

2023-2024

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Cool Beach Morning

By Summer Fields

I look over the water,
The sunrise painting everything in its ethereal glow.

I sit with my feet in the water,
The cool breeze wrapping its arms around me like an old friend.

Sand so small, delicate, unique
Yet beautiful, strong, complex.
Rests underneath me creating my throne.

The waves grasp at my feet,
Tempting me to join their dance.

But now,
Without the sweet, sweltering heat of the sun
I am at peace with just watching the waltz they perform.

Overhead are the gentle birds,
Playing, hunting, living
Under the water, exuberant fish do the same,
Hunting, playing, living

I look out over the water,
Knowing that in a few hours,
When the sun hits its peak
The water will be crystalline,
Blinding, as the sun hits it.

The sun no longer swelters at the peak of the day,
Yet I yearn for its fiery kiss,
That leaves me warm and red for hours to come.

Still, I only sit,
The sun still amber and rising,
The cool breeze begs me to stay,
The water continues its serenade.

I long to stay.

Although I must go now,
I will return tomorrow.
And this movie will play again,
I will be at peace.

My Dad

By Gabrielle Spalding

I wonder where I went wrong.
I was only 3 months old when you left.
Why wasn't I enough for you to stay?
My mind wandered to different places questioning why you wouldn't stay.
You're the reason why I think everyone will always leave.
When you came back two years ago I finally thought you would stay.
You didn't stay, you stopped talking to me again.
Then all the questions started coming back asking me why I wasn't good enough for you.
You say the phone works both ways but remember you left me. I didn't leave you.
You're supposed to be the father.
The tears fall like rain when I lay in bed thinking about you.
You say you wanted custody of me but you haven't even tried.
I'm 18 it shouldn't bother me much that you're not here but it does.
It hurts knowing you can be a father to your other three kids even though two ain't actually yours.
I wish you would have stayed with mom.
We could have been a happy family like you are now with your other family but I'm kind of glad we aren't because I wouldn't have my little sisters.
I have your last name but I don't want it. I don't feel like part of your family.
Let's face it, your own mother even said I wasn't yours.
You were my first heartbreak.
When people ask about you my heart breaks a little more each time.
I want to scream and shout out at people that ask about you but then I remember it's not their fault or mine it's your fault that wasn't there.
I needed you, I wanted you but you didn't want or need me.
After 18 almost 19 years I finally opened my eyes and realized that I don't need you and I never will.

Sentries of Life

By Faith Smith

Who can say why the trees stand firm like guardians of old,
Their gnarled limbs shaping maps of the tales they once told.
Of the lush summers, bleak midwinters, and great storms in their life.
Of times of gladness and joy, times of sorrow and strife.
Why do canopies of leaves reach up to the heavens as one,
to soak up last drops of gold from the fading rays of a setting sun?
Who else, in another time, might have looked upon these sleeping giants
Wanting to discover their secrets hidden deep within the silence?
And why, when the wind comes singing through their branches, creating a
melody so pure,
Do I, too, feel lifted up on eagles' wings to sing with them as long as life
endures?
How great a blessing then is it, to gaze upon and behold
The beauty of the nature's own, displayed in autumn gold.

“Life Is Grand, Bring It On”

By: Faith Smith

Surely you know that one plus one is two—
And you wouldn't be tripped up by traps like thorough and through.
The earth is round and maps are flat; you were probably once best friends with Cat in the Hat.

Every day I am called upon to answer questions.
Fifth math problems about calculus,
Figurative language, and trees worth of essays in English. At least I've got hyperbole down.
My generation says to question everything—
Question traditions, make denial their new mission.
Questions swirling in my mind, I look around and can hardly find
Who I am or what I should be—
But then I remind myself to just be me.
Because in asking out there, we forget to ask in here.
Life is a journey.
We listen, learn, and start again.
Maybe today is the day to learn something new.

What if today I choose to try?
If only I choose to fly, so high, to fall, to learn, to laugh, to live.

What if today I have some fun? I could sit in the sun, maybe go for a run, even watch *Top Gun*.
See? Now wasn't that fun?

What if I realize I don't have to be perfect?
That being right all the time is more than anyone can expect.
Oh, that didn't quite rhyme—
EXpect, PERFect, expECT, perFECT
It was close, not quite. But that's all right.

What if I spontaneously burst into song?
What if I just let it go, let it go, can't hold it back anymo—ahem.

Because I want to fly, it's the truth, I really do.
I want to stretch out my arms and wave at the stars even if from the ground.
Not to have gravity always pulling me down—
Like in my physics homework, it's there, at a constant -9.8 m/s squared . Why can't gravity be
more positive?

Because it always seems to bring you down.

How much can I achieve, if I just believe,
that knowledge is power, and every step of the tower just leads to that better tomorrow?

What if today I say I've got this?
Let's go, I'm ready to rock this.
Like paper, scissors, and, oh shoot—I have a test today.

In equations, I've learned to solve for x.
Make predictions, test a hypothesis for a science project.
Read to understand, read to inspire,
Yet I don't know why world views are all end game and fire.

Why is there war, famine, destruction, and greed,
Wouldn't it be better if we saw all that we could truly be?

Why don't I save the world, stop pollution, help the whales?
These big questions need to be solved, it's true, but life can also be in the details.

What if I shout, scream, laugh, cry, dance around my room?
Or I could just stop and talk to the man in the moon.

Why don't I call someone up, give them a ring,
Because wait until you see what joy these little things can bring.

The teacher calls on me, and my eyes are on the floor.
But then I stand up
Wake up, rise up, seize the day.
Have courage, speak up, yes I speak up and say:
Come alive, sing out loud
Have peace, stand up tall, walk unafraid.

So what if today you chose to do the things you never thought possible,
Pondering those "what ifs," making them realities.

Because we can sit behind a desk our whole lives,
staring up at the blackboard,
waiting for someone else's ideas to be displayed,
or we can raise our hands, rise to the occasion,

take the chalk in hand, and write our own stories, the pen mightier than the blade.

What if today's the day I learn to see all that I am meant to be?

What if I don't?

I might not have all of the answers today, but there's always tomorrow.

Stereotypical Love Song

*It was them all alone
Your stereotypical love song*

*He knew he loved her
But she wasn't quite sure*

*He helped her thrive and grow
She just didn't know how to show*

*But once she had caught on
She knew his love was long gone*

*Now they are out of touch
No, she loved him far too much*

*It couldn't end there
He was it, she would swear*

*She knew she loved him
So she prayed her heart would win*

*She gave him a call
And in love he would fall*

*He fell for her again
And again and again*

*It was them all along
Your stereotypical love song*

*They always knew in the end
It'd come down to the two of them*

-Natalie Poninski

A Sun's Wrath

By Kylee Nix

A star shining ever so brightly over our heads
She gives us warmth
She allows our food to grow
She even promotes good mental health
We need the sun

Relentlessness though, she beats down
Burning and bubbling bare skin
Drying up crops that didn't get enough rain
Taking away one's ability to control body temperature
Heavy sweating, faintness, dizziness, fatigue, weak pulse, muscle cramps, low
blood pressure

So we hide
In our air conditioned houses
Under trees
under SPF 50

The sun
Ever so giving
But unsympathetic

The Town I Do Not Belong

By Briley Smythe

I feel upside down,
In this ugly town,
I look around,
Beginning to drown,
It's all about "who has the crown",
But I just feel like a clown,
In my reflection,
All I am is rejection,
Wanting to be perfection,
Taking risk after risk,
Finally getting the hint,
I do not belong in this poisonous pit!

Perfect Prey

By Alexis Woodruff

Anxiety dances through my head
Not like fairies, but more like dread
Its roots embedded deep within
Its essence vile, its whispers grim
The battle is silent, the war is won
The girl I knew is now undone
As thoughts unravel with confidence slim
The face of betrayal bares its grin
Slithering slow, a threatening squeeze
I do not run, instead I freeze
Coil curls as hope unfurls
Die I might, but there live more worlds
Rarely does it hide away, it prefers my surrender, it prefers to stay
For I'm the perfect candidate
Prey unwilling to avoid getting bit.

(a)Maze(ing) Mind of Me

By Brittany Gibson

My mind is like a maze,
Positive thoughts are what I crave,
But what goes through it instead,
Is unwanted negativity.
I try not to think like that,
I try not to be so down,
But it's hard when I think too much,
So my mind goes and turns around.
I doubt myself too much,
It's like I don't believe in myself,
But when good things happen,
I'm more grateful for it when it does.
Sometimes it's a good thing,
Sometimes it is bad.
I just don't wanna end up,
Falling off my path.
It's easy to overthink,
It's hard to think good,
But it's not impossible,
As that is what's so misunderstood!
But my mind is like a maze,

When I think about getting out,
I think I'm good,
Then I go back to the same spot,
And end up getting more lost...
Slowly getting out,
Slowly making my way,
Soon I'll be successful,
And my mind won't have to worry as much,
And make it out safe.

Fall

By Kalee Walton

*Still a summer breeze
Barely any autumn leaves*

*I can barely breathe
With so many trees
So tall and green
These bugs make me wanna scream*

*I'm so sad
My eyes are a gleam
There's NO Autumn leaves*

The Crow

By Madison Jenkins

The crow walking around

He seems to be lost

And his eyes are so glossed

Walking around the yellow poles

I hope he doesn't step in any holes

Looking for something shiny in the rocks

In his old little crocs

In circles he hops

Looking for something to make him stop

His memory could be gone

Maybe he's singing a song

The crow is just out enjoying his day

Maybe he's just using this time to pray

Parkinson's couldn't stop

This old man from wanting to walk

Outdoor Poem

By Tanner Ballard

From the trees to the trash
And all things in between
The cool air rushing
And small animals buzzing
The park is where you find peace

Heartbreak - A Series of Poems

By Kierstyn Lyday

The End

Constant, but forgotten

Creeping and lurking

Silently

Heartbreak

She's smiling

Her Sweet Blush

She's *laughing*, a raucous symphony

A whisper, a *secret*?

Her hair so much like honey, thick and heavy

Autumn air blows through us like leaves

I *sway*

She says something again, but the Wind steals it away

"What?" I can't hear her

She's shivering, she looks *so cold*

Something floats towards us, a warm blanket

I reach to grab it, the smooth fabric too hard to hold

She's crying now, her tears freezing to her skin

I blink

My eyes won't open, my eyelashes frozen over

I hear the whisper now, carried directly by the Wind

Too late, I think

I can't see anymore

But I know

She's gone

Desolation

The empty nothing

The silent waiting

Waiting to see *What's next?*

Desolation is that final Goodbye

Thoughts

By Emma Thompson

Sitting down isolated from the world
4 gray walls
1 white window
1 wooden door
1 tanish- brown carpeted floor
1 sky blue with white clouds ceiling
Flowers that range from purple to white
And I was just questioning life
Like why is the grass green?
Why do people leave?
Why do people lie?
When does life end?
Is it when we die?
Or feel we can not fly?
In life people act like they want you to succeed
But you only want to recede
Recede to under the covers where nothing can go wrong
But that just makes the days feel long
These four walls feel like a prison
A prison where it is just you and your thoughts
All the good in your head just rots
Everyday is a battle
And your whole world begins to rattle
You aren't depressed
Because depressed is when someone is in a general state of despondency
So instead you make your feelings pressed
Pressed all the way down
So you can smile when others are around
You feel like the walls are caving in
And you have been thrown into the lion's den
And the lions attack you
And split you into two
Two pieces that will never be put back together
Torn apart forever
You don't reach out
Because you've been told to deal with the cards of life you've been dealt
So you deal with the cards
But that doesn't change the way you feel
Because these feelings are real
And instead of telling people
You write poems

Poems to calm you down
But you are tired of acting strong
You feel yourself going downhill
But not like a roller coaster which gives you a thrill
Because when you go down you feel like you are slipping away
And you wonder if you will see another day
You know you must continue
You have people counting on you
Even though at the end of the night
Nothing feels right
Because you're left in the silence
Just you and your thoughts
Waiting for hours
Until the sun ascends
And the cycle starts all over again
Till there is no end

Never an End

By Kayley Lacey

Mental illness

I'm filled with them

Anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder

It makes my brain all sorts of out of order

Anxiety is the constant worrying

The constant second guessing

The constant fear that something bad might happen

It's all fine in the end

We will all live

Depression drowns me out

Buries me down

I want to crawl back, back to the lightness

Back to the enlightenment

It's all fine in the end

We will all live

Bipolar disorder makes me crazy

Having so much anger you can throw things

Having so many emotions you don't know what to do with

I want to rip all the doors off their hinges

I want to not feel

I want to heal

It's all fine in the end

We will all live

It's hard to think that everyone has to struggle

I wish we could all just be humble

It's the kind of thing that makes you want to crawl out your own skin

My body doesn't even feel like my own

My world is a revolving ferris wheel

I just can't get off the ride

I just can't get off the ride

I just can't get off the ride

It's constantly turning turning turning

My mind is constantly going

My gears constantly flowing

Nothing slows it all down

Therapy

Medication

Psychiatrist

Even they don't slow it down

I think I'm manic

Constantly cleaning

Constantly pleading

For help

Don't ever say you want to be gone

I think you are very important to belong

Bipolar disorder is something that's a part of me

A part of me I hate but deal with daily

There's no good way to put this to an end

Mental illness never pretends

Memoir

Undesirable

By Camden Patten

I would constantly check my phone, praying you hadn't viewed the message yet. Hoping you never would, but at the same time I wanted you to read it. Just so you'd know we share a taste in music. I was scared, thought I was just so *undesirable*, thought you'd never want to talk, that we were just too *different*. After feverishly checking, I saw you had viewed my message. I was worrying about the things you might say: "Don't talk to me. I'm never listening to this band again. Weirdo." I heard a ding and checked my phone. "Hey :)"

Flower from the Frost

By Alexis Woodruff

The forceful flapping of wings echoes through the trees. A stork, proper and powerful, carefully lowers my fragile body into my great aunt's arms. Suddenly, he's gone. My new life has begun where I know no evil; no harm. For 17 years and counting, I'm sheltered and nurtured. Tucked away like a flower from the frost. The frost, though, is melting, and the light is flooding in. The world I once knew isn't as cruel anymore. The heart I once owned isn't as cold anymore. The love of my great aunt softened me then; and it softens me now.

