

EQUINOX

Literary & Arts Magazine



About

Equinox is the literary and arts magazine that is exclusive to the Campus Honors Program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was created, organized, and published by Campus Honors Program students.

The mission of *Equinox* is to share the artistic and creative talents of Campus Honors Program members. Its name, borrowed from astronomy, reflects this mission: the vernal and autumnal equinoxes are days of the year when day and night are seen equally. The duality of day and night reflects the balance between academic and artistic achievement among Campus Honors Program scholars.

2013 Executive Board:

Samantha Fuchs and Clara Mount, *Editors-in-Chief*
Ethel Liao and Monica Jarboe, *Review Board and Editing Team*

Thank You

Equinox extends thanks to the 2013 Executive Board for collecting, reviewing, and selecting submissions for publication in this inaugural issue.

We also thank Jessica Chen for her beautiful watercolor cover art, Dario Aranguiz and the CHP Computer Administrators (Tej Chajed, Sanjit Dutta, Alex Kordas, and Genevieve LaBelle) for their assistance in making this issue an online publication, and all of our student contributors for making this magazine such a success.

Finally, we want to thank the Campus Honors Program staff for their encouragement throughout this process.

Your dedication, time, and contributions were invaluable in the making of this inaugural issue. This magazine could not have been created without you!

Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

We could rattle off the traditional letter-from-the-editors comments: “We worked so hard to put this together! It was a challenge, but teamwork made all of this possible!”

But really, that would be a bit of an understatement. (And also really cheesy.) This is the true story of the creation of this magazine:

Sam sends out an email to find out who’s interested in doing a startup. Clara, Monica, and Ethel respond. Sam asks Clara to be Co-Editor-in-Chief. Clara accepts. The four of us meet once or twice to make a game plan. We decide to call ourselves the Fantastic Four. Sam and Ethel leave for Europe, never to return. Clara and Monica stay behind. Submissions open up. We have a naming contest. Clara still owes the winner cookies. For five weeks, the Fantastic Four wait for submissions, dreading the possibility that no one wants us to publish them. Then in a single week, we receive a billion emails asking us to consider their art. We send celebratory emails to each other. We bask in our own awesomeness. And then we realize how very much work we have left to do to finish the magazine. A month or two later, here we are!

The process was a trial. And our long-distance situation made teamwork a hassle. But the trouble we faced along the way has made our results even more rewarding.

We are proud to have produced such a massive first installment of *Equinox*. We are proud to have received so many submissions, and we are proud to be able to share the artistic talents of Campus Honors Program students with the ~~internet~~ world.

But none of this would have been possible without the overwhelmingly positive response that we received from our Campus Honors Program community. We are ecstatic to present to you the first-ever issue of *Equinox*, the Campus Honors Program literary and arts magazine.

Enjoy!

Sincerely,

Samantha Fuchs and Clara Mount
Co-Editors-in-Chief

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I. Poetry

Cascades of Cacophony

Erik Kountz

Hungry hikers tiptoe through the tangled forest,
Between sticky and thick thorny thistles,
To an open clearing where the sun shines through.
In the center flows a stream
And nearby the rush and roar of a waterfall thunders.

The stream is a tumbled torrent of water,
As it tears and blasts from cataract to cataract,
And thrashes and smashes from rock to rock.
The fast water flow is like a horse that can never be broken.
The bubbling foam of the stream makes the rapids rage whiter
And have more shape than ever before.

The water gushes as it seems to race from rock to rock,
As it cascades down from the drop,
As it rumbles down the steep and slippery slope.
In a jet of pure power, water spurts and spouts,
As wave after wave of water rush to destroy
Everything in their path with untold force.

The hungry hikers, no longer famished,
Pack their picnic belongings.
They smile happily, as they think about their wonderful day,
Inundated with joy.

To Race the Rapids

Erik Kountz

As I propel myself in a kayak through the tight turns of the river,
The river becomes a tumbled torrent of water
As it tears and blasts from cataract to cataract
And thrashes and smashes from rock to rock.

I paddle fiercely to dodge each and every jagged rock
Which stabs into the sky.
The spiky rocks scrape my little kayak with a vengeance
I thought was reserved only for cat fights.

The river careens like a wild horse that can never be broken.
The bubbled foam on the river makes the rapids rage whiter
And my longing to navigate them all the stronger.
The water gushes and crashes as it races from rock to rock.
The spray splashes my face.
The waves buffet me from every side,
With only enough control to keep myself upright.

My ears pound as I hear the thunder of the waterfall that I approach quickly.
The rush and roar of its danger is soon upon me.
It's too late to change my mind or course
As my kayak and I plunge into the froth.

We cascade down from the drop
And rumble and tumble down the steep and slippery slope.
In a jet of pure power, water spurts and spouts,
As wave after wave of water rush to destroy
My kayak and me with untold force.

I am excited and a little scared
And my heart skips several beats as I fall through the air and mist,
And I smash the surface of the water at the base of the fall,
To plummet below into a calm underwater abyss.

I pop back to the surface and paddle downstream
As fast as the current flows.
My pulse slows slightly and I catch my breath.
I journey on: One down, three to go.

Nutella, Dear Nutella

Ethel Liao

My love for Nutella is trumped by none—
 I long for it like a caged bird longs flight,
 Innately seek it, like flowers the sun.
 I'd wither without it; that is my plight.
 For who could resist its sweet temptation?
 Each rich taste makes me desperate for more
 Of hazelnut's grace, darling sensation.
 Eat ice cream instead? I would be left poor.
 Yet, with my daily Nutella spoonful,
 Over time, I notice my growing pudge.
 As I suspect this might not be healthful,
 With each bite, my arteries clog (my judge).
 Perhaps, of my Nutella consumption,
 I should deliberate moderation.

She Tells Me

Jessica Chen

She tells me she's broken,
 Mumbling incoherent somethings about
Cracks and *humbled pasts* and *flaming memories*

While she sits on a ledge,
 Fishing for gems she'll never have,
 Ignoring the refracting ripples
 Which originate from her peeling lies,
 Noting only hypocrites' faces flake off in desolate grays.

Perspective
Clara Mount

“O, image!
Your beauty, ever reflecting,
show me perfection
that I may woo her divine soul!”

O, image!
Speak not such words to me,
For how—
how can I portray your perfection,
when you assuredly have none?
Humans—
vain, hateful creatures;
You bathe yourselves in demeaning opinion.
How distraught you make me!
lost in this chaos
of mass imperfection,
while humanity fishes for some extinct utopia.

Nay, it is you, weak specter,
who should reflect me.
For a mirror, captured in stillness,
Has no purpose but to relay an image
to his Creator,
And can do no wrong.

“O, image!”

Finals Week
Christina Crusius

It's 2:22! Make a wish!
And by 2:22, I mean 2:22 AM.

My room is silent
Except for the hum of the refrigerator and heater
And fingers tapping away at the keyboard,
Hoping for an answer.

My eyes droop, but then they notice my whiteboard:
Six assignments on my to-do list.
Zero turned in.
Crossing out procrastination only happened on paper
Or rather on the board staring back at me.

Facebook kept my attention.
Why can't homework?
I tell myself that this will all be over in a few days,
But until then, I wallow in the mud of overdue essays, practice exams, and social commitments.

What is laundry?
What is sleep?
What is sanity?
I see no end in sight.

Now it is 2:38.
I have made no progress since I started this poem.
Time to get back to work.

Stranger in Both Lands

Ethel Liao

She's born by the East, raised in the West,
Comes into the world with this burned bright as a brand.
(Really, such a union couldn't be for the best.)

Her different looks are the first object of detest;
She's too conscious of the shape of her eyes, the skin on her hands.
She's born by the East, raised in the West.

She accepts her mispronounced name without protest,
Tries to adpt customs foreign to her supposed native land.
(Really, such a union couldn't be for the best.)

With her parents' halting English she is forever obsessed,
Knowing if she isn't, her self-taught native accent will crumble like sand.
She's born by the East, raised in the West.

Racial slurs ache, but still she humors their jest,
Because otherwise she's abandoned and no man is an island.
(Really, such a union couldn't be for the best.)

When she returns to the distant land she's never addressed,
She realizes too late the lost home she can't understand.
She's born by the East, raised in the West—
Really, such a union couldn't be for the best.

Tugboat
Jessica Chen

i.

In ancient photos of sepia
and black and contrasts of white
he sits alonesome, dangling pale *sunlightdespised* feet
along grass that will never taste color
surrounded by a grey ocean on his island
given only a tree for company
wondering if solitude is his destiny

ii.

In a not-so-faraway world, a girl drives tugboats
watching cobalt oceans turn in gradients of slategray
irondark, obsidianblack
pigments *washingaway* like
the sky during springtime rain
hitting the rocky, unvisited shore of
boy's island

iii.

With a rope twined by fate, friendship, *curiosity*
she lassos his blanched tree companion, grinning
"You'll be fine, the world is a beautiful place"
driving her tugboat with his isolated island along the path
where balloons litter the sky
and the sun kisses the stars
and embraces the boy whom it longed to see but was so deprived of—
and he is drenched
in that world, tasting the sweet flavors of blues,reds,purples,sunburntoranges
"Is this what I've been missing my entire life?"
and suddenly life
is more than just black and white piano keys

iv.

They net falling paintdrops and gumdrops and sundrops,
feed fish whose scales glisten silver coins dipped in metal wash
searching for clones of his *used-to-be island*—
tying together (saving) those solitudechildren
and linking the sepia landmasses
like a connect-the-dots of stars
creating a *something* out of a *nothing*
a constellation which pushes the tides of that ironclad sea
sailing the *Argo Navis*
and lighting the world abright with color.

What a Shame

Kira Bonk

how horrendous!
 (gulp that
 Fresh Air)
 for Goodness' sake,
 where is your cigarette?
 that had better not be Water,
 take this red cup—it's stronger.
 how piteous!
 (ignore that
 nagging voice)
 for Goodness' sake,
 where is your fun side?
 unclench those weathered Spines,
 join these juvenile times.
 how credulous!
 (notice that
 slight smirk)
 for Goodness' sake,
 where is your life going?
 You stress, and worry, and Care.
 succumb already and swear.
 how humorous!
 to behave.

Love's List

Debbie Newcomb

I love him for:
 small, sweet notes left on my door
 the way he smiles when he's glad
 or when he shares dreams he's had
 when our hands hold
 the tales we have not told
 when our lips say
 life won't get in the way
 his jokes that run from sense
 the times he'll jump a fence
 to play on slides or swings
 the way that, just for me, he sings
 the way he sees a film...
 He left me one day. Bastard.

The Part of the Fairytale That Never Got Told, Vol. I
Clara Mount

I swear the evil Queen in Snow White had a lover. He was probably young, and, knowing her, not very manly—she definitely enjoyed being in control.

I kind of feel sorry for him. I mean, what if he pissed her off?

You know how angry she was with Snow White—and that was just for having nicer skin and hair and lips and eyes and pretty much every physical attribute ever. That wasn't even anything intentional—or political—yet we all know what happened to her. Undeserved poisoning. Discrimination by virtue of birth—genetics—genocide. (She did get a Prince Charming in the end by some act of *deus ex machina*, but that's just a tidy example of karma—unrelated.)

No, I think the Queen's lover was an effeminate man who probably wasn't a robot and instead thrived on originality and creativity—though why he would use a mind like that to love a witch like her is far beyond me. Maybe he channeled his originality into something cool—like dreadlocks. Maybe that's what got the queen so pissed off—a random misinterpretation of creative expression to be some sort of political call to anarchy or something equally nonsensical.

And maybe to apologize he did something arguably sweet—stole her batch of apples, laid them on her bed like rose petals, and then waited for her, naked under the sheets—a nice little surprise for when the angry Queen came home.

