Like ink spreading throughout its eyes, until they became like a bottomless pit. Its shoulders and back hunching to a sharp and intimidating arch.

The transformation happened so quick. December barely had time to react before the creature lunged at her. She screamed as she threw herself to the left, just out of its reach. She scrambled to her feet and started running as fast as she could out of the forest. From behind the creature growled deep in its throat as It sprinted towards her. December willed herself to not look back as she broke through the tree line and ran back towards the stream.

She could sense movement behind her as she ran, but the sound of her racing heartbeat and rapid breathing drowned out any implications as to how far It was from her. But just as she entered the stream, kicking up water all around her as she rushed through it, something snatched at her ankles and pulled her feet out from under her. She shoved her hands out in front of her to stop her face from hitting the rocks at the bottom; instead they jabbed into her palms as her body and face smacked into the water. Soaking her from top to bottom.

She pushed her upper body out of the water and took a sharp inhale as she tried to fill her lungs with air and swipe the loose hair strands out of her eyes. She tried to move herself forward, but the creature clung to December's ankles like tight handcuffs. She cried out in pain as It dug its nails into her skin. The creature pulled at her legs as it attempted to draw her out of the stream.

December defiantly dug her nails into the rocks below the water and tried to pull herself away from It, wildly flailing her legs as she tried to break free of Its grasp. She twisted her right ankle to face the creature's paw downwards and smacked it on the rocks with all her strength. She heard It cry out in pain as she felt its grip vanish. She kicked at its other paw with her free foot.

The creature lost its grip and her ankle slipped from its grasp. December splashed through the water, crawling on her hands and knees till she reached the other side.

Hot adrenaline pushed through her veins and made her arms shake as she lifted herself out of the water and onto the grass. Panic flowed through her entire body as she sprinted at top speed towards the little hill just below Aria's house. She began desperately climbing the hill, her feet slipping in the mud as she rushed to get to the top. Climbing on all fours up the hill, she could just make out Aria's house in the distance as she neared the top of the hill. She was about to reach the top when out of nowhere the creature sprung itself up towards December and swatted at her head; instead its claws grazed her hair, whipping her head back as its claws pulled her hairband out of its knot before falling back onto the ground.

"No!" December exclaimed as once again her feet were pulled out from under her. She slipped and smacked her side into the ground; pain spreading like a blooming flower on the spot of impact. The creature again teared at her ankles. "Help!" December cried as she clung to the hill, refusing to be pulled down. She twisted her body towards the creature that pinned her feet down.

Its face scrunched up in a snarl and its bottomless eyes piercing her soul with fear; it snapped its jaw at her, exposing rows of razor sharp teeth. She screamed at the top of her lungs at the terrifying sight. With all her force she yanked her feet free-ignoring the searing pain of its claws cutting deep lines into her ankle as she did-and with both feet, kicked the creature straight in the face.

It shrieked in pain as it fell off the little hill and landed with a thud on the bottom. December twisted her body back around and lifted her torso off the ground, squeezing her eyes shut with the effort. Her entire body ached. But as she did she no longer felt grass and mud underneath her hands, but carpet instead. She opened her eyes and saw a pillow under her face. She felt a blanket on her back and flat ground beneath her. December frantically looked around the room.

She was back in Aria's living room where they had fallen asleep the night before. They had wrapped themselves in blankets and sat on the floor watching old movies all night. She shoved the blankets off her and examined her clothes and hair. They were clear of any dirt or blood and completely dry. Her ankles were free of any cuts and her hairband still clung to her wrist.

December checked her shoes and jacket as well, but both were clean as a whistle. The only thing remaining of her venture was her racing heartbeat. "It was just a dream" she reassured herself. She willed her heart to calm, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply through her nose and slowly exhaling out her mouth.

Out of nowhere, Annabelle started barking. Startled, December open her eyes. She hadn't even heard the dog move from its sentinel spot next to Aria. Now the pooch stood right by the sliding glass door, barking fiercely at something in the distance. December cautiously stepped towards the door and peered through the glass, following Annabelle's gaze.

She gasped as she spotted a blur of reddish-brown fur far in the distance. Its shape like a wolf and fox hybrid. It seemed to be looking straight at December, unflinching towards Annabelle's warning bark. An icy chill spilled down Decembers spine at its gaze. The animal then slowly turned and headed down the hill, vanishing from December's sight.

"Oh, can it Annabelle." Aria mumbled as she emerged from her cocoon of blankets. She glanced at December, examining her troubled expression. "What's wrong? Did you have a bad dream or something? She asked. "I'm not so sure." December replied shakily.

~Is There Somewhere I Can Be Me?~

Is there somewhere I can be free?
Somewhere I can be me?
Without thinking about what they'll think of me, Without thinking about the things that drag me down?
Is there somewhere out there were it's just you and me?
Is there somewhere I can let go,
A place where I can let my emotions show without tainting my cheery image,
A place only you and I know, A place that feels like a home?
Is there somewhere we can let go?
Somewhere we can be alone?
Is there such a place beyond this gate,
A place beyond this cage,
A place without limitation,
That will allow us to not think of all the things we hate about ourselves?
Is there somewhere we can be us,

Without people flashing funny looks,

Like they've never done dumb stuff,
Like they've got life all figured out and they're just waiting for us to catch up?
Looking at us like they were never young.
Does such a place exist,
A place where expectations don't live?
Is there somewhere we can be free?
Is there somewhere I can be me?

Nostalgia Is A Strange Thing For Me.

Nostalgia is a strange thing.

For me at least.

I've never really felt at home anywhere.

I consider home to be my family, but if we're talking about a physical place, nothing comes to mind.

Even the house I live in now doesn't feel like home.

Home is not just a house.

It's a feeling.

It's where your roots are.

Like you know that's exactly where your supposed to be.

It's where you go to get away from all the noise.

Where everything just seems right.

Where you came from or where you were born doesn't mean that's where your heart lies.

I was born in Arizona and had lived there till I was seven. And there are lots of little things I didn't know I'd miss about it.

Like how there would be rainbows that you could see the entire arch of.

How there would always be mountains in the distance.

But no matter how far you drove, you would never get closer to either of them.

They remained in the distance no matter what.

There were a billion stars in the sky at night and The David Star would almost always be out.

But no matter how often, I would still marvel at it.

As if it was a very rare sight to see.

How every now and then a tumble weed would come out of nowhere just like in the western movies.

As well as a little dust storm here and there.

I don't know if I miss the place in general.

I think I just miss the feelings I had as a little kid. Before iPads and iPhones or electronics in general became a normal thing that practically no one can live without.

I didn't have a care in the world.

I guess I just miss my earlier youth.

When I was really little.

When we're young all we want is to grow up.

But when we're grown up all we want is to be young again. The older I get I realize how much I didn't appreciate when I was a little munchkin.

I miss the days when I didn't worry about making breakfast in the morning, getting my drivers license, getting a job, saving up to move out or getting my GED.

Back when I didn't know of the obstacles that would get in my way.

When I was little none of this mattered.

I just played with Barbies and ran around outside for hours.

I didn't think about what tomorrow would bring Or worry if I was productive enough in a day.

I had a freedom I didn't appreciate until it was gone.

But I hope to one day regain that sense of freedom again.

The Silent Guardian

I perched atop the roof ledge of the hospital. My eyes valiantly tracking a dark haired young man in a red, plaid flannel and black converse; hands stuffed in his pockets and eyes too attentive. This wasn't what gave the boy away though. It was the secret behind those eyes he thought was so well hidden. And that much was true...if you were a mundane that is. But I'm not human. Not completely anyway, just half. But I guess having wings makes it pretty hard for anyone to believe you have any form of ordinary in your blood.

But for anyone to think that they'd have to be able to see me in the first place, which doesn't happen very often. I preferably stay invisible most of the time. There's too much evil in the world for me to get much time off. But if you could see through my eyes, time off would be the least of your worries.

For example: the boy headed towards the hospital. Many probably just see a nervous boy. They may think the cause of his anxiety is that someone he cares about is hurt. Hence his worried stride towards the hospital. And you have no idea how much I wished that was the case or how close that assumption actually was. But unfortunately demons don't care about anyone. They're the ones who cause the hurt. And they have no remorse for their actions.

As the boy pushed through the doors, I pushed myself off the ledge and nosedived down the building. As I drew closer to the bottom I sprung my wings out, the air catching my feathers and gliding me down the rest of the way. I landed on my left foot, crouching my right knee and placing my right palm on the ground to steady my land. My wings swept down and folded back to my sides, creating a slight wind that blew through a nurse's hair as she sat at a picnic table eating her lunch. I rose up and started towards the entrance doors, slipping through them as a woman left the building. I walked passed the receptionist's desk and down the hall, where the anxious boy was being led by a nurse into an elevator. As the doors closed, I watched for the floor number. "Floor 5 it is then." I mumbled as I soundlessly sprung myself up and phased through five roofs/floors of the building, landing softly on the floor of the fifth story-about three yards away from the elevator the boy and nurse had just emerged from-I continued tailing them until the nurse stopped at the doorway of room 17.

"She is asleep right now, but she should awake soon. My condolences for you and your family, you must be going through a lot, but I assure you we are doing everything in our power to insure she has a speedy recovery." The nurse said with a sympathetic smile. "Thank you" the boy said emotionlessly as he entered the room. I discreetly followed him into the room as the nurse turned to leave. The boy walked to the foot of the hospital bed and stood staring at the girl who occupied it.

She was pale skinned, with long sable curls that sprawled over her shoulders in messy heaps. She had an oxygen tube in her nose, her face was freckled and young. She looked so innocent and that's exactly what she was, but an angry aura seemed to surrounded the boy. I stood unmoving in the doorway, waiting for my cue to make a move on him. I couldn't do a thing till I knew he intended to cause any actual harm. The boy stood stock-still for a long moment, as if he was contemplating something.

I quickly glanced into the hallway outside of room 17. All was silent and tranquil; no nurses roamed about anywhere. I shifted my gaze back to the boy, who still stood by the bed. The tight set in his shoulders and the way he gripped the bed frame gave me the sense that he planned to do more than just stand there, so I stood in place. Waiting. After standing still some more, the boy finally moved. He inched himself around to the side of the girl's bed where her heart monitor beeped a steady rhythm. He venomously stared at the oxygen tubes in her nostrils. He started to reach his hands towards it, but that was all the reason I needed.

"I hope your intentions aren't to cut off her oxygen supply," I spoke in a warning tone. The boy whipped around to face me, his eyes turning to slits when he noticed the wings folded at my sides. "Because I'm pretty sure that would kill her." I finished, crossing my arms across my chest as I stared at the boy in disapproval. "You know damn well that was the point." The boy spoke in a low menacing voice. Clenching his fists at his sides, he looked as if he was trying to resist launching at me and scratching my eyes out. But that's exactly what I would expect from a demon, so I stood my ground, unfazed by his death stare. "I suggest you leave and do it quietly. I'd hate to wake her up; she's sleeping so peacefully." I said, lifting my chin towards the girl. The boy's shoulders stiffened at my words, his jaw setting in a tight line. For a long moment he remained by the girl's bedside until he defiantly stepped away, walking himself towards the door. "You know what I mean." I said, moving my body to block the boy's way of escape. The boy stopped in his tracks; he lifted his face, staring me down with eyes that practically danced with rage.

"Move out of my way." He breathed angrily. "You know I won't do that." I spoke. "Neither of them deserve to have their life's destroyed by you." The boy's face scrunched up in anger; he looked as if his control was

reaching its last thread and I expected it'd snap pretty soon. "This is your last warning," I spoke authoritatively. "Leave." At my words the boy's hands began twitching and he cocked his head as if he was in pain, as if a mental war was brewing inside his head. Suddenly the boy stopped twitching and stood motionless. His eyes seemed to cloud over and his face subsumed a vacant expression.

I stood waiting for a response from the boy. In a flash, a fiery rage returned to the boy's eyes. He pounced on me like a cat diving for a mouse. I swiftly dodged the boy's attack, slipping behind him as he grabbed for the door frame to keep from tumbling out onto the hallway floor. I grabbed the collar of his shirt and whipped him back into room 17, shutting the door as I turned to face him. He again lunged at me. As I grabbed his shoulders and tossed him to the ground, the boy reached out and grasped one of my wings. His nails scratched at them as he fell and sent a couple feathers flying. I winced. My wings being a third set of limbs for me, I felt each pluck like the small jab of a dagger. I pulled my wings from his grip and pinned him to the floor with my foot, pressing down on his chest to keep him from moving. He flailed wildly, trying to break free, but my strength was far greater than the body it possessed.

"Enough!" I exclaimed. I bent down and pulled the boy up from the floor, positioning his back towards a chair in the corner of the room. I pulled my hands back and smacked into his chest with both palms. The boy stopped midway of charging at me and fell into the chair behind him. Knocked unconscious. A shadowed figure detached from his body and hung above him. The demon's gaze shifted to the girl. "Don't you dare." I warned. Of course it didn't listen; it dashed towards the girl's bed.

But I caught the demon by its ankle and threw it to the ground. It bellowed as it crashed to the floor. I sprung my wings out to their full length and stretched them behind me to wrap around and over the girl's bedside, creating a shield that hid her from the demon's reach. Before it could recover, I stepped onto the bed frame, launched myself off and with the flap of my wings, charged downwards and crashed my fists and feet on top of the demon. It cried out as it dispersed into tiny dust like particles before disappearing all together, its cry fading away like a whisper in the wind.

I stood up and surveyed the room. The girl laid peacefully in her bed, blankets tucked up to her neck and the boy sat slumped in the chair where he'd landed. I quietly walked over to him and crouched by his side. "Wake up." I whispered into his ear. At the sound of my voice the boy's eyes slowly inched open. He groaned as he sat up in the chair. He looked around curiously, but his expression softened when he laid his eyes upon the girl. He stood and pulled his chair over to the girl's bedside. Sitting back down, he scooted to the edge of his seat and gazed at the girl with a caring expression. He reached for her hand and gently held it in his, hanging his head as he tried to hold back the tears that welled up in his eyes.

The girl slowly awakened at his touch, sleepily lifting her eyelids to reveal dark green irises as she set her gaze upon the boy. "Jacob?" She spoke in a weak tone. He lifted his head and smiled at her with warm eyes of the same color. "Hey Serena." He spoke softly as he squeezed her hand delicately. They continued speaking, unaware of anything that had just happened. "I thought you had to work today?" Serena asked. "Well, so did Mom and Dad," he replied. "But I didn't want you to be alone again, especially not with your surgery coming up." "Thank you." She sighed in relief. "I know the doctors don't want me to get my hopes up, but I have a good feeling about this one." "Yeah, me too." Jacob agreed.

I stood silently as I watched them talk, knowing they would never know of the danger they had both been in, or know of my presence at all. But they were safe again and that's all that matters to me. That is what I am called upon to do. Protect. And that is what I am dedicated to doing until the end of me. For I am willing and loyal to my heavenly father's commands. Forever.

What Blue Means To Me

Within the last couple of years, the color blue has come to mean a lot to me.

I think of the sky a lot whenever I think of blue.

When the clouds part and let the sun cast its golden glow on us, it brings blue with it. And the sky means traveling to me.

We're all connected through the sky

And it's fascinating to think how many people are looking up at the same one as you.

The sky connects us to places we've never been and may never go. It connects us to all the people we've never met and may never know.

Blue skies mean the clouds have gone and that the day will be sunny.

Blue skies mean the storm has passed and the rainbow will soon come.

I also think of the ocean a lot when I think of blue.

I've never been to an actual ocean, (not that I was old enough to remember anyway) but somehow it gives me great comfort when I think about one.

Water in general calms me and I guess it does for a lot of people.

When I'm in water there's blue all around me.

It makes me forget all my troubles and just be free for an hour. The sky and the ocean for me, represent motion, life and the unknown.

They represent the roads untraveled and the places never seen.

So I guess blue means curiosity and adventure to me. Someone I really admire once described blue as a happy sad color.

And I completely agree.

Blue can bring me comfort.

It can bring me joy.

It can be lonely.

It can be curious.

So I guess you could say blue is all my emotions wrapped in one.

Corryn Dunlap

Mark of the Phoenix

"Ava run!" Callie screamed behind me. I didn't look back just sprinted down the alleyway I'm in. The cold, wet air stung on my uncovered face, but my legs dare not slow down for any reason. This is normal for Callie and me. She told me to never trust the soldiers or any official they will not help us like everyone else. The people on the TV always say to embrace our powers, but Callie says to hide it. The TV shows the Institute is amazing. I will stay away from it for Callie. I am told many things about myself. I don't know what I am.