The Field Which We Once Stood

By Oddyssie Horton

There is a field behind my childhood home where I used to go every day. Waking up early every Saturday morning to a crisp breeze, and hearing the birds humming their melodic tune, which now only seems to be found in memories. The same kids since I can remember, laughter fills the air, running around, and moving with the wind, knowing that tomorrow it would all be repeated, and the next day after school, and the day after that, and everyday until we drop. Standing in the field now, I can't help but mourn the ghosts of what once was.

Changes

By Jacie Reynolds

I was patiently waiting in the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket. It was finally my turn to go into the bedroom. My grandpa was lying there in his bed. He looked so peaceful, I hated to bother him, but I had to say goodbye. He takes my hand and pulls me closer, where my head was on his chest. We had one last conversation. He soon turned cool to the touch. The firm grip he once had on my hand slowly slipped away from me. My knees gave out, my legs went numb. Part of me died along with him.

Short Stories

The Malachi

By Madysen Arnold

“Ok, see you at seven, bye Bri,” I said.

Brianna was my best friend; I don't get to see her anymore. I don't get to see anyone anymore. Bri, Taylor, James, and I are all going out to the Willowed Woods, about half an hour out of town, for a school project on living and surviving in the woods all on our own. All of the kids in our class got to pick our groups of four and what woods we want to try and survive in. I picked the Willowed Woods—my friends aren't too happy. There have been rumors of the Willowed woods being haunted by a very dangerous creature that kills its victims, called the Malachi.

I don't think it's real, but everyone else does. Oh, how I was wrong. So very, very wrong.

“Hey, James,” I said as I was coming up to Bri's house.

“Hi, Lilac,” James said nervously as he was walking to the door of the light up small trailer that housed Bri and her family: Alice and Cory, her parents and Josh and Emma, her siblings. They were the last to get there.

“Ok, so here's the plan,” I said, once everyone stopped talking and started to calm down. “We get your mom to drive us to the edge of the woods, drop us off, and we start going on our adventure. And remember, record everything. Everything from what we do, like, for shelter, what we eat, and what we hear. Whether that's the rumor about Malachi, or just a squirrel. Does everyone agree with that?”

“Ya,” mumbled Bri.

“Sounds good enough for me,” said Taylor with a worried voice on her paper white, pale face.

“I guess, but are you sure we have to do this, Lilac?” asked James.

“Ya, it doesn't sound like the best idea to be going into the most haunted woods in our area!” exclaimed Taylor

“No, it really doesn't,” Bri agreed.

“It'll be fine guys. Don't worry!” I said with a sigh. “I'm sure everything will be fine. Plus you heard Mrs. Malan: the more dangerous the area, the better the grade on this assignment. And we all know how much we need this grade.”

“Ya but still, it doesn't sound very safe,” James said in a doubtful, soft voice.

“We'll be fine, and if we're not, and something goes wrong we can have Bri's mom come get us,” I explained.

“Fine, but only if we get to prove that we were right all along,” said Tay in a slightly more cheerful voice.

“Ya, I agree,” said Bri.

“Ya, me too,” said James. “I guess.”

There was a knock on the door.

“What was that?” exclaimed James.

“It's Bri's mom at the door,” I mumbled.

“Hey kids, are you ready to go?” asked Alice.

“As ready as we'll ever be,” said James with a nervous look on his face.

“K K let's go then!” Alice said a little too excitedly.

About 20 minutes into the drive, I started to get nervous. Stupid James finally started to get in my head. *What if this is real? What if something happens to us? What if it tries to eat us like in the rumor. What am I thinking? It's obviously not real! You're just being stupid!*

We pulled up to the dark, scary Willowed Woods. Filled with red, brown, and purple leaves in all different shapes and sizes, some falling from the trees and most covering the damp, wet ground.

“Ok, we're here,” Alice said, bringing me out of those dark, gloomy, stupid thoughts. “Have fun kids.”

“Ya...Right...Fun,” mumbled James in a shakey, cautious, scared voice.

“Ok, Bri, will you do me a favor?” I asked

“Ya sure,” Bri replied cautiously.

“Ok, great, I need you to grab the food bag. And James can you grab the tools? Oh, and Taylor, can you please grab yours and James’ clothes? I’ll grab mine and Bri’s.”

“On it,” replied Taylor.

“Sure, anything you say,” James replied sarcastically.

“Oh, and James. You do know how to tell coordinates right?” I ask.

“Ya I can do that. Just tell me when,” James replied in a slightly more enthusiastic voice.

“That’s the spirit!” I say in an even more excited voice this time.

“James, again there’s nothing to worry about. Everything will be fine,” I replied. *I hope I’m right. Wait, I know I’m right. Nothing is going to happen. Stop getting in your head. But what if it is real. What if I lose the people I care about? I can’t let any-*

“Lilac, is something wrong?” Bri asked in a concerned tone of voice.

“Ya, are you scared?” James asked with a hint of laughter in his voice.

“Everything will be fine. Don’t worry,” Taylor said with a laugh, “It’s just a stupid rumor, it’s not real.”

“Right, I know,” I said, focusing on the words, trying to get myself to believe them. *What if it’s real? Why did I do this? Somethings going to go wrong. I can feel it. This was a terrible idea! I’m gonna hurt whoever decided this was the place we went! Oh...wait...I did...Right...Great...*

“Ok guys, let’s go. What’s the first thing we need to do?” James asked.

“The first thing we need to do is find somewhere to make our shelter,” I said.

“Am I gonna have to share a room or bed with one of you? I don’t know if I feel comfortable with all that,” asked James for the third time this week.

“No, James, for the last time, you don’t have to share a bed with one of us. That’s why we all brought our own sleeping bags and pillows, remember?” Bri said with an annoyed tone.

We eventually stumbled upon a clear patch of land with nice grass, not too wet but not dry enough to be poking us all night from our sleeping bags, and trees around us to cover us from the rain during the night, and the sun early in the morning.

“Ok team, this is where we’ll make our home for the next couple nights. James, can you give me the coordinates, so I can put it into the log book?” I started in an excited type voice. *Just ready to make our shelter so we can go to bed, and so I can stop thinking about this stupid children’s story. But what if- NO! I’m not letting this start again.*

“Ok the coordinates are 41° 20’ 53.13 North and 72° 25’ 57.14 West,” James said in a happy, cheerful voice.

“Got it. Thank you so much,” I reply in a very light cheerful voice.

“Is it ok if I go and get some supplies for our shelter?” Brianna asked.

“Yes, that’s fine, but take Tay with you just in case something happens. I’ll start getting wood for a fire while James gets some rocks so we can start it,” I explain to the three of them.

“Ok,” James said, “I think I saw a river on the map not too terribly far from here, I’ll go there for the rocks.”

“Ok, but be careful, and bring your radio! I mean it! We don’t need one of us getting lost and not being able to find our way back to camp,” I explain to all of the group in a very cautious, meaningful tone.

Ok, I’ve got the wood for the fire now we just have to wait for James to come back with the rocks so we can start it. He’s been gone for a while. I hope he didn’t get lost, or hurt. I’ll radio him.

“Hey, James. Are you there?” I say trying to hide the shaking in my voice.

“Ya, I’m here. Is something wrong?” James replies in a hard, breathy voice.

“You sound like your breathing really heavy. Is everything ok?” I ask, getting even more nervous.

“Ya, this is just a longer walk than I thought— hey, I think I see some rocks that will work for the fi- OW CRASH AH BZZZZZZ.” James radio starts cutting out towards the end.

“James. James, are you still there? Did something happen? Are you hurt? James?” I said still trying to hide the worry from my voice but slowly getting worse and worse as time goes on.

“Ya, I’m fine I just fell. AH... My ankle... I think I hurt my ankle...” James says with tons of worry, shock, and pain, in his voice.

“Ok, ok. Calm down, don’t worry. Just tell me where you are and I can help,” I say, trying to stay calm.

“Ok. hang on, I’ll get the coordinates. Give me a couple minutes to try and figure this out.... Crap...” James says starting to get frustrated with the amount of pain and stress he’s in right now.

“What! What happened? Are you ok?” I say, losing the ability to hide my worry in my voice.

All I could hear was the sound of static coming from the radio. I began hyperventilating while trying to calm myself down and convince myself that James just fell, and he’s not getting ripped apart by the Malachi right now.

Then I hear it. The sound of a teenage boy’s blood curdling scream. I start running to the direction of the river that James had gone to, trying to find and save him from whatever was making him scream like this. If it even was him. *God I hope it's not him. Please don't be James. Just calm down. I'm sure he just fell and hurt his ankle and he tried walking on it and it hurt. Right. Right? I'm sure that's what happened. We're gonna be laughing about how scared I got for years after I figure out he's ok.*

It’s right there. A tall, black half deer, half wolf-looking creature, with glowing red eyes and razor sharp, yellow, rotting teeth covered in blood and other weird substances that I have no idea what they could be. Then just as soon as it had appeared, it was gone. Just vanished into thin air!

I keep looking for James. Then I see a big pool of black looking goo in the rocks just a few feet away from me. I start getting closer, making sure to take my time so I don’t fall and hurt myself the same way James had fallen. As I’m getting closer, and closer I smell the worst thing I’ve ever smelt in my entire life. It smelled like something had just died. I look at the black goo looking substance trying to figure out what it was. Then I see parts of clothing. The same clothing James was wearing when he left the campsite. The next thing I remember seeing was his face and head completely taken off of the rest of his body, which was now in shreds.

I start running back to the campsite to look for the girls. They still hadn’t gotten back yet so I try calling them on our radios.

“Girls. We have an emergency. James is dead.” I say freaking out. Trying to get the words out before I start completely breaking down. “I-I think you were right. I-I think that the M-M-Malachi is real, and it got James.”

“Ok we’re on our way back now, we should get there soon ok. Don’t freak out,” Bri says.

“Bri, Tay you’re ok. Thank God you’re ok,” I say as I start running up to them to give them a hug. “Wait, what’s that behind you?”

They both start slowly turning around right before I watch the Malachi start ripping my two best friends. Both at the same time. Not even giving me time to think about what’s going on,

After it’s done with them, it comes for me. It picks me up and throws me back onto the ground. It walks up to me and puts its hands around my neck, ready to slit my throat.

Then, when I wake up.

“It was a dream?” I ask myself. “It was all just a dream.”

Exactly one year later. On a cold, rainy, Halloween night. “Good morning, honey,” my mom said when we got me up for school.

“Morning mom,” I said less than thrilled to be getting out of bed at such an early hour on a Monday morning.

“You need to start getting ready for school. We’ve got to leave in less than 30 minutes,” my mom said in a harsh voice, not yet loud or angry, but getting there.

“I am, I am. Just give me a minute to wake up.”

“We don’t have a minute to wait for you to wake up,” she said as she was walking to the other side of my bedroom toward my window.

“No, wait mom please we can talk about this,” I say in a desperate voice, “Ahhhhh!!! Close the window please. It hurts! Please! Just close the window!”

“Not until you get out of bed. We have to get ready to leave, you're going to make me late for work. Get up!”

“Fine, I'm up. I'm up.”

“Good. Now get ready for school!” she said. Her voice started to sound more and more angry by the minute.

When we got to the school everything was normal, at least at first, it was fine until I got into my last hour, *Survival Science*. It's a class where we learn how to survive on our own in the wild. I didn't even think about the dream I had just one year earlier until my teacher brought up a new project.

“Bingggggggg!”

“Hello everyone, how's your day been so far?” Mrs. Malan said after the bell for class to finally start had gone off.

“It's been good,” one of the students said in an excited voice. I don't know why they would be excited for this class, I know I'm not.

“No it hasn't. I have a 2-3 page paper on suspense to write in English and I don't even know what to write about!” another student added.

“My day's been fine,” another said.

“Good, I've heard a lot of good things about today.” Mrs. Malan said, “I've got a surprise for you all. We're finally doing our end of semester project. Everyone will get into a group of four, people of their choosing, and you have to find a way to survive in an area of woods, also of your choosing, for a whole weekend. You will have to find your own food and water everyday and make your own shelter, just like we have done in class. And remember kids, the more dangerous the area of woods, the better the grade.”

Wait, this all sounds familiar. Have I heard this before? I know I've heard this before, but where? I don't know. I think it's nothing. It has to be nothing, right? Right?

“Hey, Lilac. You ok?” Bri asked me in a concerned type of voice.

“Ya, ya, fine. I'm fine.” I replied still thinking about where I heard that.

I swear I've heard someone say that, but where. And even more important who?

“Are you sure? You don't sound so sure,” James said, sounding even more concerned for me.

“Ya, I swear I've heard Mrs. Malan say that before. Has she mentioned this project in the past?” I reply.

“No, she kinda just threw that on us. She hasn't said anything about it that I remember,” Bri said.

“Ya, she didn't say anything about this project. Maybe you're thinking about something else,” Tay said.

“Ya, I'm sure it's nothing, Lilac. Don't worry, why would we need to be worried any way. We know what we're doing,” James said, “We are doing this together, right guys?”

“Yes we are,” Bri said, “of course we are!”

“Ok, cool,” Tay said, starting to get more and more excited by the second.

“Where are we gonna go, guys?” James asked, being just as interested and pushy as normal.

“Ummmmm, what about the Willowed Woods?” I suggest.

“I've heard those woods are really dangerous,” James said, starting to get worried.

“Ya, are you sure that's a good idea?” Bri said, also starting to get worried.

“She did say the more dangerous the woods, the better the grade on the project,” Tay said.

“That she did, that she did,” I say, proud of my amazing idea.

“I guess, but what about that creature thing that is rumored to be in the Willowed Woods?” Tay asked. “Is that real? I hope it's not.”

“What the Malachi?” I said, “No, of course not. Why would it be?”

“I don't know. I've heard a lot of things about it,” Bri said.

“Ya, me too,” James said in a worried voice.

“Guys, don't worry. It's not real, we have nothing to worry about,” I say in a slightly sarcastic voice.