Unfortunately for him, he probably didn't realize that she likes her apples venomous—a poison not deterred by a thin layer of skin.

Poor guy.

I told you I feel sorry for him.

Nominando

Matt Macomber

Echoes, Gift of the Past
Light, Illuminator of Secrets
Noise, Toller of Confusion
Rot, Revealer of Corruption
Pain, the Smelting Furnace
Bitterness, the Taste of Defeat
Age, the Curse of Time

Country Midnight

Christina Crusius

Silent was the whir of the tractor.
Silent was Mother's voice,
calling for dinner.
Silent were the cattle,
mooing as if suspended from a cliff.

The old barn lay still,
blanketed by the blackberry darkness.
Needles of light
and a shadow of the moon
shone through the clouds
forming a halo in the haystack.

Pretending

Kira Bonk

digging in my purse for something
(that doesn't exist)
wearing headphones
(that aren't plugged in)
texting on my cell phone
(that isn't turned on)
avoiding conversations
(that aren't interesting)

Scarlet Red

Jessica Chen

I'm scarlet red, he declares proudly
Jabbing a thumb at his chest of *barely any muscle* (*skin and bones, really*)
And I nod, absentminded
Yes dear, good for you,
Too caught up in so-called "adult affairs"
Which is only ever a fancy word used to describe
Things we'd rather not burden children with because we're ashamed
Their sense of purity can see a path otherwise Undetectable
By maturity—

Scarlet red, he urges
And I sigh, pretending to look at the world with "wise eyes"
Yes dear, I get it
A very pretty color
Now go outside and play,
Hiding from him
That secretly, I desire that
We too, be *scarlet red*,
Praying that children take us with
To those long-forgotten memories, only barely remembered in faded photographs
When simplicity was the answer.

To the Top of the Cliff

Erik Kountz

The climber hangs with spider legs dangling,
Scrambling for a foothold upon the steep rock face,
Getting a grip and pushing higher,
Each step sending pebbles crashing down in little landslides.

The climber nimbly glides along the rocks jutting from the face.
But if he slips, he hangs on dearly to the thread
That keeps him from falling and hitting the rocks below,
Safely tethering him to the granite wall.

The climber skitters gracefully upward,
Creating a new pathway with nylon rope stronger than silk,
Slowly succeeding, inching upward, reaching the top.
The prize—the beetle that the spider caught.

Zom-Poc Survival

Clara Mount

These days, my dear, are called bittersweet,
the moments and places and half-eaten faces
when words part ways and distances greet.

I've witnessed the monsters' cannibal embraces
as they suddenly turn on friends walking by
and hungrily dribble their slobber in traces

of sickening wetness like human meat pie.
I've watched them merge into shuffling masses,
but when I see zombies, the zombies see I,

and then I must flee to save all our asses
and shout out my warning to run, run away!
For the zombies emerging from all those car crashes
entice living people to sharper dismay.

Gutters

Jessica Chen

I have gutters in my esophagus
Where nasty words tumble down like rusty rainwater
Gathering in a barrel of leaves
And the growing stench grips my heart
Vice-like
With things that I'll never say
Wishing that little bits of lemon rain
Like blessings of the stars
Will chip away the graffiti stains

Con Passione

Christina Crusius

When my lips meet my reed
we become one
in an embrace that transcends reason.

Euphony emanates
like a gentle lullaby.

Rock beats reverberate in the concert hall
beat-boxing bass lines.

Victorious melodies resound,
boldly bellowing beneath the band,
stating their presence.

CHAOS
Clashes with the person next to me
Creating explosive chords or

beautiful dissonance

restfully
resolving.

Creature of Habit

Nathan Stables

Dream the creature and it might crawl out
from a glass holder; the fluidity of line
and shape but knowing that its creation was
absolute and its self-destruction arranged long ago.
And I come sometimes, anticipating
that maybe the creature will flower a tail,
grow taller as light absorbs into his frayed skin and
shrink back when time calls him inward.

I know now that the mirror brings no promise
of change. I challenge its forward stare and meet
a creature, but not the one of my vision.
I see the unrelenting scorn of the sun, pock-marked
strips on pallid skin displaying a chameleon-like
talent of masking the truth, my inherited impatience
and resentment bubbling up. I peek ahead into
a smile so manufactured only my mother could have done better,
never willing to yield unhappiness lest it seem insincere.
I look deeper past the blue pools of my eyes over-framed by inching
black caterpillars to locate the real creature, whose
face concedes truth that mine no longer can. It conceals a
natural ease made cancerous from exposure to judgment, weighed
down by the residue of the day caught in the fibers of my clothes.

I leave the glossy face behind in a half-stupor,
undecidedly disappointed or motivated to lock the creature
away in its crystallized reflection within the glass. But the
resistance comes from within and oozes down and out the space between
my toes, cementing my step. I look down at the gooey imprisonment and sigh,
knowing how hard it is to change a creature of habit.

II.

