

May 2021
Short Story Competition Journal

"The heart keeps beating, "unaware that it was once in another chest."

—Haley Dulniawka, pg. 65

"I didn't see a writing project in front of me any longer; I saw a living, breathing soul beginning to take form."

—Lindsey Bergner, pg. 30

LIVE IDEAS: UNDERGRADUATE PRIMARY TEXTS JOURNAL

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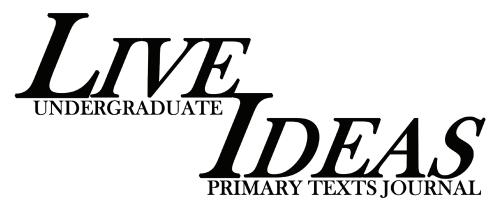
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LIVE IDEAS: UNDERGRADUATE PRIMARY TEXTS JOURNAL is the open-access, peer-reviewed undergraduate journal of Kansas State University's Primary Texts Certificate program. It is co-produced by students and faculty at K-State and is published online quarterly (Oct., Dec., Feb., Apr.). Live Ideas was co-founded by Jakob Hanschu and Dr. Laurie Johnson in 2018 with the mission of providing a platform from which undergraduates could express their original ideas or add to the conversations of existing ideas in creative, unbounded and meaningful ways. It is a student-led adventure into thought-provoking and creative expression. The founding editors would like to firstly acknowledge Dr. Glenn Swogger and the Redbud Foundation he founded to support the liberal arts and sciences, without whose financial support the creation of this journal would not have been possible. Second, we would like to thank the numerous reviewers, contributors, and friends that helped us get this journal "off the ground."

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

It is quite intimidating to serve as editor in chief after Jakob Hanschu and Olivia Rogers and especially amidst a global pandemic; but my assistant editors, Trace Henderson and Camryn Eberhardy, and Dr. Laurie Johnson have been of great help and encouragement. I officially began as editor in chief with our first Live Ideas Institute during the summer of 2020. The goal of this institute – and truly all of them – is to provide students with the opportunity to share and workshop their original pieces hopefully towards publication in the journal. There is also the added benefit of a \$250 scholarship if the accepted applicant attends all four days of the institute. We usually begin on a Wednesday evening with a guest speaker followed by personal introductions. We then meet on Thursday and Friday evening for breakout sessions where students are able to interact with their peers and workshop their submissions. The weekend is then spent finalizing entire pieces or an excerpt to be read aloud on Monday, the last day of the institute. Of course, all of this is occurring online!

Students have resoundingly praised the institutes, as they offer a creative escape and opportunity to meet artists of diverse backgrounds and disciplines. The Primary Texts Certificate program has been greatly enriched by these institutes and so too has the journal. We have been able to extend across campus and achieve a greater awareness among students beyond the College of Arts & Sciences. Moreover, the \$1,000 Swogger Scholarship continues to attract worthy applicants and encourages undergraduate projects that enliven the scholarly discourse.

It is therefore with great confidence that I and the Live Ideas team present this edition of the Live Ideas Journal. Thank you to our authors and loyal readers.

Sincerely, Suan Sonna Editor-in-chief

FOOLISH FRESHMAN KERI BROCK

junior | english-creative writing

First Place Winner - Short Story Competition

Author's Preface

This short story is based on true events and is part one of a three part story. The story is about a girl's first semester in college. It entails all the unexpected events and drama that she was not expecting to happen in college. She is telling the tale of her semester to a stranger in a diner after a surprising turn of events that deeply impacted her and makes her question who she is as a person.

Keywords: Romance, Coming-of-Age, College, Student, Drama



I was never much of a coffee person, but at this moment I find coffee to be my saving grace. My only comfort is this heating ceramic cup filled with the bitter tasting temporary fountain of youth. I have not given much thought to those around me in this classic diner off of interstate 81. Most of them are fifties and up enjoying their regular breakfast dishes on this Friday morning. I have my back to all of them as I sit at the counter on a worn and cracked maroon leather stool. A man that looks to be in his late thirties to early forties sits down to my right a stool length away. His appearance is a bit rough around the edges. He looks like he was

an average respectable man not too long ago but fell from his pedestal and into his current state of existence. He is wearing two brown jackets, both different shades of brown, heavily worn blue jeans, and black work boots that have snow caked on the bottoms. He orders a cup of coffee and is greeted by another regular customer walking in the door.

After a few sips of coffee, he realizes that he is not alone at the counter. He sees me and inspects me. I do not blame him because I must be quite a sight. A walking crime scene with mascara smeared under my eyes, terrible bedhead, and an unfortunate odor detected by the nose from my

lack of hygiene during the last thirteen hours or so. I can tell he is debating furthering his investigation. To let us sit in near silence with the only sounds be of sipping coffee or to engage in conversation that could go nowhere or go somewhere he did not ask for it to go. I do not know if it is the presence of boredom or overbearing interest that make him ask,

"You alright, kid?"

His deep voice creeps across the air and if I was not so exhausted, it might have frightened me. I am too tired for fear and lies, so I reply with a weak, "No," before taking another sip of my coffee.

The regret of his asking is probably setting in now, but he listens to his conscience and asks another question,

"What happened?"

"It's a long story," I reply looking him in the eyes this time. I cannot handle his judgement no matter how much my female tendences tell me to share.

He sighs and says, "I've got time."

He is not going to let up and to be honest I want to talk about it. What happened was bad, but not to the level where it is something I cannot speak about. I take another sip of coffee and think about where to begin my tale.

The best place to begin is when I met them. It was the first week of college and I knew I had to make an actual effort to meet people and make friends if I did not want to repeat the loneliness and lack of quality friends I had in high school. I had friends in high school, just not the



kind of friends I could call friends without changing the definition of the word. I started with my roommates. I lived with them and saw them daily so I thought it would be nice to be friends with them. We had the largest room on the floor. An oddly designed room that was different from all the others and everyone around us was jealous of our ability to walk around our room whereas they had to perform a shuffle like movement to reach the other side of their glorified prison cell. With that being said, we were also the only room on the floor to house three students. The first roommate I met was Sarah. Sarah was from St. Louis and was shy and timid in nature. She was easily persuaded and easily fooled. She was however kind and an avid reader. She always had a book with her. Pride and Prejudice in her backpack, Wuthering Heights in her bed, and Frankenstein in her hands every day. I thought her books had the same purpose for her as a child's blanket. A source of comfort and familiarity. I grew to enjoy her company and she even convinced the three of us to have our own book club, Dorm 125 Book Club. Then there was Katie, my other roommate. Katie was from the other side of Missouri and I liked her instantly. She had this quirkiness about her that heighten her appeal. It was the kind of quirkiness that boys were drawn to. She was good looking, but not necessarily



considered a beauty queen. She also did not truly know who she was or what she was thinking, which is the case for several eighteen-year-old girls. This was a factor of her that frustrated me. Neither one of my roommates possessed the ability to make firm, independent decisions.

Then there were our neighbors across the hall. Josh and Isaac had been best friends since eighth grade, from a small town in northwestern Missouri, and both business majors. We rarely saw Isaac because he was always at fraternity houses working towards his goal of being accepted into one. We did get to know Josh. He was easy on the eyes and a sight that made all of us girls nervous. He had a personality that shocked, horrified, and fascinated. He was racist, sexist, and a self-declared Nazi descendant. He had a toxic intoxicating masculinity that made you curse his name at every insult directed towards any being that was not a white male but worship him whenever his inoffensive attention was directed towards you. He was a man of many interests including cars, guns, weaponry, and heavy metal music. We had nothing in common, but like most girls with a crush on a boy she should not have a crush on, I was determined to have some common interest with him.

In the room next to ours lived Adam and Blake. They were from a small town along the border of Missouri and Arkansas on the Arkansas side. They were also racist and sexist and immediately clicked with Josh given their shared values. I did not know people like them still existed in the twenty first century and especially among my generation, but there are always exceptions to expectations I suppose. Adam was hilarious, a natural leader of friends, and had a touch of obesity. Although his jokes were usually offensive, after a few days my roommates and I's taste in comedy changed and found him more entertaining than Comedy Central. Blake, after three sleepless nights, was diagnosed with insomnia and was prescribed medical marijuana. He usually spent his time lounged across his extra-large twin bed curled up with his dab pen and the occasional homemade joint. He said few words and when he did speak, I usually wished he had not.

Last but not least there were the Texan cousins Randa and Maria Blackwood. Their room was next to Josh and Isaacs' room and Josh could not have been happier about it. The Blackwood cousins were true to their Texan culture. They believed in the "everything's bigger in Texas" moto with lips, breasts, and butts plumped by technologies greatest advances. They were loud, and never had a problem making their presence known, especially to the opposite sex. Their room could have been mistaken for the local beauty shop with piles of products for their dyed blond hair, ever changing skin color, and faces made symmetrical with the heavy help of the products. Any man that says a wom-

an looks best without makeup is a liar because if that were true the Blackwood cousins would not have been lusted after like goddesses with their smoke and mirrors act. Randa had an anger problem but would never admit it and no one dared to bring it up. One small, dismal lie or wrongdoing anyone dared to do would pay dearly. She operated in stages. Stage one was unrelenting rage where she would yell and throw a fit at the criminal until her dramatic exit. Stage two was the silent treatment and complete belief that the person was in fact dead to her. This stage's length would vary from a few days to a few weeks to forever. The third and final stage was her version of forgiveness. She would neither forgive nor forget. Instead, she would wake up one day and act as if nothing had ever happened and make the criminal/victim of her wrath feel as if they dreamt up the whole thing. The only reminder of its reality was the occasional looks she shot their way as a warning of her capabilities and that they would forever be on probation because she would never forget their crime and she would never forgive them no matter how sorry they were because no one, not even her own flesh and blood, deserved her grace. Maria was the most unique person I had ever met. She had a Cinderella story of a wicked stepmother and two snotty younger siblings. I did not know if it was her bitter upbringing that made her the way she was, but what she was wasn't natural. She

resembled a snake by inserting herself into situations and groups, stirring up drama, and slithering away when the war started. She was a great actress. She could be the sincerest friend you had ever known among a generation that found sincerity irrelevant. She would be your shoulder to cry on, cheerleader, and warrior as long as she needed to be so she could gather your greatest secrets, insecurities, past traumas, weird fetishes, and any other information that would be useful in your defeat. She was mysterious and almost other worldly. With a single look she could have anyone she wanted under her control and with powers like that she could not be conquered and would be overlooked as a suspect of foul play. I was friends with her during the first few weeks before I saw through her act, but by then it was too late. She knew the book of my life and I would not know the capabilities of her use with the information until months later. Somehow, we all became a friend group and got along with Adam as our unelected leader, and Maria as a close second.

Josh did not see-through Maria's award-winning performances and instead saw her through the rose-colored glasses of love. Not only was he blind to the ways that she could crush his heart and soul, he also did not care if she did. He was attracted to damaged goods and that Maria was. He did not let anyone into his heart that he subconsciously knew would not hurt him. I was not damaged goods;

I was simply good. Some called me innocent and pure because I was more of a virgin than Mother Mary. I was not on Josh's radar. I was not even friend zoned. I was worse, sibling zoned. He said that I reminded him of his little sister who was twelve, but that did not stop me from trying for months to get him to see me in a more desirable light. I was not the only one trying to be desirable to someone. Adam liked Katie and convinced me to take on the role of his secret agent with a mission to make him more appealing to her. This excited me for a few reasons. One, Adam seemed like he genuinely cared for her. He said he wanted to take her on a picnic and introduce her to his mom. I thought it was sweet and I worshipped romantic comedies and could not resist the chance to direct one of my own by being his wing-woman. Second, Katie was in a crappy long-distance relationship with her high school boyfriend and I had to listen to her complain every night about him and about how difficult long distance was. Lastly, I knew Katie liked Adam too. I could feel it in the air when they were next to each other. I saw my secret assignment as a win-win-win situation and happily obliged.

Fast forward to the end of October and things were heating up. There were golden brown and yellow leaves on the ground and a chilling wind in the air, but emotions were running high. The pressures and desires for relationships were in full swing. Josh constantly put himself out there for Maria and she would dang words and sometimes actions of her affections in front of him only to yank them away at the last minute so he would fall headfirst into rejection. One week she allowed him to hold her hand then did not talk to him for five days. Then, during a movie night, she cuddled with him and when he invited her back to his room she said no and was not seen again for a week. Josh was an emotional wreak and confided in me since he saw me as an extension of his sister. He would come into my room almost every night and ask us for advice. Sarah, Katie, and I would all tell him to move on and not play her game anymore, but he always did. He would sit in the middle of our floor and cradle a bottle of vodka while informing us of his misery. All of our maternal instincts were in bloom during these counselling sessions. We wanted to help him, but he would never listen. I believed that Maria did not like him and was using him to hurt me. I told her that I had a crush on him in the early days when I still spoke to her. I noticed that every time she would lead him on, I was in sight of it. She knew he would come to me for comfort, which would increase my pain of knowing I could not have him. Of course, I had no real way of proving this, but I considered my theory to be golden.

Then, four nights before Thanksgiving break, she kissed him. She kissed him right outside his door, which was right

across from mine. They were talking loudly late at night in the hall when the rest of us were trying to go to sleep. I, being the predictable being that I am, looked out of my door's peep hole to see who was in the hall and it was in that moment that I was the only audience member of their kiss. At that point I knew he would never like me, and their kiss destroyed any hope that remained. I was not the only person that kiss destroyed because it also destroyed Josh. He was living on cloud 9 until the next night when she disappeared again. She was not in her room and she was not answering her phone. We did not know where she disappeared to, but Randa said she knew some guys on the third floor and that she was probably with them. That night Josh was the most upset he had ever been and knocked on my door. I was the only one there since Katie and Sarah were taking tests. I opened the door and he stood there, hunched over with a one-third empty bottle of vodka in his hand and a flushed face. He was a drunken wreak. He came into my room and went straight to my bed. He laid down and took another swig. I was in shock of the situation and slowly walked towards my bed. As I stood in front of him, he sat up and extended his arms towards me in want of a hug. It took me a second to realize what was happening, then I hugged him. It was agonizing being that close to him, smelling his cologne, and seeing him in my bed. I forgot about

everything and sat down next to him. He rested his head on my shoulder and kept his arms wrapped around me. He whined about how she was tormenting him. Kissing him then running off to some other guy's room. How he longed for her to stay in his room, especially that night. I sat there but tried not listen. I took in the moment and thought only of his touch and attention. After a few more minutes he stopped whining and laid down behind me and rested his head on my pillow. He starred at the ceiling and asked me why she did not like him the way he liked her. I knew the answer to this question but chose not to answer it directly. I told him that sometimes we like people who are not going to like us back and it is the unrelenting pain of unrequited love. I told him that it was the only form of love that I had ever known, so I knew what he was feeling. I could not see him and heard no noise from him, but hoping he was still listening told him that sometimes the people we should be with are the ones we would never think to be with. Then I turned around to what I hoped would be him realizing that he should be with me, but instead found him to be fast asleep. I was crushed and felt like I missed my opportunity. I was tempted to sleep next to him and pretend we were something that we were not, even for just the night. I contemplated it for a moment. I was the representation of a pure white lamb that never did what I knew should not be done



and that had gotten me nowhere. Maybe being good caused me to lose. Maria was not good, yet she got everything she ever wanted. For once in my life, I did something my conscience told me not to. I did something bad. I grabbed a blanket and laid down beside Josh. I let my head nest into the same pillow as his. I felt the heat of his body only inches away from mine. I eventually drifted off to sleep while watching him sleep.

The next morning, I woke up to him shaking me. He angerly asked me why we were both sleeping in my bed. At first, I did not know how to answer, but then I came up with a brilliant explanation that was mostly true. I told him that we were talking about Maria and must have talked until we fell asleep. I assured him that was all that happened. He immediately unraveled and was concerned about what would happen if Maria found out. He made me promise not to tell anyone, but it was too late. Katie and Sarah were already out of the room and no doubt saw us when they came in last

night. He ran out of my room to try to track them down before the news spread like wildfire. He believed that if Maria thought he was sleeping with me then there was no chance of her ever sleeping with him. Once again, I was rejected, and Maria was the only thought his brain could process.