“I hope not,” Bri said, “what do we do if it is real?”

“It’s not. Stop worrying, everything is going to be fine. I promise,” I say, trying to calm them down.

Wait, hang on. I know I have been here before. It’s all so familiar. What’s going on? I don’t know about all this. Something’s telling me something bad is going to happen, and I have a feeling it has something to do with this project. What am I talking about? I’ve never been through this project. I’m going crazy. I just need to calm down, maybe I didn’t get enough sleep last night or something. I just need to go home and take a nice, long nap.

“Hey, honey! How was school?” My mom said as I walked in the door.

“It was fine, I have a project for Survival Science,” I reply

“Oh, that’s cool! What do you have to do?”

“I have to spend the weekend in the woods, to see if I can survive in the wild.”

“Oh, that’s neat,” My mom says, sounding all too excited. “Are you doing it with anyone, or is it a single person project?”

“Ya, we get to work with people. We get to have a group of four. I’m working with Bri, Tay, and James.”

“Are you alright honey?”

“Ya I’m fine just a little tired I think.”

“Well, ok I guess you can take a nap then, until dinner. But you know your dad’s coming home from work early today so I would really appreciate it if you eat dinner with us, so you can see him for a little bit before bed.”

“Ya, I will. I really think I just need a short nap really quick. I’ll get up for dinner. What time will he be home?”

“Ok honey, ummm I’m not entirely sure what time he will be home I just know it should be soon. Go ahead and take your nap, I’ll wake you up when he gets here.”

“Ok, thanks mom.”

Ok everything is fine you just need to sleep this off. I guess you didn’t sleep as well as you thought last night after all. It’s fine, just take your nap and it’ll all be fine.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh”

“Honey! Lilac! Wake up!”

“Ahhhhhh”

“Honey, wake up!”

“Mom, what happened?” I say, still confused and nervous.

“You had a nightmare, I’ll give you a minute to calm down.”

“Ok, thank you. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Ok honey. Take your time and calm down before you come down. If you need anything just call and I’ll come right up ok. I’m here for you.”

“Thank you. It means a lot.”

I remember where I heard about the project. We can’t go to the Willowed Woods. I’ve seen what will happen if we do, and trust me it won’t go well. I have to call the others and tell them that we can’t go. It’s too dangerous.

“Hay Lilac. Are you ready for this weekend? We agreed on meeting at seven, at my house right?” Bri said right after answering the phone on the third ring.

“Ya, about that... I don’t think it’s a very good idea to go to the Willowed Woods.” I said, getting more and more nervous by the minute. “It’s too dangerous. We have to pick another place.”

“Why? We already agreed, and you said it yourself it’s gonna be fine. We’ll be ok.”

“Listen to me, Bri! I know where I heard about the project, I know what’s going to happen and it’s not good trust me. We can’t go to the Willowed Woods. Please, you have to listen to me!”

“What has gotten into you, Lilac? Are you feeling ok?”

“Yes, I feel fine! Just please listen to me, we can’t go to the Willowed Woods!”

“Why? What happened?”

“Just listen to me! We can’t go!”

“Are you sure you're feeling ok? Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“Yes! Ok yes! I'm feeling fine! I got plenty of sleep! Just listen to me, we can't go!

“Ok, but we already picked and told Mrs. Malan where we were going. We can't change that now. What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don't *think* something bad is going to happen, I *know* something bad is going to happen!”

“Ok... And what is so bad that we can't do our project.”

“I don't know how to explain. Just please listen!”

“Ok just calm down. Do me a favor, Lilac, please.”

“Fine. What is it?”

“Just please calm down and get some rest. This will all blow over by tomorrow when we go do our project, but we don't have another choice. We have to go to the Willowed Woods.”

“We can't!”

“Just please. Listen, I have to go, but please get some rest for me. I'm really worried about you.”

“Whatever. Bye.”

“Bye.”

On the morning of Friday, the start of that weekend, I was terrified.

I hope nothing goes wrong. What am I talking about? Nothing's going to go wrong. This stupid thing isn't even real. It's just some dumb story you tell your kids so they'll Listen to you more. There's no way that it's true. It's just a stupid story. You know what, I'll do some research and see what others are saying about it.

“Oh here's something,” I said to myself, “it's a video.”

In the video it was a very, very dark night. All you can really see is some figure standing above something, I couldn't even tell what it really was at first, covered in a dark red almost black substance, having a thickness like corn syrup. That's when it hit me, that thing the figure was standing over, that was a mutilated, not even recognizable, human body. I couldn't even tell if it was a male for female laying there, on the cold, hard, dark ground. I couldn't see anything else, just the body and the figure. The figure was a tall, black, half deer half wolf looking creature, with glowing red eyes and razor sharp, yellow, rotting teeth covered in blood.

“It's just like I remember from the dream,” I say to myself again.

“Hey honey, are you ready to go?” My mom asked, startling me.

“Ya, I'm ready,” I said, “give me just a second.”

“Ok, I'm gonna go ahead and start the car. If you need anything just call me.”

“Ok.”

When we get to the school everything seems normal. People are laughing, talking, being loud and annoying.

“Hey Lilac,” Tay said, as I first walked in.

“Hey,” I replied.

“Is everything ok, you're really quiet this morning,” James said, sounding concerned.

“Ya. Fine.”

“Ok now we know something's wrong,” Bri said, wanting to get it out of me, “are you still worried about that stupid project we have to do for Survival Science?”

“Why would she be worried about the project?” James asked.

“Because, she thinks that something bad is going to happen if we do the project,” Bri said.

“Oh my god guys, please just listen to me. We can't do the project, at least not at the Willowed Woods. Please!” I say starting to sound desperate.

“Well we don't really have much of a choice right now,” James said.

“Yes we're supposed to start tonight, we can't pick a new place now,” Tay said with a hint of worry in her voice.

“Binggggggg!”

“Well we can talk more about this later. I have to get to class,” Bri said, “I have to get all the way to the third floor.”

“Ya, ok, fine,” I say

“Ok, see you in eighth hour,” Tay said right before leaving the group.

“Ya see you later,” James said after he had already started to walk off.

We can't go. I have to make them listen to me. But how? Oh crap, I should probably start walking to class now. Why are there so many stairs in this stupid school? I hate stairs!

Not even half a second after I walk into the ice cold classroom on the second floor, the bell rings for class to start.

“Good morning everyb-.” The teacher, Mr. Donoho, started.

“IT'S WAY TOO COLD IN HERE! TURN UP THE HEAT! I'M COLD!” Tanner, a very, VERY annoying boy from the back of the class screamed, cutting off Mr. Donoho.

“I'm sorry Tanner but I think it's a very reasonable temperature here, but I will turn up the heat a couple degrees,” Mr. Donoho stated, “now, as I was saying before *someone*, not naming names, interrupted me. Good morning everybody, how was your morning?”

“It was good,” One of the students, Marissa said. She's one of the preppy girls, who thinks she's better than everyone else.

“It was terrible my mom got me up at six this morning because she had a work meeting first thing in the morning and had to drop me off at my older brothers, so he can take me to school,” another student, Mark, said.

“What about you, Lilac? You've been really quiet this morning,” Mr. Donoho asked me.

“Ummmmm. Ya I'm just really tired today,” I say hoping he believes me, “I didn't sleep very well last night.”

“Ok well I hope today gets better for you, Lilac,” Mr. Donoho said.

“Thanks,” I said, just wanting to end this conversation ASAP.

The rest of the day went by super slow. I felt like a sloth, or a snail. It was terrible, I hated every second of it.

I can't stop thinking about this stupid project. It'll be fine, I hope. Everything will be fine. Nothing bad will happen. I'm just getting worked up over nothing. This is stupid, you're being stupid. You just need to calm down, nothing is going to happen. Just stop thinking about it. It was a stupid nightmare! IT'S NOT REAL!

“Binggggg!”

Great now time for my favorite class. Survival Science. I need to talk to her about the project, see if I can change where we go. I doubt the others will let that happen though, they don't believe me. I don't know what I'm gonna do. Stop thinking like that nothing is going to happen. I doubt Mrs. Malan is going to let me switch where we go anyway. We had to choose a week ago. All she's going to say is, “You should have talked to me sooner.” Or, “It's a little too late for that. I've already put it in the log book.” Either way, the guys still want to go, and there's no convincing them. They all think I'm crazy. Maybe I am. I don't even know anymore.-

“Lilac, Lilac? Hey, are you ok?” Bri said, taking me out of my thoughts.

“Ya, ya I'm fine. Just thinking about something. Everything's fine,” I say, still thinking about what I'm supposed to do.

“Well, let's go ahead and sit down. Are you sure everything's alright?” Bri said

“Ya I'm sure let's just sit, and wait for class to start.”

“Hello everybody. Are you ready for your projects this weekend?” Mrs. Malan asked, starting class.

“Ya we are,” Bri said, sounding excited.

“Yep, this will be fun,” Tay said, also sounding excited.

“I hope this goes well,” James said.

“It'll be fine,” Bri said, sounding surprisingly convincing.

“Ya, we've been trained for this, remember?” Tay said.

“Ok, so everyone gather your supplies for your survival task,” Mrs. Malan said in a cheerful annoying voice.

“About that, Mrs. Malan, can I talk to you for a second? It’s about our project,” I said in a nervous, scared, worried voice.

“What are you doing, Lilac?” Bri whispered in an annoyed voice.

“Fixing our project,” I said trying to sound like I’m not externally freaking out.

“There’s nothing to fix. We’ve got it under control. You’re not changing where we go!” Bri said, sounding even more annoyed now.

“Yes Lilac, is something wrong with your project?” Mrs. Malan asked.

“No! There’s nothing wrong with our project,” Bri said, taking over before I got a chance to talk.

“Are you sure?” She asked, “Lilac, what did you need help with, how can I help you?”

“Ummmmm...I... Ummmmm... I want to ummmmm... change where we go for our project... please.” I say getting more scared and nervous by the second. She has to let us change places.

“Ummmm. Why are you just now telling me about this? You should have said something a long time ago. I’ve been asking all week if we need to make any changes, why didn’t you ask then?” Mrs. Malan replied, sounding confused and slightly upset.

“We just real-” I started to reply when Bri cut me off.

“We don’t need to change anything, everything is fine. She’s just nervous about being on our own in the wild for the first time,” Bri said, in an even more annoyed voice than before.

“Is everything alright with you two? You both are acting very strange. And Lilac there’s no reason to be nervous, we’ve gone over what we need to do multiple times. Everything will be fine.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling her, but she’s convinced that something bad is going to happen if we go to the Willowed Woods like we planned.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine, Lilac. I think you’ve been watching a few too many videos of the Willowed Woods and you’re just scared, but I promise you it’s not real. Those people fake everything you’ve seen. Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

“Ya, I guess you’re right,” I replied in a small scared voice.

Maybe she is right. I’m just overthinking things. Nothing bad is going to happen, I’ve just heard too many stories. Nothing is going to go wrong, just because you had some bad dream and everything that has happened the past few days seems really familiar; that does not mean that your dream is going to happen. I’m just getting in my head. I’m scaring myself. Everything will be fine. I hope at least.

“Hey Lilac, are we still meeting at my house at seven?” Bri asked right after I answered her phone call.

“Ya I think. If that’s still ok with you, Tay, and James,” I said, still a little worried about what might happen tonight.

“Ok, I already talked to them about the time. I just thought I should check with you one more time.”

“Ok, how are things going there?”

“They’re good-what mom? Ok one sec.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Ya my mom just needs my help with something. I got to go. I’m sorry”

“It’s ok. I’ll be fine.”

“Ok, just please try not to worry about tonight. Everything will be fine.”

“Ok see you at seven, bye Bri,” I said.

As I’m walking up to Bri’s house at 7:05, I see James. At least I’m not the only one that is showing up a few minutes late.

“Hey James, how are you doing tonight?” I ask as we both get to the front porch.

“Hey Lilac, ya I’m doing good. Are you still worried about tonight?”

“Everything should be fine, right?”

“Ya, but I’ve been thinking about what you said. What if something bad does end up happening tonight?”

“Nothing bad is going to happen, James, stop worrying.” I say, trying to sound confident, when in reality I’m still really nervous.

We walk into Bri's small bedroom, with empty walls and scratchy, light brown, carpet. Her bedroom was filled with a small bed with white and pink sheets and pillowcases, a dark brown wooden dresser, and a small, wood, desk in the corner of the room.

"Hey everybody," I say as I walk in, just after James.

"Hey. Have you come up with our plan yet?" Tay asked.

"Right, our plan. So we get your mom to drive us to the edge of the woods, drop us off, and we start going on our adventure. And remember, record everything. Everything from what we do, like for shelter, what we eat, and what we hear. Whether that's the rumor about Malachi *that I hope is just a rumor*, or just a squirrel. Does everyone agree with that?"

"Ya that sounds fine," Bri said.

"Ya sure, that's fine with me, I guess," James said in a small, shrill, scared voice.

"Please don't tell me you're scared too, James, how many times do I have to say it. Nothing bad is going to happen," Bri said

"No it's not that," James said, "it's just I'm not going to be sleeping in the same bed as one of you, right? I don't know if I feel comfortable with that."

"No, James. Like we've said eight times this week, we will all be sleeping in different beds. Why do you think we all brought separate sleeping bags?" I say starting to get annoyed about the fact that I have to repeat this so many times.

"Ok, ok. I get it. You don't have to be so defensive about it," James said, backing off.

"Hey, kids, are you ready?" Bri's mom, Alice, said in a very high pitched, excited voice.

"Ya I think so mom." Bri replied, in the same cheerful, high pitched voice

"Ya I think we've got everything we need. Does anyone disagree?" I say taking charge again.

"Nope, I think we're good," Tay said, getting excited.

"No, I don't see anything we're missing," James said, still in his scared, small voice.

"Ok, then I think we're good to go, Alice," I say, trying to sound confident and brave.

"Ok then, let's get your guys stuff in the car," Alice said still in that annoying, cheerful voice. It's not annoying because it's cheerful, but because it's so high pitched.

"Yep, everyone grab at least one bag, and put everything in the trunk. I think it should fit, right? Does this look like it'll fit in your trunk?"

