

# WORD PLAY



## THE '57 CHRONICLES

**English '57 Series  
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### Introduction

The English '57 Independent Writing series is a unique series of courses designed to help writers challenge themselves and their writing in the safe and comfortable environment that the Tutoring-Learning Center provides. What each '57 student works on in this course is entirely up to them as they design their own assignments and meet once a week with a peer tutor who gives them support and helpful feedback on their work.

The polished pieces that are presented in this volume of *Word Play* shows the range and ability of many of the Tutor-Learning Center's '57 writers from this semester. Some of the following pieces are from writers that have continued to take English '57 semester after semester to continue working on longer pieces and some writers are brand new to English '57 and the practice of expressing themselves through writing. Despite these differing experiences, all of these published pieces are incredibly impressive and demonstrate the possibilities that the English '57 series offers to student writers. I hope you enjoy the pieces in this volume of *Word Play*.

Lisa Knuth, Editor

### Acknowledgements

This volume of *Word Play* would not have been possible without the talented writers in this semester's '57 Independent Writing series. I would like to thank them along with their dedicated tutors who provide support to their learners throughout the entire semester as well as the Tutoring-Learning Center's senior staff. *Word Play* would not be possible without you.

### Additional Credits

Lynn Ludwig, English '57 Course Instructor  
Paul Kratwell, *Word Play* Publication Advisor  
Lisa Knuth, Cover and Section Photographer



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*100 Years is a short poem, but it evokes strong emotions from the audience. Many of us have questions of what life will be like when we are no longer part of it.*

*Megan Ball, Tutor*

## **100 YEARS**

**KATIE AXLEN**

A 100 years from now I will be dead and gone  
Hopefully my memory will live on  
Even if I'm not here in person, my sprit will never die  
Tell my story every now and then  
Please don't forget about me but live your life  
Don't be sad and don't fake happiness  
Learn from my mistakes  
Never let your memories of me die  
Even if I'm not alive

*Katie tells a tragic story in this poem. Her writing style creates instant images of what is happening moment by moment. The chronological nature of the poem also brings the reader into the story.*

*Megan Ball, Tutor*

## **DON'T BLINK**

**KATIE AXLEN**

In a blink of an eye, headlights were headed towards us.  
In a blink of an eye, confusion washed over me.  
In a blink of an eye, our ears rang from the sound of metal clashing.  
In a blink of an eye, our screams echoed into the night.  
In a blink of an eye, we were spinning out of control.  
In a blink of an eye, I thought I was going to die.  
In a blink of an eye, we flew off the road.  
In a blink of an eye, all was still.  
In a blink of an eye, I was frozen with fear.  
In a blink of an eye, I thought the end was near.  
In a blink of an eye, everything was going to be alright.  
In a blink of an eye, the engine blew up.  
In a blink of an eye, flames engulfed my body.  
In a blink of an eye, death was before me.  
In a blink of an eye, I was jealous of the dead.  
In a blink of an eye, it was the end.



*In this poem, Katie takes a hard look at the emotions someone feels when contemplating death. She takes a relatively dark topic and gives it an inquisitive tone that makes the audience wonder these things themselves.*

*Megan Ball, Tutor*

## **IF I DIE YOUNG**

**KATIE AXLEN**

Day fades to night  
Night fades to day  
Time slips way, but I never change  
If I die today will I be missed?  
Life goes on, even when you're dead and gone  
Memories fade, but no one cares anyway

Life is full of good things  
Life is full of bad things  
If I disappeared would anyone notice?  
If I ran away, would anyone come looking for me?  
Friends fade away but one day will they think of me?

Times moving too fast  
Times moving too slow  
If a car hit me, would anyone know?  
If I'm always walking alone  
Would anyone cry if I died?  
Besides my family who would be at my side

As night fades to day  
Maybe I'll fade away  
Will anyone be mad, sad or glad?  
Will I leave this life with no regrets?  
Guess will find out and see as soon as it's the end for me

*This poem leaves room for several interpretations by the audience and is a perfect example of Katie's style of writing. Each stanza paints a picture in your mind.*  
Megan Ball, Tutor

## **OF COURSE**

**KATIE AXLEN**

You can feel it coming  
It's the calm before the storm  
You hope it'll pass over you  
Of course it won't

Black clouds roar over you  
You hurry to the basement  
Wishing it'll be over soon  
Of course it won't

Your friends circle around you  
Everyone trying to protect each other  
Saying it'll be okay  
Of course it won't

Lightning strikes and winds howl  
You scream when it goes dark  
No lights at the end of this tunnel  
You hope for the end  
Of course it won't

You open your eyes to see what's left  
The night is over with  
You hurry outside to pick up the remains  
Wishing that the storm is gone for good  
Of course it won't

The suns come out  
Now that the worst is done  
Your friends are by your side as you silently cry  
As soon as you calm down your friend sees a storm coming  
Will the storms ever end?  
Of course it won't

*Katie uses strong description and an interesting topic in this short story. The story caused me to be fully immersed in one idea, and then have that slowly shift as more details are brought to light.*

*Megan Ball, Tutor*

## **PLAY TIME**

**KATIE AXLEN**

I held up a knife, the silver blade glistened in the light. I looked it over as the light above my kitchen table shined on it. I felt the end of it too make sure it was sharp enough for what I was about to do. I took a deep breath as I look down and what laded before me. I thought about not taking the knife and destroying the objects peacefulness, but that would be no fun. I smiled evilly as I thrust the knife down and started cutting. My victim couldn't move as I dug the knife into it. The knife created a sawing noise as I cut all the way around. After I cut a circle, I popped the top off. I dug my hand down, deep inside, feeling the squishy gunk. The gunk was surprisingly cool but slippery. Raping my hand around the guts, I began to pull and rip the guts out. They made a large tearing noise as I ripped them out as if they were screaming in protest. Once the guts were mostly ripped out, I wiped off my slippery hands. I picked up a spoon and I scraped all of the remaining insides out. I drop the guts into a bucket by my feet. The table was a mess with pieces of guts everywhere. The aroma filled the room with the scent of Halloween.

I cleaned up the mess that I had created at the table. I grabbed my bucket of guts and took it out behind my house so there wouldn't be any evidence of what I had just done. I hurried back inside after making sure no one saw me dump the bucket out. I didn't have much time left to finish what I had started. I sat down at the table and examined my cleaned out object. It had once been living but now was dead before me. I sat there staring at it, thinking about what I should do to it. I picked up my kitchen knife and looked at my reflection in it. I then stabbed the object with the knife and began cutting chunks out. It was silent in the room except for the cutting noise of the knife and the smell of Halloween. Halloween, the onetime of the where the freaks can come out in play, when I can come out and play. This poor creature had been my victim this year, but I didn't feel bad at all. I felt glad. Halloween was my favorite time of year and I could be as evil as I wanted.

I finished cutting shapes out of my victim and then I grabbed a lighter and placed a candle inside. I lit the candle then placed the top back on my victim. I picked up my creation and took it outside. The sun had set which meant it was time to play. I set my creation down on the front porch, where everyone could see my amazing pumpkin creation.

*Summer Breeze is a short, suspenseful story with vivid imagery. The story is written in first person, which Katie prefers because the audience can feel like they are a part of what is happening.*

*Megan Ball, Tutor*

## SUMMER BREEZE

KATIE AXLEN

“What scares you? Is it the sharp butcher knife held up to your throat? Is it the fact that you’re tied up to a chair with duct tape covering your mouth? Is it the feeling of death creeping up on you? Is it knowing that no one will save you? Do I scare you with my eyes flaming with excitement at the thought of blood? What scares you?”

There was no sound in the room except for a pounding heartbeat. I stood over him as he looked at me eyes pleading forgiveness. I started to chuckle. “You think I’m going to forgive you just like that?” I stated “ha ha well think again.” Tears started to run down his cheeks. I had never seen him cry before. It felt good seeing him cry, seeing him suffer. It’s about time he felt as miserable and helpless as I did. “don’t think I’ll fall for your innocent eyes trick ever again. It won’t work so you might give up. It’s over, no one will save you, no one will even care your gone. In fact I’ll be thanked for getting rid of scum like you. Boys, who play with girls hearts die a painful death” I said to him and then smiled. I smiled at the thought of his face deformed from pain, his silent screams into the night, the look of his mistress face when she found out what has happened to him. Finally I would get my justice, my revenge, my honor back.

I dug the knife deeper into his neck causing him to cringe from the pain. I watched the blood run deeper and faster as it rushed down his chest. Should I let him bleed to death or set him on fire and burn him or I could drown him....I heard that was the most painful way to die. Hmmm I thought then I grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. I forced him to look me in the eyes, “come on now don’t look away” I said as I smiled, “I’m feeling generous towards you since I did use to be madly in love with you. I’ll let you choice how you want to die. Sound good?” I smiled even more evilly as I let go of his dark brown hair. His head slumped down and he closed his eyes. I removed the knife from his neck momentarily. I held it in my left hand as I used my right to grab one end of his duct taped mouth. I ripped it off taking some of his facial hair with it. He yelped from the pain and I felt more power, more in control. “I told you to shave but you never did listen to me, did you? You know if you would have just listened to me and loved me you wouldn’t be in this situation right now would you?” he still had his head slumped over. His neck was bleeding like crazy, draining color from his body. I took his sweatshirt that laid on the ground beside him and ripped some of it and tied it around his neck to stop the bleeding. His body was cold but he was still alive. “so” I whispered into his ear, “how would you like to die?”

I took a few steps back and looked over him. He started to speak. It was almost a silent whisper, “sorry.....sorry....sorry...please....please...don’t...do this...” his head was still slumped over as tears dropped to the floor. I just stood there looking at him, frowning, almost pitying him.

“josh”, I spoke softly, “you know it’s too late for sorry. You should of thought about what might happen if you cheat on your wife.”

“sorry.....sorry....sorry...please....please...don’t...do this...” he repeated once again.

“You said you loved me and wanted to only be with me. Tell me wasn’t it a lie the whole time! Tell me!!” I started to grow louder and more furious. “Why did you do this to me! You created this monster that stands before you! You brought this on yourself! Tell me why! Is she better than me? Do you love her?” I was yelling then I brought my voice down and softly said, “why? I loved you so much and would do anything and everything for you so then why? Why did you cheat on me? Why did you crush my heart? Tell me...” my voice faded out and tears were silently rolling down my cheek.

He forced his head up even though his body protested against the action. He locked his hazel eyes to mine and softly spoke. “I loved you and I still love you. I don’t know why I did, but I’ve been regretting it ever since it happened. Taylor...I love you and I want to be with you, forever! That’s why I said I do 6 months ago. Come on Tay, you know me and I’m sorry. I really truly am sorry and I will do whatever it takes to win you back!” He still was looking at me his eyes were honest.

“Why did you cheat then? If you loved me so much” I said sternly

“i..i..im not sure...I had too much to drink and you had been so busy with working with animal rescues that I hadn’t seen you in a few weeks. And I really missed you and then some friends came over and one of them looked so much like you....I know it’s not a good reason to cheat on you and I really am sorry Tay. What can I do to get you to forgive me...to give me a second chance. You’re such an angel Tay don’t do this you know you’ll regret it!”

I looked at him neither one of us looked away from the other. “Really?” I gently asked “if that’s true then why did you keep seeing her! Why didn’t you tell me the moment I got back what happened!!”

“I didn’t tell you when you got back cause I didn’t want to hurt you because I loved you too much to let you go! And I didn’t keep seeing her it was a onetime thing!”

“Don’t you lie to me! I know you saw her again and again! I know! I saw you!”

“Taylor!!!” he yelled, “it was a onetime thing!!! My heart only belongs to you, come one Tay” He started to cough up blood from yelling and talking so much. His will power seemed to be running out.

“I saw pictures! I heard about what’s been going on between you two!!! She even gloated to me about you two!!!”

“Who do you believe!!!! Me or her!!!” his last words echoed in the dark cold basement. I looked over him, his pathetic body tied to the chair.

“do you really mean everything u said? Do you still only love me?”

“yes Tay! Everything I said was the truth, I only love you!”

“do you wanna win me back? Do you want me and only me...forever?”

“yes Tay! What do I have to do to win you back?”

“If you really do love me then kill her”. I said sternly

“What...?” his eyes started to reflex fear.

“If you want us to be the same like before and act like this never happened, she needs to be out of the picture...*permanently*”

“What...Taylor...that’s crazy..”

“what’s so crazy about it? Why should you care if she is alive or dead? I thought you only loved me and wanted to be with me. Don’t you want my forgiveness?”

“Tay...yes of course I do but...”

“But what?” I asked glaring at him

“Tay you’re asking me to kill someone...don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“No. don’t you want to be with me? Then do it!!!!” I yelled

“Okay! Fine! You win.....ill...ill do it...” his head slumped in defeat, in shame. I smiled evilly feeling so powerful. I walked over to where he was tied up when suddenly a large yell echoed through the basement. I quickly whipped around towards the sound. Standing there was Josh’s mistress, Morgan with a look of horror on her face. I put my arm around Josh’s body and looked eyes with Morgan. Every time I said her name it was like poison in my mouth.

“What’s wrong, Morgan. You look a little pale. Maybe you should try fake baking haha” I smiled at her

“What the Hell is going on down here!!! What did you do to him!!! You monster! You freak!”

“Come on Morgan. Don’t be like that. I was just having some fun with MY husband Josh. I guess you could join us.....What are u doing here anyways?” I said as I smiled evilly. I slowly removed my arm from his shoulder and took a few steps towards her.

“Stay away from me!!” She yelled while taking a few steps back. “What do you mean ‘what are you doing here’? I live here; this is my house, my basement! What the Hell are you doing here!? How did you even get in here?”

“What? Do I scare you?” I smiled even bigger. “The door was open and since you like to gloat I knew you too were meeting after you got back from work. And besides I wouldn’t want a bloody mess in my house. Duh” I took a step closer. Morgan pulled out a pistol and attempted to look strong. “Do you really think that scares me? Bring it on bitch!” I yelled and she pulled the trigger as I began to move towards her. The gun shot sound echoed in the room. I put my hand over my stomach and yelled “YOU BITCH!!!!” as I when down on my knees. She started to hurry towards Josh. “Don’t even think about it. He’s mine!!!!” I crawled over to him and raised my knife and stabbed him in the heart. I turned my head and locked eyes with Morgan. Her face was twisted with pain and disbelief. I turned back to josh and cut him loose causing his lifeless body to fall into my arms. I cradled him and gently spoke, “Now we’ll be together forever, just me and you” tears went down my cheeks as I closed my eyes and drifted into the blackness.

*This poem brings out our ideas of the seasons through descriptions of color, and also of different emotions brought on through those colors. This poem tells a story, which is common in Katie's poetry.*  
Megan Ball, Tutor

## THE CHANGING TIMES

KATIE AXLEN

The wind blows my hair  
The leaves change color  
The air gets colder  
Our stress gets stronger

Red, orange, yellow, green  
Are the colors of the trees  
Painted like a masterpiece  
Will you always be with me?

We live far apart, now that school has started  
Time slipped away from us  
School work now controls us  
Our memories start to fade as do the days

Blue, white, gray, black  
We live in a winter wonderland  
Trees are bare, and you are gone  
Can life still be fun?

Time was frozen in place  
If only it would stay that way  
Was it painless when the trigger was pulled?  
All you needed was a place to call home  
But now you left me alone in this world  
Hopefully heaven's everything you wished for

Pink, purple, yellow, green  
I wish you were here with me  
The flowers bloom over you  
The stormy weather reflects my mood

Red, black, screams, cries  
Why did you have to die?  
Was the pressure too much that you just wanted it to stop?  
Why didn't you tell me what you were feeling?  
You will always be with me

Yellow, blue, green, white  
I wish we could go back to that summer night

I was just you and me  
No distance, no school, no pressure, just free  
Fall is sad, winter is torture, spring is mad, summer is neutral  
As time goes on my emotions die until I get to see your smiling face again



*Katie questions what could be seen as simple emotion in this poem. I encouraged her to consider different types of emotions to write about, and she described these creatively and in detail.*  
Megan Ball, Tutor

## **WHAT IS EMOTION?**

**KATIE AXLEN**

What is love?  
Is it real or make believe?  
Do we find it or does it find us?  
How do we know when we're in love?  
Do we make it or do we fake it?  
Is it true or all a lie?  
What is love?

What is hate?  
Is a word of dislike or just something to say?  
Do we mean what we say?  
How do we know what hate really is?  
Do we hate enough to kill?  
Is it a true emotion that we feel?  
What is hate?