Even though I failed at my plan of love, I succeeded in another. I had done a brilliant job of getting Adam and Katie together. In September, she broke up with her boyfriend and a week later she told me she had a crush on Adam. I was so excited in that moment that I almost gave the plan away. Katie was catching on that something was up and that maybe Adam liked her too. I could not tell her that Adam liked her because it was not my place to say. Instead, I blurted out that Adam had a crush on a girl in one of his classes so she would be thrown off until Adam could tell her himself his true feelings. The operation was in full swing by the beginning of November. Adam and Katie would hold hands and flirt. Adam told me I had been a good wing-woman to him, and I could step down from my position now. The problem was that I did not want to stop. I had become addicted to my secret role and was afraid that if I did not have news to report to Adam, then he would not talk to me. I enjoyed his and Katie's company and was afraid of losing both of them because they would be too into each other.

Their company was not the only ones I had grown fond of. Sarah, Randa, and I had our own group within the friend group. We were an odd mix, but somehow, we worked. Sarah was go with the flow and a bit of a pushover which was pleasing to Randa who always had to get her way. I was the glue that held us together and the one that come up with things to do. We discovered a TV show we loved and organized a viewing time almost every night for us to huddle around my laptop and eat popcorn. You cannot consider your friends your family until you share the tradition of watching a TV show together. After a few weeks they really did feel like my family. They were like sisters to me.

It was two nights before Thanksgiving break and Randa, Sarah, and I were watching our TV show, when we heard shouting in the hallway and went to see what was wrong. Maria, Blake, Josh, and Adam were there and told us that they just saw Katie having dinner with a guy in the dining hall. They did not know who he was and were not happy about it. Maria and Randa called Katie all the names in the book that described a girl with multiple boys in interested. Blake and Josh were also in agreement with Maria and Randa. Josh was just pleased to be in Maria's presents again and was disgusted as soon as my foot stepped into the hall. Sarah and I just stood there and watched their madness unfold. We knew there was probably

a good explanation for Katie having dinner with the guy and she was not cheating on Adam because they had not given themselves a label yet. Adam shut down as depression overcame him. He was silent, went back to his room and played video games until the early morning hours.

That night when Katie returned to our room, she was unaware of the reaction to her dinner. Sarah left the room when Katie came back so I had to be the one to explain the others newfound hatred for Katie because she could not handle all the drama. I did not want to hurt or scare Katie, but I also did not want her to walk



into a verbal assault trap set by the others. I told her that they saw her, and they thought she was cheating on Adam. Katie said that the guy she had dinner with was a project partner and they were going over the project. I told her that they thought she was being flirty with the guy and she said she did not know she was and if she was, she had not meant to be. She did not know what her feelings for Adam were, but she did not appreciate their criticism. She was afraid to go around them and I told her that it may be best to lay low for a little while. I did not like the situation that I put her and myself into, but it was too late now. I wanted to be friends with everyone and for us all to get along, but I guess that was too much to ask from a group of teenagers.

The next day, which was the last day before Thanksgiving break, was awkward. Katie had not done what I suggested even though she thought she had. After class we saw her getting out of a car with the guy from the night before. They had ice cream in their hands and were walking back towards the dorms. Randa, Sarah, and I saw this when were in my car looking for a parking spot. Randa was immediately infuriated and the fire of her unique anger ignited. She raced back to the dorms and alerted the others of the breaking news. Adam, still in his mopey state, put headphones in and drowned out the world. Maria had a look in her eye that I knew meant trouble. They all, except Sarah,

continued their rant from the other night and bad mouthed her for what felt like forever. They even mentioned physically hurting her when they saw her. Randa said that she would give her a black eye if she dared to speak to Adam. I did not know if she would or not, but I felt like it was a possibility with her anger issues. I could not stand there anymore and let them destroy her in this matter. I raised my voice to silence them and with emotions raging, explained that we did not know the full story. I told them that he was a project partner and that they could just be friends. After all we had no say in who she could and could not date because her and Adam were not an official couple. They really did not like that observation. They all rearranged their anger towards me, and I could see it in their faces. Before they had the chance to yell at me, I left and stayed in my room for the rest of the night. Terrified, I warned Katie about their threats, including the physical ones. We were both in hiding, afraid of our own friends.

The next morning was the beginning of Thanksgiving break and we made plans to go stay in Josh's uncle's cabin in Carbondale, Illinois. I drove with Sarah, and Katie for the three-and-a-half-hour drive, while everyone else rode with Josh. Things were still awkward and I feared that this week would not be as fun as I had hoped. We were all going to leave the day after Thanksgiving to go home, giving us four full days together. There

were only two bedrooms and two queen size beds. Sarah, Katie, and I were in one room and Maria, Randa, and Adam stayed in the other room. Blake and Josh slept on the couch. There was not a lot around the cabin. There were no other homes in sight, a gas station a mile up the road, and a small restaurant and shopping area ten miles away. The cabin backed up to a tree line of woods where the boys planned to go hunting. I had no idea what I was going to do for the next four days. At least I brought a book as a backup.

After I put my things away, I ventured around the cabin to see what everyone was up to. I stepped into the living room and saw Maria, Randa, and Blake talking. They did not bother to look up at me, but they knew I was standing there ten feet away from them. They stood up and walked towards the bedrooms without pausing their conversation and still without looking at me. There was an odd feeling in the air from their coldness. I was hurt and confused by it but decided to continue my search for the others. I walked into the kitchen and got a glass for water. As I filled the glass, I saw Sarah, Katie, Josh, and Adam outside. They were talking and laughing, and Josh was showing them how to use a bow and arrow. I stood there for a moment, feeling strange in a strange house watching people I knew, and that knew me, but pretended that I was a stranger. They saw me through the window and walked into the

woods so they would be out of my view. It was official, I was a disease.

I stayed in my room for the rest of the day and read my book. I did not know why everyone was ignoring me and it was torturous. I read until seven that night, when my hunger overcame me, and I had no choice but to face the shunners. To my surprise, no one was around, and Josh's car was missing. They must had gone out to dinner. There I was, all alone in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to eat since the fridge was empty. I thought about driving into town to get dinner, but I feared running into them. They did not tell me they were leaving for a reason and it killed me not knowing what that reason was. I decided to walk to the gas station and find something edible and if possible, appealing, for dinner. They were still gone when I got back, so I stayed in my room, ate a bag of potato chips, and cried myself to sleep.

The next two days were the same. I was ignored and practically invisible. I pulled Sarah aside and asked her what was going on. I could see the panic in her eyes. She told me to keep to myself for a while until things cooled down. Cooled down? No one looked anger or upset, they simply treated me as if I did not exist. I kept to myself those two days just like she said to, not because I chose to, but because I was forced to. I went for daily walks to the gas station for food and walks in the woods to keep myself out of bed. Every time I came

back to the cabin, I hoped it had all been a bad dream and they would say hello to me, but they didn't. For two days I was alone, utterly alone. The next day, I hoped and somehow believed it would be different because the next day was Thanksgiving. I kept up my regular routine of a walk to the gas station and a walk in the woods. By the time I returned it was late in the afternoon. I decided to be brave and sit in the living room. It was Thanksgiving, and how could they shun me on Thanksgiving? I sat in the chair closest to the corner while Josh, Blake, and Sarah were playing a card game on the couch. Within two minutes they scattered. Blake and Sarah went outside, and Josh went into the kitchen. I had to know what was going on. It was Thanksgiving for god's sake! I followed Josh into the kitchen and as my mouth opened, I began to cry. I asked him why they were ignoring me and what I had done wrong? He looked right into my water filled eyes and told me in a firm aggressive tone to stay away from him. I chased him out of the kitchen and called his name. He slapped me across the face and said, this I will always remember, "Have you no heart?"

What did that mean? Me, not have a heart? What about them! What about him! Slapping me and ignoring me for, now, four days! How was I the heartless one in this situation? I went back to my room and packed my stuff. I would leave first thing in the morning. I did not want to exit from my room until I was ready to leave, but I was really hungry and out of gas station snacks. It was eight o'clock and I could hear them in the living room. They were laughing, talking, and having a good time. That noise sent daggers into my heart. I was once a part of that noise, a part of the fun. I felt like I would never be a part of it ever again. My heart was beating rapidly fast as I opened my bedroom door. Somehow, I just knew that what was going to happen next was going to be something I was not prepared for.

I crept down the creaking hallway and kept my eyes on the ground and mind on the kitchen hoping there were leftovers. As I passed beside them in the living room, I heard Adam ask them if they were ready. Then, the next thing I heard was my name. I looked over to him and he told me to take a seat. There was a chair from the dining room table in the middle of the living room. I sat in it, fearing what was going to happen, but grateful to be noticed. Adam and Randa had what looked like lists in their hands. Adam started the conversation by stating the fact that I was probably confused and to that I nodded my head yes. He proceeded by telling me, the way a disapproving father explains to his daughter, that they were ignoring me for a reason. He said in a firm, emotionless voice that he, and presumably the rest of the group, were no longer friends with me. My mouth dropped open in shock and tears began to roll. He

continued saying that after talking with Katie, they discovered the lies I had filled her with. I was more confused now than ever. He used vague descriptions and large vocabulary words to describe my deceitful acts. I had trouble following him since he used so many words that I did not known the meaning of. His eyes glanced at the list, which was the receipt of all the reasons he was ending our friendship. He stated that I was delusional and obsessive. That I had convinced myself that it was my job to get Katie and him together. I whimpered that he had asked me to, which he firmly denied and used as an example of my level of delusion. His next accusation was of my lie to Katie. The only lie I ever told her, that Adam had a crush on a girl in his class. He asked why I told her that and in that moment my mind was completely blank. I remembered saying it, but I could not remember why. I was in an intense state of shock and my brain could not process what was happening. I confirmed that I said it, but that I could not remember why. He laughed in a way that sent shivers down my spine and told me to stop the BS and confess. I searched my mind, but it was all black. The moment when I told her that lie in distant past that seemed like heaven compared to my current residence in hell. I sobbed and repeatably said sorry.

Randa stood up next to Adam and asked, while wiping a tear from her eye, why I spouted lies to Katie telling her that

she would punch her. She said that I was taking things out of context and tried to turn Katie against them. Randa looked at Katie, held her hand, and said that they loved Katie and would never be so childish towards her. My mind spiraled as I left like I had fallen into a Twilight Zone episode. I was the one accused of immaturity. This was coming from someone I considered family, and she just threw me under the bus. Then she asked me how I could have been so cruel to Sarah. That when I made fun of her lifestyle, Sarah went crying to her. Made fun of her lifestyle? The only thing that could come to mind was one time when I asked Sarah if she was going to do laundry since her dirty laundry hamper was overflowing onto my rug. I shook at the thought of Sarah crying over something I said. My face was bright red from the blood rushing to my head to keep myself from passing out over shocking grief. My hands trembling, clasped my cheeks and were wettened by my unrelenting tears. I looked at Sarah and told her I never meant to hurt her, and that it was a terrible joke. Out of nowhere, Maria shouted at me. She said that I was playing the victim when I was not, Sarah was. She said I had to own up to the terrible and rude things I said to Sarah. I glanced back at Sarah and said that Maria was right. I was a terrible, terrible friend and Sarah deserved better. I asked Sarah if we could still be friends and for the first time that night, she opened her mouth and said

that she was willing to let me try to earn her forgiveness.

There was a moment of silence, apart from my sobbing, and I thought that it might have been over, but I was wrong. Maria was not done. She scorned me for "throwing myself" at Josh and stated that I clearly had no dignity. She said that just because I could not be with Josh, did not give me the right to keep Adam and Katie separated because in all their eyes I kept Katie and Adam apart from day one and never wanted them to be together. According to them, if I could not be happy, then I did not want anyone to be happy. She carried on her accusations by saying that I was a pathological liar that needed professional help.

By now, my sobbing turned into a sniffily, drippy cry and my lips were horribly cracked and chapped. I laid my head in my hands but looked up into Maria's eyes as soon as she reasoned that I did not have the right to treat them with such cruelness just because that is how my high school friends treated me. There it was. The information I had given her all those months ago twisted against me for the final stabbing of my heart. This was the line she had written months ago for her performance tonight.

After a moment, Adam asked if anyone had anything else that they would like to say to me as he checked off the last item on his list. No one spoke. At that moment I knew two things. One, whatever I said they would not believe and two, I was starting to believe that I was the hellish person they were describing. I asked Adam if I was free to go, to which he replied that I was never forced to stay. I rose, scanned the room remembering the last moment I would ever be in the same room as all of them, said thank you and went to my room. I have no idea why I thanked them. Perhaps because I believed they showed me who I really was. My inner demon that I had ignored and denied.

As soon as I reached my room I cried hysterically. I could not stop; it was a force not to be reckoned with. The realization that I had no friends and was hated by not only them, but myself sunk in. I could not stay there, and I did not feel welcome to, not that I ever really did. I grabbed my things and ran out of the door to my car. It did not matter that I had not eaten in hours and that it was pitch black outside. It did not matter that I was still crying hysterically and could barely breathe. Nothing mattered because I did not matter. I did not want to drive home because I did not want to face reality. I needed to escape, and I knew just the place.

"Do you think they are right? Do you think I am a crazy, cruel, pathological liar?" I question the kind stranger who asked to hear my tragic tale.

He makes sure I am looking him in the eyes before he answers, "Based on what you just told me, these are your crimes: you told a little white lie with good intentions behind it, you showed love to someone that did not deserve it, you made a bad joke about laundry, and you meddled too much with a possible relationship. No kid, you're not crazy, you're just young."

"What do you mean?" I ask as my eyes start to tear from his comforting answer.

"When you're young, you're a little confused and a little foolish. It's nothing you can help and the only thing that will cure it is time. Don't worry kid, you'll still get into heaven. If you want to hear some real sins, then you should hear mine."

"What did you do?"

He looks down at the counter and takes a sip of his coffee before answering, "A while ago, I cheated on my wife and ran away when she found out. I left her with our four boys. The oldest was in middle school, the middle ones were toddlers, and the youngest was only a year old. So yeah... if anyone here is to be considered a criminal, its me."

"It's not too late, you can go back. You can try to work things out and see your kids."

He looks down at the counter and chuckles to himself, "You think my boys are going to want to see me after what I did? No, no they don't want to see me. They probably hate me."

I wait until he looks back at me to speak again, "Us kids might not get along with our parents all the time, but we never hate them. We can claim to hate you, but in our hearts, there is always some amount of love."

Now the man looks like he may cry too.

"Thanks, kid. I'll think about it."

I nod at him satisfied with his answer. Then he speaks again,

"So where are you headed? Where is the place you're escaping to?"

"That's another long story, but to make it short, I'm headed to a small coastal town in Massachusetts. You see, my family has been going there every summer for the past five years to run a lighthouse. I have a friend that lives there, Philip. I met him the first summer we went there. He is the only real friend I have and since I lost all my other friends, I wanted to be with my best friend."

"So, your parents still don't know what happened?"

"No, you're the only one that knows."

"You should call them."

"I was supposed to be home over an hour ago, so they might be worried."

"Call them, kid. I know I'm not exactly parent of year or anything, but I know I would be worried."

"Okay... thanks for listening."

He nods his head, puts money on the counter for his coffee, and stands up. "Take care, kid. Things will get better."

"You too." I say and he leaves.

I decide that he is right, and I call
my mom. She answers on the first ring.

"Nikki? Nikki, where are you? Are
you okay?"

"Yeah mom, I'm okay."



THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH OF YATES

ALISSA M. REHMERT

senior | english-creative writing

Second Place Winner - Short Story Competition

Author's Preface

This social commentary piece depicts a regular Sunday morning in Southern Missouri. The narrative is from the perspective of a young "unchurched" girl going to church with her highly religious Grandma.

Keywords: Religion, Missouri, Baptism, Childhood, Grandma



Grandma pushes open the heavy oak doors to the church; a sea of grey hair lies behind. I've never been here before, but it smells familiar — like Grandpa's forever-stained-yellow pillow.

"Phewy!" I blurt out as the musty odor coats my nostrils, "Why does it smell so ba— "

Grandma's hand swoops down to grab the words right out of my mouth. I feel the wrath of God in her sharp gaze. She tugs me forward as we look for an open pew. We can't sit too far back, or they might think we want to make an early escape for lunch at Ma and Pop's Diner next door. But we can't sit too close to the front either or they might think that we're Pentecostal and Grandpa says that's worse than people thinking you don't believe in God at all.

