

JUNE 2023

The Comsewogue High School's Literary Magazine

Serendipity



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weeks, you will probably need one by that time anyhow.

This two week's delay looms as a tremendous obstacle and breathlessly to the telephone office where you become strong surrounding a counter an hour. At the end of the tell your story to a man at who dodges to a desk tele conversational purposes every forty seconds, obviously to demonstrate what a really great help this invention is to a busy man. This gentleman ultimately helps you fill out an Application for Service which you recognize as the old income tax blanks the Government used in 1919.

He asks you if you want a regulation switchboard with plugs and things or a Jumbo Jr., which a child can operate and which accommodates three incoming trunk lines and fourteen extensions. You decide on Jumbo Jr., because of its marvelous simplicity and because it comes in two finishes, oak and mahogany. You order an oak Jumbo. Some days later you decide on mahogany finish furniture and some days after this you think the incongruity of the Jumbo. By this time however, you have decided that such things are how and that you detail person.

The day after you to put up starts to ing. of the paper that they are of the U open things, such the International After Jumbo simple and you misgiving, confident

thing of the uptown branch of the Farmer's Loan and Trust Co. (As unexpected to him, you suspect, as it is to THE NEW YORKER). And there you

are peaceful enough to get out a magazine.

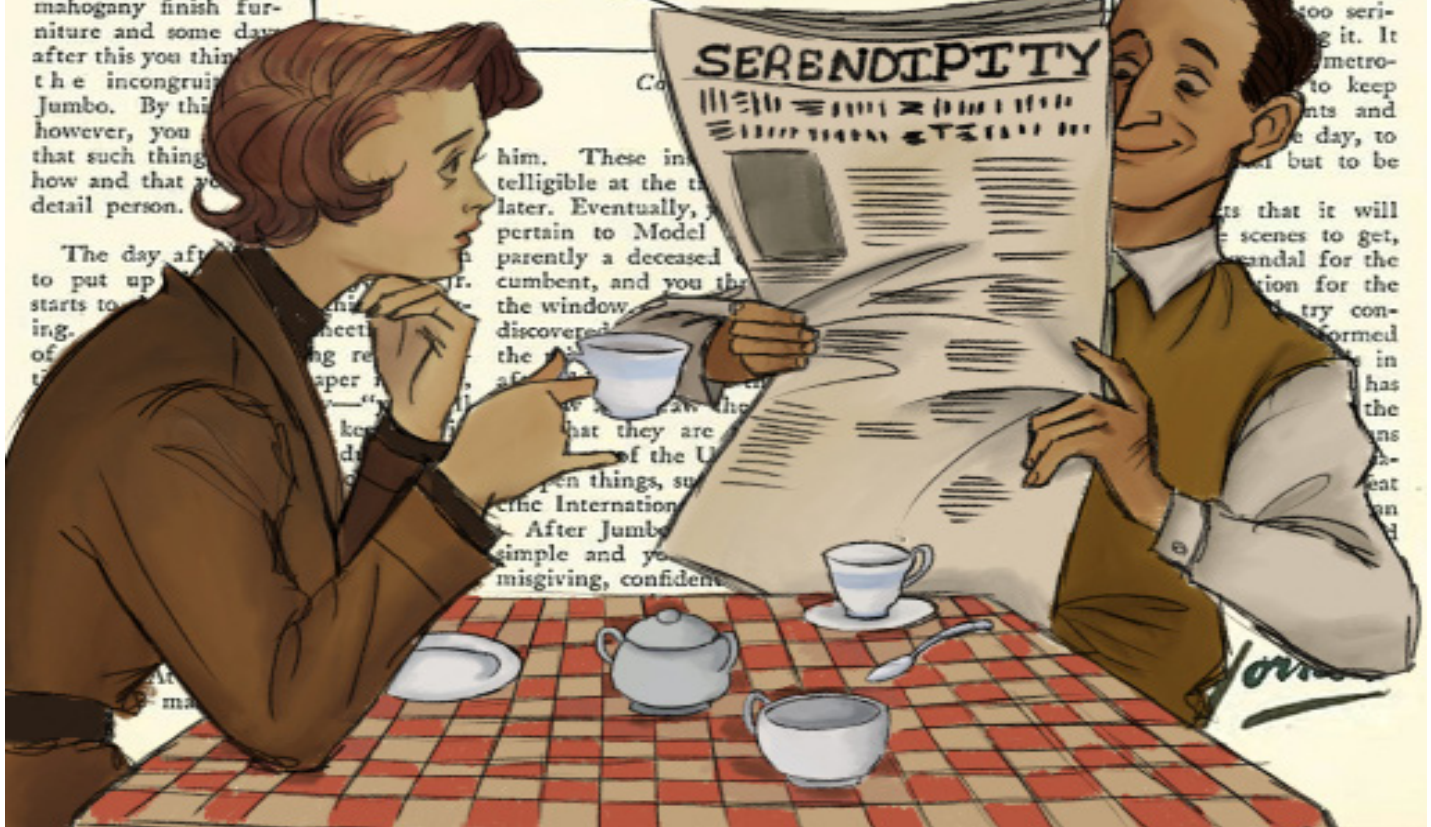
This does not leave you unshaken, of course, and at this point your doctor

Senior Spotlight

the middle of February time most magazines have fourth of July issue behind and are relaxing before the strenuous work on the Big Christmas Number. By nature THE NEW YORKER cannot be so forehanded. Most of its contents must be speedily prepared by a dozen persons and the magazine must be speedily put together. Because of the necessity for this haste THE NEW YORKER asks consideration for its first number. It recognizes certain shortcomings and realizes that it is impossible for a magazine fully to establish its character in one number. At the same time it feels a great deal of pride in many of its features and heart-felt gratitude for the support it already has received.

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A New Beginning

By Cassandra Paciella

In each stanza of life,
There's a new chance.
A chance to do it over again.

With each new chance,
There are new people.
People who are looking for their new chance,
Too.

In each new person,
There are old mistakes.
Mistakes that don't define them,
Anymore.

With each old mistake,
There are lasting regrets.
Regrets that will follow us.

And we will learn,
And become our best.
And help these new people to do the same.
And that's what the end is:
A new beginning-

The Game

By Oscar Rodriguez

Valentina was only twenty-one years old when she began her life as a world-renowned chess player. She'd been playing for most of her life; her mother had taught her the basics at eight years old, and by the time she was ten she could beat both her parents, her older brother, and any kid in her grade who challenged her. She always tied with her grandfather, who had been a big name in the chess world long before she was born.

She recalled her first and only real losses at fifteen years old when she'd first participated in her school's chess club. The upperclassmen were leagues above her, and whenever she played against one of them she would lose so horribly that she'd cry on the bus ride home.

She went to her grandfather for advice in this matter; he showed her an elaborate series of methods to get ahead in the game without cheating.

"But how would I cheat?" she'd asked. To her grandfather, skin sagging with age, eyesight so bad he had to wear glasses that made it look like he had eyes made of marble, she was a doe-eyed child, innocently inquiring on how someone could do something so despicable.

He'd listed off cheats he'd met, smart in some ways and dimmer in others, and she'd listened with eagerness, asking more and more questions, especially curious as to how they got caught and how they got away with it. She scribbled them down in her little journal and studied them at night instead of worrying about her test scores.

She devised a strategy— a fairly perfect one, as far as she was concerned— wherein she'd win every other game when she started playing with the upperclassmen, then slowly began winning two out of three, three out of four times, until finally it was no longer contested that she was the Queen, the player who controlled the game, so to speak, the winner you face off after you think you've practiced enough.

Of course, there were skeptics, at first; she easily shut down the men with accusations that she had simply damaged their egos by losing to a woman, and the women, although more difficult, were easy to convince as well. She'd simply lose a few games with the especially smart ones, or play in her own regular way a few times before going back to the cheat's way, which she'd learned was really much more fun.

The only player who seemed to be continuously suspicious of her, even after her attempts to thwart these suspicions, was a woman her own age named Cheryl. Cheryl— as she was often called— was a vicious player, and didn't take well to losing games. When she first lost against Valentina, she declared her a liar and a cheat, and everyone around them sympathized for Valentina, the poor young girl; they'd comforted her after the game, calling Cheryl jealous, rude, and unable to put up with losing. One boy proudly exclaimed, "She's a sore loser, alright!" after a game in which Cheryl knocked the board over at Valentina's checkmate.

After high school, most of Valentina's chess rivals vanished altogether in favor of pursuing their other passions, but Cheryl stuck with chess the same as Valentina and was eventually let into the same leagues as her.

Cheryl would now face off against Valentina for the first time since their high school days. Valentina wasn't particularly phased by this prospect; she'd become something of an expert in cheating. She faced her opponent with a grin. She would win this, she knew, even if Cheryl threw a board in her face at the end of their game.



The timer began, and Valentina began with her usual method; unusually enough, when she won at the end of the game, all she got from Cheryl was a shake of her hand and a “good job.”

Valentina ran after Cheryl, paranoid. What had she done? Rigged up a camera somewhere so the coaches could see she’d cheated? Found her journal, the one she kept in her purse at all times, which detailed ways to cheat and ways to not get caught? (She’d rewritten the notes she’d taken in high school in code, but she had no doubt Cheryl would take the time to decode it if it meant ending her career.)

“What was that?” she asked when she caught up to her. Cheryl was accompanied by two twin boys—her younger brothers, Valentina remembered—and she motioned for them to wait in the car as she stepped out and confronted Valentina.

“I was just playing fair,” Cheryl said. “You were good. Really good. Nothing’s changed since high school.”

“You were—you still think I’m cheating,” Valentina accused. “And now you’re playing with my head, trying to be all nice suddenly.”

Cheryl cocked her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Anyway, I’d better be going. I hope we play again soon.”

“You—” Valentina paused. She wasn’t sure how she’d be able to figure out whether or not Cheryl knew anything without making herself seem guilty. Maybe that was part of Cheryl’s trap. “Why weren’t you mad?”

“Why should I be?” Cheryl asked. “I know why I lost. It wasn’t because I was bad. There’s no reason to get mad at someone who I know would be worse than me if only she played fair.”

“I knew it!” Valentina yelled. “You still think I—you think I’m a cheater. Well, I can prove otherwise.” She wasn’t sure why she said it; speaking with Cheryl seemed to bring out a competitiveness in her, a need to prove herself that she’d long since satisfied with other people. She wanted others to like her, even people she didn’t particularly like herself.

Cheryl cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Why don’t we do a match on my terms, then? With no one watching, so they won’t see the sad look on your face when you finally lose to me for real.”

“It’s a deal,” Valentina said.

Valentina found herself nervous about a match for the first time in ages. She almost didn’t show when Cheryl texted her the address; she lived in a fancy mansion with her family, it appeared, which made sense to Valentina, as she’d heard rumors in school about Cheryl coming from old money.

In the middle of a large room sat a chess board, and beside that chess board sat Cheryl, looking smug as ever despite not having yet played.

Valentina was sure she’d be able to wipe that look off her face soon enough; though she’d agreed not to cheat, she was sure she was adequate enough at the game itself to give Cheryl a run for her money. Of course, if things turned South, Valentina had more delicate ways of cheating that were inconspicuous even to the trained eye.

The match began. Cheryl was good—good enough that Valentina resorted to cheating on her third turn with her—but when the match ended it was, of course, Valentina who came out on top.

“You’re ridiculous,” Cheryl said when the match ended. “I thought, maybe, for once we’d have a fair match. But no—you’re too concerned about winning to be fair, even when it’s a friendly match between colleagues.”

Valentina shrunk in on herself at the criticism. She’d never thought of a match as “friendly” before. Everything about her life, when it came to chess, was about competition, about winning. It never occurred to her that one could play without that competitive voice in the back of their mind egging them on. She frowned. “Fine. We’ll do a rematch.”

Cheryl looked reluctant, but agreed, setting up the pieces again and sitting down.

“I’ll start.”

They played for hours, eventually locking themselves into a tie. Neither of them was particularly happy with this result, but, as Valentina pointed out, it proved that they had both been on the same level after all.

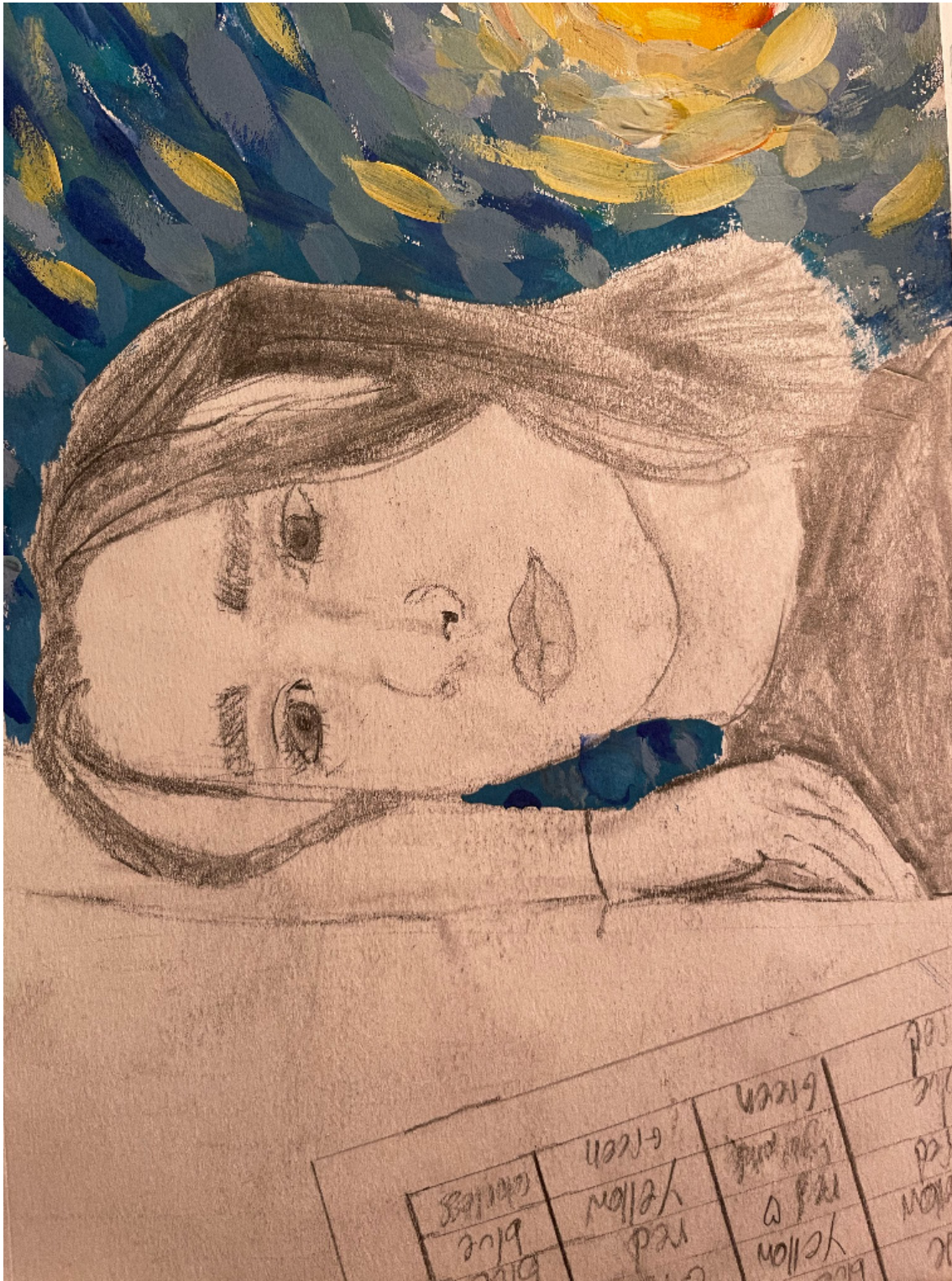
Afterward, they sat in the dining room, drinking tea and reminiscing about their high school years together, the anger and resentment they'd both had and how it now seemed it had all been for nothing.

"We could work together," Cheryl said suddenly. "You and me. I— not cheating— but I could tell you what moves to make, and you could make them for me since I'm out after you beat me and I lost my last game."

Valentina smiled. "That is cheating. But I don't need your help, anyway."

"Yeah," Cheryl said. "I guess you don't."





By Ava Kalberer

The Infection

By Jenna Levine

A familiar scent filled my nose. I peeked around the street corner and found a ruined, old shelf with decrepit books piled beside it. *This is home*, I thought to myself.

Behind the shelf was a broken-down building filled with the same shelves of books. Nothing would get more snug than this. I found a cozy corner at the back of the building. The smell of aged, used books danced through my nostrils, and I curled up tightly, hiding myself from the outside world. I closed my eyelids and took a nap.

