

Serendipity

By Comsewogue High School's Literary Magazine Club



Sonder
January 2022

Photo by Alexander Kan

sonder

/sohn-dehrr/

(*n.*) The realization that each passerby has a life as vivid and complex as your own.

Read along as the writers of Comsewogue High School creatively utilize one single photograph to illustrate the concept of the word “Sonder.” Every window holds a different story about happiness, struggles, growth, and loss, allowing us to reflect on the powerful yet hushed presence of the intricate life around us.

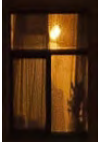
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1ST FLOOR



By Alexander Hunt



LOST IN GRIEF

By Panika Garg

A guy and a girl
Met in uni and fell in love
Powerful young love

Together for years
Love so undeniable
Couldn't stay apart

Married to her love
A car crash was all it took
To break them apart

Lost alone in grief
Crying in their apartment
Where they were to live

Silence all around
Devastated by heartbreak
Broken and alone



THE STAR GAZER

By Samantha Cardarelli

Cornelia Charlene Williams lived in apartment number 103 for as long as anyone could remember. She had seen people of all ages come and go, chasing their eccentric dreams for decades. Cornelia or Nettie, as she was often called, stood near her window every night watching the stars move across the sky, thinking of her impossible dream. Of course Nettie knew her dream was long over, even though this weakened her spirit, she found reasons to keep moving forward. Nettie's life had primarily been centered around this town and her small, cozy apartment.

Nettie loved her small city because of her past. She had spent ages picnicking and bicycling around the familiar streets and plazas. Nettie often visited a fairly large park located right at the center of the town. Nettie's youth was a blur, lost in the many years of memories—the park being the only real thing she remembered. In her seventy nine years of life, she had spent as much time as possible there, which was quite ironic considering she never learned the park's correct name. She felt like the park was her own, though she only ever called it The Park. She had laughed there, cried there, walked there, ran there and everything in between. Nettie hated that she loved the park where the worst moment of her life occurred—where her dream began, yet also came to a grinding halt. Her dream was not known by many, but it has everything to do with the park.

Nettie, the tenant on the first floor in room 103, had a big wish because of a small accident. She and her best friend, Alora, loved the park nearly as much as they loved each other. They walked to the park together all the time. They did so on that day too. As they headed towards the bridge leading into the park, a car swerved. It struck and killed Alora in one swift movement, leaving Nettie alone in tears. One minuscule moment that might have seemed so insignificant to someone else changed Nettie's life forever. She had survived and Alora hadn't. Nettie took it upon herself to live her life to the fullest after realizing how quickly it could be taken. So Nettie stayed not because of her love for the town, but because of her loss; and every year for sixty two years, she walked to the park. She sat on the faded green bench, and called Alora's name out, talking as if Alora was sitting right next to her. She sat in silence, watching the children play, the cars pass, and dawn turn into dusk.

After, Nettie trudged home watching the world pass her by. She had never learned to drive so she walked. As she walked home she felt happy for once and she knew her dream would soon come true. As the curtain of darkness fell across the city, Nettie shut her lights and slowly hobbled towards the window. She stood by it one final time, her heart slowed, she looked at the stars once more, blooming with happiness. It was her time to achieve her dream and walk alongside Alora to the park for one last time.

As the night faded into day, a pair crossed the bridge to the park, one final time.



THE GETAWAY CAR

By Jack Montoya

“This is the rendezvous point, right?”

Luis locked the apartment door and slid the curtains shut. The place was quite sophisticated for a one-room apartment: modern white cabinets decorated the light gray walls with chestnut planks covering the dust-free floor. Luis dimmed the lights; his watch read 2:16 a.m.

“Kurt gave me this address if we were to go with Plan E,” Scott answered. Over the past five months, Luis and his three lifelong buddies—Scott, Kurt, and Dave—planned the bank heist of the century. Actually, they planned it seventeen times, lettering each from A through Q; Tonight’s circumstances called for Plan E.

Each step of the plan had to be precisely timed, down to the second. So far, everything had gone to plan:

11:40 p.m. Kurt distracted the bank’s two guards on duty. Kurt was the inside man. A few months ago, he was hired by the bank under a pseudonym. “Have you guys seen the new Spiderman trailer?”

11:44 p.m. Luis and Scott listened to Kurt through their earpieces. “That’s the signal.”, whispered Scott. The two crouched on top of the bank’s roof. The bank’s security system had silent alarms on every entrance, including all doors, windows, and air vents.

Weeks before, Kurt explained, “The only time the alarms are powered down is when the day guards switch shifts with the night guards.” These shifts were randomized by the bank’s manager each day. The deactivation would only last for ninety seconds; Luis and Scott needed to react quickly.

12:19 a.m. The night guards arrived for their shift. On Kurt’s signal, Luis started his stopwatch. Scott hoisted himself off the roof; he dangled thirty feet above the ground, holding on with only one hand. With his free hand, Scott slid open the second story window that Kurt left unlocked the night before. Still dangling, he covered the window’s motion sensors with scotch tape. Scott swung himself inside, Luis right after. The stopwatch pinged just as Luis silently slid the window closed. They were in.

1:34 a.m. After finagling with the vault for endless minutes, Luis and Scott snuck inside. With incredible speed and finesse, the two stuffed hundreds of thousands into their packs and bolted out the fire exit, alarms wailing behind them.

Now, Luis and Scott were inside the one-room apartment a few blocks away. Luis peered between the closed curtains; sirens hollered in the distance. Luis paced the room, constantly glancing at his wristwatch. “Dave should be here by now with the getaway car.”

The sirens outside began growing louder. At the same time, a muffled voice echoed in Luis’s earpiece, “The plans... changed... roof... now...” Overwhelmed with curiosity and anxiety, Luis and Scott headed for the stairs, hoping they heard correctly.

As the two ascended, a mechanical buzz roared from above, amplifying as they moved higher. Finally, they reached the top of the stairs and opened the door to the roof. Immediately, Luis was overcome by an unexpected blast of wind. Scott nearly backed off the edge of the building from the sudden hurricane.

Luis opened his eyes; perched in front of him was a sleek, midnight black helicopter. The chopper was invisible in the pitch black night sky, except for three words painted in hot pink on its side: The Getaway Car.

2ND FLOOR



By Nicholas Mattheus



RELIEF

By Fazal Naqvi

It was a long and tedious day at the office. As clients were walking in and out, the chiming of the door ringing in my ears was driving me mad. All I wanted to do was go home and see my family.

When it was finally time to go home, I left the office without saying a word. I was fatigued and the strong gusts of wind slapped me, which allowed a headache to grow more prominent each time the air passed. My warm car, however, provided a sense of relief after a long, exhausting day. As I was driving, I saw a group of kids eating together at a restaurant and the first thing I felt was envy and regret. As a lad, I thought that the only way to succeed was by making money, so I worked towards it in hopes for a better future for myself.

What I realize now is that it was a selfish decision. I loved my family and my friends dearly, but I blocked them out of my life for so long, thinking they were a distraction. When I came to realize that I was wrong, I tried to fix it, but it didn't go quite as planned. My friends looked at me with disgust while my family, on the other hand, welcomed me back like I never did anything wrong. I was so grateful for them. I didn't feel that I should have been forgiven. I did injustice to those who cared for me most. It was then where I stopped engaging in close friendships as every experience I had with it was miserable.

When I arrived at the apartment, I entered through the large glass pane door, and the doorman was asleep, quite understandably so. I went to the elevator, but of course it was out of order. I paid \$3500 in rent, and I didn't even get a working elevator. I was furious. I felt like unloading all of my anger and frustrations on the already damaged door.

I took the stairs, carrying my 30 pound bag with my already worn out arms. They were aching from the day's fatigue, but alas, I finally made it to my room. I entered the pin into the keypad, and I heard my favorite sound: two short rings followed by one long ring. It was the sound that reminded me of home.

I came in unnoticed by my wife and children and went to my room to change. When I went to the dining room, I was instantly greeted by the smell of roasted chicken with rice cooked in the stock. I greeted my wife and hugged my children as I started to engage in conversation. It was my favorite time of the day- the time where I could forget all of my problems and focus on my biggest blessing: family.

I finally felt free of the harshness of life. I was safe with my family: the one thing I held dearest to my heart. I lost all sense of worry and I enjoyed the rest of that night with those I loved.



OCTOBER

By Luke Myers

October 25th, 2020, Linda and Todd's fiftieth wedding anniversary. Except this year the celebration is not as extravagant as they imagined because Linda is celebrating alone.

A beautiful, late October day in 1970, in Burlington, Vermont. The trees are changing from a blanket of green to a whirlwind of reds, yellows, and oranges. Hundreds of people gathered at the lakeside venue to witness two young people start their new lives together. The anticipation leading up to this day is unmatched. The bride's family on the left, and the groom's on the right. A low buzz of stray conversations hangs overhead. Until the pianist starts the bride's processional song. Then silence.

Linda remembers this day like it was yesterday. The joy, the anxiety, the relief. All she wanted that day was to spend her life with Todd, he was the perfect man. He always treated her with care, he loved her deeply, was tall and strong, and had a great job.

After the reception, when they had a minute to breathe, Linda and Todd finally had what they wanted: they were together. As the years went on they grew closer and closer, going through many of life's big milestones, buying their first house together, adding new members to their family, Marie, TJ, and Miles, and growing old together.

Life seemed perfect. They had a beautiful house, both Linda and Todd had good 9-5 jobs, their kids were happy, they were happy. As Linda and Todd grew old and watched their kids grow into adults, and start families of their own they only grew to love each other more. For their 50th anniversary they had planned a beautiful European trip across the Alps and throughout the Mediterranean.

But one day while Linda cooked dinner while she waited for her husband to arrive home she heard a knock at the door. She thought it was odd and maybe someone had the wrong house and ignored it. When she heard another knock she put down the potatoes for Todd's favorite meal-- steak and baked potatoes-- and answered the door to see two police officers standing at the door. Linda was in shock, running scenarios through her head of what could have happened.