Grandma finally finds a spot in the middle, right next to a man wearing a black suit and red tie embroidered with the same fish design that Grandpa has on the back of his truck. He nods ever-so-slightly as we shuffle sideways into the bruise-purple pews. I plop down, allowing my yellow Sunday dress to swish up slightly, like the patch-work



parachutes we play with on the playground at school. Grandma's fire-and-brimstone eyes remind me I need to sit like a lady. When she isn't looking, I, like that salt-lady in the Bible Grandma told me about, let my eyes wander. Behind us sits an ancient woman made of stone. She sits straighter than ruler and looks like she's never smiled a day in her everlasting life. I flash a wide-toothy grin, thinking maybe she just doesn't know how. I'll never know if she learned either, because at that moment I felt Grandma's familiar pinch on my bare arm. I snap my head toward her just in time to see her final warning glare. For the rest of the service, I make sure to keep my own eyes in order.

A bloated whale-of-a-woman begins playing the pipe organ as she leads "Hallelujah to the Lord". I don't know any of the words but move my lips anyway, hoping I just might dodge Grandma's judgement. While the rest of the church sings "Hallelujah", I let out an impassioned "Watermelon".

Behind the music lady's head, there's a painting of Jesus and his disciples drinking grape-juice and eating bread that looks like the rocks that Grandma makes me pick from her lawn when I'm acting too "rowdy".

After what seems like eternity of staring at the painting, the music dies and a fat, bald man shuffles up onto the stage. He kind of looks like he's made of one of Grandma's candles I left in her window last Summer — globs of white wax-skin hanging from his arms and face. In a deep twang, he ,

"Welcome, Brothers and Sisters, to The Southern Baptist Church of Yates." The preacher begins his sermon and I begin to thank God for the painting.

After Candle-Man starts to wind down, he invites us to join him at the front to pray. I stare at a buff baby with wings hovering above the head of Jesus and wonder why anybody would want to come to church. Despite his calls, the church people, including Grandma, remain as still as a kid trying to conceal themselves in a game of hide-and-seek. After a few seconds, the Preacher and the church people recite something in unison, and the church people are finally freed from their seats. Grandma's attention is now on me. Her hard eyes soften slightly, giving me permission to stand as well. I stretch out my legs and pull my itchy lace-ringed socks back up my ankle. Grandma grabs my hand and walks us to the front of the church. The preacher stands there, shaking the whale-lady's fat hand. Grandma reaches out her hand to greet him next.

"And who is this sweet thing?" the Preacher asks.

"This is my granddaughter, Alice Mae. She is going to be living with me this summer."

As they chatter about my being here, I notice what looks like a dirty bathtub under the Jesus painting.

"Do people take baths right here in front of everyone?" I tug on the bottom of Grandma's dress.

Neither Grandma nor the Preacher hear me, so I pop up on my tippy toes to get a better look. At the bottom of the otherwise white tub, it looks like a thick layer of shiny black licorice.

"Grandma? What is that?" I mutter.

She rebukes me for interrupting the adults.

"I'm sorry, Minister. There's a reason she needs to come live with me...she doesn't even know a baptismal from a bathtub," her voice is full of pity, just like when she talks about the kids at school who don't have food at home.

I lift my chin a little more to get a better view. My toes give out under my weight and I feel the biscuits and gravy I had this morning do a somersault.

The licorice wriggles and writhes: thousands of insects, mostly dead, line the bottom of the tub.

Burning Bright

LINDSEY BERGNER

senior | education

Third Place Winner - Short Story Competition

Author's Preface

Kathryn Barrett, Virginia Rayse, Rae Catron Clyne, and Esther Parker—four names that fueled Lydia Barrett's passion for writing. As Lydia was reading these cursive inscriptions written inside her antique books, she had the idea to write the stories of those who had cherished the books before her. She began researching the names written inside the covers, piecing together the beautiful stories of their lives.

After a fire destroys Lydia's home—including the hundreds of antique books—she mourns the loss of her family memories and personal library. The tragedy took away her devotion for the writing project, but with the help of her English teacher and her small-town community, Lydia begins to find a renewed passion for writing. She feels the history and stories behind the inscriptions start to come to life despite losing all of her books. As she continues her research, she becomes deeply connected to Virginia, Rae, and Esther, and their lives are forever woven together with hers.

"Burning Bright" is a heartwarming story about the magic of words and the power of love, shining through the lives forever connected through literature and an enduring hope despite life's tragedies.

Keywords: Blake, Poetry, Books, Memory, Loss

The Morning After

Fire Fire, burning bright In the darkness of the night;

William's Blake's poem repeated through my mind, though the words were scrambled, and the meaning was lost. The words "burning bright" clawed my mind like his tiger, though no flames flickered any longer, and the darkness was gone. On any other day, I'd say it was beautiful out; the sunshine mocked me today. The heat burned my skin, but my insides were cold.

Mom and Dad had sent my grandma back to her house, saying they needed time alone. The bitter tears started to flow the moment my grandma left. Mom cried beside me as Dad held her against his chest. There was nothing else to hold onto but each other anymore; only the skeleton frame of the house stood, and everything else was ashes.

What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Blake's words unscrambled, and I questioned the world like the speaker of the poem. What immortal being let this happen? What power blesses the world with sunshine but allows destructive fires? What God sprinkles soft rain on the roof but permits lightning to burn it down?

Mom's ceaseless sobs clawed through my thoughts. Dad told her we had to go, that there was nothing left. The flames were out; our life's memories were ashes. For the first time, I wished we lived in town instead of on the farm. Maybe someone would have seen the flames and stopped it sooner, saving some of our memories. If only we hadn't gone to my grandma's house last night, maybe we could have stopped the fire or at least called 911 sooner.

I could do nothing any longer but search through the ashes for any remnants of our memories. I approached the smoldering rubble and blackened frame as closely as I could, desperately looking through the grey dust for remnants of my books, but I found no trace. No loose pages. No half-burnt covers. My library must have been kindling, fueling that fearful fire.

While no real lives were lost, thousands of lives were taken from me. Heathcliff and Catherine, Cathy and Linton, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, Janie and Teacake, Maya, and on and on. The characters lived in those pages, my pages, until the fire consumed them. I suppose their lives could be replaced. I could easily find another copy of Pride and Prejudice or I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings—any old bookstore would have those titles on their shelves, but they wouldn't have the cursive names written on the inside cover. The lives of those who owned the book before me were erased from their favorite narratives. Their story doesn't live in the pages

of the book like the characters; I couldn't just go buy a copy of their lives. They were real people, and they weren't memorialized in the pages of any book but my own. Their lives were mysteries to me, except for the names I'd begun to research, delicately scribed in the front covers of the books they'd once held in their hands.

While I grieved the loss of all my books—most of which were given to me by my grandma—I knew her story. The other names were what haunted me. I remembered a few inscriptions: Virginia Rayse, Rea Catron Clyne, and Esther Parker. I had started to research and write about those three names, their stories, their lives. The rest were lost.

I cursed my affinity for paper. Why had I not written their names on my phone instead of the notebook? Paper burns, and my notebook and those cursive names were gone. Even the research I had on my computer was lost, the device fried by the flames. There's nothing left echoed in my thoughts, scraping across my brain like the claws of Blake's tiger.

Dad placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling me away from my thoughts. I looked up at his mournful gaze, with Mom still cradled against his chest. He pulled me into the embrace with her, urging us both into the car—our only possession left.

As Dad began to drive away, I couldn't help but look out the window at the skeleton of our home. The farm

looked desolate, resembling the wasteland of our empty wheat fields. The wheat would grow again, changing the fields to a beautiful gold in the summer, but the house would remain a charred ash pile. There was no beauty in ashes.

When Dad turned onto the highway towards my grandma's house, the smoke and rubble finally out of view, something sharp poked into my leg. I inhaled sharply, my heartbeat quickening as I remembered the card I'd taken to my grandma's house. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the "In Loving Memory" card that memorialized Herbert Clyne, protected by the baseball card frame. For the first time, silent tears ran down my cheeks. Sadness was mixed in, but mostly relief flooded my heart. One piece survived; one life made it out of the flames. I had the memory of Herbert to hold onto, and it was as if a dear friend had been restored to me.

The Days Before

Before the fire, I sat in my bedroom at my vintage writing desk, pouring over historical documents and books from around Pratt County. On both sides of the desk stood two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with beautiful, antique books. I stopped writing notes from the documents and looked at the hundreds of books on my shelves.

A thousand lives are in this room, I thought. So many experiences, memories,

and secrets embedded in these pages.

For the previous two weeks, an idea had settled in my mind after reading the inscriptions inside some of my older books. I devised to start a short story anthology project, chronicling the lives of the names in the covers of my personal books, what I called my 'living library.' With all the inscriptions I found in the covers, I wrote the over forty names in my floral notebook where I kept all my ideas for future writing projects. I had begun writing a few other ideas and had trashed some others, but something in the sinews of my heart could not put the idea of the lives of those who owned the books before me to rest. Something about the names wandered through my mind at night; I dreamed of their stories. I had to give those stories life, and so I started small and began researching.

Sadly, many names remained just that—names—their lives mysteries, uncracked by my questions. Some inscriptions had initials with no date, and others had a first name with a date but no surname. Inside the cover of *Nicholas Nickleby*, I could find nothing on the name "J.C.H. Koon," and there was no date written. No record I had read even mentioned the last name of Koon, so perhaps he was not even from Pratt County. Another inscription inside *The Tempest* just said, "to Walter 1897," which gave me a time period but no surname to even begin researching.

For the full names I could research, I simply began going down the list in my notebook. Some searches brought up nothing, but a few had begun fruitfully. I found information on Virginia Rayse, Rea Catron Clyne, and Esther Parker, and their plots began to unfold for me the more I read and researched.

A tangible excitement sparked across my room as I looked at the books on the desk in front of me. I had four key documents to help further unlock their lives: The Chronicles of Pratt and Pratt County, Kansas; History of the Cairo Community: 1885-1998; Growing Up Black in Pratt; and Before I Forget. I had bought the former two books from the Pratt County Historical Museum, and the latter two had come from my parent's collection. To further boost my research, I had also purchased a membership to ancestry.com.

With all those resources in front of me, I grinned with giddiness. I had stacked one of my grandma's books with the three most promising antique books with inscriptions on my bed beside me. I thought of those who had held the books before me. It seemed that their fingerprints were as tangible as my own; I imagined their hands turning the pages with a satisfying crinkle, opening up their world and experiences, even their thoughts and dreams.

So far, I gathered a short history of the three names– just a starting point of scattered notes.

The first book was the easiest place to start: my grandma's 1948 Rainbow Classics edition of Wuthering Heights. The inscription read "Kathryn Morton," which was my grandma's maiden name. At the time, she would have been eighteen, just graduating high school before attending Kansas State University to become an English teacher. After she met and married John Barrett in 1952, she gave up teaching to raise four boys on the farm where my family and 'living library' resided. Thankfully, I had the direct source at my fingertips: Grandma Kathryn lived about twenty miles from us. I planned to sit down with my grandma and interview her, gathering details of her life that I could flesh out in a short story or even a novel.

The second book was a dark green 1902 edition of Little Women. The inscription read "Virginia Rayse." In reading History of the Cairo Community: 1885-1998, I was able to find a lot about her life because it was such a small town. Cairo, which was now only a cluster of run-down houses and the Co-op, was once a thriving small community with a church, school, general store, and small train depot. It was built in that spot because of the access to both the Santa Fe Railroad and the Ninnescah River, officially established in 1885. I read that Virginia's father was a sheepman named W.C. Rayse. He was a founding member along with a whole group of farming fathers who wanted a place to conveniently sell their crops and livestock. Virginia was

born four years after Cairo's founding in 1889. Her father built the house and barn where Virginia and her family grew up, and, amazingly, pieces of Virginia's girlhood journal survived and made it into the Cairo history book. She wrote about her love for the sheep they raised and how she enjoyed taking care of the animals except in the frigid winters. She wrote about her dad's strength and how he had singlehandedly built his farm and helped Cairo become a real town. For many years, the only place Virginia knew was that small community, never venturing farther than the store, church, or school. The journals described Virginia's love for that little town. I had a similar love for my small town and a passion for raising livestock, and though Virginia lived over a century before me, she cherished her family and farming as much as I did and had lived just a few miles from our farm. I imagined that her copy of Little Women brought a lot of happiness to her small corner of the world, just as the little green book made me happy. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy found joy even in hard circumstances and sadness, and after rereading Little Women and studying Virginia's journals, I envisioned with confidence that she had the same good heart and strength of mind as the March sisters. I knew Virginia's journal and her own lovely words would be a major part of writing her story; so many of the words I wrote would be her own, mixed with my experiences.



The third book was a vivid, rosered 1920 edition of Pride and Prejudice. The inscription read "Rea Catron Clyne -1936." I could find no information on her; it was as if she never existed. Then, as I had flipped through the pages a second time, a small card fell out of a blank, yellowed page that had been stuck to one of the title pages in the front, revealing a rectangle-outlined stain where the card had most likely rested for over half a century. A prayer was written on the card above a picture of a young man. Below the picture, it read, "In Loving Memory of Pfc. Herbert Clyne, born on November 27, 1913. Killed in action in St. Lo, France, July 17, 1944." My heart had sunk as I flipped the page to the inscription. Herbert would have been around thirty years old, most likely married just before the war only to leave and never make it back home. I researched military documents and the Battle of St. Lo, and while I found some useful documents, the most meaningful was the marriage license of Rea and Herbert Clyne, married on June 22, 1934. I imagined

Rea reading Pride and Prejudice in their first years of marriage before Herbert left for the war. Perhaps he was her Mr. Darcy; perhaps she had dreams of raising a large family, living in bliss like Elizabeth and Darcy at Pemberley. As I held Rea's copy, my hands resting in the same spots hers might have touched, I sensed Rea's anguish from hearing the news of her husband's death. I could almost hear Rea's piercing sobs, imagining how devastated she must have been at her loss. I hoped she found some solace in reading the story of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. Maybe it reminded her of her time with Herbert and the love they shared. I knew I had to find out everything I could about Herbert and Rea, but I paused the research in the anticipation of other heartwarming and heartbreaking stories. I put the "In Loving Memory" card into one of Dad's old baseball card holders, tucking my most treasured discovery in my schoolbag so that I could show my grandma when we visited her.

The fourth book was a 1969 first edition of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with the dust jacket intact. The inscription read "Esther Parker." A few more of my books had Esther's name inscribed in the cover—some of my Brontë books, more in Maya Angelou's autobiographical series along with her poetry, and a couple of Toni Morrison titles. While I couldn't find much about Esther aside from her birth in 1945 and marriage in 1963, I dis-

covered a great deal about her son, Elijah Parker. He wrote an autobiography about his childhood in Pratt called Growing Up Black in Pratt. It was a short 90-page book of essay-like stories, but it gave me insight into his mother's life. As an African American family in a small Kansas town, they faced a number of challenges. Many may have called them poor, but Elijah wrote that he was "rich in family, friends, joy, and faith." He wrote that his mother never missed a church service, she managed to furnish a little personal library despite their tight funds, and she made a point of going fishing as a family every weekend. She helped her husband support their family of five by raising chickens and selling the eggs around town and was also known to cook the best fried chicken in Pratt. While their family may have struggled, Elijah wrote that they thrived because Esther raised them to have compassion, faith, and love for one another and the community of Pratt. I imagined that Esther's books were her safe haven, as they now were for me. Though I cannot imagine what Esther must have gone through and the adversity she must have faced, I was connected to her deep faith in God. The way Elijah wrote so vividly of his faith, I knew Esther must have been a major part of the foundation of his love for God. In the future, I wanted to raise my own children with the same, deeply-rooted faith. Esther also had a similar love as me for the Brontë sisters and Maya Angelou's vivid

writing, so I cherished Esther's books, knowing from their pristine condition how she much she must have cared about them. Perhaps Maya's own autobiographies and vivid poetry inspired Esther in meeting challenges and having the strength she needed to raise her family, just as Esther's own biography inspired me.