I never thought that I would find a spot so comfortable, especially in this world. Sometimes I like to imagine what life was like before everything changed. Before the dead people walked the earth and before life was scarce—when every building you looked at was populated and bustling with life. Sleeping in this library was comforting because I was surrounded by stories that were created before life was so fear-inducing, depressing, cold, and dark. I could imagine real humans walking and living in the space that used to be. When I closed my eyes it was as though they were really there, and I could feel the warmth of their presence surrounding me—

A large bang woke me up from my daydream. I thought it might be one of the dead people walking around, infiltrating my new home, and I grew weary. I uncurled my tail from around my belly and I stretched out the sleep from my body. My ears were perked up, listening in for potential danger.

Cautiously, I left the small nook. I decided the only way I could make sure the library was safe was to scout out the area before it was too late. So, I wandered the abandoned building, trying to find the origins of the sound. Minutes of searching turned into hours. The structure was large, even in its feeble state, but I didn't mind roaming around. I loved scanning the old book covers that were surrounded by dust and debris. Looking at the titles and the art on the books gave me hope that wasn't there before; hope that one day life would resemble what it was like when those books were written.

After walking around what I thought to be the entire library, I circled back to where my cozy corner was. As I approached the area I heard the bang again. I proceeded with more caution than previously. When I turned the corner I was met with something completely unexpected.

Standing in front of me was a human, but not one of the dead ones. It was a real human being, one with clear, pale skin. They were almost completely untouched, with just the occasional dirt spot; they appeared to be healthy—a healthy person nowadays was beyond rare, and the fact that I found one was surprising, to say the least.

I stood in place, completely astonished. So many questions arose in my mind. What were the chances that I found a healthy human? Of all the buildings, and cities in the world, why this one?

The human was cautious, they could tell I was thinking something. Can they hear my thoughts too—that wasn't all that far-fetched in a world like this one. I stood. Not moving, my breath was fast and heavy.

"It's alright, little one." She spoke in a sweet motherly voice. Somehow, it had actually calmed me. She crouched down to the floor, trying to get as close to eye level as possible with me, and she let out her hand.

Slowly, without even realizing it, I advanced toward her hand. As I got closer I could smell the dirt and grime on her hands. It wasn't the most pleasant smell, but not much smelt very nice around here, not



even myself.

“*Pspsss*,” she let out a tempting sound that piqued my curiosity even more. So, I brushed my head on her hand. My body buzzed with an unexplainable calmness. Nothing had ever felt this right. She was exactly what I needed.

“That’s right little kitty,” she said. “What’s your name?” She pet my body, checking around my neck as if I was wearing something, “No collar,” she added.

We sat there, enjoying each other’s company, she pet me, and I basked in the attention. It felt nice to be appreciated and to appreciate someone in return. It’s safe to assume that most people in the world worked alone, it was too dangerous to make friends with someone because they could easily be infected—once someone was infected with the disease, there was no saving them. It was a gradual process, and at first, you don’t notice it, but then it gets worse. I’d seen it with my own eyes, the different stages of the disease taking hold of people in different ways. It was scary, and there was no stopping it, no prolonging it. Eventually, everyone would succumb to the disease—it was only a matter of time.

“I’ll name you Cheese,” My eyes widened. I’d never thought about giving myself a name. It never crossed my mind, “Cheese was my favorite food before everything went to shit,” she said, her voice breaking at the end.

I turned around to look at her face; it was turning a bright red like she might cry. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I snuggled up closer to her as my way of comforting the young woman. She kept her hands on my body, I became hyper-aware of my breath and I could tell that my heart was beating quickly, faster than it would normally do. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe her tears were putting me on edge.

Moments passed, and she was done crying. She quickly wiped away her tears and smiled at me once again, though this time I could tell it was more forced. She looked around our surroundings, looking at the dusty old books that surrounded us.

“This is a really nice place, I can’t remember the last time I was in a library,” She said, sounding congested from crying. “I like it here,” she added under her breath. *Me too*, I thought to myself. If only I was a person, we could have a much better relationship if I could talk to her.

“*Meow*,”

“That’s right Cheese, I agree.” She concurred, as if I’d said something of substance. Humans were weird that way.

The girl got up, and stood with her hands on her hips, “What to do?” she sighed, looking around the book-filled room. I stood up as well. I walked and brushed my body against the girl’s legs.

It was nice to have someone to keep me company. My only fear was that it wouldn’t last long— but that was nothing to think about; at that moment everything was alright, and I had nothing to complain about.

The young woman started walking around frantically as if she was searching for something. She started moving books around, and eventually, she made her way to the shelves and started moving them as well. I maneuvered around her shenanigans, trying to avoid getting in the way.

Hours later, she was finally finished. I looked around and found that she’d created our own cozy corner. It was protected by the shelves and made comfortable by the books. There were spots to sleep, marked out by the books, and spots to hang out, also made out of books. There was a couch shape and it was surprisingly comfortable to lie down on.

“Ta-dah!” She exclaimed with her arms outstretched proudly. “This’ll be our new home, Cheese,”

“Mrow,” I responded as my way of thanking her and telling her it was a great spot for us.

“Yes, Cheese, exactly what I was thinking.” I wasn’t quite sure what she was talking about, but I went with it. She started to walk out of the little nook she’d just spent hours making and left the building. I grew nervous, but followed anyway.

We wandered around for a while, each minute that passed I grew more and more comfortable with the girl. Everything felt much safer when I was with her, and before I knew it I was walking around with her confidently. Nothing could touch her or me, we were a force to be reckoned with. No one would hurt us.

They could try, but they would fail. These thoughts made me want to laugh, but instead, my body buzzed once again. This time it was with excitement.

All of this was going through my mind, a confidence was coursing through my veins, something that wasn't there before.

That was until...

A dead person came out of nowhere and jumped right on top of the girl. They struggled with one another. She punched and kicked the person. The dead person was unrecognizable. There was no way to tell if it was a man or a woman, old or young. It drooled and growled. The only thought racing through my mind, the only worry I could think of: would she be infected?

I wasn't sure exactly what transmitted the disease, I am just a cat after all, but I knew it spread easily. I couldn't tell who was winning. There was blood dripping from her nose and the dead person seemed un-phased. But she continued on.

I knew I couldn't just watch, so I walked over toward the fight, and without any forethought, I bit the leg of the dead person. It wailed out in pain and fought harder, I thought I'd made it worse. That was until there was an oozing substance that poured out from the bite mark. One more strong, powerful kick to the face from the young woman and the dead person fell to the floor, groaning.

Quickly, she got up and ran back towards the abandoned library and I followed suit. I assumed she was worried the dead person would come after us again. We had no idea what these dead people were capable of— at least not one hundred percent sure, especially after the events that just occurred. They were much tougher than I'd initially thought, and that's what really scared me.

Once we made it back to the library and our cozy corner, my stomach started growling. It was yelling at me to eat something. I couldn't remember the last time I had something to munch on, and it was starting to show.

"Meow," I let out as my way of complaining to the young woman.

"Me too Cheese," she said. Although, I wasn't sure what she was referring to; it could have been anything. "We'll get something to eat soon enough," she said, which surprised me. Had she just read my mind?

Minutes passed, and we'd just sat in our cozy little hideaway, basking in each other's company. Enjoying the fact that we weren't alone at that moment. But my stomach raged on, growing hungrier by the second.

She coughed.

Now to a normal person, this wouldn't seem all that bad, but in this world, it was the first sign of being infected. She was infected. This was the beginning of the end, I thought. I think she knew that I noticed her coughing. It was the start of something terrible. It was only a matter of time before she was completely taken over by the disease.

"It's okay, Cheese. Everything will be okay." She reassured me, but I knew it would be the complete opposite of okay. She was going to leave me, and I didn't know how to lose someone in such a horrible way.

"Meow," I let out a sad sound, trying to express my feelings.

"It's alright Cheese, you'll be fine without me." My stomach growled again, reminding me of my growing hunger. Why me? Why us? Why couldn't we be happy together without something terrible happening?

All these thoughts ran through my head, paired with hunger; it was all too much. I had an overwhelming feeling deep within my stomach. I felt like I might throw up, but I had nothing left in my body.

"Meow," I cried out in pain. She looked at me with sadness in her eyes. A worried look, as if she knew just how bad things were going to get. She's probably seen the different stages of infection, and she knows what is coming.

Later that night, after the initial awful feelings of worry and anguish, we'd decided it was time to get something to eat. We'd managed to catch a rat scurrying around our library. She gave me a majority of the meal, because of her imminent death— if you can even call the infection a death. It's more like a purgatory,

not quite dead, but not alive.

We sat in silence, and just ate the food. That's when I noticed she was scratching at her neck—the second sign of infection—there was a red mark, oozing with puss and blood from her scratching. I knew soon I'd have to leave her before the infection got too bad. I had to save myself, but I didn't want to leave her. I couldn't leave her. I hadn't known her very long, but I just couldn't bring myself to leave. It just felt wrong. It was wrong. It's like leaving someone to die when you could help them. Could I help her? The question flooded my mind. Could I save her?

"I'm sorry," She said between coughs and while scratching at her neck. "I'm so sorry," she said again, regretfully. At that moment I wished I could hug her, just to make her feel less awful about herself. I wished I could do so much more than what I was doing right then.

The girl grew pale, and without warning she hunched over and started vomiting. The smell was nasty, unnaturally nasty. It looked disgusting, filled with chunks, like she'd just vomited out her insides—the third sign of infection. When she looked up from the floor, she looked at me and her skin looked a pale green color rather than the fair tone it had prior to the infection.

The infection was getting worse, and quickly, there was no question about it. She was going to be gone in a day, or less.

"Cheese," she said, whilst still hunched over and recovering from the vomiting. "You have to go," she begged, "I don't want you seeing me like this, it's not fair to you." She added, with tears streaming down her face. She crouched down, to get closer to eye level with me. I looked up and locked in eye contact with her.

"Meow," I said sadly.

"You have to Cheese," she sobbed, "Please, just leave me!" she cried out and it echoed throughout the library. I was the first one to break the eye contract. I spun around to get comfortable, and I sat down in protest. I wasn't going to leave.

"Mow" I let out.

"Don't make this harder than it already is, Cheese." She said behind hysterical tears. "It's time to let go." I looked at my paws placed in front of me. I didn't know what to think or do. There was nothing I could do.

My stomach sank at this realization. The thought of going on without her ripped my heart out and left it on the floor to bleed out and die. There was a pit of emptiness deep within me and I didn't know what to do about it—how to fill the void.

"Goodbye Cheese," she finally said.

She started walking away slowly, scratching at the wound on her neck and coughing up a lung. Her green tinted skin looked sickly, and it was hard to watch her suffering so much—just the thought of what she had to endure, the thought of completely losing herself, I couldn't imagine.

I walked in the opposite direction. Accepting the fact that once I looked back it would be the last time I see her.

One last time, I thought. I would look back one more time. We happened to look back at the same exact time. She smiled, but it was a quick glance, and we both went on our way.





By Ava Kalberer

Rain

By Jenna Levine

The gentle tapping of the rain on the window never fails to put me to sleep. I love watching the rain; it's one of the few things that puts my mind at ease. Watching as the drops squiggle down my window, merging together as they meet one another is so satisfying. Just sitting, doing nothing but watching the rain. Watching as the puddles accumulate on the sidewalk, watching the cars pass through those puddles, splashing them around—disturbing their peace—then waiting for them to join back together in their perfectly imperfect little cumulations of water.

I might be old, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the small things in the life I have left. The one thing I know I'll miss is the rain. I'd imagine that heaven doesn't have rain, although the rain itself is heavenly, to me at least; I'd imagine for most people the rain doesn't belong in their heaven. If we have to share the paradise then I think it's safe to assume that for a majority of people, they'd prefer it if there wasn't any rain. Most people find that the rain is unbearable, and hindering—as in it hinders their plans for the day—and it's moody and makes people drowsy. But I think it's beautiful and it's calming. It's cleansing for the soul and the earth. It also makes movie scenes more dramatic, what would we do without it—

My cat jumps up on the windowsill seat I'm sitting on, disturbing my peace. He likes watching the rain with me. We watch it together all the time, especially after my husband's passing. I hope he's up somewhere in heaven watching the rain with me. If that's even possible. I miss him more than anything in this sad, lonely world. Without him, I'm nothing and I'm no one.

The house is empty and quiet without him. When he was here, we used to go out to this busy park that was always filled with people. On rainy days, we'd sit on this bench together, and when we got there it would already be wet, but we would let the rain just soak into our clothes, and we didn't mind at all. We would sit together and just watch the rain and the people. He loved to people watch. People interested him; he loved the way people acted and reacted to different things, especially to the rain. He loved watching how they'd rush on through to wherever it was they were going, how they'd cower under their umbrellas or, if they were younger, they would cower under their jacket hoods.

He was a writer, always jotting down notes on things to write about. He'd do it whenever we went people-watching. He carried around his little Moleskine notebook, with the special pen that I bought him for one of his birthdays, and he'd just write down notes—I was never actually allowed to read his notebook, he never liked me to. I did, however, get to read his stories. They were always beautiful and I never knew how simply watching people could give so much inspiration to a person, enough to write a story of ten to twenty pages. It's incredible, I think. I've always wished for a talent like that.

Now that he's gone, I often go back to read his old stories. My favorite is one with a man and his wife—probably based on our own lives—where the man and the woman marry each other and live a happy, honest life together. They have children and later grandchildren. They live with each other for a long time, and nothing happens, they just live their lives and that's it. And that's my favorite story he's ever written; it's also one of the firsts he wrote for me. I'm not sure why it's stayed with me for so long, but I don't think I could ever forget about it. It was so beautifully written.

The story never had an ending, it simply stopped when the couple grew old. Neither of them died, it just stopped, paused right there. You could say it was unfinished, but I think he just didn't know what came next in their lives—our lives. It's impossible to tell how he would have finished it, but I think I'll give it a try:

I stood up from the windowsill I was watching the rain from, and walked down to one of our children's old rooms, which we later converted into an office for him. It had an old wooden desk right near the window, and bookshelves that covered the walls, along with old drawings from our grandchildren. The desk was as it always was, covered in papers, some crumpled up pieces of paper, the pen I gave him for one of his

birthdays — left in the exact same spot he had last used it— and other clutter: old coffee cups, post-it notes, pens that'd run out of ink...

I sat down at the desk in the leather chair. It was cold, ignored, and hadn't been used in ages; it was worn out from all the times he'd sat there— I felt as if I was intruding on something. If I messed up something on the desk, it would be like I was messing up his life, the things he had held so dear to him; it would be like I was reading that Moleskine notebook— something that wasn't on the desk, which was surprising—the one thing I wasn't allowed to read. What if he'd never wanted me in here? He'd never said anything in reference to me being in the office, negative or positive.

I pulled open a drawer, the one I knew had all the lined paper in it. I picked up the pen, the one I'd given him for his birthday one year, and I started writing. My heart ached for him, I wished more than anything that he was here with me...

Benji, my cat, walked in on my writing. He brushed his body against my leg, the same leg that bounced anxiously while I wrote. He meowed, but I ignored him. As I wrote, my body ached; it pained me to write this, but it was something I needed to do— my breath grew heavy, I was having trouble breathing— it was something I had to do for him. I looked back at my words, my vision blurring. The words turned into mush, and I couldn't read them; was it because my vision was blurring, or was my handwriting unreadable? I couldn't tell, but I continued, my body still in pain, my vision still in a blur.

Everything turned dark. There was a light at the end of the tunnel of darkness, and I walked toward it. It was a long walk, but I didn't mind all that much. As the light got closer, I realized someone was there. It was him, my husband, the love of my life. I ran the rest of the way down the tunnel, his arms outstretched just for me, and he wrapped his arms around my body. He was warm and felt like home.

Time to Go

By Zoe Marks

James fell asleep when the sun rose. I was told this had been the case for a few months, and the others didn't know what to do about it. He refused to see a doctor, and that was all anybody tried to suggest, whether out of fear or resignation I didn't know. "I'm fine," he would protest loudly whenever somebody tried to get him to bed at four in the morning. "Just need to lay off the Netflix, yeah?" even if the TV was off and he was staring blankly at nothing with an empty bottle of Newcastle in hand. "Bloody dangerous," with a cheerful, almost-manic grin. In those moments, I was told later, he sounded like his brother, so eager to fill a silence with noise, and that was why nobody tried very hard, at first. And at the time I didn't know what had happened, so I didn't feel comfortable giving opinions.

I came around in the middle of July. I was new to the country; I'd never left Long Island before. The closest I'd ever been to the UK and Europe was standing at the end of Montauk, pretending I could see a tiny stretch of land on the horizon. I hadn't known what to expect when moving to England, and I hadn't even known any of the people living in the house; just one girl named Sylvie—I'd forgotten her last name—from a class we shared sophomore year in high school.