"Are you Mrs. Jones ma'am?"

"Why yes I am, can I help you?" Linda said inquisitively

"May we come in?" the officers said solemnly. Linda stepped back so they could enter. She led them to the den so they could sit.

"Is everything okay officers, am I in trouble?"

"No ma'am... we have some bad news for you". At that moment Linda knew something was wrong. Her eyes began to well up, she started crying, she was so worried about what happened to Todd. All she wanted was for him to be okay.

"Your husband was killed by a drunk driver on his way home tonight. We already have the woman in custody. I'm sorry, the EMT's tried their best. There was nothing they could do. We were too late."

Linda was now balling, she was absolutely broken. Her heart ached at the loss of her love. The officers attempted to comfort her to no avail. She hurried them out the door and sat in the den eating her steak and potato alone, crying.

Two months later, Todd's wake and funeral had passed. The constant flow of "I'm sorry for your loss" and "If you need anything just let me know" had subsided. Linda was alone, her children barely contacted her, her husband was gone, and she didn't work. She was utterly alone on a cool night in October of 2020.



BLUE

By Arianna Oca

Looking at the picture of the blue room gives me a sense of calmness and anxiety at the same time. The tint of the blue just doesn't sit well with me. It feels cold and doesn't seem lively. I feel that the person living in the blue room probably feels a sense of peace. It's as if it's their safe room for when he or she is feeling down.

The room's color it's not the best color for me. I would choose a darker blue. That would make me feel comfortable while looking at it. This blue room makes me a bit sad and well... blue. It also feels outdated. However, I feel that it is making the person in the room feel calm and happy.

The blue room most likely helps the person clear their mind. Some might feel it relaxes them. I would like to see a more vibrant color if it was my room.

3RD FLOOR



By Alexander Hunt



THIRD FLOOR, FIRST ROOM

By Regina Martinez

I stomped through the door,
pacing ahead of everyone.
I didn't emote an inch of concern,
holding back any expression, any feelings, any tears.

But once I got to the room,
I exploded into a pressurized spew of anger.
Of disgust and childlike sadness.
I sobbed.
I threw her lamp onto the floor.
I shoved my face into her pillow,
and for half a second, I tried to imagine what it would be like to float away.

The room was hot and dark.
And orange light now covered the floor,
The fallen lamp shade cast a dark shadow against sharp stucco.
And after a couple minutes went by,
a double knock sounded on old hickory.
The door opened just slightly.
It was Mama peering in,
looking at me sulk in my own mess.

She wasn't angry.
We actually joked about that whole thing.
I cursed his name a few times, wished him ill and sat in guilty silence.
Looking at the fallen lamp,
I felt two arms envelop my shaking body.
I assume it should've felt comforting.
But it was unnatural.
She showed affection through fat checks.
And this hug, the smile, her hand on my cheek—it was forced.
I noticed the distance between us.

I looked down at her grey hairline.
And I apologized that she'd "had to deal with him."
Although we were alone,
she consoled in a soft whisper.
"We've been together for many many years, mi hijita."
"We've learned to live our lives together,
but separately"

It was like she was convincing herself.
There was an obvious pinch in her voice.
The way she pursed her lips and slowly shook her head.
Like this was a shame but nothing new.
Nothing detrimental.
Old rhetoric to the mirror,
A thought kneaded like dough,
tormented and tossed in her mind from years before.
Or maybe just yesterday.

And at the end of her coercion,
in some corrupt way,
I was supposed to forgive him.
I was supposed to hug and kiss,
even apologize.
Follow in her submissive footsteps.

I realized she was living in an aged dependency.
A love broken on one side,
But very alive on the other.
A marriage tested by deceit,
and a marriage failed.
A union that left two lonely people looking for company.
Clinging to whatever and whomever they could find.
Never forgetting,
And never leaving.



DINNER

By Riley Grimes

My family and I have been eating dinner together for years. As many Fridays as possible, we would all eat dinner at the table with no phones. It was a great way to spend time with one another and to keep in touch.

That Friday was no different. My wife and son had been busy, so that was the first dinner we shared in a while. My wife prepared my favorite meal. It felt as if for the first time in years, I wasn't lonely.

It was good to hear how my son's day went, what he did at school, and why he hated math. It was good to hear why my wife needs an air conditioner in her office, why her boss should be fired, and why she should be paid more. Their long rants used to annoy me, but without them, it felt like something was missing.

In the middle of dinner, I got a text. Normally I would follow the no phone rule, but it had been so long that I had forgotten about it. I began to reach for my phone in my pocket but my wife and son startled me.

"No!" they shouted .

"Wh-What?" I said, stuttering. It was strange how insync they were when they shouted.

"Let's just talk together, honey, don't take out your phone", my wife said calmly. I didn't want to fight with her and ruin the moment, so I nodded my head and started eating again. We talked more about work and school. I poured myself another beer; I only recently started drinking.

After a short while, my phone buzzed again. I felt drawn to it, like I needed to look at it. It almost felt like my hand moved on its own when I started reaching for the phone.

"NO!" they shouted at me again, making me jump from surprise.

"What?! Why do you keep shouting at me?!" They looked at each other for a few seconds, their eye contact never breaking. My wife looked at me.

"You can't look at your phone, you'll be alone again..." she said, in somewhat of a whisper.

"What does that even mean?" I asked her, raising my tone. They looked at each other again.

I felt a burning sensation in my pocket where my phone was. It needed me to look at it. I reached for it. My wife quickly stood up from her chair. I saw tears beginning to form in her eyes. "Honey, please" She stared deep into my eyes.

I wanted to listen to her, but I just had to answer my phone. It was out of my control. As I took my phone out, my wife and son began to cry.

They watched me intently, tears streaming down their faces, while I looked down at the phone screen. There were two messages from my brother.

"How've you been today bud?"

"It's been two years since the crash..."

My heart began to sink and my mind started to race. "What is he talking about? What is going on?" I shouted, tearing up. My wife and son were still crying.

"I'm sorry, honey, we have to go now," my wife apologized.

"You can't go, I can't do this by myself. I need you," I said, falling to my knees. "I'm sorry."

“It wasn’t your fault, honey. You couldn’t have saved us no matter how hard you tried,” she said, her voice drifting farther and farther away even though she was right in front of me.

“You need to let go now, dad,” my son sobbed.

I was still on my knees. Resting my head against the floor, I squeezed my eyes shut. “I can’t....” I said. I waited for a response, but heard none. I slowly lifted my head and sat up, scared to open my eyes.

When I finally opened them, I saw an empty table, centered in an empty white room. On the table were three plates full of food. Only one was partially finished. Next to my plate was an unopened bottle of medication.

I sat back down at the table, still crying. I opened the pills and washed one down with my beer. It will be a long time until I see my family again.

4TH FLOOR



By Lydia McGuigan



ORCHIDS IN THE RED ROOM

By Grace Jos

I smoothed the red tablecloth onto the counter so that no bumps were prevalent in the fabric. I could feel my chest practically vibrating as I compressed the red tablecloth onto the counter so that the tapestry was adjacent to the table. My body quivered with angst from this unfamiliar feeling. I'm not the type to do this. I'm not romantic. My last girlfriend always told me I was "not the type for romantic gestures." I always laughed it off and concurred with her. We broke it off several months later, and thank god for it. A sense of consolation diffused through me after I got rid of that god forsaken awful woman. It took a couple months to get over what happened, I'll admit, but I'm aware my circumstances are different now.

I ambled back to the kitchen with a small pep in my legs that I have not been able to implement in years. I grabbed the white orchids I picked out on my way home and slid them into the clear, seldomly used vase. I have never been quite fond of roses. I always found them a bit too cliché. Not to be frank, but if my significant other gave me red roses I think I'd projectile vomit. I loathe when people give gifts because they're known to be romantic. My fixation on the orchids faded, and my hands admired the flowers I selected for her. My dexterity has always been poor, and I tend to shake from my anxiety tremors, but tonight that has not been the case. I am nervous, yes, but there is almost a part of me that knows this is an obligatory part to my growth.

6:18 p.m, I am unaccustomed to this feeling of suspense. She's coming at 6:30 p.m, a Friday October night. My first date with my ex-girlfriend was in October, although I'm not exactly sure when it was. We went out to a fancy Italian restaurant after we met through a mutual friend. It was a splendid evening nonetheless. Not long after I realized how much I cared about her, but to this day I can't say the feeling was reciprocated. I loved her. I really did. She had the tendency of eye contact. It's always been a pet peeve of mine when people look me in the eyes. She used to stare into my eyes all the time, but it was hard for me to look into hers. It wasn't that I was scared of eye contact or anything. I think it'd be quite pitiful if I was scared of that as a 27 year old man. It's not that she had ugly eyes or some peculiar flaw that made her eyes intolerable. It's not like I was going to cut her up and put her under the floorboards because they bothered me that much. It is just an ick of mine. It's just like what people always say, "the eyes are the gateway to the soul."

The slightly transparent curtains are a deep maroon red. As the light bounces off the wall filling the room with a rather idyllic ambiance, I must admit I did a wonderful job. The clock rings 6:23 p.m, I start to anticipate her arrival. Everything is set: the flowers, the food, and the table.

6:43 p.m. She's late. Maybe the 5th is jammed. Maybe she's just running late. Maybe she took a little longer to get ready, just because she wanted to look nice for me. Maybe she's outside and nervous to knock on the door. Maybe she had a family emergency and forgot to call. Maybe she just isn't coming. Maybe she never liked me. Maybe she felt forced to say yes to our first date. Maybe she likes roses and knows I didn't get them for her. I'm not sure. My leg tapping is getting monotonous.

6:52 p.m. My hands finish wiping over my face and I can almost feel a splash of uneasiness soil my ego. I get up from my living room couch and open the door. I stand in the presence of a desolate hallway. Maybe it's for the best, I try to reassure myself. My apartment still is glowing red. The deep

maroon ambiance is starting to mock me. How must I stand in the color of romance if it is not prevalent? At this point I agonize over her arrival. If she shows up, it will only be embarrassing to still answer the door.