As I looked over the progress I had made so far with the first four names, I didn't see a writing project in front of me any longer; I saw a living, breathing soul beginning to take form.

The Monday After

The Monday following the fire, I stayed after school and approached my English teacher, Mrs. Reed. I had always admired her, and I wanted to share the idea and research for my stories with her. I honestly didn't know if it was worth pursuing anymore. With the books destroyed, my heart wasn't as invested any longer. I had re-gathered research, replacing some by revisiting the museum to buy the Pratt County history books and then Amazon to once again buy Elijah Parker's autobiography, but I didn't know how to continue without other names to explore and pieces of research lost. Without the books, it seemed as if part of my project was missing.

I nervously showed Mrs. Reed my new notes, along with Herbert Clyne's "In Loving Memory" card that had survived, hoping she would give me some direction. "Lydia, this is amazing." She smiled and looked up at me. "You found all of this from names written in a book?"

I nodded, unable to form any words.

"Well, you have to continue this project. This is a book waiting to happen, and you can bring it to life."

The pile of ashes sat heavy in my mind. "I-I don't know how."

Mrs. Reed sighed. "I know the fire was awful. I know you and your family lost so much...I can't begin to imagine what you're going through." She held up the "In Loving Memory" card. "This survived?"

"Yes. I had it with me at my grandma's. I put it my pocket."

Her eyes sparkled. "Look at this. Herbert's story survives, and it looks like a few more of those names live in your mind. Just look at all this research you've collected! And you can bring them to life with your pen and paper. You have to write these stories. And maybe you'll recall a few more names." Her eyes lit up and her smile brightened. "You will have more names. Many more."

"What do you mean?"

"You're staying at your grandparent's house?"

"Yes..."

"You'll have a library again. I promise."

The Weekend After

Throughout the week after the fire,

clothing and toiletries and money had arrived at my grandma's doorstep. Mom said the support we'd received from our small community was a blessing from God. I still saw the God who sent lightning to strike our house. I still mourned my library and the names in the covers. I had continued writing about Virginia, Rea, and Esther, but the inspiration was gone without their books. I still held onto Herbert's memorial card as a lifeline to my project and their stories, but I wasn't sure what to do with it. The card seemed fragmented since it could never again be reunited with Rea's copy of Pride and Prejudice.

And then a new lifeline arrived as Mrs. Reed pulled into my grandma's driveway. I heard the car pull up and went to answer the door. She hopped out of her car, almost skipping towards the door, a box cradled in her arms. *More clothes*, I thought. I opened the door with a forced smile, and Mrs. Reed handed her box to me.

"Open it," she urged.

I set the box down and pulled back the cardboard flaps, revealing crumpled newspaper. I removed the protective wrapping to discover dozens of antique books. As I eagerly took out the newspaper, I gently picked up the books and flipped the covers open, reading the inscriptions: about half were owned Jene Tyree, another few by C.J. Arends.

"Maybe you can give the names

more life than I ever did," she said. "Write their stories."

My hands shook as I ran my fingers over the intricate, worn covers. "Thank you," I said softly.

"When you do write them," she continued, "I'd love to read them. You have a gift with words, Lydia. And this is a wonderful idea."

"I'll let you read them." I was still in shock, tears beginning to blur my vision. "Are you sure you don't want to keep these?"

She shook her head. "They are all yours. Your research and writing bring those names fresh life. That's the magic of words and the power of books. You just keep sharing that magic."

I let out a deep breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "Thank you so much."

She smiled, her hair glowing in the sunlight of the porch. "I know you'll give them life, Lydia." Mrs. Reed turned and walked back down the sidewalk, got in her car, and drove away. I was left stunned, standing with the door open, a few books hugged to my chest. So many books, so many new lives to research. *Keep sharing the magic* surged through my mind over and over, and no longer did negative thoughts rake through my mind like the tiger's claws. The tears flowing down my face were joyful instead of mournful.

A living, breathing library again – and that was just the beginning.

Throughout the day, books continued to arrive. Family friends, church members, my grandma's coffee group, other teachers, and even classmates brought out a few books or sometimes multiple boxes of books. Many were cherished family books—even heirlooms graciously given to me. By the end of the day, I had over one hundred books piled in my grandma's guest room where I was staying. I began cataloguing the books and cursive names, this time taking a photo of the book and its inside cover so that I would never lose those names again. Hope surged through me, revitalizing my passion for writing.

As I organized the books, I kept picking up Herbert's "In Loving Memory" card, wondering about any living relatives he may have had. Without the card residing in Rea's copy of Pride and Prejudice, it seemed right to get it back to its rightful owner somehow. Maybe he had surviving children. I hadn't gotten far enough in my research to know if he'd had children before the war, but it seemed likely since he and Rea were married a few years before the war began. I borrowed my grandma's computer and searched Rea Catron Clyne and Herbert Clyne in ancestry.com, searching for any relatives. I found some names in Nebraska, contacted a few with no luck, and then presumably found a surviving daughter named Jill. She was 86 years old and had only a landline number listed. I wanted to simply text a picture

of the card to her, but I was forced to call the landline. With shaking hands and a thumping heart, I dialed the phone number. A woman answered.

"Is this Jill Nedrow?" I timidly asked.

"Yes. May I ask to whom I'm speaking?"

I cleared my throat. "My name is Lydia Barrett. I know you don't know me, and this may sound crazy, but do you know a Herbert Clyne?"

Silence met me over the speaker, and I just prayed she didn't hang up. Finally, she answered, "My father was a Herbert Clyne. What is this about?"

"Please hear me out. My mom bought a book back at an estate sale many years ago, a red copy of *Pride and Prejudice* with the name Rea Catron Clyne written inside. Tucked in one of the pages, I found a small card that has a prayer, a picture of a man, and an inscription that reads 'In Loving Memory of P.f.c Herbert Clyne, born on November 27, 1913. Killed in action in St. Lo, France, July 17, 1944."

I was met with more silence, until I heard soft cries.

"Mrs. Nedrow?" I questioned.

"My dear, this is a prayer answered."

I pulled the phone away from my ear as she blew her nose.

"I apologize," she continued. "But you just cannot imagine how dear this is to my heart. I-I recently lost all of my things, all of the family pictures and memories of my mother and father and my father's time in the war. He died when I was only nine years old, so most of what I knew of him was from my mother and the memorabilia I had left."

My throat tightened. "Well, I'll gladly send you this card. It belongs with you."

"What of my mother's *Pride and Prejudice*? Is it possible that I could have that, too? I don't know how that ever parted from our possession...of course I'll pay you whatever you ask. I know it must be dear to you."

"Mrs. Nedrow, I'm so sorry. I would send you the book for free, but my family just lost our house in a fire. All of our belongings were destroyed."

"A fire?"

"Yes, but I will still send you the card. Could you give me your address?"

I heard more muffled crying.

"I'm really sorry about the book," I added. "I would give it to you in a heartbeat."

She blew her nose again. "No, it's not that. My house burned down too, about six months ago. Dear, you must be a part of my answered prayer. Here is my turn to sound crazy. Would...would you mind if I wrote you letters? That is, if you wanted to write to me?"

I grinned. "I would love that." I thought about my research. "And would you be willing to share stories about your mom and dad? I'm actually writing about

the names I found in my books at home, and I'm doing lots of research, but first-hand knowledge is always best. Also, it sounds like your parents had a beautiful love story, and I would really love to capture that."

Mrs. Nedrow laughed heartily, and it was the purest laughter I'd ever heard. "That would be splendid, and from what my mother shared with me, her and my father had an Austenian romance just as you'd imagine. You'll love hearing about it." She let out a long breath. "You said your name is Lydia?"

"Yes, Lydia Barrett."

"Lydia, you can call me Jill. You're now my pen pal and friend."

She proceeded to give me her address, and then I hung up filled with more joy than I'd felt in a long time. I held Herbert's memorial card in my shaking hands, knowing in my soul that I was meant to write these stories.

Since my family was staying at my grandma's house indefinitely, I knew I would hear my Grandma Kathryn's life story right from her lips. As for the other two names, I resolved to search for any living relatives. For Virginia, maybe I could find a great-great grandchild or someone who knew her. For Esther, I had her son Elijah's autobiography *Growing up Black in Pratt* and could most likely find his phone number or Facebook so that I could personally talk to him about his mother. His book mostly shared his

childhood experiences in Pratt—which thankfully were positive—but I wanted to know how his mother felt growing up in Pratt in the 50's and 60's. I wanted to know all of the true history behind the racism she most likely faced and the grit and heart she definitely possessed to raise a family as a black woman in a small Kansas town.

There were so many untold stories and countless opportunities to learn about and share them. I was determined: the world was going to know the names Kathryn Barrett, Virginia Rayse, Rae Catron Clyne, and Esther Parker, and they were going to fall in love with these strong, beautiful women just as I had.

After the weekend of book-giving, with thanks to Mrs. Reed, I had a hundred more names to research and write about. Their stories would live on in my words just like the characters in the books we'd all cherished. Though many of my books were gone, our lives were forever woven together, and their stories were now in my hands.

A new poem emerged from William Blake's famous first stanza, no longer clawing my brain but instead embracing my soul for all the possibilities to come:

Love and Mercy, burning bright In the humans of the light; What glorious hand or eye, Could frame thy lovely harmony?



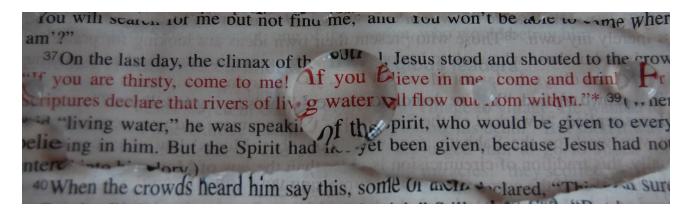
DUST LUCAS COOK junior | english literature

Keywords: Western, Bible, Gun, Jesus, Martyrdom

Dust was everywhere in Cotton-wood Falls, Kansas. There was dust in the floorboards, dust in the cupboards. Dust lined the windows of the general store. After a long day at work, dust found its way into the socks of vaqueros and cowboys, who dumped it out between the barstools in the saloon. Three of the four wells outside of town brought up nothing but dust of different colors. On Sunday mornings in the old evangelical chapel, dust rolled in with the parishioners.

The Reverend scratched the back of his head, a vain attempt to rid the dust from what was left of his hairline. It bit and dug at the silvery strands and made preaching to the masses more a lesson in endurance than a lesson in the Word. His knees and knuckles ached as he made his way to the pulpit. The dust was harder on him than anyone else, he figured. He coughed once to rid the phlegm that rose up after the snake oil pills.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us be



thankful for our health. Through our suffering we will be made strong enough to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, by God." This earned a delighted sigh from the twelve or so in attendance.

The Reverend smiled and continued, his hand resting on the worn King James set on top of the makeshift pulpit that had since become permanent. "While I may never have saved a soul, the Lord Jesus has given me the words to help direct you all towards salvation, even in this heat and dry. Let us open with a prayer."

His hand slipped through one of the pockets in his tweed jacket, retrieving the thin wireframes he needed to see through yellowed eyes. On a sheet of paper, wedged in the Bible in front of him, a prayer scribbled across the page, along with the rest of the sermon notes. Through his peripheral vision, he watched with authority as the heads in attendance bowed. Even little Thomas, the more ornery of the two children in attendance, had found some way to be quiet.

"Heavenly Father, today we come together to worship you in the midst of

a horrendous drought. We pray, as the Israelites did outside Rephidim, for water. Strike these rocks and flood our souls with the water of life, dear God!"

Somewhere outside came the sound of thumping hooves. A horse, maybe two. His brow furrowed. Hadn't William already shut the chapel doors? Ten o'clock every Sunday morning. This was the only church in town, and the only meeting place for those of the faith in miles. Everyone knew when the doors were open and when they were closed. "We thank you for your watchful hand over us and your continued strength."



Light conversation infiltrated the space in the sun-bleached doorframe. He could hear the voice of William and some other man. Surely William was informing the man of future times of worship, or perhaps times when he could schedule a meeting with the Reverend. He paused his prayer for a second, a light grin tugging at the corners of his face. He did so love to impart his wisdom on members of the faith. "Now, dear Lord, we ask for that strength and unity in this trying time, as we go out into our world and become the salt of the—"

A gunshot, loud and harsh against his oration, tore the small room in half. Heads rose in near unison towards the creaking front door. The Reverend's face fell, then contorted into a frown. Cottonwood Falls was not the most lawful of townships. Rowdy cowboys and drunkards had found their way into gunfights often, so this was not out of the ordinary. "Excuse me? Hello out there? We are having congregation at the moment. If you could refrain from—"

The doors slammed open. A woman screamed. The Reverend couldn't tell if it was Miss Annie or Missus Redd. He caught a glimpse of little Thomas diving behind his father, who fumbled for a gun that wasn't there. A second or so passed before the Reverend's eyes affixed on the offender. He was slight and slim, with slick black hair hidden behind a bowler hat. His sleek moustache betrayed a coy



smile of yellowed teeth, rotten from tobacco. One gloved hand held a cattleman's revolver, still smoking. Looking past the new attendee's brown leather jacket, the Reverend caught a glimpse of old William, keeled over in the orange dirt, rump square in the air.

A solemn wave of dust blew in with the new arrival. He slowly glanced around the room, making his way towards the Reverend. The slat floor creaked underneath his boots. "Can I help you?" The Reverend's voice lilted as he dropped the written prayer.

The newcomer sized up his prey. "I do believe you can, preacher. Could you be a good fisher of men and bring the tithe box to a man in need?"

The Reverend's lips quivered, fighting him on the words to say. He must protect his flock. "Sir, I apologize, but those funds are for the church, the hands and feet of Christ. Though if you asked the good folks here, they may be willing to—"

An ear-splitting crack, and a bullet whizzed past his head. Through the ringing, the Reverend heard the wooden crucifix crafted by dear Miss Annie splinter feet behind him. "The church is a scam, Reverend. Here you are, claiming to care for the people, and yet you hoard their money for yourself. As far as I see it, that money ain't belong to you anyways. What does God need it for?"

The bandit aimed the barrel of the gun straight into the Reverend's chest. "He ain't gonna buy himself these fancy clothes you've got on."

The Reverend's chest tightened as the hot steel from the barrel burned into his thin skin. Another man with a shotgun entered quickly, probably a member of the posse, ushering the rest of the congregation out. The Reverend never saw his face, only that he was dressed similarly.

Little Thomas' sobs pierced the silent Sunday afternoon. Miss Annie's skirt rode up as she hustled. Old William hadn't moved. "I will not allow thieves in my church, sir."

"And yet Jesus sat with the sinners, didn't he?" The man pushed the barrel into his chest, searing him, jettisoning him from his perch at the front of the chapel. The smell of burnt cloth stained his nose. "You'll take Silas MacCoy to that damn tithe box, now, preacher, or I'll send you to meet that Jesus a lot sooner than you'd like."

The Reverend's eyes never left Silas MacCoy's as he kneeled, aching knees creaking with the rafters. His trembling hands lifted the small rug up from underneath the pulpit, revealing a lockbox. At the suggestion of another bullet, he dug said key out from his breast pocket and unlocked the box. Twenty yellowed dollars and a pile of dust. "Here it is, Mr. Saul. All there."

"That's it?" Quickly, Silas MacCoy's free gloved hand shot in and retrieved the crinkled papers and rusted coins, stashing them roughly in a knapsack. The gun returned to the Reverend's chest, eliciting a sharp inhale. "You must be getting senile, old man. I told you, the name's Silas. Silas. Now where's the rest of the money?"

"There is no more. That's it, Mr. Saul."

The Reverend felt his throat tighten, and he lifted from the floor. Silas MacCoy had grabbed him by his neck. How could such a thin man be so strong? His knees scraped against the wooden floorboards, catching imperfections in the oak and tearing his pant legs open. He gulped for air like water and clutched at his assailant's wrists in a vain attempt to find freedom, but found neither oxygen nor a chance to escape. His weak, desperate moans for help were drowned out by grunts as he was pulled towards the doorway. The sky was white.