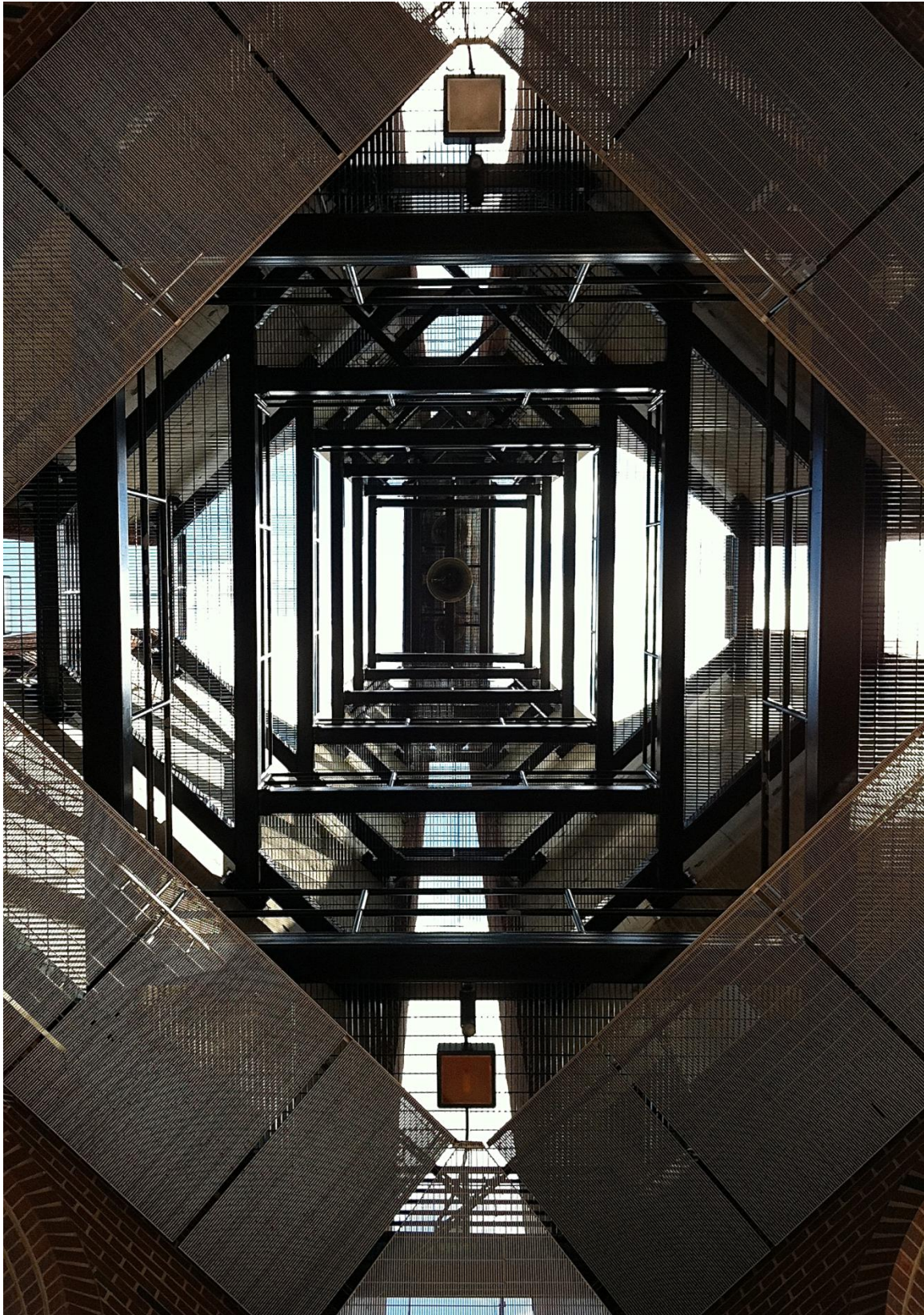
Visual Art



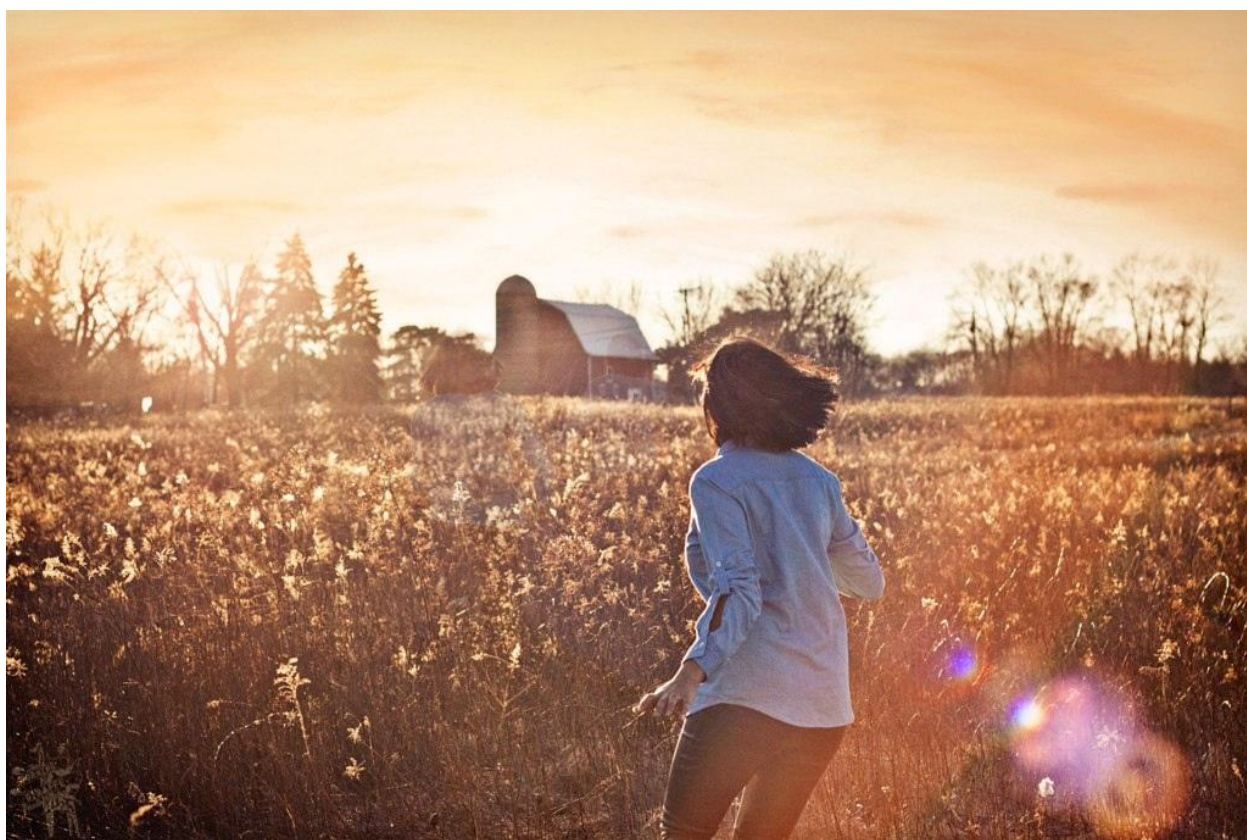
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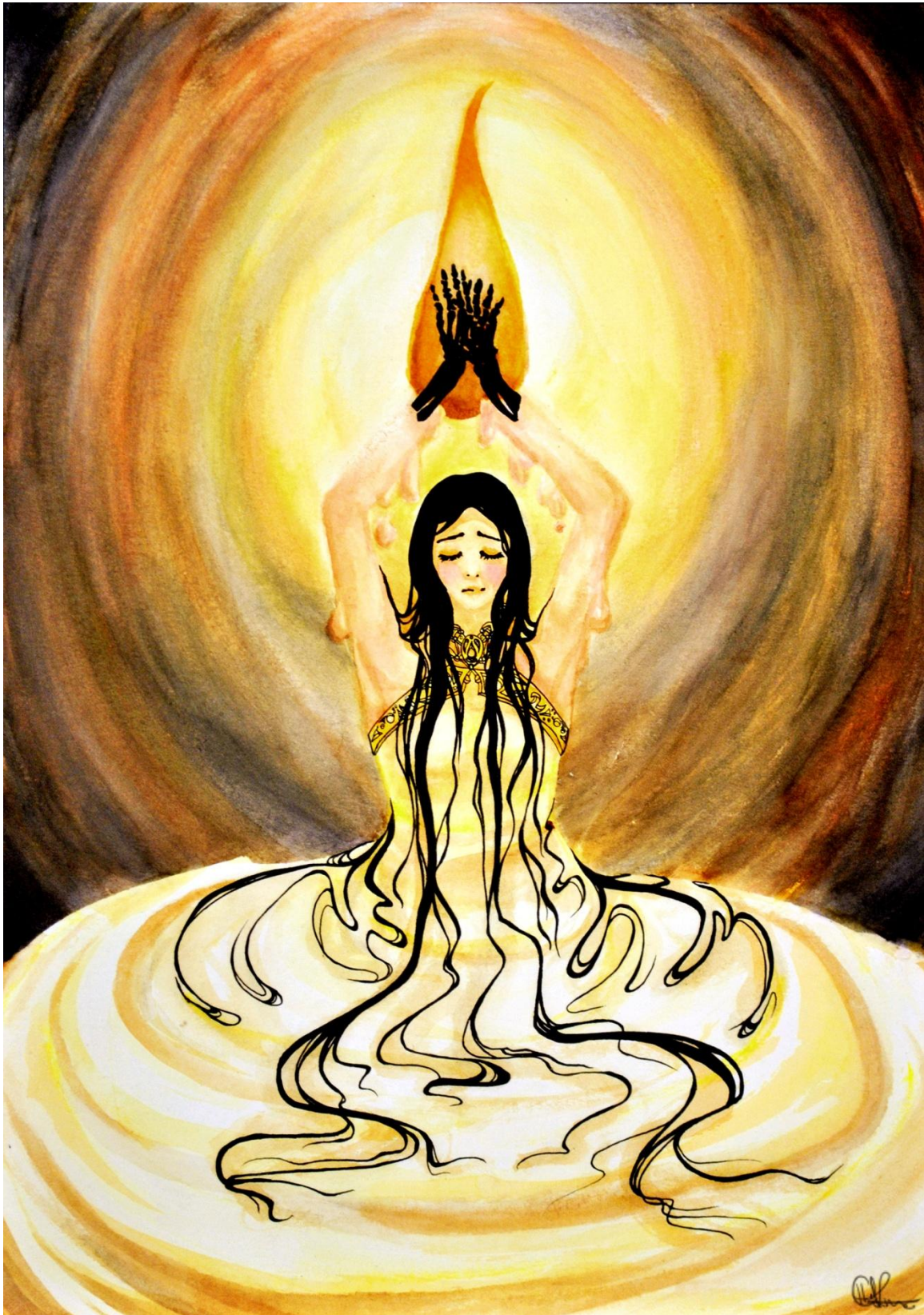
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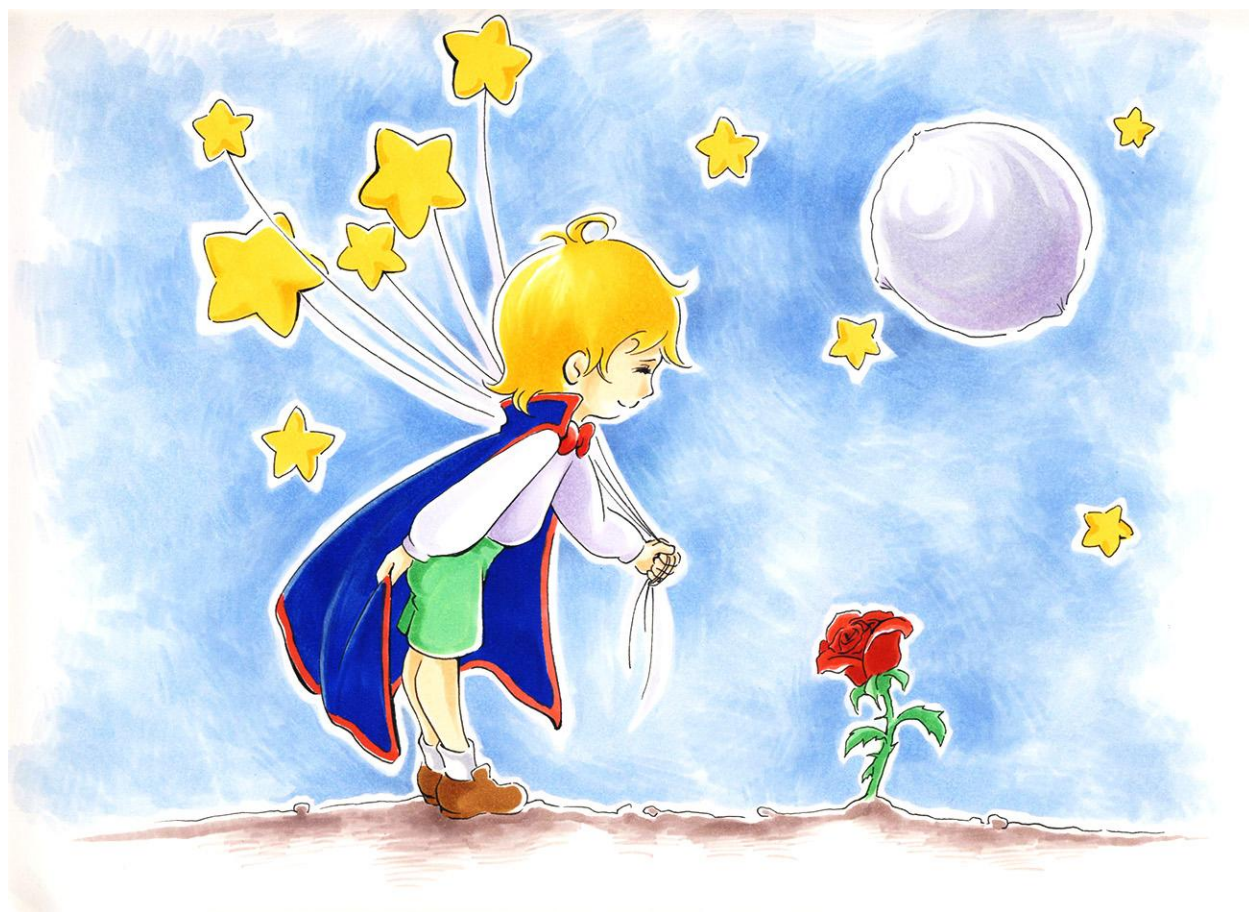
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Cosmic, Pooja Bag



LOVE ILLINI: A Handmade Friendship Bracelet, Grace Deetjen



Splash, Pooja Bag

III.

Nonfiction Prose

The Beauties of a Body

Samantha George

The heart is still beating when I open up the body cavity. It's much smaller than I expected, this pulsating organ that controls the ebb and flow of internal tides, the red sea that rushes through the veins and arteries, eventually trickling down to those minute tributaries we call capillaries. But then again, it is a mouse that lies on the dissection table, not a human with its fist-sized heart, but this tiny creature possessing a heart the size of my fingernail.

I always felt the need to apologize to the mice during those first few weeks working in the lab. I'd slide the tip of a syringe's needle just beneath their skin, quietly murmuring "sorry"s and hoping that they'd feel nothing more after the barbiturate began its plodding dance through their systems, lulling them into a dense slumber, a slumber from which they wouldn't awaken.

I never felt the need to apologize for the work we were doing, only to the creatures unlucky enough to be assisting us in our endeavors. Because in my eyes, the work we did was necessary. We were creating an immunotherapy for atherosclerosis, a disease of the arteries, and we needed to see their miniscule vessels, their small hearts, to determine if the therapy was successful. In some ways, the work was even beautiful. Some might find that strange, that I found beauty in the body cavity of a mouse. Sometimes I even find it a bit odd that the sight of a gallbladder peeking out from beneath the lobes of a liver so intrigued me. I would marvel at the winding labyrinth of intestinal tubes and tracts, so perfectly packed and placed in the crater of the abdomen. The fact that there were nerves and tendons and bone and muscle all meshing together, working together, to perpetuate the life I analyzed under the antiseptic fluorescence of lab lights never ceased to amaze me. Their harmony was beautiful. And so, life was beautiful.

Labs seem to have a stigma attached to them, of having a sort of sordid sterility in which people huddle over microscopes and slides, indifferent observers merely taking note of life. I speak to the contrary. It wasn't until I was in that lab, seeing the heart throb, seeing life unfold before my eyes and my scalpel, that I was able to appreciate the beauty that lay in the far-off obscurities of even a single body.

**How Many? How Much? Some, Maybe:
A Satirical Solution to All American Problems**

Erik Kountz

\$16,607,216,503,950.75. That was the value of the national debt on February 27th, 2013. The ability of the United States to pay off this debt without compromising present services worries many American citizens. It has caused many people to suggest possible solutions: many workable, some very applicable, and some not worth considering.

Of course, in order to develop an effective plan to conquer the national debt, one needs to learn a little about the history of the national debt and how it affects American citizens every day. The national debt arose during the Revolutionary War when the Continental Congress needed to borrow money to pay for an army to fight the British. Over the course of American history, the United States has also often practiced deficit spending, in which the government spends more money than it has to disperse. The government then has to make up the difference by borrowing money from lenders and paying interest on these loans. These interest payments are of the most concern to many Americans because money spent on interest cannot be used to fund social programs, national defense, or other federal initiatives.

Because this problem affects 315 million American citizens, many solutions have been proposed. The most common methods are to reduce spending, raise taxes, or institute a combination of the two. However, the most frequently used strategy for solving the national debt is doing nothing while occasionally threatening to double all taxes and lay off Congress. While some of these methods are occasionally effective, a bolder, better strategy is needed.

Some bolder suggestions that are commonly mentioned for erasing the national debt are passing a balanced budget amendment and reforming the tax system. However, these may not be the most effective possible resolutions. In the event of a major disaster, the government needs to have money available immediately to start rescuing and helping people save their lives, their pets, their possessions, and their pets' possessions. Also, trying to pass an effective tax reform bill to eliminate all the loopholes would cause many loophole-hunting lawyers to lose their jobs, who would then be forced to spend their time actually being lawyers in court to defend or prosecute accused criminals. If not in the courtrooms, these lawyers would be unemployed, therefore, not paying taxes as a futile form of vengeance. Perhaps their skills could be best utilized to write anti-loophole language for legislators.