Pounding footsteps get louder and louder. We get closer to our secret door and I notice how Callie's face twists in worry. She usually loves when we are escaping. To really get to show them that they don't always win. Something was definitely different. Her hand grabbed mine. She pulled me to go faster but the soldiers were already far enough behind us to hide. I try to concentrate on not tripping over my own feet. Then I saw the spot that looks like any other part of the wall but if one of us touches the hole beside it will reveal the door. Callie does it while anxiously glancing back at the entrance of the alleyway. "What's wrong." I asked letting go of her hand and taking a step back. She finally looks down at me. There is fear shining in her eyes but then it disappears. The door opens.

"Everything is going to be fine, just get inside and trust me." Still unsure I stepped inside. I go far inside then turn. Callie stood in the doorway. She smiles, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, and reached inside. Hitting the close button. I ran to her but not in time. She turned and looked away from me as the door shuts. My clenched fists hit the door in sad, confused anger.

"Noo!" I screamed. What is she doing? They are going to get her. I ran over to the corner of the room. Up on the wall was a video monitor of the alleyway. There was Callie. The soldiers were there too. I watched as my only guardian was being surrounded by evil men. They flanked her at each side and thrust her arms behind her in a way nobody could consider gentle. Slowly her eyes rose from the ground and looked for something behind the soldiers. Someone. The group of men separated for a man in a suit. Emotion radiated off of Callie and through the monitor. Hatred. Then I realized who he was. Yinar, the creator of the Institute and hero of the Community. Also the enemy of any people with an ability. He even gave us a name, Selects. His reason for this was that only the select few are gifted like us. As special as us. But I don't think Callie felt special right now.

He clicked his tongue in a condescending manner. The sickest smile I've ever seen spread across his face. "Callie you are known for your escapes. You really did have a long run. Too bad it didn't last." He holds out his hand in the air. One of his men places a pistol in it. He closes his hand around it and aims it at her. "Now the only reason you would get caught is if you took too much time hiding something from me. Am I correct?" "You're the devil!" She spat at him. Yinar frowned and glanced at the officer at Callie's side. That was all that was needed, the man punched her. I tried to look away and stay silent. I managed to do the silent part, but I couldn't look away. What did this man want with Callie? What did she hide from him? Her head lifted again as she gasped for the breath that had definitely been knocked out of her. How dare they do this to her she hasn't done anything wrong. That I know of.

"Right now isn't the time for compliments. And as for my question I'll take that as a yes. Now where is it?" "You're wasting your time. Nobody else told you anything, why would I?" Her voice was strangled as she spoke. All I wanted was to go get her. She is strong I reminded myself. If anyone could get out of this she could. Yinar looked away and nodded his head. "You were always the strong, independent one. That was one of the reasons I always liked you. Don't you remember when I was the only one you shared your secrets with? I found you and

took you under my wing.” He walked closer to her. The closer he came the more she fought to get away from his outstretched hand that reached for her. The guards kept her still until Yinar could cup her face tenderly. Callie was completely motionless. “Stop fighting, tell me where you hid it, and you can come home with me. You want to be with me, don't you Cal?” She didn't respond immediately. Then she turned her face from him.

“You are not the same man I knew. I thought we could save you but there is nothing left to save.” Her head turned to face him. “Power has taken all the love from you that you could have ever given me.” I watched to see the hurt in his eyes but none came. It was obvious that they used to be close but how much. What had happened? “This is your last chance.” He said a little gentler. “I know.” Callie replied with no fear.

Then Yinar raised the pistol and shot her. I stood there in that cold room staring at my friend's dead body who was so alive only moments ago. Every moment of the last hour played at triple speed through my head. I backed as far as I could from the screen, hit the back wall, and sank to the floor. My eyes could not tear away from the scene taking place. They started to take her away. She was gone. She wouldn't come back. I am all alone. Hours passed and I stayed on the floor. The sun slowly came up and even made the alleyway look beautiful. Nothing should look like that after what just happened. Finally, I managed to turn away from the screen. I rolled up into a ball and cried. It hurt so bad. Wake up. This is a nightmare. This happened years ago. Just a memory.

Suddenly the scene changed. I was in a dark field of tall grass. A strong breeze hit the middle of my back. It arched and a deep breath filled my lungs. The wind swirled around my body as my arm stretched out and my hair danced. I spun in a long white dress looking at the stars above. A raindrop fell silently on my crinkled nose. I laughed and turned to look at another drop of rain dive onto a slice of grass. It grew. The grass climbed higher to an inch below my shoulder. The air warmed slightly. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a spark. Fire spread towards me. Everything glistened in its luster. I felt pulled by it. Something being evoked by it in my mind. I let it take control as I was mesmerized by the flame. It seemed to shine brighter as I got Closer. Closer, Closer, only a touch away and some part of me pulled back. In a flash I was on a cliff looking over a rocky shore. The pleasant smell of salt water calmed me. The I felt something move behind me. Someone. I turned to see him and slipped. A hand shot out to catch me just in time.

“Thanks” I said, then saw him. Bright blue eyes piercing my heart. Jet black hair that stood above his raised eyebrows. His rosebud lips held a certain temptation. Wait what?! I just saw him and I am not boy crazy. He smiled as he pulled me up. As soon as he lets go I look at the ground and straighten the dress on me out of habit. Those eyes seem so familiar.

“Hi Ava. It is nice to see you again. Do you remember me?” I shook my head. He kept smiling but I saw the sadness hidden in his eyes. He took a step closer to me. What is happening? “What is your name?” I ask curiously. Am I supposed to know him? I racked my brain. He laughed sweetly. “Where is the fun of giving you all the answers? Soon I'll tell you everything I can.” His arm started to extended and the back of his hand stroked my shoulder. It felt right. He stared at my eyes searching for a secret. I broke connection and watched his hand that still lingered. I took it and held it next to my face. Our body's moved together until his arms arm were wrapped around me from behind. His chest fit perfectly against my back. His warm breath on my neck made hairs stand up. A voice of reason told me to push him away but I couldn't. He was shielding me from the world beyond us and reality. It was enough.

“I'll be gone soon. “He whispered tightening his hold on me. We both didn't want to let go. “Please don't.” I'll remember him. I'll let him hold me forever. Whatever he wants. “We'll see each other again. I promise.” Promises can be broken. “When?” I asked instead. My body finally decided to break from his grasp. Reality came crashing back. I didn't know him. Why do I care? I turned to tell him to go. “I will see you when it's time.” He leaned in and kissed me on the head. I froze the fondness in his eyes stopping me. Then everything faded away as I awoke from my dream.

“Ava.” I blinked as I got adjusted to the brightness the room. The orphanage's colorful curtains spread color across the white walls. Damien was sitting on the end of my bed with his light brown hair sticking up everywhere.

He pushed the blankets off my feet and started tickling them. I tried to back away but he grabbed my ankle. Finally I resorted to kicking him away.

“Get out!” I yelled at him playfully. He put a hand on his heart faking pain. “Me? Get out? You hurt me Avel.” He laughed, his brown eyes twinkling in the process. “Whatever, why did you wake me up?” I yawned and pushed my blue fuzzy blanket off in a heap. That dream was one of the weirdest I’ve ever had, but at least it wasn’t only the night terrors of Callie. I hadn’t understood much when I was younger about everything going around me but I started to understand at this age. We live in the Community a place separated from the world outside. It is all because of amazing people with abilities. They did miracles for many people but not everyone used them for good. Wars broke out everywhere. Finally, two boys arose that had abilities of controlling the elements. Their names were Maddox and Yinar. Maddox had control of water and earth. While Yinar had powers of fire and wind. Together they ended the wars. With their help the Community was created. They chose loyal citizens and the low percentage of people with abilities left. A government was created for it and order was established. If everyone had followed the rules they said things would have been fine.

Then it happened. People went missing everywhere. Mostly they were gifted but a few were normal. Even Maddox was gone. Everything was left to Yinar. He found the criminals and justice took over. That is where Damien and I came in. Damien’s mother was taken and his father had died in the war. In school we learned about the whole crime. That is where I learned Callie had been one of the criminals. I had cried in the middle of my fourth grade class. With no information from where I came from they simply assumed that, after my scene, I was just another child from a missing person.

That was the first time I ever felt betrayed. And I had promised myself it would never happen again. Never let anyone get that close. Sadly Damien had a different idea. “Ava!” He exclaimed. “Check out what is the com.” I grabbed the tablet from the side of my bed. Normal morning news flashed across the screen. Then I saw it, the people graduating today. I scanned the names. His name appeared at the middle of the huge list. “Oh, Damien this is great! You’re graduating!” He stared at me for a second and then busted out laughing. “What?” I questioned. He walked over and scrolled to the bottom. That is when I finally saw it. Avel Cole. Me and the last name they chose for me. That meant today was the beginning of The Choice.

The Choice was the system where we got our jobs. They would evaluate us for six days. Then they give us a list of jobs that would suit our personality and performance. Something about it was a little suspicious to me. I knew if I told Damien he would think I’m over reacting. I should be happy we would be going through this together but what would happen after this? Damien has been like a brother to me since I came here. We won’t be together if they decide to put us in different areas of work. It would be hard to keep in contact.

“Hey don’t worry.” He smiled as he saw the stress on my face. I don’t know how he did it but when he smiled I felt myself relax. Amazing. I pushed him playfully again. “You know me too well.” “I beg to differ. There is much too much I have yet to learn about you I can feel it.” “Hopefully you have learned how much time we have until we have to meet the rest of the graduates at the school. Or else you are going to learn about how I act when I’m mad.” “I’m sure I have seen that before, but just in case,” He grabs his tablet and starts to tap wildly. “We have to be there in approximately six hours and seventeen minutes.” “Good, that means we need to get packed for the week of training.” “You know what that also means?” He asked mischievously. “What?” Then when I realized what he was going to say I wish I hadn’t even asked.

“We are going out shopping for you for tonight’s graduation party.” “Damien, no, can’t we just celebrate alone without noisy annoying people?” I pleaded. Damien had been trying to get me out of my shell for years. The thing he doesn’t seem to understand that my shell protects me. “Or better yet why don’t you go while I unpack and study. After it is over come back and tell me everything.” He was already shaking his head. “Oh, no you don’t you have not been to a single party during your whole time in school you are not skipping the biggest celebration of our teenage life.” “Fine but no shopping.” “Please Ava, just let me get my way once. Plus, this will be our first impression on our future bosses. There is even a rumor that some high up official will be giving a speech. “How could you have known that when you couldn’t have known about the graduation until about one hour ago, tops.”

He ignored this comment. "You can't exactly wear that." He points down at my old t-shirt and sweat pants. I raised my eyebrow. His hands went up in surrender. "Just saying." "Fine!" I crossed my arms across my chest and plopped down on my bed. Damien stared at me. "What?" I asked. "You don't have to go you know." "Damien I'm going." "Ava if you don't want to go you really don't have to. I just." I raised my hand to cut him off. "Damien." Finally, he got the message. "Okay I'm going. Meet me downstairs in about forty-five minutes." Then he left and closed the door behind him. The door opened again. "Unless you need more time." I grabbed two pillows and threw them. The first missed. "Ha you miss..." He didn't finish. The second pillow hit him square in the face. "Out!" I yelled. This time he listened.

Space

Everyone walks in different directions
I sit
They run because their late
Why hurry
Their thoughts don't make sense
Mine leap
They look at the ground
Look up
Nobody looks over at me
I smile
They don't expect little things
Like me
Only if they saw me
in space

Trust

A murderer was told to be near
We trusted no one out of fear
Together we hid away
Protecting each other for all our day
I was scared to have to let you go
Always wondering if you would show
Men and women fell to become the earth
That was when we realized what life was worth
I told you that it was my time to fight
But you commanded me to stay out of sight
I was tired of being afraid
That was the day I disobeyed
I followed you without you knowing
Feeling the adrenaline flowing
You seemed different than the you I know
Then I saw a man tied up in ropes
I waited for you to free him with your knife
But instead I watched you take a life
The hands I washed now red with blood
My emotions drowned me like a flood

Betrayal is the strongest of all
The feeling that quiets heart's call
I refuse to let myself scream your name
Instead I keep following you the same
This time you start closing in on a child
I can't see any more bodies piled
My satchel gets lighter as I pull out my gun
I come out into the light as the girl starts to run
Your head whips around in surprise
I raise my gun and close my eyes
I pull the trigger and hear the bullet fly
The first thing I see is the blue of the sky
You cry over your bloody foot
You keep telling me it is not how it looks
I stare at you and try to hate
But I want to believe it was a mistake
The truth is clear as I tie you up and ignore your cries
Then over his head I put this sign
It says 'this is the murderer decide his fate'

Julie Glover

Take My hand

Chapter One: Summer Camp Begins

June, 1, 2014

Dear Diary,

I'm so excited for camp! A whole summer spent away from family making new friends and meeting possible boyfriends! Haha! This summer is going to be great! We are currently on our way to Camp Yutam! My mom thinks I'm weird for writing all the time but I think it's fun! I can express myself while keeping it to myself! It's a win-win! I see the sign. Camp Yutam! Woo-hoo!!!

Fifteen minutes of being at camp and I'm already regretting it! Summer is going to be horrible! I miss seeing my family! This is so dumb!

Ooh! Never mind! I think I just saw a possible boyfriend! Awe man! My bunk mate Jennifer just saw what I wrote. She is shunning me now. It turns out she dated him last summer, I have to go scope things out!

June 2, 2014

Dear Diary,

Camp isn't that bad I guess. I mean Jennifer hates me now, and I figured out the dude's name. That's a plus. It turns out we share survival class together! Not Jennifer, the hot guy. Survival class was fun, we both got to shoot arrow heads at a target. I purposely shot it wrong, he put his arms around mine to show me how to shoot. Then instantaneously I knew how to shoot. His crystal clear blue eyes looked into mine, I saw his dark brown hair flowing in the wind, and his name tag just sitting on his chest perfectly! Did I mention he is a councilor? A hot one at that! He is just 5 years older than me, I mean he's pretty young looking for a 16 year old!

June 3, 2014

Dear Diary,

I seriously have a problem! I love this guy so much, I'm scaring myself! Today at dinner I was eating my pie and I said to his face that he was dreamy! Ugh! Total fail! Of course I saved myself big time by saying "Oops, I mean the pies are creamy!" He believed it, then chuckled. He is so cute! Uh oh! My cabin councilor found me writing. Got to go, write to you tomorrow!

June 4, 2014

Dear Diary,

I was just told that there was a dance for the camp, girls ask boys! This summer just keeps getting better and better! I'm obviously going to ask creamy pie boy! He will have to say yes, it's in the rules!

"Want to go to the dance with me?" I asked "I can't." He replied "Why" I asked confused "Because, Jennifer asked me already, sorry" He said unrealistically. "Wow. Just when I thought my first time being out of the house was going to be good I get turned down after a few days! I'm calling my mom, getting out of here and never leaving the

house again!" I may have stretched the truth a bit, still, it was mainly true. I almost never leave the house, I hate not being at home so... Anyways.

I stormed off crying going to the phone booth. He didn't even run after me! I HATE CAMP!!!

June 5, 2014

Dear diary,

I want to leave. The dance is tonight, I have nobody to go with. Speak of the dummy, here he is with his dumb girlfriend. "Hey, can I talk to you in private. Like alone alone?" He asked. "Why? Are you just going to make me want to leave even more by telling me why you turned me down again and how I had "nothing" to do with it"? Leave me alone!" I said in the cabin. Other girls crowded around us in a circle. "Come on! I need to talk with you" He said persistently. "Fine" I said. "Just go with wannabe Britney Spears!" Jennifer said. At that moment I had had enough. I kicked her right in the chin. Girls started verbally attacking me. Saying that I would get kicked out of camp harder than I kicked her. I replied back with whatever. Dreamy boy dragged me out of the mess and told me to run as fast as I could with him. So I did

Later on we stumbled upon nightfall. We had circled around the campground about 20 times without getting caught. The dance was going on, and we boycotted it. It was getting dark out. We started talking about our lives, and soon it went on to our love lives! We both obviously liked each other. The cabin doors opened. I knew I was in trouble so we headed back to receive punishment.