When I arrived, blinking away nervous exhaustion and jet-lag, it was to Sylvie and a group of five other people, all smiling excitedly. There were three men and two women including Sylvie, and they all looked about my age—so guys and girls, then. All three guys were bigger and stronger-looking than me, and two of them insisted on taking my bags, and because I hadn't been able to sleep at all on the plane, I let them.

"Food first, yeah?" Sylvie said, smiling softly. She looked just as I remembered—small, gentle, fragile, like a kitten or a puppy; but I remembered vividly the time she'd been attacked and broken the assailant's wrist and nose. "Bet you're famished, there's a brill take-away not far from here."

"Okay," I said lamely, trying to figure out what 'brill' meant. "Yeah, food sounds good."

"Oh!" Sylvie said suddenly; I jumped. "Forgot introductions are in order—Chris this is Emma, Liz, William, George, and James."

I shook hands, and when I met James' eyes I almost flinched. He was looking at me as if he could see into the deepest parts of my soul; but he grinned, and took my hand, then let go. I looked away.

Later that night, I couldn't sleep. It was nearing the better part of three in the morning, and I wouldn't get anything done lying around, so I went downstairs to pour a glass of water and maybe run around outside a bit. But there was the soft glow of a TV, and when I went to investigate, James was sitting in front of it watching a show I didn't recognize.

"Lo," he said hoarsely when he noticed me hovering near the doorway, wondering if I should pretend I'd never seen him and he could pretend he'd never seen me, and we could be the only two people existing in the world without interacting. But he wasn't really seeing, there was a glazed-over glinting sort of look in his eyes reflected off the TV; he was drunk. "Look come in, I don't bite," he grinned.

I thought that maybe he did, especially because he wasn't the same person he'd been earlier that day—aside from the fact that he wasn't sober, he had the air of someone who was about to snap, and it unnerved me—one of the things drilled into my mind from my father was that you don't argue with drunk people; so I shrugged and stepped in. I took a seat on the couch, at the opposite end.

"You smoke?" he asked, already pulling out a pack of Marlboros and a lighter from his pocket. I shook my head; I had in high school, but I was trying to quit. "Too bad," he said, and his voice was neither teasing nor serious. "Care for a drink?" he asked, holding out a bottle of vodka that was mostly finished.

I laughed. "No thanks," I said.

"Missin' out mate," he informed me, lighting up and taking a drag. He put the bottle to his lips and

took a long swig.

We watched the TV for a couple minutes; I could hardly follow what was happening, the exhaustion of the flight finally catching up to me. But I wasn't tired, just relaxed, and I thought that it was dangerous to be relaxed around a stranger. I thought that maybe I did want a drink, if only to make the moment last.

"This is shit," James announced; I laughed again.

"If you don't like it, why are you still watching?" I thought maybe he'd want to change it, and we could stay here, him drunk and me sober, bordering on the crackling electricity of danger in the halfway point between night and day. I wasn't sure that he wouldn't kill me, because at that moment we were the only two people in the world, and he could do whatever he wanted. To me.

But he just barked a laugh, and said, "You're funny. Off to bed you go, I'm no fun to be around this time of night." I hesitated. Then I listened.

I nodded off at some point, because I startled awake. It felt odd, waking up in a bed I'd never slept in before, in a house full of strangers. I dressed and went downstairs, and only realized too late that there were voices in the kitchen. I didn't want to intrude, but I was starving.

"Chris!" Sylvie exclaimed, eyes brightening. She came over and started fussing, and I thought briefly of my mother. "Poor thing," she said sympathetically. "You must be knackered. Did we wake you?"

"No, not at all," I assured her, looking over and nodding at William, who nodded back. "Um, listen..." I told them both about last night, about coming across James drunkenly watching TV at three in the morning. I didn't tell them about how our interaction felt excitingly dangerous, like jumping out of a plane or swimming with sharks.

William frowned, but neither of them looked particularly concerned.

Sylvie sighed. "He's been like this—"

"Sylvie!" a voice gasped dramatically from the doorway. "You light of my life, you made me a cuppa!" It was James, looking as though he'd gotten a full twelve hours of sleep. I stared in disbelief.

"Er," Sylvie said. "Actually it was for..." But it was too late. James came over and pulled something out of a drawer, added it to the mug.

"We take our tea the same then," he grinned at me, the same grin from yesterday at the airport, a friendly one. I stared in disbelief some more.

Then I couldn't help it, "How's that then?" I asked.

"Four spoons of honey," he said, seriously. He kept eye contact with me and took a very pointed sip.

"We do not take our tea the same," I said hotly, mostly to William and Sylvie.

"Ew James, that's minging." Sylvie wrinkled her nose and swiftly left the room, patting me on the shoulder as she went.

James winked at me. I knew without a doubt that it was meant for William to see; but William wasn't looking, he was looking at his phone, and so James' wink was private, a second just for him and me.

George was tasked with taking me around the neighborhood. James tagged along, occasionally adding funny details about places George would tell me about. James was smoking furiously; eventually I gave up and asked for one, because the smell was driving me crazy. George ducked into a cafe to buy us lunch, and James leaned up against the wall outside, watching me as we smoked. It felt good. There was a routine, a rhythm, to smoking, and I forgot why I'd quit in the first place.

We finished our cigarettes in companionable silence, and when I opened my mouth to ask for another, he was already lighting it for me, passing it along once he'd taken a drag.

"You miss it?" he asked.

I sucked in some smoke, shrugged. "Not really." He was talking about America.

"Yeah," he said, and I could tell that his eyes were on me again, "I wouldn't either." And I could tell that we weren't talking about America anymore.

We shared a cigarette outside once we got back to the house. I couldn't call it home yet, even though it looked like one from where we were standing; the lights on inside were all golden, and because somebody had opened all the curtains on the ground floor, I could see Liz and Sylvie laughing in the kitchen, William speaking seriously into a phone. I couldn't see the others. George had gone inside, shaking his head at us when we hung back, James fumbling for a cigarette— his last— like we were in high school, afraid of getting caught by a teacher.

“Bless them,” James said, fondly. “They’ve all been trying to get me to quit for ages. It’ll be right bloody difficult for them now we’ve got a posh American.”

I didn't bother addressing the last thing he said; I didn't know if it was bait or not. “How's that going for you?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “The quitting?”

“Well I'm out here with you, aren't I?” he replied, but his voice was neither angry nor disappointed.

“I'm not posh,” I told him, suddenly confiding.

“Are to me,” James said. “Never been outside England. Never met an American.”

“We're not all that exciting,” I grumbled.

“Are to me,” he repeated.

We stood outside a while longer, even when the cigarette was long gone— he let me have the final drag then he crushed it underneath his boot. It started to rain, and when he moved to head up to the house, I followed.

It had been like that for a while, the following. I should have been embarrassed, trailing after someone my own age like I was a child. But James was like me, ironically quiet, reserved. We both liked to observe rather than join in, and we both smoked. It was easy to run out to the store with him— after a while, I felt bad taking his cigarettes— buying a couple packs together and smoking in the park near the house for a couple hours. Sylvie and the others highly disapproved of this, and thought James had ‘turned’ me— I didn't have the heart to tell them that I'd smoked in high school but quit and started again. Because of James. It would have had the same effect, and they were polite enough about it— George told me the night James had called me a posh American that there was to be no smoking in the house, and if I really needed the money for a pack I could borrow some but I had to pay it back at some point.

The first couple months of me living in the house were some of the happiest days of my life; the seven of us went out for drinks and dinners often, and I got to know everyone so that I no longer felt like a stranger intruding. They had game nights every Sunday, with snacks and virgin drinks— because getting drunk on a Sunday night was irresponsible, according to Sylvie, but we went out every Friday night and sometimes Saturday too. I almost felt bad about not having a job; but I'd brought enough money over from America to last me at least half a year at my mother's request, and converted it to pounds. We took turns paying for rounds on weekends, and we all chipped in for dinner and groceries and anything else everyone contributed in together.

And, of course, there were the late-night moments set aside just for James and I.

They weren't really set aside, because it wasn't a routine either of us said aloud. But James was always the last one to go to bed, and he never went, he stayed downstairs under the pretense of cleaning up or whatever excuse he could come up with that nobody bought but didn't argue with. I would go to my room



and then start craving a cigarette before bed. James always just wanted to light up in the living room, where he didn't have to get up and could stay comfortable, but I made it clear after a couple times that I didn't want to go behind anyone's back like that. He would grumble about me being a tosser but would generally cheer up after a cigarette and maybe some alcohol. Sometimes he slipped into the predator persona he'd adopted the first night I'd spent at the house, but if I didn't egg him on too much he would usually relax again. Sometimes I did egg him on, just to see what would happen—which was not much. He seemed to be restraining himself.

We spent most late nights together, when the rest of the world didn't exist, and in a house of seven we were the only two. Sometimes we would both have one cigarette. James always finished his first, and the second I'd smoked mine to the very ends of it James would leap up and dash out of the back door, and I would run after him, and we'd end up outside, which was a great big field that went on for what seemed like miles, or maybe forever.

"Do you think there's aliens?" James asked me on one of these nights. We'd exhausted ourselves chasing each other, and were lying underneath a weeping willow, which must have been planted half a century ago because it was huge, a golden-yellow sort of color because it was nearing the end of September.

"Sure," I said. I reached out and touched one of the tree's branches, which it didn't seem to like; it rustled insistently. "There has to be something."

"Intelligent life," James nodded.

"No," I said thoughtfully. "I mean, this tree is alive, right? And so is the grass, and all the plants...so maybe those are the aliens."

Silence stretched on for so long that I worried I'd bored him, but when I looked over, James spoke. "When I was younger I used to wish that aliens would come and attack Earth," he said. "Anything to get me away from whatever was going on."

"Me too," I said, and he looked back over at me; I looked away. "But then I grew up, and I realized that it probably wasn't going to happen."

He flinched; I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Then he said, "Exactly."

In November I got a job. Two days later I got a phone call.

It was Friday, so we were all getting ready to go to the pub. Sylvie had deemed it a celebration. I'd left my phone in the kitchen and forgotten about it until William knocked on Emma's door—she'd pulled me into her room to ask about what I thought of a work situation, ranting while simultaneously doing her eye makeup.

"Yeah, come in," she called.

William came in with my phone in his hand; he looked distressed. "Sorry mate," he said. "Thought it was mine, picked it up—got an earful about... Well, you'd better just..."

"It's okay," I said, slightly alarmed. I took my phone from him and saw the contact; it was my sister, who I hadn't spoken to in years, not since the end of high school.

"Hello?" I said into the phone. I didn't mind Emma listening in, nor William—both looked in no hurry to leave me alone, and I appreciated their unspoken protectiveness.

"Chris?" My sister's voice was quiet.

"Yeah?"

"Chris," my sister said again, more urgently.

"Jesus, what?" I snapped, suddenly feeling angry. She didn't have the right to blow me off for years and then suddenly call me one random Friday night, and...and—

"Chris," she said, a third time, and I was half a second away from hanging up when she blurted out, like it was a secret she couldn't contain anymore, "Dad's dead."

The phone fell out of my hand.

THE MURDER OF ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ

By Hayley Villani, Riley Grimes, Jack Montoya, and Fazal Naqvi

Ding! The golden doors shutter as the elevator arrives on the fourth deck of the *MY Serendipity*. You check your watch: 10:01 AM.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” says the tall man to your left. His voice is the first you’ve heard since the anonymous phone call. Your pilot was eerily silent during the entire three hour helicopter ride out to the boat.

The man continues, “My name is James Meanor, second in command to Mr. De La Cruz.” Next to Meanor stands a shorter, wispy-haired man you assume is the captain. Just as you’re about to ask why you were flown out here, the elevator stops shifting. The engine inside lets out a huff of breath as the doors slide apart.

The first thing you notice is your own reflection in the elevator’s golden mirrored walls. Then, the body.

“Here he is, the man of the hour! Ernesto De La Cruz: entrepreneur, philanthropist, dead man,” the captain states indifferently. “One of our housekeepers found ‘im ‘ere about five hours ago.”

“It’s truly a shame; he was a very kind man,” Meanor says, bowing his head. “We hear you’re the best of the best. We flew you in right away because we must solve this murder before we port at 2:30 PM. If we dock with our yacht owner victim to an unsolved murder, that’s bad press. *Enterprises De La Cruz* doesn’t get bad press. We’ll call all your main suspects to the bow at 2:15. Be there to make the big decision!”

The captain adds, “You *must* find De La Cruz’s murderer as soon as possible! You have complete permission to explore each room of the ship, investigate evidence, and talk to anyone on board. I suggest you take a look around here in the lobby first. Best of luck!”

Every room will have multiple pathways.

Go to the item or area report to learn more about it. Move on to the next room or return to the previous to investigate further.

Ex. “What do you want to do?”

Investigate EXAMPLE ”

*Play **fairly** and have fun!*

Meanor and the captain leave you alone in

THE LOBBY

1

THE LOBBY

The lobby is unlike any lobby you've ever seen, let alone seen on a boat. The ceilings are high, which is strange because it doesn't seem possible from the deck.

A massive staircase stretches out from the center of the room, leading to a loft with what appears to be more seating. On either side of the room are typical seating areas: two sofas and an end table, respectively. On the left side of the room is the elevator where the body lies. It grows colder with every passing second. On the right is the entrance to the dining room. A beautiful vinyl floor stretches across the room, covered partially by a long thin carpet.

A beautiful view of the ocean is displayed by the large windows. Water stretches to the sky with only a smudge of land visible on the horizon.

An eerie feeling fills your body just being in the room; a place typically full of life is completely devoid of it- dead. The only soul in the room is yours.

At the base of the staircase spreads pieces of broken glass, mostly shattered, but you make out the shape of a drinking glass. A puddle of liquid is spread on the floor below it, soaking into the carpet lining the walkway. Perhaps this was his drink?

Ernesto's body is sprawled along the floor of the elevator. He is facedown with his head between his legs. Aside from the glass, the room seems undisturbed. No blood stains or shoved furniture. No signs of scuffle or struggle. Unfortunately, Ernesto's position in the elevator means he could have died on any deck.

What do you do?

Investigate
ERNESTO'S BODY

Investigate
BROKEN GLASS

Go to the
DINING ROOM

ERNESTO'S BODY

Upon investigating, you see that Ernesto's corpse doesn't have any gashes, gouges, or gunshots. However, there is a fragrance you can smell. A hint of cherry. Maybe a cologne, but it smells more feminine. Perfume? Ernesto is wearing a tailored white pinstripe suit with many pockets. A distinct tan line is noticeable on his wrist, where a watch would be. You scribble this down in your notebook.

	What do you do?	
Investigate SUIT	Return to THE LOBBY	Go to the DINING ROOM

BROKEN GLASS

You walk over to the stairs and stare at the shards spread along the floor. Amongst the pieces is a small red stem. Upon piecing the larger glass fragments together, you recognize the shape of a martini glass! You wonder if this could possibly be related to the murder. Was it his drink? Was someone frightened by the sight of his body and dropped their glass? You realize there's not much else you can get from this glass.

	What do you do?	
Return to THE LOBBY		Go to THE DINING ROOM

SUIT

His suit is pristine. A perfect eggshell white. The suit's lapel appears to have a stain on it, the only stain on the entire suit. A liquid stain, but one of no distinct color. Its stench is masked by the smell of corpse and perfume. Searching through his jacket and pants pockets, you discover three spare buttons and a yellowed wallet photo of Ernesto and a tall, plasticky-looking woman, presumably his wife.

	What do you do?	
Return to THE LOBBY		Go to THE DINING ROOM

2

THE DINING ROOM

From the lobby, you follow the hallway into the grand dining room of the ship. The place is buzzing with energy; a strange sight considering the man in charge is dead. Waiters run food and dishes to and from the kitchen. Important men and women sit around two large circular tables. They seem rather unbothered by the death of their friend, employer, or whatever he may have been to them. You take a moment to people-watch.

At the table to the left (TABLE 1) sits three men and one woman. Sipping on champagne glasses, they seem to be having a serious discussion. The woman is visibly intoxicated, and the man she sits near seems displeased at that fact. The men across from them appear to be businessmen: one tall and slim and the other short and stout. The tall man's head reflects the light from the chandelier overhead. The only hair above his neck consists of thick eyebrows and a thicker brown mustache. The pudgy man has a full, dark beard, heavily contrasting his pearly white smile that stretches from ear to ear. He appears jolly, like a garden gnome, but his icy eyes scan the room, as if they're searching for weaknesses to manipulate.

At the table to the right (TABLE 2) sits only one man. He seems anxious, looking nervously around at the surrounding people. He wears a dark brown suit, but it seems disheveled. He himself seems disheveled. His hair is unruly and pulled back into a ponytail. His suit jacket is barely resting on his shoulders and his shirt appears to be stained by various liquids. Between his glances around the room, he gnaws at his fingernails. His eyes dart to you for a second until he notices you meeting his gaze. He quickly turns away and puts his head down. Something is off about him.