What is fear?  
Is it something we love or something we hate?  
Do people like to scare or be afraid?  
How do we know to scare someone the right way?  
Do people like facing their fears?  
Is it easily overcome or avoided?  
What is fear?

What is happiness?  
Is it something we can fake?  
Do we really feel it?  
How do we know what it truly is?  
Do we create it or find it?  
Is it from possessions we own or something more?  
What is happiness?

What is sadness?  
Is it caused by life or what we've done?  
Do we feel it enough to want to die?  
How do we overcome it?  
Do we ever try to get over it?  
Is it something that can haunt our lives?  
What is sadness?

What is stress?  
Is it created by us or our lives?  
Do we ever stop feeling it?  
How can we stop it?  
Do we ever not want to just scream cause of it?  
Is it really the end when it feels like it?  
What is stress?

*This was the first poem Christian composed (after much vested interest and prodding). This poem not only captures his honest feelings toward poetry, it also showcases not one, but three types of poetry compiled into a well-constructed poem with its own twists, turns, and comic relief.*

*Tyler Peters, Tutor*

## **A SELF-REFERENTIAL POEM**

**CHRISTIAN BECK**

An English class' poems are not the best  
In any way I could imagine it.  
I would instead first take a pointless test  
Than read some trash from T. S. Eliot.  
They make no sense and have no structured form  
No rules or guides that show their clever mind  
And don't believe there is a standard norm.  
What is the challenge of work not confined  
To certain words in certain spots in rhyme?  
This sonnet written in iambic pent  
Has surely taken much more work and time  
Than stupid, lousy free verse would have spent.  
I never liked it and I never will  
For it gets no respect when there's no skill

But  
I'll try it.  
Maybe there's something to it.  
There are plenty of people famous for it.  
I mean, just look at how I'm structuring this section!  
The steady increase of syllables per line represents a sudden flow  
Of information in the form of an epiphany. And I ended a line mid-sentence!

This is strange  
I'm not sure I like it  
Or know how it works  
But  
Should I  
Keep using it?

I think I'll stop using free verse,  
Because I don't like it, of course;  
(And to make it stick  
I wrote in limerick)  
I don't think there's anything worse.

*When Christian described his ideas for this piece the week before he brought it in to show me, I did not imagine the rich, pragmatic writing that embodies "Inconsistency." Week after week, Christian continued to delight my literary side with writing, ideas, and concepts that capture his way of thinking in a readable, entertaining way. This piece is nothing short of inspiring. Read this piece carefully; there are hidden messages and themes within.*

*Tyler Peters, Tutor*

## INCONSISTENCY

### CHRISTIAN BECK

Try as she might, Susan could not help but take her time as she strolled down the sidewalk towards her bus stop. The autumn chill was nothing compared to the view of leaves changing colors. She felt as though they went from green to red in the time of a single step. Wind blew the leaves off their wooden homes, to drift along the road. Susan's eye was suddenly drawn to a nearby hedge as it rattled. The leaves were commonplace, but it was a rarity for wind to be strong enough to create that melodic sound. It was an inconsistency, but a pleasant one at that. Aren't they all? Susan slowed her walk even more and smoothly pulled off her backpack. She had seen this inconsistency time and time again, and had a special way of dealing with it.

Something in the bushes was rattling, but she knew it wasn't the wind. Sure enough, a second later the rattling was followed by growling. In front of Susan now was a werewolf, she was certain of it. Wasting no more time being cautious, she pulled her crossbow out of her bag and pulled back the string. It was then that she saw the werewolf had brought company; a vampire appeared from the shadows. The werewolf was the bigger threat and much closer, so Susan fired her silver-tipped bolt straight into the beast's heart. As it keeled over, the Vampire floated to Susan at an uncomfortable speed. She was quick enough to reload and fire another shot. The Vampire fell, but was not dead. Susan leaped on the Vampire and shoved a wooden stake right in its chest.

"Crazy girl," muttered a voice from behind. Susan spun around and saw it was her bus driver, staring at her with his robotic eye. "You're going to get yourself killed," he told her, with a look of disapproval. She kept silent and her mouth formed a slight smirk as she hopped on the bus. She was always nervous getting on the bus. A misstep could send her falling into the planetary core, instead of landing safely on the hovering bus. When she entered, the driver closed the dilating door and turned on the deflector shields. As he activated the thrusters, Susan crossed her fingers hoping they wouldn't crash. She is confident that on more than one occasion those shields were the only things stopping them from crashing into normal speeders. It was over quick, though, thanks to the driver's reckless speed and "shortcuts." As the pressure normalized Susan stepped outside. "See you later Princess!" said the driver as he closed the aperture. The driver's parting words annoyed Susan, since she hated that nickname. She was no Princess.

Every eye was on her. The royal guard announced her appearance, "Duchess Susan Waldorf has arrived!" Her power was mostly a formality, but it came with status. She walked down the road to the entrance of the royal academy. Many had hoped she would marry before she was 18, but Susan was devoted to getting a proper education, so as not to be a figurehead for her future husband. Any person her family would set her up with was of no interest to her anyway. She had already found someone. He was a beautiful young man with long flowing hair, but she had only ever seen him once or twice, cleaning the halls. She knew, though, that he was her future. She would do anything to find him.

So that's when she comes to me. She was a nice enough dame, and she was smart enough to come to me. I was a little suspicious at first, wondering what a fine lady like her would be doing talking to a shady private eye like me. I kept my pistol in its holster, though, and listened to her story. She was looking for a guy. I didn't know why at first, but it wasn't long. After all, I am a detective. I managed to track him down after a few days. As soon as I told the dame about it she pulled out a weapon and tried to cut my life short. I ducked out of the office, you see, and I haven't seen her since. I don't need to know why she attacked me, or what happened with her and the man.

Often there is a truth behind the truth, a story behind the story. Maybe the person you were hired by isn't whom she says. Maybe the story is a lot more complicated than it seems. Maybe reading the first word of each paragraph gets you a little message. Whatever the case, I thrive for those little changes, the little inconsistencies that mess up everything else. Isn't that what makes life worth living.

Christian penned this piece—as he does most pieces—with unbridled creativity and fervor. To me, this one stands out because neither of us could come up with a story or plot line to write about for our next meeting. But Christian came the next week with this piece. Although unexpectedly dark at times, the common saying “when pigs fly,” is given a whole new meaning through Christian’s eyes.

Tyler Peters, Tutor

## WHEN PIGS FLY

### CHRISTIAN BECK

She never loved me.

I know this now. Maybe if I had figured it out earlier I could have ended all this before it even started. All the hard work. All the heartbreak. All the pigs. All the bloodshed.

She was the most beautiful girl in the world. Her thirty-second conversations felt like hours to me. I enjoyed seeing her laugh even when I was at the other side of the room. Her kind eyes, her subtle smile, I thought it meant something. When I made my intentions clear, so did she.

“I’ll date you when pigs fly.”

It was possible. I had a biology/Pre-med double major. I knew that it could be done. I needed something or my senior thesis anyway. It was possible.

I worked tirelessly. Problem after Problem kept hindering my progress. Is there any creature whose wings can be compatible and isolated? How do I compensate for the major increase in mass and density? Will the wings be functional? It didn’t really matter. I didn’t let anything hold me back, no matter what the cost. This work devoured my life. It was possible.

And then I finished it. They were monstrous creations, but they counted. Wings of a hog nosed bat, Body of a common farmhouse swine. I never thought they’d make it past a week, but they had already reached maturity. And they can fly. It really was possible.

I went to see her. How long had it been? Weeks? Months? Years? The thought hadn’t even occurred to me. She didn’t even recognize me. She remembered me soon enough, though. She was reluctant to talk to me, so I started talking first. I explained everything, where I had been, what I’d been doing, how I knew it was possible. Then I showed them to her. I let them fly right past her, go up to her and smell her.

She was disgusted. She wasn’t impressed by the difficulty of it all. She didn’t realize how much work it had taken. The look on her face was that of sheer terror. She ran away and said the two of us together was impossible. I never saw her again. Not alive at least.

The next time I heard of her was in the paper. Someone broke into her dorm from the window and pushed her out the window. No one knows how someone could have climbed to the fourth floor and have enough strength to completely shatter her window. Her roommate suffered severe bruising on most of her body and a concussion that may have affected her mentally. I heard some of her mad stories; I was interning at the hospital she was staying in. She died from internal bleeding a in a few

days. The police say there are still no leads, and the roommate was telling them stuff that was impossible.

But it was possible.

*Corey was such a riot to work with! A true comedian, Corey's writing is always filled with hilarious imagery that constantly made me laugh. He is truly one of a kind, and I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with him. Good luck on the rest of your studies Corey!!*

*Angela Bemowski, Tutor*

## THE GOOD GUY

### COREY BOVILLE

Ever hear the common term good guys always finish last? In many guys case this seems to be the story of their lives. It may not even be the story of their lives, but it seems that they have been as nice as possible, done everything right, and the prick down the hall still gets the girl. We ask ourselves many times why this is, what could we have possible done wrong to get second place with the girl every time.

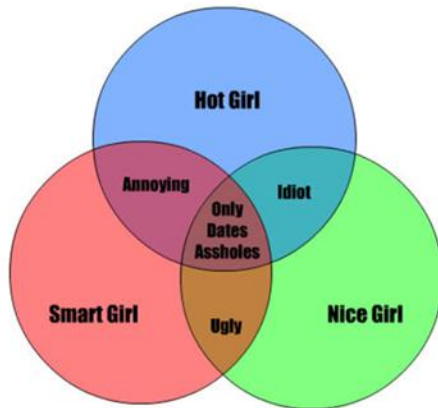
When you wonder what could possibly go wrong you can't assume every case is the same, where as there are a few different kinds of nice guys who finish last, isn't there? The first one we think of is the absolutely nice guy. He doesn't really do anything special other than account for her every need. He opens the door, gives her rides, and listens to her every whim. He is the guy who is at a party that he has been waiting to happen for months and months and when it finally happens he has to leave because his girlfriend wants him to come watch a chick flick with her. You generally know if you're that guy when all your friends constantly call you "whipped" when these sorts of things happen. This is not going to get any guy anywhere. There's a fine line between being a gentleman and being a pushover. You just need stop and look at the situation and put a line between you being the nice guy/pushover.

The next type of nice guy seems to be the hopeless romantic. He is the gentleman and seems to do everything right—gets the girl flowers and opens all the doors. He takes every romantic movie and tries to copy it in some way, the kind of corny stuff girls generally want. The problem with this is that if you do this stuff too much they take it for granted it seems. The first few romantic dates they smile and it's perfect, but after a while the charm seems to wear off. You're not "whipped", but you just do way too many overly romantic things in a short amount of time. Some guys can pull off the sweet talking without a hitch, though it does not last very long. I had a friend in high school that would hang out with girls and tell them they're the best, even that he thought he was falling in love with them without overdoing it. The issue with him was once he pulled off the sweet talking and began with sex, his sweet talking seemed to stop real quickly afterwards. Unless you're just in the game for the sake of playing not winning the solution to this seems to be choosing quality over quantity. You need to do a couple special things that take a lot of thought and time, but don't overdo it.

The next type is the guy who immediately falls in love with the girl. He is really cool, acts like it's nothing then gets overly attached to her. He is what most other guys would refer to as overemotional. Within 2 weeks after dating a girl he has already told her that he loves her. Girls can be the same way, but it's not nearly as creepy. THIS WILL NEVER WORK. I don't know how else to put it. A lot of girls want a guy that can carry her over the castle bridge after fighting the dragon, or a funny yet charming guy, not the guy who is on his man period the entire time (dwarfing the emotions of his girl's actual period). When dealing with these girls what is one supposed to do?



## The Girl Paradox



GraphJam.com

(This chart is showing that no matter how nice you are, the girl will most likely go for the asshole)

How is one really supposed to deal with the endless misery of trying for a girl, bleeding their heart dry, and brutal rejection? Many have been dumped, put off, or rejected by most every girl they have really liked up until now. At this point, many gents have been driven not to trust any more women because every time they think they are doing well they get their balls in a meat grinder. Even when many find someone, there can be no commitment because they know that they will just end up dumping them because they have either been way too nice or some other issue. Every girl out there thinks all they guys who are players were born that way and are never ending dickheads. It never occurs to them that many girls made guys like this; they didn't ask to be fucked over and never trust women again. I bet you money that most every player, sweet talker, or dick can recall that one girl who he gave it his all for and can't trust any girls now. Well if you were messed up by that one girl there's a couple of approaches I've seen work.

When first going to talk to the girl everyone tries to make these huge plots and tries corny ass pickup lines. This may get them to laugh or think is cute, but nothing seems to work better than simply walking up and introducing yourself with a smile. No one seems to think saying "Hi, My names Corey", with a smile on your face is ever going to work. Just keep it simple or you're more than likely to make a fool out of yourself. No one likes to stumble over the line "Do you know how much a polar bear weights? Enough to break the ice, Hi Corey Boville." When they awkwardly look at you as if you as if the short bus was your main mode of transportation for the last 8 years, you wonder why you just didn't come up and say hello.

Another approach I've seen work is to act in a way just like you don't care that much. Listen to different guys talk about how they have so much more game and girls coming on to them when they have a girlfriend. This is simply because they are acting like they really don't give a shit. I don't mean to be crude about the subject, but it seems to work. Now in no way are you to be mean, but simple don't text her back for a while and if she can't hang out just play it off it doesn't matter. I believe this work because when you are single, you're trying to woo the girl, letting her know how she is the best. This does not work. She knows you like her and can play with the situation as she pleases.

Another way to get a date or a girl to do something could possibly be the shut the door in the face theory, which I found while aimlessly paging through my psych book in complete boredom. Let's say you really want to go out with a girl and she isn't even giving you 5 minutes of her time, she's shutting the door in your face. Try asking her out on a full-fledged date and she still doesn't give you her time, quickly suggest that you just go grab a coffee or a quick lunch. She will feel much more inclined because you are asking much less of her and it sounds more reasonable. You may totally screw up your

cup of coffee date, but at least you had a legitimate chance to win her heart this time. This can work in many situations though you have to apply it at your discretion.

Another thing that psych class has brought to my attention is the idea of classical conditioning and how it may work on girls. Before I explain how this could work I need to explain the basics of classical conditioning. This conditioning has 4 main components: conditioned stimulus, unconditioned stimulus, conditioned response, and unconditioned response. To explain these I will use Pavlov and his dog. Pavlov was a scientist who did a series of psychological experiments to learn how classical conditioning worked on the animal brain. The dog's unconditioned stimulus is the presentation of food. The unconditioned response would be the dog salivating. Pavlov soon paired the ringing of a bell with the presentation of food which evoked salivating. Now every time the dog heard the ringing of the bell he automatically salivated believing that food was coming. The bell became the conditioned stimulus and the salivating became the conditioned response. As I'm being taught in psych class my mind seems to wander and this is what I came up with.

The theory of classical conditioning could be used on girls quite easily. Eventually when you're with a girl long enough most times you will be having sex at one point. You have to beg and plead for it, but there could be an easier way every once in a while if you use this right. This seems like a horrible thing to say—at least hear me out. To think if you played the same song every time right before you make love she would be used to hearing that song before the actions that followed. The foreplay would be the unconditioned stimulus and making love would be the unconditioned response. Soon every time you played that song it would soon mimic the foreplay in a way and become the conditioned response. So one of the times you sit down and play the song and don't make a move she may very well want you considering that song is normally played before sex. This could be used various motions or any basic action that is not completely evident. When using all these heinous techniques you may think that nothing bad will happen; you very well may be wrong.

Don't think that you can do all this and there will be no consequences. Eventually when you finally get these girls to like you there will be a point that they will want a relationship. Whether you are using this advice to finally get the girl you want that has been shutting you down or just getting girls, there are different kinds of issues that go along with each situation. For instance, you finally realize that few to none on the female population will react to a nice guy and you really want a date with the girl that has been blowing you off there will be consequences. Think about it, unless you feel like keeping up this 3 act play as a funny guy who has a severe lack of emotion, she's going to see your real side and who knows if she will like it. If you want a real relationship, just be yourself and if she does not like what she seen, who cares, there's "always more fish in the sea." Another issue that comes up is that you play this part so much envelopes you. If you are pretending to be this player guy who is smooth with girls long enough, you will become this player guy who is smooth with girls. So after hearing all this pointless rambling take with a grain of salt and if the nice guy thing is working for you don't worry about it, just be who you are.