"Ummm... ya I think this should fit. If not we can put it in the front seat, with Bri."

"But mom! Then I won't have any room!" Bri said, sounding upset about her mom's comment with the front seat.

"Ummm... you'll get over it, honey."

"I was kidding, don't worry. It was a joke."

"It better be, you don't want me to tell your father do you?"

"No mom. Trust me it was a joke, I don't care if you put some of the bags on the floorboard of my seat."

"Who said they would be on the floorboard?"

"That's what I thought you meant. Did you mean we were going to actually put them in my seat?"

"No, honey. Now I'm kidding."

"Oh, ok. Good."

"Ok and I think that's the last bag," I say after putting my sleeping bag in the trunk.

About thirty minutes later we're finally here. It feels almost like what you would think Antarctica would feel like. It looked just as dark as I remember, the blackest of all blacks, there were barely any stars in the sky, the only light we had after the car lights turned off was the faint light coming from the moon, only allowing us to see a few feet in front of our faces.

"Ok I think we're here. Is this a good place to drop you guys off?" Alice asked.

"Ummm. Ya I think this should be ok," Tay said, looking at me for reassurance.

"Ya this is fine," I say, sounding doubtful. "This looks exactly like I remember, this is not good."

"What was that last part? I missed it." Bri asked, sounding interested, or concerned, I couldn't really tell.

“Oh nothing. Sorry,” I say, hoping something will distract her.

“Ok I think we’ve got everything. You wanna go ahead and try and find a shelter, before it gets too dark?” James asked, curiously.

“Ya let’s go ahead and do that,” Bri said, forgetting about what I had said just a few seconds earlier.

“Well whenever you kids are ready, I’ll go ahead and leave,” Alice said in a small comforting voice that reminds me of my mothers voice.

“I think we’re ready,” Tay said, “there’s nothing else in the car.”

“Ok let’s go,” Bri said, with leadership in her voice.

After walking for about forty five minutes into the dark, scary, damp woods we finally found a spot that is clear enough for us to make our shelter.

“Ok I think this will work,” Bri said, sounding very excited, yet tired at the same time.

“Ok let’s think. What do we need to do first?” James asked. “Oh, right, start setting up camp and getting things for a fire to keep us warm throughout the night. I’ll go get rocks so we can st-.”

“NO!” I scream, scaring hundreds of birds out of the trees they were housing in for the night.

“What, do you want to go get the rocks?” James asked, sounding concerned and confused.

“Yes! I’ll go get them, you stay with the girls and get some firewood.”

“Ok. I can do that I guess. Ummm. There’s a stream not far from here, you could check there if you want.”

“Ya I’ll go there. I’ll be fine.”

That stream James is talking about is the same stream that he died at in my dream. If I go there I might be able to save them. Even if it means me getting hurt, or worse. I’m willing to take that chance to make sure my friends are ok.

“Ok we’ll all take our radios, make sure you have yours,” Bri said, taking charge once more.

After walking for another fifteen or twenty minutes, I hear the humming of the water from the stream. It’s only a faint sound but still there. It’s there enough for me to start feeling a little bit more hopeful.

After another five or so minutes I find some rock and other stones laying on the ground.

That means I’m getting close to the stream. I hope this goes well.

“Swooshhhhhh”

“What was that!” I whisper with a voice full of concern and fear.

I looked behind me and saw nothing, just the pitch black sky and dark colored trees that surrounded me.

I need to find something to defend myself with. What’s this, a stick?

The stick looked to be around five feet long and four or five inches in diameter.

This is perfect!

“Swooshhhh”

“There it is again,” I said with even more fear in my voice. There it was. A tall, with black and brown fur, half deer, half wolf creature, with glowing red eyes, and razor sharp rotting teeth, with bald spots a pinkish, reddish color, from where the fur had fallen out, for whatever reason. Whether that be because it just fell out, or it was pulled out when it was killing one of its victims. I really hope it’s the first option. The creature suddenly lunges itself toward me with no warning whatsoever. I took a swing at it, and surprisingly hit it, right in the side of the abdomen. I thought I was dead for sure. It went to the ground with a hard thud, shaking the ground feeling like an earthquake.

“Oh my god,” I whisper to myself again.

As the creature is laying on the cold, hard, damp ground, it’s groaning in pain. *Something’s off, that noise. It doesn’t sound like a creature at all. It sounds like a human. It almost sounds feminine.*

I see something lighter, almost like a tan color close to what would be the neck of the animal, looking like skin, human skin. As I get closer I grab my flashlight out of my pocket.

What’s that? Is that skin? There’s no way. Is that skin?

I get closer with the flashlight on, being careful and ready for it to attack again at any moment, and see a seam where the mask separates from the fur suit.

“It’s a mask.”

I rip off the mask with little struggle. I was right it did sound like a human, because it is a human. It was a female. A female I knew, someone I knew very well, someone I saw everyday.

“What are you doing here! You-You're The Malachi!” I scream, with tons of shock, terror and confusion in my voice. My voice was so shaky that you could barely even tell what I was saying, “How could you do such a thing! How could you do this! Th-th-They were innocent people, they were just kids! H-How could you-why would you do this! Mrs. Malan, answer me!”

The End

Thing

By Elly Back

Living in the mountains was not quite the transition I expected, it was surprisingly natural and very fulfilling. I'd been wanting to live in the Appalachian Mountains since I was young. I discovered my love for hiking and nature at a young age when my parents took me up to Shawnee and Garden of the Gods. Being in the woods and alone with nature thrilled me.

Appalachia took my interest when I decided to hike the trail in my twenties. It was laborious and difficult, but wonderful. There is no high like reaching the end of a trail, at least to me. Part of my love for Appalachia comes from my love for Lucy. We met through hiking, we met on that trail, and we shared a dream of moving to the mountains. We wanted to live near where we met. Appalachia reminds me of her.

I couldn't stop returning to these mountains after that hike, but I can't hike like I used to as I get older. That weighs on my heart a little. Hiking was my drug. I hiked when I was stressed, and practically lived in the woods after Lucy died. I think hiking was my way of looking for her, but also escaping her and the pain her memory carried.

Death isn't ever easy, especially when it's your wife, and especially when it's sudden. But mountains can't die—nature can, but it always returns—and I think I found comfort in that. Sometimes I swear I heard her voice calling me, but I could never find her. It was silly of me to think I could, but it was just as silly of me to try to wake her when she died.

My daughter tried to keep me from going, but I insisted that I would be living out the rest of my days in the mountains, just like Lucy and I intended.

"You'll be all alone out there, Dad," Molly protested, as stubborn as her mother. "What if something happens? You're not young anymore, you know."

"I have a phone and Buster. I'll be okay," I assured her.

Of course, I was sad to leave my daughter, but I needed the mountains more than anything. They called me like a wife calls for dinner.

So I rode up to the mountains with nothing much but my dog and my clothes. Molly and her husband helped me move in, and stayed a few days, and then they were gone, and it was just me and Buster.

Buster sure liked the open space. Boy, he was happy as a lark to be able to run around so free. There wasn't a moment his tail didn't wag. I was pleased too. Me and him walked and walked until our feet nearly fell right off.

I didn't get too lonely, at least not any lonelier than I was in Seattle without Lucy. Washington was wonderful but it just wasn't Appalachia.

Every night as dusk fell I wandered back into my cabin and lit a fire. I let Buster come in when he chose through his doggy door. I'd hear a bell jingling off his collar and then hear his big paws clacking on the hardwood floor. He was a big border collie, but he didn't think so, and he'd lay right on my lap and about crush me.

Happy, we were. I found I quite liked the quiet mountains. I was parked right in a valley, a few miles up a dirt road. My cabin was not much more than that. One bedroom, a bathroom, and a little kitchen area. Cozy as could be. The mountains rose high above me and Buster, and there was a little pond near the house. Me and Buster liked to fish there. Sometimes we'd catch something and cook it up. Lucy always liked fish. She would've adored the pond.

Tonight, as I sat with my rod in hand, nothing would bite. Buster sat next to me patiently as I reeled, waited, reeled a little more. Cricket's didn't even chirp. The trees blew lazily above me, and the water was completely still. It was as if the forest was completely stuck in time.

"Randy?" A voice called, breaking the silence. "Randy, come here."

I jumped out of my seat, spinning around to look behind me. Buster growled, baring his teeth. I'd thought I'd heard Lucy before, but she had never come so close before.

I figured it must've been my mind playing tricks on me, especially since I was out here by myself.

"Randy, come here. I'll take you home."

Lucy's voice was just as I remembered. Sweet and gentle, like music to my ears. The sound of her voice warmed my heart.

Buster barked furiously, and I could tell he was awful spooked. I dropped my pole onto the ground, and looked around. This really didn't seem like my imagination.

"Where are you?!" I shouted into the forest. Wind blew around me. The sun was beginning to fall behind the trees, and it would be dark soon.

"Here, Randy."

I stepped toward the bushes. Buster usually followed me, but this time he froze. His tail went between his legs, and his barks turned to whimpers. He backed up, then bolted for the house, scrambling in through his doggy-door noisily.

"Is it really you, Lucy? Are we really going home?"

"Come here, Randy," the voice answered.

I stepped into the woods. I realized my heart was pounding with excitement and fear. I remembered hearing stories of old folks being called home by their loved ones just before death, but they were usually riddled with disease and much older than I. But I guess that didn't really matter to me, if it was truly my time or not. I wanted to see Lucy, and if she was going to take me home, I'd follow her.

The sun finally fell below the horizon, and a long shadow seemed to creep over the woods. It was silent. Leaves rustled in the air, but that was all. The smell of pine and dirt infiltrated my nose, and I pushed back a bush as I searched for my beloved.

“Lucy?”

“*Here, Randeeeee...*” She called. Her voice dropped to a low whisper, not her usual sound. I didn’t care.

A small shiver ran up my spine, and my hair stood up on the back of my neck. I was nervous, but excited, and confused. I was entranced with the idea of seeing my sweet Lucy again; how I wanted to hold her one last time.

I realized suddenly I was deep into the woods now, following the voice intently, not looking back, much less paying attention to where I was going. I couldn’t see my cabin anymore, and it was almost completely dark now.

“*Randy!*” Lucy hissed.

“I’m coming!” I yelled desperately. “I can’t find you!”

“Right here,” She said suddenly.

As I pushed my way through the brush, I emerged in a small clearing.

My heart pounded furiously. I thought I’d found her this time.

Lucy was not there. But something else was.

A something, a thing, stood in front of me, on all fours. It was nearly humanoid, with human hands and tufts of hair on its head, but it ended there. Its hips contorted and merged with its back, its knees twisted backwards. Its front arms were much too long, and its back arched as it looked up at me. It stood more like a deer than a human.

“Hi, Randy!” It beamed, smiling. It only had a few teeth, but they were thin and sharp looking. Its eyes were small and bulging, and looking every which way.

The thing was trying desperately to be human, but it was anything but. Its body bulged and moved as its shape shifted, trying to replicate my own humanity. Its knees began to crack and break as they twisted around. The thing stood up, now facing me, its arms hanging limply at its sides.

I turned to flee, too shocked to even scream. As I began to run, it pounced on me, sinking its little teeth into my shoulder. I tried to pull myself away, but it was no use, the thing had me.

I scratched at it and screamed, but I was too weak compared to this thing. My old muscles howled at me to stop, but my brain told me to continue. The thing sunk its teeth deeper into my shoulder and pulled until it ripped my flesh away. It then went for my neck, and I was gone before I could even try to resist anymore.

Lucy, here I come.

Guiding Flames

By KJ Engel

I assure you I don't worship Satan, or use demons for my bidding. I also most definitely still have my soul. These "witches" are laughable. Including the idea that they're primarily women. It's absurd to think that when the majority of the population are men, there wouldn't be more male witches. Of course, that's the logic of the non magical side of the male species. Always keeping women from taking over. The idea that any "normal" civilian could best a true witch is hilarious. I'd love to see someone try to capture and burn me. I'd have an enormous amount of fun with that. Don't mistake my humor for a lack of empathy. Believe me, I've been fighting the people convicting all of these innocent civilians. It makes me sick to my stomach hearing of children and animals, who've hardly had time to do any wrong, being convicted of being a witch or working with one. I make sure to avenge every one I can, if I can't manage to stop it all together.

"Hear ye, hear ye! A witch has been convicted! Trial begins this Wednesday! All are welcome for attendance! Hear ye, hear ye!..." the voice trailed off as my focus waned. Another innocent soul to be "tried" for witchcraft. They rarely get a true trial. They're assumed guilty before it begins. I can't stand the way these people solve differences. Two people argue, and if one convicts the other as a witch they're as good as dead. This one is close enough to stop. I must stop it.

"Nehemiah! Let me in this instant! I know you're home!" I shouted banging on his door. I couldn't cause enough of an impact alone, so I decided to recruit some helpers for this public demonstration. They will regret the day they chose to harm innocent children. Nehemiah opened the door and invited me inside. We spoke of the recent news, eventually landing on the newsboy from this morning.

"Another young lady wrongfully accused," Nehemiah sighed, shaking his head. These tragedies were often talked about amongst all of the witches. We despised the idea of our name being slandered, and innocent beings being slaughtered because of it. We'd often spoken of how wonderful it would be to prove them wrong, but had rarely found a way to do it. This time, I refused to back down.

"We're going to put an end to this. Gather as many witches as you possibly can to go to this trial. When they inevitably light the fire, we shall channel it towards those responsible. Let them never forget."

With that, I left.

"How does the jury find this lady?" The judge boomed over the murmuring crowd.

"Guilty!"

Of course she was. The crowd knew what the result would be. She never stood a chance. The executioners had been prepping the stake the entire morning. Today, things would be different. We had gathered roughly twenty witches from all across town to witness the execution. Our plan to put an end to the trials seemed promising.

The crowd closed in around the stake as the young woman was dragged, tied up, to the stake. The executioners tied her hands around the stake. The flame was lit on the end of a stick in the hands of the executioner on the left. He raised the stick above his head and lowered it to the base of the stake.

“Go!” I shouted.