Once outside, Silas MacCoy threw him to the dirt next to old William. A puff



of orange dust clouded his vision. Gasping for air, the Reverend choked on his own breathing. His arms burned, and he could not feel his knees. He had to escape. God, please let me escape. Looking up, only the dark silhouette of Silas MacCoy was visible. "Mr. Saul, please."

"It's Silas, got-dammit." A hot flash of pain split the Reverend's face as Silas MacCoy brought the butt of the pistol down. Though his vision was clouded and his forehead throbbed, the Reverend blinked a few times through the clearing dust. He glanced around as quickly as the aching joints in his neck allowed. No Miss Annie, no Missus Redd. No little Thomas or his father. They were all safe. A relieved sigh escaped his heaving lungs.

"Thank the Lord for this day."

The sky grew dark, and he was filled with a peace he could not place. A cool breeze caressed his wrinkled face. The dust underneath his head felt shockingly soft, like a fine feather pillow. He exhaled. A broad smile dug at the corners of his mouth. He could no longer feel his knees or hands, so he raised his eyes towards the One Most High. The face of Silas MacCoy and the other man faded into obscurity. Behind them, he could see through to the back of the church, where Miss Annie's crucifix still hung on the wall. Distant thunder rolled.

One final time, the Reverend met the barrel of Silas MacCoy. He did not shrink away. He could not feel the intense burn of the gun-steel against his exposed neck. His yellowed eyes met the darkened ones of his neighbor, his brother. Silas MacCoy said nothing.

The gunslinger's finger hovered over the trigger. The Reverend could see it wavering, jittering in the hot summer air. A single drop of water tapped his crown—a light comforting touch from the Almighty. The Reverend offered a small, truthful smile. "It appears my ministry is done earlier than I thought it'd be. I have fought a good fight. I have finished this course. I have kept the faith."

Silas MacCoy's finger faltered, falling from the trigger. The Reverend did not notice his own hand come to rest on the man's wrist, just behind the butt of the pistol. He took one deep breath, and the skies opened up. Light rain drizzled the three men, mixing with the blood running down the Reverend's face from the new wound on his forehead. His voice was still and small. "There is still time. All who sin are born anew by the blood."

Silas MacCoy's lower lip quivered. His eyes were pained, and they darted from side to side. He was looking for something that the Reverend couldn't quite place. He hoped that he would find whatever it was someday. Rain poured like wine from the sides of his hat onto the new mud around them. The Reverend exhaled, softly smiled one last time, and closed his eyes.

"Grace be with you, Paul." Silas MacCoy pulled the trigger.

THE COLORS HELEN GIEFER

senior | animal sciences and industry

Author's Preface

A hopeless young girl, Abigail Martins, changes her outlook on life, and it in turn changes her. Follow her journey as she travels through the seasons, meeting interesting characters who each carry a burden of their own.

Colors associated with each of the four seasons signify various moods and experiences encountered in real life. At first, the reader is led to believe it is Abigail going through these "seasons"; however, in the end, it is discovered that it is instead Abigail's caretaker, Martha, whose perspective changes along with the changing seasons.

Keywords: Sophomore, Seasons, Bicycle, Highschool, Friendship

Introduction

Look at the colors, the colors,
the colors! Yes,
Look at the colors that the
seasons bring
They're constantly changing, they're
changing, they're changing
They're constantly changing, just
like you and me



The high school auditorium seemed to burst with applause as the last note of the last song resonated in beautiful harmony. The choir members bowed in unison and exited the stage before heading to the back of the school where a crowd would soon be swarming with pens and paper at the ready, hoping to get as many autographs as possible. When a well-known musical group performs in a small town, it seems as if each and every person, whether musical aficionado or not, shows up - and this particular event did not disappoint.

Walking home after the conclusion, thirty-two year old Martha Hendrickson sighed pleasantly as the noise died down behind. "It's so wonderful that such a great group would come to a town like this. I always feel that it shows something about the people. You know, they could've been greeted in any number of big cities, so why would they come to a place as small as this?"

Abigail Martins shrugged. "They must've thought it would be profitable somehow. Most people aren't thinking about the good of their fellow man. They'd rather make another dollar, even if it means hurting someone else."

"I don't believe that," replied Martha. "I have to think most people are naturally programmed to be good. Selfishness is something that's learned in life."

"Hmph," was all that came as a reply. Abigail dearly loved her caretaker, who really must have been "naturally programmed to be good." However, she found Martha's unfailing trust in the goodness of mankind to be a delusional way of thinking.

Changing the subject, Martha said, "Well, what did you think of that last song? The one about the colors, I mean. Pretty applicable to life, huh?"

"Yeah, only I'm in a perpetual autumn, I'm afraid," was the negative response.

"Oh, don't say that! All people have some autumn in their lives, some more than others I suppose, but they have all the other seasons, too. Just think of all the blessings in your life. There are so many more than you give credit for!" "Hmph."

With that, the conversation came to an end, and the two walked the last four blocks in silence, no doubt Martha thinking about the beauty in her life and Abigail dwelling on the misfortunes in her own. Only once the door was shut and the coats hung up were words exchanged again.

"Last day of sophomore year for you tomorrow, Abigail! Isn't that exciting? Next time you walk into that school, you'll be an upperclassman!"

"You mean if I do walk in again. You can't be sure, you know."

"The more confident you are in it, the more likely it is to happen. Now, come on, off to bed, and make yourself excited for the last day. Who knows, you might surprise yourself."

Spring

The spring is for new life and love and great beauty

The spring is a symbol of a brand new day

The spring is the blooming of fushia and ruby

The colors of spring always brighten our way

Abigail woke up to the sunlight peeking into her room. She jumped up and looked out her window to see a robin dancing along on the ground trying to find a prize worm to take back to her nest. Two squirrels chased each other around the big maple tree in the front yard. Birds could be heard chirping throughout the town, and a light breeze tousled the tops of the trees. If you looked closely, you may



have noticed what appeared to be a smile creeping across the pale face. Spring was presenting itself in full force today, as if nature understood that today would mark the beginning of a much-needed break from school that would be filled with fun activities.

The smell of pancakes wafted to Abigail's nose, waking her from her little reverie, and she was soon trotting down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Blueberry pancakes! My favorite!" she exclaimed, as she squeezed Martha in a tight bear hug before settling down in her chair. Martha laughed that sweet, lovely laugh of hers and replied,

"Yes! Eat up. A good breakfast is just the thing to start off a good day."

Breakfast eaten and lunch and books packed, Abigail kissed Martha on the cheek before trotting off to school in a much better mood than was typical of her sullen self.

A much less jubilant soul was the one that came back home that afternoon. Abigail closed the door behind her then looked up, her guilty eyes meeting the troubled ones of her caretaker.

"I suppose you've heard?" was all she could say.

"Yes, I just got off of the phone with the principal. Abby, how could you? Your last day! Why did you have to go and make such a fuss?" The look of remorse on Abigail's face turned into an indignant one as she retorted,

"That Judith Keens has caused me trouble all along! I don't know why she hates me so much. I never did anything to her!"

"Did you?" Martha replied. Abigail looked as though she was about to say something but couldn't find the right words. Instead, she shrugged, and muttered, "I'm sorry" before turning around to ascend the stairs to her room.

To those who knew her, Martha seemed to be a confident, invincible woman. Even Abigail, who knew her best, would have agreed that this was the case. However, Martha took things very personally, and whenever Abigail struggled with anything, she blamed herself for having failed her ward. This was not the first time Abigail had clashed with Judith Keens. At first, Martha had believed that Judith must be a bully, but as the pieces of the puzzle began coming together, she realized that it was more likely Abigail who had sparked the problems. Martha knew Abigail had a big heart and was capable of showing her love for others, but because of a doctor's diagnosis, she was trying her hardest to avoid letting anyone become attached to her. She had shut out everyone from her life. Everyone, that is, except Martha.

Abigail heard footsteps coming up the stairs towards her bedroom. She knew Martha must be coming in to give her a "talking to". These were conversations she dreaded. Other kids at school talked about how their parents would yell and curse at them. If only Martha would do that! Instead, she always sounded so disappointed that Abigail felt like she must be lower than dirt to hurt the feelings of such a good, kind soul.

She was prepared for the worst when Martha appeared, holding something in her hand.

"What's that?" Abigail asked. Martha smiled and handed her a small card. On it were the words "It's not about how much you do but how much love you put into what you do that counts" set around a photograph of Saint Teresa of Calcutta.

"Take these words to heart. They'll do you good," said Martha. Abigail didn't appear to be overly enthused, but she nodded and placed the card in the pocket of her jacket. Martha continued,

"You can do so much more than you think you can. Go make a difference! Every day is a new opportunity to do some good in the world."

"That's easy enough for you to say, but I don't have as much time as you or anyone else to actually accomplish anything significant," came the typically negative response.

"For one, you don't know that. You may live to be ninety, and I might die tomorrow. As for accomplishing something significant, don't think about it in that way. Just bringing a smile to someone's face is a way to make a difference. It doesn't have to be something big, but small things often lead to big things."

"Hmph." An extended silence followed until Martha's voice broke in.

"Anyway, you can think about it while you're taking some soup to Mrs. Mason."

"Oh no, please! Don't let that old witch spoil my day any more than it already is. Anything but that. *Please!*"

"She's really not that bad, you know. All I ask is that you take her the soup, and you can come right back home after that if you like. But please try to be pleasant with her."

Abigail groaned and muttered something under her breath before begrudgingly obeying and stomping down the stairs. A small tub of soup sat on the kitchen table, and Abigail picked it up on her way by without stopping. She trudged out the door and headed down the street, feeling sorry for herself and wondering how a day she thought was about as bad as it could get could become even worse.

Mrs. Mason's house was nearly a mile away, and the walk gave Abigail time to think. At first, her thoughts were very negative, but a stroll on a beautiful spring day never fails to bring some gladness into a heart. By the time she was nearing her destination, Abigail was again thinking happy thoughts and feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. The feeling lasted until she knocked on the door of the dilapidated little one-room house that scarcely could be called a home. From the inside came a grouchy old voice asking her to come in.

Funny how one little moment can cause a total change of heart. Abigail rolled her eyes and opened the door.

"Please, child! Don't open that door so wide. You know my old eyes can't take it," Mrs. Mason exclaimed.

"I'm sorry," was the response, though it's doubtful that the words expressed their true meaning. Mrs. Mason sat, as usual, in her wheelchair. Abigail had never seen her anywhere except in her wheelchair, which could be reclined for sleeping and then brought back up to a sitting position. She set the soup on the stand by the chair, went over to the drawer by the sink, and produced a spoon, which she set by the soup. Then, she turned around and was about to head out the door when Mrs. Mason's voice stopped her.

"My goodness it's been a little while since I've been able to do dishes. It would be so nice if someone could help me out." Abigail knew that Mrs. Mason hadn't done her own dishes in a long time. She seemed to rely wholeheartedly on other people doing everything for her. As for "helping her out", this certainly meant that Abigail was expected to do dishes while Mrs. Mason sat there talking about her bad back, her poor head, her sore feet, and so on. Whatever problem she could come up with would be discussed . . . and by discussed, I mean Mrs. Mason would speak and Abigail would listen. And not willingly, at that.

Indeed, Mrs. Mason didn't disappoint and went through her list of ailments while Abigail scrubbed away at a week's worth of dirty dishes. Which, fortunately enough, was not much for the old woman. When finished, an exasperated Abigail turned around and blurted out,

"There! It's done, and I'm getting out of here. Since I don't have much more time to live, I may never see you again, and I can assure you I don't regret it. Now I'm going to tell you just what I think about you because it's likely no one else ever has. I think you're a miserable old woman who believes that people flock to you because they truly want to help you. Well, it's wrong. We only help you because it's apparently the right thing to do, though I don't think it actually is. There are plenty of other old ladies who are kind and considerate and in much worse shape than you who actually go to the effort to take care of themselves and their houses. There, I've said it, so with that, good-bye!"

As she was stomping out of the little house, the angry words were spewing behind her like lava.

"Well, I never! Of all the impertinent . . . when I was growing up, children were to be seen and not heard. You go right back home, little missy, and . . . you're just going to stomp off like that, are you?" But Abigail wasn't listening, and as she violently turned the door knob to exit, something came flying out of her jacket pocket. She bent over and picked it up,

then pausing, reflected on the words a moment before calmly turning to face the old woman.

"I'm sorry I said those nasty things, Mrs. Mason. I've let my temper get the better of me all too often, and I know it hurts poor Martha's good name."

"Humph!" Mrs. Mason turned her head away with her nose high in the air and remained in this position as if ignoring Abigail would teach her a lesson.

"Mrs. Mason, how long have you been in that wheelchair?" Mrs. Mason turned her head back to address her guest.

"Sixteen years. Not that it's any of your business." The head returned to its stuck up position.

"And how long has it been since you've been outside?"

"Longer than you've been around, I should say." This time, the head stubbornly stayed in its place without even turning to acknowledge Abigail, who pondered Mrs. Mason's words for a minute and couldn't help but feeling a little sorry for the old woman. Then, she proclaimed,

"Mrs. Mason, you're going to hate me for this now, but you'll thank me later!" And without giving the surprised woman a chance to respond, she flung open the door and headed for the windows.

"No, no!" shrieked Mrs. Mason.
"My eyes! My eyes! Oh, my head, it hurts already! What are you doing, child?" But Abigail didn't listen and instead, after drawing the curtains away from every

window, started heading for the chair. Mrs. Mason's eyes became very wide with the terrifying realization of what was coming next.

"Now, child," she begged in a quieter, pleading voice, "don't you think you've done enough? You know you don't . . . don't you dare!" The last words roared out in an agitated tone, but Abigail didn't heed them and instead grabbed the handles on the back of the wheelchair and broke into a trot as she wheeled Mrs. Mason to the door and out into the lovely spring day, the old woman moaning and crying out all the way.

Not knowing what to say and a slightly out of breath, Abigail pushed the wheelchair in silence, and Mrs. Mason only groaned and covered her eyes. They were headed for the city park, where neat rows of daffodils and irises burst with color along the pathway, and blooming plum and pear trees added to the display. The sweet smell of lilacs greeted their noses, and Mrs. Mason even forgot to moan for a moment as the aroma settled in around them.

The odd-looking duo made one loop around the park, and on the latter half, Abigail thought she saw Mrs. Mason part her fingers just a little. No doubt it would be nearly impossible for any human being to resist gazing at the beautiful view that met her eyes now.

The trip took about fifteen minutes, and it was only when Mrs. Mason was

established back in the place that she had probably not left for sixteen years that she spoke again.

"If I'm dead tomorrow, I guess you'll be to blame for it." But there was a slight change in the woman's voice that sounded . . . could you say, almost a little pleasant? Abigail was sure she noticed it, and replied,

"If I cause someone to die of some much-needed spring fever, I'd be glad of it. Anyway, I'm leaving all of your window curtains drawn, and the only way you can change that is if you go close them yourself." And with that, she left the woman to feel sorry for herself. Or perhaps, she was feeling less sorry for herself than usual because a little light had finally come into her dingy world.

On the walk home, Abigail was amusing herself with the thought of seeing old Mrs. Mason being rolled along in the sunshine of the outdoors when she looked up to see Judith Keens coming her way. Judith saw Abigail at the same moment, and moved as far to the other side of the sidewalk as she could to pass her. Abigail began moving as far to her side as she could and shoved her hands in her pockets. Upon doing this, a hand ran into the card, and she was reminded of its words and Martha's words to "make a difference". She sighed, hesitated a moment, then called out,

"Judith!" Judith, surprised, stopped and looked at Abigail. Abigail continued, "I'm really sorry about today. I truly do want to be your friend, and I hope it's not too late. I've been so hateful to you, but I didn't mean to be. Would you be good enough to give me one more chance?" Judith's face softened for just a moment, then, as she seemed to recall the events earlier that day, became angry.

"Abigail Martins, I tried and tried to be your friend. I was never sent to the principal's office until I knew you, and every time I tried to be nice to you, I somehow wound up there. The other girls were smart and just didn't try to talk to you, but I thought I could truly see some good in you and for some crazy reason thought I could bring it out. Turns out I was wrong. You've only shut people out your whole life, and I'm not going to be stupid enough to fall for your tricks again." She paused for a moment, looking a little remorseful for having said anything so awful but also a little proud that the words she had so long wanted to say finally made their way out of her mouth. She spun on her heel and briskly walked off in the opposite direction. Abigail only stood there and watched her until she disappeared over a hill. She knew what Judith had said was true. Whenever people tried to be kind to her, she acted as if they were mocking her and let herself lose her temper. Then, the poor person, whoever he or she may be, would try to explain that that's not what he intended at all, but the interaction would always turn ugly, and Abigail practically had her name written on the chair in the principal's office that she had so often occupied.