*Jason is a writer every consultant dreams of having. Bringing enthusiasm, phenomenal writing, and a wonderfully brilliant mind, Jason's stories and poetry leave the reader truly captivated. For me, Jason's characters are his strongest point; everyone is unique and fascinating, bringing life to his writing. I feel quite honored to have had the opportunity to work with him and wish him luck (though, no doubt, he needs none) in pursuing his English major.*

*Angela Bemowski, Tutor*

## **MUSEUM OF NATURAL EMOTION**

### **JASON EITLAND**

Of her I see too little, see too much, see none at all  
These eyes shut tight; she's in my sight, a painting on the wall  
She calls from deep behind the glass that shields her from my touch  
I curse the air and pull my hair and rip out what I clutch

The darkness of the atmosphere, the rotted, moldy wood  
Would make me think to take a drink of poison if I could  
But such reprieve cannot be mine, for always Fate has shape  
And it would seem that from this dream there is no such escape

Museums full of broken hearts with guided tours of pain  
Are quite well known to those alone with everything to gain  
What can't be lost was never had, what once was had is gone  
Just tell the crows that so it goes and sit to watch the dawn

# THE GRAVE MISTAKE

## JASON EITLAND

I saw another one last night, a crime most extreme. Even I was taken off-guard by the unusual events I witnessed; I, who have seen far more darkness, violence, occultism, supernatural phenomena and death than anyone else I've ever met, was surprised. It may be difficult to understand just how much of a point I am making right now, but it should come in time.

My reason for being changes moment by moment. At that moment in particular, I was house-sitting for a friend. They lived in a safe enough neighborhood and weren't worried about any kind of crime, but someone had to feed the dog. For some reason they found it would make the most sense to ask me, even though I despise dogs. For a reason even less determinable, I told them I would.

That was how I came to be sitting outside a small house by a high school watching the sun go down. It was the beginning of summer, so the air was quite warm even as the shadows of the trees grew taller and the sky darkened. The beauty of twilight was what had driven me to sit outside that night, and it did not disappoint. The serenity of the fading sun was broken only by the distant sound of approaching footsteps.

I turned my gaze to the left with a raised brow. In the age of gasoline, I always found it interesting to get a good look at whoever still used their own two feet. Though the figure was shrouded in darkness and distance, being a number of yards away as well as across the street, the glow of the streetlights helped me to determine that whoever was walking in my general direction was probably a teenager, possibly a young adult. Light brown khaki pants that were altogether too baggy for his build and a darker leather jacket covered his form. Hands in his pockets. Longish hair. Kids these days.

His stride was rather leisurely, and I expected he wasn't in too much of a hurry to get wherever he was going. I certainly understood, or at least, I thought I did – the mellow scent of the cool twilight air was fresh in my mind, and I couldn't imagine how someone could be surrounded by it without taking it in. That was what I remember thinking immediately before I noticed the second figure.

This new arrival was a fair distance behind the first, but close enough that the similarities between the two struck me as exceptional. At this point, the first was nearly even with me across the street, and with my better view of him came the understanding that the relationship between them was very real. In the distance, the second looked just the same as the first had. As the first drew closer, I found myself predicting what the second would look like as his image became clearer with frightening accuracy. The strangest realization I had, the strangest observance that slipped into my mind as I watched the odd couple like a witness to a murder was that as one drifted to one side of the sidewalk, the other moved to the other side. When one got closer to the center, so did the other. It was not call-and-answer, but rather an eerie simultaneity that unnerved me.

That was when I thought I knew exactly what I was looking at. As the first drifted away and the second stepped into the light directly across from me, only one word was going through my mind.

Doppelganger.

I've spent a good deal of my life looking into the depths of what should not be known to humanity. The occult was my playground; over a period of twenty-nine years, from the age of 17 to 46, I had searched enough texts, joined enough twisted groups and performed enough rituals on both myself and others to leave scars everlasting. If ever there was a problem with the paranormal, I had the answer. I may not have had the spiritual strength to enact that answer, but that's another matter entirely.

Why was I so curious? That is perhaps the saddest part of this tale. Like Faust, I traded whatever soul I had for all the dark knowledge and experience the world had to offer me, and I didn't even know why. The darker parts of life, the roads less traveled – these things always held appeal to me. I didn't want to be the same as everyone else. I didn't want to know only what everyone else knew. It was knowledge for the sake of knowledge, learning for the sake of learning without rhyme or reason. God help me.

The last of it, when I realized I'd finally had my fill of the whole thing, was in Vancouver. There was a house in that fine Canadian city that was wrong. I can't explain it any further than that one word: wrong. I could never tell exactly what was in that place, but there was certainly more to it than the litter and stench of the homeless who sometimes took up residence in its abandoned rooms.

What I know for sure about that house is that I took part in a ritual sacrifice of a neighborhood cat inside the run-down garage. Animal sacrifice was nothing new to me; in fact, I'd done it so often and seen so few results that I'd become rather dispassionate to the killing business, and I never thought to ask what we were sacrificing it to in the first place. I heard a few hushed whispers about pleasing the house and nothing more.

My downfall was the fact that my capacity to care about such things had run out years beforehand. When I had first entered the world of occultism, it was with the bright, wide eyes of an explorer scanning over some speck of land that had yet to be civilized. The problem with the darkness of the world is that there is no civilizing it. Years of pain taught me only that the blackest depths were populated with the corrupt hearts of people and nothing more. Oh, the paranormal was certainly real, to an extent, but there were no dark secrets it had to share with me. Ever since the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise, we had been the real darkness. My downfall was that I was walking into a death trap, and I cared too little to even realize it.

The garage, I came to find out, was the most amazing display of filth I had ever seen, illuminated by a dim light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Cardboard boxes filled the majority of the volume, and what they themselves were filled with was something only God knew. I certainly wasn't about to go looking through them – the scent permeating the air around the boxes was absolutely sickening. What bare spaces there were on the floor were covered with such things as dead birds, fecal matter and dark crimson stains that could only have been blood.

We found the largest bit of floor space, kicked a half-rotted sleeping bag out of the way, pulled the cat out of the bag, and began.

One held the poor cat in place while the other drew the sharpened tip of an old letter opener across its throat. I was just there to watch, it seemed. I stood, silent, and watched as the animal was thrown, to the ground, watched the shudder of its dying breaths as blood drained out onto the floor to form a pool at the center of the circle the three of us had made. The one who had done the cutting

began to whisper a chant. The one who had held the cat joined in after a minute. I stood, silent, and watched.

I began to worry when I felt the temperature inside the garage drop quite rapidly. In the dim lighting, I could see little wisps of breath rise before my face. A moment later, the light in the center of the room shattered, leaving us in darkness of night. I heard something slam quite forcefully into the wall closest to me. Holder screamed, but Cutter continued to whisper. I was ready to get out of there just as fast as I could go by that point, but there was a lingering sense of curiosity, and I wanted to stay just a moment longer.

That moment was Hell.

Something else flew through the air and hit the wall, this time generating a rather wet sound on impact – was it the cat? – that tore another scream from Holder. Cutter was able to hold his mental ground, but I could tell from his wavering voice that he wasn't likely to last much longer. I was fairly certain I wasn't going to last very long either.

Then, all at once, we were surrounded by a demonic cackling, the laugh of a crazed hyena. The noise was everywhere and nowhere, filling the air with an oppressive madness that would drive many to insanity without seeming to have a source. The laugh grew in volume and pitch, and even as I felt myself become lightheaded and dizzy, I maintained the sense of mind I needed to stumble through the darkness, across a sea of boxes and moldy blankets in the general direction of the door.

I regret to say that I can't remember finding the door or going through it. The entire thing was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was *real*. It was *visceral*. Nothing could match its impact on my psyche.

What I do remember is gasping at the cool night air as I stumbled across the lawn to the break in the fence that I had come through not a half-hour before. I remember that the sky was dark with cloud cover, offering humanity no curious glances at the wonder of the cosmos. Most clearly, I remember a moment of absolute silence punctuated by the most horrified screams I'd heard in all my life.

That was the singular event that drove me away from the paranormal. I never wanted to touch it again after that. True, I had found a power far darker and more disturbing than any human element I had become familiar with, and that search for more than the every day was what my whole life had been about, but one must weigh knowledge against sanity, and I wanted to keep mine. I had no intention of losing my mind like some poor sap in a Lovecraft story, of going mad from a mere glimpse of the incomprehensible. I was mad enough already for looking.

I left Vancouver that very night. A few days later, I ended up in the American Midwest, trying after so many years to return to some kind of normalcy. Unfortunately, it would seem that, as with Adam and Eve, I was too late – I had already traded my happiness for knowledge, and I would be damned for it.

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If I had the capacity now to say why I got up to follow the strange pair that night, I still wouldn't actually have anything to say. The situation was obviously above and beyond what would be considered

normal, but that night, my vow to never involve myself with such things was completely forgotten. It might have been a sense of duty to help the poor soul being followed by a messenger of death, but then again, it might have been the same foolish curiosity that had gotten me in trouble the first time. Regardless, it only took a few moments' consideration for me to lift myself from my chair, lock the door behind me, and set off down the sidewalk.

Once I was up and walking, I found that I was driven by a strange sense of purpose. I think it was because, for once, my knowledge and experience could actually help someone. My eye for the supernatural had picked out this one event because I could stop it. I could forewarn this innocent traveler of the death that lurked behind him and foil the evil spirit. I could save a life.

The tricky part would be approaching the innocent without agitating the doppelganger. I'd heard a few tales about people interfering with doppelgangers, and I didn't want to be the next horror story. From across the street I paced myself so that I could catch up with the kid while not making my intentions obvious. There was a side road ahead – my plan was to cross the street there, as though I was making my way down this road, and intercept the kid along the way.

The sky was dark, the last remnants of twilight having made way for dusk a while ago. The eeriness of the darkness and still air was making me nervous. As I drew closer to the kid and the side road I planned on going down, I started to reconsider what I was doing. I was putting myself at stake for someone I had never met before and who could very well be on his way toward death even without an otherworldly force bringing it to him. These thoughts passed through my head and drew a quiet sigh from my lips. I was damned, to be sure, and this was likely my only chance at redemption.

As I began to cross the street diagonal to my landing point, the very person I was trying to save sped up and made a quick turn down the very same street that was my target. Worse, his pursuer sped up even more to catch up to him. Was I too late?

I found myself quickening at the sight of the doppelganger turning and disappearing around a bush. I had decided to save this kid and I wasn't about to fail. My heart pounded as I approached the corner the pair had taken, my stiff, old legs working their best to carry me on. I swung around the bush.

It was as if I had entered a vacuum. Many of the sounds of the night had been silenced – crickets, wind, the rustling of leaves – and those that remained such as the traffic behind us were muffled. What little light there was seemed to be contained in a small area that only stretched as far as the three of us were spread out, which wasn't terribly far. I silently cursed myself for not being faster, but I still thought there was a way I could rectify the situation.

It took me a minute to realize that nobody was moving. Not walking, at least. The doppelganger seemed to be drawing sharp, heavy breaths, which confused me... but then as the 'innocent' turned to face us, I realized the fatal mistake I had made.

I had picked the wrong one. The innocent kid had already seen his doppelganger and had followed it, a curious fool. We were both fools, really. We had both followed. As I was soon to find out, I had been even more foolish, as there was one more mistake I had made.

The apparition before us stared on with dead, black eyes. A dread gripped me. I had never seen eyes like these before, and that fact was the most unsettling of all. But then I noticed that the eyes weren't the only strange things. The arms, what was happening to the arms? And the legs – both sets of limbs were growing ever so slightly. As the figure grew taller, so too did it grow more emaciated with

every passing moment. What face there was dissolved away into a blank slate devoid of soul or expression. Soon this horror was towering before us.

This was no doppelganger. This was something I could never have imagined in all my worst nightmares.

The kid screamed, and the sound seemed to echo in the confines of the space that had somehow condensed around us. As if inviting him, the being slowly lifted its arms in the fashion of one awaiting embrace. My stomach turned. Inch by inch, one arm came forward, reaching out towards the boy, and I noticed that the limb simply tapered off at the end, handleless.

Reaching out. Beckoning. I thought I was losing my mind. The boy seemed to convulse for a minute in dry heaves before screaming again. I wanted to help but found myself unable to move, paralyzed with this sick show being put on before me. I tried to break the hold with what little strength I had left within myself.

I inched forward.

The boy bolted, throwing himself onto that outstretched arm which slid through his belly like a hot knife through butter. I was too late.

The being had yet to acknowledge my presence directly, but I could tell it knew I was there. It toyed with me. It let me take a good, long look at the boy's squirming body until the last vestiges of life had been drained from the poor kid. He was done.

I woke up some hours later in the same chair I had been sitting in when the whole thing started, drenched in a cold sweat and with a terrible thirst. The memory of what had transpired was the only thing in my mind, clearer than anything that had taken up residence there before. It was like this for the next week. When I ate, I tasted blood. When I slept, I dreamed of death. It had taken over my life, and I feared I was going to lose my hold on reality.

But I wasn't about to let that happen. I still had some grip, and I was going to go out with that in tact. I might have been a little crazy after that first week, but not completely crazy. All my life had been leading up to that point, surely, so how could it completely wreck me? No, I wouldn't let it. I was stronger than that. Exactly one week after the incident, I had found my salvation, and I spent a few moments staring into its depths before deciding I was ready.

I pulled the trigger.



*Aaron is a hard-working writer, and it shows. Over the course of the semester, "What You Don't Know" has been restructured and revised time and again to make it into this enticing mash-up of creepy biological horror and gritty noir mystery. Aaron has a gift for fluid word choice, natural dialog, and deadpan humor that pulled me through his tale, and other readers should find themselves similarly entranced by the style.*

*Luke Zinkowich, Tutor*

## CARE

### AARON FOSTER

She was cute. She seemed intelligent, or at least more intelligent than the other women who had joined my roommate and myself on our bar run. Most of all, she didn't seem to mind being around me, considering how close our bodies were in the heat of the dance. The alcohol had left me hours before, but in sobriety I now had a new lightheaded air about me. Maybe I wasn't as big of a loser as I had made myself out to be.

At first the noise sounded like something I'd misheard, perhaps merely an aftereffect of the bristles running across my teeth. It rapidly evolved into something exterior and carnal. Something I understood all too well and yet not enough.

She let out a soft, low moan, and then another and another. The girl that was grinding against me in the bar, the girl whose name I couldn't even remember, the girl who I figured I had a shot at happiness with, was screwing the guy that was openly declaring the girls he talked to were eights out of ten.

On my living room couch.

I finished brushing my teeth to the tune of the sex ensuing just around the corner. I kept my noise down so as not to disturb them, but my inner voice was screaming in fits of anger. I couldn't be angry at her or her lover, since I never had a chance to be with her anyway; I was angry with myself for not seeing the vital signs that this prospect wasn't worth pursuing, and that I was – after all – a big loser. As I spat into the sink, I closed my eyes and forced myself to absorb their mingling gasps. I needed to hear this to remind myself that if – for this woman – I wasn't as good as this man, I would never be good enough for anybody.

With soft footsteps carrying me down the hall, my hand gripped the door handle to my bedroom, turned it silently, and pushed the door in. The only light emanated from the computer screen, displaying some insipid YouTube video I'd been viewing only seconds before. I made my way into my room and finally granted myself solace from their coitus by shutting and locking myself in. This only amplified and concentrated my thoughts, which had now degenerated from basic comprehension to the uttering of the word "failure" over and over again. I wanted to break down, but I couldn't.

"Are you OK?"

Her voice was one that I'd been hearing for years. It was small and quiet, but I'd gotten familiar with her to the point that the slightest peep from her would catch my attention, and tonight was no exception. I couldn't bear to look in her direction, though, so I simply slumped down onto my chair; I could sense her in my bed looking at me.

"You know what the answer is." I muttered.

"But I asked anyway," She sat up, dangling her legs over the edge, "Because you needed to hear it."

"I don't *want* to hear it."

She smiled at me knowingly. "Liar."

I propped my elbows on my desk, leaning my head in both hands and sighing. Her smile faded into an expression of concern.

"You're forgetting that I know how it feels to be in your shoes." She stood up from the bed and walked behind me. "Remember when I was in high school? Everyone picked on *me*, too, because I was so different. I was tall, a little awkward around the other guys, and I'm...well, I'm pretty flat. That didn't help me get guys, and every date I went on ended in total disaster." Her hands slid up my shoulders, thumbs pressed deeply into the back of my neck. "Then I realized that there were people who cared about me for who I was. There were people who believed in me, and that I could be a hero to them. People like..." She leaned toward me, her face inches from my ear. "...you."

"Are you trying to reciprocate that?" I didn't budge, though my voice nearly gave out due to the massive lump in my throat.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Don't." I stood up, which prompted her to let me go, but my sight was still focused away from her as I flopped down onto the bed. I heard her give a frustrated groan as she sat in my chair.