Where do you go?

TABLE 1

TABLE 2

TABLE 1

As you make your way over to the table, the woman who sits there spills her drink over the dissatisfied man's lap. He stands abruptly.

"Son-of-a... Goddamn it Lucy. I just... God. I'm tired of you doin' this every time you drink," he says angrily at the woman.

"Oh, quit your whining. You b-barely got any on you. Jus- Just sit, sit back down," she replies drunkenly. The man, with the now wet pants, turns toward you, wiping himself off. He looks up at you.

"Well what do ya think you're looking at. You're not judging my wife are ya?" He sticks his hand out, looking for you to shake it. "I'm only jokin', you don't seem like the type. The name's Henry. Henry Thomas. And this lovely lady here is my wife, Lucy." He says sarcastically, gesturing toward the drunk woman.

"Pleasure t- **hick** to meet ya, handsome!" she says, stumbling over her words.

"And these gentlemen here are Mr. Gulyansky and Mr. Cummings." They both nod their heads, acknowledging your presence. "They don't talk much to feds," Henry says, looking at the badge pinned to your jacket.

"Please, have a seat!" Lucy shouts. "I wanna talk about Mr. D.L.C.!"

You reach for your notepad and start to flip to a new page but Mr. Gulyansky, the tall bald man, grabs your wrist. His grip is incredibly tight, though it doesn't seem like he's trying that hard.

"No note," he says flatly. His deep voice flows like tar, with a thick Russian accent. You comply, hoping to keep your wrist intact.

The man named Mr. Thomas speaks, "So, Mr. De La Cruz is dead. Big whoop. We all saw this comin' from a mile away. Or, at least I did. These other folk are a bit slower than me." Mr. Thomas chuckles to himself as he strokes his own ego. He's a cocky man. "So what are ya here for, the inside scoop?"

"I don't know, Hen," Mr. Cummings cuts in. "What's in it for us? I don't like talkin' for nothin'." He blows his cigar smoke in your face. The woody scent of the cigar tells you that it wasn't cheap.

"Zip it, Rick. I'll tell him what he needs to know to get this all dealt with." He directs his attention to you. "De La Cruz had ties in many different areas of business. The thing about ol' Cruz was he had no enemies. I mean *none*. If someone was out to kill him, they was the one up to no good, not big man Cruz. Me? I'm a business partner. An associate, you could say."

He continues, "That Meanor though. Strange guy, quiet. Keeps to himself. Cruz's assistant. 'Two,' Cruz called him. He's always so stuck up, couldn't take his lips off the boss' rear end." Mr. Gulyansky chuckles at Thomas' remark. "Meanor was in charge of most of the cash flow of the company: donations, salaries, yada yada. Meanor was the money guy. Sometimes I wonder if Cruz even knew what Meanor was up to with his cash. I wish I had that kinda money, ya know?"

Mr. Gulyansky's smile fades. "Ernesto was smart man, comrade. He know if fishy business going on."

"Yer damn right about that 'comrade'," Mr. Thomas mocks while leaning back in his chair and putting his boots up on the table. "That's about all I can tell ya, I'm afraid. I believe if I tell ya anymore I'd make some enemies!"

You thank Mr. Thomas for his time and shake his hand. You start to reach your hand out to shake Mr. Gulyansky's, but quickly pull it back.

What do you do?

Check out
TABLE 2

Go to
THE KITCHEN

TABLE 2

You walk over to the table, and the man anxiously stares as you approach.

“I-I swear I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t kill him! I SWEAR TO IT!” His voice turns from a whisper to a shout. “I- I’m sorry sir, I didn’t mean to yell. Just with all these shenanigans with the murder and all, I’m a little on edge. I’m Rusty. Rusty Razorblade.” He stretches out a quivering hand, which you shake. It’s extremely sweaty.

“I work for- or, used to work for Ernesto. I’m his barber. I mean was. This is hard, sorry.”

You take a seat and take out your notepad. You title the page:

RUSTY, BARBER. He sits impatiently as you’re writing.

“You learn a lot about a guy as his barber. His likes and dislikes. Who he does business with and how he does his business- though I never really understood any of that nonsense. You get a guy in the chair for 20 minutes every couple of weeks and you know his every dark secret.”

As Rusty speaks, you watch his eyes. They dart to you periodically throughout his rant, as if checking for your approval. You write this down, reminding your future self that he may be deceptive.

“You know, this feels like the first genuine conversation I’ve had in ages, and all you’re doing is listening! But I like you, pal.” He looks around the room, checking if anyone is watching.

“Take this,” he whispers, slipping something out of his pocket. He slides it across the table under his palm. “It’s a keycard-for employees only. Don’t ask me how I got it, because I don’t remember!” he giggles and spits while he talks.

How could a regular passenger acquire this card?

You take the keycard and slip it into your breast pocket. This may come in handy later.

You thank Rusty for his time, shake his hand, and stand up.

“Why of course! Anything to get this nasty murderer caught!” he shouts, looking around as he does. You like Rusty, but his desire for innocence is suspicious nonetheless.

What do you do?

Check out
TABLE 1

Go to
THE KITCHEN

3

THE KITCHEN

When you go to walk into the kitchen, the door whips open from the other side as two busboys with full trays come rushing out. The door continues to swing back and forth after they exit. After a few swings, you grab the door yourself and make your way in.

The sound of steam catches your attention as it sizzles up from the stovetops. You follow its path all the way up to the ceiling where you see pots and pans hanging on racks above. The room is bland and cluttered- black and white tiles cover the floor and the walls, dishes are thrown in the sink, cookware is spread all along the various areas in the room. Yet, everything looks shiny and new, like it had just been thoroughly cleaned. It's as though the room would usually be as neat as it is clean, but was torn apart, possibly in search of something lost.

Disrupting the kitchen's clean appearance, a shattered dish with splattered food sits half beneath a tray on the floor to your right. With how clean the rest of the kitchen is, it's weird that it hasn't been taken care of yet.

At the back of the kitchen, hunched over a cutting board is a man dressed in white. His tall, puffed up hat tells you that he must be the chef. Beads of sweat drip down his neck as he's frantically slicing vegetables and throwing them in the pot of boiling water behind him.

What do you do?

Talk to
THE CHEF

Investigate the
SPLATTERED FOOD

THE CHEF

You carefully make your way through the kitchen to introduce yourself. Just as you approach, his voice cuts through the searing of the steam.

“The name is Guy Ramsey,” he says without taking his focus away from the knife in hand. “Usually, I’m just the chef for special occasions. But I’ve spent the last few nights here on the yacht. I’ve been cooking for De La Cruz for some time, so I knew the guy pretty well.”

Even though Ramsey has known De La Cruz, his bitter tone tells you he doesn’t seem overly fond of him.

“Yeah, I mean, I really just stick around for the money. No other job pays this much.”

Ramsey stops dead in his tracks and looks you in the eyes for the first time since you’ve started talking.

“You know, we’ve been having problems with rats lately, but we can’t seem to find our rat poison anywhere around here. No clue where it could’ve gone. I’ve had the boys running around all over the kitchen looking for it whenever they have the time, but we’re just so busy recently. That’s why this place is such a mess. I can assure you that my kitchen never looks like this. We just haven’t been able to catch a break today. No time to even clean up that dish that splattered all over the floor.”

He continues after wiping sweat from his forehead, “I can take you up to the casino so you can talk to a few guys. They might have some information that can help you crack this case. Let me know when you want to go up!”

Check out the
SPLATTERED FOOD

Follow Ramsey to
The CASINO

SPLATTERED FOOD

That one out of the ordinary plate of food still sits on the floor, smeared and splattered and half covered by the tray that once supported it. You decide to go take a closer look. It seems as though the plate has been sitting there for hours, after all it is a breakfast dish. Footprints track across the food telling you that the kitchen was too busy to clean the mess.

Unless, of course, it’s just that nobody wants to clean it up. You lift up the tray to get a closer look and start picking at the food. It’s all mushed together, so nothing really stands out. As you continue to play with the food, you feel little powder-like crumbs rubbing between your fingers. Is this dirt? Poison?

Evidently, the food never got to whoever it was meant for. Was someone trying to poison De La Cruz before the murder itself was carried out?

You go talk to
THE CHEF

4

THE CASINO

Chef Ramsey leads you back through the dining room toward the main staircase, and you follow him up one flight to the glossy red doors of the yacht's casino. You enter.

Immediately, the casino's overwhelming sounds and smells make your head hurt. A warm stench of tobacco flows through the room. Slot machines ring and ding enticingly. Casino chips clack into stacks and smack onto tables. The vibrant violet and obnoxious orange carpet creates a nauseating stomach-aching pattern across the shifting floor.

Suddenly, in this central room furthest from the ocean, you can feel the ship rocking the most. Hopefully, you can leave this room as soon as possible.

Chef Ramsey walks over to the blackjack table and begins conversing with the two men sitting there. The first, you recognize as the ship's captain who greeted you upon your arrival. His name tag—which you must have missed earlier—reads “Capt. Rodgers.” The second man you don't recognize. His broad shoulders and muscular arms stretch his navy suit to the point of bursting. Tattoos crawl up his wide neck like tentacles ready to swallow his face.

“Ah, good evenin' detective,” the captain hollers through the fat cigar propped between his fingers. “Have ya done found our killer yet?” He gestures to the chair on his left, telling you to take a seat. You do. Captain Rodgers twirls a casino chip across his fingers. He notices you glaring at the muscly business man. Under his breath, he says, “I been fixin' to tell ya about him. That right there's Mr. Aaron Jaeger, head of *Titan Steel Company*. His partnership with *Enterprises De La Cruz* helped fund this here yacht's construction.” You title two new pages in your notepad: *RODGERS, CAPTAIN* and *JAEGER, TITAN STEEL*.

At the other end of the table, Mr. Jaeger releases a gloomy gray smoke ring from his snarling mouth. “Anyways,” the captain continues, “I don't trust ‘im.” You look back at Jaeger and accidentally meet his eyes. You can't tell what he's thinking—his poker face is incredible.

“I'll tell ya what,” Captain Rodgers whispers, “I'll sit this next game out. Why don't ya play fer me? See if ya can break my blackjack losing streak.” The captain pushes over his remaining casino chips. The dealer slides two cards to you, Mr. Jaeger, Chef Ramsey, and herself. The dealer's top card is a Jack. You look at your cards.

Seven of hearts. Nine of clubs.

What do you do?

HIT

STAND

HIT

Jaeger stands. Ramsey stands. You hit. The dealer flips over your card: six. Bust! The dealer collects your chips. “Sorry pal, better luck next time.” You notice her eyes meet Mr. Jaeger’s. Did Jaeger just smirk? You apologize to Captain Rodgers for losing his chips. He seems quite indifferent.

“Ey, don’t sweat it, man. To be honest, I wasn’t really expecting ya to win.” He gets up, “I gotta get back to the bridge. This boat can’t always drive itself. ‘Ey, I got some advice for ya. First, don’t hit on sixteen. Second, go check out the pool. That was Mr. De La Cruz’s favorite spot on the whole ship. You might find a clue there!”

What do you do?

Check out the
POOL

Play blackjack again
ROUND TWO

STAND

Jaeger stands. Ramsey stands. You stand. The dealer has fifteen, she must hit. Bust! You win, doubling the captain’s chips.

“Thanks man! Ya got some good luck. Hey, why don’t ya come with me to the bridge. I’ll even let ya drive the ship. Whatta ya say?”

Follow the captain to the
BRIDGE

Stay at the table and
TALK

ROUND TWO

You can’t stand to lose. You take out your wallet and trade some bills in for a stack of chips. The dealer places two cards in front of you: a six and a Jack. Just your luck.

“I admire your perseverance,” says a cold voice behind you, tingling the hairs on your neck. You turn and see Mr. Jaeger’s dirty, cigar-filled grin. He speaks again, his voice vibrating the room like a car engine underwater, “I’ve got some information that might help with your case.”

“Okay kid,” Jaeger hums through his cigar, “I’m gon’ be real honest with you. None of Cruz’s employees would’ve done it: Rodgers, Ramsey, Meanor, not even Razorblade. Ernesto pays them too much already.”

Jaeger sips on his whiskey. “Had to be one of Cruz’s competitors. They think he’s too good, always giving donations to sick kids and orphan puppies. It makes these businessmen sick. I’d bet all my chips it was Gulyansky. Dmitri Ubiytsa Gulyansky. They were both here together in the casino late last night. Couldn’t’ve been anyone else. Ever since Ernesto revolutionized the oil industry, with my help of course, Gulyansky has lost major influence. He used to be the king of oil. The Czar of Tar! Ha!”

Jaeger chuckles, causing the whole ship to rumble. “Go arrest Gulyansky. I bet he’ll be at the pool right now.”

You leave Jaeger to head up to the
POOL

TALK

The captain gets up to leave, “Alright then, ya don’t wanna come with me. Just be careful around Mr. Jaeger, would ya.”

You turn around to find Jaeger and Ramsey’s chairs empty. The dealer notices your confusion, “They went up to the pool for a swim.” You don’t see how either of those big men could possibly swim.

“So you’re the detective they hired?,” the dealer questions as you take out your notepad. “I’m sure by now you’ve noticed how peculiar this ship is. The boss man is dead, there’s a murderer on the boat, and everyone acts like it’s a normal Tuesday.”

The dealer checks to make sure no one was in earshot, “I’m telling you, not one of these guests cared about Mr. De La Cruz; they just cared for his wealth. The only people loyal to Mr. De La Cruz were his staff. He paid us well, gave us plenty of vacation time, and actually treated us like real people. He knew every one of our names,” she says, pointing to her name tag: *C. HAPPENS*. “You can call me Chip.”

You make a new note: *CHIP HAPPENS, DEALER*. Chip continues, “He especially took care of his assistant, Mr. Meanor, paying for his college education and giving him an opportunity to escape poverty. He didn’t spoil him though. Cruz still makes him work, but Meanor is obviously making cash, based on how he’s dressed. Anyways, if anyone ever messed with Meanor, Cruz made sure they would regret it.”

“You know, that reminds me of something that might help you. There’s a guy here that’s always had something against Mr. Meanor...”

Suddenly, Rusty Razorblade bursts into the casino, panting, his greasy forehead beaded with sweat. Between gasps of air, he says, “Detective... Follow me... Important...”

You leave the casino and follow Rusty. He silently leads you down another flight of stairs, then through a main hallway, then through two more side hallways, finally stopping at a closed metal door.

“This is- I mean *was* Ernesto’s room,” Rusty says at last. “He didn’t care for a fancy suite like most of the guests he invites here. Mr. De La Cruz rather preferred to sleep here in the employee quarters. He really is- *was* a humble man.”

Razorblade unlocks the closed door and enters the dark room.

You follow into
ERNESTO’S ROOM

5

THE BRIDGE

Leaving the casino, you follow Captain Rodgers to the main staircase. The elevators must still be out-of-order after the “incident.”

“The bridge is only two decks up from here, follow me.” You are ascending the stairs at the captain’s heels when a familiar, greasy-haired gentleman in a raggedy brown suit appears coming down the stairs above you. His name tag reads: *R.RAZORBLADE*

Rusty Razorblade nearly misses a step on his way down. He fixes his gaze on you, his eyes jittering frantically. He appears to be trying to tell you something through his stare, all in the split second you pass one another on the staircase. Either he wants you to follow him in the opposite direction, or he is trying to warn you about something. Struggling to decipher his body language, you must make a decision.

	What do you do?	
Continue up the stairs and follow CAPTAIN RODGERS		Go down the stairs and follow RUSTY RAZORBLADE

CAPTAIN RODGERS

You arrive at the bridge. A large window overlooks the ocean; land is quickly approaching at the horizon.

“This here’s the heart of the ship. Sometimes, Mr. De La Cruz would come up here. He said it was for the view, but I know he was really just keeping me company. It gets awful lonely up here.”

You look around the room and notice three large computer monitors on the right wall. Captain Rodgers follows your gaze, “Ah, yes. That right there’s for security.” He hesitates. He takes a deep breath; his eyes look pained.

“Our ship has security cameras almost everywhere. The last twelve hours of film is saved on our server before being uploaded to the cloud. Yet, the camera’s have been off since 3:30 AM last night. Couldn’t tell you why. Only Ernesto had the authority to turn ‘em off.”

“Take a look at last night’s feed, but don’t judge what you see, alright. Everybody makes mistakes, right?”

Curiously, you sit down at the computer and search through the security footage from 1:30 AM to 3:30 AM.

LOBBY: Nothing suspicious here. Guests and employees walk through and stop to talk but no sign of Ernesto.

DINING ROOM: Ernesto, alive and well, is sitting at a table with a blonde man in a red polo shirt. His name is Mr. Thomas, the captain reminds you. The two men are enjoying some coffee until Ernesto looks down at his BlackBerry phone and leaves the room with his brow furrowed.