There was a motorcycle attack. It was weird. Motorcycles circled around for a while when we were walking back. We slipped in the mud and got soaked. We started laughing. Then I started crying. Hoping that this day would never end. He said three simple words : Take My Hand. I did, and I never wanted to let go

Taking the Jump

She was pushed too far
She had enough
She was going to take the jump
To end all things she had ever known
To get away from the world
She was going to take the jump
"Go kill yourself" they said
"Nobody likes you" they said
She took their request
Standing on top of the mountain
The mountain of her thoughts
She was about to take the jump
She stepped forward
And felt herself falling
She made the choice
She took the jump
Her life ended
Within seconds
She was gone
Never to be found
She told her mom she went out for a walk
She never said that it was off a mountain
Or that she wasn't going to be back ever
Soon months past

Her mom wondering and praying every day
Wanting her baby back
There were police reports
Everyone missed you
Even the people who told you to die wanted you back
Years after you were gone life functioned different
Outside was like a huge rain cloud of silence and sadness
Raining on them until the day they die
Everyone misses you
Yet you aren't there to see it
You took the jump

Crazy Mystery

Lexi awoke to many voices and beeps. When her eyes first opened, everything was blurry, and she heard a man say, "I don't think she's gonna make it."

Now her vision was getting clearer, but still she was so confused and in so much pain.

"Where...what's going on?" Lexi struggled to say.

A male voice said, "You're in the hospital sweetie. You're hurt, but we'll figure everything out." Then a cop came into the room. He looked at Lexi with stern eyes.

"Where did you find her?" he asked.

"In the woods. Did you find anything?" The cop drew in a deep breath.

"Well," he said, "she's not the first one to be found all torn up in the woods lately. There's either a man or a crazy animal on the loose!" Lexi started moaning, and got restless. She knew the lunatic. She had all the answers, but refused to believe them.

"Jonas! No! Don't leave me! Don't leave me, I won't tell!" The doctor and the cop were suddenly alarmed. The doctor thought she was hallucinating, but the cop thought this was some evidence to find the killer. But just in case, the doctor told the nurse, "Give her some sleeping medication, and write down what she just said."

The nurse did as she was told, and Lexi fell asleep quickly....

At first everything was black. Then she saw trees, many of them. There were oak trees, pine trees, and the sound of birds. Ahh, she was in the woods, her most favorite place in the whole world. Lexi found herself sitting against a tree, admiring her ring. Jonas had given it to her. He said she was his motivation, his purpose in the world. Then she looked up, and there he was.

"Hi!" she smiled as he helped her up.

"I need to tell you something," he whispered. Then, he told her. It was that his family was to run away, and Lexi had to keep a secret.

"What secret?" Lexi got a little anxious as Jonas leaned in closer, then very softly whispered in Lexi's ear.

"I'm a dangerous werewolf and I'm hungry."

Lexi's eyes widened and she tried to push him away but she was too late. He started attacking her like she was an animal too. It seemed to go on for hours. At one point, and Lexi didn't know when, she stopped fighting. It hurt too much so she lied there, near death, on the forest floor.

All of a sudden Jonas stopped. He looked at Lexi and started crying. "I'm sorry," he said. "Oh my goodness, I'm a monster!"

He sat there for a while panicking, and after what now seemed like years, there were sirens. They were coming closer and closer, very fast.

Jonas ran. He ran for dear life. He ran from everything. He ran to forget what he just did to Lexi.

"Jonas! No! Don't leave me! Don't hurt me, I won't tell!"

Lexi woke up, sweating, and panting. "It just happened again," she said. "But he didn't want to. But he tried to." She laid on her hospital bed, debating whether it was worth it or not.

Lexi struggled to get up. It hurt so bad but she needed to do it.

Then a man came in and said, "Oh no no no, don't do that baby."

"Excuse me?" she said, but then she saw his hand. It was Lexi's ring. Then she looked up. There he was. "Jonas?" Lexi said baffled.

"I'm so glad you're safe. I called 911 as soon as I saw him killing you. I'm just so glad you're alive."

"But it was you," said the confused girl. "You turned into a werewolf."

Jonas stared down at the ground, and squeezed Lexi's hand.

"It's gone now. It's dead. I'm just me. You don't have to worry. I'm going to protect you now."

Lexi laid her head down. This was all too much.

Then the cop came into the room. "I think we found it. It's a wolf"

"Good," she said. Lexi smiled and looked over at Jonas. But he was gone.

Blind

The wet dew brushed up against my skin as I laid in the cold grass. The sparkles on the front of my loose tank top made the fabric that brushed against my skin unbearably itchy. My jean shorts covered till a little above my knee, but I could feel the bugs biting at ankles. My long soft hair flowed out next to me onto the ground, slowly getting soaked in the dew.

I closed my eyes, not that it mattered, and took deep breaths, trying desperately to calm myself. To no avail. My bare feet played aimlessly in the grass as I tried not to think about what just happened. Taking in sharp breath, I slowly started to reminisce about what got me to that point.

I remembered when I first met Max. I had been fifteen and just finished my freshman year of high school. I had started looking into ways to get money so I could go to college. My family was doing fine, but not well enough to send me to college, and the Cs I got wouldn't get me a scholarship anywhere. Not to mention playing sports was impossible.

I was at the doctor's, again, when a man approached me. I heard him sit down next to me, "Hi." the deep voiced man said, "I'm Max. You're Vanessa, right?"

"Yeah," I answered honestly, but suspiciously.

"I heard you're blind."

"I heard whomever gave you my records should be fired." I shot back.

He laughed, "No records, just rumors."

"Well people should learn to shut up and mind their own business. I'm blind, so what! I wish people would stop making such a huge deal out of it!" I had been blind my whole life. I was born that way. I didn't know any different. Everyone always told me how sorry they were for me, but I was fine the way I was. At least I thought I was.

"I run a team of scientists who are working with new unknown biochemicals to try and fix health problems such as eyesight." Max explained, "Or well, a lack thereof." "So what? Why do I care?"

"Well don't you want to see?" Max asked. I shrugged. "We are looking for a test subject for the biochemicals, I was hoping that could be you." "Wait, you want to test a bunch of unknown biochemicals on me? You're aware the I'm blind not stupid right?"

He laughed again. "Yes, I know. I was hoping maybe you would test them if we paid for you to go to college."

"Ok, but if you aren't sure what any of these biochemicals do, some could be unstable and dangerous. I don't think money for college will do me much good if I die before I even get on campus."

"None of the chemicals should be deadly."

"Key word is 'should' there. I still don't understand why I would help you. I don't even care about seeing that much."

"You may not care, but you know that other people care."

He was right. Sometimes I would come in for a standard appointment, and the doctor will be telling someone they are permanently blind. I've heard a grown man reduced to tear that he would never be able to see his beautiful wife again. I've heard mothers scream, sob, and beg for help when they found out their child was blind. I've heard teenage girl one time on the phone with her friend, scared out of her mind that the teenage boy who was stalking her would try to beat her or take advantage of her, and that she wouldn't be able to defend herself because she was blind.

I may be used to it. I may have had to deal with it my whole life. I may not care, but other people care.

"Fine," I said reluctant, "You can run your tests on me, but I want an ironclad contract that you will pay for me to go to college." "Done." They got me the contact in less than a week. I signed it and we started testing the next day.

The first day they did a bunch of testing, mainly on my eyes, but they also checked the basic things like my heart beat and blood pressure. They had to take some blood, which wasn't fun, but I dealt with it. They did a little bit of light stress testing, walking and strength testing, stuff like that, but not much. Luckily, it was summer so I had time to do all of that. They told me the first day would take the longest because they had to run so many tests, all of which were "necessary" to the experiment.

Max didn't come by till the end of the day. "Hey Vanessa. How were the tests?" "Annoying and long, but at least they're over with." "Yes, well, we have the chemical we want to test first here. This one had the highest chances of being successful when we did our calculations. If you're ready we can inject it now." "Wow, don't waste any time do you? Yeah, sure, go ahead."

"Ok, so the way the tests will work is, we will inject, what we figure is, a normal dosage of the chemical into your bloodstream, like a shot. Then the next few time you come in we will run more tests to determine if it worked. If it doesn't work within two weeks we try a new chemical. We keep trying till we figure it out." As he was talking I heard metal clicking in the background as they got the injection ready. "Ok?"

"Ok." I replied. "Alright, hold out your arm please." I held my arm in front of me as Max's hand came to meet it. He gently moved my arm so he could inject the chemicals. "Ok, you'll feel a slight pinch in three, two, one." The needle punctured my skin and the chemicals entered my bloodstream. He was right about it being like a shot, it just hurt more. A lot more.

I fidgeted a little at the pain. I tried to stop when Max said, "Stay still please." But it was hard. I moaned as the pain slowly spread through my arm to the rest of me. "Almost done." Max assured. After what felt like an eternity, but was probably only a few second later, Max said, "And done." As he slowly pulled the needle out of my arm.

"Oh thank goodness!" I sighed as I laid back.

"That bad?" He asked.

"Um... Yeah! That sucked! It was incredibly painful! So thank you for that!"

"Sorry, but, hey," he said in a look on the bright side-ish attitude, "Imagine how great it will feel if we can give people the ability to see."

"Yeah, yeah." I sassed slowly forgetting why I agreed to this. I ran my fingers through my hair.

"You know, you have very beautiful brunette hair, it would be so wonderful if you could be able to see it. You're a very pretty young girl." "Thanks. Hey Max?" "Yeah?" "What do you look like?"

"Well, I don't know, um... Old, I look old. I'm sure you can probably tell by how I sound, but I'm in my early 50's. And I have gray hair, not that that probably means much. I don't know, I look average. You'll just have to see for yourself if we can make that happen."

"Fair enough. So what do I do now? Just go home and live life normally?" "Pretty much. Just come back tomorrow, and if you feel woozy, queasy, or uneasy in anyway call here immediately."

"Got it."

So I did exactly that. I went home and lived life normally. I was fine the whole time so there was no reason to call anyone there. The next day I went in and they evaluated me again.

They checked my vitals and the usually stuff before moving on to my eyes. They ran test, but I told them right off the bat I still couldn't see. They said they wanted to do a little bit of stress testing too, just check that the chemical had no effect on the rest of me.

First they had me walk again. It was normal. When that was done they brought me over to a bunch of weights and slowly increased them to see how much I could lift. I started with the five, I lifted it like nothing. Then the ten, it was same as the five. Then the fifteen, it was still easy to lift. Then I picked up the twenty-pound weight, lifting it above my head like it was nothing. Yesterday, I could barely lift the ten. They started increasing the weight by larger margins, and I continued to lift them with ease. They kept checking to see if I was having a hard time lifting the weights, but I said no every time. Eventually they increased to the highest weight they had, and it was still easy to lift. They said ok, and I set the last weight back down.

"Max!" Will, one of the other scientists, called, as I heard static buzzing in the background. "You need to come here immediately!" I heard a walkie-talkie beep, then Max saying, "I'll be right there."

"What's going on?" Max asked when he got to us a minute later. "You have to see this. Sam, guide Vanessa back to the weight." Will commanded. Sam gently grabbed my left hand and placed it on the weight. "Vanessa, can you please lift that for me?"

"Will, she wasn't lifting above a ten yesterday."

"Just watch, sir. Vanessa."

I wrapped my hand tightly around the weight. I lifted it into the air like nothing. I held it there for a minute, then Will said it was ok to put it down, and I slowly lowered it to the ground.

"Incredible!" Max marveled.

Then him and the rest of the scientists when on to talk about how this happened and a bunch of other scientific crap that just totally went over my head. Basically the just of it was I now had superpowers. Permanent superpowers. It was something the chemicals became a part of my blood stream or something, but I wasn't paying that much attention, so most of that went over my head too.

The next day they ran some more test, then decided to try another chemical. The day after that they found the new chemical gave me enhanced speed, not that it does a blind girl much good, and it too was permanent. I found it hard to do anything at normal speed at first, even talking, but I quickly got used to slowing down.

They continued injecting chemical, they always added one new one per day, and the chemicals continue to give me superpowers. None of the chemicals gave me the original goal of being able to see though.

By the end of the summer I had just about every superpower in the book. I could fly, move things with my mind, shoot fire from my finger, etcetera.

They weren't sure why, but the chemicals only had an effect on me. They brought in a couple other people to test who had been blind since birth too, and nothing happened. They tried the chemicals on people who had been able to see their whole life, and nothing there either. They couldn't figure out exactly why, but it was just me.

They continue to monitor me on a regular basis, but when I was ready to go to college they stopped. They didn't want to, but they had to send me, and I still wanted to go. They knew it would be too hard to keep an eye on me on campus, and besides they trusted me enough to leave me alone.

The summer before college I met Eric. He had just gotten his bachelor's degree at one university and was starting at the same college as me in the fall.

He saw me a lot at school and often came up and talked to me when he did. We would find somewhere to sit when we both had time so we could talk. You know without having someone from the school standing over me tell me to take exactly a half inch step to the left to avoid a pothole that could potentially "throw me off balance."

About a month into that year he asked me out. We have been dating ever since.

I never told him about my superpowers. I had never told anyone. I was scared people would look at me like I was even more of a freak than they already do.

But today something changed. Something wonderful. Eric proposed. I didn't expect it. I mean, we had been dating for two and a half years, but I still wasn't expecting it. When he proposed I explained everything about my powers. He was shocked, and wasn't sure I was telling the truth. Then I picked up our king sized bed with one hand. Yeah, I'm pretty sure he believed me after that.

I didn't stick around to find out. I stumbled out of the house and went into the backyard. I laid down in the grass and took in the warmth of the sun like a plant. Even though it was early it was hot outside. Or maybe it was just me overheating from the stress. I couldn't have been outside for more than a minute before Eric came and sat down next to me. He pulled me up off the ground into his arms. I wrapped mine around him and cried. "I'm so sorry." I said though my sobbing, "I know I should have told you before, but I..."

"Shhh, it's ok. I get it." Eric said trying to make me feel better. "Well, kind of. This whole engaged to a superhero thing is new to me," I chuckled as my crying slowed. "But I love you, so I'll figure it out. Well, actually, I guess we technically aren't engaged. You still haven't give me your answer. So, let me try this again. Vanessa, will you marry me?"

"Yes!"

Eric tilted his head down, lifted mine to his, and kissed me. When the kiss stopped we slowly pulled away.

Colors started to fade into view. I saw the vibrant light blue of the sky dancing in my eyes as my blurry vision started to clear. I looked up and saw Eric's beautiful light brown hair and spectacular blue eyes. I blinked a couple times, not quite believing it, but it was true.

For the first time in my life, I could see.

Fire in the Sky

In an alleyway in New York City, a girl called Liana was hiding. But she didn't know that something very big was hiding in her. Suddenly, three teenage boys walked into the alley. The biggest one thundered, "Come out you little snitch!" Liana scooted closer to the wall. She saw an old pot and threw it at the biggest boy. He yelled and dodged it. Liana saw her chance and ran past the boys! She ran past into another alley. She was trapped. They came closer. The boy on the right cracked his knuckles and snickered. Liana was scared. Suddenly, a huge burst of blue light shot in all directions! Her eyes turned completely white. The boys screamed and ran. Liana started to fall. The sky was getting darker. And then everything went black.

Dim light was all around her. Then, a voice whispered. "Are you awake?" She looked up. A girl with waist-length blonde hair was looking at her. Liana stood up noticing she was in a big room with many beds. They were in a giant tree. "Yeah I'm awake but where are we, and who are you guys?" The blonde-haired girl replied, "Well, this is Firevale. I'm Aleah". She gestured to the people who had just come in, "That's Elizabeth, Noah, and Anora." Elizabeth had jet black hair with a blue streak, Noah had short blonde hair and green eyes, and Anora had long orange hair with red tips. "Well thanks for taking me in." said Liana. She heard a deafening roar! "What in the world was that?!" Aleah smiled, "Your dragon." "Come with me.

"Liana followed her into a tunnel. "Wait, I have a dragon?!" Aleah smiled and replied, we all do. Noah will explain later." When they reached the end, it opened up into a huge cave. Then, she saw them. Dragons the size of two cars, were perched in little caves in the wall. The first one was what looked like a fire dragon. It had bright red scales and yellow horns. The second was an earth dragon. Bright green scales and a bird beak made this dragon beautiful. The third was a deep blue dragon with webbed feet. She looked up at a huge golden dragon with emerald horns and jewels. "That's Noah's dragon, Ace." said Aleah. "And there's yours." Liana's dragon was a brilliant white with scattered blue scales and sapphires. "Well, what will you name her?" Liana thought for a moment. The dragon looked like a queen sitting atop her throne. So she replied, "I'll name her, Regina." Aleah smiled. The other dragon riders were running in now. "Shadow's coming Aleah! Get Liana saddled and get your dragon." Noah sounded worried. "Who's Shadow?" Liana asked. Lightning shot across the sky. "That's Shadow."