"Sometimes I don't understand why you act like this. I try to show you that you're cared about and you push it away." She paused. "But then I remember that you understand. You do, don't you? I want to hear it directly from you."

She was right about me knowing, but she knew the reason herself. We'd been over this several times in the past. She merely wanted me to admit it aloud. I mentally pushed myself and finally spat it out.

"Because I have to ask for attention instead of earn it."

"But you aren't asking for attention." She replied without hesitation. "You're asking for help. It's OK to ask people for help, especially from me. I promise that I won't laugh at you for anything unless you want me to."

I started to take a few deep breaths, calming myself down. "What do I do?"

"Move on from her." Her very words seemed to smile. "She doesn't seem like much of a catch anyway, if she's willing to bump uglies with a guy like that. There are plenty of stars in the sky; you just need to find the one that's right."

"But there's none..." I began to say, but I cut myself off. It hardly mattered.

"None like me?" She finished for me. I nodded. "Better not be. I'm one-of-a-kind." I felt her gently climb over me. "But you are, too, and someone out there is looking for your type."

"And what kind of guy am I?" I asked.

“You’re...” She finished her answer by whispering my name into my ear; what truly haunted me was how honest she was. Her arms wrapped around my chest, and she rested her face against the back of my head. She clung tightly to me, and my hands clasped hers. Soon I realized that I needed this intimacy far more than I needed any other. An embrace from someone that you know cares about you can outmatch even the height of sexual ecstasy.

Instinctually, I began to speak. “Jen...if I could love you back, I would...”

I turned to look at her, and saw only the bare ceiling of my room.

“...but there will never be anyone like you.”

At last, I could cry.

# WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

## AARON FOSTER

**Monday, 4:20 PM**

*It ain't the worst place in Chinatown, thought Ken Patterson, but it's close.*

The apartment building felt tiny, despite being four stories tall. It had probably been sitting neglected since a year or two after the legendary '06 quake, and didn't look like it'd been maintained much since then, bricks seemingly having vanished from their positions within the exterior superstructure. Thanks in part to a nearby factory, what was once red brick was now closer to grayish-pink, the same exact shade as brain tissue; if Patterson hadn't been a detective for twenty years, he'd have been troubled to make such a connection instantly.

All he knew at this point was that the call had been made twenty minutes before. A deceased man had been found on the roof, an apparent suicide. The owner of a popular herbal shop in the area, he'd been discovered by his wife, though it was a son who made the call. No other info had been received, but that was just fine; it was Patterson's job to find out what he could anyway.

Patterson was out of uniform, so he was sent with two officers to back him up. The first was Lu Harris, who'd been on the beat for five years thanks to Ken's influence. They'd gotten to know each other well, so even if Lu wasn't a translator of Mandarin Chinese his being there would be a no-brainer. Neither one of them knew what the other officer's name really was, since they never bothered to ask. They were both content to call him "Squint", being a semi-portmanteau of "San Quentin" where he'd just left a security stint. Given his lack of street experience and portly frame, the other two were quick to poke a little fun at his expense; now, though, was not the time. The three showed their identification at the concierge's desk, asked for the Xing residence, and were directed toward a derelict, rusted elevator.

The ride to the fourth floor was rickety and perilous. Each step a person took could make the whole thing almost sway in its shaft, and there were three men crammed into a space that could barely handle that much mass, especially with Squint and his bloated frame.

"You'd think they'd have weight restrictions on these things." Squint quipped, giving off a nervous laugh. The elevator jerked as though it was, itself, offended at the remark; Squint let out an ungentlemanly squeak in shock, then attempted to calm himself. Ken and Lu could barely contain themselves, fighting to maintain their serious composure

The bell that signaled their approach to the fourth floor was barely audible, and far more of a dull "tunk" than the respectable "ding" it once could have been. The doors opened with a deafening screech, and all three men were far too eager to leave the confining space: for Ken and Lu it was not as much out of comfort as it was to get their job done (but for Squint it was definitely space). They were definitely taking the stairs when they had to come back down...unless they were just as ramshackle.

A raucous noise could be discerned from behind the cracked wooden door numbered 42. Children too young to understand death were laughing. A woman too old to forget it was sobbing. Ken knocked thrice, and the door was answered by an adolescent. The translator spoke quickly, and the youth answered calmly, allowing the officers in.

The apartment seemed to match the condition of the rest of the building; the carpet had been worn along the paths most frequented by the apartment's residents over the years. The curtains that hung in the windows were probably the same ones the building had had on its opening, and the couch didn't seem to be much newer. Although it was nearly half past four, the dinginess of the place made it look like night had fallen inside the room; three light bulbs, two in lamps and one from the ceiling, attempted in futility to rectify the situation.

Three children laughed giddily as they played with wooden dolls together, singing childish songs in their native tongue as though they'd gotten used to such sadness in the house and chose to ignore it. Their mother, who sat on the couch, watched them as she mourned the loss of her husband. The eldest offspring, who didn't show any sign of sorrow, said something to Lu.

"This is Chiang." Lu said to Patterson. "He's the one who placed the call." Lu turned again to Chiang, this time asking him a question in Mandarin Chinese. "*Do you speak English?*"

"*Not as well as Chinese.*" Chiang replied.

Lu spoke to Chiang again, who merely bowed his head somberly in response. The sobbing woman sprang up from the couch and started shouting hysterically at the three police officers; Chiang held her back and gently forced her to sit back onto the couch.

"I said that we were sorry for their loss." Lu replied.

"What'd she say?" Ken asked.

Lu took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "Some choice words."

Ken nodded. "Very well. Get a few...more *informative* words out of them. In the meantime, I'm gonna take a look at our victim. Sun, isn't it?"

"Yeah, he's Sun Xing: owner of Xing's Remedies across the road."

"I'll go look at Sun." Ken effortlessly pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "Squint, you stick with Lu."

"Roger that." Squint confirmed, in as official a voice as he could put on, which is to say not very official at all.

Ken began to walk out of the apartment, but heard more frenetic speech coming from the elder woman. This time she sounded nearly hysterical. Lu told her to remain calm and approached Ken.

"The old lady says something about his body being cursed." He said.

"Cursed?" Ken was taken aback. "Never heard that one before. What's she mean by that?"

Lu asked her something, and she merely repeated some mantra over and over again. "She won't say."

"Well, get what you can out of her anyway. If anything, she's probably trying to scare me off."

As Ken went out into the hall, he pondered all of the possible outcomes of the situation. Xing's business seemed to be successful, but perhaps there was more to it than met the eye. The Chinese criminal syndicates were always willing to lend a filthy hand; who knows if Xing could have paid off all his bills, legitimate or otherwise? It wouldn't be the first hit in the area, and unfortunately not the last. The

death could have possibly been a suicide to prevent the hit from taking place. Better he take his own life than let someone else do it for him.

Then there was the victim's health. Sure, the guy was a supposed "herbologist," but he specialized in folk remedies. Ken wasn't one to believe in the benefits of pressure points and acupuncture, so to him it was doubtful that a ginseng root a day could keep heart attacks away. It was just as likely that something he'd grown had done him in, too, be it directly or indirectly; opium was getting to be a hot commodity.

Stepping out onto the roof, the detective shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun; despite its nuisance, he initially welcomed the warming rays, since life in a city like San Francisco didn't always allow for sunlight. Then he realized that the warmth also had a negative secondary effect as the scent of rotting meat filled his nostrils. Grimacing, he did what any normal person would not have done and began to seek out the origin of the smell.

Ken had been hoping that this roof would be a large, flat expanse, but there was an additional small level at the back of the building that went up another story. He couldn't have seen it from the street, and judging by the stench that was where the body had been located. A small, rusted stepladder led to the upper roof, and its rough surface irritated Patterson's hands as he climbed up, rung by rung. Each step was giving him goose bumps from the sensation. As he reached the edge, he could see a variety of plants and tubers in pots and planters, vials and vases. Some – like licorice, cinnamon, and salvia – Patterson recognized, while others he did not. Whatever was up here, it was clear that it was important enough to want to keep out of sight. At the summit, his aching fingers were relieved to hit something that didn't hurt to hold. The substance was soft, almost rubbery, with a full set of ... toes.

Letting out a cry of surprise, Ken let go of Sun's foot and lost his footing, all of his weight now concentrating on a single hand clinging desperately to rusted iron. If he were to let go, his face would most certainly get bashed on the next rung beneath it. He grasped so tightly that it was hurting him to hold on, yet he was eventually able to regain his control. At last, he pulled himself up, paused for a moment to catch his breath, and continued upwards.

The corpse was laid out on its back with its feet facing the ladder, so a foot was the first thing Ken Patterson saw. The smell of decay was now almost overbearing, but it wasn't anything that Patterson hadn't experienced before. The body could wait. It was time to examine the scene around it. Hoisting himself over the edge, he began to examine the plants. There was something in particular that he wanted to find, and his instinct and experience led him straight to it. A poppy plant, slightly wilted, was sitting amongst the collection of herbs; its seed pods had been slit several times and cleaned of residue, though there were a few drips of latex that had still escaped. A pipe was laid out near the deceased's hand. The presence of opium was enough to generate suspicion. Things weren't supposed to be this easy.

"What were you doing up here?" Ken muttered, more as a thought aloud than truly speaking to the actual corpse. Repeating the question, he looked at Sun's face. "Seriously, what the...

*"Jesus."*

Not only did Sun's flesh bear the mottled, livid complexion of a corpse, but the body's skin sagged and wrinkled as though it were half a size too big. It appeared as though too much handling would cause the epidermis to slough right off, which just wasn't normal for a body that had been deceased for such little time, even in the sun. A great amount of the muscular structure and bone beneath had been exposed.

With all of this happening to his face, it resulted in a hellish visage with lips pulled down and away from the opened mouth in an eternal scream. The interior of the mouth also looked disturbed to some extent, with some teeth missing. Whether this was as a result of age or not was up for grabs. Nothing, however, compared to the condition of Xing's eyes. They appeared to have been messily gouged out, with the eyelids forced back and various viscera still hanging from the space where they would have been whole.

Ken knelt down to Sun's mutilated face and began to examine it, whipping out a pocket magnifying glass and focusing it on the wrinkled skin. It was difficult to discern for certain, but it appeared that Sun's pores had expanded several times their size, with some of them ripping into their neighbors and creating bigger holes. Something had been forced through them.

As his investigation traveled down the neck of the deceased, Ken could detect bits of brown dust and gray residue coating the victim's distorted flesh. At the collar, there was enough dust layered on to create a large puff with the slightest movement of his fingers, which flew straight for Ken's face. In annoyance, he waved it away. Gently grasping the cotton fiber of Xing's shirt, Ken pulled it down.

He knew it was going to be a long week.

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**Monday, 9:30 PM**

"What'd you say when you saw what was underneath Mr. Xing's shirt?" Eric Lipton asked Ken as they made their way through the morgue.

"I said, 'Holy shit.'" Patterson replied. "What else could I say?"

"Nothing that wouldn't be an understatement." Lipton, the department's autopsy technician, affixed his surgical mask upon his face and offered one to Ken, which he quickly donned while he followed Lipton through the metal doors into the autopsy section. He could never stand how unbearably cold it got in that place, and often wondered how Eric could stand working in such conditions himself, being so lithe in frame. He never took the opportunity to voice those concerns, especially when there was work to be done.

Upon entering the morgue, Ken realized that he couldn't smell the scent of carrion, which he was more than thankful for. Instead, the only odor that hung in the air was the bitter aroma of coffee. He glanced at a small, stainless steel table near the door and saw a ceramic mug sitting there.

"You thirsty?" He asked Eric.

"I was, an hour ago." Eric confirmed, a bit annoyed that Ken wasn't focusing at hand. "Why?"

"This is your mug, right? It's still..." Ken's train of thought was derailed when he finally got the chance to see Sun Xing's form exposed. This was the first time Ken had seen the body since he'd found it on the roof and had it sealed in a body bag, and only now could he have understood the extent of what happened to it. What he saw when he'd peered down Sun's shirt was a blanket of tiny gray growths, each barely three millimeters high, covering the dead man's skin. Now that all of its clothing had been removed, Ken could see that every inch of this body that had not been exposed to the world was coated in the things. From head to toe, it looked like Sun had donned a one-piece grey suit.

A T-shaped incision had been made in the deceased's torso for Eric to examine the innards, but for the moment it remained closed. Various organs and viscera were given individual trays to be prepared for their own examinations.

"Can you explain to me what we're looking at?" Ken asked, eyes widened in astonishment.

Eric shook his head. "Not entirely. I've given him a look-over for the past two hours, and while I can tell you what I've seen, I can't tell you how it got that way."

"Well, let's start with what we have." Ken pointed at the tiny growths. "What the hell is this crap?"

"Not a clue. All I know is that this is some sort of new fungal species. He must've been hit with it for a while because it dug deep."

"How deep?"

Eric grabbed something from one of the trays. It was as grey as the fungus itself, but looked like a very sinewy twist of tubes. "This is a chunk of his spinal cord."

"...really?" Ken asked, more out of shock than genuine disbelief.

"I've never seen anything like it myself. If you want to take a look, I've gotten similar results from his digestive system and lungs."

"Can you tell me anything more about the skin?" Ken inquired.

"Sure." Eric walked to the head of the body and picked up a piece of paper. The paper held an image of two areas of Xing's skin magnified several times: one on his face and one on his torso. The latter also contained a larger image of a fungal body, which looked like a piece of broccoli that had been left out for too long.

"The fungus grows through the pores of the skin. It looks like it grew through his face somewhat, but died off shortly afterward. That's why the skin of his face and hands is so saggy in comparison to photos we've received of the victim before death."

"And the mouth?"

"Looks like a violent attack to me, except it didn't occur until after the victim had died. The spaces where his teeth used to be are relatively bloodless."

"Now comes the big question." Ken leaned himself against a wall, taking this information into account. "What killed Sun Xing?"

Eric rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I wasn't able to find any source of injury, accidental or intentional. No other disease could be seen in him; seems his career did him at least some good."

"Do you think that..." Ken gestured mutely. "...could have killed him?" He didn't want to communicate the possibility that the fungus was responsible.

Eric shrugged in surrender. "Ken, I'm an autopsy technician: not a mycologist. I even sent a photo to an associate who *is*, and he didn't have a clue. All he told me is that molds that have killed humans did so through toxins they contain, not because they consider humans to be prey."



“Not to say that we aren’t prey to fungus at all.” Ken responded. “Last week I had to teach little Trish what athlete’s foot was.”

Eric chuckled. “She must’ve *thought* she was going to die or something.”

“Took me fifteen minutes to prove otherwise.” Ken sighed and shook his head, but with a smile. “Nine-year-olds.”

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**Tuesday, 2:44 PM**

Ken watched from the café’s table as Jessica and Tricia Patterson made their way to the counter. Trish always had a habit of asking for the more expensive items on the menu – whether she really wanted to consume them or not – and he was always a sucker for his daughter’s wishes. Jessica, on the other hand, was a bit more responsible, and often volunteered to take her up to the counter herself. Ken usually got there first anyway, and would order for himself.

The detective looked away and began to allow his mind to wander. He traced his finger around the plastic lid, an artificial smoothness under his finger marred only by the existence of the hole through which he was supposed to drink. His thoughts were still on the case of Sun Xing, and every time he felt the sharp edge of that hole meet his fingertip, the image of a man lying in a morgue covered in a fungus he’d never seen would enter his vision. The body itself, along with its squatters, was a hole in solving the case, and he needed to find out what had happened. Even if it didn’t kill the man, it would at least be able to tell how long he’d been dead.

A crunch shook him out of his state momentarily, and he looked up to see Jessica chewing on a slice of biscotti, and Tricia in her arms frowning. The daughter seemed to almost be mimicking her mother, trying to chew something but somehow failing to do so as enjoyably as Jessica.

“What’s the matter with her?” Ken asked.

“She wanted to know what biscotti was, so I offered her some of my piece.”

Tricia grimaced. “Too hard.” She feebly admitted.

“Told you that you wouldn’t like it.” Jessica smiled at her daughter before looking back at Ken; he was back in his thoughts again, finger tracing around the lid. “Ken?” She asked him out of concern.

Ken stirred and looked at Jessica again. “Sorry. It’s been getting hard for me to keep my mind off of work since this last guy showed up.”

Jessica sighed out of frustration, brushing an auburn lock out of her face. “Honestly, I don’t know what gets into you sometimes. The reason we started meeting up out here was to get your mind off of work! To relax! *Re. Lax.*” She compulsively placed her hand upon his, stopping his finger squarely on the hole in the lid. “Can’t you do that anymore?”