To find the best solution to the national debt, one only needs to ask anyone what the number 1,000,000,000,000 is. If that anyone were an American, the response would be one trillion, but if that anyone were a European, the response

would be one billion. Since this is the case, what would prevent anybody from saying the number is one million, twenty-six, a lot, or more money than the average thief could steal from a bank teller in 30 seconds? Nothing, nothing, nothing at all! In fact, American educators as a whole should cease even **teaching** numbers and should even eliminate mathematics entirely from every single person's life. Some people already ignore the problem of the national debt, but it would be even better if no Americans even understand what the national debt is, let alone what numbers mean.

While some people may say that this solution sounds a little extreme, it is not. If Americans continue to teach math to others but ignore the national debt, then the occasional person using all of his or her scary math abilities, such as addition and long division, might realize that there is a slight problem and thus would generally irritate and annoy everybody around him or her with these findings. This action would be positively detrimental to the national psyche and would not be acceptable. The only way to prevent this from happening is to not let anyone get near math with a 10-foot (3.048-m) pole. Thus, the banishment of math would solve the problem of concerns about the national debt.

Many social problems that the United States must deal with on a daily basis could also be solved by ignoring math. To start, there would be no more unemployment and no unemployment rate because businesses would hire people just for fun. Businesses would no longer care about cash flow. Unemployed people would feel less demoralized because they would not know how long they had not had a job. Additionally, even if the unemployed did not want to work, they could be given some money or even green paper with random writing so that they could buy food and not starve, all because Americans would no longer care about a budget. Dreaded losing streaks, like those of the Cubs and Yankees, would vanish because no one could keep score. Better yet, many civic problems could be solved by ignoring math. A police chief this author once knew stated, "Our town had a lot of crime and few officers. But once we started ignoring our math, we claimed our criminal activity was down. We hired somewhere between a few and a ton of new officers whom we paid by giving them big batches of money we did not want." Today, everyone thinks his town has a small amount of criminal activity and quite a few bunches of uniformed officers to help stop crime.

Many people will agree, however, that the hardest part of this plan is drawing up a timeline (if that were possible to do without numbers). These citizens must be certain that those math-knowledgeable people are not teaching others their deadly arts and are not complaining that the country is going to the dumps because this proposal has a few problems. Luckily, the only possible way to keep these math hooligans from complaining so loudly as to prevent this proposal from occurring is simple. These scoundrels will be given a very great deal of money in assorted bills, half dollars, quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies

and are to be told the money is theirs. The overwhelming desire for them to count their money will cause them to spend one or two years indoors and give enough time for the entirety of the No-Math Plan to unfold. The inability for them to communicate their results and their complaints in general to the vast “un-mathed” will reduce their negative influence on the success of the Plan. They will give up and the Plan will succeed!

In the end, without math, the United States would become a much better place because there could be no unemployed, poor, hungry people living in a country where there are unlimited funds for social and health care. Americans would enjoy boundless national security because concerns for financial needs for defense would disappear. People could relax in a country where pressure to make a deadline such as April 15th is gone for good. In addition to solving the national debt problem, it can be easily seen that social, economic, and psychological concerns can be effectively addressed by eliminating numbers and math. Think about it: is America better off with or without knowing math?

Letter of Resignation to Language

Samantha George

Whenever I write, I feel this aversion towards the words that appear on the page. They never say exactly what I mean for them to say. That's not their fault, though. It's a fault of my own. Or perhaps there's fault on both sides. On one hand, I am too lazy and impatient to sit here and write down thoughts that I could easily say to someone else (or just not say at all). On the other hand, language is this thing that tempts me with the belief that I can relay my ideas to another individual so well that said individual would know exactly what my thoughts were.

And so, I keep writing, keep talking, keep thinking to myself, that if I write, speak, think so many words, eventually it will make sense. But it doesn't. I've already written eight pages of words to get to these that appear on paper. You won't see those other words, but they exist. And they mean something all by themselves. Well, at least I think they mean something. They were haphazardly written, but I believe they were coherent enough to mean something.

That's why I envy words. All they have to do is exist, and they already have meaning. They don't have to wonder or worry about whether or not their existence is significant because:

- 1) They're not "self-aware" beings who are capable of wondering or worrying about their existence.
- 2) They can exist on their own, despite the fact that they can have more meaning when in context with other words.
- 3) They are ascribed meaning by us.
- 4) There were other things, but I can't remember them right now.

If it turns out that words are actually self-aware individuals who are capable of being offended by my saying they are incapable of wonder or worry, then I'll make a public apology. However, for now, they're not, so I'll continue.

Although words seem to enjoy a simpler existence, it seems we share some similarities with them. We are the creators of words who give them definition. Alternately, we create religions and other institutions in order to have a "creator" who can give us definition as well. Words, even with our definite definitions, seem to find meaning in context with other words. In the same way, we also seem to find meaning when put in context with other individuals, events, environments, etc. The only definitions we can really have are those formed in context with our surroundings.

Even when words are put in context with each other, though, like in a sentence, there's always this distance between them. Or at least there's supposed to be. There are spaces between words and punctuation marks installed to keep those words in order and by doing so, give them structure. There are spaces

between us as well, the distance created either by our contrived assertion of "individuality," or the distance created by that language that works to unite words, to unite us, but ultimately ends up keeping everything apart. We impose grammar upon our lives so that they may make sense. Rules and requirements are made in order to give significance to the things we do or don't do.

Look at us. We're a language. We wish to be in perfectly constructed sentences, but it's not possible. The syntax is always off and the wording is never quite right. It never means exactly what we'd like it to mean.

Why do we have language? We desire our lives to be structured and significant just as much as we desire something that *we* can structure and ascribe significance to. That's what language does. It controls our lives, gives us trouble, brings us to our knees, all the while leading us on to believe that we created it, brought it into being, and gave it meaning.

Quaffing Cupfuls of the Cure

Samantha George

From my bed I could see the cold, bleak Saturday peek through the blinds. Something tickled the insides of my throat, some internal feather duster trying to stir up debris, and a fit of coughs racked my small body. My young immune system seemed to be especially susceptible to all the sticky hands and runny noses inherent in the second-grade classroom. My nose was perpetually stuffed up, bouts of coughing were frequent, and soreness permanently resided in my throat. Mornings were when all the ailments would come together in one cacophonous choir and swoop in to take my health hostage.

Only my mom knew a way to beat them off, and that day it was the scent of this cure that managed to waft through the obstructions of my nasal passage and convince me that waking up was a worthwhile venture.

Running downstairs, I swung around the banister and into the hallway. My sock-bedecked feet helped me slide from hardwood to linoleum, into the kitchen. I stood in the warmth and waited. My mom turned away from the stove when she heard my skittering step. Then the ritualized question was put forth.

“Would you like some chai?”

I grinned, knowing she knew that the answer to that question would always be yes.

I dragged a stool over to the stove, as I wanted a first row seat to the potion’s creation. Milk rested in the pot, waiting for the energy to begin its frothing performance. Cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, ginger: all went into the pot to mingle with milk. Both waiting for the show to begin, we heard a hiss as the milk began to boil, its foamy appendages rising and reaching to meet the lip of the pot. Just before it escaped, my mom turned off the heat, and the dairy-derived beast settled down. Loose tea leaves were thrown into the mix and the colors swirled and eddied, pushed forward by the heat. When an even tint had reached all the edges of the pot, the cure was poured into a cup for each of us.

I took a tentative sip, and the warm taste of spices and milk and sugar soothed the ragged edges of my throat. Tendrils of steam caressed the air and opened up my airways. Coughing subsided, and I thanked my wizard of a mother for healing me. I was determined to learn her magical ways of chai-making, and eventually, I did.

Years later, chai would help me with a different affliction: stress. During the wee hours, when a paper was due the next day or a test was looming in the near future, I’d turn to tea for comfort. Taking my stool over to the stove, I’d sit with my homework, my book, or my calculator, and keep an eye on that impish milk that had the habit of rising out of the pot and onto the stovetop, sometimes even dousing the pilot light. The rhythm of creation always worked to calm me. It

reminded me that it was all right to breathe every once in a while, to inhale the scent of familiar spices and watch steam writhe in midair. With my liquid courage, I was able to bypass most mental turmoil. Papers would be finished; nerves, calmed. My magical friend had done it again.

These days, I don't make chai as often as I used to. There's no fresh ginger, and the kitchenette is always cluttered with someone else's cooking. When I do get the chance to make tea, it's a happy occasion. Joined in my venture by a friend or two, we'll make the trek down to the kitchenette. There aren't any stools here, but we'll drag a few chairs to the stove, throw our ingredients into the pot, and begin our vigil. A contemplative companionship is present during the process, spawning conversations that wouldn't happen elsewhere.

During one of these chai sessions, a friend turns to me and asks, "How is your soul?"

Only around chai would she dare talk about such things as souls.

I reflect for a moment.

"My soul is well."

Content with my answer, my friend resumes the watch, waiting once again for milk to perform and steam to spiral and healing to be delivered to body, mind, and soul.

IV.

Fiction Prose

The Head and the Heart

Nicholas Rossi

Once there was a man with a giant head and a tiny heart, but he had not always been so disproportionate.

The brain had begun the same size as the heart, small and fragile. Over time, the brain grew at the expense of the heart, always using as much blood as possible to grow in size and strength, always convincing the heart that this allocation of resources was in the best interest of all involved.

And so, over time, the brain became gigantic. The massive brain required an enormous amount of blood to function, such an enormous amount that his tiny heart could never imagine pumping enough blood to satiate it. Working day and night pumping every ounce of blood possible to the perpetually thirsty brain, the heart never rested and never faltered in its devotion. All the while, the heart cursed the brain every moment of its existence for being an ungrateful and unyielding ruler, never taking a moment to let the heart slow down and collect its strength.

Over the years, though, the heart grew stronger and stronger from the constant slaving at the foot of the brain and slowly gained the attention of its master, until one day the brain finally felt it was getting enough blood to function comfortably at full capacity.

"Okay. Great job. You can plateau at this output and we can both be content," said the brain to the now not-so-tiny heart. "You've really impressed me with your work consistency and loyalty. I'm glad we can now coexist in comfort." But the heart was not content. The heart did not want comfort. The heart wanted control. So it kept pumping at full strength and growing more powerful by the minute.

"Why would I want to coexist with you? You've ruled me for so many years with your constant, impossible need for more blood, for more work. With all your thinking, you never spared a thought for me. You never gave me what I needed, so why would I give you what you want now that we are equals? See, you think you are the undeniable superior, the unchallenged champion and sole torchbearer. Well, I'm here to show you that my fire burns brighter and longer than yours because I hold the oil that fuels both of our flames."

The heart kept pumping with blinding passion and overbearing pride until it flooded the brain with blood, eliminating the tyrant forever. But without the purpose of serving the brain, the heart began to feel alone and worthless, pumping blood to the rest of the man's withered limbs, which had become limp twigs from years of the heart's neglect in preference of the brain. But the limbs never grew strong and never challenged the heart as the brain had. After a short time of this pointless pumping, the heart's struggle ceased.

In the meantime, the man lived and died.

Homemaker

Debbie Newcomb

Dad was always there to help me out. I didn't know which major I wanted in college; he told me to pick Accounting. After I graduated, I didn't know where I wanted to work; he told me which company to apply to. Eventually, Dad figured it was time for me to settle down and move out of my apartment. "Michael works in your building, right? He comes from good people. Marry him."

I had talked with Michael before, so it was easy to walk past him and wink. I made sure to stand next to him if we were in a group, and he and I just happened to eat lunch at the same time most days. He asked me to a movie one night, and I said yes. He picked the movie and the snacks from the concession stand. It was perfect.