6:56 p.m. I start to pour myself a drink. Scotch on the rocks with a twist is my preferred drink of choice. I take the first sip and it crawls down with the impetus to burn and sting my throat. I sigh, look up, and hope that pointing my chin up will make it go down faster. The doorbell rings. I widen my gaze and turn my head to the door. I hesitate before answering. I stand up from the couch that's carried a weight so heavy that there's an imprint of myself in it. I stand in the middle of my kitchen like I'm a stranger to my own house, frozen. For a second, and only a second, I wonder if I need to move on. Do I really need to answer? What if I didn't? Would she leave? Would she knock again? Is it really worth it?

Love is a peculiar endeavor, and I'm not sure to what extent I am ready to venture again. I hear a second knock. My heart drops and then rises to the back of my throat. It's time, I know it's time. I inhale and close my eyes, and let my shoulders drop as I start to walk towards the door. Never have I heard my floor creak so loud. I turn the knob, and as I open the door I hope my aspiration is not false. I'm looking down. God, why am I looking down? I bet she looks beautiful. I look up, and I was right. I look into her eyes, and I am so glad to have moved on.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. The 5th was jammed."

5TH FLOOR



By Lydia McGuigan



BEHIND THE BABY BLUE CURTAINS

By Sophia Arredondo

Twenty year old Briar had the so-called “picture perfect life”. She had it all. A loving mother, a set plan, and a healthy lifestyle. Yesterday, she and her mom had driven from their small town two hours away to the big city where Briar planned to start her new life. A fresh start in the big city. The big city where she got accepted to attend her dream school.

The family of two had spent the whole day together. They set up Briar’s new apartment, and once done, they roamed the city finding unique sights. Briar’s mom made sure that she knew Briar would be comfortable and content in her new home. Briar and her mom were extremely close. She was so grateful for her; especially for the unconditional love and support that she never failed to give her. She knew many weren’t able to experience the same relationship she shared with her mom. Briar had no idea how she was going to live the next chapter of her life without her mother right by her side.

Once they finished setting up the apartment, Briar’s mom had one last thing to give to her. Briar and her mother went into the bedroom, for one last goodbye. Their favorite room in the apartment was the bedroom; the large window faced the busy city below allowing for an amazing view of everything. The room seemed to be the perfect size, almost as if it was made for Briar. There was one thing missing though.

As Briar stood facing the window, her mom pulled out two baby blue curtains. Something Briar and her mom shared was their love for the color baby blue. The color radiated tranquility and happiness between the two. Briar was so grateful for a gift that had so much hidden meaning to her and her mother. They set up the baby blue curtains on the big window. Briar knew that every time she was in this room a part of her mom would be in there too. Briar’s mother drove back to their small town, while on her way, in the corner of her eye, she saw a window with baby blue curtains; and she smiled. Smiled knowing that her little girl has a whole new life in front of her and she couldn’t be more proud.

Before 2 a.m one fateful morning, everything was perfect. Briar had been living in her apartment for about two months and she was surprised to see just how well she was fitting in. Her grades were the best they had ever been, she actually felt happy where she was. Her life was finally coming together, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. Unfortunately, the picture perfect world Briar was living in would come tumbling down with one phone call. A phone call strong enough to crush a mountain to boulders.

The loud ringing of Briar’s cell phone caused her to violently wake up from her deep, heavy slumber. The repeating ringtone blared in her ears. As soon as she woke up, she had an awful feeling deep down. She turned on her night side lamp, and automatically knew something was off. She hastily answered the unknown number.

“Is this Briar Collins?” a calm voice asked. Briar’s grogginess had completely disappeared and she was now wide awake.

“Yes, this is her speaking.”

“I’m so sorry to tell you this, but your mother, Blake Collins passed away at...” Briar’s phone fell from her hands onto the ground. She stood still, yet the whole world was spinning around her. She heard a ringing noise, an obnoxious ringing noise that just wouldn’t stop, taxis who were continuously honking their horns grew louder and louder, and Briar’s breath got harder and shorter, all at the same

time. All her senses tremendously increased. She felt like everything in her had shattered. Her heart had broken into a million tiny pieces.

She was gone. Her mom was gone. Briar felt broken. Tears streamed down her face. What was she going to do without her mom? Her mom was the one person who was always there for her, her mom was the one to help her with any little thing in her life, her mom was the one person who never gave up on her, no matter what. Her mom was her home. The baby blue curtains, once gifted to Briar from her mother, stared back at her. She loved being able to see the city night sky in front of her. But now, she hid behind the curtains. They reminded her of one person and one person only. Briar stood up to look at the sky and life in front of her window just as she did the first time she moved into the apartment, but this time she was all alone and would be for the rest of her life, without her mother by her side.



A FRAGMENT OF REALITY

By Jordana Schweitzer

I didn't want to believe that I was only a small part of something much bigger than myself. It was so much easier to hide away as a hermit, and pretend like I was the only one alive in this chaotic world. I think, little by little, this mentality brought me to a place that I called home. It was shoddy, sure, and maybe it could use a touch up here and there, but overall it was a good place to live. I wasn't like all those other bozos trying to make their house look nice or anything.

So things were good for a while; I wasn't bothered unless I went out of my way to be bothered. I'm sure housewives would be envious of this lifestyle. Anyways, my train of thought was askew today. Although I'm reclusive to say the least, I still like to keep a faint idea of the world around me, because even if it pains me to do so, staying informed really does keep you alive sometimes. One of the faint notions I had of the world was a pandemic. "Yippee!", I thought to myself. Maybe I could feel like a normal person for once, although it didn't matter much considering my nonexistent ties to the outside world. Eventually, the apartments that were empty next to my solemn blue one began to take a more prominent shape.

Shadows reflected off the plaster walls, misshapen and crudely malformed. They chilled me down to the very marrow of my bones. I haven't felt this way in a long time. People were shuffling from upstairs, pacing, moaning even. People from the cubicles to my left and right were blaring music and plumbing, creating an auditory disturbance that I wasn't used to. And here I was, thinking the pandemic was exuberant "Ha!" I played the role of a fool for so long. I am the jester in this game of shame. I wasn't proving anything by hiding myself away for so long. Looking at all of these people, freshly quarantined, finally woke me to the resounding truth of my pitiful existence.

But what at this point could I possibly do? Even if I did manage to rise from the ashes of my defeat of the habitual gesticulations of my life, I would never gain back all of the time I had already lost. I would never experience love from family again. I had cut off all ties long ago. It was just time to let go. I was a perfectionist. I wanted everything to make sense in my life and it just didn't. So I hid myself away and with my progressing reclusiveness. I more so withdrew from society and dragged my problems behind me.

But now, I have come to realize there is a stark difference between hiding from your problems and escaping them. Hiding slowly wears you down, you are able to get physical rest but your mind doesn't have the on and off switch your body does. Physically running from your problems is more immediate and direct. You will be physically exhausted but the actions of literally putting your problems behind you should far outweigh the physical drawbacks. It is an instant gratuitous reward.

I didn't care anymore. I was ending it. I kicked the stool and said goodbye to the things I never had, or I guess never gave myself the chance to experience. "Goodbye cruel world," I whispered as the blue silhouette of the night ebbed away at the edges of my vision.



PRETENDING

By Julia Hamdi

i think there is something almost poetic
about the way we tiptoe about one another
as if we are walking on eggshells
though it is cowardly
in a twisted kind of way
it is also so very sweet

i notice when you pretend
you don't see me in the halls
but who am i to judge if i do the same
i notice the way you look at me
and then turn to your friends giggling
and glancing back at me with hushed voices
i notice when you ignore my presence
in order to prove a point and evoke jealousy
as if we are children playing a game
of "hard to get"

well, you're hard to get.

you say nobody noticed
but i noticed
when your eyes slowly emptied
and your skin was drained of color
when you seemed to be perpetually tired
and frustratingly irritable
when you lost weight by accident
and wished someone would realize
it was your heart that was empty
not your stomach

i noticed, but i never spoke up
because i didn't feel as though
it was my place to intrude
i liked you when you were full of life
enthusiastic, energetic
funny, flirty even

i just can't help but wish i reached out
when your soul grew noticeably tired
but i think it was the familiarity of the heaviness
in the air that surrounded you
that scared me into staying away

so now i sit
wallowing in sorrow and regret
in my stupid little blue room
with my stupid little brain
teeming with anger
because all you had to do was stop pretending

well, you're going to be hard to forget.



THE MAN FROM ROOM 507

By Jenna Levine

“Please state your name, and the date, for the voice recording.” A man with dark hair and tired eyes instructed. He wore a clean black suit and a red tie with stripes of white.

“Clyde Crawford, October twenty-second.” A man in a blue, blood-splattered t-shirt obeyed.

“Do you know why you’re here, Clyde?” The suited man asked. Letting out a sigh, Clyde shook his head. “You really have no idea?”

“Nope,” he said, while still shaking his head.

“So this afternoon, when police came knocking on your door, you genuinely had no idea why they were there?” The man questioned, tilting his head in confusion.

“No, sir.” Clyde replied.

“I have pictures from the crime scenes. Do you wanna take a look?” Clyde furrowed his brow at the professionally dressed man.

“What crime scenes?” Clyde asked. The interrogator placed a manila folder on top of the metal table that separated himself and Clyde. He opened the folder to dozens of pictures and started placing them one by one in front of the handcuffed man.

Clyde’s brow raised in curiosity. In front of him completely covering the table lay what most people would consider a horrific scene. However, to Clyde, it was nothing. Just some pictures of the woods, and some of his apartment. Clyde was overlooking some very important details. In the pictures of his apartment, blood was everywhere. In his kitchen, there were blood-covered knives, tiles, furniture, and appliances. The pictures of the forest weren’t normal pictures either. Covered in leaves, there was the decomposed body of a middle aged woman; yet Clyde saw nothing wrong.

“What do you see here, Clyde?” the interrogator asked. Looking down at the pictures, Clyde tilted his head like an onlooker at an art exhibition, trying to interpret the paintings. Clyde was at a loss for words. He didn’t know the right answer.