At once, all the witches gathered raised their hands, manipulating the newly formed fire. It grew, and split and chased the people watching. It scalded the executioners and the judge. The jury box burst into flames. A panic arose and everyone ran in different directions from the multiple flames, bursting with given life. A few stopped and saw the people at the center. They screamed something, most likely an attempt for our conviction, but were ultimately scared away by an approaching flame.

My eyes landed on the young lady at the stake as she watched the chaos. Our flames skillfully avoided her. She almost seemed to be laughing, although terrified. Once the crowd had scattered, I walked towards her.

“Do not be afraid, please,” I said, untying her hands, “We’re here to show these horrendous men what real witches can do.”

She was clearly trembling, rightfully so considering she nearly lost her life, but her eyes showed an intense thankfulness.

A few armed men had returned. The lady ran, I am unsure where, leaving the real witches to deal with them.

“Get them!” one of the men shouted.

It took every ounce of composure not to laugh in their faces. They raised burning clubs, swords, and pitchforks. All were immediately thrown from their hands. One man made the mistake of looking me in the eye. I raised him in the air, just enough to scare him, not intending to cause too much harm. The screech he produced made me finally lose my composure. I laughed in his face. The rest of the men took off running, and I set him down. He scrambled backwards, and took off, nearly tripping every other step.

“If you’ve learned your lesson, you’ll stop this madness!” Nehemiah yelled after them.

As we were leaving, I heard a small chuckle behind me. I turned, prepared for another fight, only to see a child no older than five.

“You guys are cool!” He exclaimed.

“Thomas, get back here right now!” a worried scream from what I assumed was the boy’s mother. I turned, and she flinched as our eyes met.

“There’s no need to be afraid, so long as you aren’t a witch hunter,” I said, calmly.

“Mommy, maybe this lady can help!” The little boy ran towards his mother.

“Of course, what do you need help with?” I asked, slowly following. The little boy eagerly grabbed his mother’s hand. She, reluctantly, led me to their side of the village.

“The water has been drained for a week now. None of the wealthy folk will help us to refill it. We’ve had to walk across the town to get any water.”

I nodded, and peered into their water supply. Nothing seemed amiss. I requested to be taken to the source, which the mother seemed much happier to get me out of her house than

bring her to it. When we arrived, I found the pipe; it seemed to be blocked, but I couldn't tell what it was. I used the water to create a vacuum, pulling the blockade out. A homemade toy horse shot out.

"I'm assuming this is yours," I said, handing the boy his toy, "The water should be running again. If you ever need anything else, don't hesitate to ask."

I began my walk home.

Several days later there was a knock on my door. I assumed it would be some idiotic person coming to convict me. I opened the door. Half the town was on my doorstep, led by the mother I had helped.

"This town is run by greedy men, we need your help to fix a lot of things since they won't."

I gladly followed, hoping someday we would get rid of those men.

Kyle Johnson

By Cale Harris

Hello everyone, my name is Kyle Johnson. I am a NBA basketball player with one arm. Growing up with one arm was one of the hardest things to do. Learning how to play ball and manage school without being a normal kid was tough. My family helped me tremendously through the whole process by teaching me ways to make basketball easier and helping me with schoolwork. Ever since I was a kid I always knew I wanted to be a basketball player. It was the love of my life. Every time I picked up the ball I felt like everyone else and not just the kid with one arm.

I grew up in Detroit Michigan with my mom and dad and my two little brothers. We all played basketball and I am two years older than them. I started playing when I was 4 and made it through grade school enjoying every minute of it. My 8th grade year going into high school I knew I wanted to go to the next level. My dad made contraptions that made it easier for me to lift and do drills. I worked all summer long and my freshman year I started varsity which was a huge accomplishment to me. We ended up having a good season but lost in regionals to a very good team. Next year I knew we had to work extra hard to beat them.

Sophomore season we beat them and were undefeated the whole school went crazy at state and we were state champions. We continued to follow this and be three time state champions my junior and senior year. I had scouts coming from all over to watch me play but one really stuck out to me. The University of Alabama offered me a full ride to play ball there. I went and sat on the bench my whole freshman year. I knew I had to prove myself my sophomore year which I did. I came out and dropped 25 points in my first sophomore game which everyone noticed. We started winning more and more and I kept playing great. My junior year came along and I broke my ankle the second game which was devastating. I didn't know if I would ever play again but I had faith and my family. My parents were super supportive and they helped with everything. My teammates continued to have a decent season but I knew I had to come back next year. Senior season rolled around and I was all healed up and back to being able to play. I worked all summer to get back in shape and work on my game. First game I dropped 30 points and I knew it was gonna be a good season. We ended the year undefeated winning the finals.

After reality set in I knew I wanted to play in the NBA. It was a dream of mine since I was a kid. So I went to the NBA draft and went in the third round to the LA Lakers which was a huge accomplishment for me. Me and my family were so excited to see where this journey took me and I was super proud that even with only one arm I proved to be better than others. My advice to kids or anyone like me is to keep working and everything always happens for a reason so don't give up.

The Day I Met Him

By Matilin Maxey

I was scrolling through my Instagram, per usual, when I received a notification. Someone had replied to one of my comments.

"Hey, ask me about my cats. I'd love to tell you." He said.

He'd spend the next 30 minutes telling me about his cats, Kevin and Marsh. We talked for three hours that first day. It was quite nice. He'd talk, I'd listen. I'd talk, he'd listen. I didn't have friends at the time, so it was nice to have someone to talk to. Someone to listen. He helped me make friends, actually. He helped me open up and talk to people. Little did I know at the time, he would be the one able to help me find myself. Something I never would have accomplished, if not for him.

"Good morning," He'd say. He said it every single morning. There wasn't one he missed. "How are you doing? Do you have any plans for today?" Again, our usual conversation starter.

"No, not really. Just school." Every day was the same routine, but it never felt like that with him. He would always have something to talk about. Something to share with me. We lived nowhere near each other, but he still felt like home.

We talked for months and months. We had played games together. We talked all the time. I had grown an attachment to him, but I had also grown an attachment to other friends at school.

On Friday, December 3, 2021, my group of friends at school invited me to go bowling with them on Sunday evening. I reluctantly agreed to do so. That night, when I was getting everything put together for the next day that evening, I texted him to let him know that I would be busy that Sunday evening. Still no reply. I had no reply for a week, but I still kept texting him, just in case. I was very worried.

On Sunday, December 5, 2021, I had just left the house. I went with my cousin and my sister. We drove to the Salem bowling alley and we waited for everyone to show up. As soon as they did, we started our game. I couldn't really hear much over the sounds of the heavy bowling balls hitting the floor and the music. Either way, we were all having a good time. Laughing and joking around with one another. But I had a really bad feeling in my stomach. I got really dizzy and hot, but I decided it was nothing. One of the girls was taking pictures with my phone, and I saw a missed call in my notification bar. My stomach sank even further. I couldn't return the call at the moment because I didn't want people to think I was being rude, so I put it away. We continued our bowling, and then we all went home. I had a pretty good night, but as soon as I got into my cousin's car, I opened my Instagram. It was a message from him.

"My best friend, I know that I haven't been texting you back and it's because I just got back from the ward again. The thoughts have been going crazy again, so they sent me back. I don't know if you'll get this or not, but I need to talk to you immediately."

I didn't even know my stomach could sink further than it has, three times before. Something bad has happened.

As my fingertips hit the keys as fast as they can go, without caring about spelling mistakes, I feel the tears well up in my eyes as I read another message.

"This is his mother. I am so sorry, but he passed away just a few hours ago in a wreck. He left a note for you before he left and he told me to send it to you. He told me a lot about you. He really did like you. I'm so sorry, honey."

My heart broke. I had lost the closest person to me. I felt mad at myself for ignoring his message. I felt hatred towards myself because of how things turned out because of it. I was shattered. All of my confidence was destroyed. A part of me was missing. Who was I going to talk to? Not him.

To this day, I still regret ever ignoring those messages. I still stay up way too late, just in case my friends need anything at all. I drain myself every day to put effort into other people. He was such a good and genuine person. He was the person I wanted to be. I took after him. I listened to the music he shared with me. We played the same games. We both played guitar, but he was better at drums. He was funny. He had a nice laugh and an even better smile. I would give anything just to see it one last time.

The Dark Guard Remains

By Brayden Rutledge

Chapter 1: "The Return"

"Alone, The Captain stood over the remains of Knights in Armor as dark as Night, atop the corpses, One Red Rose. The Royal Guard's Signature. The Man arose from his kneel, Longsword in hand. A Silent vow was made, A Shady Deal was Committed. The Captain in Armor as dark as Shadow, took the rose and fused it to his chest plate for all to see. The Captain turned and began his march to the Capital." Or so says the Legend of King Frederick

Captain Fredrick of The Dark Guard arrived at the Village of Duransville, He was stared at by guards and Peasants alike. It was only in Legends that his Guard existed, Men encased by shadow and darkness, that even god never looked down upon them for fear of Lucifer to look back. These are mere legends, as he went to a Blacksmith. He entered the Blacksmithy with 10,000 gold in tow, and in a voice raspy and deep, "Give me your finest Poleaxe, and Your finest Longsword. Some daggers as well." The blacksmith nodded as he took the bag of gold from the Dark Guard.

The weapons were given immediately as he put them onto his body and into sheathes. He stepped out as he was approached by a Young boy, The Captain watched the boy with intrigue, then the Boy raised a wooden sword, "Demon!", the boy smiled playfully as he tossed a wooden sword to Fredrick. He picked it up and got into a stance, "Nay, I am a Man." He let the boy attack, he dodged and blocked his feeble attacks. Fredrick knocked the wooden sword away with a hum.

The Boy laughed as Fredrick nodded, and left the wooden sword with him. He began to walk off further down the line, his new weapons resulted in him in his prominence. He stepped down further as a group of roadmen appeared around him. "Look at that..We got ourselves a Fake Dark guard!" They spoke aloud, Fredrick readied his poleaxe. "My name is Sir Fredrick Vin Staholmen the XXIIInd, I am the Last and The

Captain of The Dark Guard. I have bested the Royal Guard, The Assassin's Guild, and you will fall the same." He noticed some realize he wasn't faking and sprinted off. He was attacked and he slammed his axe head down onto the first man's back, blood covered the ground as he pulled it up, and slammed his spike into the next man, gutting him. He killed each roadman without hints of mercy. He sat drenched in blood of the Unholy, and he walked on. He flicked his axe into some grass, the visceral being launched away. He put the poleaxe over his shoulder as he walked.

Chapter 2: "The Royal Hunt"

Fredrick arrived at a Lord's residence nearly 100 kilometers from the Capital. He entered the Lord's Protected Village finding only suffering and sickness. He was approached by what appeared to be a Nun, with a loud begging for him to kill her. He obliged by unsheathing a dagger, and stabbing it into her heart, "Close your eyes, Sister. Your suffering ends.." she smiled and fell back as he took his blade out from her. He sighed and kneeled praying for her as he stood up, a Bunch of guards in golden armor that barely fit them approached, "You Murderer! We will maim you for Lord Farendale!" They cried as he chuckled. "Gluttonous Pigs have no right to call me a Murderer.." Fredrick replied as he unsheathed his Longsword. He charged ahead. The Guards, fat with Gluttony, were too slow to react. His blade touched flesh and bone, chopping away at the Gluttonous Guards. He began to walk past their mutilated and Bloated corpses. Upon reaching the Lord's Castle, He kicked in the side door of the Lord's Castle as he grabbed a Torch.

He tossed the Torch into the Horses stables, which was filled with unfeed corpses of Horses. He went and busted in the Lord's door with his poleaxe, as he released a deep cry, "LORD FARNEDALE". Guards rushed towards him, and they in turn were sent to whatever gods would take them. A Maiden appeared, a Beautiful Girl, "The Legends were true.." she had cuts and bruises upon her body.

He put his poleaxe away, as he had gashes in his armor. "Where is that Gluttonous Bastard of a Lord?" She motioned upstairs, as he stepped upstairs he questioned how the man became a lord. Soon, He found a room with a bed, and there laid a Ball of flesh. He kicked in the door, To a stench most foul. "You have come to whisk me away, Dark Angel?.." the ball of flesh spoke. Fredrick nodded as he used a dagger to cut into the flesh, ending the man's life, yet releasing something that made the Dark Guard finally peel off his helmet and vomit as he ran out of the room. He sighed as he went down the stairs, back to the woman who looked sicker now. He stepped past her as he continued on his journey to the Capital, Yet now he noticed something, a Bounty board.

When he turned to it, There sat a bounty of 1 million, The Crimes were Treason, Murder, and Assault. It was Him. The King wanted Him dead. He was the Only one who escaped the Massacre of the Dark Guard. He found two people behind him, An Assassin and a Knight from the Order of Lightning. Fredrick turned to them as he grabbed his Poleaxe, "Well? Are you here to kill me?" He asked as they shook their heads no, and kneeled to him. "Sir Fredrick of the Dark Guard, We are indebted to you. We are Members of the Dark Disciples." Fredrick was stunned, he remembered a group of Individuals who hunted for his base known as the Dark Disciples.

He sighed deeply now as he remembered the Day one found them, and all they asked was for Food. They were given some and asked if they wished to become a Dark Guard. They denied and walked away, 30 feet later he had an arrow in his head. He sighed at the shame of killing that one.

"If you wish to follow, Then come. For my life's goal is to end the King of Rolandis." He turned away from the two, and began to walk once again. He now had two inept companions, Mistress Zaya of the Dark Guild's Watchers and Sir Deni of the Order of Lightning, both had their skills and abilities to an acceptable point of service of the Dark Guard. He sighed as he led them to a Military Outpost, and knocked.

The Guards rushed out weapons pointed at him and his entourage. He cleared his throat, "I am Captain Frederick, The Last of The Dark Guard. This is Mistress Zaya and Sir Deni. I implore you to drop your weapons, and surrender yourselves to my command. For I will bring you a reward better than Wealth, The King's head on the tip of my Poleaxe's Spike." The Soldiers were hesitant, and one asked, "How do we know you're a Dark Guard of Old?" He showed the Red rose now a part of his armor. "The signature of the Royal Guard, who slaughtered my new recruits and men of Old." The Soldier who asked nodded and kneeled to the Captain, then the Outpost commander rushed out trying to strike Frederick, and in result, Mistress Zaya sent a short sword into his neck and a parry dagger in his guts.