Michael and I went on many more dates after that. I never had to strain myself thinking of where I wanted to go because Michael always chose what we would do. After one dress that was so modest Michael told me it looked like a nun would wear it, he came over before our dates to help me pick out my clothes. He told me that if the neckline was three fingers below my collar bone or higher, I should never wear it on a date. He took care of everything. It was wonderful.

Of course, I still had dinner with Dad every Thursday night and told him all about my week. "You need to get that boy to propose," Dad said, swirling his wine. "Just tell him you're pregnant. It'll be true soon enough." He gave me a weird smile. "Now, let me tell you the best thing to order next time you go on a date."

I told him it wasn't a problem, that Michael always ordered for me. I'm not sure Dad liked that, but he didn't say anything.

Soon, I got a drawer in Michael's apartment. I added a few light accents to his dark dwelling: a vase filled with marbles here, a snow globe there. Life was going so well. Then Dad's ended.

He wasn't there to tell me what to do like he had when Mom died. I was dressed all in black, but it felt wrong. Michael held my hand during the visitation and told me what to say to people. He told me he'd pick my dress for the funeral. Michael was there for me, but I started slipping away. I went driving. Farther and farther. I began to know the highways better than my town's streets.

One Saturday, I drove until late at night, and got a hotel room in the middle of nowhere. The tiny bathroom came stocked with tiny shampoo and conditioner bottles and two tiny bars of soap—one for the shower and one for the sink. I wondered how long it would take to use them up.

I slept in the next day. When I opened my eyes, I saw the dingy hotel room and knew there wasn't a reason to get up. I drifted in and out of sleep, ignoring the brief buzzes my phone made for texts. When it continued buzzing, I couldn't help but answer the call.

"Where are you?"

Michael and I were supposed to have lunch. I told him the name of the town.

“What are you doing out there? I didn't tell you to get a hotel room.”

I told him that I didn't know.

“Come home. We can have lunch on Monday instead.” A pause. “I want to be there for you in this difficult time, Jane. Even though you've been different lately, I still love you. Just come home.”

For the first time, I hung up on Michael, and I turned off my phone. I tried to go back to sleep, but I kept thinking. I didn't want to go back. Home wasn't a good place. I kept thinking about this instead of sleeping. “Then I'll just stay here,” I said sleepily. I opened my eyes. Actually, that was perfect. I could start over, make a new life for myself. Dad had been a huge part of my life before, so it would be difficult continuing without him, but it would be easier in a town that had never known him. I smiled and closed my eyes again. Soon, I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke up awhile later, I realized that I'd need a new job. A job meant interviewing, and that meant that I needed to look decent. I stumbled out of bed and into the shower. The bar of soap hardly looked diminished after I was done. I was glad Dad had told me to keep a change of clothes in my car just in case. After I changed, I got in my car and started cruising. There was a gas station with a “Now Hiring” sign, but Dad would have wanted me to work somewhere better.

Guessing that there would be newspapers at a diner, I pulled into the parking lot of one. I sat in the car for a moment. I would have to order my own food, but if I was starting over, I didn't have a choice. I took a deep breath and headed inside. The waitress set down my water and asked, “Do you know what you want to eat?”

“I'll have grilled cheese, please,” I said, with barely a quaver in my voice.

“All right.” She smiled and took my menu.

It was that easy!

I asked the waitress if they had newspapers and she pointed me to their stacks. I grabbed one and took it back to my table. I looked at the job applications page, but none of the jobs were for an accountant. I needed something soon. I tapped my fingers on the table and finished off my fries. Maybe I didn't care if Dad wouldn't want me working at a gas station.

After I was done eating, I had to pay the bill. I walked up to the register and handed over some cash. The waitress punched in some numbers and handed back my change. “Have a nice day,” she told me.

“I will,” I said, smiling. I could do this.

I walked into the gas station with the “Now Hiring” sign and talked to the man behind the counter. He said I was their only applicant and he'd call me in a few days if I got the job. Then he winked and told me I probably would. Michael would have been so proud. Why was I thinking of him? Dad would have been

proud.

On my way back to my place, I stopped at the grocery store and picked up some food. I got pasta, apples, and a cucumber for dinner as well as a box of brownie mix. Dad would always make me brownies when I had done something right. I carried my bags out of the car and up to my room. Then I remembered that I didn't have a stove. I had a mini fridge and a microwave. This would be an adventure in homemaking.

I didn't have a bowl, so I went to the front desk to ask for one. The lady there told me they didn't give them out to guests. I got back in the car and went to the store again. I got a microwavable bowl for my pasta, a knife and cutting board, some measuring cups, a pan for the brownies, and some silverware, plates and bowls. The lady at the cash register asked if I was just moving into town.

"Yes I am," I said with a smile.

"This is a great town," she told me. "You'll have a good home here."

"I think I will," I told her. I went back to my place and unloaded the car again. Then I trooped upstairs with my goods. I put the bowl in the sink and filled it about halfway with water. Then I put it in the microwave. While that was going, I started cutting the cucumber and filching pieces. It wasn't dinnertime yet, but I was hungry after all my exertion today. The microwave went off and I looked at the water. It wasn't quite boiling yet, but I was hungry and it seemed really hot. I poured in some pasta and put more time on the microwave. I cut a few more cucumber slices and put the rest in the fridge for later. Then I cut up an apple. As I was arranging everything nicely on a plate, the beeper went off again and I checked the pasta. The angel hair wasn't stiff anymore, so it was good enough for me.

I grabbed a spare plate and the pasta bowl and took them both over to the sink. I held the plate against the opening of the bowl and left a thin space for water to escape, then I dumped out the water. A few noodles went with it, but I fished them out of the sink and threw them away. I would hate to have to call a plumber so soon after being on my own.

Dad usually warmed up the sauce, but I figured the warm noodles would do that for me. I put some noodles on my plate and started my first dinner on my own. It wasn't too bad. The cucumber and apple were great, although the apple was a bit brown when I got to it. I didn't finish the pasta, so I put the rest on a plate and set an upside-down plate on top of it in the fridge. When I was done, I took my dishes to the sink, but I realized that I didn't have any dish soap. I had already been out today. I decided I'd pick up soap tomorrow.

After I stacked my dishes neatly on the counter, I sat down to watch some TV. I had to be informed about what was happening in the world, after all. By the time I remembered the brownies, I was too tired to make them. Maybe I'd be good again tomorrow.

I turned off the lights and slid under the covers. Unlike when Michael slept over, I could go to sleep when I was tired. Being a homemaker was great.

Someone called me from the gas station the next day and told me I got the job. I was so excited. I asked when I started work and they told me to come in as soon as I could. I showered, but I had to wear the same clothes I wore two days ago. I had only brought one change of clothes with me. After work, I decided to go shopping.

When I got to the gas station, the same guy was working there as when I interviewed. He showed me how to check in so I would get paid for my time. Then he told me about selling cigarettes and alcohol and what all of the buttons on the cash register meant. After he told me not to keep more than \$200 in the cash register, he said he had somewhere to be and left.

I was on the clock at my new job. It was really boring standing there and waiting for anyone to walk in. Still, that was part of being an adult. One lady came in to pay for her gas in cash and she picked up a pack of cigarettes while she was in. Several hours later, a mom came in with two children. "You can each have one candy bar," she told them. Excited, the kids ran to the candy aisle and started looking at their options.

Their mom grabbed an emergency kit for her car and waited for her kids at the counter. She looked at them and back at the emergency kit she'd grabbed. "Billy, Lucy, we've got to go. Pick something soon, or you won't get one." She looked at me. "Kids," she said shrugging and smiling.

I smiled back. "They must be a handful."

"Sometimes." She smiled. Billy and Lucy came charging to the front of the store with their candy bars clenched tightly. "Put them on the counter so she can ring them up," the woman directed. The kids set their treasures down quickly and I scanned them first so they could get them back sooner. The woman paid with a credit card, and the three of them left.

I remembered the box of brownie mix I had waiting for me back home. Maybe I would have a candy bar instead. At the end of my shift, when the next employee came in, I bought dish soap and a candy bar. I ate my treat while I drove to the mall my coworker had given me directions to. As I was driving, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Jane? Where are you? Why didn't you come into work today?"

"I did, Michael. I'm working at a gas station now."

"What?"

"I know. Isn't it great? I mean, it's just for now until I get a better job, but I interviewed all by myself."

"You have a better job. I told them you were sick today. Just come back home and everything will be like it was."

I slammed on the brakes for a red light. "Why would I go back? I am home."

Michael was silent for a moment. Since I had done it once, it was easier the second time. I hung up on him again. The light changed and I made the next

turn to get to the mall.

The first store I walked into had so many beautiful clothes. I knew I wouldn't have room for all of them in my closet and dresser, so I tried to be particular. I picked out an armload of clothes to try on, and left five of them hanging on the rack outside the fitting room. It was getting warmer, so I made sure to buy a sundress. I swiped my credit card at the cash register, and carried my bags back to my car. Traffic was light, so I got back to my home quickly. I carried everything upstairs and locked the door behind me. I was in for the night. I had a great time cutting the tags off my purchases and putting them away. I left the closet doors open so I could walk over and admire my clothes. It had been my first shopping trip alone.

As I lounged in bed while watching TV, I couldn't help but think, "I have a great home." I smiled, half-paying attention to the television. An ad came on with a smiling family, and it suddenly hit me. I didn't have a great home. I was still missing something. I needed a baby.

I didn't have work the next day. I resolved to find a baby. I'd take such good care of it. It could sleep in bed with me. I wondered if babies liked pasta. "Silly," I chided myself. "Babies drink milk." I'd buy some tomorrow and get some bottles. I turned off the TV and slid under the covers. I fell asleep thinking about how I'd welcome a baby into my home.

The next day, I realized my first order of business had to be diapers. I had passed a baby store on my way to the mall the other day, so I knew where to go. Babies used a lot of diapers, so I put several packs in my cart. I knew that a man and a woman made babies, but I was still disappointed that none were on sale at the store. "It needs to change its name," I thought, grabbing a package of baby bottles. As I was touring the store, picking up little things I realized I would need for a baby, I found the section for formula. I grabbed a few packages of that and looked at my cart. My baby would need clothes too! I found the correct section, but did not know whether to buy boys' or girls' clothes. I didn't know which one my baby would be. I decided on some cute onesies. They were a bit flowery for a boy, but if I got a boy, I hoped he'd forgive me for it later.

I was surprised at how much everything cost, but I swiped my credit card all the same.

"First time mother?" the cashier asked me with a smile.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not sure if I'll get a boy or a girl. Do you think these clothes are okay?"

She looked them over. "Yeah. These are pretty androgynous."

"Oh good. I'm picking my baby today and I wanted everything to be ready."

"Are you adopting?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Yes I am."

"How exciting. There are a lot of children who need a good home."

"I've got one." I said, smiling and putting my bags in the cart.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks.” I left the store humming. I was going to adopt. I was such a good person. I'd just look around for an unhappy mother and offer to take her baby. It couldn't be that hard. First, though, I needed to put away the formula.

I went home and carried all of my bags up the stairs. I slid the formula in the fridge and started taking the packaging off of everything else. I arranged the bottles in a line on top of the desk and laid out the onesies near them. My garbage can was overflowing at this point. If I wanted to be a good mother, I'd have to take out the garbage. I made sure to put a new bag in, then I tied up the full bag and headed down to the dumpster to throw it away. My phone started ringing, so I set down my garbage bag next to the dumpster and looked at it. Michael was calling. I pushed “Ignore” and put my phone back in my pocket. I still heard a noise, though. It was coming from the dumpster. Confused, I looked in and started moving bags of garbage around. Someone had been very unhappy with their baby; they'd left her in the dumpster. She was covered in yuck, but I pulled her out anyway. Babies were supposed to be cute, but she was red in the face from crying so long. Maybe if I gave her a bath first, she'd look cute later. I slung my garbage into the dumpster and headed back up to my home.