Aleah

Aleah began to run around the cavern and grab supplies. "Here. Grab this." Aleah tossed a white and blue saddle to Liana. "Ok, can someone please explain what is going on?" asked Liana. "Shadow is an elemental dragon rider who is trying to take and control our dragons," she explained. Aleah stroked her dragon, Ivy. "I won't let him get you girl." "Hop on!" Aleah hoisted Liana up onto Regina. "Wait I'm supposed to ride her?!" Liana was toying with the reigns like a horse. "Yeah! Don't worry it's fun." As the dragons took off, Liana screamed. Aleah laughed to herself. She had been riding since she was 8 years old. It was never scary, Ivy had never let her fall. She spotted Noah leading Elizabeth and Anora toward the dark cloud. "What...is that?" Liana stammered. There was a huge dark storm cloud in the air. Aleah looked closely into it. Someone about Noah's age was in the middle. He had a mask and a black cloak, but his dragon was the biggest thing. It was jet black with red spikes and tattered wings, but it flew fine. "So, what do we do?" asked Liana looking scared yet determined at the same time. Aleah

answered, “Regina knows what to do. We have instincts that make us have better reflexes. But right now we need to stay back.”

Suddenly, Noah charged! His dragon Ace was gliding straight toward the middle. Noah yelled, “Now!” On cue Aleah stroked her dragon’s frill, and spikes came shooting out of Ivy’s horns. They shot at Shadow, who had been distracted by Noah. He whipped around and threw both hands in the air. A black energy shield formed in front of him. The spikes bounced off and fell to the earth! He saw Aleah and his dragon shot black sharp spines directly at Liana. “No!” screamed Aleah. Liana held up her hands to shield her face. The arrows froze in front of her and dissolved. “H-How? “Great block Lia!” exclaimed Aleah. Shadow yelled to his dragon, “Retreat Hades! We have found the girl!” Aleah yelled, “Noah shoot!” Noah quickly steered Ace back towards the cloud. Ace shot golden flames at Shadow, who quickly turned around and threw a dark sphere. He vanished and the dark cloud rolled away. “So close! Coward!”

Anora, the girl who had been close to the front, was hurling insults at the slowly disappearing cloud. “Yeah you stinkin’ scaredy cat!” Aleah laughed. “Calm down hot head. We won. Yet still, Aleah was shaken. “Noah, what did he mean by, “We have found the girl?” Noah seemed puzzled too. “I don’t know Leah, but it worries me.” Suddenly, Regina and Liana landed in the clearing. “That, was, AWESOME!! How did I even do that?!” Liana was trying to shoot ice at a flower, but it wasn’t working. “Well we’ve been wondering if you were the one, and I guess you are. We all have powers, just like our dragons. You... have ice. I have the elder power, Elizabeth has water, Aleah has forest, and Anora has fire.” Both inside and out.” Aleah chuckled. “Hey!” everyone laughed. “Ok let’s go back to Firevale. We can train you there.” Noah suggested.

Aleah headed back on Ivy, alongside Elizabeth. “So what do think of Liana?” she asked. “What do I think?” “Well I mean, she’s cool I guess.” Elizabeth looked uncertain. “Well she’s fine to me.” Aleah replied. They got back to Firevale and landed in the cavern. “Ok, I’m going to show you the dragons.” Aleah took Liana over to a big blue dragon. “That’s Mako.” Aleah told her. “She’s Elizabeth’s dragon.” Next she walked over to a sleeping dragon that looked like a bird. “Hi Ivy.” The dragon looked up and made a purring noise. “This is my dragon. She is extremely friendly.” Liana reached out and stroked the dragon’s head. Then, a huge burst of flame shot out of a cave in the stone wall. A tree caught fire. “Ok, two questions. What was that?! And how is there a tree in a cave with no sun?” Liana asked. “That was Nora’s dragon.” Aleah replied. “And the tree? We have magic, and so does the wildlife.” Mako shot a stream of water at the tree, and it went out. “And that, was Pyro.” They walked over to another cave. A big red dragon with rippling muscles. “He likes chili peppers.” A long melodic sound came from everywhere. “Well I guess its lights out.” A girl the same age as Anora emerged from a tunnel. “Hi. My name’s Lauren. I’ll show you our room.” Lauren had mid-length brown hair and a music note pendant around her neck. “Follow me.” And they walked down the tunnel.

Liana

They reached the end of the tunnel and turned right. Liana was shocked by how hugely open it was compared to the narrow tunnel. It was a large open cave room with a balcony to the outside. Hanging from the ceiling were glowing crystals. Two beds and furniture were also included. “Wow!” Liana stepped out onto the balcony to a view of a mountainside. “Well I think I’m going to go to bed.” said Lauren. Liana climbed in bed. She looked up at the crystals. Then she heard a beautiful sound from the other side of the room. Lauren was playing a harp. “Lauren!” Suddenly two kids came running in. “Emma! Jonathan! W-what?” Emma looked just like Lauren, while Jonathan had black hair and a blue streak. “Can we sleep with you tonight? Please? Lauren gave Liana a pleading look. “It’s fine with me.” That night Liana couldn’t sleep. She decided to step out on the balcony. She breathed the fresh air. She wasn’t homesick. She had always depended on the alleyways for food and shelter. She thought about her parents. They had left her when she was little, and her grandma took care of her. But when she died, there was no one left.

Suddenly a blue light shone from far away. Liana felt an urge to go to it. She looked down far below. She couldn't just climb down. "Hmm..." She waved her hand and a small ice slide appeared. "I can't believe I'm doing this." She mumbled. She sat down, and slid down the ramp! When she reached the bottom, she could see the blue light. It was small and looked sort of like, a person? She walked deeper into the forest. Then, she came to a clearing. The figure was in the center. "Who, are you?" she asked. Nothing. Liana walked closer. Suddenly, a laugh came from nearby and the light vanished! Liana whipped around and saw a dark hooded figure. "Foolish girl, don't you know what happens to curious minds?" He stepped out. "Shadow." Liana addressed him. "Attacking me alone? One against you and your men? Coward." She was scared, but she wasn't about let him know it. "You have been hidden from me since I learned about you." sneered Shadow. "But no longer!" Liana looked around; there was no way she could run from this guy. He pulled his hood off of his head. He had dark hair and red eyes. "You are coming with me Liana." Before she could react, He thrust out his hand and, dark mist flew out of it. The mist touched Liana's chest and then she fell, the world darkening around her.

Noah

Noah was in a forest. He saw a blue light and followed it. "Hey! Wait!" he protested as it flew faster. A flash of light! A girl with blonde hair in a hooded figure's arms. "Liana!" He called to her, but she was apparently unconscious. He kept calling to her and chasing after the figure. The scene was fading. "Liana!" He woke up! Breathing hard, he got out of bed. He ran past each bedroom. When he got to Aleah and Elizabeth's room, he woke them up hurriedly. "Elizabeth, rally the riders. Shadow has Liana. "What?!" Aleah shot out of bed. Lauren came running into the doorway. "We need to leave now!" Noah looked out their window. "I just hope we're not too late.

I'm Human, I'm Monster

I'm human, I'm monster

I weep and I hunger

Inside I'm torn, outside I'm whole

It's burrowed deep in my soul

The monster hides, never showing its face

As I fight and run a losing race

A race to my soul

To fight for control

When it wins, all is lost

When it loses, I lust

For its strength is addicting

But my body is not predicting

What it'll do to those I love

And what I'll do to stay above

For I do not control it and it does not control me

Hopefully now you'll see, what it means to be me

Love

What is love? Some people say it's magic, some people say it's evil. But me? I don't really know. There are many forms of love, love of a sister, love of a pet, love of a friend, love of a girlfriend, love of a wife.

Sometimes people find love like it's nothing, other times people spend all their lives to find it. Some people never find it and give up, others just never look.

I honestly don't know why there are multiple types of love.

Let me put it this way, there are 2 sides; The side that says its good and the side that says its bad., I've honestly seen my very fair share of good and bad, but I'm not prone to one side like a lot of people are.

What I like to do is see "both sides of the coin" so to speak.

Now some people might say I'm heartless and some people might say I have a huge heart, I can't say which is true to be honest. But anyway, the way I see it is that there are many forms of love and different people do better with different forms.

I've rambled on for long enough and I think I got off track a bit, sorry about that. All I know for sure is that love is there and there's nothing we can do about it.

I personally think it's best to look into it, maybe see where it leads you. If it's for you than you'll know, if it's not then you'll know.

Well like I said, I don't take a side.

All I can do is leave it up to you to decide for yourself what you see love as. But then again what do I know?

I'm either heartless or huge hearted remember?

Cate Patten

The Battle of the Wordsmiths

Why must language bear constraints?
Roald Dahl knew this
He understood the constraints
Of the English Language
When you grasp for a word
But catch nothing
Other than half-synonyms
He understood
That to really be free while writing
You can't just wait for the right word to come your way
You create a word
A word that is as perfect as perfect can be
How do you think
Our English Language grew so?
There had to be innovators
Rebels
Who made the right words
Wordsmiths
Who used their minds to shape them
Word Shakers
Who rearranged them
Into a true picture
So clear you could see the setting yourself
Whose tone and personal colloquialisms
Prevailed against the monotony
The drudgery
The monochrome
Of reality
The fight against reality has long been fought
And
Despite our hardships
We have won so many victories
Charlotte's Web
The BFG
Alice in Wonderland
The Wizard of Oz
Liesel and Po
A Wrinkle in Time
Where everyone gets what they deserve
Where we can reside
If only for a few precious hours
In another world
Another time
In the humble
The phizzwizard-like
The curious

The wonderful
The ineffable
And the tessered
Words of another
But eventually we retreat
We surrender
We let the monotony win
But every day
Another victory is written
Every day
We are ready to fight for our freedom
For we know that there is more than just us
And we are ready to share our own worlds
Our own words
We are the wordsmiths
And nothing crushes us

Waves

As I looked out on the beach, seagulls flew overhead, their noisy caws disrupting the beautiful scene. My brother, Leo, didn't particularly care, and immediately began to imitate them in the most annoying way possible. I lightly punched him on the shoulder. "Ow!" he complained, glowering. I shrugged. "You were being annoying."

He rolled his eyes (a talent of his) and began to wade into the water. I walked off, bored, and studied the beach. Most of it was just one long stretch of sand, filled with colorful seashells, glistening pink and turquoise in the sunlight. The beach was fairly small, about 100 square meters, I estimated. My father was a carpenter, so I was good at guessing how big a space was. But it was the ocean that my eyes drifted to almost immediately, and they stayed there, transfixed by its beauty. It was blue, like the pictures of the ocean you see in magazines, the pictures that are altered by computers to look picture perfect. But this really was that wonderful, with a golden brown beach and no trash in sight. The water was crystal clear, and its blue waves were more dazzling than any sight I had ever seen. Even sapphires couldn't match its cerulean sparkle. I half wished I could stay there forever, watching the glimmering waves crash to the shore as they burst into droplets of water. I tried to tear my gaze away, but each surge of crystalline water transfixed me anew. I was almost afraid of how long I would have stayed if I had been left alone. Suddenly, yet unfortunately, I was broken out of my reverie by panicked splashing. I snapped my gaze away from the ocean, turning towards the source of the desperately continuing sound.

It was Leo. Leo, who couldn't swim without a life jacket. Leo, who was at least ten yards away from the shore. As annoying as he was, I was his older sister, and he wasn't going to drown, not on my watch!

"Leo, you okay?" I shouted, my voice carried impeccably by the wind. I half harbored the hope that he really was okay, and I was just overreacting. Somehow, though, I knew he wasn't. He nodded in reply, but that single motion almost sent him under. He smacked at the water desperately, as if it would stop him from sinking like a rock. I was pretty sure it wouldn't. Leo was definitely not okay. I began to paddle out, so worried I almost lost my ability to keep going. I went as fast as I could, but it felt like it took forever. I was almost there, only a yard away from him, when it happened.

Suddenly, Leo shrieked and went under, thrashing wildly. I leapt forward, hoping to stop it, but it was too late. He had gone. But he was still fighting, I could tell, his kicks still sent up waves of water, splashing against me. I swam in circles, somehow still hoping that I could find him. That he was okay. Then the water was still, with no sign of my brother having gone under at all. Soft ripples were all that remained. I screamed his name, hoping against hope itself that I had misunderstood the scene, even though I knew that wasn't true. My brother was gone. Then a sharp pain in my ankle pulled me down into the water's shadowy depths. I kicked out, and my foot connected with something.

The something, however, didn't give up. In the dim light, I could only make out one thing: the shark. With razor sharp teeth, still biting into my ankle. The shark that killed my brother, and in a few seconds I would be dead, too. I tried to yell, but nothing came out except a few bubbles, and now I had no breath left. My lungs filled with water, and my chest burned, pleading for air. As my vision faded, I looked up, remembering the beautiful, azure waves, wanting that to be my last thought. I wondered how beautiful they were, really. Perhaps if I hadn't been so enchanted by them, I could have saved Leo. Waves crowded my mind. Waves. Deadly, beautiful waves. Then everything went black.

Navya's Knowledge

Long ago, in a small Indian village surrounded by miles of green forests, there lived a young girl named Navya Riya Jindal, but she went by Navya. Her family lived in a lavish home that was quite big. Her house fanned out in the back with a smaller separate house for the slaves to reside in. The home itself was made of the traditional mud bricks, but in the front of her home was a medium sized courtyard with a large, costly fountain. The inside of the home was gorgeous with expensive vases and valuable murals on the walls. Navya herself lived an elegant lifestyle. She was an extravagant beauty with grand taste in fashion and looks. Her mounds of silky black hair were always combed, and her small hands were always free from dirt and grime, unlike the other children of her village. She always had the most expensive sari because her father was a government worker. Whenever the people of the village saw her, they gasped in astonishment, for she was the most beautiful girl they had seen. However, when they spoke to her, they quickly realized that her beauty did not transition to her character. Navya was glamorous, elegant and captivating, but she was stubborn and haughty. Her true demeanor showed when she reached the age where she was taught how to read and care for her family and home.

Her mother was to teach her, and she was expecting her daughter to be an excellent student, attentive and astute. Days went by and Navya's mother noticed that Navya was rolling her eyes and zoning out when Navya was being taught new information, so she decided to confront her.

"Navya! Why are you not paying attention? Your pitā and I are concerned. You are not paying attention and you are rolling your eyes when I am talking about how to clean and cook," Navya's mother questioned.

"Listen, old woman! I am Navya Riya Jindal, and I am the prettiest girl in this village. I have no need to be taught how to cook and clean like homely looking girls need to," Navya scoffed. Her mother was astonished and became even more so when Navya stormed off. Navya's mother did the only thing she could do; she prayed. She prayed to the goddess of knowledge, music and the arts, Saraswati. She asked for her daughter to be willing to learn and to be a good maternal figure. This was a recurring action: Navya would be horrid to her distressed mother, and then her mother would pray to Saraswati. Finally Saraswati took notice of Navya's atrocious attitude and decided to do something about it.

It was just a normal school day, and Navya had just stormed off after an argument with her mother. It was possible to see the smoke billowing out of Navya's ears. Navya was sitting in the courtyard fuming when a woman landed in the middle of the courtyard and stepped off of her large white swan. Then she approached Navya. The woman was covered in an elegant white sari with orange accents. Her wrists were adorned with many gold bracelets and cuffs. Her long black hair cascaded down her back, and on her head lay an extravagant head piece. Her extravagant headpiece was made of solid gold, and there was a single red stripe around the border of the headpiece.

"Navya," said the woman calmly, "I have come to tell you something. I am the goddess Saraswati!" Navya then glanced up at the woman but still didn't pay much attention.

"What have you come to ask me?" Navya questioned as her voice hinted a bit of curiosity.

"You have shown a great amount of disrespect, and that is not to be tolerated. I have lost my patience with you after giving you countless times to try and turn around your attitude. So I have come to give you a choice. I will give you one last chance to be respectful and learn the motherly nature and knowledge that will take you

farther in life than your beauty. If you do not choose this, you will be forced to endure a severe punishment. I will give you two days to make your choice," Saraswati said seriously. With that, she strode off to her swan and flew away leaving Navya to ponder her decision.