This feeling of guilt lasted for only a moment before her stubborn pride returned to her. She said aloud,

"Well, I'm not going to be stupid enough to try to be friends with you either, Judith Keens." Realization struck that she had not checked to see if anyone was there to see her make this comment to the spring air, but a bashful look around proved that she was, indeed, alone, and she continued on her way home.

Thoughts of her encounter with Judith were still playing with her mind when Abigail walked into her house and was startled by Martha's voice.

"Well, you were gone a while. Go by way of the North Pole?" A mischievous look came across Abigail's face as she recounted every detail of her visit to Mrs. Mason. Martha listened intently, an amused smile breaking over her face. When Abigail finished, Martha laughed heartily and responded,

"That's just what that poor old soul needs - some fresh air! I bet she's secretly going over every second of that ride in her mind, delighted to have done something exciting for the first time in ages. It looks like it has done you some good, too." It was true a little color could be seen peeping through the pale cheeks and a spark showed in the eyes that usually appeared so dull and sad.

"I guess a jaunt through the park was just what I needed today," Abigail replied, feeling oddly happy and jubilant even after all of the unfortunate happenings of the day. She didn't mention her confrontation with Judith. Why let something like that ruin her day that was just starting to take a turn for the better? Instead, she and Martha went on a walk, chattering constantly and enjoying the fresh spring air.

The following Sunday, Abigail left bright and early for church. She had been chosen to be the third grade assistant teacher for Bible school, and she had been looking forward to this task now for weeks. Though clearly lacking in her ability to get along with her peers, she seemed to have a knack with younger children and always enjoyed spending time with them.

Mrs. Peters, the head teacher, handed her some books upon her arrival, and Abigail surveyed the row of eager little faces to find an opening where she could sit. A boy whom she knew a little from church was seated by himself, far from the group, and seemed to be sobbing. Her heart twinged to see the little figure looking so gloomy, and Abigail went over to where he was and sat next to him.

"Hi, Johnny. Are you alright?" she queried. Johnny looked up at her through a teary face and only nodded. Abigail tried harder to get him to say what the trouble was, but he still wouldn't say a

word, so she settled into place next to him and remained there while the lesson was delivered.

The Bible reading was taken from John 9: 1-12. In it, Jesus cured the man who had been blind from birth. When Mrs. Peters finished reading, she asked the children to write down the five senses and why they were grateful for each. Abigail made her way around the room, helping the children who asked for help and reading what others had written. When she made her way back to Johnny, he sat with his head in his hands, pencil still on the table and nothing written on his paper.

"Maybe if you start thinking of the things you're grateful for, you'll feel better," Abigail said, soothingly. Johnny grumbled,

"I'm not grateful for anything. Jesus isn't going to help me like he helped the blind man."

"Why don't you think so?"

"Because I'm not blind from birth, I'm just becoming blind."

"What? What do you mean?" Abigail implored.

"The doctor says I have some retina pig disease and I'll be blind in a few months." There was a long pause as Abigail pondered on what the poor young boy had said. Then she replied,

"Do you mean retinitis pigmentosa?"

"Yes, that's the one. It's terrible. It's almost as bad as if Doc said I'd be dead

in a year." Realizing what he had just said and to whom he had said it, the little boy quickly looked up into Abigail's eyes and said apologetically,

"I'm so sorry! I forgot . . ."

"It's alright." Abigail smiled and put her arm around the boy's shoulders. She continued,

"But you'll still have four senses, and it will make them all the more special. What do you want to be when you grow up?" The little boy sunk back down with despair.

"A concert pianist," he grunted. "But not now."

"Why not?" asked Abigail. "There have been many blind pianists. I've read about them. Some of them are much better than sighted pianists because they can focus totally on the sound of the music, and their eyes don't get in the way."

"Really?" Johnny sat up straight again. "You mean, I might be even better than I already am?"

"Certainly! Why, you'll be the best pianist in the state if you put your mind to it and work hard."

If only everyone had the faith of a child! When a young child is told something that gives him hope, especially from a high schooler, his outlook will change in an instant. Johnny's gloominess turned into a sincere excitement at once, and he began jotting things down on his paper. When it came his turn to present what he wrote, he jumped up and proclaimed,

"I'm thankful for my four senses because . . ."

"You mean five senses, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Peters.

"No, I mean four. I'm gonna be blind soon, but I'm gonna have better ears than anyone else in the world! And prob'ly better smell, taste, and touch, too. Wait and see!"

Thinking about the little boy's excitement at being able to still play the piano, Abigail smiled despite herself on the walk home after church, where Martha had come to join her. Noticing this unusu-

al display of pleasure, Martha asked,

"Did I miss something?" Abigail recounted Bible school and how Johnny's attitude had changed so quickly with the development of new possibilities in his life.

"The poor child," Martha sighed.
"I sure hope he keeps up his excitement.
That's a lot for a little boy to have to take
in. In a few years, his friends will be playing sports and games and he won't be able
to participate. But, of course, this life isn't
everything, and I hope he sees that it's just
a preparation for what is to come."



Spring was quickly coming to a close, and Abigail was taking a walk on a sidewalk lined with tulips that were producing their last blooms before retiring for another year. She was lost in thought and stepped into the street to cross to the other side when a startled yell awoke her from her daydream, and she looked to her left to see a bicyclist hurtling down the hill toward her. Knowing she didn't have time to get out of the way, she ducked and closed her eyes, and the bicyclist swerved so hard and quickly that he was thrown from the seat and landed in a heap on the street. Abigail rushed to his side and burst out,

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" The man rubbed his right knee and slowly got to his feet. He looked over at his bike, which had lost the seat in the crash and was bent up beyond repair. Then he turned to face Abigail.

"Now look what you've done! I paid three hundred dollars for that bike. Of course this has to happen right after I get fired from my job. My life could not possibly be any worse than it is at this very moment."

"I'll replace the bike for you," Abigail meekly responded, "and as for losing your job, I've found there's a reason for everything. It'll turn out all right, I'm sure of it!"

"You Bible thumpers," the man retorted. "You're all alike. Pray, you say. God's looking out for you, you say. Well, I quit going to church twelve years ago because God wasn't doing anything for me."

"And has your life improved much since then?" countered the girl.

"Does it look like it?" the man bitterly replied. "Anyway, leave me alone. It's bad enough that you cause me to crash, but then you have to start preaching to me."

"I wasn't preaching," Abigail reacted, angrily shoving her hands into her pockets as she spoke. They ran into a little card, and Abigail was again reminded of its words. Darn that thing, she thought. I don't feel like being pleasant to this person at this moment. But, she took a deep breath and followed the man, who limped toward his broken-down bike.

"Give God a chance in your life," she said gently. "You may be surprised. In fact, I think you will be. He's always looking out for you, and He wants to come back into your life more than anything." The man only scowled at her, turned away, and started limping home, dragging the defective bicycle along with him. Abigail called out,

"Wait! What's your name? I need to get you a new bike!"

"Forget it," came the aggravated response, and the man didn't even turn around to look back. Abigail watched him go and let out a long breath. She pulled the card from her pocket and gazed at it a moment, then said aloud,

"Why does something that seems so simple have to be so hard?" Mother Teresa's image just smiled back at her as if to encourage her to keep trying. She returned the card to her pocket and turned around to go home. Just then, she caught sight of Judith Keens coming down the sidewalk. It was the first time she'd seen Judith since the encounter on the way back from Mrs. Mason's. As they neared each other, Abigail smiled politely, nodded, and prepared to walk on by. Judith was the one who spoke this time.

"Abigail, I've been thinking things over. I was wrong to be so mean to you a few weeks ago, but I was just so flustered. If you really mean what you said about wanting to be friends, I'd be glad to take you up on that. You know I've always wanted to be your friend, it's just that you never let me." A smile that a few weeks ago would have been expected to break the face of the despondent Abigail now came out in full force as she eagerly took the hand of the other girl.

"Judith, I do want to be your friend! Don't worry about a few weeks ago - I had it coming to me for so long. I know I was terrible to you and everyone else. But I'm trying to become a better person for Martha's sake, and it would be my greatest honor to make it up with you!" Judith smiled sweetly and squeezed Abigail's hand. Then, they turned and walked together, babbling non-stop to

catch up on all of the things they should have discussed over the past years as friends.

When they arrived at Abigail's house, they embraced in a hug, promised to meet up again tomorrow, and headed their separate ways.

Abigail burst in the door and announced to Martha, who was tidying up the kitchen,

"I have great news!"

"So do I," Martha replied, a look of excitement on her face. "But you first." Abigail gave a recap of what happened with Judith, and Martha looked so pleased that Abigail felt her heart swell up inside of her.

"That's so wonderful!" Martha exclaimed when Abigail had finished. "You two were made to be the best of friends; I've always been sure of that. Now for my good news. The doctor called me with results from your visit last week and said he'd never seen your condition in such fine shape. He said you'll probably just need one more regular visit, then you'll only have to see him twice per year!" Abigail gasped.

"Really? Oh, I'm so glad! This day just keeps getting better." The two chattered on for hours, and Martha couldn't help but smile when she thought about the improvement from the unenergetic, uninterested Abigail of only one month ago.

Summer

The summer is happiness,
good times, and glory
The summer represents the
times when we thrive
The summer's green means there is
strength and there's growing
The colors of summer are bright
and alive

It was two weeks after the flower buds of spring had all receded, and the green leaves and grass of summer were peeping out from every corner of the town when Abigail again went to see Mrs. Mason.

Since her encounter with Judith several weeks before, a day hadn't passed where the girls didn't spend time with each other, and a firm friendship had been established between the two. Abigail waited by the window, and when she saw Judith's figure come trotting up the sidewalk, she emerged from the house and ran to her friend.

"I'm so glad you agreed to come with me today! I'm afraid last time I saw Mrs. Mason I didn't leave her thinking too highly of me. In fact, she probably wants to kill me, so you can act as my bodyguard."

"I will be glad to perform the duty," Judith replied, "and if the woman proves to be dangerous, I shall engage her in combat and give my own life so that you may escape." They both laughed at the joke and headed down the sidewalk.

When they arrived, to Abigail's utter astonishment, the curtains were drawn from the windows, and light poured into the little room. She burst in, and without so much as a "hello", exclaimed,



"Mrs. Mason! The curtains! They're open!" The woman broke out into a smile. An extremely astonished Abigail listened as the woman reported,

"I'll admit I was very angry after you left last time. I immediately wheeled over to close those curtains, but when I got there, I realized I couldn't reach high enough to do it, and the only way I'd be able to accomplish it was to get out of this chair. My goodness, child, I haven't stood for over sixteen years, and I knew I couldn't do it, so I decided I would have to wait until Mrs. Shenson came in the morning to bring me my breakfast. But she was later than usual, and it gave me time to see the morning. I hadn't seen the sunrise in so long I'd forgotten how beautiful it was. Then a little robin started hopping along on the windowsill, and - you may not believe this, child, and I don't blame you - but I laughed! I thought I'd forgotten how to laugh! When Mrs. Shenson came in, she looked horrified and raced over to close the curtains, but I begged her to leave them open for me. Can you imagine? That poor dear was so surprised I thought she was going to fall through the floor right then and there. But she did as I told her and left them open, and I haven't closed them since. I daresay I've been feeling better every day."

"I...I don't know what to say. I'm so pleased! I didn't think you'd appreciate it very much. I..." "I know you didn't," interrupted the strangely joyous woman, "and I didn't at first. But it didn't take me long to realize how much I needed it." Abigail was bewildered by this new development. Judith, who had been silent to this point, proclaimed,

"About those curtains, Mrs. Mason. I can help you stand again so that if you ever do have a reason to close them, you'll be able to!"

"Hold your horses, my dear!" Mrs. Mason laughed. "One miracle at a time! I doubt I'll ever rise from this chair again. I don't mind so much now, though." The girls begged for Mrs. Mason to at least let them try, but the old woman would have none of it. She did, however, ask for another stroll through the park, a wish that was readily granted, and the three were soon making their way on the same path as before, but this time the situation was much changed. Mrs. Mason's eyes were wide open, taking in the beauty of the summer day, and instead of silence, the stroll was filled with chatter. Mrs. Mason asked the girls about school and activities they were doing, and she herself spoke of the "good old days" and went on and on about things she did as a young girl. To Abigail's surprise, the old woman was not a dull conversationalist at all, and she listened with rapture to the stories the good woman told. They were a little saddened when they returned to the house and Abigail and Judith had to leave, but

Mrs. Mason made them promise to come back again soon, which both girls eagerly agreed to do.

A doctor's visit the weekend after the surprise at Mrs. Mason's house prevented Martha and Abigail from attending their community church, as the nearest hospital that could help Abigail was all of three hours away from the little town. But the next weekend, Martha and Abigail were seated in their usual pew, Martha listening intently to the sermon and Abigail's mind wandering as usual. Father Timothy was a very nice man, but his sermons tended to stray from the topic, and it seemed as if he could go on forever stringing together topics that didn't necessarily relate to anything important. Without a doubt, Abigail was not the only one who failed to devote her attention to the drawn out sermon.

Her eyes were running along the pews, surveying for abnormalities. The Bennett family was seated further right than they typically were. It looked like Grace Gossel had a cold again. Mr. Long, who was colorblind, wore a bright red shirt with brownish-green pants and navy blue shoes. Then something caught her eye. A family she hadn't seen before - a couple with three young boys. Suddenly, she gasped. Could it be? No. But it almost looked like . . .

She waited impatiently for communion, where she knew she'd be able to get a better look. Sure enough, it was the man who had crashed his bicycle! Their

eyes met, and he gave her a big smile. She returned it and sat, dumbfounded, until the end of the service, and the last note of the closing hymn had scarcely concluded before she dashed out of her pew toward the man, who was already walking toward her. He spoke first.

"I guess you're probably a little surprised to see me again."

"That's putting it mildly! What happened?"

"Well, after I got home that day I saw you, I went straight in and sat down in my chair like I always do. There's a bookshelf on the other end of the room that I've looked at a thousand times, but for some reason, my eyes fell right on the Bible on the top shelf. I hadn't touched that book in years, but I thought maybe I should just give it one more chance. I could barely reach it, and when I tried to pull it down, it slipped from my hand and fell on the floor. That made me even more angry than I already was, but when I stooped down to pick it up, I saw that it had opened to Job. I started reading it right there and didn't stop until I finished the entire book of Job - it's one of the shorter ones, you know, but it was still long enough that I was sitting there on the floor for quite some time, and I'm sure it looked a little ridiculous. Anyway, I finished and just sat there for a long time, and it hit me that I'm not the only one in the world who's had a hard time of it. I felt so guilty for acting the way I had -

not only to you, but to everyone. I'd been hurting my family, friends, and . . . well . . . everyone for so long. Last weekend, I took my family to church for the first time in twelve years. I was feeling so much better about everything in my life, and just after I got home, the phone rang, and it was a call from my old boss saying he had a new opening and wondered if I would be interested in taking my job back."

"That's wonderful!" Abigail exclaimed. "I'm so happy for you and your family! I guess I'll be seeing you around more now, then?"

"I would expect so. Thank you so much. You've done more than you know." With that, he turned toward his family, and they walked out together.

Autumn

The autumn is sadness and darkness and mourning
The autumn's for times when we struggle and fall
The autumn time's darkening, fading, and browning
Bring colors for bad times that must come to all

The leaves on the trees were turning all variations of bright reds and yellows, and Abigail and Judith found themselves walking through the halls of high school once more, this time as upperclassmen. Abigail made friends with a lot of the other girls and even a few boys, all who were extremely surprised at the



change in the girl they had known as a troublemaker. No matter who she became friends with, though, Judith was always her closest, and the two rarely spent a minute apart. Each Tuesday and Friday afternoon, they would stroll through the park pushing along Mrs. Mason, who thoroughly enjoyed the girls' company as well as the bright colors of autumn. Everything seemed to be going so beautifully in their own little world.