She removed her blades and Frederick kicked the dead man to the ground, Zaya chuckled, "No filth can touch our Captain!", with a soft sigh, The second highest rank bowed and kneeled to Frederick, "The Legends are true, and the King has lied. You are Knights, You are Shadow, You are Death. Let us serve you, Captain." The fellow soldiers followed as he smiled under his helmet.

Frederick went inside the Outpost to the highest point he could reach. "Let it be known men and Women of Rolandis, The Dark Guard is no more, but what remains is The Darkness of Frederick. We WILL end the King, We WILL Win. Glory to the Fallen, and Peace to the Dead! Tonight, The Shadows Crawl!"

Chapter 3: "The Night the Shadows Haunt"

Upon the arrival of Night, Fredericks force of 150 men began their march towards the Capital, Gathering recruits and slaughtering others. They left burning royalty in their wake as the army arrived with 500 strong on the outskirts of the Capital City, Durandal's Rest, and with a horn bellowing. The siege begins with trebuchets and catapults launching at the Walls of the City as Frederick entered the city with Zaya and Deni in tow. While his men besieged the wall, Frederick accompanied by Zaya and Deni by his side, walked the city where he found guards a plenty lined up before him. In the rear, sat

the Royal Guards which angered Frederick that the Royal Guard would have the nerve to sit and watch as their rank and files were to be Slaughtered. Frederick grabbed his Poleaxe and nodded to his entourage, "FOR THE FALLEN!!!" He charged with his entourage into the Guards with pure contempt and rage. The bodies of guards began to pile as the three slaughtered the many guards. Frederick was stacking many bodies unto his kill count. The countless corpses of his weapons Unknown to even his former dark guards. Deni used his blessing of Lightning and his blade to slaughter many a foe. Zaya using her agility went from being in front to behind the lines of the Guards, she rushed the Royal guards and in result got a large blade through her chest.

Narrative Snapshots Collection

By: Faith Smith

Living at 221B Baker Street

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” I say in my best deep-voiced-slightly-aristocratic-male-British-accent, which, admittedly, isn’t very good. *But it certainly is a jolly old time.* I make it through about three more lines before collapsing into a fit of giggles. Next chapter. Mom’s turn. She takes a deep breath, tries to keep a straight face, and begins. “Looks like the chap lost ‘is ‘ead, ‘e did.” My mom instilled me with a love of reading, and even now she shows me the door to wonderful new worlds. It’s just good, old-fashioned, *smashing* fun with my mother, me, and one brilliant detective.

Family Ties and Falling Stars

3:00 a.m. The night was dark and still, for once not in a rush, but full of pure wonder. Watching comets streak across the heavens, I felt the universe had chosen to share a moment of magic with me. I looked over at my parents, snuggled in lawn chairs beside me in the cool air. It was special, sharing this night together—our hopes and dreams under millions of stars. It was a night for wishes. A night for dreams. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but for now, I was content to just wave at the stars.

Into the Woods

Standing at the cliff’s summit, a slight chill in the air announcing the arrival of fall, I realize the vivid display of color is a message: Seasons change, they always do, but for the moment, all the time in the world was mine. Time to walk down trails with my family, leaves crunching pleasantly underfoot. Time for Mom’s “Turn around for a picture!” with Dad’s arm around me, adding to dozens of snapshots she has taken. Time to realize that no picture can capture this—the fresh air, fun, and peace that comes with being surrounded by people I love.

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

Time was running ominously short. The fate of the free world rested on my shoulders. I dove through the escape hatch (okay, it was just a cardboard tunnel) and crawled out the other end. *Mission accomplished.* In the enormous cardboard fort my dad built (which took up the floor for months), I was an explorer, homemaker, and superspy. My parents encouraged my imagination, playing inside with me for hours. I wish those days could have lasted forever. Now, the fort’s gone, but the refrigerator still works. We need a new dryer and washing machine, so maybe the fort will return.

The Swashbucklers' Society of Cabin Boys and One Ship's Girl

Faith Smith

April 23, 1829

Whoever thought piracy was easy is either brilliant, or the greatest fool who ever sailed the high seas. It is the third day since I have fallen in with this motley crew of pickpockets, runaways, and general miscreants. They are an utter disgrace to the world of pirating. The "captain" of this ragtag gang of ragamuffins—Flynn—I believe he said his name was, is different from the others. I rather wonder why he is here with them at all. I dare say that if it wasn't for his keen eyes and annoyingly sharp wit, I would have already stolen the dingy and rowed my own way to Fair Winds Isle, as I somehow doubt I will make it there aboard this ship.

Trixie closed her journal with a sigh, swaying slightly as she stood, adjusting to the rhythm of the ship under her feet. She made her way up onto the deck, where the pack of boys had assembled. Christophe, whom Trixie judged to be around eleven years old, and Emil, perhaps thirteen, were tossing buttons into cups they had arranged in front of them. Moritz and Nenad, quickly nicknamed "The Terrible Two" by Trixie for their monstrous size and even more terrifying tempers, were glowering at her from the rail. Pierre, the pint-sized reason she had been discovered, scampered across the deck up to where Flynn stood steering the ship. When Flynn's eyes met hers, they hardened slightly.

So, Trixie thought, I suppose nothing has changed in the last two hours. Or the last two days for that matter. I am an outcast even among outcasts.

Flynn handed the wheel to Pierre, who was barely tall enough to see over it. As he walked over to her, tension evident in his stride, Christophe and Emil began snickering, doubtlessly thinking Trixie was about to land in hot water.

"I think the subject of your place here has been avoided long enough," he began, adjusting the collar of his brown jerkin that kept blowing up. "I very considerably did not toss you in the brig the moment you were discovered stowing away aboard the *Swooping Gull*."

"Why didn't you?" Trixie asked saucily, determined not to let Flynn intimidate her. Despite the fact that he was four inches taller than her, forcing her to look up to meet his gaze, he couldn't be more than a year older than her sixteen years.

Flynn frowned. "Because regardless of what you think, I consider myself to be a gentleman—"

"Not a pirate?" Trixie couldn't resist asking.

Emil, one of the more serious boys, shook his head in a scolding manner at Flynn. “The girl’s right, Flynn. You should have tied her up and thrown her overboard. No bold thing such as herself would ever appreciate a boring, proper Englishman. She needs a little bit of trouble in her otherwise plain life to stir up that fiery passion betrayed by her flaming curls. If we’re to be pirates, we might as well have our first walking of the plank.” With a quick wink at Trixie, he made himself scarce as Flynn glared witheringly at his retreating back.

“The truth of the matter is that this is my ship, and you have stowed away with no intention to pay for your voyage to... Well, I don’t know that, either. Where in Neptune’s ocean were you planning to go? You’ve been aboard for three days without so much as a word to your intentions. It’s not safe out here, you know. There’s pirates, the King’s Navy, and all manner of sea creatures lurking beneath the surface.”

Trixie folded her arms and leaned against the rail, letting the coolness of the sea spray calm her before she spoke. It would never do to tell him about the island she was determined to find. He would laugh at her, or worse, think she was out of her mind like some of the villagers. Then she would likely find herself marooned somewhere.

“I was only planning to stow away until we reached the port of New Haven. I thought this was some kind of trading vessel, with a crew too busy to search the cargo hold very thoroughly. And no one would have ever known I was there, had little Pierre not felt an overwhelming urge to peek in every single crate in the hold.” Pierre grinned sheepishly from his spot behind the wheel. “Where I’m going isn’t any of your business.”

“I think that hiding out on my ship makes it my business,” Flynn retorted. “You could be a dangerous fugitive, or something.”

Trixie smiled at this description. “Even if I was, you lot are *pirates*. At least so you say. I haven’t heard of your ship nor what crimes you have committed. You couldn’t exactly turn me in to the authorities, now could you?”

“Hmm. No, I suppose that wouldn’t be the smartest move,” Flynn grinned. “Though you had best be careful what you say,” he advised her, glancing at Moritz and Nenad, who seemed to be monitoring the conversation carefully. “Some of the fellows might not take too kindly to your misguided notions that we aren’t the most fearsome pirates these waters have ever known since Blackbeard.”

“Look, I’m willing to barter passage. I brought some money, but no ship in the harbor would have let me buy passage. The guards would have dragged me back to the palace in an instant.”

Flynn’s ears perked up. *The palace?* There was something going on, but Trixie was as tight-lipped as he would be in her situation. He supposed there was no real harm in letting her stay for the moment, until she revealed her true purpose for running away. Besides, her bantering wit might prove to be more entertaining than the boys’ endless pranks, complaints, and questions that filled all waking hours. He ran a hand along his face and nearly groaned at the thought of the work it would take to turn them into fearsome pirates.

“That won’t be necessary. What kind of reputation will we get if people ever find out our booty was given to us from a girl who wanted to run away? No, you will earn your passage. Starting with peeling two dozen potatoes for this week’s soup.”

Nenad’s eyes visibly lit up. *Undoubtedly, it had been his week to peel potatoes*, Trixie thought, sighing. The large boy’s hands looked far more suited to hefting a heavy sword than delicately peeling potatoes, anyway. *He probably peeled as much of the potato as the skins.*

After toiling in the galley for the past two hours, the fresh air was a relief as Trixie hefted the bucket of potato peelings over the rail. She felt in her pocket for her handkerchief, but it was nowhere to be found. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Christophe’s mouth twitching. “Christophe,” she turned on him, hand outstretched. He shrugged innocently.

Flynn came up to her grinning wickedly, and he handed her a mop and a bucket. She felt a tug at her pocket and pulled out her handkerchief, where it always was. Christophe laughed behind his hands but went back to polishing the rail when she held up the mop threateningly. Emil laughed aloud. “Maybe it’s time we practiced our sword fighting, lads. Brooms and buckets would make good mock swords.”

Trixie allowed herself a small smile. “I think I could give you a lesson in the art,” she teased Emil. She paused to wipe her hands on the blue tunic that someone had given her. The dress she had been wearing wasn’t well suited to climbing up ladders or swabbing the deck. At home she would have been stuck doing her Latin exercises about now. If nothing came of this venture, the sense of freedom, even if it came knee-deep in suds, was well worth it. She glanced at Flynn, who was consulting his compass with a frown. He was back in his grim, captain’s mode.

“What’s eating him,” Trixie asked Christophe as she leaned on the mop.

“Oh him,” Christophe shrugged. “It’s harder for him than the rest of us. Most of us boys ran away from orphanages to become cabin boys. We wanted to explore and see the world. One by one, pirates attacked our ships, stealing our goods. The ships had to turn back, the companies were bankrupt, and we were turned out. Flynn was the son of a pirate captain. He stole merchants’ goods and treasure, but never killed anyone. One day, the Royal Navy caught up to them.” Christophe shook his head sadly. “They were as merciless as Blackbeard himself. They left no survivors.” Trixie looked down. “Except Flynn. When the officers boarded his ship, Flynn’s father told him to hide. Flynn was watching from beneath the stairs when his father was killed. I think it taught him a lesson in ruthlessness that has made him determined to take his father’s place as the captain of a ship.”

“So he recruited all of you and wants to take on the Royal Navy?” Trixie asked, shocked.

“No, he only wants to take on the captain, Yuka Drustan. He’s one of the best military strategists in the entire fleet.”

“And Flynn is planning to attack him?” Trixie exclaimed. She quickly lowered her voice as Flynn shot her a hard look at her outburst. “You mean he plans to challenge the captain to a duel to reclaim his father’s ship?”

Christophe nodded solemnly. “He could do it, too. Flynn’s the best swordsman I’ve ever seen. He says that his father taught him. If he were to teach us all, we could be real pirates, for sure.”

Trixie looked up at the stern boy navigating across the sea with the command of one twice his age.

Though he appeared completely confident, she could see he was struggling to turn the ship a few degrees starboard, as the wind stubbornly refused to yield to the bulk of the ship.

“What if you tried tacking?” Trixie called up to him. “If you ever want to get where you’re going before we run out of food, you’ll need to go faster. It’s a technique I read about in a book. You sail in a zig-zag pattern—”

“I do know what tacking is.” Flynn interrupted brusquely. “It isn’t my first time on a ship, you know.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I appreciate the advice. I just have many things on my mind, that’s all.”

Flynn scowled. That girl had some nerve to stow away aboard and then try to tell him how to run his *own* ship! Then again, she had a point. The boys in his crew were runaways and survivors from ships that had been attacked by pirates. They were cabin boys, not warriors. If she truly wanted to see them act like pirates, maybe he ought to make her walk the plank! The thought momentarily cheered him, even though he knew he could never carry out the threat. He made a mental note of it, though, in case the situation became desperate.

April 27, 1829

The ship has been rolling for hours. If this goes on much longer, I will be grateful I didn't sample Nenad's fish stew. The boys have the makings of a good crew, but they need the proper training and motivation. They still feel the excitement of being without adult supervision. Flynn tries to keep them in a tight line most of the time, though. It's strange how invested I've become in their success in the course of a few days. Pierre is like the younger brother I never had, and it turns out that Moritz and Nenad are nice enough if pacified with crab cakes. Flynn remains an enigma. He wants to enjoy the company of his crew, but I think he feels too responsible to allow himself the pleasure. I've decided to tell him where I've been trying to go. The journey to Fair Winds Isle, often called the Island of Forgotten Dreams by the people of my kingdom, is said to have the power to reignite long-extinguished passions of those who brave the waters to reach it. If one were to bring a branch from a tree back, all

those who look upon it will remember their deepest wish. If Mother and Father were to see it, they might remember the sense of adventure they must have once had, and allow me to have the freedom I desire. They've become stiff, stuffy rulers. Surely something once filled them with wonder and burning curiosity.

The clanging of a bell on deck snapped Trixie out of her reverie. She rushed on deck, where torrents of rain were cascading over the ship's deck. Flynn was fighting the wheel as his wet hair whipped across his face. The other boys gasped when they ran out from below deck.