“I don’t know, sir.” He responded. The interrogator stood up, pushing his chair out loudly. He looked back at the pictures laid out on the metal table, staring for a moment as if they would strike inspiration. Shaking his head in disappointment, he left the room.

Clyde sat there, not a single thought in mind. Unthinking, he began fidgeting with his handcuffs. What more was there to do? Maybe look at the pictures? Nah, that’s boring. They’re just normal pictures after all, right? Clyde smiled. No one knows what for, but just as he was smiling, a woman walked into the room.

A tall, thin woman with long, dark hair walked in the room, a glass of ice water in hand. She sat in the seat the previous interrogator used. Her face was soft and welcoming, but at the same time, you could tell she meant business. Oh, you could tell she had some things on her mind, at least, Clyde could.

“Hello, m’lady,” Clyde said, “What brings you here?” He smiled menacingly. Without saying anything, the woman picked up the manila folder, one by one taking the pictures, placing them neatly into the folder. Clyde looked on in confusion. Once done collecting the images, the woman sat back on the metal chair.

“Tell me about your childhood, Clyde.” The woman asked unexpectedly. Clyde felt confused, once again uncertain of how to respond. To Clyde, his childhood was just like any other.

“I don’t know.” He responded. Keeping it simple. The woman pushed over the glass of water, offering it to Clyde.

“What was it like living in the foster system?” The woman asked. Why would she bring that up? What’s the significance of his childhood? What’s going on? When the suited man was in the room he kept asking questions related to the pictures. But now the woman is asking more personal questions.

“It wasn’t fun, that’s for sure,” Clyde replied, purposely leaving out details since it was easier to be as vague as possible. The woman nodded her head.

“What about the Hudsons?” The woman asked while neatening the folder of crime scene photos. Clyde shook his head, as though a disappointed parent. Looking down at his hands, Clyde began picking at his fingers. A nervous habit he had developed over the years.

“Why do you ask?” He finally responded.

“You don’t have anything to say about them?” The interrogator asked. Still looking down, Clyde shook his head. He himself was unsure of what exactly the nod was in reference to. The name, Hudson, rang in his mind, ping ponging off the walls of his brain. Over and over again, each ping brought up the almost pleasant moments he had with the Hudsons; each pong the abundance of distressing moments he had with them.

Even with so many troublesome thoughts pinging through his mind, Clyde managed to smile. To an onlooker, he would have looked insane. But Clyde knew what he was smiling for. It was actually one of his favorite thoughts. No, not thought, a memory. A memory of the last time he saw the Hudsons.

“Why are you smiling, Clyde?” The interrogator asked, softly, as if talking to a child. Clyde looked up from his hands, still smirking. “Clyde?” the woman questioned. His smile grew wider, now a menacing grin. The woman stood up.

“Heh heh heh,” Clyde let out a chuckle. His smile grew endlessly wider.

“Clyde?” The woman asked again, suddenly more cautious. She put her hand on her Glock holster, just in case the situation called for it. The interrogator looked at the mirror that everyone knew was one way.

“Ha ha ha,” Clyde got louder, “HA HA HA,” a maniacal laugh beginning to peer through, “HAHAHAHAH,” now turning into a cackle. Hysterical laughter, uncontrollable laughter, Clyde could not contain himself. The thought, it overpowered everything else. It was a thought that could take over the world. It was the most powerful moment in Clyde’s life. It proved his power and he loved that.

“Clyde!” The woman abruptly slammed her hand on the metal table, she was successful in snapping Clyde out of his trance.

“Hm?” Clyde questioned. Looking up at the woman. Completely calm, as if nothing had happened.

“Tell me about the Hudsons. Now.” Clyde could tell the woman wasn’t having it with him. She was annoyed and just wanted answers. But the question was, will he give them? Oh, it would be great to share his story, for someone to hear his greatest accomplishment. But what repercussions will it have? Sharing with this woman could be dangerous. Clyde wasn’t interested in getting in trouble or spending any time in jail. He still had so many plans for the outside world. But something deep within Clyde was fighting harder than his rational side.

“They deserved it. Mr. Hudson more so than the Mrs.” Clyde began, a smile forming once again. “They were the last of many foster homes. By far the worst. They thought I wouldn’t know the difference between good and bad parenting since my mother died at a young age, and I’d been in the foster system ever since.” Clyde looked deep into the eyes of the interrogator, getting a sense of the room. Clyde could tell where her mind was going. As an FBI agent, she was probably right. Even though Clyde knew

this, deep inside of him, the feeling of sharing built up. “They thought they could take advantage of me, using me as free labor around the house for the younger children they had. Their only income was that from the foster system, given to them while they kept me.”

“Where did the other children come from? Were they also in the foster system?” The woman interrupted. Clyde wasn’t happy with that, since the question doesn’t pertain to his own story. He let out a sigh.

“I’m not sure, they were all there before me.” He responded. The woman took out a small notepad; one that a journalist would bring while following a lead. She began writing while Clyde continued talking, “I was forced to work long days, with very little sleep. If I didn’t work, I wouldn’t get dinner or a small break in the middle of the day.” He drew in a long breath, eager to get to the good part.

“You were the only one working?” The woman asked while Clyde took a sip of water, the ice in the glass now almost completely melted; he purposefully sipped loudly. Trying to provoke the interrogator just a little, it made telling the story more enjoyable for Clyde. Taking his sweet time, Clyde gently placed the glass back down in front of himself.

“Yes, I was the only one working. The Hudsons claimed the other children were too young.” Admittedly, Clyde was a bit annoyed with the woman’s questions, it was his story to tell. Don’t people know to keep their questions and comments until the end? “For years I lived in that house, allowing myself to suffer the abuse. Mr. Hudson was more consistent in the beatings. I remember this one time, I hadn’t gotten around to washing the dishes. My punishment: being beaten to within inches of my life,” he chuckled, “That was fun. I remembered that moment the day I left the Hudsons.”

“How much longer did you stay with them?” The woman interrupted once again. Clyde inhaled deeply.

“God woman, why can’t you just listen to the damn story!?” Clyde was losing it, keep yourself together, keep it together, he told himself. He started hating himself for the outburst. But the woman was really getting on his nerves. So was he really in the wrong?

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, “would you please continue your story?” The woman and Clyde made eye contact with one another. It felt like an eternity to Clyde, he replayed the story in his mind, while they stared. Just thinking about it made him happier. The interruptions from the interrogator were forgotten about. How could he possibly hold a grudge against the woman when she was so kindly listening about his greatest accomplishment?

“I was beaten up pretty bad,” Clyde finally broke the silence, it was eating away at him. The thought of finally sharing his story was overpowering. “I had to stay for a few more years while I built up the strength to leave. I continued to work even though I was injured; I was never sent to the hospital. The Hudsons claimed it would cost more money than they had. It took a little over a year to be fully back on my feet and recovered.” He drew in a breath. “Are you getting all of this?” he asked the woman. She had stopped taking notes, and for some reason, that really got to Clyde.

“Yes.” She responded. Probably nervous Clyde would have another outburst. He liked that control, she was finally quiet because he told her to be. It’s all too easy, he thought.

“After building my strength back to where it was, the next few years were spent building it up. Getting strong enough to leave so I could make a life of my own. Away from the foster system, the Hudsons, and everyone else who’s done me wrong. Are you ready for the good part?” He asked, eager to tell her. The anticipation was killing him. Finally, someone will know of his greatness, it’ll no longer be suppressed in him. It doesn’t have to pool in the bottom of his conscience anymore.

“Yes, Clyde. I’m ready.” The woman replied. Clyde wasn’t sure if she was as enthusiastic as he was, but it didn’t matter because she was here to listen, and he could give all the details he so desired.

“I found out where they kept their gun. A small pistol that sat in a gun safe in the basement. But that wasn’t really my weapon of choice. It was however my way of gaining control. Although, for the children, it was more than just for control; since it was the fastest way to get rid of them. They never did anything wrong per se, but they didn’t do anything right either.” Clyde sat up straight. Taking pride in his accomplishment. “There were three kids, I think. I finished them off first since I wasn’t all that interested in them.” He looked around the room, for no reason in particular. “Then I moved on to Mrs. Hudson. I strangled her. That was nice,” He smiled remembering the moment. “I like thinking about and reliving the feeling of her life and breath leaving her body.” He takes a few breaths in, prolonging his story.

“What about Mr. Hudson?” the interrogator interrupted yet again; Clyde knew that the woman knew this was a question he wouldn’t mind answering.

“Ahh,” he sighed. “Mr. Hudson, heheh,” he chuckled at the thoughts flooding his mind. What great thoughts. Wait, no. Not thoughts, memories, reflections of the past. Something most people would regret having done, but a moment of freedom for Clyde, a liberating moment that he’ll never forget.

“What did you do to Mr. Hudson?” The woman asked.

“Mr. Hudson was the best part of that day,” he started, “I tied him to one of the wooden kitchen chairs and I made him watch me kill the children and his wife.” He smiled widely. “He screamed, begged, and cried. Can you believe that wasn’t even the best part!?” The woman’s eyebrows lifted in curiosity. Clyde took note of it. “He kept trying to bargain with me, “I’ll give you anything you want!” he’d yell, over and over.”

“How did you kill him, Clyde?” She was growing impatient, Clyde had her wrapped around his finger, on the edge of her seat, waiting for him to get to the best part. “Clyde, just tell me how you killed him,” she said, more serene this time.

“Alright, alright, I get it, you want me to get to the good part. I kept him in the kitchen chair for a while, the only thing in his eye line being the dead bodies of his family.” His grin swiftly left. “Then... I tortured him for a while like he did to me for all those years.” He stopped for a bit. The woman looked at him for a while as he stared off into the nonexistent distance.

“What was the cause of death?” She finally asked.

“I let him bleed to death. Then later, I individually cut off each of his limbs and scattered them all around town. The best part about it? None of his parts have been found, the only reason you guys have me here is because of Mrs. Hudson’s body.”

“That’s not the only reason.” The woman interrupted.