As time drew on, the chilling winds of autumn grew stronger and began tossing the now dead leaves about the town. Abigail and Judith had no trouble finding indoor activities and every once in a while had to cancel their adventures with Mrs. Mason when the weather was particularly ugly.

On one such day, Abigail and Judith met up between classes at their lockers as usual. Abigail placed an envelope in Judith's hand.

"Here, take this. I can't explain exactly, but I have a strange feeling that's been bugging me for a while. Don't open it now, but I think you'll know when the time comes to do it."

"Okay?" Judith questioned. "But what . . ."

"We'd better get to class." They parted ways, and Judith tucked the envelope in her pocket and didn't pursue the incident further.

They walked home as usual, talking and laughing. Then they hugged, and Ju-

dith continued on her way home. Abigail stepped into the house, hung up her coat, then started heading up to her room when she stopped dead in her tracks. Martha sat on a chair, leaning against the wall, her face ashen white.

"Martha, are you sick? I'll call the doctor!" Abigail was rushing to the phone, heart pounding, when Martha's voice croaked,

"I just got off the phone with the doctor." Abigail slowly turned around with a sense of understanding. All she could say was, "Oh."

Martha turned her gaze toward the young girl and spoke in a tone Abigail had never heard before.

"I'm afraid, Abby. I've always . . . you've been . . ." Abigail rushed to her side.

"Remember what you've always told me. Don't run from your troubles. It will all turn out right. You've taught me so many wonderful things, and I could never be more grateful to you for that."

"And you've taught me so much," came the feeble response. "Growing up, I learned it's wrong to become attached to any Earthly thing. Now I know that's untrue. You've taught me what it is to love someone with all your heart. You're all I've ever had. Don't leave me, Abigail, don't . . ." Abigail threw her arms around her caretaker, and they remained there in a tight embrace for a very long time.

Winter

The winter is loyalty,
honesty, pureness
A sign of the good that's in
everyone's soul
The clearness of ice and the
pure white of snowflakes
Show promising futures for us,
one and all

A concert and a funeral have something in common. In a small town, everyone shows up. Especially when a young, lively member of the community is laid to rest. Among those with their heads bent silently in prayer were a young boy, nearly blind, who had found a new and better understanding of music because he now had one sense fully devoted to his passion; an old woman who at this very moment sat in a pew instead of a wheel-chair; a middle-aged man and his family, who this morning had stepped into a church for just the nineteenth time in who knows how long; a girl, clutching tightly to an envelope; and a young woman, tears streaming down her face for the first time since she was a child. All had been given new sight.



Judith quietly opened the envelope in her hand, and in it was a card depicting Saint Teresa of Calcutta. On the back was written, "Once I began carrying this, beautiful things started happening in my life. I hope that you will take the words to heart as I did. Go make a difference. Love, Abigail." Judith held the card tightly against her heart, and a tear rolled down her cheek. She forced a smile as she turned her eyes upward in the direction she knew her dear friend must now be.

Something caused Martha to suddenly lift her head. What it was, no one will ever know, but her eyes settled on the casket for a moment before moving over to the window, out of which the first feathery flakes could be seen leaving their white film on the leafless trees. A smile spread across the tear-stained face. Winter was here, bringing with it the promise of a bright new future.

As they Lay Dying

HALEY DULNIAWKA

senior | biochemistry

Author's Preface

As a surgical technician, I am part of a team that faces the risks of life and death in the OR. In this work, I explore the professional detachment that enables healthcare workers to distance themselves from the prospect of death. We relinquish our individuality when we die, our bones, bodies, and organs may outlive us but in anonymity. Organ donation may be taken as a beautification of death, leaving a silent, ongoing dialogue between the living, and deceased. By serving as organ donors, the dead have lasting power over the living.

Keywords: Medicine, Life, Death, Consciousness, Legacy

Everything was covered in a pale, sky blue. The stainless-steel instruments arranged neatly on the table, awaiting the operation. I stood next to it, triple-checking that everything was in order, memorizing the placement of each instrument. Neurosurgery is an awe-inspiring field, but it also can be terrifying. We put the patient to sleep, open them up, and change the structure of their brain. It is one of the most life-altering operations that can happen. We touch and manipulate the part of the body that makes someone who they are. What happens in that room, can alter the patient's life forever. Thinking this way can be overwhelming and a lot of responsibility lies on your shoulders, even if you're not the one who is operating. I was going over each step of the operation in my head when the patient rolled into the room. On each side of the bed was a team member. The room erupted into activity, with each individual ready to perform their responsibility. I waved hello to the patient as Kate, the circulating nurse introduced me. As Anesthesia prepared our patient for the procedure, Kate approached us, her smile concealed by her mask. She whispered that the patient's husband was the sweetest older man. "Take care of my girl," he said as they had wheeled her towards the OR doors, adding that they had been married for fifty years.

I "broke scrub", tearing the tie on my gown, rolling it up along with my

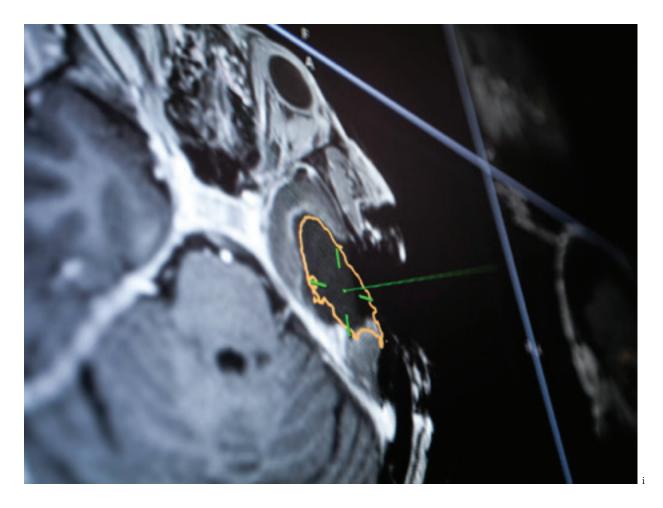
gloves, and stuffed it in the trash. The OR is a cold place. Patients look over to the back table and cringe, thinking that these instruments will inevitably be used on them. Some patients look into our eyes, hoping to make one last connection with their surgical team- often in the form of jokes, last-minute concerns, hopes, or the "tough-guy" act as if they have no cares in the world.

Distancing ourselves emotionally from the operation enables us to do our jobs. Our faces are covered in blue masks and hair in caps to maintain sterility in the OR, but it also puts up walls between "us", the operating staff, and our patients. To them, we are a sea of uniform blue doing a million things to prepare for the surgery. They watch as if the waves of the sea are crashing down around them, while they lie still. What looks chaotic to the outside world is purposeful here. When a break in the storm of surgical prep comes, we can take the time to console our patient. Although it may appear as if our jobs are the mechanical, monotonous steps of surgical personnel, we are real people who know that our performance impacts patient care.

It's not a room many people want to visit. Every member of the team tries to put the patient at ease before the procedure begins. The operating room feels freezing when all that protects the patient from exposure to the cold is a thin gown. I went to grab warm blankets from outside the OR, my small contribution to the patient's comfort. Everything was ready for intubation, the anesthesia provider announced, "Alright, everyone out!" This was a new step in the OR protocol- the evacuation of the room during intubation. To prevent any potential spreading of the coronavirus, everyone who was not wearing an N95 had to leave for some time, until anesthesia or a nurse declared that it was safe to re-enter.

Huddled outside the door, we held the remaining items we needed to start the surgery. Given the signal, we burst in and began putting the final touches on the room. The residents began placing the

patient's head in a device used to keep it completely stable during the procedure. Pre-operative images were confirmed, and they started skin prep. I went out to scrub. The scrub sinks get crowded when the residents are finished with their pre-op duties and I needed to be ready for them when they come in. I entered the room, my back pressing against the door so that my hands avoided the potential germs on any unsterile surface. I reached for my gown and put it on along with my gloves. As I was tying my gown, three neurosurgical residents came in one by one, their arms outstretched. awaiting their own surgical attire.

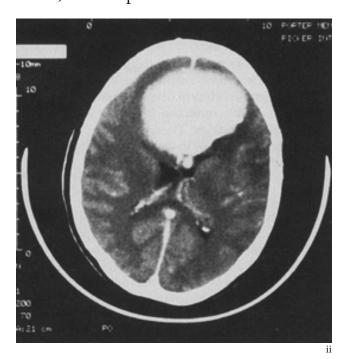


In school, they taught us why everything in the OR is blue. When we see a color frequently, our brain gets sensitized to it and we begin to ignore it altogether, focusing on the outliers that aren't blue. In this case, it becomes much easier to see body tissues. The surgeon can immediately see bleeding or tissue abnormalities because of a simple thing like the color of surgical drapes. I found it sort of ironic, being that we wouldn't likely see the blue sky for many hours, this was as close as we could get.

The patient was soon fully covered in the blue drapes and I pulled the tables closer for easy access during the operation. "Time out!", we stood still as our team roles, the patient's identity, and the operation- a Right, Frontal Craniotomywere all confirmed. The team of residents confirmed the placement of the tumor using a GPS-like imaging program. I watched as they mapped out the tumor, drawing lines across our patient's bare scalp. "Ten-blade", the surgeon ordered. And so, the operation began.

Cutting and scraping away at the tissue, the surgeon exposed the bone. Once more, the location was confirmed before drilling into the bone. When the craniotomy was complete, a section of the skull- the "bone flap"- was removed, the dura was opened, exposing the giant beast that stared back at us. Awe, responsibility, and privilege. These are the feelings you go through when staring at an exposed hu-

man brain. But now, looking at this invader, there comes an overwhelming ambition to take action. In came the microscope, it was time to resect this tumor piece by piece. At last, the surgeon finished the resection, moving the cancerous growth into the specimen container. Somehow, after staring at and destroying this tumor for several hours, it seemed smaller once it was in the specimen cup, defeated. The patient's brain however was noticeably altered. An unfillable hole remained. The surgeon beckoned me closer, offering each member of the team a peak. This resection left the anterior fossa completely exposed, something I had never seen before. I was awestruck that we could take so much tissue, and the patient could survive.



It feels wrong to start closing after witnessing the emptiness that remains inside our patient's head. This hole was once

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her frontal lobe. The part of her body that controlled higher level functioning, but it's not something we can replace. Instead of filling in the gaping hole, the instruments are removed, the microscope moved out, and the surgeon began closing the dura. Next came the bone flap, secured using titanium plates and screws. The muscle and skin were sutured, and dressings were placed. It was as if we were never there, in the depth of her brain, tunneling into her consciousness. But still, a pit remained.

It reminded me of a time when my training as a surgical technician was just beginning. I was learning the ropes and talking to the nurses about their favorite and least favorite operations. Several noted that organ donation procedures are their least favorite. I was sort of shocked, my first instinct was to think of the operation in terms of the benefits it would provide the recipient(s) and how fulfilling that must be. Yes, that is one aspect of the operation, but you also have to be prepared for the death of another person. In most medical environments, the objective of hospital staff is to do everything possible to keep the patient alive and healthy. But that's not possible during an organ procurement.

Many surgical operations are about taking something from the patient- a tumor, a pathological condition, or maybe an unwanted cosmetic appearance. In the case of our patient, we took away her tumor. But we also gave her back her freedom, perhaps a better quality of life, and peace

of mind. Maybe, in an organ donor operation, we are not simply taking each organ out for parts, leaving a pit, but we also give the donor something back as well.

Death is a word feared by many. I think most people fear this experience because, at that moment, they have to relinquish control. We no longer have a say over our physical bodies or the memory that we leave. At this moment, we surrender our individuality and become a distant memory even to the ones that love us the most. We join the masses of people who have died before us, resigning our identity, and become the anonymous forgotten figures.ⁱⁱⁱ Our bodies decay in the Earth, ashes are spread out in the wind. But our corpse no longer signifies who we are or the person that we were. When a person donates their organs, their tissues function with no indication of who they were, what they experienced, or what their life meant to this world. The heart keeps beating, unaware that it was once in another chest.

Simultaneously, organ donation gives someone else a second chance at life. This gift of life staves off the anonymous death of the organ donor. Many families of organ donors say that donation made the death of their loved ones mean something. iv The dead may gain power over the living by granting this gift when it is needed in the direst circumstances. We restore life to the dead by crediting them with the phenomenal courtesy of their gift.

There is a barrier that separates the sick from the well. Volumes that barrier is a mask and gown, or a pane of glass, or even the doors of the hospital. People who are sick can become enslaved to their illness. When an organ donor takes it upon themselves to share the gift of life, they may relieve some of this burden. The recipient is no longer alone in their suffering.

In some ways, fear has silenced conversations about death. In proper society, it's considered obscene or uncomfortable to talk about. The hidden, beautification of death remains the only aspect we allow into our lives. We await the "good death" in stories, in movies, and even in life. Even if a "good" death doesn't happen for us or the ones we love, donating organs to people in need makes it more meaningful. It assigns a purpose to dying. Donation may be taken as another example of how the beautification of death lives on in our society. Yes, someone died. And that's terrible and sad, but some good came out of it too which shouldn't be ignored.

Death leaves out the things unsaid. The things undone. It reminds friends and loved ones of all the what-ifs or should-haves. The inscriptions left on a stone marker linger on as the final words of the dead. A headstone is not enough. It's just a taste of the memory of the person you lost. It can't bring them back. It can't offer up any words of wisdom.

Donation continues the dialogue between the living and the dead. The memory of the deceased lives on. You can't get that final conversation with the one you lost, but sometimes, you can hear their heartbeat one last time or talk to the recipient of their organs. Establishing another connection in someone's life mayalthough not completely- bridge the gap, the hole that is left in their absence.

A certain detachment enables people to take on the experience of death up close. Distancing ourselves from the conversation with our loved ones, assuming an analytical perspective in the professional setting, or surrounding ourselves with team members- like in the surgical environment- allows us to continue on with our lives, even when faced with death. In the OR, you typically find a team trying to fight it off and give your patient a favorable outcome. In organ transplantation, the donor's family and OR staff have to come to terms with death. As a donor lies on the table dying, rather than helping the patient survive, and fulfilling the oath to "do no harm", the team has to put into perspective what the outcome of this operation will mean, for the recipient, for the donor's family, and for the legacy the donor leaves behind.

Endnotes

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Ashes to Dust

CHRISTOPHER WIDENOR

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Author's Preface

The story of a young man trying to bring honor to his family while struggling with the knowledge that he may not be the best man he could be.

Keywords: Japan, Mythology, Competition, Champion, Battle

The Trials of Creation have begun, and the fire clan, my clan, has chosen me as one of their representatives. It is a title that filled so many former champion's with pride, but it takes all that I can muster to stand up straight and not look like a fool in front of everyone.

The arena for our first trial is a massive dome made up of clay with gates on either side. The one we enter through is covered in moss and chipped at by both age and fingernails, while the one opposite is embroidered with lavish flower designs. Jagged rocks protrude out of the ground and walls with their shadows barely lit under the floating torchlight. Above it stands a massive throne room looking down on the arena. Dozens of smaller bleachers jut through the walls, dominated by earth clan people. They shout and jeer in a united attempt to bring us down before we even start the challenge. The area we are meant to fight in is massive. It's like I'm inside of an oven, and hundreds of people are waiting to turn it on and watch me bake.

Agni stands beside me along with our priestess, Suzumi. I grew up with them, but I would not call either of them friends. Agni's already taken the attention of the audience by flapping his arms up and around as if to say, "you all want a piece of this". If anyone was to be chosen as our champion, it would be him. His physique is intimidating, and complimented by his devilish orange irises, and

his powers are far above and beyond my own. Suzumi stands there unfazed by the roar of the crowd; her expression twisted in pretend interest like a mother at her child's play.

"Hey, Ash," Agni says. "How long do you think it'll take me to bury these dusty old pricks?"

"I-I told you to stop calling me that." I curse myself for stammering. Ash is an old nickname the other kids gave me because I was so much weaker than them. I've always hated the name. Ash is just a symbol that something once existed before it was burned to the ground.

"Yeah, yeah. I get that you're nervous but don't worry. Just stay out of my way, and we'll do just fine." He grins. "Throw some knives at someone, or whatever."