Navya told her family about her trouble in making the decision. Her family wanted her to be respectful and learn, but Navya did not want to lower her pride. Her family begged and pleaded with her, urging her to make the right decision.

"Navya! Don't be stupid. You need to be respectful and learn. Look at me; I was one of the lucky children to go to school because of pitā's privileges. Now I make three times what the average man makes, and I have five sons to carry on my family name," Navya's older brother expressed sensibly.

"Navya you should not deprive yourself the joys of being a mother. Mother taught me well. I have a better future than the slave girls and the farmer's wives. I will marry a high official, live comfortably and have children to raise. Dear sister, you will be well taken care of," Navya's older sister begged.

"Navya. You are lucky that you are not working the fields and are here being fed delectable Indian cuisine and clothed in silk. You should be grateful that I work so hard to provide for you. You have no right to be disrespectful to your mother," Navya's father screamed furiously. Her father was a serious man who was sensible and didn't understand his stubborn daughter.

"Oh Navya," Navya's mother began, "I am most disappointed in you because of your disrespect. You truly are blessed. I don't think I have ever told you the story of how your pitā and I met. We were close to your sister's age, maybe a few years older, and I was a slave girl captured in battle by your father's family. One day your father had stormed off, with just the temper you show, after the school master had beaten him for being clumsy. He had come in the back garden to calm down but he didn't know that my five sisters and I worked in the garden at that time every single day. We apologized over and over again for being there and asked if he would like us to return at another time. He said no, so we continued on working. This happened quite frequently until one day your father asked me a question; he asked me if I had ever been so prideful that I had lost sight of the blessings in front of me. I thought for a moment before answering him. I told him yes I had, but by the time I realized it, it was too late. Secretly every day we met in the garden to discuss things of all sort; meaningful remarks and childish ones. Then one day your pitā was at the age where his parents assigned him a bride. He had come to me to express his sorrow but that we were in two different worlds and we could simply not be together. Your pitā was the apple of your grandmother's eye. She noticed his remorse when they talked about marriage, and she noticed his joy whenever he came back from the garden. So one day, she decided to follow him to the garden and find out what was making him so happy. She saw that he lit up whenever he was around me, and she knew that she had to find a way for us to be together.

Later that day she called me into her chambers. She confessed that she had followed her son and had seen his attraction to me. She told me that her son and I must be together. She wasn't the most traditional mother, so she decided to dress me up like the daughter of an Indian official that I would be able to marry her son. When your pitā saw me, he was overjoyed, but he kept quiet and didn't tell his father that his future bride was really a slave girl. My sisters and family had to live a wretched life, and I had to watch them suffer. From then on I vowed that my family would live a life of comfort, but they would always be willing to help and respect anyone who was going through a troubling time. You are so blessed that you don't know what it is like to be poor, Navya. There are people who are sick, lame or old. There are slaves that are beaten for dropping a silver platter. You don't realize how blessed you are to even have the opportunity to go to school." Navya's mother began to cry softly. Navya pondered her decision and knew that she could either admit her mistakes or she could stand by her pride.

Two days passed quickly, and before she knew it, Navya was sitting in the courtyard waiting for Saraswati to arrive. When Saraswati arrived in her swan chariot, Navya was ready with her answer.

Wasting no time, Navya said, "I have decided that I would rather endure what you call a severe punishment than give you my pride to be respectful and learn. I am too much of a beauty to have to learn," Navya announced triumphantly, for she was as stubborn as a cow.

Saraswati didn't utter another word, but she grabbed Navya and threw her onto the swan. Navya began crying and realized that she was too stubborn and prideful. Saraswati's swan took Navya to the cliff on the far north of the island. The cliff and surrounding area was isolated but exquisite. The lush greenery of the cliff would hide Navya from any rescuers. Once there, Saraswati tied Navya to the cliff where she could never escape. Navya's tears flowed over the side creating a waterfall. Her tears would never stop, and the waterfall would serve as a reminder to everyone who saw the running water that looks on the outside are not as important as knowledge on the inside. For that water could pull you away from the path, just like being stubborn and prideful can pull you away from the path of life.

Red

It was evening and there was crunching. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*, Jamie thought. *Five, six, seven*, Jamie thought. Her feet switched and changed and switched and changed, leaving prominent footprints embedded in the thin layer of snow. The tall trees reached their bony fingers to the sky, looking as though they were trying to claw at it.

Jamie breathed in the cold winter air, remembering the reason she had left her house so abruptly. It was the yelling. The fighting that had erupted between her parents and sister almost every night since their 16th birthday last month. Jamie's fingers clasped around the pink and red bracelet on her wrist. The birthday gift from her twin. Since they were five years old, Marissa claimed that red was her special color and pink was Jamie's. Same color, different shade, she always said.

The sound of a twig snapping resonated through the forest. Jamie looked over her shoulder for the source of the noise, momentarily pausing the rhythmic crunches.

But there was nothing. Nothing for Jamie to see or hear. Nothing but her breath materializing in front of her face and the trees scraping the sky. Jamie continued on her way, stuffing her hands in her coat pocket. *Nothing*, Jamie thought.

But then she heard it again. It was more clear, a definite snap that stood out. This time, Jamie completely turned around ready to face whatever animal was stalking her.

Was stalking their prey.

"Marissa," Jamie breathed, letting out a relieved sigh. Her twin stepped out from behind the tree, taking a slow step towards Jamie. Her blonde hair was straightened, neatly falling around her face and her red dress hung off her frame elegantly. Jamie's sister looked like a sparkling ruby atop some thin clouds, but Jamie could tell something was off. It was the look in her eyes. Calculating yet carefree at the same time. A very dangerous combination when it came to Marissa.

"It's your fault, you know," Marissa said, dragging her gaze from the snowy forest floor to meet Jamie's similar eyes.

"I'm this way because of you."

Her voice came out so very calm. So very calm and emotionless that Jamie almost didn't recognize her identical voice that had been twisted into something else. Something so different.

"Maris-"

"No!" Marissa cut in sharply. "It's my turn! It's finally my turn! Why can't you understand that? It's always been about you. Jamie and her luscious blonde hair. Jamie and her skinny pretty little body. Jamie with actual friends and attractive guys falling at her feet. Jamie and her bubbly personality and innocent golden heart. Jamie, Jamie, Jamie, Jamie, *Jamie!* You were always so PERFECT!"

Jamie took a hesitant step back, astounded by her sister's speech. It was never like that. Marissa had always been the star of the show and Jamie her backup singer. Marissa had been the extroverted, likable one of the two as Jamie sat back in the shadows, too shy to try to communicate.

Jamie's small hands clenched into fists and she tried to understand what was happening. Sure, Marissa had been mad before, but Jamie had never been scared of her. Now, Marissa was letting go. All those emotions she had stored up were being released in the form of piercing word bullets.

"And me? I tried! I tried so damn hard to be flawless! I spent hours applying the precise amount of makeup. I bought the right clothes and took in the exact quantity of calories. I laughed when I was supposed to and I talked when I was supposed to. I paraded around like a little girl's

porcelain doll, and yet I could never be *perfect!*" Marissa yelled, her shrill voice echoing off the bare trees.

Jamie took another step back, sympathetic towards her sister's hurt but more afraid of the rage swirling in Marissa's icy blue eyes.

The sound of a crow cawing ahead stole Jamie's attention for a moment. She looked up and up and up until she located it. The bird flew around in circles above them and it was as dark as night. Its coat was a sleek black that completely stood out from the endless gray sky like a lightning bolt does on a stormy night.

Jamie's heart picked up speed as she tore her gaze away from the animal and back to her twin. Her sister looked like a well-organized mess. Marissa's form looked the same—shoulders back, back straight, and chin up—but something was happening with her eyes. Jamie squinted and realized what it was.

Marissa was crying. It was a completely silent cry and of course none of her make-up smeared—she always wore water proof makeup—but Jamie could still see it happening.

But then something strange occurred. As the tears rolled off her sister's face, Jamie watched them fall to the snow. It wasn't very noticeable at first, because it was so slight. But as each tear hit the snow, a redness leaked from that spot. It was almost as if the tears changed to red against the pure white canvas.

But before Jamie could find enough courage to inform her sister or take a brave step forward and comfort Marissa, Marissa beat her to it.

"But it doesn't really matter, now does it?" She said in a thoughtful and calculating manner. Jamie was speechless. What could she say that would make a difference? Her sister was past the breaking point now.

Marissa sauntered closer to Jamie. There was a pip in her step and a rhythm to her strides. Jamie recognized this stage as play time. The time when Marissa would toy with Jamie.

"Let's start with a story, shall we? Oh, we love stories! It will be *just like* when we would read books to each other when we were younger. Every other sentence, remember? Well I have a fun fairytale for you," she continued, a mean smile stretching across her pale lips.

"Once upon a time there was a terrible, terrible curse. How it came to be, nobody really knows. But that doesn't actually matter. This curse would change an innocent, loving child into a scaly and horrid monster. But you see, it only affected one family line. And of this family line it only changed one child in each generation. One child."

Her eyes snapped to mine.

"The eldest, Jamie."

Jamie felt her stomach turn over and over and over—like the contents of her stomach were tossed into a washing machine. Marissa couldn't be serious. Like she said it was just a story.

Marissa's cool demeanor fell off her body like the red tears that now slipped from her cheeks. Her straightened hair suddenly transformed into a blonde frizzy mess and her eyes flashed with hatred as she glared at Jamie. But maybe it wasn't hatred, Jamie thought. Maybe they really did just flash.

"It should have been you, you worthless piece of trash! *You ruined everything!* You should have been born first! You should have been born six minutes before me. It was a *stupid six minutes!*" Marissa screamed.

Marissa's body began to tremble, and in a different way than Jamie's shaking form. It seemed like her bones were being thrown and shaken around in her body. Her porcelain skin looked as though it was being peeled off her face and all Jamie could do was stare.

Stare at the peeled skin as it lay in a pile on the snow that was tainted red from her sister's tears. Stare at the bumpy scales that now covered her sister's face in a jagged pattern. Stare at the new reptilian skin that spread across Marissa's body like a sickening disease and the sharp teeth that jutted out from the mouth along with a forked yellow tongue.

Stare at the monster that now stood before her.

"Marissa?" Jamie squeaked, her heart fluttering in her chest. She tried to take a step back, but slipped on the snow and fell.

But it wasn't the coldness of the snow nor the soreness of her leg that registered in Jamie's mind. No, it was the monster that was advancing upon her. Jamie cried out and scrambled to get back on her feet. But after a moment, she figured it was useless. After a lifetime of spending day after day with Marissa by her side as her best friend and worst enemy, Jamie knew that Marissa wouldn't stop until she was finished with Jamie.

Jamie shut her eyes tightly and shivered from the snow that had worked its way up her forearm through her coat sleeve. She breathed in a deep breath of winter air and focused on the crunching of the snow beneath the monster's feet. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*, Jamie thought, counting the footsteps.

But suddenly the crunching stopped. Jamie's eyes flew open just as the shooting started. It all happened in such a fast second that Jamie barely understood it. The bullets that ripped into the monster. The shots from the guns that rang out from behind her and into the woods. The scream that erupted from her twin as the monster transformed in front of her eyes.

Marissa's body flopped to the ground and Jamie heard her parents' voices from behind her. But all Jamie could do was take in her last view of her twin sister. Her blood that now ran along her frail body and seeped into the red dress. Her blond hair that was littered with snow and her face that was still stained with tears. And last of all her dead eyes that stared at Jamie that were now red, red instead of their icy blue.

Red was her special color, Jamie thought as she sat down in the snow.

Sophomore Moment

I've been waiting for this moment ever since I watched my older brother win state. He pinned his ultimate enemy, settled it right on the mat. That was his moment. The moment he loved his high school life and couldn't imagine life outside of wrestling. Sophomore year was my year. I knew this feeling as I walked down the white tiled hallway surrounded by perky teachers and smiling students.

Pulling the metal locker handle up, I shove my backpack in the locker and grab my science book. Honestly, it sucks I have science first period because I will probably struggle to stay awake more than half of the time, but Mallorie also has it with me. Over the summer we became great friends; we are pretty much never apart. We were both the newbies at cheerleading tryouts. Although, we both cheered in junior high, Freshman year we sat back. Thankfully her locker was only two down from mine.

"Mal I need gum!" I yelled in her direction. "I've got you covered!" We walk into science, ignoring the seating chart, Mal tossed her stuff down on the desk right next to mine. I extend my hand in her direction, she put gum in my hand and says, "Choose truth or dare." "Dare." I unwrap the tin wrapper and cross my fingers for nothing too inappropriate to be written on it. Reading the white letters printed on the blue wrapper, I instantly wanted to change to Truth. Mal stole the wrapper from my hand and began to laugh.

"Tell someone how you feel about them." She read trying to control her laughter. "Well I don't like anyone so that can go in the garbage." "Amber you cannot be serious right now. I see the way your eyes watch Clay!"

"Mal! Uhm let me remind you I broke up with Graysen last night. I do not need one more obsessive guy in my life." "Whatever, we both know mentally you guys broke up like 3 months ago." Mal was right. After being with Graysen for two years, I had been preparing to break up with him since the beginning of summer. Don't get me wrong, he was nice and all, but way too controlling for someone like me.

Day one of school and I have barely made it to lunch without falling asleep. I quickly went to the cafeteria to save a table for the cheer team. Brittany and Kayla already chose a table for all of us, which was a relief because I had no clue what table everyone wanted. Pulling my chair out I said "Do you guys know what time the bus leaves after school?" "I am pretty sure it is 3:30, but that's sorta a guess." Kayla answered. Secretly I knew Kayla would have no clue, she is straight up a dumb blonde.

Goosebumps covered my legs as I sat on the cold locker room floor. Mal was bumping my hair for the cheer competition at the fair. As she was spraying hairspray on my hair I wondered if she knew each time she sprayed that nasty stuff it landed on my shoulder..not the hair. "Okay, okay I can get it from here." "Oh By the way I might have told Clay to come to the competition and to bring the football team with him." Flipping her hair back and laughing she walked away. "Don't forget there's a Karma!!!"

I slid so far into the leather bus seat; with each blink my eyelashes scrape more and more fog off the window. Two cheerleaders per seat is the rule, but with every person's bag it's more like 4 per seat. Mal knows I get the window seat no matter what. I pull Mal's ear bud out and whisper, "My stomach is so hungry!" "Mine too, I need fried pickles right now." "Dude, Same!" Apparently that came out a little loud because coach turned around and yelled, "Ladies, Focus." Something I will never understand is why coach actually thinks we have a shot at winning because no matter how hard we try, we come in second.

"Whoa, watch it there slick. My fries are worth more than your shoes." Says Clay sarcastically.

"Excuse me? You're the one that was walking with one eye open." "For the record that was a wink."

“ Well, whatever it was I don't quite think that girl would be interested in someone whose ego is larger than this country.” Flashing a sarcastic grin at Clay I left it at that went to find the team.

For this being my first competition with the school team, I'm having a lot more fun than I imagined. Our team is second to last, so we've pretty much been sitting and nervously waiting for our turn. Huge outside lights shine onto the blue floor mat, making each cheerleader visible through the outdoor darkness. Enhancing every white shoe hitting the floor, allowing judges to see pointed toes, and forcing a glisten from each pore that releases sweat. A spring floor; the platform cheerleaders compete on, is just like a football player's field. It's the place you give it your all, until there's nothing more that can be done.

Spiriting my way onto the mat I take position. Music starts, that's my cue. I jolt my head up, my eyes travel with my arms as I shove them toward the sky and push off the mat with both feet. Opening the routine with a skilled toe touch is the way to each judge's heart. Our routine was over in a flash. I honestly think we have a shot at placing first. Never has the team looked so stellar. Running off the mat we all begin to scream and pull each other in close for hugs as a sign of approval.

“Now take that excitement over to the one who drug himself and the football team here!” Mal said.

“Fine, but only so you'll give it up.” “Uh huh, sure that's the only reason, I've got to see this.”

“ There's nothing to...” My words trail off once I see Graysen trying to get in Clay's face. Every part of my body feels frozen. Numbness quickly shoots through me. Running faster than I ever have to reach them; I pull my hands up and lunge into Graysen with all my body weight, shoving him back. “What are you doing?” I blurt.