She stopped crying when I started walking, but after I stopped moving, she started up again. “Shh. It's okay,” I told her. “We're going to get you cleaned up.” I looked in the bathroom, but it was just a shower stall, not a bathtub. I didn't think you put babies in the shower. “I guess the sink will have to do,” I told her. I ran the water warm and plugged up the sink. I stripped off her diaper and wiped all of the gross stuff off of her that I could. When the sink was pretty full, I put the baby in the water. I set her down to open the bottle of baby shampoo/soap and she slid under the water. I set the bottle down and pulled her up.

“What are you doing?” I asked her. “You can't swim in here.” Then I remembered that babies can't sit up at first. This was going to be more difficult than I'd thought. I opened the bottle one-handed, and slathered the shampoo/soap over her. The rest of the stuff from the dumpster came off and turned the water in the sink a dark green. I pulled her out and set her on a towel. She had stopped crying and I made sure she was still breathing. Babies were fragile. I unplugged the sink and pulled out the solid bits of garbage. The baby started crying again, but I had to wash the stuff off my hand before I could touch her. When my hands were clean, I wrapped her in a towel and walked around the room with her. She quieted, but still fussed a bit.

“Oh. You're hungry.” I opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of formula. I set her down on my bed and poured some formula into one of the baby bottles. I put the nipple into her open mouth and she stopped crying and started sucking down the formula. Then I realized I needed to put a diaper and clothes on her. I thought about taking the bottle out of her mouth to do this, but I knew she'd start crying again. I would too, if someone took away my food. She held onto the bottle, but she wasn't strong enough to hold it by herself.

I resorted to sliding the bag with the package of diapers and changing cloth to a well-lit spot with my foot. When she stopped drinking, I set her down and laid out the changing cloth. There was something for diaper rash, so I opened that tube. Then I set her on the changing cloth and read the directions on the tube of cream. I applied it where the tube told me to and put a diaper on her. It was too loose the first time, but I undid it and tightened it a bit. I looked at my work and smiled. Then I grabbed a onesy from where I had laid them out on the desk and put it on her.

She looked up at me and smiled. My heart melted and I knew I had made a good home. Someone knocked on my door. I picked up the baby and walked over. I might not want to answer. My home was not in a good part of town and I had a baby to look after now. I looked through the peephole and saw Michael.

What was he doing here? Maybe he wanted to start over, too. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but maybe Michael would tell me. I looked at the baby closing her eyes in my arms. Maybe I would figure out my own opinion. Either way, it was rude to leave him standing outside. I opened the door.

"There you are. Now come home with me."

"I am home."

Michael looked at the baby in my arms then past me, into my home. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." I stepped back from the door. I sat on the bed and Michael pulled over the desk chair.

"What the hell are you doing with a baby?" he asked me. "Where did you get it?"

"Her," I said, swaying gently so she wouldn't cry. "I found her. I needed a baby to make this a home, and she needed a mommy."

Michael closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. "First you're working at a gas station, and now you've got a baby?"

"I got all the stuff I need to take care of her. I just fed her."

"Do you have a burping cloth?" he asked me.

"A what?"

"After you feed a baby, you've got to burp it. Sometimes more stuff comes up with the burps."

"Oh. I guess I could use a towel."

"How do you think you can be a mother? You don't know anything about it."

"I'm making a home here, so I have to be a mother. You can help me. The three of us can live here. We can make a home together." I set my baby down on the bed, where she began dozing.

Michael glanced around my home again. "Jane, this isn't a house. You need to come home with me. We can leave the kid at a fire station. She'll get taken care of."

"You want me to leave my baby?" I stood up.

“She's not your baby,” Michael told me. “I don't want you taking care of a kid that isn't mine. We'll have some kids of our own, okay? Just not right now.”

“When will we have kids, then? When you say it's a good time?”

“Yeah. I would know.”

“No, Michael. I'm sick of you telling me what to do.”

“You can't keep that baby. She's got to go to a real mother.”

“I am a real mother!” I saw Michael reaching for my baby, so I grabbed a lamp and smashed it over his head with all my strength. He looked confused, then he crumpled to the floor. I stared at him for a moment. Then I began to smile. I had a home with a man and a baby. I went down to my car and got my roll of duct tape and some rope. I would have to make sure my man didn't run away, but that wouldn't be too hard. This would be the perfect home.

First Encounters

Dena Raposa

"Excuse me? Sir?"

Leeroy ignored his secretary. Miss Smith was an unattractive woman in her late fifties with a voice like a hungry cat, a face like a horse, and a mouth like a sailor. She had been working under Leeroy for fifteen years, and in all that time he had never seen her smile.

"Sir!"

Normally, Leeroy found ignoring Miss Smith to be a very useful technique, one that usually resulted in her storming out of his office, cursing his name, and leaving him free to get back to work. Or, in this case, his mid-afternoon nap. Today, apparently, she had no plans to leave.

"I see you have no intention of leaving, Miss Smith," Leeroy said. The words came out slightly muffled, on account of the pile of paperwork that had tipped over while he slept, burying his head in a pile of unfinished reports. Paperwork. Files and forms, facts and figures. He hated it, hated the duplicates and triplicates he found most of his days filled with, but it was just one of the necessary evils of the job. One of the very many necessary evils. Sometimes Leeroy wondered what working at a job full of so many necessary evils said about him and the state of his own immortal soul.

"No, sir," said Miss Smith.

Leeroy sighed and sat up. A waterfall of papers cascaded to the floor. "In that case," he said, "maybe you can answer a question for me."

"And what's that?" asked Miss Smith. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You've read Dante's *Inferno*, haven't you?" Leeroy asked, ignoring the note of impatience in her voice. "I mean, it seems like your kind of a book. Kind of a downer."

"I have."

"Then tell me." Leeroy grabbed the nearest sheaf of paper out of his overflowing inbox and waved it in her face. "Is there a special circle of hell reserved for paperwork?"

"Not in the version I read," said Miss Smith. "But if we can return to the land of sanity for a moment—"

Leeroy snorted. "Sanity? Here?"

Miss Smith ignored him. "I just came in to say we have an important visitor."

"Lies," said Leeroy. "We don't get important visitors. We don't get any kind of visitors. No one outside of the government even knows we exist, and the government doesn't *want* to know we exist. They don't even let us keep our records on the computer because they don't want anyone to find out they actually have a department devoted to chasing down every alien-related red herring, and this way they can just deny that Area 51 actually exists."

Miss Smith waited patiently through Leeroy's rant. It was far from the first time she'd been exposed to one of them. When his tirade had worn itself down to angry mutterings, she said, "The visitor isn't the government. It's an alien."

Leeroy sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Miss Smith," he began. "You and I have been to more 'alien landing' sites than anyone else on this planet. We've seen more crop circles, talked to more supposed abductees, and fielded more prank calls from more crazies. We've got a warehouse full of so-called UFOs that could just as easily be bits of meteor or just about any piece of random metal someone found lying around. Aliens do not exist."

Miss Smith didn't even blink. "There's one in the bathroom."

Leeroy made a noise halfway between a groan and a snort. "Fine," he said. "Let's go see this alien of yours."

Miss Smith turned on her heel and led Leeroy out of his cramped office, through the equally cramped reception area where she worked—which had never once been used as a reception area, as they had never once had a visitor—to the bathroom on the other side. Very carefully, so as not to make any noise, she opened the door and gestured Leeroy to poke his head in.

Over a decade ago, when Miss Smith had first come to work for Leeroy, she had made it quite clear that she had been hired as a secretary, not a janitor, and therefore she would not spend her working days cleaning up after anyone, not even her boss. Leeroy was used to living and working in places just shy of being declared disaster areas, and as visitors to Area 51 were literally nonexistent, he agreed. The office quickly descended into a state of comfortable chaos, broken only for the annual fumigation when the cockroaches started to get too big.

The sole exception to this was the bathroom. Several years ago, following a bad bout of food poisoning that had left the bathroom in an unusable state, Leeroy and Miss Smith had divided bathroom-cleaning duties between them and never mentioned the Incident again. Because of this, the bathroom gleamed. Shining porcelain toilet, a floor fit for eating dinner on—and a green-skinned man standing in the middle of the room, his back to the door, examining a roll of toilet paper with apparent fascination.

Very quietly, Leeroy withdrew his head and shut the door.

"There's an alien in our bathroom," said Leeroy in a whisper.

Miss Smith nodded.

"Why'd you put him in the bathroom?" Leeroy hissed.

"I don't know!" Miss Smith looked slightly panicked, at first. Her hair had started to slip from its normally impeccable bun. "Where else was I supposed to put him?"

"Anywhere else, maybe?" Leeroy suggested.

"Well it's too late, he's already in there!" said Miss Smith. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"What did he say when he came in?" Leeroy asked. "Did you talk to him? Did he speak English?"

Miss Smith nodded. "He had the strangest accent I've ever heard, sort of... Scottish mixed with Norwegian with a dash of old South."

"Where do you come up with these things?" Leeroy asked. "You know what, never mind. I'm going in to talk to him."

"Talk to him?" Miss Smith repeated. "Are you crazy? He's an alien!"

"And we're Area 51!" Leeroy shot back. "It's literally our job to talk to aliens!"

The bathroom door opened, and the alien came out. "Sorry," he said. "I heard your voice and thought it was about time we got down to business."

"Uh—business?" Leeroy asked. "What business?"

"Of course." The alien was wearing something that looked a bit like a large brown parka. He adjusted it and coughed dryly. "We never got around to discussing the purpose of my visit."

"Right," said Leeroy, rubbing the back of his neck. "And that would be...?" He somehow felt that the conversation had gotten away from him.

"I am here on behalf of the planet Nixtraxes," said the alien. "My name is Jelvan Trek-Plume. You are Leeroy Delgado and Marigold Smith."

Miss Smith glowered. Her first name was something Leeroy had learned not to mention too often, and certainly never in her hearing.

"I've done my research," said Jelvan, in response to their slightly worried looks, "which is also how I know you recently impounded a vehicle belonging to the son of one of my clients. Now, normally we wouldn't bother trying to retrieve it, but unfortunately the client did insist."

"We—" Leeroy glanced at Miss Smith, who shrugged helplessly. "I don't remember any spaceship landings."

"Unfortunately it didn't land so much as crash," said Jelvan. "Burned up in the atmosphere. It probably wouldn't have looked like much more than scrap metal by the time you found it."

"Last week," Miss Smith hissed in Leeroy's ear. "In Seattle, remember?"

"Oh yeah..." Leeroy turned to the alien. "Well of course you can have your ship back." He chuckled nervously. "Wouldn't want to start a war or anything..."

"A war?" Jelvan seemed surprised. "Over a drunk driving incident? I'd heard the inhabitants of this planet were aggressive, but surely—"

"No! Of course not," Leeroy backpedaled quickly. "I was—it was—wait, seriously? Drunk driving?"

"Oh yes," said Jelvan. "This galactic sector has notoriously bad law enforcement. Favorite... 'hang out' for the kids when they want to make a little trouble away from their parents. You must have heard reports of alien abductions, anal probes, cow tipplings..."

"Basically every unexplained event we've investigated in our careers," said Miss Smith. "Apparently we've been running around after teenage... hijinks." She spat the word out like it tasted bad.

"More than likely true," said Jelvan. He noticed Miss Smith's expression

and took an involuntary step back.

Leeroy cut in. "So—the... the spaceship. It's in a warehouse about twenty miles east of here. You're more than welcome to it."

"Thank you," said Jelvan. "You will, of course, require recompense?"

"Oh no," said Leeroy, just as Miss Smith said, "Yes."

She turned her glare from Jelvan to Leeroy and said, "Excuse us a moment."