KITCHEN: Chef Ramsey finishes the final touches on a breakfast tray, probably some late-night pastries to go with Ernesto’s coffee. He hollers at a waiter to bring out the tray, but a silver rat climbs up the chef’s cloth pant leg. Although the video has no sound, you can imagine Ramsey’s scream of pure horror. The tray flies out of his hands and splats all over the floor. Ramsey frantically searches a drawer; perhaps for a mouse trap, but can not find what he needs. Instead, he reaches

for a cleaver and begins chasing the rat.

LOBBY: Nothing suspicious here. Guests and employees walk through and stop to talk but no sign of Ernesto.

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CASINO: Mr. Jaeger and the gnome-like businessman, Mr. Cummings, sit at the blackjack table. Ernesto storms into the room; he seems anxious about something. Ernesto approaches Jaeger. Jaeger responds with a puff of cigar smoke into De La Cruz's face. After talking for a minute, Jaeger points Ernesto in the direction of the tall bald Russian, Mr. Gulyansky, sitting at the empty casino bar. As Mr. De La Cruz sits next to him, the video feed cuts to static.

BRIDGE: Sitting at the wheel of the ship, with a cocktail in hand, is Captain Rodgers. However, he is not alone. Sitting on his lap is the drunk lady, Mrs. Thomas. Her martini spills onto herself and the captain. She whispers in his ear. They laugh.

POOL: Meanor sits at the pool anxiously. He keeps checking his watch and looking up, like he's waiting for someone. Rusty Razorblade snoozes in one of the lounge chairs.

BAR: The bartender sits alone on his phone before leaving for the night.

"I ain't proud of it," the captain mumbles from his chair, "but at least I ain't a murderer."

He sighs, keeping his eyes fixed on the glossy wood floor. "You better head up to the pool by now. You don't have much time left, and I reckon you'll find some good information up there."

You leave the captain alone with his thoughts and head up to the

POOL

RUSTY RAZORBLADE

You hurriedly tell the captain you appreciate his offer to show you the bridge, but you have a lead to investigate. He shrugs and continues up. You race down the stairs to catch up with Mr. Razorblade.

Rusty silently leads you down another flight of stairs, then through a main hallway, then through two more side hallways, finally stopping at a closed metal door.

“This is- I mean was Ernesto’s room,” Rusty says at last. “He didn’t care for a fancy suite like most of the guests he invites here. Mr. De La Cruz rather preferred to sleep here in the employee quarters. He really is- *was* a humble man.”

Razorblade unlocks the closed door and enters the dark room.

You follow into
ERNESTO’S ROOM

6 ERNESTO’S ROOM

Sitting on the edge of the bed is a sandy-haired businessman.

“Hello detective,” says Mr. Thomas, the man with the intoxicated wife. “Thank you, Rusty, for bringing him here. You may go.” Rusty’s head twitches, a shaky nod, and he leaves.

“Not much time is left before the yacht reaches port. While you investigate the room,” Thomas says, “I’ll recount all the information I have about Ernesto. You can trust me.”

You don’t trust him. Quickly, you scan the room: one queen bed, a desk, a coffee maker, and a calculator on the floor.

While Henry Thomas talks, what would you like to investigate?

BED

COFFEE MAKER

CALCULATOR

DESK

BED

The queen bed is professionally made. Ernesto probably didn't sleep last night. But what was he doing up at four in the morning? As you investigate the bed, Thomas recounts:

"Hmmm, let's see. Mr. De La Cruz grew up a poor boy in rural Mexico. I'm almost certain he dropped out of school and started working for Cumming's Oil. At nineteen, he came up with and prototyped a device for drill sites to maximize efficiency and minimize pollution. However, the higher ups shut his idea down. No one would take this uneducated teenage boy seriously..."

Return to
ERNESTO'S ROOM

You are
DONE INVESTIGATING

COFFEE MAKER

The old machine is completely gunked up. Either Ernesto was a slob, or he drank a lot of coffee. You can't blame him though. Dealing with all the people on this boat, you'd need a lot of coffee as well. As you examine the machine, Thomas recounts:

"...Ernesto partnered with Aaron Jaeger's Titan Steel Company to help mass manufacture his invention for the growing international demand. He used the revenue to start Enterprises De La Cruz."

"After a small 'disagreement,'" he says with finger quotes, "I stopped working for Ernesto, and he hired James Meanor to assist with finances. Today, the company has connections with almost every major industry: oil, tech, energy, agriculture, yada yada. You name it, he's in it. Ernesto started to attract a lot of attention. And with that attention came a hell of a lot of competition..."

Return to
ERNESTO'S ROOM

You are
DONE INVESTIGATING

CALCULATOR

Thomas continues:

"...Many of the guests on this boat are Ernesto's biggest competitors—Gulyansky, Cummings—big names in even bigger industries. But like I said, Ernesto is, I mean, was a smart man. He always kept his competition close..."

While Thomas talks, you search. On the floor next to Ernesto's suitcases, you find a calculator? No, not a calculator. It's a *BlackBerry* phone; apparently, Ernesto was old-school. There's a few messages with Mr. Meanor on the phone from last night, dated around 1:00 AM!

MEANOR: *Ernesto, I'll make it right. It was a lapse in judgment and it won't happen again.*

DE LA CRUZ: *I'm not one for second chances. You took advantage of my trust, and will be punished as I see fit. We need to meet to discuss this further.*

MEANOR: *Be at the pool in 10 minutes*

DE LA CRUZ: *I have to meet someone first, but I'll be there. I'm very disappointed.*

MEANOR: *At this hour? Who?*

There are no more texts from last night.

Return to
ERNESTO'S ROOM

You are
DONE INVESTIGATING

DESK

On the desk is a framed photo of De La Cruz on his wedding night. The bride is a tall elegant woman with a waxy face. You also recognize a few of the groomsmen in the photo: Mr. Gulyansky, Mr. Cummings, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Meanor, and even a younger, shorter-haired Rusty Razorblade.

There are also two letters on top of the desk, sitting beside each other. One is from a children's hospital, thanking *Enterprises De la Cruz* for their generous donation. It's handwritten. The second note is also handwritten, but the writer of the note calls themselves "2". The letter is something about wanting to donate more of the company's profits to charity to generate good press. The two notes have similar handwriting.

"...So, he left. He started producing his invention with scrap metal. He hired me," Thomas gestures to a younger depiction of himself in the wedding photo, "to keep track of finances and patents. Slowly, the business gained wealth and recognition..."

Return to
ERNESTO'S ROOM

You are
DONE INVESTIGATING

DONE INVESTIGATING

Thomas suggests heading up to the pool; most of the guests will be there around this time. You thank him for all his help

and head up to
THE POOL

7
THE POOL

Ascending the stairs up to the pool, you feel a shaky hand on your shoulder. It's Rusty Razorblade. "Detective, there's something I haven't told you yet."

"Last night, I fell asleep on the pool deck staring up at the stars. At some point, I woke up from the sounds of people arguing and glasses clinking coming from the bar. I don't know who it was, or what they were yelling about. I know it's not much, but I thought you should know." Rusty leaves.

You step outside onto the roof. The sun bounces off the surface of the pool and goes directly into your eyes. Although you are partially blinded, you are still able to see both Mr. Gulyansky and Mr. Meanor on opposite sides of the pool.

To whom do you blindly stumble?

Mr.
GULYANSKY

Mr
MEANOR

GULYANSKY

Mr. Gulyansky sits on a lounge chair by the pool. His thick beard still holds water, so he must've just been in the pool. He is wearing a fluffy, maroon robe that has his name embroidered on the breast. *D.U.GULYANSKY*. It doesn't seem like he's wearing anything under the robe.

He stares grumpily at you as you approach. He is clearly not pleased to see you interrupt his bathing. "I not talking to cop." His sharp Russian accent cuts through the relaxing pool atmosphere.

You sit beside him and ask a few questions. What was his relation to Mr. De La Cruz? Where was he at the approximate time of the murder? He doesn't even acknowledge your presence.

It's no use trying to talk to him.

Where to now?

Go speak with.
MR MEANOR

Check out the.
BAR

MEANOR

Holding your hand between the sun and your eyes, you make your way over to Mr. Meanor. You reach out for his hand to shake it.

"I don't really shake hands," he says. "Sanitary reasons." Meanor gestures for you to sit on the lounge chair next to his.

"Detective, I'm glad I found you. There's something I want to tell you that could help. Last night, I was waiting at the bar for Mr. De La Cruz." He takes a sip of his piña colada. "At the time, I didn't think much of it. He mentioned he had to meet someone on his way, so I just figured he got distracted and forgot to come up here. I think whoever he met with is in fact the murderer."

You thank him for his assistance.

Where to now?

Go speak with.
GULYANSKY

Check out the
BAR

8

THE BAR

Past the pool, you walk over to the bar. There's a wide open space with fancy seating areas leading up to the bar itself. The sun shines in just the right amount of light leading up to the long overhang that covers the bar. The place is usually flourishing with people under bright neon lights, but now it's just empty.

The bar is entirely glass. The bar top? Glass. The barstools? Glass. The space underneath the bartop? Glass. The glass stretches from that area, covers the floor, and continues all the way up the wall where glass shelves are filled with bottles and bottles of alcohol. Even the overhang has a glass opening in the middle, creating a type of skylight in the bar.

You hear a creak from behind you and quickly turn to see what it was. A man is making his way behind the bar.

"You must be the investigator. I'm Jax Danielson Jr, the bartender." You shake his hand. "The bar is actually closed right now, since last night's incident. Is there anything I can help you with now that I'm here?"

You ask him what he knows about De La Cruz as you take out your notebook and flip to a new page. You title it: *DANIELSON JR, BARTENDER*.

Danielson responds, "Well, I do see him here at the bar pretty frequently, but I don't know much about him personally. His time spent here is usually just for discussing business over a couple drinks. I did see him last night, though, if it's any help. The bar had just closed, so I was cleaning up. I left to go to the bathroom for a few minutes before heading back to my room, but I realized that I left my coat behind the bar. When I came back up, I saw De La Cruz talking to someone. It was too dark to make out who it was that he was speaking to, but it seemed pretty intense."

You note that a meeting occurred at the pool last night.

He continues, "I grabbed my coat and left because it wasn't really my place to eavesdrop on them. As I made my way up to open the bar this morning, we were told that there was a dead body in the elevator, so the bar wouldn't be opening. I haven't been up here since I saw them talking at midnight. I'm only up here now because I'm responsible for stolen drinks. These drinks are quite expensive, you know, and there's one woman I've seen around who would definitely sneak a bottle or two."

You let all that information process in your mind. You need a drink. You ask him to pour you a glass of anything he has. You take a seat as he steps behind the counter. Watching as he walks around, you glance over at the other end of the bar. Danielson hears you get up, and turns around to look as well. He immediately sees what you see.

At the end of the otherwise clean glass bartop sits a spilled martini with cherries instead of olives. Next to the glass is the sticky ring watermark of another absent martini glass. You look down at your watch; it reads 2:15. You need to make your decision now.

You go to the
BOW

THE BOW

You finally reached the bow. You go to check your watch to see the time, but a voice cuts through before you can look.

“You’re late. It’s 2:18. You were supposed to be here 3 minutes ago,” declares Captain Rogers.

With that same annoyed tone, the captain continues, “Come on now, we don’t have all day. Take your pick. Who did it?”

The suspects all stand in a crowd around you. It’s time to make your decision. Nervously, you look around at each of them as the clues replay in your head. Everything pieces together, leaving you with only one possible option.

So, who do you pick?

AARON JAEGER	CHIP HAPPENS	DMITRI GULYANSKY
ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ	GUY RAMSEY	JAMES MEANOR
JAX DANIELSON JR.	MR. & MRS. THOMAS	RICHARD CUMMINGS
RUSTY RAZORBLADE	STEPHEN RODGERS	YOU (DETECTIVE)

AARON JAEGER

Jaeger partnered with Ernesto many years ago. His *Titan Steel Company* played a crucial role in De La Cruz’s success. His close connection with *Enterprises De La Cruz* could put him in a position to benefit financially from Ernesto’s demise.

And yet...

Aaron Jaeger did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz

CHIP HAPPENS

Chip works on the ship, giving her employee access and eavesdropping abilities at the casino. She is also quick to blame Gulyansky without much evidence.

And yet...

Chip Happens did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ

Ernesto De La Cruz was found in an elevator. He was making his way back up from the bar. He had no suicidal history.

Ernesto De La Cruz did not kill himself.

GUY RAMSEY

Ernesto De la Cruz was not the chef’s favorite person. He told you that he sticks around for the

money. You found the rat poison in the food that was splattered all over the kitchen floor.

And yet...

Chef Guy Ramsey did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

JAMES MEANOR

James Meanor was Ernesto's assistant. He knew things about Ernesto that no one else knew. It is possible that he was the last person Ernesto was in contact with.

Go to the EXPLANATION

JAX DANIELSON JR.

Jax Danielson Jr. saw Ernesto by the pool talking to someone just hours before his death. He was with you when you discovered the spilled drink and the sticky ring left behind from another glass.

And yet...

Bartender Jax Danielson Jr. did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

MR. & MRS. THOMAS

Mr. Thomas worked alongside Ernesto for years. He knows Ernesto's history, but he could be leaving out major details.

Mrs. Thomas was having a not-so-secret affair with the captain. She also is a heavy drinker, and Ernesto was found next to a shattered martini glass.

And yet...

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

RICHARD CUMMINGS

Ernesto used to work for Mr. Cummings, who never took him seriously. When Ernesto started his own company, Rick Cummings became a competitor. He is dirty and untrustworthy, which is exactly why Ernesto liked to keep him close by and under supervision. He was in the casino with Mr. De La Cruz hours before his untimely death.

And yet...

Richard Cummings did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

RUSTY RAZORBLADE

Rusty has known Mr. De La Cruz for many years. He constantly appears nervous and extremely sweaty. He is also familiar with Ernesto's business and competition, which can leave him in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And yet...

Master Barber Rusty Razorblade did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

STEPHEN RODGERS

Captain Rodgers is one of Ernesto's highest ranked employees, most likely giving him access to security cameras and company information. He is having an affair with Mrs. Thomas. He also seems unnervingly indifferent toward the death of his boss.

And yet...

Captain Stephen Rodgers did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz.

YOU (DETECTIVE)

You don't know Ernesto De La Cruz. You have no motive. You weren't even on the ship. Are you serious?

You obviously did not kill Ernesto De La Cruz

EXPLANATION

Congratulations, you chose correct! Mr. Meanor *did* kill Ernesto De La Cruz. You arrest Meanor as the yacht pulls into the port, just in time!

All of your clues lined up to tell you that Meanor was lying. He was the last person to see De La Cruz. They got into a heated argument by the pool that midnight, and Meanor suggested they have a drink to calm down. It was his drink that was spilled by the bar. The remaining ring belonged to Ernesto's drink, which was in the elevator with him.

But why? Meanor was the loyal assistant of De La Cruz for twenty years. After Mr. Thomas was fired, Meanor took over the finances of *Enterprises De La Cruz*. He was in charge of donations, salaries, partnerships, patents, etc. As *Enterprises De La Cruz* started bringing in massive wealth, Meanor got greedy. He was putting aside money for "donations" that actually went right into his pocket!

Eventually, Ernesto found out about Meanor's scandal. Ernesto went up to the bar to confront Meanor. That's when Meanor killed him. He slipped some rat poison from the kitchen into Ernesto's martini. With his high employee authority, he disabled the security cameras to cover his back.

By the time Ernesto got to the lobby, the poison must have started to settle in. He was most likely trying to get to his room but died in the elevator before he could reach his floor.

THE END!

The Whipping

By Jordana Schweitzer

Crack! Went the whip against his back.
The grime around his knees took him back to childhood.
Playing in the dirt. Oblivious. Unassuming.

Crack!

Childhood passed into adolescence.
His isolation was stifling.
There were people around him. He saw them.
They were right there!
Their toes by his face.
Unrelenting.

Crack!

Adulthood glowered ethereally at the backs of teenagers. He was no different.
So enthralled was he by its splendor that he ceased to care about his peers any longer.
Yet he still had to kneel to his superiors in the workplace.
How...

infuriating.

Crack!

I watched as the whip struck his back. Again, and again, and again, and...
He was unmoving.
Unfaltering.
Unflinching.
Unwavering.
Undeterred.

As his eyes bore straight through me.
Bearing down upon my soul.
Excommunicating the remains.
A cacophonous litany of attacks on my consciousness.
And then...

Well, there was nothing left at all.
Just a sad little smile.

As ample blood dripped down his perfectly pretentious jawline,
I couldn't help myself from slipping into a smile of solidarity.
I could feel the edges of my mouth quivering.
Fraying.

The bite of his whip on my back was all the same.

Crack!

Astonishment and Joy

By Joseph Tabasko Jr.