“I'm taking back what's mine!” “ I'm not yours, I'm not his, I'm not anyone's!!” Graysen looks over at Clay holding eye contact with him, which felt like hours. “Screw you Man.” Graysen pulls his keys from his pocket and walks off to the car, only leaving his words lingering behind. As I sit on the cold bus waiting for the bus driver to leave the lot I can't help but replay my evening. The argument was enough to shake a girl up, but add third place to the mix. So much for thinking sophomore year was mine.

Stepping off of the bus I notice a solid figure leaning up against the hood of my black Toyota. Not able to make out the figure I continue to squint my eyes, but quickly give up because still I can't figure it out. Approaching the toyota I realize the figure is Clay. Please go.” “No.” Rolling my eyes I pop the trunk then sling my overweight bag down. Truth is a piece of me was wanting to hear that. Grinning a little bit, I say, “I know you didn't come here for no reason, so when are you going to tell me why?” I'm not sure, I got home and then I had the urge to come see you.” “Ahh, well I don't know about you, but my stomach is so so hungry and I need to get some food.”

Clay was turning around headed towards his car. Confusing was consuming me. I begin to pick at my fingernails just standing there on the scratched up cement. “Are you coming or what?” Clay hollers as he climbs into the driver's seat of his car. Hearing him say that brought a weird feeling to the pit of my stomach, but I sat myself in the passenger seat any way. I was starting to think you were going to run.” “Why would I do that? Clearly you've misjudged me because I do struggle turning down food.” “Oh whatever, you couldn't turn down the opportunity to hang out with me.” Clay joking said while nudging my arm. A smile took over my face.

“ Well aren't you Mr. full of yourself! ” Raising my eyebrows I turn myself toward Clay and laugh. He grabs my hand and laughs with me, while steering the car. “Maybe Grayson was right earlier when he was accusing me of everything.” “ It's funny how we are the last ones to get on board with this idea isn't it?”

Looking past Clay out the window, my eyes catch the window sticker on the car passing us. I freeze, taking in the moment and replaying what I just saw.

Wrestling shoes.

“Isn’t It All Just Swell?”

There’s a moment
When things are serene
And at peace and in harmony
Right before the H- bomb drops
And decimates an innocent village.

What did they do
To deserve that?
Whose god did they anger?
Who chose the coordinates?
And guaranteed doomsday?
What was their point?

O, what delicate balance life is!
To feel like death but not be dead
And somehow still desire it so!
To think you’re finally out of the pit
Only to find yourself at the bottom again!
How clueless, how pointless, how stupid!

I gotta call life’s recruiter,
Tell him I didn’t sign up for this.
Gotta CTRL- ALT- DEL and force-quit,
Call customer service for a refund.
Wish I could just leave the show and sell my ticket to someone else.
I’m not compatible with life
And life never lets me forget it.

Ridley

The funny thing is, I relive this over and over and I still can't remember his face. Or his voice, even. That's the funny thing about memories like this – it's like you know you've forgotten something, and that's worse than remembering it, even if you wanted to forget in the first place. But I didn't. I didn't want to forget in the first place, I mean. That's why all of this happened – if I had started out trying to forget, I wouldn't have ended up like this, and I know it's so selfish, so wrong of me to think this, but I wonder if I should have started out trying to forget, if I shouldn't have tried to save him at all. I fought for him, but even if I had fought to forget him it would have ended the same way. With him locked in the cellar again. At least if I hadn't started out trying to save him, I wouldn't have had to be the one who killed him.

I know I'm not making much sense, but it's not like I'm trying to get anyone to understand me. I'm done with that. I'm just tired of not talking.

Hello?

Like I said, I don't remember his face, not even vaguely, if you can believe that. I mean, it comes to me in flashes and I can remember bits and pieces of him sometimes, but it's like my brain lets me remember for less than a second before I force myself to forget again. That's part of what my family and therapy did to me – now I forget even when I don't want to.

I don't even remember much about how all this got started, when I first met Ridley. I was little, of course, and I found him looking down at Grandpa's cellar door, and I asked him what he was doing. I remember thinking he was a little kid, the same age as I was, and then when he turned and looked at me and I saw his eyes, I instantly thought he had to be years older than he looked. You ever see one of those TV commercials where they're asking you to donate to animal shelters, and they show you dogs in cages? Those dogs, they had to go from living on the streets or being abused to wasting their lives in cages. The dog looks into the camera, and you feel like it's trying to say, *help me*.

Ridley was like those abused dogs, except his eyes were a little more human. But not by much. I was so mad at myself for not figuring out on my own what Grandpa had done. It's not like he hadn't left me any clues. I remember when I used to sleep over at his house nearly every weekend and, wait, what? Is someone there?

Hello?

Hello?

Well, Grandpa was obsessed with comic books, especially the superhero kind. He had a *massive collection* of comics, I mean, like, full-sized bookcases full of them. So that's what he had read to me as bedtime stories when I slept over. I liked the superhero *stories* well enough, but I begged him not to show me the artwork, it made me shiver. The characters look too real." I told him. "I don't like their faces."

Grandpa laughed, and back then I hadn't realized why he'd thought that was funny. "To tell you the truth, Meredith, I don't like the artwork, either. Not at all." "You don't?" "Nope. It's the stories and characters that I love, not the actual comic book part of it. That's why I never ended up being a comic book artist like I wanted – I just didn't like it."

"Why didn't you just write regular books then, without pictures?" I asked. Grandpa shrugged. "I didn't really like writing, either. I didn't want to write or draw, I just wanted to tell a story." He laughed again. "I used to fantasize about people falling in love with my stories, to the point that they believed my characters were real." he said. "I wanted people to dress up as my characters during comic book conventions. They accept other people's superheroes as real, so why not mine?"

Something changed in Grandpa's expression then. At the time, I had thought he looked thoughtful, but now I think his eyes turned cold. I was a little unnerved by the thought of superheroes being real, because that would

make super-*villains* real, too, right? Superhero stories are very exciting, but they also have a lot of pain and suffering in them. I said that to Grandpa, another time I slept over. “You’re right, they do.” he said. “But the world has a lot of suffering in it, too. A lot of people don’t see this, but superhero stories are rooted in reality. I mean, sure, not the too-tight spandex costumes, but the bones of the stories, the characters’ hearts... they’re as real as anything.”

Grandpa smiled at me. “You hear about how there’s good and evil in all of us, but what has always interested me is what brings out the good and what brings out the bad.” said Grandpa. “Remember when I was telling you that my favorite stories are the ones where the hero’s brother is his archenemy? Well, that’s why. You have these two men who grew up together and shared many of the same experiences, but they end up completely different. One of them has always been better liked than the other, and that’s what sets the less-appreciated one on the wrong path.”

He had that thoughtful look on his face again, his eyes turning cold. “The ‘evil in us’ doesn’t always mean horrible things, you know.” Grandpa continued. “It could be as subtle as teasing someone when you know you shouldn’t, or not telling someone you love them when you know they need to hear that you do. You get what I’m saying, right?” “I think so.” I said. Grandpa leaned closer to me. “It took me *years*, but I think I’ve finally figured out what the difference is.” he said softly. “The heroes are the ones who keep fighting, and the villains are the ones who gave up.”

Is someone out there? Hello?

Ridley? That’s not you, is it? Hello?

I *always* had imaginary friends; even by the time I was fourteen, I hadn’t outgrown them. So for years, I had thought that Ridley was just another one of my dreams. But then as we got older and Ridley started telling me more and more about how he’d grown up, I started to wonder why I had given one of my characters a story like his. It sounded like something Grandpa would be into. Ridley told me that he’d grown up in a cellar. He was an “experiment”, but he wouldn’t tell me what kind of experiment he’d been meant to be. He’d been tested on, like an animal. Abused. There had been other experiments in the cellar with him, but they had all died. They were the closest thing Ridley ever had to a family until he met me.

By the time Ridley escaped from the cellar, he wasn’t completely human anymore. Ridley didn’t know if he ever had been – he could have been made from scratch in a lab, or he could have been a real woman’s stolen baby. He didn’t know. I was about fourteen, that day Ridley led me into Grandpa’s cellar and showed me what was left of his experiments. I didn’t want to believe what Ridley was telling me, but then I remembered what Grandpa had said about wanting people to accept his characters as part of the real world, about how superhero stories are rooted in reality. And I had always thought that Ridley’s story sounded like something Grandpa would come up with.

I can’t talk about what happened next, when I was trying to save Ridley. Those years I tried to confront Grandpa, tried to convince my family that Ridley was real. Grandpa convinced them that there was something wrong with me, that I had to have some sort of mental problem to even come up with a story like that, let alone about my own grandfather whom I loved. My parents threatened me, tried to bully me into telling the truth, couldn’t accept that I was already telling it. Ridley stood right in front of my mom, and she screamed that she couldn’t see him, and Grandpa stands behind her, smiling.

Then there was therapy, week after week of listening to all the reasons I may have come up with Ridley. But Ridley was the truth. It went on for years. I couldn’t take it. I was so tired of fighting. I got to the point where I wanted to believe that they were right about me, and I realized that it didn’t matter if I kept trying to save Ridley or not, because I’d already lost. That’s why I did what I did. If I had let Ridley run away, if I had told him that I never wanted to see him again, there would always be that part of me that wonders, *Was I right all along? Did Ridley exist?*

But if I locked him in the cellar, I could come back someday, as an adult, when I didn’t have to live with my parents anymore. I’d either find empty air in the cellar or a pile of Ridley’s bones, but I’d know if he was real. I’d finally know. “The heroes are the ones who keep fighting, and the villains are the ones who gave up.”

I guess that makes me the villain, then. I came back to the cellar sooner than I expected. I had to. Grandpa died, and his house was going to be sold. Grandpa had left Dad a few things in his will, small things that Dad could easily get into the car without help, but I asked to come with him to Grandpa's house anyway. I'd said that it was the closest I could come to saying goodbye to Grandpa, but the truth is, he's been dead in my mind since that day Ridley led me into the cellar. I told my dad that being in Grandpa's house again brought back more memories than I expected and that I was going to take a walk to calm down.

I ran to the cellar as fast I could, but it took me a long time to work up the courage to actually go in. I just stared down at the door, like Ridley used to. When I finally unlocked it, I was too scared to call Ridley's name. It was the first time I had ever walked down the cellar stairs without his hand in mine. It didn't smell like there was a corpse in here. I couldn't hear anyone breathing. I was alone.

I know I should have felt relieved. Happy. Ridley wasn't real, I hadn't killed anyone! But I *wanted* him to be real. I loved him. And all those years I'd been trying to save him, all I had suffered to try to prove I was right... it felt like such a waste. It had all been for nothing. All of it! So I just stood there in the middle of the cellar, sobbing for I don't know how long. I cried for Grandpa, for Ridley, for me. It felt like hours before I stopped.

Then, as I was turning around to leave, I felt someone gently place their hand on my arm, and I knew it wasn't my dad. "Hi, Meredith," said Ridley. He'd grown up since I abandoned him, proving he wasn't a ghost, which was something I used to wonder about. But he was still Ridley, still had the feral eyes of an animal that's been beaten too many times. In stories, the villain and the hero are supposed to talk before they fight, explain the reasoning behind their actions and tell the other what went wrong. But I couldn't say anything to him. I was even crying silently.

Ridley was smiling at me. I heard my dad calling my name. He came down the cellar stairs, stopping halfway down. "Meredith, you've been gone for so long that I – " "Daddy! Daddy, I'm seeing him again! Ridley!" It had just occurred to me that just because I was seeing Ridley now didn't necessarily mean he was real. "Why am I like this, Dad? I can't – "

"Meredith," he cut me off, clutching the railing as if afraid he'd fall. "Meredith, I can see him, too." Is anyone listening? Hello? Ridley? Please? I don't know if Ridley killed my dad or not. One second Dad was on the stairs, the next he was lying unconscious on the cellar floor with Ridley standing over him. At first I thought Ridley had hit him on the head, but there was no blood, no welt. I don't understand what Ridley can do.

Ridley dragged my dad's body out of the cellar, promising that if my dad or anyone else tried to help me, he would kill them. He told me not to doubt that he was capable of that; apparently Grandpa hadn't really died in his sleep.

I didn't put up a fight. I didn't even scream. This is Ridley's story, not mine, and in stories the villain isn't supposed to prevail. Anyway, I was tired of fighting. As he was walking up the cellar stairs, I asked him how he'd survived. I hadn't left him any food or water. "I told you," Ridley said, glancing over his shoulder, "I'm not human anymore, remember?"

After I heard the lock click into place, I had this weird feeling that Ridley was standing right outside, staring down at the cellar door. I carefully made my way up the stairs in the darkness, kneeling down on the top step. I didn't scream or pound my fists against the door, but I was crying.

"Ridley?" I whispered.

He didn't answer me.

The Test Run

I would have missed out on magic if I hadn't tried to convince my dad not to do all of his Christmas shopping online.

"It's a tradition! Come on!" I'd said that morning. "How can you not do at least some of your Christmas shopping out of the house? That's like, agoraphobic!"

"You get the same stuff online as you would in a store. Well, actually there's tons of stuff online that you never see in stores. Plus, you get way better deals." said my dad, who was on his third powdered doughnut.

"Yeah, but then you've got to deal with all that shipping and handling garbage. Amazon isn't nearly as cheap as it was when I was little." I pointed out.

"There are plenty of alternatives to Amazon!" he said.

I don't know if he was excited over his new laptop or what, but my dad was suddenly very... I don't know what you'd call it... anti-non-online-shopping. Granted, he had always kind of dreaded Christmas shopping, but that's just because he doesn't like overly crowded parking lots and standing in checkout lines for half an hour. As much as other customers stressed him out, he didn't let their bad moods rub off on him. But apparently this year he'd decided that he couldn't take that kind of stress anymore.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't do most of your shopping online Dad, but won't you feel like you're missing out on seeing Christmas lights and decorations and all that?"

"Oh, please, you act like I'm not going to leave this house until December 26th!" he said, laughing. "Besides, if I want to see Christmas decorations, I can drive in circles around the neighborhood! That's better than walking through a store!"

My mom came in from the kitchen and picked up our dirty dishes.

"I'm with you Bryce, I don't like to do everything online either." she said to me. "But I feel so bad for people who work retail. You think crazy customers stress us out? People who work those jobs don't get nearly enough credit or pay, and during this time of year they're treated like garbage. I hate seeing that."

She sighed in annoyance and shook her head. "It takes the fun out of Christmas shopping for me."

"Look, Bryce, you're a big guy. You can defend yourself if you have to. You can drive." said my dad. "If you really want to, just go Christmas shopping by yourself!"

I don't know why I had been so stubborn about it. I mean, my dad had a point --Christmas decorations are a lot more fun to look at set up in someone's yard than in a store, aren't they? I didn't even have anything specific in mind that I wanted to buy. For several minutes I drove around aimlessly trying to decide which store I wanted to go to. ("Just don't go to Wal-Mart, okay?" my mom had said as I left that night. "Seriously, not at this time of year. Anywhere but Wal-Mart.") In the twenty minutes I'd been driving, I had seen two fender benders and one car that had somehow been driven into a streetlamp, and it wasn't even snowing. I was considering forgetting the whole thing and just going home when I saw him.

A big guy with shockingly white hair was walking on the side of the road. From his hair and the slow way he moved with slumped shoulders and shuffling footsteps, I was pretty sure he was an older man, but in the dark it was hard to tell. There were no sidewalks here, so he had to walk in a ditch, his boots caked with wet mud. The traffic was moving slowly, with about three or four cars getting through before the light changed back to red, so I kept watching the man to pass the time. He was dragging one of those massive heavy-duty garbage bags behind him, the kind that are too big for most garbage cans. The bag was so full it was bulging. I couldn't tell what was in it, but it was obvious it wasn't a body, so I wasn't too creeped out. I wondered if he was headed for one of the superstores or one of the fast food restaurants or somewhere else entirely. I hoped he wasn't homeless. Maybe he just didn't have a car. At least I knew he couldn't be very cold; he was wearing a very large, thick coat, the kind an Eskimo would wear. Suddenly the man tripped and fell flat onto his face, his entire body sinking an inch into the mud. I gasped, my hand flying to my mouth. He didn't get up.

"Oh, my gosh." I groaned, checking my rearview mirror. Thankfully, the car behind me was still several feet away, so I was able to back up and pull over into the emergency lane. As fast as I could, I got out of the car and started jogging in the man's direction, pulling my cell phone out of my coat pocket. I was going to dial 911 when I saw that the man had stood up, wiping his face with the part of his sleeve that hadn't gotten muddy. He was shaking violently.