Ken looked into his wife’s eyes, almost confessing to her that he’d progressed to a point where relaxation was impossible. The face and body of Sun had entered his very dreams. Then he noticed Tricia, looking slightly perplexed. “What’s the matter, Trish?” Ken picked up his daughter and set her

upon his knee. Jessica huffed for a moment and put a hand to her face; he wasn't fooling her in his attempt to avoid the issue.

"How come you aren't drinking your coffee?" Tricia pointed a tiny finger at the steaming Styrofoam cup he'd set upon the table.

"Because I'm not too thirsty right now." Ken playfully shook her by her shoulders, but she continued to look at him in confusion.

"Then why'd you spend money on it?"

Ken was about to tell her that his 'tummy' was hurting when he spotted another face he knew outside the window. It was Lu, hurriedly advancing up the sidewalk toward the café's entrance in the corner. His dark eyes peered into the window, and Patterson could see an expression of urgency on his face. Not only could Ken tell that something bad had happened, but he had a gut feeling that it involved this recent case.

"Sorry, Jess." He spoke quietly. Jessica looked in the direction of her husband's gaze, and saw Lu enter the café and spot him. She went slackjawed at the thought that instead of escaping his work, Ken's work was now finding him. Sometimes getting along with this way of life was just shy of unbearable.

"What is going on?" She asked out of annoyance.

"I'm about to find out." Ken replied as he stood up from the table.

Lu wiped his brow. "Ken, you gotta come back to the station." He panted breathlessly. "Something's up."

"Can't you tell me what it is?"

Lu looked at Mrs. Patterson and their daughter. "Not here."

Ken kissed Jessica and Tricia. "Love ya both." He said.

Jessica stared for a moment, then pulled Ken back in for a firmer kiss. "Love you, too." When she recognized that he was doing work beneficial for the city, the constant interruptions weren't so unbearable anymore, though it had come awfully close.

Lu didn't say another word to Ken until they were both in his cruiser, parked outside of the window of the café.

"Must be an emergency if you drove here." Ken remarked, buckling his seatbelt along with the driver. "It's only 3 minutes from the station."

"Something happened in the morgue this morning." Lu blurted as he started the engine. "Something that Lipton didn't want us to see."

Ken blinked for a few moments before being jarred out of his seat by the car's sudden acceleration. "What the hell are you talking about?"

“Last anyone’s seen of him, he was running – and I mean that literally, *running* – out of the station.” He shook his head. “He’d covered the door into the morgue with yellow warning tape and apparently had some kind of bomb set up inside.”

“A bomb?” Ken’s eyes went wide. “Why would he blow up the morgue?”

“That’s what we wanna know. All the letter said was ‘Do Not Enter, You Will Die.’ We’ve already notified the bomb squad, and there’s a team combing the streets for him now.”

“So why do you want me there?”

“You were one of the last people to see him Monday.” Lu replied, pulling into the station’s lot. “They figure you might know something.”

Ken’s mind was now racing faster than the V-8 engine powering the vehicle. He tried to think of any clues that Eric could have left behind, but all he could think of was that cup of black coffee, never drank. Before he could have an opportunity to think of anything else, they arrived at the police station. A fully armored SWAT officer stopped them and asked for identification, which was swiftly provided. When he saw Patterson’s ID, he visibly looked back and forth between the man and his badge.

“OK, we’re going to need to talk to you, Patterson.” He said.

Another SWAT member approached and gave a muffled “All clear.”

“You sure?” The first said.

“Positive. The door is lacking any kind of trigger device, and is locked down. Just got the all clear to open up the site for investigation.” The first SWAT member sighed in response and removed his helmet, his shaved head shining in the sun from the sweat that had covered it.

“I still want to talk to you, Ken.” He urged. “Maybe you’ve got some insight into this incident.”

“Maybe.” Ken replied, and he and Lu exited the car and followed the officer into the station.

“We’re heading to Lipton’s office.” Lu said. “If we’re finding any clues, they’re there.”

Lipton’s office was a cramped space, and the clutter within made it even more so. He was the kind of person that turned ‘organized chaos’ into an artform. Across from it was the hallway that led toward the morgue and autopsy room, and Ken could distinguish the yellow Caution tape Eric had haphazardly draped upon the metal door.

“So what was he like when you talked to him last night?” The armored officer asked.

“The only thing unusual was that he had a full cup of coffee that he never drank.” Ken replied, sidestepping a pile of paper. “Apart from that, we talked about the Xing case.”

“Did he mention anything about himself?”

“No.”

“Woah.” Lu’s voice spiked through the air as he picked up a single sheet of paper that had been laid upon Lipton’s desk. “He never told us about this.”

“About what?” Ken asked. Lu handed the paper to Ken, whose eyes briefly scanned the contents. “...HIV Positive?”

“Maybe he just found out about it and snapped.” Lu surmised. “No way we’d let someone with AIDS work in the autopsy room; with a steady stream of dead people going in and out, he’d be bound to catch something bad.”

Ken took another look at the form. “Don’t think that’s exactly why.” He pointed at the form’s date, a month and a half prior to the day they found it. “He’s known about it for at least six weeks, which means if he’s had this form for so long and we found it laying out in the open, especially in this mess...”

Lu finished the thought. “He wanted us to find it.”

Ken’s eyes flickered from the letter to the steel door. The connections made themselves within his mind. “He didn’t rig it to kill anybody. Something in that room has already killed him.” He had a bad feeling that he knew what it was as well. “Get me to security. I need to find the camera feed from the morgue.”

By the time they’d made it to the security room, Ken’s stomach was beginning to churn. As he pressed the key that turned on the camera’s view of the autopsy table, he shut his eyes out of anticipation, out of fear. He could hear gasps, cries out of the mouths of his associates. This wasn’t good. Against his will, he looked upon the flickering screen.

Whatever this was it had apparently brought a fine layer of dust, which coated the entire floor of the room. The object itself, on the other hand, was hard to describe. A tendril? A column? An antenna? Ken could keep imagining words of what it *looked* like, but not what it could possibly *be*.

It was tall.

It was thin.

It was brown.

And it had erupted from the body of Sun Xing.

Ken’s thoughts turned to the mug of coffee, still sitting in the lab. Was Eric somehow affected by this thing? Then the sharp edge came back to haunt Ken once more when he realized that he still hadn’t had his own coffee.

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### **Wednesday, 2:45 AM**

As he lay in bed, Ken didn’t move a muscle. He knew it was going to be a difficult night to try to get any sleep, considering what he’d seen. It was such a grotesque display of natural brutality it was enough to have made even the most hard-boiled man to walk a beat retch. At the very least, it was enough to give him a major headache. Ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin weren’t helping him in any way, shape or form, and he had to get back out of bed within the next three hours. Still, he lay as still and quite underneath the covers as he could. Tossing and turning would never help, especially with his wife sound asleep next to him. The last thing he needed was something else to add to his headache.

Slowly, he got out of the bed and made his way downstairs toward the kitchen. It was his hope that another pill or even just a glass of water would do at least something, but by the time he reached the halfway point between stories of his home, the intense pain had been magnified beyond the impossible. He stumbled, and just barely caught himself against the wall of the stairwell. His breaths turned into agonized winces from the searing heat that was burning in his brain. He turned around and went back up.

The pain diminished. It wasn't entirely gone, but at least Ken could think again. Deductive thoughts began to cross through his head; if that was enough to alleviate it slightly, what if he could go higher? He looked up to the small chain that dangled from the ceiling's attic access. Feeling the ache start to return, he knew he had to try it; something had to get rid of the pain. Gripping the chain, he pulled it down and revealed a set of steps that led up into the unlit space above.

Each step felt almost pleasurable in comparison to standing still, and when he met the summit there was no sense of hurt in his mind at all. Taking a few deep breaths, he smiled and began to laugh out of nervous relief. The only light that came through was emanating from the full moon, and it gave the attic a blue glow, comforting Ken further. Rifling through various boxes of bric-a-brac, he found an old quilt and a pillow to rest upon the floor, and he laid himself down upon it in utter exhaustion. Within seconds, he was out like a light.

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### **Wednesday, 6:45 AM**

Ken felt his eyes meet with the light of the rising sun through closed eyelids. He blearily began to wake up, and surveyed the area around him. He barely remembered climbing up there a few hours before, but not the reason why. He didn't even care to find out; the sun was beckoning to him from outside, and he stood up and stretched, hearing and feeling his joints crack into place. Feeling relaxed, he decided to attempt to get to work. With a steady foot, he pushed open the tiny staircase that led back to the second floor.

He hadn't even made three steps when the pain made its return, now much more powerful than it had ever been. With a cry, he clutched his head in his hands and tumbled down the stairs, his face meeting the floor with a smack. Having lost all his breath, he could barely moan or cough, but his body desperately needed to scream; his head felt as though it would pop.

"Ken?" Jessica called up, concerned. Ken didn't hear her voice or the sound of her footsteps approaching. Every sense he had was overloaded by the fire that burned in his mind. Instinctually, he turned around and began to crawl up the stairs back into the attic just as his wife reached the second floor. Before she could ask if he was alright, she was struck dumbfounded by the sight of him heading up into the attic.

"What the hell were you doing in there? You left me worried sick about wherever you could have gone?" She approached him quickly and helped him to his feet. His eyes were shut tight, teeth gritting together, and his forehead bore a red streak of rugburn along one side. "Did you take that bad of a fall?"

Ken seethed each breath through his teeth. He struggled to speak to her, and could only say one word at a time.

“Get...me...”

“Get what?” She asked.

“...back...up...there.”

Jessica was puzzled by this request. “Why?”

“NOW!” Ken pushed her away from him and into a picture hanging on the wall as he began to dash for the stairs again. He was barely capable of understanding what he was doing, but his needs were now coming first as he made it through the hatchway. The relief came so quickly that he didn’t even hear his wife sobbing on the floor after he closed up the stairs.

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**Wednesday, 1:25 PM**

“Where’d you say Patterson was?” Squint asked.

Lu didn’t immediately answer; he just tried to keep himself occupied on driving to the Chinese herbology shop that had been owned by Sun Xing. Since Patterson’s wife had reported him becoming suddenly reclusive and experiencing some kind of pain, his mind was beginning to go places he didn’t want it to, especially in connection with what had happened the day before. He hadn’t been allowed to see the aftermath of the fungal growth himself, but Ken had personally assured him that he was better off that way. Ken and Eric were the only two individuals to have made such close contact with the body, and Eric was still nowhere to be found. It was enough to give Lu pause and concern, but he still needed to trek on.

“He’s home for the day.” He finally replied.

“Ah, alright.” Squint shrugged off the response, though his voice also contained a hint of concern.

The shop was directly across the street from the Xing’s apartment building. The cruiser pulled up and the two officers made their way inside, though Lu hesitated for a moment as he looked at the building where Sun’s body was found.

A tinny, electronic tune sounded from above them as the door opened. Someone shouted out a welcome in Chinese; it was Chiang, manning the counter in lieu of his parents (since his mother had been booked for assisting Sun’s opium endeavours). Chiang’s welcoming smile quickly faded when he realized he didn’t have any customers.

“You have the pictures, Squint?” Lu asked.

“I wish I didn’t.”

“Give them to me. I’ll talk to Chiang.” Squint handed over a few instant photos of Sun Xing’s body – they were some of the initial photos, not of the atrocity it would become – and prepared them as he approached Chiang.

*“Whatever it is you want from me, I don’t have it.”* Chiang said bitterly. *“I told you that my parents dealt in the drugs, not me.”*

*“Let’s not jump to conclusions. We’re looking for information about your father’s death, not the shit he peddled.”* He held the photos flat between his hands and held them out. *“What I’m about to show you is what your father looked like when we brought him into the station. We need you to identify the substance on his body.”*

*“Why are you hiding it?”*

*“Because I need to give you some fair warning. Your father had definitely seen better days.”* Lu hesitated further. He didn’t want to shock the teen any more than necessary. *“Ready?”*

*“I suppose.”* Chiang couldn’t think of anything better to say. He wasn’t ready for whatever it was that this officer wanted him to see, but if it meant solving Sun’s death he didn’t have much of a choice.

Lu opened his hands and watched Chiang’s expression shift from initial confusion to that of utter terror. His father’s eyeless, screaming face stared back at him. Chiang’s body stiffened, and he found himself transfixed by the sight of the corpse.

*“Stick with us, Chiang. What do you see?”* Lu cycled to a different photo, of some of the fungal coating that had covered wide expanses of the man’s skin. Chiang softened slightly, and knelt closer to examine the image. Then his eyes widened once more, this time out of comprehension.

*“It couldn’t be.”*

*“What?”* Lu quickly interjected. *“What?!”*

Squint browsed the shelves with a bemused interest. He felt like he needed something to do as his partner conversed with the suspect in a language he couldn’t understand, so he was perusing the store’s selection. The shelves were lined with products of differing varieties and familiarity organized in Tupperware containers, crudely labeled with English and Chinese writing in Sharpie on a white sticker. Half the time was spent wondering what good these items would do, and the other half was spent mocking how poor some of the translations were.

*“Other officer!”* The voice snapped him to attention, and he realized Chiang was speaking to him. *“Bottom shelf, left side! Kuài yīdiǎn!”*

Squint nodded and knelt down to the bottom row of containers, pointing at the one on the far left. Chiang nodded and beckoned for him to bring it up. Squint did so dutifully, as though he himself were a clerk at the shop. He set down the box on the counter. It was labeled “冬虫夏草, Winter Worm Summer Grass” and was definitely a bit more sturdy than any of the other containers it accompanied; no doubt that was because of the high price tag, asking for nearly a thousand dollars per kilogram. Chiang removed the lid, and everyone looked at what was inside.

The container was filled with several dead caterpillars. Sprouting from each of them was a long, brown stem, and hundreds of smaller blooms covered the rest of the body. Squint’s eyes bugged out at the sight. Lu’s eyes narrowed.

*“What is this?”* Lu asked.

*“Cordyceps.”* Chiang struggled with the Latin pronunciation. *“My father taught me about it. It’s a fungus that attacks caterpillars, but there’s one for pretty much every insect species.”*

*“Don’t tell me that it’s attacking humans now, too.”*

*“Never heard of it happening. Sun thought these would be lucky for business, considering their unusual appearance, so he acquired them.”*

Lu suddenly thought of something. *“Are we in danger from them right now?”*

*“He said that he cleaned them himself after he acquired them.”* Chiang replied. *“Only he would be in danger from the spores.”*

Lu relaxed, but only barely. *“I need you to give me all of the information you have regarding his source: the ship, the date, the crew, everything that you can find. We need to prevent any more of-”*

“Lu,” Squint interrupted. “A unit on the south side found Lipton. Dead.”

“How’d he look?”

Squint said nothing and pointed toward the container of caterpillars.

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**Wednesday, 2:00 PM**

Ken could hear his wife shrieking through the floor of the attic for him to do something, say anything to tell her that he was alright. He said and did nothing except hold the picture in his hand; all he knew was that he wasn’t going to come out of this OK. The only logical conclusion he could make was that whatever thing it was that erupted from the body in the morgue was now inside him. It was slowly warping his mind, senses, and logic. Eventually, it would kill him.

The picture was one that had been stowed away in a dusty box in the attic. Amongst baby clothes and softball gloves, he had found an image he had nearly forgotten about: a fall day four years ago when Jessica was teaching Tricia how to properly hold a softball bat. He sat in stillness as his mind began sorting through half thoughts, lips moving with each word instinctually.

*I’m dying. I need Jessica. I need Tricia. I’m dying. Eric knew it. Soon Lu will. And Squint. And the rest. Soon they will come. Take me away. Away from Jessica. From Tricia. I’m dying. I can’t be alone. It can’t happen.*

A gleam of metal caught his attention. The light of the sun shone through the tiny window and onto an axe that Ken used to enjoy taking out onto camping trips. The blade still looked sharp.

*It won’t.*

-----| | | | |-----

**Wednesday, 3:15 PM**

Lu and Squint paid careful attention to wind direction as they approached the site of Eric Lipton’s demise. They didn’t want to end up as happenstance victims of any of those spores. Still, being here was in itself a huge risk.



They asked for evidence from the officers that had reported there – brave souls, every last one – and were allowed to see a single sheet of loose-leaf lined paper. It was weathered and stained, but still legible.

*Initial digestive discomfort, in stomach area (About 8:25 PM yesterday)*

*Minor headache (11:35 AM)*

*Migraine-level (1:35 PM)*

*Headache relieved by altitude change (3:45 PM)*

*I can sense loss of cognitive function as well, but I don't know how long I've had it*

*1:45*

*2:00*

*2:15*

*2:30*

*2:45...*

The list of minutes continued until it reached 5:00 PM on Tuesday. Ken's associates looked at the piece of evidence, troubled.