There is nothing like a ray of light
To do what cannot be accomplished with a spade
To melt the ice of a hardened exterior
Inured to the harshness of the winter glade

Wrapped firm around delicate innards
Whose frailty would surely lead it to destitution,
Should ever a violent squall arrive
To carefully destroy it with diligent execution

Nestled in the heart of the foliate land,
All happenings are as mundane as they are repetitive
Save for the conspiracies of nature
Whose progeny may on occasion render them more tentative

In the absence of novelty and indulgence,
The cunning maestro of tenebrosity takes his hold
And if he were to get his way
It is doubtless that the heart would shrivel in the cold

It is not implausible, then,
That with the quick glimmer of a foreign ocean's eye,
The heart will timidly perk up
And curiosity will begin its prudent game as the sun draws nigh

The first exchange of words, nay sentences,
Reveals a mesmerizing voice whose utterances float on streams of air
Eloquently filling the empty spaces of silence
So that no more attention is distributed elsewhere

And what beauty lay streaming in curls of red!
Captivated by the soft flush of skin caressed in morning light,
And fingers lightly brushing sleeve fringes
It stirs up an unanticipated sensation of comfort against bite

Thought upon thought, action upon action
Utterance upon utterance, deed upon deed
Lost in the thick web of novel infatuation
Banality consumes all until distant desire reappears on the mead

One single step, one single step
One single word, one single word
Lip against lip in moments fabricated heavenly so
Tête-à-tête, the world will never have to know

Emotion is neither expressed, nor suppressed, only conceptual
The self is no longer repressed at life's behest, its bloom now eventual

Astonishment and joy
Astonishment and joy
Quiet desperation illuminated by the oil sun
Lamplight holds love dear in this world to come

Casualty

By Panika Garg

Stabbed in the back
Thrown into the sea
Numb

I'm only looking up
At the war raging above
The sea tearing into the sky ripping through the sea
A war of ego
A war of pride
No side will back down
No side will concede defeat

Sinking
Like an anchor
The water's too dark to see
Black all around
No lights at this depth
No way up

Limbs paralyzed
Eyes drifting shut
I know what's next
And it's a relief

The deafening silence
The enveloping darkness
Is an embrace
Welcomed home
At last

The world torn apart
An end to my pain

One day
I guess
There will just be no more





By Lydia McGuigan

Prose/Poetry



Somewhere Along The Way

By Annmarie Kosak

The steps were yellow.

My mother used to say I looked like a lilac, or rather, that I was one. She said my smile filled people with warmth, that I was the warmth. She told me that I put forth a sort of calm; one of still water and open fields. Such open landscapes should be filled. My mother encouraged me to seek friends; to scatter my field with trinkets that brought me as much joy as I brought others. I guess I didn't make people as happy as I thought.

Somewhere along the way, the steps turned blue.



My mother used to say I'd grown distant. She teased me, calling me a mellow duck, asking where her little duckling had gone. I don't recall uttering an answer. I shut her down time and time again. It stung to see her eyes when I refused to smile. But, if I was meant to smile, God would have given me perfect teeth.

Somewhere, the steps turned grey.

My mother used to tell me stories. She told me about vast seas of lavender and a little girl who slept among them. I threw lilacs into her grave so I could always be with her. I didn't often blame myself for things that were out of my control, but I found that I was the only one at fault. I didn't think it was a mere coincidence that her health declined when I cut her off. And how cruel must life be, for when I was getting better, she was getting worse. I'd finally felt empty enough to refill the field.

Somewhere along the way, they turned red.

My mother used to have rules. Some were simple, common sense: Don't play with your food, clean up after yourself, say please and thank you. Some were complicated, to help me grow: be kind, be honest, stay patient. Some were lifesaving, those that would help me stay healthy: don't drink, don't smoke. It's too bad I never listened to the dead.

Along the way, the steps turned black.

My mother was right. If only I knew before. It's too late now. When I breathed, I wheezed; when I coughed, my sleeves dripped red. I couldn't tell whether the stains were blood or wine. Stage 4— they said the odds of survival were slim. If I was spared, I swore I wouldn't disregard my mother. I fought to live, yet some part of me wished I wouldn't. And if I lived, what would have become of me?

Somewhere, they turned pink.

My mother used to love a man. I have no face to put to the name, only the stories my mother used to tell. I

longed for the love that she felt. For a while, I felt as if I'd never find it. I'm glad I did. In those final months I'd look forward to him. His white coat. His hands. I'd hoped to teach our child the lessons my mother taught me.

Somewhere along the way, they turned purple.

My mother used to tell me to be grateful. I never thought myself the thankless type, but how often had I stopped to delight in the joys at my fingertips? I've found many people who wish for a life, a life that I was willing to throw away. I no longer wish for death. I would live for those who couldn't. I'd live again for the one who gave me my life back.

Along the way, the steps turned yellow.

My mother wanted to be a grandmother. If she was still here, I'm sure she'd smile upon my little duckling. I think she'd be happy to know we named her Lilac. That way she might spread the same warmth my mother used to say I did. I counted myself lucky that I could share these moments with my shining bundle of light.

Somewhere along the way, the steps turned black.

Again. My lungs felt constricted, crushed under the weight of all my sins. I'd tried so hard to make still the water that had begun to ripple, but somehow I'd fallen in. No matter how long I treaded, I could not keep my head above the water. I felt like I was drowning. I couldn't breathe. I fought to live, yet some part of me knew I wouldn't.

Somewhere along the way, the steps turned white.

Why? It's the only question I could ever ask. Ever since I was little, I was just so curious. I admired puzzles and all the intricate works of man. I cursed the things I couldn't comprehend. Unanswerable questions bothered me in that way. Why had my mother left me when I wasn't ready for her to go? Why had my friends offered me a cigarette that day? Why had I been spared from death just to spark my hope? I think I found the answer: stay in this moment of time where the light shines on your unworthy soul. A moment where my mother's arms would open as wide as the gates had.

Somewhere along the way, the steps ended.

(Somewhere along the way, I left my uncertainty with the lilacs).

I Actually Have Nothing to Write About

By Joseph Finn

If you only read one story in this magazine, this shouldn't be it.

I know, I'm disappointed in myself as well, but I think my life is going fine. I don't have anything to rant or rave on, nor do I have any splash of creativity. Believe me, I tried. I tried to be creative, I tried writing prompts, I tried random word/noun/verb/sentence/phrase generators. Nothing motivated me to write.

I tried making boredom a creative idea, but I'm so low on inspiration that I can't even write about what this is like. It's a feeling of total apathy and no emotions. No ideas. But it's not burnout; I don't resent doing this. I just don't feel anything, which might actually be dangerous. If I have nothing important to say and if I don't have anything to feel, what am I? Do I have any purpose on this Earth if I have nothing to do?

I understand that not all jobs need creativity, and that I deserve the right to create. That doesn't mean I can actually make anything. I mean, obviously I can— what are you reading right now— but is it of any value? This isn't going to change the world, it's filler at best.

I had a couple ideas to write about, mostly about death. Some suicide story, à la Pearl Jam's "Jeremy", or maybe a car crash. But I couldn't write more than a paragraph of each.

Currently, I'm sitting in chemistry class, writing only out of a sense of obligation, not a place of general creativity. Again, this is probably the most pointless short story (if you can call it that) that was ever written. It's about absolutely nothing, and I regret writing it after it's done.

But that's all I have.



By Lydia McGuigan

The Girl of Fire and Rain

By Macy Carter

She's the girl of fire
Flick'ring flames inside her mind
When her situation's dire
She feels no need to hide

She's a violent volcano
Leaving carnage in her wake
She will even burn up snow
There's nothing she won't take

She flourishes by feeling numb
As flames fall out her chest
Her blazing heart knows she's won
For though she burns she's still the best

She's the girl of rain
With her heavy heart and puddles
Droplets fall like leaden chains
That teather her to troubles

She feels too much emotion
Raging storms inside her never quit
She's lost in the commotion
Of the blinding rain that never splits

She heaves her sighs like gusts of wind
Blowing rainy tears unto the ground
Isobars show where she's been
For in her wake gray skies are found

She's the girl of fire and rain
Her power is unbeaten
Yet it comes at the price of pain
And a heart that's now half eaten

No rival challenges her strength
Nor her suffering
Her life will reach an infinite length
A curse disguised as a blessing

Anger burns inside her heart
But she is ordered not to complain
Sadness pours till she falls apart
This girl of fire and rain



the Song of Movement

By Macy Carter

All that anyone seemed to know about her was that her name was Celeste. She was a beguiling ballerina, devoted to her craft as a bishop to God, movement was her bible. She was delicate and strong, and her dancing was ethereal. With every move, her muscles curved, gathering light for strength. She had a gravity of her own, a force that drew everything that could see or touch her. With every pirouette, the air revolved around her. Even the sun looked at her in adoration— for how could it ever shine so bright?

But Celeste had not an arrogant atom in her body because she was more than just a person. When she moved, she became a vessel of spirit and grace. Even with an air of silence sinking around her, her dance could make you hear music. From bass, to viola, to twittering little piccolo, the music swirled about her with the air.

However enchanting, she was a mysterious figure, a girl in constant motion. Celeste grew too superlunary for the world she had barely seen; though every bit of it had admired her, it couldn't see her, not her spirit, not who she really was.

With a single glissade, she began to glide through the air, clouds forming beneath her whenever she required energy to draw upon before leaping again through space. Even as the oxygen flowed completely from her lungs, she stepped upon stars, climbing higher. The sky around her had faded from impressionist strokes of blue, green, and violet, to a deep indigo, occasionally lit gold by her astral stepping stones. She was drawn to the light shining above her like a squirrel to the last standing tree in a sea of fire, and she soon found herself on the moon.

Though the world around Celeste was physically dark to her human eyes, she could see clearly in a fourth dimension the aura of light and positivity that flew to her, and the world watched with her, holding its breath. Not a single member of the ubiquitous audience moved a fraction of an inch, leaving every bit of strength and force for the enchanting dancer. Suddenly, Celeste felt the weight of infinite eyes staring towards her, striking her with their glare.

She dipped her toe into a lunar river of light, drawing upon it for strength, but, too light on her feet, she slipped off the surface of the moon, and began to fall. The world released its breath all in an instant as the air rushed around her.

Celeste grasped onto the moon, clinging for hope, for the prospect of one last dance, but the moon began to crumble. The wedge that she clutched fell from its maker, and she fell with it. She could feel the gravity of the glassy rock carving into her hand, pushing her down to the depths of the sky. It was a beautiful, terrible, incredible fall. Each star that once had to gaze up towards her now bumped her skin with a bright warmth Celeste had never before felt. She looked from afar like a doll tangled in a string of Christmas lights. The stars lent her light and she glowed dully as the clouds engulfed her.

Celeste had been a transcendental vision, a goddess of light and motion that the world watched. Now, though, for the first time in her life, she was a member of the world. She was no longer a slave to passion, but a Taoist gear of the universal machine. She closed her eyes and smiled. A few mere feet from the surface of the Earth, she began to laugh joyously, crying simultaneously with the beautiful, somber truth of the moment she could now participate in, possibly her last.

Celeste no longer danced, and yet the music played on. Booming cellos and horns descended with



her down a scale, though her spirits were lifted with the high trills of the violins. At last free of purpose, liberated from the light, she found herself seconds away from expiration. Of course, she would finally discover the bliss of life moments away from death. She did not fail to breathe easy, though, and embraced the encroaching quietus. Celeste at last met the Earth.

All was still.

The Long Walk

By Madison Villani

It was Monday, January 5, 2012. I had just gotten off of the bus and started to walk home. I was all alone, and this walk never got any easier. A quarter of a mile felt like forever to me. Mind you, I was 12 at the time, and walking any distance by myself seemed to be the scariest thing in the whole world. My parents had to work all day and never bothered to get me a babysitter, and my older brother couldn't care less about my safety.

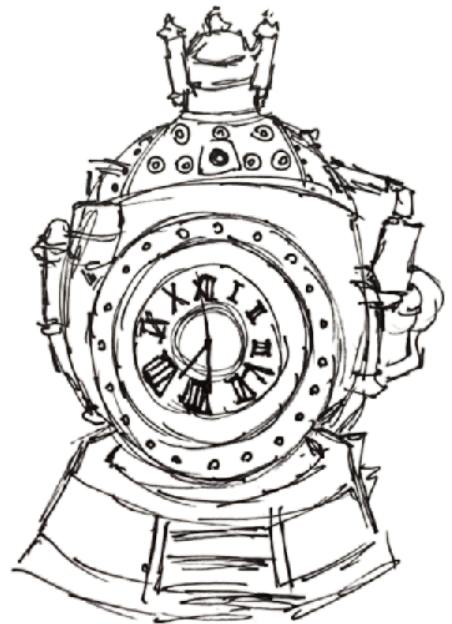
I knew the route to get home pretty much by heart at this point, but every once in a while I would make a wrong turn or forget which street I had to go down. This day seemed to be one of those days. I passed my turn on accident and turned too late, but I didn't realize until I was halfway down the block and the houses didn't look too familiar. I had started to panic, when all of the sudden some haze came over me which calmed me down. I don't really remember what happened after that, but I do remember waking up in a living room that didn't belong to me. Some guy stood in front of me claiming to be my long lost Uncle, but even 12 year old me wasn't believing that. Being as young as I was, I had basically no survival skills, and was definitely not prepared for something like this to happen.

A few minutes had gone by, but it truly felt like hours. I expected this man to be some sort of serial killer like my Dad watches on TV, but he was actually really nice. He had some weird setups in his kitchen, I wasn't really sure what they were though. I thought that maybe he was a drug dealer or some sort of scientist, but looking back on it, he wasn't either of those things.

To be honest, I still don't really know what I would classify him as. His house seemed to be really outdated, like it was from the 1930s. I asked him why it looked like that but all he did was look at me funny, almost as if I was wrong and the style of his house was popular. I couldn't understand what his deal was. It was a few days that went by, I think, when all of the sudden the guy brought up a weird machine thing from his basement. It looked like a human could fit inside of it, which worried me. At that moment I was so unsure of what he was doing, and I could only hope for the worst. What made me even more anxious was the noises that started to come out of the thing— almost alien like noises.

The guy picked me up and shoved me in the machine, and at this point there was nothing I could do to stop him. The only thing I could think about was whether or not I would ever see my parents again, or if they'd even notice that I'm gone. The machine closed by a latch above my head, and it sounded like the weird guy started to mumble random words. Something about going back, and time travel, but that's not real. Right? That's what I thought. I drifted off to sleep, but I wasn't even tired, so I think that same haze that came over me while walking home was coming over me once again.

I opened my eyes after a little bit expecting to see the walls of the machine, but to my surprise I definitely was not in the machine anymore. I was, however, in the same living room as before, except it was filled with people. People who I've never seen before, but they did look oddly familiar. A little girl running around looked almost identical to my Grandma, but that was impossible. It was really weird because almost everyone in that room resembled people in my family, so there was only one possible explanation for this:



Time travel.

I only remember a little bit of these interactions, and I could have sworn I was taken back to many years ago. Once again, that odd haze came over me, but this time I woke up in my own bed. I was so incredibly confused, so I got up and went downstairs to find my mom. Everything seemed normal, until I saw that she looked about 5 years older than I had remembered. I asked her what I thought was a weird question: "What's the date?" Her answer almost brought me to tears. It was January 5, 2015. A whole 2 years since I remember walking home from school, but yet my visit to that weird guy only seemed to last a few days or weeks at most. I became hysterical, but my mom was acting as if everything had been normal the whole time. Apparently I was home the whole time and went to school each day, but I had zero recollection of that, I only remembered going back in time. When I told her and my Dad my experiences over the past two years, they called me crazy, but I wouldn't give up. I tried to convince everyone that what I had experienced was real; my teachers, guidance counselors, police officers, and even the therapist's my parents made me go to.

That's how I ended up here, the asylum. The more I told my story, the crazier I seemed to be, and my parents finally gave up on dealing with my problems, so they found a spot for me here. I've been here 3 years already, and I've seen many people come and go, but not me. No one ever came to visit. Not my parents, my brother, the friends I used to have, no one. Well, actually there was one person who regularly visited me and comforted me. It's some guy that keeps claiming to be my long lost uncle...

Writer's Block

By Terrance Degnan

I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make it to the same point and no longer know what to write about.