"Sir?" I called out, my voice cracking with nervousness. "Are you okay?"

As I got closer I realized that he was shaking because he was laughing. He jumped at the sound of my voice and turned around. I was relieved to see that he looked unhurt.

"I didn't think anyone saw me!" he said. "But yes, I am perfectly fine! Just a little embarrassed." he added, chuckling.

I couldn't believe that no one else had stopped to make sure he was all right! There was no way that I was the only one who had seen him fall.

"The ground here is just really slick from the mud. I tripped." the man was saying, his voice incredibly cheerful. I glanced at the phone in my hand. "Are you positive you're all right?" I asked.

"I promise I'm not hurt." he assured me. I hesitated, then slipped my phone back into my pocket.

The man was beaming at me, running his hand through his long white beard.

"You are a very kind young man." he said. "I've seen a lot of unkindness tonight, all around. You're different."

I smiled back, my face getting warm. "Thank you." I said. The man grinned wider and gestured at the road. Cars were moving again, though the traffic hadn't really improved.

"I didn't think anyone saw me," he repeated. "Honestly, it's been so long since anyone has noticed."

"Noticed what?" I asked. He chuckled again and gave a little shrug.

"Noticed that I'm here," he said, his eyes shining a little less than before. He bent down and picked up the garbage bag at his feet. Nothing had spilled out of it when he had fallen. That's when I realized that I should have been a little afraid. Here I was, on the side of the road talking to a ridiculously happy stranger lugging around a bulging garbage bag. I knew I had to be wary, but at the same time my gut told me that I had absolutely no reason to be afraid.

"You remind me of Santa Claus." I said without thinking. "With the bag and everything." He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. "I get that a lot!" he said. My face grew warmer. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude." I said hastily, but he shook his head. "I didn't take it as an insult, son. What's wrong with being like Santa Claus?" He laughed again and hefted the bag over his shoulder in a very Santa Claus-y way.

"Thank you again. You've made my night." he said, turning around. "Wait!" I said, again without thinking. "That bag looks heavy. Do you need any help carrying it to..." My voice trailed off as I remembered that this man might not have a car. He smiled warmly. "I would greatly appreciate the help. Only if you don't mind, though. My ride is a good ways off from here."

"I don't mind at all." I said, and I meant it, even though I knew I should have been more cautious of him. I double-checked my pocket to make sure that I hadn't left my keys in the ignition, and then reached out for his bag. "How about I carry it for a while, and then you take it when I get tired?" he asked. Okay." I said. I was surprised that he wasn't already tired. Maybe the bag wasn't actually as heavy as it looked. "My ride's not parked in any of those parking lots," he said as we started walking. "You know that small stretch of farmland behind that row of superstores?" he asked, pointing.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." I said. I knew that area well -- it was only five minutes away from my house. "I parked over there. I don't like to park in parking lots. My ride takes up a lot of room, and people tend to... miss it. I'd hate for someone to run into it." I wasn't sure exactly what he meant by that; how could his car take up a lot of room but still be hard to miss? But I felt like I should respond, so I said, "That's just as well. Parking lots are so crowded and hectic this time of year. My dad went off on that this morning."

He laughed again, quieter this time. "It's even more hectic in the stores, but I guess you already knew that." he said. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled at me. "Do you want me to take your bag now?" I asked. By this time we had passed most of the shopping and had almost reached the farm road.

"No, thank you, I'm good. I'm used to carrying it." His tone indicated that it was some kind of joke. I didn't get it. "Okay. Let me know if you change your mind." I said brightly. "Will do. Thanks!" he said in an even brighter tone, as if his favorite thing to do was carry a heavy garbage bag while walking in a ditch on the side of the road at night. Then again, I didn't know this guy. Maybe it was his favorite pastime.

"You know," he said after a few minutes had passed, "I used to think that the reason people get so frantic during Christmastime is because they're excited. Like children who get cranky from too much excitement." I laughed. "That's a good way to put it! That's exactly what they're like!" I said, but he shook his head. "I don't know. There really is so much stress this time of year, a lot more stress than happiness for some people... and there's a lot of greed, but that just goes without saying..." His voice trailed off, and he was silent for a long time. "Maybe it really is true, what they say, about how Christmas presents make people unhappy in the long run." he said. He sounded so sad now that I really wanted to cheer him up, if I could. "I don't know if I agree with that." I said slowly. "I don't think Christmastime-stress has anything to do with presents."

"Really?" he asked, sounding genuinely interested. We were walking on the side of the farm road now, past fields that had been filled with corn and soybeans a few months before. "Yeah. I mean sure, presents are a part of what causes people stress, because the stores are so busy this time of year and it can be overwhelming to shop for everybody you want to," I said, hoping I wasn't talking too much. "Especially if you're buying more than one present for the same person, like if you're shopping for your kids. But it's like what you said, about how people just get cranky from too much excitement. It's the people who make Christmastime stressful, not all the presents."

He didn't say anything, but he was nodding slowly, as if he was really taking what I was saying seriously. That's another thing you hear all the time, about how it's better to give presents than to receive them. And I'm sure

that's true," I added hastily. "But still... what about the person you're giving the present to? It makes them happy, doesn't it? Well... unless you accidentally got them something they don't like, but hey, it's the thought that counts!"

He laughed, long and hard again, and I laughed too, happy that I had managed to cheer him up. "So you don't think that Christmastime would be any easier on people if there were no presents involved?" he asked me. I thought for a minute before answering. "No. I really don't. People can be crazy sometimes. I think that if there weren't any presents involved, they'd just find something else to stress over. I don't know what exactly, but I still don't think Christmas presents are a bad thing. Not at all." I said.

He had stopped walking and was staring straight ahead of him, at an empty field overgrown with weeds, some as tall as my waist. "My ride's here." he said, though I didn't see it anywhere. At the far end of the field there was a small wood of tall, scraggly trees, so I assumed he'd parked it there, though how he had managed to park a supposedly large vehicle in between such closely spaced-together trees, I did not know. Plus, why would he do that? What did he have to hide?

"It will be here soon." he said, turning to me. "Thank you so much, son. You have helped me more than you know." "Um... you're welcome, but... really?" I asked, trying to be polite. I hadn't carried his bag for him at all! "You have no idea." he said. His smile grew bigger than it had all night, which was really saying something.

"Look." he whispered, nodding his head in the direction of the field. I turned to look, and then I laughed out loud. There was really nothing else I could do except tell myself that I had to be delusional, and I knew that I wasn't. I knew. Just a few feet away from us stood nine majestic reindeer hitched to a sleigh beautifully painted in red and green and gold, like something out of a Christmas storybook. No wonder he reminded me of Santa Claus.

"Did you know?" he asked, his voice soft. I stared at the reindeer for a long moment and then turned to face him again, my own smile almost as large as his was. "A part of me did." I said honestly. Together we walked to the sleigh, which was much bigger up close than it looked. I wondered if that was part of the magic. He carefully placed his bag into the sleigh. "The reason I brought a garbage bag is so I don't have to get my special one dirty." he told me.

I shivered, but from excitement. Maybe this sounds cliché, but I could barely even feel the cold. "So, were you... shopping?" I asked. "Christmas Eve is still a little over a week away." "Sort of." he replied, his voice warm. "This was what I call my test run."

"Your test run?" He nodded. "I'm invisible to most folks. The reindeer and the sleigh are too, and even those who can see me usually don't realize who I am. Or if they do, they tell themselves they're crazy until they believe it." He began to stroke one of the reindeer's muzzles as he spoke. "That's why you don't hear about Santa Claus traveling the world on any night other than Christmas Eve -- most people don't know. And those who do usually keep it a secret." "I will, if you want me to." I breathed. He smiled at that.

"It's your choice. Just be careful who you tell." He walked around the sleigh and began stroking a different reindeer's muzzle. "Because people can't see me most of the time, I don't usually go shopping. Well... not here, at least!" he laughed. "But sometimes I like to come to stores anyway, so I can see all the decorations, and see other people getting ready for Christmas. It gets me even more excited than I already was. But the past few years... past several years, actually, it's made me sad."

"Because of all the crazy frantic people?" I asked. He laughed. "Pretty much." he said. "I will never stop coming on Christmas Eve, mind you, and giving people presents, but lately I've wondered if people might actually be happier without me."

"They wouldn't be." I said, without having to think about it. I meant it, too. "Even if they think they would be happier, they wouldn't be."

"Thank you, Bryce," he said, climbing into the sleigh. "And Merry Christmas!" "Merry Christmas!" I said. "And thank you! For everything!" "You are very welcome. Now, your car is a good ways off from here." he said with a grin. "Would you like a ride?" "Can I?" I whispered, my heart pounding. "Would that be okay?"

He smiled and patted the seat next to him. I climbed in, and Santa took hold of the reins. I felt the sleigh rising. I was infinitely grateful that I had not stayed home tonight, that I never really stopped believing in Santa Claus. I was confident now that I had not missed out on anything.

Wooden Heart

The toymaker carved him a wooden heart,
out of a tree that had long since died.
The toymaker gave him a wooden heart,
roughly cut into the shape of a valentine.

The toymaker painted the wooden heart red,
a thin coat of paint like dark dried blood.
The toymaker painted the wooden heart red,
the heart born of wood of a tree long dead.

“If someone were to try to take you apart,”
whispers the toymaker, his fingers stained red,
“They’ll see that I tried to give you a heart.”
The toymaker slowly smiled.

The toymaker gave him a dead wooden heart
that could not beat against his hollow chest.
The toymaker stained it with the color of blood,
so his puppet could pretend to be human.

The toymaker gave him a dead wooden heart
so his puppet could pretend to be human.

Playing with toys gives children power,
lets them rule over worlds they imagine for themselves.
Why should anyone live in the darkness of reality
when they have the ability to make their own light?

The toymaker had never understood
why children outgrow their toys.
Making toys was a chance to feel young again,
let him try again, start over.

When he was a child
he had lived a hard life, seeing the world for what it really was.
He didn’t want any child to ever have to suffer
in the same way that he had, when he was a child.

Each of his toys is a reflection of himself,
a reflection of the toymaker back when he was a child.
His fear shines coldly in his toys’ glass eyes,
sadness lies like splinters in their smooth carved wood.

Sometimes he thinks he’s on the brink of forgetting,
tells himself, *maybe this time I got away*,
and then his memories seem real again,
come alive again in his toys.

His fear shines coldly in his toys’ glass eyes,
sadness lies like splinters in their smooth carved wood.

The toymaker's daughter looked like a doll.
Her clear shining eyes looked a little like glass.
But she had real skin instead of wood,
eyelashes and hair instead of thread.

When she was little, when people still came,
back when her father's store was still open,
her father had told her she needed to hide,
that people wouldn't believe she was human.

"Why do you think I don't let anyone see you?"
the toymaker sometimes asked with a laugh.
"If anyone sees you in my store,
they'll think that you're a toy for sale!"

She told herself that it was just a game,
that she hid to play along with her father.
He probably asked her to stay out of the store
so she wouldn't get in his way.

But she wondered why she never felt any resentment,
why she never felt like a prisoner.
She was happy to hide in the silent back rooms.
She never wished to go outside.

But in the silent back rooms, she heard his customers talking.
She heard what they said about her father and his toys.
How his toys were exquisite, incomparable,
but they inspired more fear than a nightmare.

All of the toys in the toymaker's shop
had been carved by his own hands.
Some were given glass eyes, silken thread for hair,
but they all had wooden limbs.

His toys had nice faces, warm, friendly smiles.
Their glass eyes shone as if filled with joy.
But look at them too long, and their smiles seem pained.
Joy turns to fear in their cold glass eyes.

"It's time for me to give up on this toy store."
the toymaker had told his daughter.
"There's something about my toys, something wrong.
Like there's something alive in them, trying to get out."

He thought his daughter looked so much like a doll.
Her eyes shone in light like cold clear glass.
He couldn't believe that her hair was not thread,
that she had real skin instead of wood

“Toys collect fear like shelves collect dust.”
the toymaker said, his gaze far away.
“Toys fill up with memories of children’s whispered nightmares.
It’s no wonder that my toys make people sad.”

“But Daddy,” she said, “Your toys are new,
no child has whispered bad dreams to them yet.”
“I know,” he said. “But they’re still full of nightmares,
because they’ve had to listen to mine.”

He couldn’t believe that her hair was not thread,
that she had real skin instead of wood.

Inside the vents of the toymaker’s house,
the house that had once been a toy store,
the toymaker, smiling, his fingers stained red,
had placed a body in the vents, and then had never come back.

The cold wooden puppet with a dead wooden heart
was painfully aware of how inhuman he was.
The hollowed-out puppet, lying still in the dark,
was breathing through closed lips.

His eyes were forced shut, weighed down
by the dust that had settled on his lashes as the years wore on.
His clothes were dyed grey by old spiderwebs,
not all of them abandoned.

The puppet had no way of keeping time,
no idea of how long he had been alone.
He didn’t have a heartbeat
to help measure passing seconds.

But he had been kept in the vents long enough
for the dust to weigh his eyelashes down,
to turn his pale wooden skin to an ashy grey.
The toymaker had never come back.

“You’ll be safe in here.” the toymaker had said,
screwing the grate to the vent back on.
“Stay here until your wooden heart starts beating,
until you realize how to be human.”

The puppet cannot move or speak.
His abandoned strings may never be untangled.
But somehow, the puppet can think and dream.
So he dreams of being human.

He was forced to dream because of the heart
that was carved from a tree that had long since died.
The toymaker had stained it with the color of blood
so his puppet could pretend to be human.

The hollowed-out puppet lies still in the dark
and dreams of not pretending.

Toys collect fear like shelves collect dust.
The toymaker's daughter was always afraid now.
She sits still with her back against a wall,
whispering her story, trying not to believe it.

"I used to wonder why I wasn't resentful,
why I didn't feel imprisoned." she said.
"My dad was always telling me I looked like a doll.
Now I see that he was trying to warn me."

"You'll be safe here." the toymaker had said,
keys in his hand. Locking her in.
"You won't have to see what the world really is.
Stay here. I'll come back for you."
"

And he did come back, every single day,
but he always left again without taking her with him.
She lived in a toy box, and it was his call
whether or not he wanted to open it.

If she were stronger, she would have broken the windows,
escaped from the toy store and lived her life.
But a toy only does what its owner wants,
plays whatever game its owner imagines.

When she was little, she hadn't felt like a prisoner.
Now, she didn't really feel anything.
She was only real when her father was around.
She may as well have been carved out of wood.

No one had come to the toy store in years,
no one besides her father.
But sometimes she sat still against a wall
and she could hear someone else breathing.

That's who she spoke to, whoever was breathing.
That's who she was telling her story to.
Whoever it was never spoke back,
but she felt sure that they listened.

She sat still against the wall.
She may as well have been carved out of wood.

The puppet could not move or speak,
but he could think and listen.
He knew the story of the toymaker's daughter by heart
and still wasn't tired of hearing it.

But he didn't believe that she was only a toy.
He could tell that she was worth much more than he was.
He knew that she had a real, beating heart,
not a dead one carved from wood.

He knew she'd never think to look in the vents.
He knew the toymaker wouldn't free him.
It pained the puppet to move, to be something that breathed,
but he had to do more than pretend.

For uncounted years he had dreamed in the dark,
trying to pretend to be human.
With agonizing slowness he flexed his wooden fingers.
If his heart weren't of wood, it would have been pounding.

When the toymaker made him, he had focused on the heart.
So the puppet's fingers were chunky and unfinished,
too rectangular to fit all the way through the grate,
but it was enough to make her look at the vent.

It pained the puppet to move, to be something that breathed,
but he had to do more than pretend.

The toymaker did not want anyone to suffer
in the same way that he had when he was a child.
So he had never been able to forgive himself
for carving that dead wooden heart.

He had meant to help children who were hurting like he did.
Children's fears are not taken seriously.
Adults think that saying, 'It's not real, what you're afraid of'
will make the nightmares go away.

But *fear* is real, fear itself,
even if what you're afraid of is imaginary.
The toymaker wanted to give children a friend
to talk to when they were afraid.

So the toymaker carved a dead wooden heart,
stained it with the color of dark dried blood,
and placed it inside of the hollow chest
of a puppet who appeared to be human.

The puppet certainly wasn't alive,
but was also far more than a lifeless doll.
No one had whispered their fears to the puppet,
yet his glass eyes shone with fear.