“What?” Clyde didn’t understand. The only evidence they had was the picture of Mrs. Hudson’s body, the one he left in the woods all those years ago. The woman picked up the folder of crime scene photo evidence. Then it hit him, the photos of his apartment, how would he explain that?

“Clyde, what happened in your apartment?” The woman asked as if talking to a child. Clyde began nervously picking at his cuticles again, fondling with the handcuffs. He felt as if the walls were caving in. He was going to explode. The guilt building up from deep within him. Who, what, when, where, why, and how, all raced through his mind.

“AAAHHHHHH,” He cried out. But wait. It wasn’t his fault...

Moments passed, Clyde kept his head down. Once again not thinking. His mind empty after his outburst... Then, one fleeting thought.

“He deserved it.” He finally spilled. He looked up at the interrogator’s sweet eyes, finding a sense of warmth, one he’s never felt before. “Peter deserved it.” He said, this time giving a name to the

victim.

“What happened to Peter?”

“I killed him,” He chuckled. “I killed him.” He repeated a smile forming once more. “I killed him like I killed Mr. Hudson.” He declared. “I killed him. I killed him! Yes, I killed him!” He repeated, without even noticing his repetition, he continued. “I killed him!” The woman stood up, taking the nearly empty cup from Clyde, as he continued, “I killed him!” She left the room...

Clyde was all alone, handcuffed to a metal table which was bolted to the floor. But he had no need for an escape, for when he was inevitably sent to prison, he would escape in his own way. Maybe he'd be lucky enough to visit his victims one last time. But was he ready? Did he do everything he wanted? Could he go to prison and be happy with the work he did while free?

For Clyde, the answer was confusing. Yes, to everything, almost everything. His job was never complete. There would always be someone else; someone else who deserves it like Mr. and Mrs. Hudson, like Peter, like the children.

While still smiling, a single tear streamed down his face. For he was a failure, a disappointment, exactly like everyone used to say. He had never, and would never amount to anything...

6TH FLOOR



By Nicholas Mattheus



BY CANDLELIGHT

By Hannah Kosak

The light that emanated from the candle in her room was the sole source of emotional warmth left in the apartment. She clung to it, the small symbol of comfort, of light, and of hope. The kind of hope that saves, the kind of hope that would someday bring him home. The hours spent and the prayers sent next to this candle allowed her to exercise what little control she had over the situation that plagued her mind daily. Please send him home, she would pray. Please.

The only lightbulb on the ceiling was out, and there was little she could do about it other than watch its intermittent and desperate attempts to flicker back on. So, important papers tended to pile up on the small wooden nightstand next to the quivering flame, stained with the ashes that fell off the dozens of matches that she had not bothered to throw away.

Among this pile of papers was a letter, which she had not yet gathered the courage to open. Every time she held it in her shaky hands, she felt that the knot in her stomach may well explode out of sheer desperation. She had received it close to a week ago, but still, her mind was not ready for what it may contain.

Another prayer. Have mercy. She bowed her head.

She picked up the letter again, wondering if this time she would have the strength to explore its contents. She turned it over in her hand, shaking almost as frequently as the candle that was her only solace. She began to break the seal on the envelope.

Please. Have mercy.

She pulled out the single sheet of paper inside. Only one sheet of paper.

Please, let him come home.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and unfolded the paper. As her eyes skimmed the page, only a few words remained prominent in her mind. Regret. Husband. Missing.

After all those prayers, too.

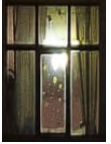
Sorrow washed over her like the tide coming in, slowly drowning her in an agonizing rhythm. If she had known, she would have said a longer goodbye. She never would have said all those things before he left, never would have told him it was selfish of him to leave her. He was doing a service, something brave and honorable. She should have been brave enough to let him go. If only she had known. Regret coursed through her veins, pumping her full of a guilt so toxic she thought it would kill her. She hoped it would kill her.

But then, she remembered, missing doesn't mean dead. Oh, who was she fooling? Missing nearly always meant dead. Death had probably turned his body cold. Never again would she feel the beat of the heart that brought warmth into that small apartment. All she had left was her candle and the miniscule comfort it provided. But, as if it were some kind of sick joke, the candle flickered out. Perfect. What did it matter? She collapsed into her bed, hoping layers of blankets would give her the warmth that she so desperately desired, now knowing he was gone. It worked, in a way, but it wasn't the same as having him there next to her. She closed her eyes.

A click. A faint rustle. A shuffle of footsteps across a wooden floor. The striking of a match, and the subsequent flame. A kiss on the forehead, and a whisper, "I'm home".

Her eyes fluttered open. It didn't seem real. But, there he was, looking rather rugged, but certainly not dead. She untangled herself from the mess of blankets she had buried herself in, almost falling flat on the floor in her eagerness to get to him. She didn't know whether it was desperation or relief that prompted her to thrust herself into his arms, forgetting all past grudges. As they hugged she felt his warmth flood her body, making her whole again. She discovered that her hours of prayer had paid off, her candle was lit, and hope had returned into this household. To be held by him felt like a miracle, the warmth of the candlelight paling in comparison to that which he so effortlessly projected.

As she looked into his eyes, the reflection of the flickering candle added a depth to his warm brown irises that made her fall in love all over again. And the kiss that followed was like nothing else, genuine and sweet, with a hint of desperation, a moment that was truly reflective of all the hours she spent praying by candlelight.



PARANOIA

By Hayley Villani

Sarah's Final Journal Entry:

The clock strikes 11:00 p.m.

I set down my brush and get ready for bed. I have this lingering feeling that somebody's watching me, so I sleep with the lights on. I've lived in this building for five years, and I've never felt like I was in any danger until three months ago.

Nobody ever thinks that they could have a stalker. Why would somebody want to watch me? Why would somebody be so infatuated with my life? I don't know for sure- if I have a stalker or not- but lately I've been feeling much more anxious than usual.

This all started around the time someone new moved into the building. Nobody knows his name. He looked a little creepy, so everyone kind of just avoided him. I didn't want to be rude, so I smiled at him when I first saw him. I tend to see him pretty often around the building now. Sometimes he stares at me very intensely. I didn't think anything of it at first, but lately I've been getting very scared.

This day specifically, he seemed to be more and more interested in me. He looked like he wanted to do or say something to me, but he never did. Every time I looked at him, I caught him already looking straight at me. I've been having so much trouble sleeping lately. He's turning me into an insomniac. I stay up all night in fear of what he may be planning. This is probably ridiculous, and I must be overthinking this, but I'm so fearful for my life that I don't know what to do.

I think I just heard someone try to open my door. The noise stopped. Did he break in? I can't move. I don't know what to do. What if...



THREE A.M. IN E MINOR

By Zoe Marks

i. spring

Mikey is thirteen years old, stuck on his way downstairs to steal a snack from his best friend's kitchen, which he does every time he sleeps over. Like every time he sleeps over, he's careful on the steps, since the sixth one from the landing creaks. It hasn't creaked yet, though, because Mikey is sitting just above it, head pressed to the railing, trying to listen.

Nobody else has ever been awake at three in the morning in Sam's house, especially not crying on the living room on the couch six steps down and four to the right. It's the kind of almost-silent crying that tears into your soul, freezes you in place. Mikey couldn't move even if he tried to.

"Mom I've never even—"

"No, listen. I am so proud of you. I've never been more proud. Do you hear me? This is the proudest I've ever been. Right now."

Mikey straightens up, turns around, and quietly retraces his way back into Sam's room, shuts the door. Sam doesn't stir, not even when the sixth step creaks twice, doesn't stir even though Mikey lies awake, frozen, because the crying comes through the wall.

The next morning, there are pancakes on the dining table. Her eyes are red and so are those of Sam's brother. An awkward sort of heavy silence smothers them all until Sam, having had enough, drags Mikey out of his chair and announces that they're going to the park.

At the park, Sam sits on a swing while Mikey crouches down at his feet to sift through the sand, picking up bunches and letting it cascade back down to the ground like water. The silence is different here—comfortable, familiar.

Sam speaks first. "That was weird," he says. "it's never been like that."

"I know."

The sun beats down on Mikey's back. They're stuck in the month of April, when it's warm, hot in the sun's direct path, but there's a breeze, the kind that Mikey could lay in a field for.

"We can ask later," Mikey offers. "or," he backtracks, "you can ask. I don't want to—"

"Shut up," Sam snaps. "We've been friends long enough that you're practically family. We're brothers, you and me. And Jay."

"Yeah," Mikey says. He feels the sudden urge to cry. "We're family."

Sam rolls his eyes, shoves himself out of the swing, and stalks off. Mikey watches him walk away for a couple steps, noticing that Sam's walk has gotten the way it gets when he's trying to look tougher than he is. Mikey picks himself up, dusting his hands off, and jogs to catch up.

ii. fall

Mikey is six years older, six years wiser. A sophomore at university studying—of all things—economics. Sam is still his best friend, studying—of all things—business management at the same university. They'll probably end up living next to each other, dying together, if the universe continues on the path it seems determined to follow. Sam's brother is gone, off in Italy, or maybe China. The details were unclear in his email.

Sam lives in an apartment, granted permission from the school for one off campus, one that Mikey hates but occupies more than his own on-campus house. It wasn't his own house. He shares it with five housemates. He's pretty sure one has some sort of criminal offense—kicking puppies, maybe, or robbery.

(A brief, relevant list of reasons why Mikey hates Sam's apartment: His lamp, at night, makes the room an eerie sort of yellow, bright at the source but edging towards darkness the further Mikey goes—Sam doesn't have an overhead in his room, and even in daytime the lamp is a portal to hell. Also, the sink in the kitchen is always leaking. His bathroom doesn't have heat except for the water, and it's always cold. There are so many things wrong with Sam's apartment that Mikey wonders if maybe Sam was high when he picked it out.)

The sun is shining through Sam's curtains that don't close all the way; it wakes Mikey up, so he kicks at Sam's bed and shakes him until he opens his eyes and lets out a curse that'd burn through hardwood.