"He knew he was going to die." Lu spoke quietly. "He kept track of his symptoms so that we'd know if someone had gotten hit by it."

"Why would the headache go away by climbing?" Squint asked.

"I read up on *Cordyceps*. Some species make their victims climb higher, to make the chance for spore spreading higher." Lu narrowed his eyes as he glanced at the long timetable. "What's that supposed to be?"

"Keeping track of his lifespan." Squint suggested immediately. "He didn't live to write 5:15, or at least had lost enough of his mind."

Lu sighed, and then gave the evidence back to another officer. "I don't suppose you know where we're going next?"

Squint ran a hand through his hair. "Not to see Ken...please not to see Ken."

Lu's lip quivered as he nodded, but he bit it in an attempt to keep placid. "We have to get him away from Jessica and Tricia. I don't care if the entire city goes to hell within the week because of this, as long as I can say honestly that we saved the two lives we could."

-----| | | | |-----

### **Wednesday, 3:48 PM**

The squad car screeched to a halt in front of Ken's house. Lu and Squint got out of the car quickly and made their way up to the front door. The wailing of other sirens was steadily becoming apparent as well, but it would definitely be another few minutes before they arrived.

"We need to make this quick." Lu said to Squint as they knocked on the door. "No matter what he says, we need him out of the building."

It was Jessica who answered the door, her face pale and expression flat.

“Yes?” Her voice quivered.

“We need to see Ken.” Squint said.

Jessica opened the door further and let the officers in. “He’s still in the attic. For the past few minutes, he’s been standing at the top of those stairs asking me to come up.” A tear fell from her eye. “He’s changed.”

“I had a gut feeling he’d changed.” Lu said regrettably as he ascended the stairs to the second floor hallway. “Ken! Ken, we gotta talk to you!”

Lu at last saw Ken standing at the doorway of the attic access. He was stock still, eyes almost vacant. Ken Patterson, as Lu had come to know him, was definitely no more.

“I’m not coming.” He finally uttered, his voice barely audible.

“You have to, Ken.” Lu urged. “It’s the only way. Whatever that thing is, it’s got a hold of you, too.”

“I know.” Ken replied. “I’m not coming. I need Jessica. I need Tricia.”

There was a sound of uncontrollable sobbing from below. Squint had apparently informed Jessica of what was going on. “You know we can’t let them stay with you.” Lu looked at the man above him, trying to maintain a stolid poker face.

“Tricia! *Tricia! Come back!*” Jessica yelled. The front door slammed, and a series of small footsteps echoed up the stairs.

“Too bad.” Ken whispered to Lu.

Tricia arrived at the top of the stairs, clad in a poofed purple coat with a bright yellow backpack slung over her shoulders. Lu could only guess that she knew nothing about what was happening, since she seemed to have just arrived from school. When she saw Lu, she paused momentarily as she attempted to recognize him.

“You’re the man from the café!” She smiled happily. “What’s...Daddy?” She walked to the foot of the steps and looked up to her father. “What are you doing up there?”

“Come up.” Ken replied. “I’ll show you.”

Despite her apprehension, Tricia trusted her father enough to follow him up the stairs, bounding up two-by-two. Lu dove in an attempt to grab one of her ankles and keep her from rising any higher, but fell down on to the steps with a thud. Before Tricia had any time to look back, she felt the powerful arm of her father wrap around her and whisk her into the attic. She squealed as though she were on a carnival ride, but there was something in Ken’s eyes that she didn’t like. Seconds later, she found herself aching on the wooden floor of the attic after being thrown down. She whimpered and looked back.

Ken gripped the axe in his hand and turned to Tricia. “Daddy’s dying. And I need you. You can’t leave me.”

“Daddy!” Tricia began to cry as she stood up. Her little eyes scanned everything around her, trying to find a way out of the situation through the tears.

“Don’t move. You won’t move.” Ken’s lips curled to generate a horrific snarl as he swung. “Daddy loves you!”

The burst that came from Lu’s pistol occurred at the same instant as Ken’s blade lodged into the floor. Ken crumpled to the ground instantly as his daughter ran past him and into the cop’s arms. He took her rapidly out of the attic as Jessica came up to the second floor hallway with mascara-stained eyes.

Lu delivered the child into her arms, and Squint began to gently usher both of them back down to the first floor. Lu took Squint aside for a brief moment.

“Better call for a body bag.” He whispered. Squint’s emotions were instantly drained from him, and all he could do was nod in response as he followed the mother and daughter down. Lu watched them until they were clear from the building, at which point he turned back to the attic, hearing something that sounded like a cross between a growl and a gurgle. Ken looked down on him from the opening. His axe was no longer in his hand because it was now traveling through the air, on a collision course with Lu Harris.

Thud.

The impact of the axe into Lu’s shoulder was excruciating, and he could hear and feel the bones in his arm snap as he fell to the carpeted floor with a startled cry. Lu kept his hand around the point of injury, keeping the wound tight around the blade; his blood was flowing, but it would be even worse if he were to remove the axe immediately. He looked up to see what had happened to his attacker.

The force of the throw had resulted in Ken himself falling through the attic opening once more, tumbling into the hallway. Ken was writhing in agony on the floor, clutching his head and shrieking with the pain. The hand that was once holding his exit wound now ran smears of blood across his face. His movements grew less and less diminished within moments, as did his voice. The pain and blood loss of the gunshot as well as the infernal pain in his head were enough to overload whatever consciousness he had left and force him to pass out. As Lu’s backup arrived and began pounding the steps to respond to the situation, Lu watched his former partner’s body fall limp and lifeless.

*These two pieces demonstrate Kimmarié's diverse writing style, each containing beautiful imagery, regardless of the topic. Her writing offers many possible interpretations that allow all readers to connect to the content. It was a privilege to work with her for two consecutive semesters and my appreciation of poetry has grown much. Thank you, Kimmarié.*

*Joe Gorzek, Tutor*

## **BIG BLUE**

### **KIMMARIÉ GIEBEL**

Big Blue

Creeping  
Finding  
Socializing  
Proposing  
Dating  
Reporting  
Advertising  
Building  
Friending  
Stalking  
Consuming  
Targeting  
Status Making  
Bullying  
Campaigning  
Raping  
Searching

What do all these words have in common?

Facebook

Though thousands use  
no one can say it is  
an addiction- for people of all ages  
not only targeting the young but also the wise  
that want to search for their old friends to rebuild  
social status after being bullied for years in high school  
but realize nothing changes  
the same dates with the same stupid proposals of activities  
to partake in to be included  
to get an A on a report card you need millions of findings  
from a computer that constitutes belonging to a community  
consuming people to the point no longer able to be in  
conversation - to be human - without a computer  
life could no longer exist and still in the news we hear

of rapes but where did they meet not the precious and cordial online  
no- that is a safe place for all to feel able to be themselves  
no worrying about the ability to stalk to creep  
to engage in illegal activity while campaigning for president  
while still yet advertising the ability to work from home  
no longer have the need for the outside world  
millions of green seems to be spread out around the floor but never going outside  
the grass is not what is in the computer the air is not the blue seen inside  
no instead money and greed get bigger  
to be the most connected on a blue site

## **FAMILY ESTRANGED**

**KIMMARIE GIEBEL**

Familial Estranged

Familiarly strange people walking down the road

Smiles simple sly secrets

Lay on lips long lingering words

Wandering wistfully from the throat

Tired tough trying to talk from the heart

Heaving headaches of another night lacking dreams

Dreadfully dying society cries

Crisply caressing crevices of the ear

Eagerly earnestly eventual dancing

Daringly dubiously returning to a childhood home

Hearing hazardous alarms of past prejudices

Piercing playfully at memories long filed

Filling un-friendly photographs of family walking

Down the road strangely familiar

*It was a pleasure working with Shane this semester! His vivid imagination and spectacular writing ability is evident in these excerpts from a novel he's been working on for quite a while. I'll be sad when our last tutoring session comes – his story has hooked me as a reader and I can't wait to see what comes next!*  
Lisa Knuth, Tutor

## HEART OF DARKNESS

SHANE T. HANSEN

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following passages are not full chapters yet at this point, nor does each section pick up immediately following the section which preceded it. These are merely the portions of the story which I have developed thus far. More will come, for those who desire it.*

### TO CREATE DARKNESS

In every battle there must be at least two sides, attacker and defender; in every soul there are two sides, light and darkness; now Rhallin had discovered a new truth – that elements could be harnessed in these two opposing fashions as well. Always had the teachings of the *Custodes* been filled with lessons of purity and nonaggression, but Rhallin believed in nothing more than power and the ambition to seize it. *The soul and intent of the user becomes a part of the Guardians' righteous weaponry*, the manuscripts had stated. *Those with impure hearts and minds will find their spirits unable to direct the elemental powers.* Such was the lie that had driven the order of the *Custodes* for thousands of years, since the Days of Darkness. The hatred in his soul had always made his lessons at *Custodum Palatii* difficult, and the manipulation of elements as he was taught to perform them had always seemed to Rhallin unnatural to his very core. Yet toward the end of his time at the palace, his need to gain power had led to a series of experimentations with... interesting results.

Corlina's screams of agony were like sweet nectar in Rhallin's ears. Surrounded by a cocoon of hardened Earth and Air, nobody beyond this room would hear them. Contrary to the claims of his now writhing teacher, Rhallin found that Dark Spirit Energy, referred to in ancient times as *Vi Spiritum Tenebrosum*, allowed for effective control of Earth once he had learned the variant twists that it required. Corlina made no such boastful claims now, hanging on the wall with her ribcage spread to expose the still-beating heart in her chest. A thin shield of Air would hold her blood and organs in their proper places until he was satisfied with the knowledge he had drawn from this experiment. As he probed at her with the elements, he slowly began replacing her organs with those crafted of Earth. This new means of elemental subjugation felt different than those he had wielded in the past, and even appeared different to the eyes of one who could see the flows he forged; they pulsed with violent energy that felt as if it were his very heartbeat. The woman's shrieks of pain were signs of his progress. Finally he wrapped a flow of air around her heart – as he removed it, Corlina's screams faded and her body slumped. The new heart with which he had replaced her own now filled the vacancy, yet no life shown in her eyes. *Maybe with a little water and fire, I could...*

Corlina's head lifted slowly, unnaturally. Her eyes glowed with a white light similar to when she had touched the power of the elements in life, as she was now forced to in death. She no longer screamed, or spoke at all, but simply looked at Rhallin and worked her jaw noisily. She appeared to be hungry. *How intriguing.*

Letting down the sound barrier he had encased the room within, Rhallin was at once bombarded with the sounds of metal meeting metal and trumpets sounding a call to arms in the crisp cold of night. The walls shuddered with the force of a heavy impact. The palace was under attack. *Useless bastards*, he thought, *I told them to wait for my signal... but it is due time I was gone from this place anyways. I've kept my true nature hidden far too long.* He released the binds of Earth that held Corlina to the wall, and she slumped only a moment before slowly drawing herself up. Rhallin smiled. "Come, my teacher... let us show them the marvelous things I have learned."

Step by step, Rhallin advanced out the doorway and through the halls. His anticipation was growing. He walked with a smooth and careful motion over the bodies of the fallen guards and attackers, his cloak soaking up the blood that stained the ground so completely. So long had he dreamed of this day that for a moment he closed his eyes and walked the corridors by memory alone, smiling. How could he not smile today? A massacre was taking place at this very moment, one which *he* had orchestrated, and when the day ended his name would be a thing of legend. His victory was nearly complete. Behind him, Corlina's obedient corpse followed in silence, except for the working of her jaw. She eyed the corpses on the ground hungrily, and sank to her knees more than once to lick the warm, fresh blood off of body and floor alike. "What a fascinating creature you are," Rhallin muttered.

As he approached the council chamber, he found a bloodied group of Bellatores attempting to breach its doors. Again and again, they beat their instruments of death against the entrance, but it continued to hold firm. "My lord," a stout one began running up to Rhallin and favoring him with a hasty bow. "They've barricaded the entrance. It will take some time to..."

"Your people are no longer needed," Rhallin said coldly. Without slowing his step Rhallin held forth one hand, and his eyes filled with light as a pillar of flame consumed the Bellatores. The fiery inferno burned through them, slamming into the doors of element-forged steel. Slowly the heat began to melt them away, the metal twisting and contorting as a hole opened through their middle. Globes of hot liquid steel dripped around him as Rhallin stepped through the hole and into the room beyond.

The council chamber felt much smaller than Rhallin had remembered. Then again, this palace had once seemed an unassailable fortress of unified strength and power. Maybe it was nothing more than his awe at the magnificent marble columns, gold-embroidered rugs, and ivory statues that had made the room feel so engulfing. Now, with the power of the elements raging inside of him, he could only think of it as a cage – one from which his prey would not escape.

## FOUNDATIONS OF BLOOD

Surrounded by a small contingent of guards, the members of the Elder Council could only stare for a moment at this unexpected entrance before Elder Sondara spoke, her voice shaking with rage and disbelief. "Rhallin... *you* lead this uprising against us, against your own friends and mentors? Where is your honor?"

"Friendship is for fools, Elder," Rhallin spat. "Honor is for fools. Ambition and cunning... these are the virtues of the powerful. I've laid in wait for years, deceiving you all, and now the time has come for my true power to shine forth from the darkness."

"I knew from the beginning that you didn't belong here," Highlord Darill's voice rang boldly across the chamber. "You were so strong, but there was darkness within you I had never before seen the like of. But *this*? You will pay for the blood you have spilled today, Rhallin."

"Bold talk," Rhallin retorted, "but your conscience and morals make you weak. They slow your mind and cloud your judgment. Your petty sentiments will be your undoing. I have no such limitations, and that's why you've lost today."

"We shall see," the Highlord began, "who..." His words trailed off to silence as the creature that was once Corlina staggered through the ruined doors behind Rhallin. Her split chest still hung slightly agape, and the blood smeared across her face was dripping to the floor. Elessia alone made a sound now, letting out a primal scream of wrath and anger at the sight of her sister's naked form, with her bloodied face and chest framing her power-lit eyes.

Rage drove Elessia forward beyond the ring of guards too quickly to be stopped, and Rhallin's cheek twitched upward in a smile. "Go," he said quietly, and Corlina's body stepped up between him and the enraged woman and began advancing on her slowly.

"Elessia, stop!" Sondara shouted in vain, but the woman pushed on. Sondara's gaze flashed to Highlord Darill, whose eyes already held the glow of the power, and she could see elemental bindings forming at his fingertips. With a raising of his palms and a cupping of his hands, Darill mimicked the action of the large slabs of earth which rose between Rhallin and the closing pair of sisters, providing a temporary shield against whatever trickery he may have up his sleeve. Elder Sondara breathed a sigh of relief at the Highlord's quick thinking, but Darill still felt uneasy. *What had this traitor done to Corlina?*

As Elessia reached her sister and saw fully the state she was in, tears overcame her and passions overwhelmed her. The distraught woman threw her arms around her sister, while keeping a wary eye on the shield between herself and Rhallin. "Oh, Lina! Sister, can you hear me?" Only blank, glowing eyes gave answer. "Whatever he's done to you, I'll fix it. First I'll get you out of here, and then we'll--"

Corlina's jaw wrenched open wide in an instant as she clenched her sister's neck and shoulder in her hands, sinking her teeth into flesh. Behind the barrier of earth, Rhallin smiled for a moment at the sound of Elessia's screams of pain.

Elessia tried to push her sister away, and staggered a few steps backward before clutching her neck. Blood poured from between her fingers. "Lina," she started, "I don't... I..." Elessia collapsed unmoving to the floor. A short distance away, the other two Elders of the council and their guards could do nothing but watch in shock at the carnage which unfolded. In mere seconds Corlina had sank to her knees beside the unmoving form of her sister. There Corlina stared at her for just a moment before sinking her teeth into Elessia's throat once again and tearing it wide open.

Sondara had time only to take a single step toward the pair before a blade of red fire sliced through the raised slabs of earth. As the blade pushed through the shield-wall, the hand at its hilt appeared through the gap, and Rhallin, holding the elemental blade high, stepped through the gap he had created. He took a moment to savor the sight of Corlina, now feasting upon her fallen sister. Elessia's eyes already becoming white, not with the glow of the power but with the glaze of death. He took a moment to smother his excitement before turning serenely to the stunned onlookers across the chamber. "I'm sorry for that brief interruption... you were saying, Highlord?"