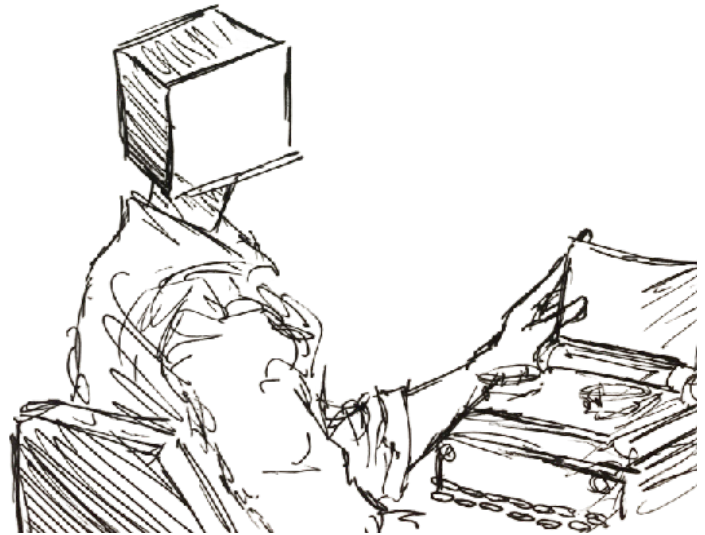
I repeat the same sentence again, and again, and again, until finally I'm stuck in this vicious loop of writing the same words in the same order until it becomes muscle memory:

"I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make it to the same point and no longer know what to write about."

While I try to find my inspiration for writing, I sit and unconsciously write the same sentence for minutes, and hours, and days, and weeks, and months, and years:

"I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make it to the same point and no longer know what to write about."

The sentence is now all I know to life. Nothing else is more important to me than the words: "I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make it to the same point and no longer know what to write about."



When one page fills, I crumple it into a little ball and shoot for my overflowing trash can, yelling "Kobe" hoping that maybe this time I'll make it in, but once more the pages pile up and I'm surrounded even more by the same words:

"I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make it to the same point and no longer know what to write about."

My memories fade from my mind, as my life fades from my body, I am just another lost soul who does not know what he is doing this for, all I know is the words:

"I sit and write my thoughts as the ink so smoothly releases from my pen as I press it to paper, like spreading slightly melted butter on bread, and then I make..."

But this time it's different, my thoughts turn single-minded and my pen turns dry. The words that once had meaning become meaningless as they get lost in the same repetitive spiral.



By Lydia McGuigan

Intergalactic Misdeal

By Madeline Dobias

It's not easy living on a spaceship alone, Skipper can attest to that.

It's been two years since his voyage began. He gets to call his parents sometimes, occasionally, but to be frank, the internet connection in the middle of space can be a little spotty. Eventually, the broken voices of his parents will come through, with a pixelated image of them also appearing on the wide screen above his control panel.

On the 3rd of April, in the bright year of 2186, Skipper sits in front of his control panel, dialing the number he knows so well. He's expecting to hear all the same questions he normally hears from his parents: "How's the weather up there?" or "Any exciting meteor showers?" or even "Any special co-pilots yet?". That last one always bothered Skipper. Of course he hasn't met anyone up here. It's not like there are a ton of other people passing by every day, or even that many people up there at all. Apparently, his mom got some misinformation about how frequently he speaks to anyone besides her and his own father. But still, Skipper types their number in with a smile on his face.

And then the panel starts violently beeping. Skipper looks down at the flashing lights, and then back up at the screen, and then focuses his attention on the lights again, barely paying attention to the single face now on his screen. "Hello?" a voice sounds above the now quieter and slower beeping. Skipper looks up to lock eyes with the now large face of a girl with long hair and bright eyes. Suddenly, he finds himself totally unable to speak. This never happens. Some would argue that he should be unable to speak. See, Skipper has this habit of talking too much. You know, now that he thinks of it, maybe people find him annoying. Not like he would know, considering he doesn't have people around to find him as anything. He should ask his mom and dad if they find him annoying.

"Hello?", the voice sounds again, breaking him out of whatever trance he was in.

"Sorry!" he finally responds, now addressing the girl in front of him. She has a look of confusion on her face that Skipper can only assume quite closely resembles the one he's also currently wearing. "You aren't my mom." Skipper's not quite sure why that's what he chose to say, but he also has a tendency to forget to think before he speaks, but considering he really only speaks to his parents, that hasn't really caused a problem until this exact moment.

"Congratulations on the top notch examining skills!" the girl responds sarcastically, "but why exactly did you call me?" Skipper sighs.

"I didn't call you. I must have accidentally typed in the wrong number or something when trying to call my parents. Goodbye." As soon as his finger brushes over the end call button, the girl speaks again.

"Wait. Who are you?" Noticing that Skipper still has an odd look on his face, she sighs. "I'm Carrie. I'm from Earth. Now your turn."

Skipper ponders the question for a moment. Here, he has two paths in front of him. First: he can not answer the question, and hangs up on Carrie, because he has no idea who she is. Second: he can actually sit and have a conversation with someone who is not biologically related to him for the first time in almost a year.



Skipper chooses the second option.

“I’m Skipper. Also from Earth. I’m not going to lie to you, it’s been a while since I actually talked to someone.” Little did he know, this one statement would lead to him speaking to people a lot more often, at least one person in particular.



After this singular phone call, Skipper and Carrie found themselves talking almost every single day. It was nice to have someone else to speak to. They balanced each other out quite well— Skipper could talk, and Carrie would listen. After a month or two, they knew everything about each other. They would chart the constellations together, sitting outside their bay windows near their screens. Carrie would help Skipper with ship repairs, and Skipper would help Carrie with deciding what movie to watch for the night. Skipper had never felt as connected to someone as he had with Carrie, but there was one issue. They were on separate ships. Unless Carrie or Skipper abandoned their ships, they’d be apart forever. Nonetheless, Carrie made it a lot harder to answer his mom’s questions about having someone there for him.

After months of this, Skipper sat in front of his control panel and screen, the silence of his spaceship ringing in his ears. This was the day. He was going to tell Carrie he was in love with her. They just got each other, you know? Skipper’s hands were shaking, and he just couldn’t bring himself to press the button. Suddenly, the silence was replaced with a loud crash. Looking down at his monitor, he saw a breach on the side of his ship. An asteroid had impacted the side, and all he could do was panic.

Carrie, on the other hand, was actually having a pretty good day. She was looking forward to talking to Skipper like she did almost every day. But she couldn’t help but notice that for some reason, his call was late.

Her ship that was normally filled with the sounds of laughter and friendship suddenly became filled with the noises of an emergency alert. Carrie rushed over to the control panel, and studied her radar. She saw an S.O.S. being sent out by a nearby ship. She panicked when she saw why. It was an asteroid impact, and a bad one at that. There was no saving that ship, but Carrie knew what she had to do. She had to save however many people were on it. She took one last look at the radar, and stepped on the power, flying her ship towards the ship in trouble as quickly as possible. As soon as she got there, she began to lower the travel port from her ship down to connect to the other ship, letting the doors fly open to allow the captain in trouble to cross over to her safe transport.

As the door flew open to Skipper’s ship, he froze directly in front of it. Was he dreaming? Did he die from the asteroid impact? Was she really right there, or was it a hallucination? He suddenly remembered that if he didn’t move now, it wouldn’t end well for him, so he sprinted on to her ship, stopping at the now closing door and travel port, and back at his now fully out of commission ship. And then he turned around. In front of him was Carrie, arguably just as shocked as he was. And surprisingly, in that moment, the only thing they could both think was that they were oddly happy that an asteroid hit his ship.

One By One... Gone

By *Adastra Cuiffo*

It was a breezy fall Saturday night at five thirty. Six girls—Amanda Matthews, Danica Smith, Ella Grey, Jennifer Jacobs, Liz Thompson, and Stephanie Ray— all planned to meet at Liz’s house around eight. Each was at home, getting ready for whatever the night would bring. The girls hadn’t decided what they would be doing yet, but they wanted to go out. Liz was usually the host, so they would go to her house before they did anything else.

Seven forty-five arrived, and each of the five girls was headed to their cars to drive to Liz’s. One after another arrived, opened her front door, and headed to her bedroom. Her parents were often not home because they had to travel all the time for work. It was now a quarter past eight, and Danica was a no-show. The five girls in the house called her, texted her, and looked at her location. She wasn’t answering any of them, and for some reason, her location was off.

“Maybe she’s going to meet up with that boy she’s always talking about,” said Stephanie.

“Who? Ben Miller?” asked Amanda. The girls all laughed and made jokes about how Danica probably told her parents she was going to hang out with her friends but then went to meet silly Ben.

After two hours went by, Danica was still not at Liz’s. She still hadn’t replied or called anyone back. The five remaining were hungry and thought about going to get something to eat. Though Ella looked sick to her stomach, “I’m not hungry.” Jen taunted her about being concerned for Danica. “She always does this,” Jen said. Danica had really strict parents, but always seemed to manage to sneak out or get away with bad choices.

Ella said, “I’m going to go outside and try calling her; when I come back in, we can grab something to eat.”

“Where is she?” exclaimed Liz. “I’m *so* hungry!” The four remaining girls in Liz’s bedroom wondered where Ella could be. It had now been forty minutes since Ella went outside to call Danica.

“Let’s go outside and talk to her. And Jen, you should apologize.”

“Apologize for what? Danica always skips our plans; there’s no reason to be worried,” said Jen. Liz, Jen, Amanda, and Stephanie went outside to talk to Ella. They searched both the front and back yards, but she was nowhere to be found. Each girl tried to reach her phone, just as they did with Danica. After seeing her location turned off too, they began to worry.

“Maybe she went to talk to her dad,” said Stephanie. Ella’s dad was a longtime policeman who loved his family more than anything. She had often gone to him, no matter what the circumstance was.

“Her car is here, and the police station is seven miles from here. There’s no way she just got up and started walking there when she could’ve taken her car. It’s dark, and we all know Ella not only hates the dark, but she hates being alone in the dark,” said Amanda.

At this point, the girls were very concerned. Danica skipping out on their plans was usual, but Ella always told her friends where she was going. Jen felt guilty and decided to call Ella’s dad. He was working late tonight, and for the most part, they lived in a crime-free area.

“911 speaking, how can I help you?”

“Officer. Grey?”

“Who is this?”

“Hi, Mr. Grey, this is Jen, and I’m here at Liz’s with the girls. By any chance, did Ella come down to the station?”

“No, why would she?” he replied.

“She went outside to call Danica almost an hour ago and didn’t come back in. We tried calling her, but she didn’t answer. Her car is here, and so are her keys.” Officer Grey began to stress. Ella would never just leave like that.

I find out where Ella went. And you said Danica hasn't been answering either?"

"Yes," said Jen.

"Thanks girls, be safe." He hung up the phone.

Little did Officer Grey know, Ella wouldn't be found, and neither would Danica. Wherever they were, it wasn't safe, and more were to come. The four girls went back inside, locked the doors, and called their parents. They did exactly what Ella's father had said. He knew best, right? He was a police officer, wasn't he?

It was almost midnight. No reply from Danica. No reply from Ella. Not even a call back from Mr. Grey. The girls' parents had told them it was probably just a coincidence. Ella was probably mad at Jen, and Danica just didn't feel like coming to the hangout. They instructed them to do the same things Mr. Grey did. Sleeping over was fine, as long as they stayed in touch. The girls were worried but were beginning to fall asleep. It had been a long week, and after getting to Liz's, they just wanted to binge watch Netflix instead of going out. Liz, Jen, and Stephanie fell into a light sleep watching the news, waiting for a word back on where their friends were. Amanda lay awake, wondering where they were or what they were doing. She got up to use the bathroom. A few minutes later, there was a loud crash. Liz was the first to wake up.

"Hello? Guys, wake up What was that?" Jen and Stephanie opened their eyes.

"What was what?"

"That loud noise—you didn't hear it?" They shook their heads.

"Where's Amanda?"

Liz, Jen, and Stephanie began to search the house. "Maybe she went to the bathroom, said Stephanie." Liz knocked on the closed downstairs bathroom door. No answer. "Amanda?" The door was unlocked, so they gave her a warning that they would count down from three. "We're coming in there if you don't come out."

"3, 2, 1," They opened the door. There was no sight of poor Amanda. But there was shattered glass all over the floor.

"I think someone's after us."

"This is really bad." They began crying while they searched the rest of the house, only to find nothing. Amanda was gone.

Again, they called the police station. No answer. "He's probably out looking for Ella still," said Liz.

"Yeah," Jen and Stephanie agreed. They were now wide awake. How could their group of six get whittled down to three? In just one night! The girls lay awake, pondering their thoughts. No one spoke, but occasionally you could hear the whimpers. They were too afraid to open the door and drive home. They were too afraid to get up from the couch where they lay. They were even too afraid to call home.

Morning arrived. Just three girls. Liz's parents were supposed to come back that afternoon. Jen and Stephanie decided it was probably best to go home for a few hours. Liz told them that was a good idea, even though she was terrified to be alone right now. Her parents knew what was happening and told Liz they would try to get home sooner. Jen and Stephanie agreed to go home and come back to see Liz a few hours later. Their parents wanted to comfort them during this time. They took their stuff and went home. Officer Grey had never called the girls back. He was now aware of Amanda's disappearance too. 'Missing' flyers were being posted all over town. How could three girls just magically vanish in the middle of the night? No one had answers.

When Jen arrived home, her parents greeted her with a hug. The news was on, and they started asking a billion questions about the three girls. They asked Jen questions she couldn't answer. "What happened", "Why didn't you come home", "Where were they last seen", "When did they go missing?" She



asked.

“With us? She never came.” Jen was the last of the six to go.

One by one, gone. In just a day, the group of six became none. No one had seen them; no one knew where they were; no one knew anything. Where have they gone? What happened to them? Questions came up for weeks upon weeks. The girls were gone, one by one.



By Madelyn Serxner

Take Your Friend Out on a Date

By Madison Maida

It's undeniable that life is stressful, so why not take your friend out on a date? Who needs romance when you got that sweet platonic love! Dates also aren't even just exclusive for romance. A date is simply dedicating time to someone. Any relationship requires dedication, time, and communication. In any close relationship, who doesn't want some one-on-one time with a close buddy? Everyone loves a great date. Not only that, imagine one of your close friends wants to have a date just to spend quality time with you! Wouldn't you love that? So, here are a couple date ideas!

While there are many, one of the most important aspects is knowing someone's interests. For example, if your friend is terrified of heights, I wouldn't recommend taking them skydiving. Who wouldn't love to go to an aquarium? Or a zoo! How about a Broadway show, or a picnic? If you and your friend aren't terrified of heights then how about a hot air balloon ride? Or a concert? If you are over the age of 21 then maybe go to a jazz club and dance to some sweet music! Everyone loves some great beats!

Food. We all love food, yet no need to go to an expensive restaurant. Nothing wrong with getting some Wendy's and chilling in the car, laughing at the radio, or you could go to a more fancy spot. Such as IHOP, Olive Garden, or Red Lobster. All great spots! Or you can get some takeout and have a movie night! Horror, comedy, laugh at a dumb romance! Why not?

Overall, there are so many other great ideas! Such as a work out date! Get those abs and meet those goals together! Or why not take your telescopes and watch the stars? There is one question I have for you: Cloud watching or star gazing? Personally, I love star gazing.

Moreover, no matter what day or month, we shall have stress. So why not take some friends and have a blast with some of these ideas?

Hearts, Flowers, and Skeleton Bees

By Ebube Maduekwe

Chiemerie Kaira Ihejirika was a breathtaking soul. Her presence in a room made men and women of all ages unwind their jaws. Her eyes would flutter like a newly winged butterfly. She was used to the advantage of being herself. If she was seen anywhere more frequently than another, it was most likely a running track. Her strides were like a gazelle and flowed like a water fountain. There was no runner like her. When she ran, her skin would react to the sun in the same way gold did. Her cheeks were deeper than the track she glided on. Her lengthy, bronze colored braids would gyrate and jump off her back as she flew. With all her perfections it seemed as if she had no flaws. She was watched by many. Her highschool knew her name because it bounced off the hallways like a soaring Nycibius. She was observed with precision.

Unfortunately, she never met another soul that could water her heart's flowers. There were bees on her skeleton, ready to buzz and tend to the flowers in her heart.

Nothing occurred. The bees were stagnant, not a healthy flower to pollinate. A bee with no flower to tend to is deemed useless, and a flower with no water is wilted and arched over. Her days were indifferent. Her windows were opened at night to bring in a fresh breeze. Instead, unwanted energies were invited in. The night would bring sadness and despair to Chiemerie. The fluorescents of the night reflected how her skeleton was wilted. Her spine curved downward, just the same as the flowers in her heart. The thought of a new day starting brought her unease. The same unease she felt on her way to her car, to school, and to her track practices. There was no one who would attentively listen to her. Her words were as slimy and slippery as a water park to her peers. She was just being a brat, paranoid, ungrateful. The girls in her school would do unspeakable things to even get a glimpse of her position.