"I'm hungry," Mikey whines. Sam lets out another curse. Mikey has noticed over the years that Sam is most eloquent when he first wakes up.

It's not like he needed to pull Sam out of sleep. Mikey has been here enough times to know where the juice is, where the eggs are, where the pots and pans are, why the furniture is placed there and here, why Sam won't just buy new curtains—for his bedroom, no less; Mikey has offered his stalker-like concerns to Sam enough times that Sam has started threatening bodily harm. But the sun looks so soft and apologetic, like it knows it should have let everybody sleep a little longer, and Mikey hasn't been able to sleep properly for two nights anyway.

He cracks two eggs in a pan, pours a tall glass of water to kick the last bit of consciousness in. Rice and salad for whenever Sam decides to stumble into the kitchen. He leaves a note on the counter—going to the roof—because the sun is being so sweet, and now that he's fully awake, the kitchen is too cold and too empty, too quiet.

The wind is strong, but the sun cuts through the cold, and Mikey realizes he forgot a sweatshirt.

The door opens behind him after a few minutes—he turns, thinking of all the movie scenes that happen on roofs, how he could probably leap from one to another—but it's just Sam.

Just Sam, familiar, comfortable Sam.

"You forgot your jacket," Sam grumbles. In one hand he's holding said jacket—not Mikey's, which means Sam has decided to be nice—and in the other he's holding a plate with a pear and a knife. "C'mere," he instructs. "Get some pear."

"One of our classmates is having some sort of reunion," Mikey says, as he comes over and squats down next to Sam to steal the first slice, for which he gets a bodily harm threat and a curse.

"Already?" Sam exclaims, mouth full of pear. "That's stupid. We're teenagers!"

"I'm not," Mikey retorts. "Though I can't say the same about you. Also—" he adds, before Sam can actually stab him with the knife—"we're not allowed to bring tequila. Apparently his cat loves it."

"Whose?"

“Jeremy.”

“Didn’t he—”

“Let’s not. Apparently his vendetta against cats has changed.”

“Or he’s abusing that poor cat,” Sam says, darkly. “If it loves tequila so much. What does he like? I want to bring something nice.”

“You didn’t bring something nice for me, on freshman moving day.” Mikey whines, just to be pointless.

“I didn’t know I’d be stuck with you for the rest of my life, and also—freshman, Mikey. Into a dorm. What does he like?”

“The cat? I don’t know, tuna?”

“Jeremy.”

The morning flies by—Mikey gets the last slice of pear—and then it’s time to excuse himself back to his own horrid house, the one he lives in with the Puppy Kicker and the three other equally-suspicious people.

“Good luck,” Sam calls.

“Thanks,” Mikey calls back.

iii. summer

The summer is hot and sticky; it’s disgusting to be outside for more than two seconds. Mikey spends most of his time at Sam’s house though he knows he really shouldn’t, and Sam’s mother’s dumplings are so good and the house is so cool, and nobody is ever home at Mikey’s anyway, and nobody cares anyway, and the weather is so hot anyway.

“We’re going to be juniors,” Sam says. “Careful, they’re hot. Isn’t that weird?”

“Juniors?” a voice exclaims. Mikey jumps in his seat and splashes sauce onto his lap.

Sam whips his head from the location of the voice without a person attached to it and Mikey, who’s trying not to cry.

“You idiot,” Sam snarls. “You burned my best friend!”

“Are best friends still a thing?” his brother says, smirking like all hell. The bags under his eyes are more pronounced than ever, the scar running from his chin to his ear like lightning struck it.

When Mikey was sixteen, he and Sam were up late, the movie too bright in the too-dark living room. A horror movie, Mikey remembers, but he doesn’t remember which one, just that when a hand landed on his shoulder he screamed with all his might, effectively causing Sam to yell out a string of impressive curses.

“Don’t— It’s me, you idiots, you’ll wake Mom!”

The light had been switched on by someone with a clearer head than either Mikey or Sam.

His brother, Jay, wide-eyed—pale. Like a ghost, like someone who was bleeding, and when Sam let out another string of impressive curses, Mikey saw red.)

(He got such an overwhelmingly strong sense of realization that night, and everything opened up in front of him like an unwanted gift, everything he’d always wondered about the conversation on the living room couch in his best friend’s house at three in the morning—I’ve never been more proud, the proudest I’ve ever been—)

-

The summer is hot and sticky, humid like it’s trying to prove a point, and Mikey honestly has no

idea how anybody could enjoy being outside unless they were faking.

Sam is faking.

“This is nice,” he’s saying. “This is really nice. Can you believe we’re on a lake? Do you think I could learn to drive a boat? This is really nice.”

“Can you shut up,” Mikey groans. “I’ll throw you under a boat if you say the word nice again.”

“Shut—”

“Who’s killing whom?” Jay interrupts. “No murders before Sunday please, I’ve had enough of those. You both promised to help with my hair. I’ll kill you if you back out.”

-

Jay had been in Croatia, earlier, back in fall. His Croatian is atrocious.

iv. winter

They’ve gotten into an argument. It’s something stupid, something that doesn’t even matter, but Mikey finds himself going over less. His life becomes quiet without Sam to threaten him, without his mother nagging at both of them to clean up, to help her with dinner. He starts going for walks, of all things. In the park, around campus, to the grocery store and back. He finds secret buildings—the music building, for one—and sits there for two whole hours listening to the distance between him and the pianos, the violins, before he realizes that it’s nine o’clock and he has homework.

“Hey,” one of his housemates says one day, the Puppy Kicker one.

They’re in the kitchen, and this is the first interaction they’ve ever had.

“Yeah?”

“You okay man? You seem like, off, or something. I don’t know. You and your girlfriend break up or something?”

“No I just...I’m just tired, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Puppy Kicker says. “I feel you. Want a hug?”

“I—” Mikey stops and thinks. “Sure.”

Puppy Kicker embraces him. He smells like coconut, and vaguely like cigarette smoke.

“My name is Carson by the way,” Puppy Kicker says, “I don’t think we’ve ever talked before.” He pats Mikey on the shoulder, once, twice, gentler than his physique might allow.

“No we haven’t,” Mikey replies, disregarding everything about this interaction already. The realization that the Puppy Kicker actually has a name is something Mikey doesn’t even want to think about. “It’s nice to meet you Carson, I’m Mikey.”

“Oh that’s cool. I’ve got a cousin named Mikey. He’s in a gang. What are you studying?”

“Uh, economics. Your cousin’s in a gang?” (He’s thirteen years old, sitting on the stairs of his best friend’s house, eavesdropping on I am so proud of you—)

“Yeah. I haven’t seen him for a while.”

“Oh.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Yeah...yeah, what about you?”

“Am I in a gang?”

“No, the—your major.”

“Oh! Yeah I’m studying to become a veterinarian.”

Upon hearing this, not only does Mikey go through the five stages of grief, he discovers

approximately fifteen new ones and then promptly dies, but not before he thinks I should tell Sam, and this just makes everything worse, and then he gets the burning feeling in his nose he gets right before he cries, and all of the emotions build up and then he explodes.

“It’s like...you’ve broken up, and it’s really sad, because I know what it’s like to lose a friend. I know that’s what you two were, friends, the inseparable kind. Brothers. I know what it’s like to get into a fight with your best friend, the kind of fight that seems so unimportant, so irrelevant, that it doesn’t hurt until it does, the kind that makes you feel like you’ll never get them back. But I also know how much you relied on his family, so maybe this is a sign. Maybe the universe is telling you to become independent for the first time in your life.”

“I’m nineteen—” Mikey starts, but in his mind, through all of the things that are making him not cry even though he wants to—and what an un-nineteen thing to do, cry—he’s going Yes yes that’s exactly it this is exactly how I feel—

“Nineteen is a perfectly acceptable age to start learning how to live life by yourself. You’re in college now, Mikey. You’ll be in your third year soon.”

“I just miss him,” Mikey whispers. “I miss his family.”

“I know,” his mother says. She’s holding a spatula in one hand, the other on her aproned hip, flour covering her hands, and she looks upset, and this isn’t how she should look baking a cake. “But did it ever occur to you that your own family might miss you too?”

v. spring

He’s twenty-five now. Old enough to know right from wrong, how the world works while he operates on his own, and the correct way to do laundry. He’s gotten back in touch with Sam but it’s awkward, unstable; apparently, the argument they’d had was more serious than Mikey remembered. He knows, all of it, the weight of it so great he’s walking on eggshells.

On a dewy Sunday morning, Mikey wakes up and remembers the conversation they’d had the night before—I’m moving to Seoul, Mike—

(Mike: Sam had called him, like they were six years old again arguing in the playground about what was acceptable to call Mikey and what was not; It’s Mikey, not Mike. Not Michael. I hate Michael.

Alright, Sam had said, in the almost-adult way of giving in that he’d gotten rid of as he got older, alright, Mikey. I’m sorry.)

—when Mikey had been crammed with work because he’d chosen economics, of all things, to study. He didn’t care about economics last night and he doesn’t care about it this morning, but, well. Anyway.

“Why are you going to Seoul,” Mikey had said, voice numb, like he was freezing, even though it’s spring.

“A job prospect,” Sam put it simply, like all the years before hadn’t mattered. “It’s really promising. I’m leaving on Thursday. You’re welcome to stop by the house if you want tomorrow night.” His family’s house, because the only thing that hasn’t changed yet, the only thing still holding their friendship together, that makes them the same until Thursday, is that they both find themselves back at their childhood homes when they can take the advantage.

“Okay,” Mikey finds himself saying. “Okay, sure.”

-

Sam’s mother makes dumplings. For just a night, a couple hours, Mikey feels like everything is

normal again. He tries so desperately to keep it that way, but they're too old for sleepovers, and Mikey, for the first time, feels as if he's intruding, that he should leave. It gets under his skin, like a spoon scraping a pot too loudly, and he wants to run away, sprint down the road like he's running from trouble.

"I should go," he announces, when the conversation has died down and their drinks are gone. "I don't want to, but I know I should."

"Okay," Sam says. He hardly looks Mikey's way.