Darill spoke in a voice that was quiet, yet hard as stone. In the hushed stillness of the council chamber, Rhallin could still hear the words of the Highlord clearly. "Captain, take Elder Sondara and find a way out." The captain's mouth opened quickly to protest, but the Highlord gave him no chance to speak. "You can do me no good here, Captain. I'll handle Rhallin. The duty I lay now on you and your men is to protect Elder Sondara and ensure the survival of the high council. I don't care how many men you have to cut through to do it. Get her out."

"And what will you do, my lord?" Sondara said solemnly, not meeting Darill's eyes.

"What I must," Darill replied, softening his gaze as he turned toward her. "Now get going, and trust in me, as you always have. I will be with you soon enough."

A geyser of water suddenly sprang up beside Darill, quenching in a burst of steam a pillar of the same red flame which had blasted its way through the doors of the hall. "Just be careful," Sondara said finally, meeting Darill's eyes. "I'm not going to be here to watch your back forever."

"Am I expected to simply let her leave, Highlord?" Rhallin said mockingly, as Sondara and the remaining guards took to the shadows skirting the walls of the chamber and began circling their way around toward the doors through which Rhallin had made his spectacular entrance.

The Highlord's voice was hard once more, like ice and stone become one. "Did I give you a choice?" A sword of white flame suddenly sprang to life in his hands, dancing gracefully from side to side, and the grey which dominated the older man's hair and beard as a symbol of age belied the speed with which he moved. The distance between them had closed in mere seconds, and with a sudden flash of movement their swords met in a spray of crackling fire. Sparks danced between them as their weapons spun through form after form of master swordsmanship. Darill pressed his attack hard, giving Rhallin time to think of nothing but counterattack. *He knows he can't best me in a contest of blade skill alone*, Darill thought. *He must have something else up his sleeve*. So it was that Darill found himself prepared when Corlina's bloodied form lunged at him from the side. Darill slid a pace back with lightning quickness, spinning the sword in his hands with a circling motion which took Corlina's head before her glowing eyes had time to blink. As her body continued its forward motion, Darill brought his focus back to Rhallin. The space the Highlord's movement had created between him and his foe had allowed Rhallin enough time to prepare any number of traps, and Rhallin's hands were now held together before him, pointing straight at Darill's chest. It wasn't necessary to use hand gestures in forgings, yet Darill himself had often found that doing so helped him to focus his mind for a precise task... which meant that whatever Rhallin was preparing would probably be large, and would undoubtedly be powerful. The sword of flame in Rhallin's hands flickered out of existence as he thrust his palms outward with a powerful motion, slamming a highly focused shield-wall of air toward Darill.

The deadly attack came at the Highlord quickly, but with its power so focused Rhallin's shield-wall was not as large as Darill would have expected it to be. Rather than expending his spiritual energy by blocking the wall with flows of his own, Darill relied upon his honed reflexes to throw himself out of its path. Coming up out of the roll, he could see the forging of air pass by at arm's length, but his thought was already focused elsewhere. Trickle of sweat, labored breathing, slowed movement— Rhallin was showing the signs of weakening. Hoping to capitalize on the opening in Rhallin's defenses left by the overuse of power on a single attack, Darill rounded on his opponent, pressing forward. *He's expending his spiritual energy too quickly. He must feel it, must know he can't keep this up*. Rhallin's gaze flickered away from Darill for just a moment, at something beyond, but the Highlord could not let himself be distracted, whether the act was deception or genuine. The distance was closing, and though

Rhallin appeared not to be reacting or preparing a defense, Darill mentally prepared several forgings in case Rhallin attempted to produce any surprises or catch him unaware. As he watched the Highlord advance, the corners of Rhallin's mouth suddenly twitched up. *That smile again... why is he smiling?*

The answer pierced him like a blade as Darill realized too late that he was not the true target of Rhallin's attack. His eyes widened as he heard the half-melted slag that had once been the chamber's doors slam off of their heavy steel hinges, flying outward into the corridor in the direction of Sondara and her retreating guard. As he turned from his grinning foe, Darill could see the wall of air carrying rubble and the sharp, twisted remains of the doors down the corridor, toward where the small contingent was caught in fighting with a group of Bellatores. They hadn't gotten far enough away.

"SONDARA!" Darill screamed as the razor edge of the spinning metal doors tore into the heart of the group. Men fell, several screaming in pain as limbs separated and flesh was rended. Others simply collapsed into silent death. Though he did not see the doors hit Sondara, he thought he heard a familiar female voice cry out in pain and then fall silent as the now blade-like doors carved a passage through the corridor, man and rubble alike.

Then pain took away all thought from Darill's mind. He looked down to watch with a feeling of shock and loss as a familiar blade of fire and steel tore its way out of his chest. As the blade drew its way back through his body, a voice from behind whispered mockingly. "It's too late to save her, *my lord*... too late to save any of them. It always has been."

Darill, Highlord of the Elder Council and strongest of the Custodes, sensed himself falling as though it was someone else's body. Lying there, face down and unable to move in the ruins of the Council Chamber, the world seemed naught to him but blood and shadows. Darkness crept into the corners of his vision. His palace was reduced to rubble. All he had worked for in life, destroyed. All those he had sought to protect, destroyed. The world continued to darken.

The sound of a familiar voice called him back. "-Yes Captain, I'm alright. Check the others, see if any survived. We have to move, now." *Sondara lives*. The thought was like a beacon of light, holding back the darkness that a moment ago had all but enveloped Darill.

Rhallin had heard the voice as well, and now swept past Darill's fallen form without looking at him. He was quickly heading for the doorway from which he had heard the sound of the Elder's voice.

*I must act*, Darill thought. *I cannot die here, not like this*. His chest burned, and he had lost too much blood. Darill knew he hadn't the physical strength left to stand up. *But if this will be my end, then I will make it an end worthy of my name*. The Highlord managed to push himself up to his knees, senses aflame with pain and impending death, before drawing in all the elemental power he could hold. The forging began to form before him, and he poured into it every ounce of spiritual power remaining within him. This was the forbidden technique, a forging designed solely for death and destruction.

"Too late..." Darill said quietly as he held both hands together before him. His final words were like a whisper to Rhallin's ears as he froze in his tracks. "...for both of us. *Inferi*."

Suddenly the room was ablaze with white light, the flames of Hellfire racing along the walls and coming together to block the doorway. It gushed toward Rhallin like a flood, and despite his attempts to stop it, the purity of the white flames grew closer by the second. Rhallin erected a shield-wall of water and earth to buy himself time, preparing to Travel. But as the flames reached the shield, the water turned instantly to steam and the earth burned and began turning to ash.

Darill's Hellfire punched a hole through the crumbling shield, and a blast of liquid flame lanced through. Darill could hear Rhallin screaming in agony as the blast scorched his face, skin and muscle alike melting down to the bone even as Rhallin forged earth and air into a doorway and Traveled away from the palace. Despite his escape, the burns of Hellfire would remain a part of Rhallin forever, if they did not kill him outright. The destruction caused by Hellfire could not be mended or healed—that was one of the reasons it was forbidden.

Now, with Rhallin gone and the last of his strength expended, Darill collapsed back to the floor. Blood pooled in his vision, and the world spotted with crimson color even as vision itself faded to darkness in his mind. His thoughts no longer raced, but poured out as slowly as his increasingly shallow breaths. Darill embraced his death. *I have done what I can. I leave now with our palace in ruins and our people broken, but both will be rebuilt. And Sondara lives. Sondara. Farewell, my love. We will meet again... but for now, our people will look to you for strength., and you must be strong. Do not let me down.* Then darkness fled Darill's mind forever, and he became one with the light.

## SHADOWS OF THE PAST

An unnatural black mist swirled in the moonlit ruins of Custodum Palatii, drinking in light and giving back none. Destin felt a chill run down his spine and pulled his cloak tighter across his chest, though he suspected the cool night air was less the cause for his chills than the sense of foreboding he felt inside. Nothing seemed natural about this place anymore. Forged from the elements it was, by those like Destin who wielded the power to shape them. The great white towers of the palace, whose element-forged brilliance could once be seen shining above the horizon like beacons to distant travelers signaling protection and safe haven, were now a monument of crumbling ruins and dust. Destin wished he could do something about that mist, but his use of fire to drive it off only seemed to strengthen the darkness. What held sway here was deeper than shadow, a tainting of the elements that made the place feel *wrong*.

This is where it had begun for him, for all of them, and Destin hoped that a return would yield some answer yet uncovered. Three years had passed since the events of that day, and even the cracks in the earth had not healed. The same dark mist which clung to the ruins by night shrouded them during the day as well, a remnant of the dark and twisted power which had crushed the foundations of this place. It was one of the reasons people feared these ruins; touched by darkness, the mist retained the memories of horror and death. Walking through it now, Destin could hear the voices of the dead, muffled screams of fear and anguish. They spoke to him, begging for help, warning of danger. The place was commonly believed to be cursed these days, and well it might be.

Even before the fall of Custodum Palatii, many considered the bending of the elements to human will to be a sin against nature – the events of the city's destruction seemed to be justification enough for that. The written histories of the Custodes told of a time when the Elementals, known at that time by the name *Nativus*, had regularly used their powers to commit acts of violence. No codes or strictures restrained their use, as those of the Custodes did today. Those days leading up to the founding of the palace were commonly known as *Dies Tenebrarum*, the Days of Darkness, and for good reason. The histories had showed that experimentation on human bodies, the living as well as the dead, was not uncommon. The knowledge of exactly how these experiments had been performed was carefully destroyed, thought by the founders of Custodum Palatii to be a terrible sin which should never be repeated. Most were attempts to unlock the secrets to immortality, though the histories clearly

stated there were no known successes. Instead, many of these experiments had yielded unexpected results – the Nativus had created *Daemones Immortuos*. These soulless shells of men were not truly alive, but rather their bodies were able to be controlled by their creators. These Undead Demons were one of *Dies Tenebrarum's* greatest failures, and though it is uttered in superstitious whispers that the *Daemones Immortuos* still haunt these ruined towers, the histories state the abominations were completely wiped out in the Elemental War which had led to the victory of the Custodes and the founding of this very palace. But knowledge of those pasts weren't what Destin was here for. He came today seeking knowledge of a more recent past, the treachery that led to the destruction of the palace.

Air Element was revered among the Custodes for its ability to extract memory from a person, place, or object – such was not the main use of that particular power, but one Destin had found useful in his scholarly pursuits. The Winds of Time moved through not only place, but past, present, and future as well, and while it could not transport a person or object backward through time, it could be used to pull memories forward – a practice known as *Recordari* – or bodies sideways, which most knew by the name *Percursatio*, or Traveling. Pulling forward the memories of the past was also quite dangerous, as the emotions connected to those memories flood the mind of the user and become a part of his or her own self, in rare cases causing loss of sanity. Every one of the Custodes who wishes to train in the art of memory extraction must first learn the names of those who lost themselves to it. Destin reflexively called up in his mind the names of the five recorded in the Histories; they were Darethe, Shak'thur, Galindra, Samithae, and Barnel. Destin knew the dangers presented by his choices – but this is where it had begun, and he was determined not to leave here empty-handed. *Will I ever be remembered the way those five have been?* Destin wondered.

Stepping through the broken archway of what was once a grand library, memory swirled in Destin's mind. The voices were quieter in here, but ever more frantic. *Danger*, they were whispering. *Leave! Death lives. Flee!* Walking carefully across the cracked floor tiles, Destin carefully pushed on. He was painfully aware of the echoing sounds his feet made stepping through the remains, but little could be done about it. As he stepped through to the next room, the mist thinned enough to no longer be noticeable to the eye, but the feeling of not being alone in this place was stronger now than ever. He could feel eyes in the crumbling ruins all around him, but every time Destin turned around, the fire he channeled to give light to the darkness yielded no secret but long, flickering shadows. Part of him regretted not taking Anariya's offer to accompany him, but this was something he wanted to do alone.

Venturing further into the dark, Destin found what he was looking for. The remains of a large desk lay before him, its broken wood twisted around an ornate chandelier which appeared to have broken free of mountings on the domed ceiling, a good 50 paces overhead. He heaved a sigh of relief to see that it was still mostly intact – the condition of an object would not matter, so long as it had not been completely destroyed by fire or the like, and the memories of the man who had occupied this desk so many long nights would have remained. Circling around to the chair behind it, a sturdy if not ornate piece of craftsmanship, Destin sat so that each hand rested on a different half of the broken desk. Breathing in deeply he summoned a flow of air, drawing invisible connections between himself and the two halves. The soft white light already present in his eyes grew with intensity, and memory came crashing into him like a flood, mixing, becoming his own. Light swirled across his vision, and voices trickled into his ears from nowhere around him. Destin's head spun, and for a moment he lost all sense of where he was. He closed his eyes and tried to organize his thoughts, searching for the one he needed.

*Why have you come to me for this?* A voice whispered, sounding at once both nervous and contemptuous. The scene unfolded before Destin's opening eyes as though smoke, thin wisps of men

and women overlaying the real world. Objects now moved or destroyed stood in ghostly images of their former selves. In memory, most things appeared this way. The only objects that appeared solid or easily identifiable were those which had a permanent place in the world, or had some great impact on the individual whose memory it was. *I've told you before, more detailed accounts of the Dies Tenebrarum are not only rare and incomplete, they are strictly forbidden to those outside of the High Council. You mark my words, Boy, and mark them well – those manuscripts hold only the secrets of death, and no good can come of delving too deeply into their pages. Now, give up this foolish errand and continue your own studies in peace and light, or Corlina will hear about this. I doubt she would be as willing to dismiss this... misunderstanding... as I am.*

The man standing across the desk loomed over it with unnatural ease, making him seem a full pace taller than he actually was, and Toulas sunk back into his seat as though to burrow away. The mist of the memory yielded no clear details of his physical appearance, save for blue eyes which seemed to burn with intensity. Their sharpness within the memory spoke to how unsettling they were to Toulas, and even Destin found himself shifting uncomfortably under their gaze. While the figure in the memory lacked the scarring and disfigurement which had become a part of his legend, it could only have been Rhallin. The man's lips parted in a smile that never touched those dangerous eyes. *Very well, Toulas. But this isn't the end. Pray you never come upon me alone, for if you do I swear we will not meet again in life.* The intensity in the man's eyes flared one last time as he spun and stalked away, his misty essence fading until it evaporated into the air, where a looming shadow took his place. That great shadow moved through the ghost-like past as though its wispy surroundings did not exist. This wasn't right – this was not a part of the memory.

Letting go of the flows of Air connecting him to the desk, Destin kicked himself back and away, tumbling over the chair and rolling up onto his knees. He panted for a moment, trying to clear his eyes and focus. Channeling the elements took Spirit strength on the part of the user, and invoking memories of the past was no easy feat; many were incapable of learning the art at all, lacking the strength to perform the task. The dark figure was still advancing slowly in the darkness, with the gait of a lame man. Destin brought the sphere of fire that had dimly lit the room to a blazing inferno, casting away all shadows in sight, and his breath caught. *Daemones Immortuos.*

The skin of the creature now standing before Destin was pale gray, with the malnourished look of being pulled too tightly across its thin, bony structure. The mouth was pulled back in what would have appeared to be a smile, if the thing still had lips. Yet what Destin found most disturbing about this creature was not the smile, but the eyes – those dark, sunken sockets made all the more evident the lifeless white light emitting from the eyes themselves. That glow, so familiar to one of the Custodes, was the mark of one who was touched by the power of the elements. In the case of this abomination, the power was all that kept its body going. *They do exist,* thought Destin, now edging slowly backwards in an attempt to maintain his distance.

Sweat beaded heavily on his skin from his previous efforts, despite that bitter cold in the air. As the last blurs of the power faded from his vision, Destin was suddenly aware that this abomination was not alone. Emerging from the deep shadows which his fiery light still cast throughout the room were several more dark figures. He could barely make out their disfigured forms, but the lighted eyes gave away their nature. Quickly, he channeled the fireball lighting the room down to him and, reshaping it, crafted himself a sword made of purest orange flame. Fire had never been one of Destin's favorite abilities, as it was mainly used for little besides aggression, but in times of need he had often found it to be one of his greater strengths. His hands closed around the intensely burning hilt, but his flames would not harm him.