School was her death sentence just as much as life was for her. She excelled in her academics but failed all her tests when it came to socializing. Her only friends were those who also answered to the title of popularity. She had three friends that she held dear to her heart. Her friends stuck with

her because of her title, none of them truly desired her presence. She was too much for them; they would beckon to anyone who would promise to keep their secret. Her locker was always decorated with letters, she assumed from her friends, and would crumble them into her hand-stitched book bag. There was not one effort to carefully put the letters into her folder. Chiemerie heard a person somewhere in the hallway scuff. It could not have been about her, it must've been about the tribulations and stress of highschool she assumed once more. She tossed the letters away at lunch; they wasted space in her bag. She always sat with her group of friends at lunch. She never minded how they ignored her and avoided looking at her in the eyes. It was their "thing". It was a routine, a routine she would rather not break.

The walk back to her car after school always haunted her. It was extended and embarrassing. She never walked with friends or a lover. She was solidarity, if it was embodied in a single person. Driving kept her going. The way the surrounding cars were impatient to get to their destination as if they were the only ones driving. It was almost a resemblance to her one and only safety-track. No one waits for the other on track. As soon as the deafening gun blows, it's a fight for life or death. It's quite similar when driving.

In her rear-view mirror, a car honked and glared at her. She moved to the next lane. She was almost home anyway. When she reached the door of her home, she stuttered. Her neighbor's eyes were stuck on her like a nail to a wall. No, it couldn't be that she had to be wrong. She's not a celebrity that everyone must gawk at every second. Her key danced and danced in the keyhole until it unlocked. Safe, was she not? In a world of loudness, she often wondered if silence was better. Was it better to break the silence with her words or was it better to perish? If she spoke, it held no weight. Her presence was adored, her words trashed. She rushed to her room. She smelt the aroma of the dinner that both of her parents were cooking. It was dishes from a country other than America. She liked those dishes, they grounded her into her self worth. Tomato, onion, beef, and fish were all swimming around in the air in her room, poking at her. Calling for her to come out. Instead, she opened her books and homework. Not only did the kitchen transport smell to her nose, it transported Afro-beats to her ears. Loudly, of course. She couldn't even focus. Birds kept throwing branches at her window.

She was going for a run. When she went for runs, she would go for hours. Many onlookers perceived her as crazy for the distance she would run. The distance never bothered her as long as she had music running through her veins and she was by herself. Crunch! Crack! Her steps this time were heavier than usual. Heavier and more dense, as if she had four feet on her.

She made a turn on the trail she always went down. This time, she would go left instead of right. Going left took her to the woods. She had been pelting through the woods for around twenty-two minutes. A break was needed. She paused to catch her breath. She also caught another breath, and another foot step that wasn't hers. With no hesitation, she began to bolt. Each breath was louder than the last. Tears were already clouding her eyes. She no longer was running like a gazelle, she was now a rabbit. A rabbit that was being hunted. Branches scratched at her, bugs yelled at her, the wind hissed at her for disturbing its peace with her speed. The ground was starting to grab at her with its stumps and rocks. She couldn't let herself die. Her speed was increasingly slowing down. Her body swayed as fast as she could, but in slow motion. Whoever was destined to ruin her was determined. Not once did the crooked person stop to speak, breathe, or even give up? Look left, look right, look straight. She punched through branches and collected scratches like they were medals.

A bee stung her, and she faltered for half a second. But she knew that half a second was too much. It was already too late for her. She felt the soft and unassailable hand curve around her arm. The hand held tight and captured her other arm. She thrashed and kicked backwards and forward. She twisted her arm around and kneed the person. Her freedom was hers once more. She started to fly. She couldn't breathe. She would breathe when breathing was safe and not a disadvantage. Her breath was trickling down the staircase and decreasing. Her body couldn't keep moving. But it did not matter. She was going routes she had never strolled down before because she had no time to think. Scrtk! Her shirt was torn and her arm was slashed with a knife. She had lost, and the attacker had won.

Her chest heaved and went up and down with each tear that fell. The attacker had on an oversized jacket and a horse mask. She was dragged by her feet. Each punch she threw was weak and afflicted no damage. Her reach was too short and slow. The attacker locked his fist around her hair to keep her in place. "You never noticed me? You never realized what I would have done for you?", the voice aggressively spat all over her face while antagonizing her. He continued pulling her hair up, to keep her face toward his. She had never heard that voice before. She shook her head, and he punched a tree. She winced with each tree bark and acorn that ran down. "I saw you for you. I was the one who knew you. Not anyone else. You disregarded my letters. You didn't even care to look back when I honked at you." Her eyes widened and her body shrunk. His other hand was clammy, and he wiped his sweat on his pants. "But, I am going to let you go." Like a moth to a lantern, she took her chance. Again, he chased her and he grabbed both of her arms. "Not without you understanding who I could be for you." He took off his mask. He had dark black hair and dreadful narrowed eyes. He had a tall slash across his pointed nose. He could smell the fear on her body. She knew that he could just perceive the strong aroma of fear and intimidation on her. She was able to utter words even

in all her fatigue.

“How do you sleep at night, you monster?”

“I sleep like a newborn baby” His lips curled upwards as he spoke. His presence was so intimidating she lost her balance and tripped. All she smelt was her sweat and her own blood. Her blood was sappy and her wounds were deep like a tunnel. The loss of blood should be killing her, she thought. The only thing dying was her self assurance on safety. She had now become a sitting duck to this barbaric predator. Like a hunter he drew his knife out, like a prey she accepted her fate and held on to one rose. The rose was crushed in between her fist, so was her life in the hands of him.

The flowers in her heart dispersed to just curved and rolled up petals. They were over-watered by a tsunami. A tsunami that collided with her heart flowers. A tsunami that killed every flower and any bee alive in her skeleton. The flowers in her heart yearned for water, but this water was dangerous. All that was heard were the drips of the bending flowers. The bees in return suffered, and no longer buzzed. A beautiful bouquet of what was once roses, now just petals. A beautiful scenery destroyed into no return. Heart flowers and skeleton bees, once in an alluring, young, and healthy state, were now gone. May they grow another garden in another heart and skeleton.

Forever Remember the Homecoming Queen

By Sarah Seale

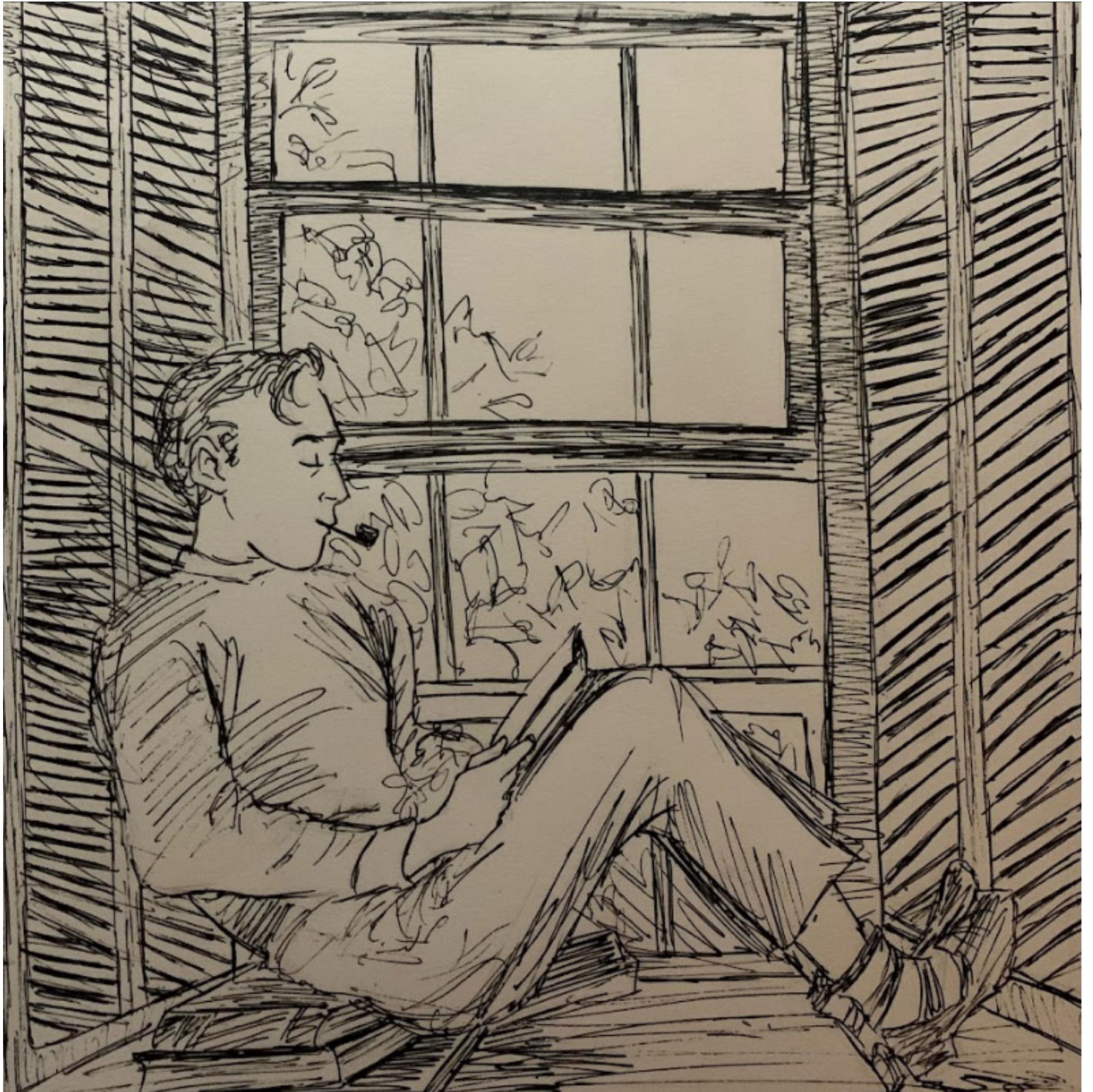
Blood red dress, music turned up real loud, a night that would never be forgotten. Everything was perfect; perfect day, perfect date, perfect dress. She couldn't be more excited for her senior year Homecoming dance. Everything she had been dreaming of for years was finally happening. She was a shoo-in for Homecoming queen, and the dress she was wearing was the same one she'd been dreaming of since freshman year.

She was applying the final layer of mascara when the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of her gorgeous date. His tie was matching her dress, and the corsage he bought beautifully complimented her eyes. After her mom took over a thousand pictures capturing every emotion, every feeling, every moment, her date grabbed her by the hand and pulled her towards the car like a puppy on a leash pulling its owner towards the park. Like the gentleman he was, he opened the door for her, and allowed her to get settled before closing it and getting into the driver's seat. He passed her his phone and she got the music all set up. It was the perfect pre-dance playlist, with all of the songs that elicited her favorite memories. She turned the music all the way up and started singing as loud as she could. This brought a wide, beautiful smile to her date's face. Knowing how excited she was for tonight made him elated. He was spending the most perfect night with the most perfect girl and he wouldn't want it any other way. They were about five minutes from the school. Energy was high and no one knew what the night would bring.

Bright lights, no way of avoidance, collision. Nothing was perfect anymore. Her perfect day was ruined, her perfect date was taking his final breaths in the driver's seat, and her perfect white lace dress was stained red with blood. The best of the many pictures her mom took that night were plastered everywhere by the next day. Classmates and community members came together to support her and her date's family, and to keep their memory alive. Everything she had been dreaming of for years ended before it could even begin, but the night of her senior year Homecoming dance was a night that would be forever remembered.



Reviews



Floribama Shore: World's Best Show

By Jenna Levine

Floribama Shore is a show that takes place on the Florida Panhandle on the beach that stretches all the way to Alabama. Eight young adults— Codi Butts, Jeremiah Buoni, Kirk Medas, Kortni Gilson, Aimee Hall, Nilsa Prowant, Candace Rice, and Gus Smyrniotis— from different backgrounds and places become roommates with one another for the summer.

In the show, these eight young adults encounter a lot of problems, whether it's with dating, rooming with so many other people, drinking too much, or peeing where you're not supposed to— it's a hilarious and dramatic show that will keep you watching for hours.

The first season is mostly just the roommates getting used to each other, overcoming past relationships, exploring one-night stands, and most importantly learning how to drink a lot.

As the show progresses, relationships between roommates grow stronger, and in some cases, break. Because these people are so overly dramatic, the show is hysterical, and it puts them in incredibly insane situations. Even with all the drama and fighting, these eight roommates still manage to love and appreciate one another despite their differences. At the end of the day they still have that southern affection; they're still able to say "I love you" after their conflicts and forget about it all with one embrace.

Personally, I think that Aimee Hall is the best person in the house. Often referred to as a princess, goddess, mermaid, she is the perfect blend of true south and a party gal. The only downside to Aimee is that she's besties with Nilsa, my least favorite. Nilsa is the one who's always looking for drama. She always causes trouble and most of the time she is the reason for the problems in the house. When there's drama, Nilsa is probably at the root of it. She is the root of all evil in Floribama Shore; she is the Floribama Shore supervillan!

In addition to my favorite and least favorite, Floribama Shore's least problematic person, who happens to be my second favorite person in the house, is Candace Rice, also called Candy. For the most part, Candace stays out of drama. When there's drama in the house, she's the least involved in the antics. Of course, nobody is perfect, and every once and a while, Candace can lose her temper and get extremely heated. However, that's nothing compared to Nilsa, or even Codi, when it comes to starting or participating in house drama.

Overall, Floribama Shore is an amazing show, and I would definitely recommend it. Go watch Floribama Shore!!!



Jojo Rabbit Review

By Lydia McGuigan

When you think of World War II movies, you think of bloody dramas about D-Day like *Saving Private Ryan* or harrowing accounts of the Holocaust like *The Pianist*. One doesn't typically think of a coming-of-age comedy about a young boy and his imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler. As crazy as that plot sounds, *Jojo Rabbit* perfectly executes this absurd premise and is a delightful combination of comedy and drama. It's a movie that can have a scene of its young protagonist kicking imaginary Adolf Hitler in the crotch while also showing tragic scenes of armed civilians and children being thrown into an unwinnable battle to defend their crumbling country.

Jojo Rabbit, which was released in 2019 and directed by Taika Waititi, is about Johannes Betzler, a young member of Nazi Germany's Hitler youth who aspires to be the best Nazi ever. His bedroom walls are smothered with propaganda posters and his imaginary friend is a warped fantasy version of Adolf Hitler who gives him life advice and pep talks.

The film doesn't shy away from showing the gruesome reality of being on the losing side of a global war or the fanaticism of a dying dictatorship. But the movie also has a clever use of satire and humor to mock and expose the hateful ideology that brought about such a conflict in the first place. It's peppered with heartfelt moments of individual kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, and courage that reminds us that there were human-beings caught on both sides of the conflict, doing their best in impossible situations.

Jojo's seemingly fixed point of view on Nazis and Jewish people changes when he discovers his mother is hiding a young Jewish woman named Elsa in their home. It turns out that Jojo's mother, Rosie, is working for the German resistance to help people like Elsa and spread information to undermine the war effort. At first Jojo is apprehensive towards Elsa as she is the living embodiment of everything he has been taught to hate. He faces a dilemma where can't just turn her in without exposing his mother too, so he has to learn to tolerate her.

Jojo has a simple childish view of the world that has been warped and corrupted by the propaganda that has been fed to him. The more he learns about Elsa, the more he is able to connect with her as a person and realizes that they are no different from each other. They have just been forced into opposite sides of a conflict that someone else dreamed up. The conflict becomes too real for Jojo when the war reaches their town and everything he once believed in collapses in on itself.

Jojo Rabbit is a film that can balance humor and tragedy in a way that complements rather than undermines each other. It uses humor to make serious points about the characters and the world around them. An example of this is how Jojo's imaginary Hitler constantly offers him cigarettes despite the real dictator being a heavy anti-smoker. It illustrates how little Jojo understands about the man he idolizes and the cause he passionately supported.

Taika Waititi plays Hitler like how a German kid at the time would imagine him: Jovial, upbeat, and fun. As the movie progresses, he becomes more sinister and domineering, a negative influence attempting to pull Jojo down a dark path.

As the film progresses, we see signs of the war getting closer to Jojo's hometown. Trucks of exhausted soldiers on the quiet country roads, military barricades, air raids off in the distance, the town around Jojo slowly deteriorating from bright, cheerful and orderly to broken, crumbling, and desperate, and the brutal acts of a dying regime.

The actors in the movie did a stellar job. Sam Rockwell brings the perfect combination of compassion and jaded cynicism to Captain Klenzendorf. Thomasin Mackenzie is outstanding as Elsa. She's easily able to switch from anger to fear, grief, despair, and hope when the script demands it. Scarlet Johansson nails it as Jojo's mother, Rosie. She's likable, eccentric, and compelling as Rosie, a good woman who's just trying to shield her son from the horrors of war. Her chemistry with lead actress, Roman Griffiths Davis who plays

Jojo Rabbit is a genuinely amazing movie that resonated with me long after I watched it. It teaches themes of love, tolerance, empathy, and acceptance. If you haven't seen it yet, then I wholeheartedly recommend it.



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