The storm was unlike any they had ever seen. The mast creaked ominously, and the sails flapped about uncontrollably, unsecured by the ropes and sheets. Moritz rushed to heave on the rope closest to him, trying to hoist the sails down before the wind ripped them at the seams. Nenad hurried to help him as the other boys stood staring helplessly at the chaos around them.

It was something out of every sailor's worst nightmare. What little light there was came in short flashes, as lightning streaked across the midnight sky. Pierre whimpered in fear. Flynn was shouting orders that were barely audible over the roar of the wind. If Flynn couldn't get his crew to take control of the situation, the ship, and their lives, would surely be lost.

Suddenly, a crack split the air, and a crossbeam that held a sail fell down towards Flynn. He dived to the side, but was pinned by the ankle and cried out in pain. Trixie instantly took action. "Moritz!" she screamed. "Help me lift the beam off of Flynn! Emil, help Nenad with that rope." The boys rushed to follow her orders. "Pierre!" the little boy looked fearfully at her, his face as white as a sheet. "Tie down whatever you can, including yourself!" Pierre sprung forward and began coiling rope around the barrels that were rolling about on deck. She ran up to the top deck where Flynn lay gritting his teeth underneath the heavy beam. "Now," she yelled at Moritz, and together they managed to lift the beam off Flynn's foot.

"I'll take him below, wrap his ankle, and come help the others," Moritz told her, hoisting Flynn in his arms, and she was grateful for his quick understanding of the situation. As the ship lurched to the side, Trixie realized she'd forgotten one crucial thing: the wheel. No one was close enough except her, so she lunged for it and hung on with all her might. The storm fought to tear it away from her, but she tore a strip from her sleeves to wrap around her hands to keep hold of the slippery wood.

After what felt like years, Trixie's eyes began to see that the storm had calmed and sunrise was making its appearance. She stretched as though coming out of a dream, and blinked as things became clear around her. The boys, *now officially a ship's crew*, she thought, looked ragged and weary, but they were alive and smiling.

Trixie suddenly began laughing in relief. "Hooray!" The boys began to cheer. "Three cheers for Trixie! The hero of the day!"

Moritz helped Flynn hobble on deck and find a chair. After assuring every boy that his ankle was only sprained, not broken, Flynn returned them to their duties. Trixie began to help the boys repair the damages when Flynn stopped her.

“Perhaps I’d better make you my first mate, now,” he told her sheepishly. “Some captain I turned out to be,” he shook his head ruefully.

“Nonsense. The boys had just never been in a situation like that. And you should have seen the way they worked together to save the ship. Flynn, I think you’ve got yourself a fine crew.”

Flynn nodded his head slowly. “I think you’re right. Facing the danger together forced them to rely upon one another. How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for us? You saved the ship, Trix. And our lives. For that, I’ll always be grateful. More than you know.” He smiled at her, and the expression lit up his entire face.

Trixie sucked in a breath, hoping Flynn didn’t notice how warm her cheeks were. She had more important matters to attend to, even if the young captain was like a figure out of her adventure books. “Are you sure that ankle of yours is going to be alright?”

“Yes, Trix,” Flynn laughed. “Moritz, who has turned out to be a surprisingly good nurse, has checked it at least a dozen times.”

“Flynn...” Trixie hesitated, afraid to broach the subject. “Christophe told me about what happened to your father—that you plan to go after the captain of the Royal Navy to reclaim your father’s ship.”

Flynn’s face lost its grin. “Well, it’s true. The *Swooping Gull* isn’t big enough to carry many goods to be at sea for long stretches of time. The boys are too young to be traders, and if we step foot back on land, most of them will be shipped off to orphanages or become messenger boys and chimney sweeps. Piracy seemed like our only option to stay out here, where we have the freedom we always wanted. We’re a bit new at the ‘Avast ye landlubbers,’ pillaging, and poor hygiene aspects, though.”

“We’ll get the knack of it in time, though, I’d wager,” little Pierre cut in enthusiastically from the crow’s nest.

Flynn chuckled. “I always forget that the boys like to eavesdrop from up there. But, truly, I am determined to do this. I’ve been planning it for a long time, and as soon as my ankle heals, I will be ready.”

“You should not have to do this on your own,” Trixie pleaded.

“You think me incapable of handling some old sea dog captain?” Flynn joked, although the tremble in his voice made the joke fall flat.

“I didn’t say that—”

“Or you’re too terribly afraid I shall perish in my very brave but foolhardy attempt and you will be left to captain this gang by yourself?”

Trixie bit back a laugh. “No, you keep twisting my words,” she huffed. Flynn flashed a gleaming smile as the wind ruffled his sun-bleached hair. “You’re incorrigible, you know?” Trixie shook her head. “Captain,” she

gave him a mock salute, "I shall now relieve Pierre of lookout duty. By your leave," and she swung onto the rope ladder suspended from the crow's nest and made her way up to the top.

After a few hours, the gentle lapping of the waves across the bow lulled her into a soft stupor for a minute. With a quick toss of her head, Trixie grabbed her spyglass and peered through its lens towards the point where sky met the rolling ocean.

There, under full speed, bearing down upon the *Swooping Gull*, billowing black sails appeared on the horizon.

Drama

Alden's Great Bang

By Franklin Addison

Alden, Businessy One, Businessy Two, Businessy Three, Ski-Mask

[the curtains are closed, car horns and yelling are played, a slow piano rhythm begins to play before speeding up and covering the rest of the noise before it all stops suddenly. The curtain opens slightly allowing *Alden* to enter before closing again. *Alden* is a chimp-like figure in a worn suit jacket and torn pants, a white button up with a perfectly ironed tie, he steps forward scratching at his head. He pulls out a paper from his jacket and begins to read from it]

Alden: "Hello, my name is Alden Lambert and I love music." [he folds the paper and puts it back into his pocket. The curtain opens revealing a piano surrounded by noticeably fake trees. *Alden* approaches the piano and stretches out his ape fingers and begins to play, after playing the piano for about fifteen seconds, a group of people in mid-80's business attire begin to walk across the stage before stopping before the piano.]

Businessy One: "What does this monkey believe he is doing? Does he believe that to be music?"

Businessy Two: "I have no idea, it's insulting actually, that a chimp would ever try to do such a thing."

Businessy Three: "Observe." [*Businessy Three* approaches the piano and pushes *Alden* to the side before playing himself. He plays noticeably worse and is more arrogant while playing. He slams the keys and does a little made up riff before closing the piano. *Businessy One and Businessy Two* begin to clap and bravo *Businessy Three* before *Businessy Three* takes a bow and walks off.]

Businessy Three: "That's how it's done, Mr. Monkey."

[the *Businessys* exit, leaving *Alden* on his own next to the piano, he slumps to the floor, discouraged. He crawls towards the piano, opening the lid, and pulls out a wad of cash. A man in a ski-mask walks on to the stage, *Alden* hands the man the cash.]

Alden: "I changed my mind, I find it necessary."

Ski-Mask: "I knew you would, this isn't an ape's world."

Alden: "What does that mean?"

Ski-Mask: "I don't know."

[*Ski-Mask* exits with the wad of money, an immediate bang and scream is heard off stage. *Alden* sits at his piano and begins to play. More banging and screaming can be heard, *Ski-Mask* yells from off stage]

Ski-Mask: "You will listen to the ape and you will like it!"

[After a pause, the *Businessys* re-enter, their clothes are charred and torn, their hair is blown back, and they are barefoot. They approach *Alden* at the piano before sitting on the ground next to him, *Alden* turns to face them and they all flinch]

Alden: "I am glad you gentlefolk have changed your minds, I was seriously beginning to worry."

Businessy Two: "Of course, Mr. Monkey, there is nothing we love more than to listen to you play."

[*Alden* tries to smile but it falls from his face, he turns to his piano and begins to play for a twenty seconds. He turns to the *Businessys* and they clap. He turns back to the piano and plays again, this cycle goes on for about two minutes before *Alden's* fingers fall off and sticks to the keys. The *businessys* go to clap but don't, they stand and exit. *Ski-Mask* re-enters]

Ski-Mask: "My final payment, you have it, I assume?"

Alden: "I achieved my fame, I traded my mere minutes of joy for my very essence, here is your payment."

[*Alden* scoops up his fingers into his palms and hands them to *Ski-Mask*]

Ski-Mask: "I take payments in cash, not souls...this piano might be worth something though."

[*Ski-Mask* wheels the piano off stage leaving *Alden* alone. *Alden* sits on the floor. As a distant piano tune can be heard playing, *Alden* drops his head and the curtain closes.]

3 Petty Thieves, 2 Great Escapes, and a Department Store Santa

One Act Play By: Faith Smith

Character List:

Charlie

Clara

Willie

Nicholas

Manager

Passing Elf/Worker

SCENE 1

[Nicholas, a man in suspenders with a bushy white beard is standing onstage as a small spotlight is shone on him.]

Nicholas: In a small apartment, devoid of all cheer,
Our three friends have gathered to plan the heist of the year.
Only a single pine bough hung carefully above the door,
Marks the season as the Christmas of 1934.
In downtown Manhattan, a city of snow and of lights,
I see the naughty and nice, what is wrong and what's right.
So come gather round, with your family and friends,
And follow our merry band of thieves 'til the end.
Could petty thieves ever help Christmas on its way?
Or will they find nothing but coal in their stockings come Christmas Day?

[Exit Nicholas]

[Charlie is onstage as the curtain rises. Enter Clara and Willie.]

Clara: *[Comes through the door shaking snow from the scarf wound around her neck; Willie follows her, flapping about in his overlong coat.]* It's a regular blizzard out there! *[to Charlie]* You had to pick a day such as this to meet, didn't you?

Charlie: Had I known you harbored such fatalistic feelings for frigidity, I would have moved the meeting to a beach in the south, just for you. Perhaps hot tea will assuage you in the meantime? *[Limps slightly as he comes over to set steaming mugs on the singular table, which is mostly covered by floor plans and strange diagrams]*

Willie: Why're you talking like that, Charlie? You don't normally use all them fancy words.

Charlie: I've been reading the dictionary. I want to practice for when we sell the merchandise. I need to be professional, you know. It makes it seem more legitimate.

Clara: [*holding the warm mug in her hands and looking distastefully about the room*] Well that's precisely what we came to talk about. So let's get started, shall we? The sooner we do, the sooner we can leave this heatless hole-in-a-wall.

Charlie: [*spreads out a checklist beside the blueprint on the table*] Christmas Eve is tomorrow. We've been plotting this heist for weeks. It's our first big break, so we can't blow it. No more raiding the tip jar or stealing fresh pies from the bakery. [*a touch more urgently*] We'll have the lives we always wanted.

Willie: [*slowly, as if he's been thinking about this for a while*] If we rob the store on Christmas Eve, won't most of the goods be gone? Everybody's already bought them.

Charlie: That's very shrewd of you, Willie. I would have thought the same thing, but I have a bit more authority on the subject. If you recall, I used to work for Macy's as a clerk before my accident. Every year it was the same--Christmas Eve was always the biggest rush. That means there will be lots of merchandise left, and lots of people around to keep security busy.

Willie: [*nods head eagerly*] And you say that you are a bad planner.

Charlie: Our plan has three stages, one for each of us. Clara—do you remember your part?

Clara: [*tosses her head as if the question insults her*] Of course I do, Charlie. I pretend to be last-minute Christmas shopping at the jewelry counter. There's normally a security guard monitoring the counter. They can be such imbeciles—shouldn't be a problem. Once I have the clerk's attention—I am used to turning heads, you know—

Willie: [*snickering to Charlie*] Is she sure *her* head's on the right way? You remember what happened last time Clara tried to seduce a security guard.

Charlie: [*grinning*] I think he ran screaming from the premises.

Willie: It was the best distraction I've ever seen.

Clara: [*glaring at the two*] It's not my fault the man has confidence problems. Anyway, while they're distracted, you two come up and ask to try on watches. We all slip some in our bags and prepare for phase two.

Charlie: [*nodding in a satisfied manner*] Right, although Clara, [*pauses until she looks at him*] let's keep the security guard scaring to a minimum, shall we?

Clara: [*waves her hands theatrically and flounces about the room to refill her mug*] Darling, you should know that I am the absolute picture of subtlety.

Charlie: [*aside to himself and the audience*] Yes, that's what I'm afraid of. [*Claps his hands*] Moving on. Once we've hit the jewelry counter, the real challenge begins.

Willie: [*in a low, dramatic voice*] The stockroom...

Clara: Why are you saying it like that?

Willie: *[in the same tone]* For eeffecctt...

Charlie: The stockroom of Macy's Department Store might as well be Santa's workshop—employees running around in cheery little elf outfits, mothers demanding to see the manager when the toy their child wants is out of stock in the main room. The security is much tighter, so nothing can be left to chance. Once we're in the hallway, Willie, you need to pick the lock to the storeroom. Clara, you need to have the bags you are going to carry in your purse ready. We grab as much as we can carry and walk out the back entrance and meet up here. Understand? *[Clara and Willie nod]* Good then. Get some rest. Tomorrow we'll be dreaming of silver and gold. *[Willie and Clara exit.] [To himself, sighing as he looks around the empty room and shivers, rubbing his slightly lame leg]* And dreaming of such a house in the countryside somewhere, where it's quiet, and there's no smog to hurt the lungs and no crowds of people to remind you that you don't have anyone.

[Curtain drops and Macy's Store counters and Christmas trees are brought in. A door on one side of the stage has a separate area that is meant to be the hallway and storeroom.]

SCENE 2

[Nicholas standing in the corner as the department store Santa. Charlie, Clara, and Willie are all on stage.]

Nicholas: 'Twas the night before Christmas, this magical night of the year,
With tinsel and sleighs, and eight tiny reindeer.
The store is warm and merry and light,
and the jewelry counter has diamonds shiny and bright.
Clara is approaching, looking lofty and half her age
With a real mink coat she "borrowed" from a theater's backstage.
Her heels are too high, her smile far too wide,
And I pity the clerk that for some time now she has eyed.
The pieces are in motion, the game is afoot.
And more people should clean their chimneys, which are blackened with soot.