"Mikey? It's three in the morning—"

"I never gave you back your jacket," Mikey interrupts. "I still have it. Here." He thrusts it out at Sam, who just stares at it. Mikey can see the exact moment the sleep leaves Sam's eyes.

Sam stares at it, then looks up at Mikey, opens his mouth, and laughs.

"You're so stupid," Sam says. "You idiot." He yanks the jacket out of Mikey's hands. "I hate you." He pauses, and suddenly he looks ten again, when he'd accidentally cut Mikey's hand with a knife in the kitchen—apologetic, like he was about to cry. "Can I hug you?"

"Sure," Mikey says, and he's pulled into a rough embrace, exactly the kind of hug he'd expect Sam to deliver.

"I hate you," Sam repeats.

"Yeah," Mikey says. "I know."

v. summer

Like always, the summer is hot, sticky, dead without a breeze, and moving boxes is a nightmare. Mikey pours himself a glass of water and chews on ice cubes, looks around his new apartment, and realizes with startlingly clear *déjà vu* that it's Sam's old one.

He can't get into the bedroom fast enough. He'd requested for everything to be moved out except for lighting—he doesn't have time for fancy lamps; he is not ready to become that kind of adult yet—not even thinking about Lamp Monstrosities.

It's there, in the corner, the cord tangled around the base, looking sad and pathetic and the most beautiful thing Mikey's ever laid eyes on.

His phone rings. He almost declines it, except he looks twice at the name and picks up on the fourth ring.

"You idiot!" Sam yells. "You forgot to call me!"

"Oh," Mikey says, puts Sam on speaker and looks at the time. "Oh damn, sorry."

"Did something come up?"

"No. No, sorry, I just forgot I was moving boxes today. I can talk now though."

"Moving boxes?"

Mikey grins. "Sam, you won't believe this."



ROOM 609

By Macy Carter

Miguel Hernandez lived in apartment 609. Miguel had lived alone all his life and worked on several trains in the US. His job took him throughout the country where he saw many different places and many different people. He had to retire when he turned 55, the constant hustle and bustle took a toll on him. Still, he often wondered about the people he saw and how their lives turned out. That is until one bitter February afternoon...

Miguel wouldn't be able to tell you what he ate for breakfast that morning. He couldn't tell you what day of the week it was. He couldn't tell you why his window was broken. Miguel couldn't really tell you anything about the past few years of his life. His dementia kept his elderly life locked behind a door he didn't have the key to. However, Miguel's days on trains remained clear as when they happened.

Miguel had a broken window. He often stared out the window watching the people and cars pass by. On that bitter February afternoon, he saw a familiar face. He remembered her from years ago...

He knew her by Carmen, but names change as people erase their past, running towards a new future. Carmen had nothing to lose, so she ran away to Watertown. As far as she was concerned, she had no past. In fact, she wasn't sure she had a future until she met Miguel.

Carmen often found herself in trouble. She was never the cause, she just seemed to attract bad luck. She had been awake for 2 days after she knocked over another passenger's bag, spilling the contents on the ground. The passenger wasn't very happy, so as Carmen saw it, her only option was to run. Miguel was in the caboose tidying his things when the door was thrown open. He watched, as a tall, young woman swiftly slipped through the crack in the door and slammed it shut, locking it, in what seemed like a millisecond. It was only when she stopped to take a breath that she saw Miguel, staring at her with a startled look on his face.

As Carmen explained everything that had happened, Miguel decided that he would help her. She was one of the many lost people you're bound to find on a train, and Miguel liked to think that he could find just a few of them.

"What are you going to do now?" Miguel said during a break one day.

"I'm going to head to Watertown."

"And then?"

"Well, I guess I don't really know."

"You could work on a train." Miguel laughed at her responding expression, "It's not as bad as it seems. It's incredible, really, seeing new places every day. You'll see loads of interesting people. Why, you're only the eighth most interesting person I've met thus far."

Thirty-three years passed, yet Miguel found himself staring out the window at the same woman. Just as he realized it was Carmen, a dog barked, startling him. He whipped his hand aside, accidentally breaking the window with his cane. The commotion caused Carmen to look up to find the man that changed her life all those years ago.

"Miguel?", he heard her shout through his shattered window.

He quickly got to his feet and shuffled his way down the stairs to meet her at the entrance.

“Carmen,” he said, “it’s been so long!”

“It is you!” she reached over to give him a hug. He invited her back to his apartment, and they talked until the tired, old man fell asleep. Carmen made a life for herself in Watertown. She took Miguel’s advice and worked on a train until she found a passenger who just happened to be the love of her life. They were married and had a little girl together. With a more stable life, Carmen was able to go to college for mechanics and engineering. Now, instead of working on a train, she made and fixed them.

Miguel and Carmen kept in touch over the years until Carmen found herself retired with an empty nest, and Miguel couldn’t remember to take care of himself. Carmen took it upon herself to help him- give back to the very man who had helped her all those years ago.

Miguel’s window was still broken. It was covered only by a piece of plywood and a black garbage bag, for insulation, as he said. It was one of the many things Carmen would fix in the years to come. She would also find Miguel doodling on a newspaper one morning. Miguel would tell her about the paintings he made when he was younger, and so one day, Carmen bought him paints and canvas, and Miguel painted his memories. Miguel had found Carmen at a time when she had nothing but the future ahead. Carmen found Miguel when he had nothing but his past. Together with a train ride and a broken window, they had all of time.



AUGUSTUS

By Jenna Levine

Instead of telling me a traditional bedtime story about a prince who slays a dragon or a princess who falls in love, my mother used to tell me how useless it was to have hopes and dreams.

No surprise here, it worked. I didn't believe in falling hopelessly in love. I didn't believe that I could accomplish something of my own. I often told myself that I would never amount to anything, that I would end up like my mother, a sad, poor, lonely single woman who could not accept, no matter how hard she tried, that the world was her oyster. Even though we lived in a city filled with opportunities, we were doomed to be forever unhappy with the life we had.

I lived with this mindset for a while; ever since I was a little girl. I really did try my best, I always tried to do well in school, have adequate relationships, just live an overall healthy and happy life, but I was cursed.

No matter how hard I tried, I was always met with failure. I would study at every opportunity, I tried every tip and trick on the internet and I still never did well. I would try talking to new people, try to put myself out there, but I was always met with rejection. I would change my look every few weeks just to try and fit in with someone, anyone. I was always on the lookout for the new trends, what kind of music, clothes, movies/tv shows people were into, alas it never worked.

My life was not happy or healthy. I went to bed at night feeling lonely and depressed, helpless and useless, like I didn't have a place in the world. The one person who was supposed to tell me that I mattered, that this life was worth living, the one person who was supposed to be there for me, was nowhere to be found.

My mother was working two jobs. She didn't have time to worry about me. Hell, she didn't have the money to worry about me. Honestly, I didn't want to bother her. She was a hard working woman, so much so that sometimes I would go days at a time without seeing her. When I did see her, it was with a bottle of booze in her hand, passed out on the couch.

I lived like this for a while. Until my senior year of high school. I reached my lowest point that year. I couldn't live any longer. I knew it would be better if I just ended everything, I knew that there would be so much relief when I just closed my eyes and forgot about this life—but I couldn't. The burden would be too much for my mother, the cost for a funeral, all that work just for me. It wasn't even worth it. A few weeks into my senior year and nothing had changed. Until it did.

It was like a movie when I first saw Augustus. His confused brown eyes trying to make sense of the new school he was just thrown into. It was an incredible moment. Suddenly everything didn't seem so bleak. This was my chance. I knew it, this was all that I needed. Everyone else in this godforsaken school had known me for years. There was no hope of having friends. Until Augustus. He saved me and he had no idea.

"Hey," I walked up to him. Something that always gave me anxiety. He brushed his fluffy dark hair out of his face as he looked up from the papers in his hands.

"Hi," he responded timidly.

"You look like a lost puppy," I teased. Trying to convince myself that this wasn't awkward.

"Yeah I kind of am," he moved closer to me, I could almost feel his ragged breath on me as he

pointed to the schedule printed on the paper, the ink in a gradient, gradually getting lighter towards the bottom of the page like the printer just gave out.

“Do you know where room 204 is?” This was my chance. It was fate because I just so happened to have the same exact class, at the same exact time as this boy.

“I’m actually headed there now. If you’d like to walk with me.” He smiled. Obviously grateful for my hospitality. I didn’t realize it then, but no one else would have helped him. We were destined to meet each other. Everyone else in this school was so focused on themselves and their perfect friends that they’ve had since kindergarten. They would never even dream to take a moment to simply point him in the right direction. I just so happened to be in the right place, at the right time.

“I’m Augustus Hart.” He turned to me as we walked, he put out his hand for a handshake.

“I’m Beatrice Welsh,” I replied, meeting my hand with his. It was sweaty, clearly, he was nervous. I would be too. A strange girl coming up to you out of nowhere, being overly nice and welcoming. It was strange, to say the least; to this day it was the best decision I ever made.

After that moment it turned out we followed a very similar schedule when it came to school. It was perfect. Gus was my saving grace, it was only uphill from there.

We ended up having a lot in common. This was the year I found myself, instead of constantly trying to fit in, I was finally able to figure out what I actually liked. I discovered surprisingly good music, shows, films, activities that I would have never thought to participate in. Gus introduced me to Bo Burnham and Cavetown. He introduced me to films like Back to the Future and Interstellar. I finally felt like myself, all because of Augustus.

Gus was big into skateboarding, he’d often drag me to the nearby skatepark to watch him; he’d poke fun and joke around about one day teaching me how to skate. It honestly surprised me when he actually did.

I sat on the bench and watched as he showed off, which had become an almost daily activity of ours. He came up to me, “Get up,” he instructed firmly. I let out an awkward laugh, no way on earth I’d ever find enough balance to skate as he did.

“No, Gus.” I looked into the warm brown eyes that somehow always managed to bring me comfort. Augustus had this look, like a pleading dog, his eyes could convince me to do anything.

“For me?” he begged. I rolled my eyes, trying to fight off the trance this boy had on me. He had no idea the power he held over me.