The crowd grows louder still, and that's our cue to bow. The throne and the clay wall behind it suddenly shift and turn, revealing another throne with a massive man dominating it. The king himself has graced us with his presence. From his audacious baggy green robe and black undershirt, I would think he's taking this event as seriously as a squirrel hunt. He waves a hand covered in stunning jewelry that sparkles in the dimly lit arena, greeting his people with a toothy smile that reminds me of a shark.

"Welcome, all. Welcome," his voice booms throughout the large arena. "Another year has come and gone, and it is time for the trials to begin. Before we as a people existed, there was nothing. Then from that nothingness came the four elements. Earth, fire, water, and air. The elements sought to control everything around them, and so they fought with each other. Until one day, from that conflict, man was born. As offspring of their

clash, we too possess the power to control the elements, and it is our duty to continue their conflict through the Trials of Creation. And so, it is my pleasure to host the first challengers," he motions air quotes as he says challengers, to which the audience chuckles. "the fire clan."

Suzumi steps forward.

"Thank you, your majesty.

Today, we of the fire clan offer up our greatest warriors in the hopes that at least one of them may overcome the odds here.

I-"

"Like that's ever going to happen," an audience member shouts. His comment is acknowledged with swaths of laughter from the rest of the crowd that echo into the arena and lodge themselves in my ears.

Suzumi's kimono becomes a shadow in front of me. The traditional colors warp and blacken into a dark mass of shame. "Our clan humbly challenges his majesty to a duel to prove which of our

representatives are strongest, and who will move to the next stage of the trials."

The king's rotund belly jostles under his lavish robe as he stands and leans over the edge of his scaffold. "We of the earth clan accept your challenge, Lady Phoenix," he says. "I must say, our champion is quite the prodigy this year. I might

even say he's the best earth bender in the entire clan."

"Champion," Agni scoffs. "Meaning just one?" I share his sentiment. The earth clan is so vast and populated that I can't imagine they only found one.

"That means either they're running out of strong manipulators, or they think they just need one," I say.

"Yeah, or they're just stupid." He stretches out his back. I can see his initially orange eyes have gone back to a cool blue, and I can't feel the heat radiating off him anymore.

The king swings his arm, and the doors beneath him

rumble and shake. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome your champion, Stonecrest." The crowd shouts and screams their approval as the doors slide open. The whole arena rumbles as if the planet itself were excited to greet our opponent. My legs wobble. Agni chuckles, presumably at me, but I don't dare to check. My eyes are glued to the widening opening in front of me.



From the light, a lone man appears. He's dressed in rags that are old and covered in so much dirt I could snap the cloth in half with a twitch of my finger. His physique, on the other hand, is like that of a sculpture. His whole body is rough with muscle, but his skin looks as smooth as Suzumi's. He waves to his fans with a smile and does the same for us when his eyes meet ours. Everything about him is so ironically gentle. I can't help but think of my brother for a moment. They share the same smile.

Suzumi turns to us and gives us each a yellow flag. "You each get a flag. Put it somewhere where he won't get it. If he does, you lose. I'll be standing by ready to heal you when it's over, so don't hold back." She looks at me with icy eyes. I feel my spine shiver. I know why she says it. I was never even meant to be here. And no matter how many times I swear I won't let them down; she never stops looking at me like that.

"Oh, don't give him that look, Suzumi," Agni says. "It's not like his brother would have made much of a difference. I'll take care of this little dirt boy myself."

"He's got nothing to do with this, so back off." I glare at him, but he just raises his eyebrows in his usual 'you sure showed me' look. The day our clan chose our champions, my brother hid away in our tiny tent. I remember seeing his pathetic frame, glistening with sweat that slid down his bony chest. I remember feel-

ing the urge to vanish before he walked up to me the day we left. He had told me "be the best man you can be, for everyone." I'm not sure what he meant, but I can't get his damn smile out of my head. It was so weak, like he knew I would lose. Like he was one to talk, having never succeeded at something in his life.

"I can do far more than my brother can."

"Just make sure you do it right." Suzumi turns around. I see the shadow on her back once more. I feel it yearning to consume me. The golden phoenix insignia stares at me with black eyes, daring me to go one step too far in the minutes to come. Then her back ignites with a pair of fiery wings before she takes off and settles in the stands far above and behind us.

"I-I won't let you down," I stammer. She either doesn't acknowledge it or doesn't hear it through the constant noise of the mob. The honor I felt mere moments ago is more like a brand burning the skin off my chest, reminding me that I'm special for all the wrong reasons.

Agni slaps my shoulder, and I see Stonecrest is approaching; his smile is casual and his raven black hair sways as he walks. He extends a hand to us. "I was hoping you would meet me halfway, but that's alright," he says. "I am very pleased to meet people of your clan. I sympathize with your plight greatly."

"I don't need your sympathy," Agni remarks. "As far as I'm concerned, we're enemies. Don't want or need to know anything about you beyond that."

His smile doesn't falter. "Well, that's a shame. I certainly hope your friend here doesn't feel the same way." I stare at him like I've gone into shock. "Maybe he'll find his voice at some point," he laughs. "Good luck to both of you!"

The moment he turns around, Agni's skin has already turned bright red. "You're really pissing me off, kid," he growls. Agni's fist connects with the back of his head. A cheap shot and the audience knows it by their gasps. Our opponent is sent flying across the ground before landing about fifteen feet away, standing up and turned to face us again. I can tell from the smoke coming up that his hair got singed, but he shows no other signs of harm. He stands there smiling at Agni.

Agni looks far stiffer. He's gotten into stance now, and his eyes are just as red now. The air in the arena starts to wave and shimmer. He's heating up. "Looks like I'll need you to back me up after all, Ash." That was all he could say before I see the earth beneath him burst.

Rocks and dust fly in all directions, leaving little cuts on my arms. The blast leaves me off balance, but that is the worst



of it for me. Agni tumbles directly in front of Stonecrest. He's quick to recover, using the momentum to leap at our opponent. Stonecrest ducks under his advance and digs his hands into the earth as if it is sand. He retrieves two head-sized rocks and chucks them at Agni. He runs to the side, dodging both. The crowd is roaring and quite possibly shaking the ground. All I hear is their conjoined voices shaking my brain till all my thoughts are stripped away.

Neither of us wastes the opportunity. Now as red as a cherry tomato, Agni takes swings up close. Stonecrest tries blocking the first attack, but he immediately grimaces. Agni's cranked his power up to where my initial observation of us baking may not be so wrong. I've seen him melt rocks by himself on a good day. I leap into action, imagining two throwing knives in my hand. Fire curls through my fingers and shapes into an exact replica of them, and I toss them at the enemy. Agni bears down on him with his right arm.

Stonecrest is just as fast, however. The earth underneath him rotates him sideways. Agni misses, and my daggers are en-route into his arm. I'm able to cancel one of them in time, but one cuts into him and he's at a disadvantage. Stonecrest buries his knee into his stomach, forcing him to shimmy back while searching for the air that was stolen from him. I sprint forward and summon a spear. My opponent is still getting up, and I feel like a tiger pouncing from the shadows.

"Sneaking up behind someone isn't very honorable, you know?" The words stop me mid-stride. I'm back in my tent, and now it's my brother with his back turned to me. The earth beneath me rockets up. I'm flying and crash back first into Agni. The crowd "oohs" at the collision.

"Augh, watch where you're going, Ash!" He pushes me off him and dusts himself off. "First the dagger, now this. Are you trying to lose on purpose?" His skin is as bright red as an imp now, and his eyes match. The entire arena turns a distorted orange color. The dirt around Agni cracks from dehydration. At this point, everyone must feel the change in temperature.



"S-sorry," I say. "I'll do better."

Our attention reverts to Stonecrest. The arm he blocked with is blistered and white. He's sweating from Agni's sun-like presence, but he's got that freaky smile back on his face. "Shouldn't you be focused on me? You're supposed to work together... or is that not how they do things in your clan?"

"You're damn right it isn't!" Agni charges at him, hair standing on end and waves like his whole body is on fire. "Idiots like him don't get in my way if they know what's good for them. I can take care of you myself."

He swings, but Stonecrest glides by it. Then by another, and another. Each punch only serves to push hot air around. "I doubt you will," Stonecrest says. He looks like a body-building ballerina, like a smiling snake gliding past death, like an older brother dodging his sibling's "surprise attack". "I lived my whole life around people like you. The palace guards used to beat me to a bloody pulp in the dark alley I lived in. I eventually learned how to evade them, but not before I learned a few extra tricks too." I see some rubble start to rise out of the corner of my eye. "For example, I know that armor can provide just as much offense as it does defense." The rocks shoot directly into and around his hands. They shape themselves around his fists, creating a larger replica of them. He grabs Agni's next attack with one hand. The heat can't

go through the rocks yet; that will take time. He whips his other hand straight across Agni's face. The snap of bones shattering rings throughout the arena. My companion slumps to the ground almost instantly like he was a rag doll all along. The crowd explodes, and I'm left wondering if he died or not.

Stonecrest looks at me as if I'm a child who just fell and scraped my knee in the dirt. There's my brother again. Why do I keep seeing him now? I should feel angry, vengeful, anything other than this ache in my brain telling me that I've chosen a path littered with thorns. In the few minutes we've been fighting, it feels like hundreds of them have burrowed themselves into my flesh. What am I doing wrong? Why don't I see that damn smile and hate it with all my might? I should want to fight him, bring honor to my family. So, why?

"Well, are you going to help him?" he asks, reaching down for the flag. I don't move. The crowd is silent. "Figures," he says. "This guy is kind of an asshole."

"And proud of it." I see Stonecrest's face contort like a bug in a web. Agni leaps off the ground, eyes glowing with such pure red intensity that his irises don't show. He grabs his opponent's already burned arm, and the sound of sizzling flesh becomes painfully audible. Stonecrest screams like a banshee. The earth shakes in resonance before erupting right below the two of them. I fall to the floor.

Agni is in the air. I hear the real snapping of bone. The noise I endured time and again because of Agni. The kind that left me crying alone and wishing that everything could be different.

Agni is lying on the ground with two massive rocks pinning his arms. The crowd looms over him, making sure if he's dead or not. I for one, pray that he's at least unconscious.

"Drake," Suzumi shouts. "Don't just stand there scared stiff. Stop him before he gets Agni's flag." Her reluctant words of advice are enough to get me moving. I race to the rocks, and I see Stonecrest come from behind the right-most one.

"Drake," Stonecrest murmurs.

"That's not what they called you before."

I leap onto the rock closest to me and use it to get above him. I toss a few fire knives at him, but he swiftly blocks by forcing a section of the boulder in front of them to create a wall. I land on top of it and jump over, facing him as he sits in the shadow of his own making.

"Is Drake your real name?"

I furrow my brow. Do you want to fight or talk? My body is twitching, itching for the chance to prove myself. I didn't feel it until this moment. "Yes, Drake is my real name."

"Ah, I see why they nicknamed you Ash then. I like it." He says. My mouth goes dry and I lose focus. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's a good nickname. Drake

sounds far too intimidating. It's a name a conqueror would have, I suppose. Ash is far gentler. Plain at first glance, sure, but I always liked it. It's a sign that something lived."

I feel my skin crawl. "What's it to you?" I ask. "I'd prefer Drake over Ash any day."

"To each their own, I guess."
"Okay, let's get to it the-"

"Why did you volunteer to do this?" He isn't even in stance anymore. Is he trying to insult me? "You don't look the type for fighting. Too lean. Too short."

"That's none of your business," I counter. "Now would you shut up?"

"No," he replies as casually as if he was an old friend. "You see, you've got my attention now, Ash." Don't call me that. "I want to know what makes you tick because I think that you forced yourself to come here." I freeze. What the hell could he possibly know? "I see I touched a nerve. Guess I was right. I'm not going to pretend I get it, Ash." Don't call me that. "I was poor for most of my life, that is until I got the attention of the king up there. He was amazed by my abilities and gave me a home for my family on the condition that I fight in this year's trials."

The audience is growing quiet now that the fighting has stopped. I can feel the chills of Suzumi's gaze on my back.

"Cool, you've got money now. That's really nice and all, but would you shut up now so we can fight." I'm starting to sound

like Agni now. I can't help it. It feels like he's trying to tear off my clothes. Like a pervert of memories.

"You got siblings, Ash?" Stop calling me that.

"An older brother. He got sick before I left." Why did I say that? Why should he care? Why does he keep being brought up? Why can't it just be about me? Me, the one who volunteered for him. I am the one who wanted to bring honor to our family, not him. He just sat there in bed and tried playing sick. I want to make a difference, dammit, not hole myself up like a goddamn coward.

"He is supposed to be here instead of you, wasn't he?" Shut up. "So that's why. Why do you let those two treat you like crap?"

"How the hell would you know about that." I'm shouting now. My voice is quaking with fear and resentment. I want to just end this now, but my body won't move anymore. "What do you want?"

"I want to help. I know you don't want to do this, and I couldn't care less about winning this trial. I mean, the only prize is elemental power beyond imagining for a year. I just want to make sure my sister lives well, and I have that now."

"I don't give a damn! I'm going to win this and bring honor to my family."

"No, you won't, Ash. Not like this." Shut up, shut up. He starts moving at me with small strides. He's looking down on me. I know it.

"Get away from me!" I want to back away, but my body is frozen. I'm screaming at myself to do something. I try to picture a weapon, any weapon. He's within feet of me. Don't touch me. Grab a weapon. Please, anything. I finally clear my head enough to imagine a sword. He's reaching to grab my flag. He's trying to win, the bastard! The sword manifests within inches of me. His eyes grow wide. The rest of the world goes black. My eyes focus on him, looking straight at the man who underestimated me. My body lurches forward and so does his. I thrust the blade at him. It misses him by a hair and hits his rags instead. They burn away instantly and cover his body in burnt fabric. I hear the sizzle of cloth meshing with his skin, burning and searing his flesh. I feel his arms wrap around me. I know I've lost now, but his arms don't move. They stay around my waist in an embrace. He makes no cries of pain, no indication of suffering. He just holds me. My mind is overwhelmed by chaos. I know not what to think until I see his flag tied around his now-naked thigh. I reach down for it. Loosening myself from his grip. I've won.

The crowd is silent. I look up from the ground and I'm at eye level with Stonecrest. He's smiling, but not like before. It's a half-smile, like when you pretend everything is alright just to save face. It's the kind that leaves me hollow like there isn't anything but flesh and bone inside me. It's the kind of smile that my brother gave me when he said to be the best man I could be, like he knew I wouldn't.

I don't move to stand up fully. I stay face to face with this naked man. "Th-Thank you." I look down at his body again. His arms and chest have burns all over them. The cloth has seared into his skin and burned to ash, creating little white specks along his swelling red body. "I'm sorry, your body..."

"It's okay," he says looking down. "I think it looks beautiful. The ash, I mean."

I want to say something, but the crowd erupts like a volcano. They finally found their voices it seems. Stonecrest walks off and lifts his naked body up and out of the stadium along with the rocks he used on Agni. Suzumi comes down to heal what's left of him, and they both look at me dumbfounded. It is now I feel the empty bond that holds us all together. It's a bond of worthless community, of forced kinship, and now the line is strained by the plateau of victory I've put upon myself.

I look down at the flag resting in my hand. Its pee yellow color churns my stomach. The color of a coward. The color of me, of my sealed lips, of the cracks in my skin. It's the color of the sun providing as little warmth and care as possible while still reminding you that it's up there providing you with something. Like a mother ashamed of her children but still feeling obligated to take care of them because that's what a mother is supposed to do.



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WHAT WE PUBLISH:

We accept a wide range of works, including research, creative writing, art, poetry, and multimedia essays. The journal seeks works that are especially engaging, as is reflected in our <u>author guidelines</u>.

Submissions should be alive in the full sense of the word.

How We Review Submissions:

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis. Once a piece is submitted, it undergoes the <u>review process</u>, which typically takes several weeks. A submission is first reviewed by the editors to ensure that it is appropriate for the journal. Following this, the piece is forwarded to three peer-reviewers—one university faculty member and two undergraduate students.

After all of the reviewers' comments and suggestions have been returned to the editors, the piece will be sent back to the author/creator with a decision.

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