*No child will want this toy as a friend!
He'll make them more afraid than before!*
thought the toymaker. He had locked the puppet in the vent;
it made no difference to a toy where he or she was kept.

But after that, the toymaker had come to understand
where the fear in the puppet's eyes had come from.
Every toy that he carved was a reflection of himself,
of the fears he'd repressed when he was a child.

He had thought he was on the brink of forgetting,
and then his memories lived again in the puppet.
So he trapped the puppet in the dusty vent,
and learned to forget all over again.

"You *are* strong enough." the puppet was whispering.
"You can escape this life of pretending."
In the years since she'd freed him from the dusty vent,
he had learned to speak aloud.

His voice was only audible to her.
She was what had made him so close to alive.
"I'll help you escape." he told her again.
"You've wasted too many years here already."

"What if he's right? That I *am* just a toy?"
Her clear glassy eyes were filling with tears.
"I don't want to see the real world he told me about."
She sat still against the wall.

It still pained him to move, to be something that breathed,
but the puppet gently laid his wooden hand over hers.
"Feel this." he said, and laid her soft hand
over his hollow chest.

"There's no heartbeat." he said. "I can keep on pretending,
but with this wooden heart, I'll never truly be human.
But *you* don't have to pretend to be a real person!"
She pulled her hand away.

"You don't understand. If I leave my father,
I don't think I'll be real anymore." she said.
"I'm like a toy that goes back to being lifeless
when it's no longer being played with."

"But you're wrong!" said the puppet. "I promise you, you're wrong!
You'd be real even if your father was dead!"
He picked up one of the toymaker's discarded tools
and laid it in the palm of her trembling hand.

“I will help you to free yourself,” the puppet said,
“But only if you promise me something.
Promise me that you will give me your heart.”
She looked down at the knife in her hand.

“I’ve loved you since I pulled you out of the vent.
My heart is already yours.” she said.
“But I can’t kill my father. I don’t have the strength.”
“But I do.” whispered the puppet.

When she was little, she hadn’t felt like a prisoner,
or at least that’s what his daughter had told him.
But the toymaker had seen his daughter change
in the lonely years gone by.

She had been telling him that he was as cruel
as the real world they were hiding from.
She called him heartless for what he’d done,
for convincing her she was a doll.

“Listen to me! *You are not real!*”
the toymaker had told her, again and again.
But as much as the toymaker tried to deny it,
a part of him couldn’t believe she was a doll.

“I’m back.” he called softly, unlocking the door.
He smiled when he found her waiting for him.
“Are you still mad at me?” he asked his daughter.
Something glinted in her hands.

The toymaker frowned, squinting in the shadows.
“What’s that behind you?” he asked.
He could have sworn he’d seen the form of a body
standing behind his daughter.

Then he looked closer at the glint in her hands
and saw she was holding a knife.
Two wooden hands reached out from behind her
to help her hold the blade.

“Do it!” screamed the puppet. “Don’t speak, do it now!”
The toymaker’s daughter charged toward her father.
The puppet ran behind her, his hands over hers, and the toymaker gasped as
the glinting blade was lost in the depths of his heart.

The toymaker fell back against the wall
and slowly slid to the floor.
“I’m sorry,” he choked as his heart became still,
as still as a piece of wood.

The toymaker's daughter stared down at the body,
at her shaking hands covered in her father's blood.

With tears in her eyes, she faced the puppet
and hugged his wooden frame.

"I love you." she whispered. "Thank you for freeing me."

Gently, the puppet pushed her away.

"You promised me your heart would be mine." he said.

"Are you going to keep your promise?"

She looked at him in confusion, a half-smile on her face.

"But I just said I love you. You know I do!"

"I didn't ask for your love. I asked for your *heart*."

His voice made her blood turn cold.

"No." she whispered. "Please, no.

Why... why didn't you take my father's heart?

You could have spared me, we both could have lived!

Why didn't you take my father's heart?!"

The puppet held her hand in his and gave her a still wooden smile.

"Because you kept telling me,

again and again,

that the toymaker was heartless."

That is the story of the wooden heart,
carved from a tree that had long since died,
lightly stained with the color of blood
so the puppet could pretend to be human.

Maybe you think that it wasn't enough,
that even with a real beating heart in his chest,
the puppet would still made out of wood,
could never be truly human.

But if that were true, how could I have told you this?

Trust me, a real beating heart was enough.

My skin is still wood, my eyes are still glass,

but her heart has made me human.

The toymaker carved me a wooden heart,
out of a tree that had long since died.

The toymaker carved me a wooden heart,
roughly cut into the shape of a valentine.

The toymaker stained it with the color of blood,

so I could pretend to be human,

but now I have a real beating heart.

I don't have to pretend anymore.

Cherie Rose Story

An Awkward Mans Guide to a Proper Apology

Mild Profanity

Well that proves it. I have to be the most socially awkward teen the great state of Minnesota has ever seen. As I watch the woman of my dreams speed walk away, I can only think one word to myself; Stupid! How could I think that asking her to come to my concert was a good idea? Now she probably thinks I'm some stuck up self-worshipping A-

"Sabe! How did it go man? Did you get the girl?" My friend Neal asks, snapping me out of my spiral of self abuse. Neal walks toward me wearing his usual beach shorts, combat boots and 'Save the Bees Honey' T-shirt. It was his idea to start a band in the first place. I just joined so I could up my popularity point to where I may be able to get a girlfriend, which is a lot harder to do when your homeschooled. He also has a annoying tendency to show up after I succeed in royally humiliating myself. Every. Single. TIME.

"No Neal, I didn't and you know? Showing up about five minutes ago to save me from myself may have changed the outcome! But we'll never know now will we?" "Woah dude, take a second, take a breath, and take a freaking chill pill! What happened Bro? Did you take my advice? Ask her how her day went? Complement her hair? Chicks dig that stuff man."

In retrospect I really should have written down exactly, word for word, what he wanted me to say to her because while that is great advice, it just didn't help me ask her to our concert. Or make her feel better about her day. I answer Neal with the only possible answer. "Sorry Neal, I just- I blew it man!" "Blew it? Come on, you couldn't have been talking to Gwen for five minutes. What did you do?"

Seriously? "Well, I took your advice and I asked her about her day-" "Good so far" Neal interrupts "-and she told me that her cat died, her maid stole all her jewelry, and that when she got the phone call telling her about this shit she fell out of the tree she was sitting in!" I had all but started screaming towards the end of the story. Neal just stood there looking like he'd just been kicked in the- well, you know

."Okay. Sounds like she had a messed up day. I don't see how you could have done worse than that." Oh boy, if he only knew. "Yeah, well that's not all. I- I didn't know what to do! I panicked! Then I remembered what else you told me to say...." "You didn't...." "I tried to say sorry." "NO!" Yes, I did. Kill me now. "I asked about her hair." Neal just stared at me for a while. Ever had someone point a bb-gun at you? I have. I'd prefer to relive that than be standing here right now. I can't take the the silence, I need him to say something.

"Please say something." "You asked her that AFTER she fell out of a tree?Dude.... what is WRONG with you!!!" "I know, I'm-""Did you grow up under a rock with a bunch of sadistic sexist sexless madmen!" That's it. "Shut up Neal! Okay? I know, I need to fix this but I don't knowwhat to do!" "Well-" The horribly loud ring of the school bell, thankfully, interrupts Neal, ending this hellish conversation.

Now I'll have all the time to think of how to explain to Gwen. I'm homeschooled, so I don't live by the beck and call of the school bell which gives me time to figure out where the conversation went wrong. I asked her about her day. She answered with painful results. I asked her about her hair and she responded to that inference as anyone would. I mean, for freaking hecks sake, she'd just fallen out of a tree! I may as well have said I thought she looked like a hag! Which is the exact opposite of what I was thinking! She was just standing there like an angry/sad caramel haired whiskey colored eye'd goddess. I was standing there, a scrawny too tall for his age 17 year old, wishing a bolt of lightning would strike me down then and there.

The conclusion to my failed attempt at flattery may just damn me to Satan's Cradle. I had tried to dig myself out of the hole I had dug. Oh man I'm cringing just thinking about it. I thought she would take the invitation

to my concert as a complement, I mean, we're not a terrible high-school (Indie-Rock) band. I told her it would be kind of like a date. Oh God.

I told her it would be kind of like a date. I'm going to Hell. Why couldn't I just have offered her a shoulder to cry on and forgot about it? I'll tell you why, because I'm the single most awkward, stupid, tactless teenager ever to grace the earth with his unholy presence. I decide to start walking towards Taco Bell® to try to stop the spiral of self abuse and think about more productive ways to think. Such as explaining to Gwen that I do not think she looks like a hag. Quite the opposite in fact, but all I could think about is Gwen's hurt, but mostly angry expression as she took off, scrambling back up her tree-trunk.

I walk into the Taco Bell® and order my usual, (a steak quesadía) then sit down to think. The more I think about it I realize that explaining is not going to help. It'll probably make it worse. Okay. Now all I have to do is think of an apology that doesn't make her feel even worse and at the same time try to explain that I did not mean to insult her. Maybe if I just-

"Sup' Sabe." Neal greets me as he walks into the Mexican restaurant. "Dude, your gonna get in trouble again!" I tell him. Although I'm not surprised. He sneaks out to visit me all the time. It's a small town so you can pretty much just walk everywhere. It also helps that Taco Bell® is across the street from the High School.

"That makes two of us, depending on what you were planning on saying to Gwen?" "Well, I thought about it and explaining isn't gonna be enough. I need to apologize, but I don't know how to do that without making it worse!" Neal ponders this for a moment, and answer's with- "You do the only thing you can do man. Tell her the truth. Tell her how you feel, and how sorry you are, and that you really were just trying to make her feel better."

I just stare at him for a while. What the heck? Does he know me at all? I'm more likely to move to Alaska and become a lumber jack than that. "How about I just apologize for existing and never show my face in public ever again?" "How about, you apologize, and try again? Gwen's a cool girl, she'll understand as long as you don't insult her." "Neal, I don't think I can-"

"Shut up? because I'm gettin' sick of your negativity man. This is your chance to do something besides wallow in the aftermath of your mistakes. Why don't you listen to my good friend Shia LaBeuf and 'JUST DO IT!!'" I've never seen him so mad before, he looked like an angry squirrel about to chew my face off and feed the rest of it to Shia Labeuf.

"I'm sorry, I just, I can't talk to girls like you can, my brain goes haywire, and I lose it!" He glares at me for a moment and I thought he was about to storm off, but he just relaxes and asks me a really unmanly question. "How much do you like Gwen?" There is not even a single trace of sarcasm in his voice or expression. How do I respond to that? "I don't know, I guess I-well I just really-a lot. Yeah I like her a lot." I (eventually) state firmly. My face is probably shining brighter than a red stop light, but strangely enough it feels good to get the truth out (don't EVER tell ANYONE that).

But the good feelings wash away when he starts to glare at me again. In the distance I hear a call for order 27 and I vaguely remember that I am order 27, but with mental daggers piercing my soul I can hardly think of Mexican food. "Than why the hell are you only apologizing? For f*cks sake do something! Don't miss out on life because you couldn't face your mistake!

You really like this girl?" I only nod in reply. "Then go man, talk to her, cause' I'm not doing it for you." He stands up and slaps me on the back as he walks out. "You order 27?" I nod. "Good, school food sucks." He takes my food and leaves me alone with my thoughts.

Can what he said be true? Am I missing out? Do I like her enough to actually do something, and not just continue being the most awkward guy in existence? I stand up start walking, not really sure of where I'm walking to until I get to the tree where this whole stupid mess started because of a grammatical error. I sit down at the trunk and think of what I'll say to her. I get the feeling that I'm not just facing my fears for myself anymore.

'Hi Gwen! Gosh you look pretty! Say, sorry about the whole hair, concert invitation thing. Want to go to dinner on Friday?' Or play it cool like 'Sup' Gwen, how 'bout we forget that I'm a self-loathing idiot and we go get a pizza, lets say, Friday?' I'm doomed.

"Sabastine?" I jump up faster than I ever thought I could and reply with the ever brilliant- "Hi!" She blushes and responds with- "Hi..... look Sabe, I just wanted to apologize for overreacting earlier. I was upset and I shouldn't have run away."

.....What? Okay, now I'm blank. What do I say? She stole my line. I'm supposed to apologize, not her! What do I do now! Oh man shes so pretty when she blushes..... darn it focus! "Uhhhhhhhhh, I'm sorry too?"

"What?" Now SHE looks confused. "Well for what I said about your hair- I mean I wasn't trying to insult you, I was trying to compliment you! And that stupid concert-" "No it's not stupid! You like it. And to tell the truth I was mad until Maddie talked me into some sense. I really do want to go. I can just be a little sensitive sometimes. I do want to go!" By the end of her rant she was blushing, (and darn it she STILL looked good) and I probably resembled a dead fish the way my mouth hung open.

"Um so..... you maybe wouldn't say no to a-" "Coffee?" She interrupts. I'm too thrilled she said yes to even notice the change in plan. The bell rings and we look towards it like a couple of blushing idiots (though she's a pretty blushing idiot) and she looks up at me and says "Friday at 4:00? I'll pick you up at your place." Again I find myself gaping like a fish. She stole my line again. But I see a hole in this plan....

"You know where I live?" Now shes redder than a beet. "OH! Oh yeah I'll need your address for my GPS." I write it down and hand it to her. She smiles when she takes it and I feel my face go red again. "See you Friday!" She chirps like a song bird, and I for the second time today I see her run away towards the school doors. Only this time I don't have that deathly sickening feeling.

I hear hooting and look towards the parking lot. Of course Neal had been hiding behind a car the whole time. "DUDE! You've got a date!!! I knew you could do it!" "I know!" He gives me a crushing (manly) bear hug "So Sabe, dude, what are you gonna talk about on your date?"

Oh shit.

Moments of Bliss

Moments of bliss, of course,
Are only moments, but truly hold,
More worth than gold.

To feel turmoil of the soul.
The heaviness of heart that fate,
Leaves you to bear.

But then, to feel the weight
Lifted from you,
A sound, that feels like Joy,
Enters your heart and sings to your soul.

It feels as though,
Through the noise of sorrow,
Peace has heard your silent cry.

But then, as quickly as
The moment came,
It leaves...

The weight returns
And weighs just the same, no lighter.
You are stronger.

The bittersweet moment renewed your soul.
And they may be, just that,
Only moments,
But they truly hold,
more worth than gold.

Oh Beauty,

Oh Beauty, how you look upon the hearts of men.

With Strength you master Pain,
With Joy you overcome Sorrow.

Oh Beauty, how do I seek you?
How do I bask in your presence?

You overwhelm my spirit.
I drown in your glory.

How do I live for you, Oh Beauty?
How do I fill my soul with your grace
When I feel only grief?

Oh Beauty, how fierce is your glare
As you look upon the hearts of men in your perfection.

Wicked spirits flee in fear.

Oh Beauty, cry for our wicked hearts, cry,
for our sickly spirits as we fall in love with our own destruction.

As we fall for the hearts of men.

Oh Beauty, how great is your sorrow, as we fill our hearts with Bitterness.

For Bitterness is blindness.

Beauty, Oh Beauty, cry, cry for my wicked heart,
Oh Beauty cry for my blindness!

For I will follow your cries through the Darkness all the days of my life.

Rain, Rain

Rain, rain
Was away my pain
My heart is now slain
And all my strength has been drained

My heart was all yours
It was scared from mental wars
But you added to the score
And now my tears pour

I gave you my heart
And you broke it apart
You consumed my being like a la carte
I can't stop you once you start

Rain, rain
Was away my pain
I'm going insane
A broken heart I must sustain

You take and take but never give
That's the way you've always lived
And for that I cannot forgive
You fill my head with misgive

You were always quick to judge
And you always held a grudge
Everything you say is adjudge
And I can't be happy without your begrudge

Rain, rain
Wash away my pain
I have nothing more to gain
And the moon starts to wane

I've finally seen through your lies
You refused to hear my cries
You didn't see how much I tried
And this is where I say goodbye

All you wanted was to get under my skin
You couldn't help but point out all my sins
My patience is filled up to the brim
And this time I am going to win

Rain, rain
Wash away my pain
I'm breaking off your chain
I can't do this again

I'm finally done with you
All the years of pain you've put me through
You've just made my emotions brew
And I'm about to come unglued
From all the venom you spew
You forced me to subdue
But to myself I will stay true
And now I say that I hate you

Rain, rain
I've overcome my pain
My tears were not in vain
I no longer worship your fane