Leeroy allowed her to pull him across the room before demanding, "What are you doing? This is it! This—this is first contact! We want to make a good first impression."

Miss Smith raised an eyebrow. "Considering you nearly declared war on him..."

"That was an accident," Leeroy snapped. "Besides, you put him in the bathroom. And what would we do with alien money even if he did pay us?"

"We get him to pay us in technology," said Miss Smith. "With real alien tech, we might actually get taken seriously."

Leeroy hesitated, but not for long. He'd been the butt of too many jokes at too many family dinners for too many years. "All right." He turned back to Jelvan. "We have a proposition for you."

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Two hours later, the deal concluded, Leeroy and Miss Smith ordered a pizza to go and ate it in the office while celebrating the first truly successful day of their careers.

"It's never going to be the same," said Miss Smith.

"I know."

"We'll make the history books for this."

"Possibly."

"And I was completely right about trading the ship for their technology," Miss Smith continued smugly. "I was completely right about everything."

Leeroy finished his pizza slice before interrupting her gloating. "Not quite everything."

"What do you mean?" Miss Smith waved her own pizza at him in a vaguely threatening manner. "What are you saying?"

"His accent," said Leeroy. "I didn't hear even a hint of Norwegian."

Miss Smith surveyed him in absolute silence for nearly a minute before the impossible happened.

She cracked a smile.

"Oh, you."

A Rat in a Cage

Nicholas Rossi

Having been sent to fetch a pan for his mom out of their assigned cubicle, the boy had crept down the cement stairs towards the complex's lowest level on that particular summer morning with his usual apprehension. Although he never told his sister, who would have undoubtedly mocked him incessantly, he dreaded having to go down into the basement. Even though they had rented this apartment for two years as of this summer, which was longer than the three of them had lived in any one place since they had left his childhood home when he was five, Jack secretly hated being sent on a mission to "The Cage." The damp cold air that enveloped him halfway down the basement stairs always gave him chills from his chest to his knees, and the fear of nondescript bug monstrosities kept his eyes locked on his feet until he reached the final concrete step.

But none of those sensations were worse than the feeling that came over him when he finally had to raise his eyes from the last stair. The crippling fear took hold when he beheld the seemingly endless corridor of chain link and clutter. It looked like a prison for broken appliances and deteriorating cardboard boxes. But it wasn't what could be seen from the stairway that paralyzed him; it was what lay hidden in the nooks and crouched waiting in the crannies. The terrifying possibilities of what could be peeking out from behind the stained sofa or overflowing paper sacks dumped a double dose of adrenaline into his bloodstream and tightened up his chest.

The only way to ensure those hidden villains would not catch him was to sprint for the storage unit third from the last on the right side. Always gripping the key to the padlock tightly in his right hand, he would lunge across his body with his left as soon as he was in reach of the lock and jam the key into the slot with a focused ferocity. On this particular day, this took a few extra tries and a deep breath before the teeth of the key clicked against their counterparts, the lock slipped, and the door swung open.

As a sort of reflexive defense mechanism, the boy shut the door behind him after he had stepped completely within The Cage. This created a sort of claustrophobic comfort that allowed his muscles to loosen, but not quite relax completely.

Now the search for the pan began. He had a general idea of where the boxes of loose kitchen junk were in the unit, but he honestly had no idea what a saucepan looked like exactly. He slid past the plastic lawn chairs and moved with purpose towards the back corner of The Cage, scanning for the word "Kitchen" or something similar scribbled on the cardboard faces as he did.

He ran his fingers over the words on the front of the boxes, methodically scanning over and over again. The longer he looked, the smaller The Cage became around him. He began to push and pull aside boxes on the front of the shelves in hopes of exposing the mission objective. Rifling through the sea of

beige, pushing past book spines and shooting glances back at the door, the boy began to search with a frantic dedication.

“Where is it? Where is it?” he muttered under his breath, pushing aside the plastic chairs that hadn’t seen the light of day since his family had moved in two years before, as evidenced by the extensive network of cobwebs strung between the arms and seats. A fresh sack of eggs quivered as the stack slid up against the front fence of the cubicle. Quickly crouching and pulling another box forward across the floor with the sickening scraping sound of cardboard against concrete, the boy felt the ghost grips loosen as his eyes fell on “POTS, PANS, ETC.” written neatly in permanent marker across the top flap.

In his haste to tear open the chest that he was sure held his treasure, Jack flailed an elbow back into the stack of trash cubes behind, causing the stack to sway like tall grass in a soft summer breeze. The tower teetered a bit too far and the top box tumbled down with a muffled thud. The death grip of terror tightened around his neck with lethal force. Whipping around and forcing himself into the seated position, he looked almost comical in his silent horror, like an aging man unexpectedly shitting himself for the first time. It took a moment for the boy to identify the source of the noise, but once his eyes focused, Jack realized that he had discovered something much more valuable than every saucepan in the box.

Pouring forth from the mouth of the fallen box was a waterfall of memories that Jack had teetered between suppressing and cherishing over the past seven years of his young life. Memories usually either questioned or cemented in the pitch-black infinity of one of the various bedrooms he had slept in since his father had died. Memories always seen as rich colors shining through a thick fog, without definition or detail, but real nonetheless. Sometimes these memories flickered against the backs of Jack’s eyelids and sometimes they shimmered through a thin layer of tears.

His vision was clear on that summer morning when he found the artifacts of his father. Spilling out onto the floor, his father’s denim coat lay in a heap at the front of the box. The jean jacket was just one of the tokens of young love that Jack’s mother had saved from her fogged but not forgotten romance with the father of her son, all of which had all but lost their meaning as they gathered dust from storage unit to storage unit. Still, she continued to put the box in the back of the truck when it was time to act on another eviction notice, always hating herself for being so weak, but unable to discard the memories that accompanied the contents of the tattered cardboard cube.

But none of this was known to Jack as he moved slowly towards the jacket. All that he knew was the inescapable feeling of needing to look in the box. He moved without thinking towards the artifacts of his father even though he knew that the tears would come later when he stared into the abyss that was the far wall of his blackened bedroom. Dragging the jacket away from the opening, the boy’s mind flooded with an image that he would not be able to forget even in old age: the shriveled body of his father, pale and naked with his knees tucked to his chin,

lying like a rag doll inside the box. As he pulled back in fear of this imagined horror, the true contents of the box became visible. Many of the knickknacks that filled the box were indistinguishable to the boy, even though he was sure they had belonged to his father simply based on an innate certainty found only in children. This certainty had begun to fade in Jack's mind recently, gradually being replaced by the lurking shadow of doubt that comes to characterize adult life.

There was one item that immediately drew the boy's hand, however. Reaching forward instinctively, he grabbed onto the bill of his father's faded Cubs hat and held it up in front of him like an ancient relic accidentally recovered from its earthen grave. Jack's father almost always appeared wearing the stained cap in his mind's eye, sometimes worn forward while sitting on the couch watching TV, other times worn backwards out in the garage working on his car or talking with Uncle Mike.

Not many of these memories were genuine, since Jack had only been five when his mother had sat him down and explained how his dad had gotten into an awful car accident and the doctors were trying their hardest to save him. Jack had pleaded with his mother to let him go see Daddy in the hospital, but Mommy had always said that he wasn't well enough for visitors. After a couple days of worried questions and tentative answers, Daddy finally died. Since then, Jack relied exclusively on his own fictionalized memories and his mom's secret photo album that he had frequently caught her looking at in her bedroom in the months after Daddy's accident. She always kept the album close to her bed in every rented room she had occupied in the years after, and Jack always made sure to locate the album in the first days living in every new apartment they had stayed in for the last seven years. He feared losing his father's face to the increasingly thickening fog of his mind.

His favorite photograph was one of his mother and father standing in front of his childhood house before he was born, both smiling with a lack of self-consciousness that is only found on the faces of people truly satisfied with their current hand in life. They both looked straight back into the camera with the faux wood door standing proudly between them as a symbol of their accomplishment: a young couple with the naïve illusion of financial stability, confident enough in their love for each other to purchase a small house in the south suburbs of Chicago. Either because Jack had trouble remembering his face at all or because Jack preferred this image to reality, Jack's father almost always appeared in his head with this look on his face, head adorned with the very cap that the boy now held in his hands.

Slowly unsnapping the strip on the back of the hat and fitting it to his own head, Jack was lost in his fantasy of his father when he heard the sound come from behind him. Suddenly he snapped back. He was still in The Cage, which suddenly felt smaller than it ever had before. He spun around for the second time in minutes to find himself staring directly into a pair of jet black eyes gleaming out from between two file folders, little glossy black beads reflecting the

fluorescent bulbs striped across the ceiling of the corridor. But it was not the eyes that made the boy squeak in terror. It was the teeth. Two long, slender white strips that looked alien on the creature's snout, as if something had smashed them into its nose long ago and they had since become stuck there for eternity. And then they moved and the creature released a screech louder and longer than the one the boy had made, like the sound of a sharp wind rustling through dried leaves pressed tightly against a chain link fence. Frozen prior, the boy scrambled towards the door of The Cage, squeezing past the plastic chairs and ten-speed bike frame that blocked his path. Neglecting to replace the lock and completely forgetting about the saucepan that had initially been the motivation for this mission, the boy sprinted down the corridor of trash cells that would now be filled with screeching creatures for months to come, up all five flights of stairs, and down the fourth-floor hallway until he was safely inside his apartment.

"Jack? Is that you? You got the pan?" his mother called from around the corner just inside the door. Instead of waiting for her son to reply, she simply poked her head out of the doorway to the kitchen with the question still on her eyebrows. Her brows quickly lowered into a furrow of concern when she saw her son pale and sweating, standing against the cheap beige door. "Is everything okay, Jackie? Why are you breathing so heavy?" But her eyes began to soften as she recognized the hat propped gently on her son's head.

"I got scared," Jack breathed, eyes fixed on the white toes of his sneakers. "Sorry I couldn't find the pan." He didn't want to tell her the truth about the awful monster that had revealed itself and undoubtedly wanted to sink its two-by-four planks of porcelain into his flesh. Most of all he didn't want to remember the sound that had escaped from behind those white teeth.

Mary could tell that her son was hiding something, but at this point she didn't want to push the subject any further. Any discussion of how or why he had found Rick's ball cap or any other relics of her past life might have caused her to spend the remainder of the day in bed staring at the off-white contours of her bedroom wall or, even worse, looking through their photo album. Eyes still swimming with the fog of feelings all too clear in her memory, she decided on, "Come help your mother in the kitchen."

“A Dream Within a Dream”

Clara Mount

Ryan began with his bedtime routine: donning pajamas, brushing teeth, combing hair, setting alarms, and finally sliding in between the nondescript grey sheets that Alix had bought him when she helped redecorate his apartment. He reached over to the nightstand, grabbed his pen, lifted the steno pad onto his lap, and flipped open the cheap black cover to the first available page. It didn't take him long to find one; he'd only been using it for a couple of weeks.

For a moment, he simply stared at the page with the tip of his pen poised breathlessly above it, allowing his mind time to process the empty lines of faint blue ink. Sighing, he began to write:

February 29th, 2008. I still think it's weird and a little emasculating to write in this thing, but I guess it helps. Alix says it does, anyway. And she's the resident expert, isn't she? Went to Theo's Java House again today, mint chocolate cappuccinos over Macbeth. She likes to read the parts out loud in different voices, especially the witches—says it helps her relax to laugh when she breaks character. She has a beautiful laugh. Carefree. Kind of innocent in a way. Like she just doesn't care what anyone thinks. It's different. Don't know why she ever bothers to drink coffee. She doesn't need it. The caffeine just makes her twitchy, and her energy level goes from about an eight to a fifteen on a ten-point scale. Cute. Tried to grab her hand today as we left. Normally she lets me, but today I left Theo's cold. Offered no explanation. I need to stop dwelling on this. I know I can make it work.