“OK, fine.” I got up firmly. He placed the skateboard in front of me, leaving his arms out for support. I balanced for a while, sitting in one place.

“See, this isn’t so bad.” He said, a wide, victorious smile on his face. I laughed nervously, holding onto his arm for dear life. “I’m gonna give you a push OK? All you have to do is look forward and if you want to turn, just lean your body the way you want to go. Easy enough, right?” I nodded my head and looked down at my feet as if that would help me. “Don’t look down, you won’t know where you’re going.”

It all happened in a flash, I felt Augustus’ hands on my back as he pushed me. After that, I went down the slight incline of the skatepark, I had no idea what happened that made me fall. What I do remember is feeling the blood on my knee. I remember Augustus running over to my side.

“Beatrice!” he shouted, I never heard him shout so loud. But what really stood out was that he called me by my full name; he always called me Bea. He knelt down beside me, scooped me into his arms. As my eyes got puffy and tears started streaming down my face.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he apologized over and over again. When the shock of the blood wore off,

I finally looked into his eyes. They were red and they began to swell up with tears. I could see the regret in his calming brown eyes. I could tell how he thought it was his fault, he felt so guilty.

I leaned in closer, finally embracing Augustus back. He squeezed me even tighter, harder as if he'd never let go. His head rested on my shoulder for a while. We just sat there, in the middle of the skatepark, for what might have been hours, but it didn't feel like it. I never wanted to let go, I know Augustus didn't want to either.

We sat there so long that the cut on my knee stopped bleeding, in fact, it hadn't really hurt anymore. I turned my head and body to completely face Augustus, our legs intertwined, our fingers interlocked.

"Bea..." he started. I moved my hands to his face, felt his soft skin beneath my hands, ran my fingers down his jawline. My hands moved behind his head. Fingers brushed his hair, I leaned in and kissed him.

He pulled back at first, which startled me. Had I just ruined the only relationship I'll probably never have? Right as I was thinking of every horrible possible outcome, he pulled further away, looked in my eyes, his hands caressed my cheek, wiping away the remnants of tears, and finally, he leaned in and kissed me.

Fireworks.

The only thing I can think of to describe that moment. My heart fluttered at the thought of Gus' lips touching mine again. My mind raced as I thought about what this meant for us.

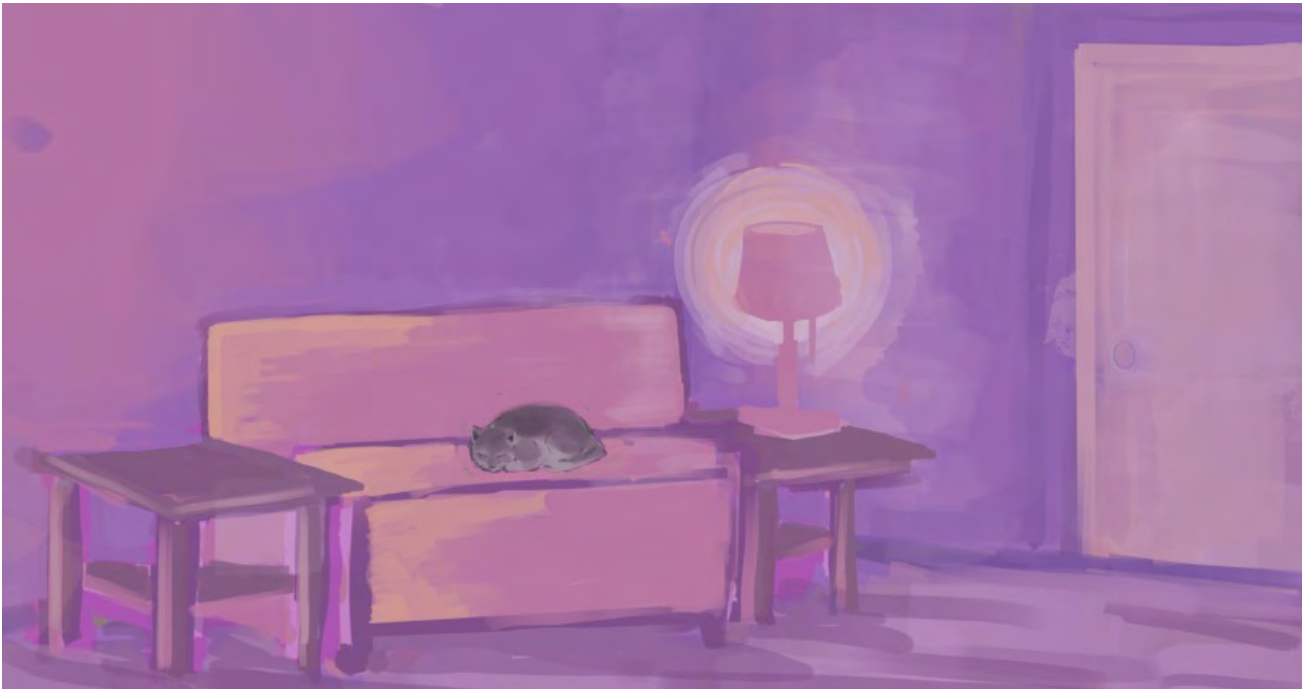
"I think I'm in love with you" Augustus Hart, the only person to even think about talking to me, the only friend I've ever had, here he is, confessing his love to me.

"Gus, I think I'm in love with you too," It was like an out of body experience, confessing my love to my best friend. I looked into his brown eyes and suddenly the weight was lifted off my shoulders. No more intrusive thoughts, no more questioning if this was right or not; it was right. At that moment I knew this is exactly what I wanted. I could tell Gus was thinking the same thing, the way he was looking into my eyes, I could tell he realized this was meant to be. Like milk and cereal, it just worked.

I watched as he looked down at my lips, and he slowly inched closer. I could feel his breath on mine, his deep, smooth, warm breath. I noticed the slight scent of vanilla, most likely his hair, the smell floated towards me as the breeze blew by. He inched closer and closer, and before I knew it his lips were on mine again. This time it was different, more passionate, intense. Overflowing with emotion.

After that day at the skatepark, I remember one thing. My mother. Why was she so negative towards everything? Why didn't she believe in a happy ending? Then it occurred to me, my lack of childhood bedtime stories didn't matter anymore, because I had managed to create my own fairytale. And we lived happily ever after.

7TH FLOOR



By Nicholas Mattheus



THE QUIET ROOM

By Joseph Finn

It was the most mysterious place in New York. A room, room 703, in an apartment building.

No one was sure what happened there. They weren't even sure if people actually lived there. The room was so quiet that sometimes it felt as if it never existed. Only the landlord went in there, once a month to collect the rent, and no one was sure if he got it.

One by one, people began to get curious. The curiosity grew and grew until everyone in the apartment got curious. They went to ask the landlord about this.

"I assure you, tenants," the landlord said, "someone lives there. They just don't like to see people. They're, what do you call it, introverts."

The tenants were not pleased. They floated conspiracy theories around. One of the most popular was that it was a family of illegal immigrants living there. Another one claimed that there was a prison escapee taking shelter. One of the most fanciful theories stated that the landlord was collecting rent from dead people.

The night custodian, an immigrant named Pepé, tried to calm the rumors down. The landlord and he were really good friends, and they would always help each other in moments of need.

"I can assure you, folks, that there are actual residents living there. They just prefer to stay inside", attested the janitor.

As expected, this didn't calm down any of the rumors. The accusations continued to build up, and nothing calmed down until a fourth floor resident, Harry, came forward. He was an extreme man who held dangerous, racist, and sexist views and spoke foul language. He was also a strong man and was prone to violence.

One day, he went up in front of a crowd of residents who were spreading rumors. At the top of his lungs, he yelled to the crowd, blaming a multitude of people, most prominently, immigrants. He hated that both Pepé and the landlord were from South America and said he wanted them fired. In reality, he wanted them killed.

A crowd of twenty three people marched forth toward the landlord's office, where he and the janitor were talking, trying to work out a solution to the problem. Harry and his followers busted in and started to attack the helpless workers.

After the workers narrowly escaped, Harry and his mob stampeded up the stairs. They made their way to room 703. Harry told his mob that if he didn't come out in fifteen minutes, "cem out en git mee."

Fifteen minutes passed. People left after that. They had all realised the atrocity they had committed upon the landlord and janitor, and went to apologize to their workers. 10 days later, someone remembered Harry, and went to 703 and opened the door.

Out of the door fell Harry, wearing a bloodstained shirt.



PARANOIA

By Lucia Simonetti

Entry #7

The clock reads 11:00 p.m. exactly.

She should be combing through her wavy golden curls in her pink satin robe. I can't help but wonder what kind of slippers she is wearing or what kind of perfume she smells like. I haven't been close enough to whiff the sweet scent. Soon I will be.

The lights in her bedroom are still on, they are always on at night. Lying awake, just like me. We are more similar than she thinks. Yesterday we were in the lobby at the same time. She charmed me with her dazzling smile. The smile that was made just for me. Only for me. When I moved here three months ago, no one even looked at me. No smiles, no waves, no acknowledgement. But she-she graced me with her toothy grin. She wasn't smiling at anyone else, I'm sure of it. The smile was made just for me. How sweet. Recently, her smile hasn't been as bright, as comforting. She's tired, poor thing. If only she knew her suffering would be over soon, just imagine how bright her smile would be then. All I've wanted was for people to smile, smile for me. When I finish shining my tools, I can see the reflection of my own smile in it. I start trudging down the steps until I reach her door. I turn the handle. Why is it locked? Doesn't she know I'm here to help? I managed to pry the door open, it only took a couple tries. I briskly walk to her bedroom and spot her in her pink satin robe. She screams as I get closer. Why? I'm here to help. I must silence her so no one will come to upset her. Must not ruin the smile. I very delicately grasp her neck, it doesn't take her long to fall into a wistful sleep.

While she is in this state of peace, I very gently oh so gently take her smile. When I'm done I go back to my apartment and add her smile to my collection. All of my smiles.

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