Nicholas: *[ringing a bell and waving at children and passers-by inside the store and singing quietly]* Silver and gold, silver and gold, everyone wishes for silver and gold. Merry Christmas to you! God bless you and your family!

Clara: *[stopping at the jewelry counter beside the clerk and security guard]* You there! *[Clerk spots her and almost imperceptibly tugs on his collar. He looks nervous. The poor boy must be new.]* Yes, you, my good man. Do assist me with these necklaces, would you? I wish to try on this one. Yes, these diamonds here. And those ones beside it. *[Clerk nervously opens the case.]*

Charlie: *[watching a few feet away and chuckling]* The poor man, he must be new. She's playing it wonderfully. He looks nearly frightened out of his wits.

Willie: I thought she wanted to make him like her.

Charlie: I think she'll turn on the charm in a moment. Probably for the guard's sake. [*Sees the clerk sweating as Clara flings the diamonds all around, slipping a ring in her pocket when he isn't looking*] Yes, Willie, I do believe that she was born for the dramatics.

Clara: [*batting her eyes at the security guard next to the counter, guard swiveling his head, looking around to see if she is looking at someone else*] Excuse me, sir, but I just had to tell you how secure I feel in the knowledge that good men like you are watching over this store. I never worry about robbers when I'm trying on jewelry or wearing it out of the store. [*Guard smooths his hair and manages a goofy grin.*]

Nicholas: [*to audience*] I think she has natural talent, don't you?

Charlie: [*nudges Willie*] Let's go. [*Clerk eagerly moves on to these new customers, leaving Clara asking the guard which necklace he prefers on her*] Could we see some of your gold watches, please? [*Willie sneaks another necklace as the clerk turns around. Nicholas fixes him with a hard stare as his hand returns to his pocket. Willie starts nervously.*]

Willie: [*whispering to Charlie*] Charlie, that store Santa is staring at me. You think he saw?

Charlie: [*Looking around and only seeing shoppers*] You're worrying too much. You're seeing things. I'm sure he was just walking out for a break or something.

Willie: Aw, Charlie, I guess you're right. I just can't help feeling like he knows something—you shoulda seen the way he was looking at me with those bright eyes of his. [*more thoughtfully*] He had a pretty good costume, too. His beard didn't even look fake and his nose really was like a cherry.

Charlie: [*Distractedly walking away from the counter with Willie, watching Clara wave goodbye to the guard before coming up behind them as the three turn down the hallway*] Well, Macy's is wealthy. They've got resources. They undoubtedly just hired the best department store Santa money could buy.

Clara: [*smoothly and with great self-satisfaction*] Well boys, how do you think that went?

Charlie: Clara, I never had a doubt.

Clara: And everyone said my family went bankrupt. I'll show them that old money is more than mansions. It is a way of life, and some people are just born with it and never lose it.

Charlie: [*hurrying them along*] Well if we pull this off, then you'll have that life back again. [*The three enter the separate part of the stage. Willie stops in front of a door and tips his cap to a worker dressed as an elf walking by with too many boxes*] Willie, you're up.

Willie: [*Fumbles around in his pocket and produces a lock pick. Nicholas appears behind Willie. Charlie and Clara are distractedly gawking at the diamond necklace Clara stole. Nicholas shakes his head sadly at Willie.*] Charlie! He's here!

Charlie: Who's here? I don't see anyone but us.

Willie: That Santa! He was right behind me.

Charlie: Don't let the pressure get to you, Willie. You can do this.

Willie: [*Willie returns to picking the lock. After a few moments he opens the door.*] Charlie, that ain't right.

Charlie: [*peering in the room, which has nothing more than cleaning supplies*] This can't be it!

Passing Elf/Worker: Looks like you three don't know what you've gotten yourselves into.

Willie: [*eyes wide in shock and fear of getting caught, hissing under his breath*] Charlie! What are we gonna do?

Charlie: [*motioning behind his back for Clara to put away the bags she has started to take out of her purse*] Of course we do. [*pause, then nervously*] What exactly have we gotten ourselves into?

Passing Elf/Worker: All the employees wear these ridiculous elf costumes. Even the cleaners. And have you ever tried cleaning this skyscraper top to bottom in pointed shoes and green tights?

Willie: Why would we have done that? We're here to st--

Clara: Start. Yes, that's it. We're here to get started right away.

Passing Elf/Worker: [*nods, exits, and returns with three elf costumes*] Best get started then. The storeroom, that second door on the left, would be a good place to start. All of the boxes marked "charity" need to be taken out to the office by the main entrance. Macy's is having their first giveaway for the children and poor in town, so they can have some Christmas joy. [*Charlie and Clara share a look. Charlie, Clara, and Willie exit.*]

[*The lights go down. Christmas music with a spy-like twist begins playing. Charlie, Clara, and Willie return clad in their uniforms. The three stand there almost posing for a second, when a manager walks by.*]

Passing Elf/Worker: You three! Don't just stand there. Get those pointy shoes moving and get to work!

Clara: [*tugging at her sparkly hat*] The things I go through for wealth.

Charlie: That was close. Let's do it for real this time, shall we? [*The three open the stockroom door and quietly snoop through boxes. They each pick a few and are quietly walking out of the room in a line.*]

Willie: [*hearing the ringing of a bell right behind him*] Charlie! I think that Santa is back! I hear him ringing his bell! [*Charlie stops abruptly, causing Clara to run into the back of him, and Willie to run into her. Willie notices the bells on his shoes.*] Oh, it was just these shoes. Sorry.

Willie: [*Seeing Charlie struggling slightly to lift the heavy boxes with his limp*] Let me help you, Charlie.

Charlie: *[more sharply than he meant to]* No! I'm fine. I don't need anyone else telling me what I am capable of. I can handle it by myself.

Willie: I know you can, Charlie. I'm only saying you don't have to handle it by yourself. That's what makes us a team. We stick together. You remember when you found me—I was running with some bad people, and they didn't care about me. You got me out of it, Charlie.

Charlie: Yes, I guess so. *[Willie takes the top box out of Charlie's arms.]* Thanks, Willie.

Clara: If you two are finished reminiscing, let's run for it. I figure we're the poor in the community and just as entitled to this stuff as anyone else.

[Charlie, Clara, and Willie re-enter the main store area and attempt to sneak out the back door.]

Manager: Where are you going with those boxes? They're supposed to go in the front office. *[Charlie, Clara, and Willie look nervously at each other and don't move.] [Manager grows suspicious.]* What were your names? I don't seem to recall an interview. *[Waves Passing Elf/Worker over.]* Where'd you find them?

Passing Elf/Worker: They were wandering around the back hallway by the supply closet and stock rooms.

Manager: Security!

[A security guard starts towards the group. Charlie, Clara, and Willie look at one another and take off through the store.]

Manager: Hey! *[Security guard takes off running.]*

[Enter Nicholas]

Nicholas: 'Twas the night before Christmas,
And not a creature wasn't stirring in the store.
When the snows and blizzards arrive with a roar,
And tinsel is strewn and scattered from ceiling to floor,
It can be a time to reflect on the seasons of life,
Embrace the Christmas chaos, peace, and joy,
And see the eyes of a young one light up when they play with a toy.
Christmas music plays, there's shopping, cards, dinners, and plans,
And the hustle and bustle can drown out the peace of the joining of hands--
Around a tree, or a home cooked meal
Gathered together as the Christmas bells peal.
It's chaos, it's joy, it's the most wonderful time of the year,
With twelve pies to bake, eleven stores to see, ten velvet bows, nine gifts to make, eight
tiny reindeer, seven angels singing, six light displays, five Christmas trees, four family
dinners, three petty thieves, two great escapes, and the best department store Santa.

[Everyone is running around. Willie is dropping boxes and picking them back up. Last minute shoppers are hurrying around. Clara is running from a security guard and bumps into the one she tried to seduce. The clerk is running away from her. Everything is pandemonium. Bits of

different Christmas songs are playing. For example, "He led them down the streets of town, right to the traffic cop. He only paused a moment when he heard him holler stop!"]

[On stop, Nicholas is the one saying it.]

Nicholas: Stop! Everyone, please calm yourselves. *[To the manager and security guard.]*
Gentlemen, I don't understand what the fuss is about. These three work for me. They are the elves I hired to help with the Christmas giveaway. They are my personal friends and I don't expect any trouble. If you'll excuse us, we have some Christmas cheer to hand out.

[Charlie, Clara, and Willie are shocked and confused.]

Willie: I told you he was tricky. He kept showing up!

[Townspeople enter for the giveaway. Willie and Clara are confused but see no other alternative than to start handing stuff out to the people.]

Charlie: I don't understand.

Nicholas: Charlie, surely you know that I know who's been naughty and nice. It's part of the job. I also happen to know what everyone wants for Christmas. And I don't think you want to spend Christmas inside of a jail cell. I happen to know that what you wanted is what you have. I just wanted to help you realize it.

Charlie: What's that? *[Nicholas motions to Clara and Willie, who are actually happily handing out merchandise. He frowns as he watches Clara pocket a necklace and goes over to stop her.]*

Charlie: *[To himself.]* A family. My family.

Nicholas: *[Looks back at him and winks his sparkling eyes.]* I knew you would figure it out.

[Clara and Willie come over to Charlie.]

Clara: I never thought I would be doing something like this.

Charlie: *[To Clara and Willie]* I'm sorry the job was a bust. You both could have had your Christmas wishes come true. I guess I didn't plan it out well enough.

Willie: *[Looking at Charlie like he's gone mad]* What're you talking about? All I wanted was to spend Christmas with you two.

Clara: And I guess that I can learn to embrace the "giving is truly receiving" kind of wealth.

Charlie: *[Smiling at his friends, his family.]* I guess it just took a fumbled job to help me see that I didn't really want any of the things I thought I wanted. Because what I needed was a family, and I realize now that it is the two of you. *[Making a realization.]* There's just one thing I don't understand. *[Turning to Nicholas.]* How on earth did you know what we wanted for Christmas?

Nicholas: *[Taps his nose like a cherry with a finger]* Ah, Charlie, let's just say I'm the authority on

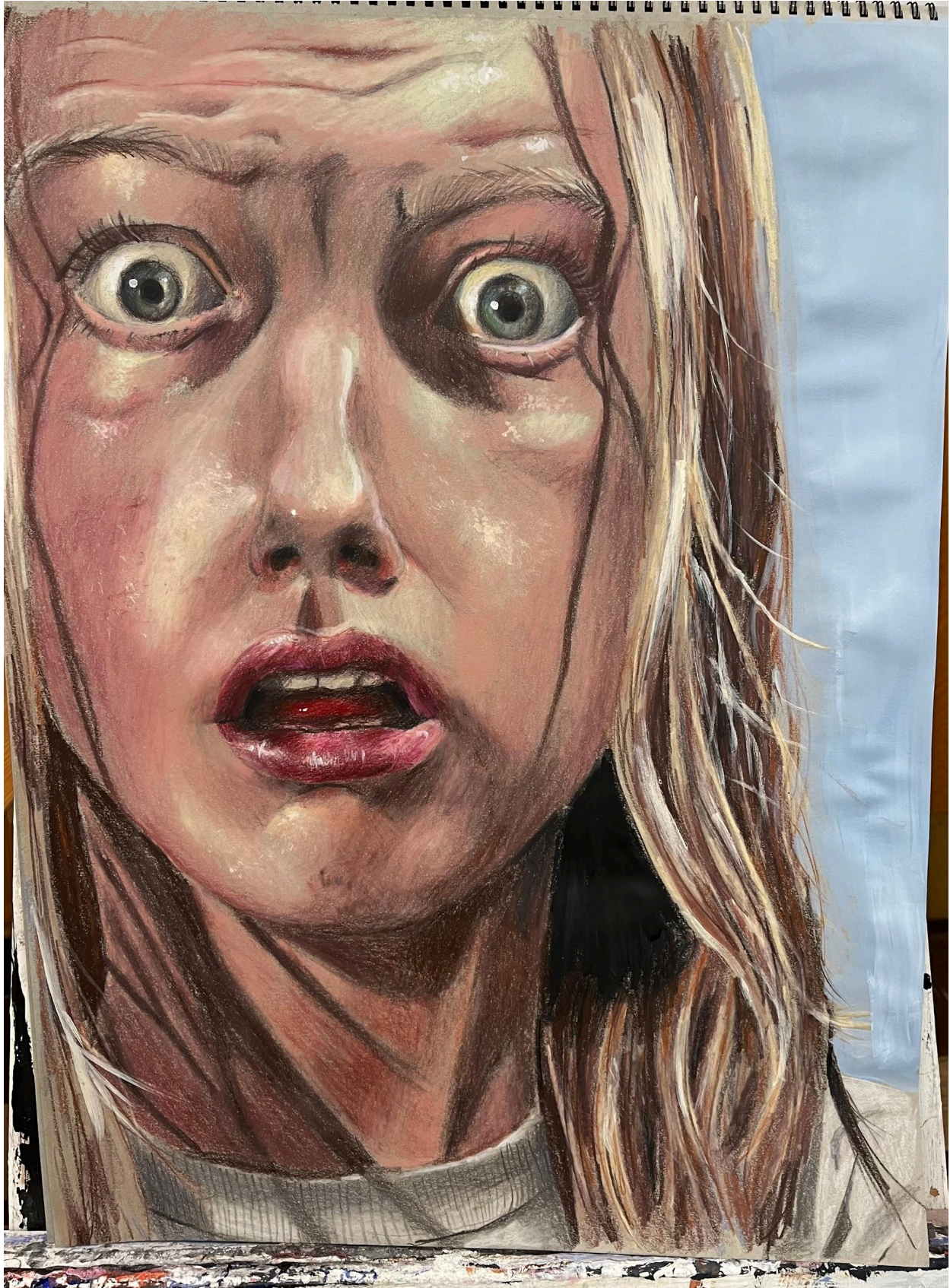
the subject. Now, I'd best be off. It's my busiest night of the year. [*Begins to weave his way through the crowds, waving at the audience and the characters.*] Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night! [*Laughs a very Santa-like laugh*]

Willie: Charlie, you don't think...

Charlie: No, he couldn't be. He's just the best department store Santa... right?

[*Curtain.*]

Art



Elly Back