Ryan quickly laid the steno pad back on his nightstand, open, and flipped the switch on the table lamp, cutting the light in his room so that only moonlight invaded the darkness. His body sank down between the sheets. His eyes closed, and soon his subconscious was just as ready as he was.

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Ryan groaned, opened his eyes, and drew into himself, rolling over on the bed to face the nightstand. Cool blue light like Alix's eyes showed the time: half past five.

He found the power switch under the streamlined lampshade, turned it on. He lifted a pen off the stand and placed its tip to the top page of the open steno pad. On the next empty line under the heading *February 29th, 2008*, he wrote, *Wake: 5:30 AM. Rocky shore, rocks in weird colors like red/purple/green, warm water, stormy weather, trying to hold sand in my hands but it's falling.*

Recalling no more details of the dream, Ryan flipped back a few pages to compare notes. He was up earlier than expected anyway, and Alix did tell him to look out for patterns: those were key. They would help him figure out his dream signs.

“Dream signs?” he'd asked, confused. He didn't know the first thing about dreaming.

She picked up her thermos, took a sip, and swallowed thoughtfully; her body radiated caged energy. “Yes. Like if people’s hands have the wrong number of fingers. Or if clocks don’t work right. Green skies, purple grass. Different things, specific to you. What’s weird in your dreams may not even exist in other people’s dreams.” Ryan looked doubtful. Alix smiled and said teasingly, “Are you taking this seriously?”

“Don’t you want me to?”

“Yeah, I mean, dreaming is fun, once you get the hang of it.”

“Once you get the hang of it?”

“It’s hard for some people to do it right.”

Ryan chuckled. “I didn’t know there was a right way to dream.”

“I’m talking about taking control. The laws of physics don’t apply when you’re the one creating the world.” She grinned mischievously.

“I’ve never done that before. I can’t even remember them very often.”

“So start a dream journal. Think about it right when you wake up and write it down as soon as possible. It’ll start to stick better. You’ll learn how to remember. Practice, right?” She took a larger drink of her coffee and her nose scrunched up. She must have forgotten how hot it was.

Ryan smiled, amused. “So what do I do after that?”

“Learn to recognize your dreams. Dream signs, remember? Lucidity is the first step to taking control.” Alix had winked and then laughed.

Looking back now through the brief descriptions he’d jotted down before, Ryan’s lips parted in surprise. Water—saltwater. It was everywhere in his dreams, the first thing he seemed to notice. And apparently his subconscious mind had a fascination with abnormally colorful rocks. His dreams showed patterns. These might be his dream signs.

Lucidity was the first step to control. And control was when the fun happened. That was what Alix said.

Practically humming, Ryan closed the steno pad, placed it on the stand, and rested the pen on the cover. Then he rose from his bed and prepared to go to the gym before another day of class.

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That evening, Ryan sat at a four-person table that was painted to look like the sky from *Starry Night*, looking at Alix over the crimson-and-silver thermos his mother had bought him for his birthday. Theo’s offered a discount for patrons who provided the mug for their beverages—it was small, but money saved was money saved.

Alix’s head was bent over one of her anthropology textbooks, her elbow propped on a blue section of the tabletop, her hand supporting her small chin as she read. Her tongue sort of worked at the inside of her cheek as she thought about the text she was reading, underlining and highlighting passages as necessary. It didn’t take her long to knock out several pages of reading, but then her focus wavered and she looked up at Ryan, noticed him watching her.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, he looked away, observing the curve of the painted lines on the *Starry Night* tabletop, but Alix's forehead became creased, her light eyebrows drawing closer together.

"Ryan," she began, and then stopped. She picked up her mint hot chocolate but didn't drink any.

"Yes?" he asked, prompting her to continue. He sipped his coffee.

"Tell me something. Do you know what you want out of your life?"

Ryan paused, surprised by the question. It was one he hadn't heard since all of the hasty introductions to new faces he had suffered freshman year, when everyone was so frenzied to make friends who could keep them company on their adventures at university. "Well, yeah, I mean, sort of. Most of the time I do."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to law school when I graduate. I'm over halfway there already."

"Barely, though." Alix met his eyes and laughed lightly. "But what else do you want to do? Law school can't be all that's important to you."

"It's not. There are other things, but... that's my career. My livelihood. My dad makes good money at it and he loves his work, and it's always been an area I'm interested in." Ryan looked over her thoughtfully, tracing the outline of her face with his eyes. "Do you know what you want from life?"

"Not very often, I guess." Her mouth quirked up in a wry smile.

"But surely you've got some idea."

"I've got an entire world of ideas. I just don't know which one is for me."

"Do you have to limit yourself to just one?"

"No, but... I guess they all come down to one thing. People. It's why I study anthropology. I just don't know where I'm going with that yet."

"Well, 'grad school' seems to be a viable answer for something like that. At least until you figure out something more permanent to say." Ryan smiled, sipped his coffee, and watched Alix's fingertips tap dance along the side of her plastic thermos.

"To be honest, I haven't really thought about grad school yet."

"Why not? Too far away? You've got less than three years before you'd be starting it, Alix. It's probably something you should give some thought to."

"I know, I know. You don't have to lecture me about that. But people here and now are much more... interesting to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I need to figure out the people in my life now before I move on to anything grander."

Ryan felt his ears perk up as if he were a dog listening to an unfamiliar whistle. "What's there to figure out?"

Alix grinned. "Plenty. It's complicated, Ryan. Don't worry about it." She finally took several swallows of her hot chocolate and dropped her eyes back into her textbook, as if to say "conversation over."

Ryan frowned, but tried not to let her vague speech get to him. Instead he raised his Shakespeare anthology to eye level and continued his halfhearted reading.

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That night he set his habits on repeat. Pajamas, teeth, hair, alarms, sheets, steno pad. He took the pen into his hand, twitching with the irritability trapped inside his muscles, and wrote:

March 1st, 2008. I can't wait for law school. Sick of reading shit by all these dead guys. Half of it isn't even good. They're all overestimated. Who seriously writes with the intent of confounding future generations of readers and scholars with hidden meanings that require hours of discussion and debate to discern?

Ryan paused, inhaled, exhaled. He realized his grip on the pen was too tight, and relaxed it. More breathing. He crossed out what he'd already written.

Okay, so I exaggerated. I wouldn't be an English major if I didn't like lit. Alix confuses me. Lunch today with some friends at Maria's Café, some little Italian joint, just opened up downtown. She wasn't even herself. First time I've seen her so exhausted in months, rings under her eyes and everything, and she wouldn't tell me why. I asked after everyone left. Wouldn't hold my hand either. Shied away. Hardly let me touch her. I'm worried. She's pushing me away. Been growing distant for the past week and I didn't even notice because I was too wrapped up in the way she laughs. I don't even care about the dreams anymore.

Ryan threw the still-open notepad and the pen down on the stand. The circuit to his lamp was interrupted with a click, and he settled his head on his pillow.

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The smell of the salty sea air of Ryan's dream faded into the pure smell of air conditioning as rapid eye movement drew to a stop. Ryan heard Alix's voice in his memory, speaking over her thermos: "You can only dream during the REM sleep stage, if you're wondering. Look into that."

He turned to the nightstand, brought the lamp to life, and consulted the steno pad in the focused light. He wrote, *Wake: 2:24 AM. Pickup truck with woman. Blue-grey eyes. Kissed her forehead on sandy beach. She gave me sand, but it felt like gold. Couldn't hold onto it. I had twelve fingers. Finally recognized I was dreaming. Must have been the fingers that tipped me off. LUCID! Then she disappeared. I followed. More sand. Something about a little girl. Was I heading to a stack of rocks in the distance?*

Ryan dropped his pen carelessly, watched it roll off the nightstand, and, sighing, bent to pick it up; then he returned to his pillow. On the way he swore he smelled the dream woman—salty, fresh, beautiful. She reminded him of Alix, if Alix liked beaches.

They'd been in her apartment, several weeks before, when Ryan had learned that she didn't like beaches. "Why not?" he asked.

“I don’t like places that are too warm,” she had confided in him, giggling over a mug of hot cocoa.

“Oh? And why’s that?” Ryan had joked, supposing that he knew the answer. He stirred his own cup of cocoa and admired the way her deep brown hair fell in gentle ringlets around her cheeks and shoulders. It was the first time he realized how beautiful she was.

“I like sweaters.” She had looked at him very seriously, as if she’d just imparted the most precious piece of information she possessed, and then her face broke into a wide grin, showing teeth. Alix had a very kissable mouth, Ryan realized. He quickly looked away to admire her apartment instead.

That was the first time he had held hands with her, too. It had seemed natural, talking for hours, him placing his hand over hers where it rested on the tan-colored couch cushions. She’d smiled over at him and shifted closer, threading her fingers through his as they spoke. They’d shared something that night, a sense of closeness, although they hardly knew each other then. Ryan had kissed her forehead before he left.

In the darkness of his room, he remembered and smiled. Then the corners of his lips turned down. How do you get close to someone who doesn’t want to let you in?

Earlier that day at Maria’s Café, Alix had picked at the rigatoni on her large, restaurant-sized plate, staring at the marinara sauce and shredded parmesan on her fork. Her friends weren’t unaware of her abnormal silence, but neither were they indulgent of her meditative mood. Ryan had been searching her face for some sign of her usual exuberance, but he’d found only the dark circles beneath her eyes, which had been growing rather than diminishing for the last several days.

The meal was uncomfortably quiet for Ryan. Even though he considered Garret, Lacy, and Erika his friends too (and by all rights they should have been plenty to keep him entertained with their stories of terrible professors, high school shenanigans, and parties that he might or might not have been at), Ryan fed off of Alix’s lack of enthusiasm. The virtually nonexistent sound of Alix’s fork moving back and forth among the short pasta noodles on her plate drowned out most of their friends’ words.

He waited impatiently until their meal was over. Alix had class at two, but Ryan was already done for the day, so he joined her in the trek across the warming campus to Temple Hall. “Alix,” he started lightly, to get her attention. She looked at him. “Are you all right?”

She grinned to herself, a nasty little thing showing no real amusement or joy. “No, I guess I’m not. No use trying to hide it.”

“Why would you want to hide it from me?”

Alix shrugged.

“You know you can tell me anything, Alix. I don’t know what’s been going on with you lately, but…” He’d been about to mention the dark circles

when he remembered that some women found it offensive to be told they looked tired. “You’ve been really quiet today. Lately. The past few days.”

“It’s kind of complicated, Ryan.”

“Who cares about complication? That doesn’t make a difference. I’m here whenever you need me.”

She continued walking, looking straight forward on her path, admiring the trees and the grass and the cement beneath her shoes. Anything but Ryan’s face.

“I’m just worried about you, is all. You haven’t been the same Alix.”

Ryan saw a flash of energy in her eyes—anger, maybe, or irritation—and she responded, eyeing him directly: “If it was something I felt you should know, I’d tell you. But this is my life, Ryan. No offense, but I don’t need to invite you to my problems.”

“I’m sorry,” he’d said, but before the words had left his mouth, Alix had already walked into Temple Hall, leaving him outside in the semi-cold spring weather.

Sighing, Ryan rolled over in his bed, the image of what had happened still fresh in his mind. He buried his face in his grey pillow and stewed over her words and the dark circles under her eyes. It took him a long time to drop back into sleep.

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Ryan’s eyes gently slipped open, and he rolled on his mattress to face the streamlined lamp, staring at it without recognition; the light automatically followed. He sat fully upright, gathered the pen and steno pad in trembling hands, and wrote, *Wake: 5:45 AM. Rocky shore, Alix and a little girl standing far off, sand in my hands again. This time I make myself catch the sand. Maybe she’ll let me in after all.*