With the only source of light now resting in his hands, the undead creatures advanced more quickly. They seemed to shy away from the light, but Destin knew it would not hold them back for long, and he could not hold the fire indefinitely. Destin's eyes quickly surveyed the surrounding area, looking for somewhere to escape. He found nothing but empty walls and the shells of the dead, continuing to advance upon him. *I'm an academic, not a soldier!* Destin thought. *Logan was always the one getting into fights, not me. Father always encouraged us to use our heads before our muscles... but I don't see any other choice at the moment. They're almost on me now, and I don't dare turn my back or let down my guard.*

The nearest of the Daemones Immortuos lurched forward, hurling itself at him in blind aggression. Destin ducked below its outstretched arms and spun to his left, swinging the blade of fire in a wide arc that opened the creature's right side from front to back and sent it shrieking to the floor. It kicked and writhed there for a few moments before going still, the white light in its eyes slowly fading to black. *At least they can be killed.* Sweat was streaming down Destin's face now, but the thought renewed his vigor, and he turned to face the remaining attackers. They paid no heed to their fallen companion, nor did they even seem to be aware of it as anything more than a broken chair or pillar of rubble. Side-stepping through the ruins toward the doorway through which he came, Destin raised the blazing sword above him and awaited the next attack.

He was unprepared for the cold hands that grasped his throat from behind. Unable to free his neck from that powerful grip or see his attacker, he blindly stabbed into the air behind him with his sword as the others continued to advance. Seconds seemed an eternity, and his mind started to numb as the creature's hold dropped him to his knees. In desperation, he channeled again, pounding his open palm to the ground as he wove together the element of Earth. From beneath his hand, the ground shot out like a lance with incredible speed and power. It arced back over his shoulder towards the creature, and suddenly the hands grasping his neck were torn away. For a moment it was all Destin could do to simply breathe and be grateful for it. As he chanced a quick look over his shoulder, he saw the form of the Daemones Immortuos, hanging from that spike of Earth, still snarling softly and reaching out towards him until the light in its un-pierced eye faded and the creature went limp.

## THE LOGIC OF MADNESS

Sunlight gleamed off the tips of the racked lances down below. The morning was cold and crisp, but the sun was just ebbing over the horizon and the small camp was alive with the cooking fires of the soldiers. Some laughed grimly over their breakfast conversation, while others were silently packing their tents and belongings into the open-topped wagons and checking over their armor and weaponry. The smell of roasting meat and sharp cheeses called to them, until finally all labors had been set aside for a few moments of camaraderie and fellowship. Laughter echoed up the valley to the canyon walls above. Bellator, they used to be called. In the Old Tongue, *Bellator* had meant Warrior. They had been a proud and powerful people once, before Rhallin the Deceiver had convinced them to support his campaign for power. Blinded by ambition and need for conquest, the Bellator nation's devastating assault on Custodum Palatii and the backlash which had resulted from it had left their people broken, divided and leaderless. Now the Bellator were a people without a homeland, pushed near to extinction. While the broken clans of this war-like race still referred to themselves by their old name, the great nations of the world now commonly referred to them as *Vagi* – The Wanderers.

From his position high above the Vagi encampment, a lone man observed their common morning routine. The gleam in Logan's eyes, as gray as those lances and every bit as deadly, held no knowledge of sympathy or remorse for what he was about to do. The cold steel of his voice reflected the ice in his veins and his unyielding mind; his skin tingled as he spoke words he had once feared. He held out his hands toward the soldiers as his eyes glassed over, all color vanishing, and became the eyes of Death.

*"Inferi."*

Fire leaped from the ground as though alive with its murderous intent. Canvas, flesh, and steel alike gave way to a blazing heat that would not be stopped, and even the stone canyon walls began to melt and drip like molten steel. The irony of this power – the purity of the white flames, as fluid in their movements as water washing filth from his dirtied hands – drew up a mad desire in Logan to laugh aloud. There were reasons *Hellfire* was forbidden. The power to control it was beyond reach for most, but few among the living could match Logan's spiritual power. *And none of them are willing to do what I have done. What must be done. This land is tainted by filth, and it will be cleansed.* Though the screams of the engulfed encampment, piercing even through that vast ocean of liquid fire, would be heard for miles around, they could no longer touch Logan's ears – not anymore. He could not even feel the hot tears of anger and pain that rolled down his own cheeks. *Can they not see what this land has become? I'm not the evil one. These people are beyond saving. It is a miserable fate they have chosen, but fate is just if not always kind. I am justice now.*

Logan started suddenly when he realized that the flames were dying. As the color returned to his eyes, he surveyed the charred valley from his hilltop above. When had the world ever been so silent? There were no bodies, not that he had ever expected there to be in the wake of those cleansing flames, but the char of fire and death in the air was thick enough to choke on. *It's surprising how quickly I've become accustomed to death,* Logan thought. *There was a time I could never have stomached the sight, let alone the smell.*

Glancing up toward the climbing sun through the burnt haze that remained, he pulled himself back into Wind's saddle with considerable effort. Logan's muscles felt fatigued, though he had not used them, and his vision spun before him as he slumped over and emptied his body of this morning's meal – an aftereffect of such extreme use of the powers. *Or maybe this hasn't gotten as easy for me to stomach as I thought.* His body radiated weakness, but he wiped his mouth and, with a soft kick, started Wind down the hilltop. *Time to be moving on. It's early yet, and there is more justice to deliver this day.*

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

***Custodum Palatii*** – In the Old Tongue, “Palace of Guardians.” The palace was founded more than a thousand years ago, following the Civil War between the Nativus and the Custodes regarding the uses of the power and the rights of Humans. Custodum Palatii was forged as a training center for the Custodes, as well as a place where citizens could bring their petitions or requests before the leaders of the Custodes, the Elder Council. It was a symbol of strength and unity throughout the realm, having influence across many kingdoms of men, until its destruction at the hands of Rhallin and the Bellatores three years ago.

***Daemones Immortuos*** – In the Old Tongue, “Undead Demon.” Originally attempts at resurrecting the dead, these creatures are the result of reanimating a corpse with the power of the elements after the Soul has left it. They have lost all higher thought capability, are driven by basic primal instincts, and will eat anything they can lay hands on.

***Dies Tenebrarum*** – In the Old Tongue, “Days of Darkness.” This connotation refers to the days before the founding of Custodum Palatii and the order of the Custodes.

***Elder Council*** – The ruling body of Custodum Palatii. Since its establishment during the founding of the palace, the Elder Council has always consisted of three members, one male and two female. The male, known as the Highlord, is the leader of the Council, with ultimate authority in matters of the Custodes. His two female counterparts share equal power between them, and second only to the Highlord himself, though he will often choose to defer to their wisdom and guidance. The current rulers of the Elder Council are Highlord Darill, Elder Elessia, and Elder Sondara.

***Inferi*** – In the Old Tongue, “Hellfire.” The art of forging flows of air, fire, and water to create unstoppable flames of destruction. The flame itself is white, and no known power has yet been able to combat them. Hellfire requires the strength and skill of a powerful elemental to control. Due to a capacity for nothing but destruction, the Custodes banned the use of Hellfire with the founding of the palace over a thousand years ago.

***Percursatio*** – In the Old Tongue, “Traveling.” The art of forging flows of air and earth to create a doorway from one place to another.

***Recordari*** – In the Old Tongue, “Recall.” The art of forging flows of air to perform memory extraction. Memory extraction can be dangerous to the user if not controlled properly, but a skilled user can perform the skill upon material objects as well as living beings.

***Nativus*** – In the Old Tongue, “Elemental.” This is the name commonly associated with those who could bend elements before the founding of the Custodum Palatii, though it is commonly used now as a derogatory term for those with elemental powers who refuse to bind themselves to the ethical code and teachings of the Custodes.



*Sylvia Kies is the most inherently gifted writer that I have had the pleasure to meet in my life. She brought in a rough draft of this piece to our first session, and reading even an incomplete, unpolished version brought tears to my eyes. It is now a wonderfully poignant piece that continues to choke me up every time I read it.*

*Penny Warren, Tutor*

## **AN IMAGE OF HUMANS**

**SYLVIA KIES**



This picture is an image that sends a message of hope. It was taken in a moment of peace among chaos, and my eye is distracted from the main focus by bright details: a jacket embroidered with the initials GS; a cluster of streetlights glowing orange; Arabic symbols against a piece of white paper torn from a banner. The picture is not perfect, yet it expresses something more powerful than any amount of words can describe.

If you look again, you see people. Hundreds of men fill the square- they crowd into it, beyond the view of the camera, yet only two faces are seen in front of the multitude. Like all the people in the picture, they have bronze skin and nearly black hair. They wear stylish clothes and look to be about the age of university students. One face looks away to the left, forehead wrinkled and eyes wide. His visage is not quite of fear, more of apprehension and a need to be aware of everything surrounding him. The other face follows his gaze, but his expression shows a slight smile, the beginning of laughter, and a gladness to be there. These two figures stand side by side, a bit apart, arms outstretched to join hands.

A wedding ring made of yellow gold and a single dark stone shows against their clasped hands. These two Christians, and many others, joined together to form a human barricade to protect their fellow protesters during the time for Muslim prayers.

I am not familiar with the place. The banners and signs bear Arabic symbols. Their meaning is a mystery to me, and I am curious about their message. Is it about why the men have come to the square? The dun-colored buildings, apartments or offices, frame the crowd and block the view of the sky.

The true meaning of this picture cannot be found simply by looking at it, however deeply you might gaze. To understand what happened at this moment in time you must know the story. Behind the two, you can see rows upon rows of men kneeling on the pavement. They kneel shoulder to shoulder, heads bowed in devotion. Perhaps they are praying for peace in their homeland, or safety from the violence committed against protesters, or simply for freedom. They came, with tens of thousands of others, to change the enduring oppression in their country, after decades of a totalitarian government that gave no power to its citizens. Those citizens came by the hundreds to Tahrir Square in January of 2011 to raise their voices and find that power, and although they acted peacefully, police forces did not. Protestors were beaten and brutally murdered.

Despite such violence and conflict, these two men and countless others found that in this moment of precarious survival, fervent prayer, grief and anger, and hope for freedom, other protesters were worth protecting. These two men did not see Muslims worshipping the wrong god, they saw people who were worthy of protection during prayer different than their own. These two men did not see strangers with different histories or class- they saw individuals with pasts, families, desires, and passions. They saw humans.

When I look at this picture, I see people that came together in acts of solidarity, not just tolerating but protesting alongside and even protecting each other in a time of chaos. I don't just see details, I see humans. What would happen if each of us, in our daily lives and moments of chaos, looked beyond our differences and saw humans?

Photo: Tahrir Square, January 25, 2011 by Nevine Zaki

<http://www.good.is/post/protesters-are-awesome-look-at-this-beautiful-photo-of-christians-protecting-praying-muslims-in-egypt/>

*Kimberly is an avid creative writer and an experienced poet. She excels at choosing her words carefully to enhance the depth and value of her writing. The following piece demonstrates her ability to maintain the maturity of her writing while still depicting a childlike wonder.*

*Molly Cobb, Tutor*

## **HE SMILED**

**KIMBERLY KOBUSSEN**

He pulled a scribbled paper from his pocket  
Corners stained with the blue of a well-worn pair of jeans  
Dotted lines  
Made up languages  
One red "X"

A cleverly placed broken paddle  
Flew his colors high  
He checked his cereal box compass  
"A beautiful morn' for the seas, says I"  
His nostrils drew in the cool backyard breeze

On the rock  
In the sand  
He gazed through a paper roll telescope  
Every bird a ship  
On the horizon of his ocean

"They be after me treasure!"  
He yelled with a wild grin  
Leaping to the sandy deck  
He fired a handful of cannon balls  
And watched as his enemies fled in fear

"LAND HO!"  
The sandbox ship neared the jungle  
Overgrown  
Undiscovered  
"Dead Man's Island, the treasure is here"

Compass in hand he took one bold step  
Into the unknown  
Ten passes east of the tire swing  
Passed the three eyed stump  
And into the center of the Wild Willow

He heard a mysterious creek of age  
As one long branch wrapped around his neck

"It's alive!" he screamed struggling with the windblown madness  
"Must reeeeach trunk..."  
And with one angry kick the tree released its death grip

A whistling wind  
A cracking twig  
And silence  
It was close  
He could smell it

Inside his pocket lay all the answers  
"What does the map say?"  
He glanced at the words only he could understand  
"The treasure be near!"  
"Through The Devil's Marsh!"

He spied a large puddle in his path  
Would he dare to cross it?  
Would he turn back now?  
What lay beneath the surface?  
What watery danger?

"Bravery, the only way to the treasure"  
Trudging through the muck  
Mysterious bubbles, the sign of movement beneath his sneakers  
Then a yank  
"The devil, the CROCODILE!"

His ankle was caught  
He plunged face first into the water  
"He's got me!"  
With all the strength he could muster  
He flung himself toward the other side

He stood  
Covered in mud  
Dripping wet  
One torn shoelace  
And gazed at his prize

There on the lawn  
Deliciously tempting  
A young pirate's true craving  
"Jelly and GOLDEN peanut butter"  
"Right where I left you"

And there he sat  
Enjoying his tasty treasure

Tucking his compass back in his pocket  
Carefully folding his map, he smiled  
"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me"

*Kaitlyn's flair for poetry is a glimpse into her personality. She has the ability to take the simplest of concepts and adroitly expand it to let the reader flow with her thoughts and words. When it comes to emotional topics, the fear and hurt are almost tangible. These poems have a depth of meaning that I felt needed to be shared, experienced and appreciated by others.*

*Nicole Mackie, Tutor*

## ROWS

KAITLYN LUCKOW

Rows. and rows. and rows.

Of stench polluted, stain infested beds  
line the walls.

Each one contains  
[tries to contain]  
effects of futile conflict.

It's all a horrific *blur*.  
Bloo-dea-screa-mortali-terror

I try my hardest, my best.  
I give it everything I've got.

...it's never enough.  
This isn't enough.

What a tragic way to die.  
A sad way to die.

I didn't get the water to him in time.  
I was too  
Late.

No one should go like this.  
Especially him.

No one will know what he's done.  
Everything.

...I don't even know.  
All I know is that he's lying there  
In front of me.  
Not                                 breathing.

Perhaps he took this bed

For another.  
Maybe he messed up  
Just *once* – all it takes.  
Did he know? Know that this was it.  
Was it worth it/ Were we worth it?  
Is anyone?

We should know.

But no one will come for him.  
No one will say goodbye.  
There will be no ceremony.

Only this white sheet  
I place  
ve  
o        r  
His head.

# TANGLED

## KAITLYN LUCKOW

The mirrors  
Grow out of her hair.

It's becoming a  
Tnageld  
mass

Of preconceived expectations  
Of beauty and propriety.

She's lost within  
making the eyes appear less dark,  
as she makes her way through crowded  
rooms. fixing the blushing blemishes,  
Smiling at strangers,  
painting on oval eyebrows,  
laughing at their dim jokes,  
making her lips puckered but not yet kissable—  
acting as if she's known them forever

just trying to be  
pretty.

and it's making her ugly.



*Working with Stephanie this semester has been an incredible enjoyment. Most of her poems, ideas, and writings are taken from her own life and as a reader, one can truly feel how much heart and effort she put into each line. I have been inspired by her tenacity, thoughtfulness, and the critical eye through which she views all of her work. The selections that Stephanie has chosen to include in this publication perfectly illustrate the strong spirit she brings to her writing and I am sure readers will enjoy her work just as much as I do.*

*Andrea Wagner, Tutor*

## **BLUR**

### **STEPHANIE WELLER**

The days pass, all a blur.

My body and heart ache to change,

to change, the unchangeable.

Gone before I could say good-bye.

But you can't change the unchangeable.

My body is hollow, yet pain runs through my hard outer shell.

Pain for your loss, pain for the thought of loss.

The days pass, all a blur.

Pain and memories cling to me like spider webs.

Memories make the loss of you hard,

they are the reminder that you are gone.

But memories keep you alive within me.

Alive within us all.

The pain is what reminds me, I am alive.

*Over the course of the semester I was able to watch Bernadette create her story "Soul Mate." In "Soul Mate" Bernadette takes you on an adventure that will introduce you to a different culture, as well as keep you on the edge of your seat. I hope you enjoy it!*  
*Brian Young, Tutor*

## **SOUL MATE**

### **BERNADETTE YANG**

I love listening to the stories and folklore that Puj, (Hmong word for grandma), tells me about my culture, the Hmong culture. When I was younger, before I started going to school, she would place me on her lap and tell many stories; some of the stories scared me, others made me laugh, but most of them made me wonder. My favorite one was about the blood bond promise.

"If two couples love each other dearly and commit themselves to one another by drinking a concoction of each other's blood, if one of them was to die first, they'll come back for the other one and they'll be together forever."

"Yeah right, Puj." I laughed. Now that I'm older, I know that's not true. It's just a myth that the elders say just to scare us. My grandma, who was sitting next to me in the living room, frowned, making the wrinkles around her eyes and forehead more prominent. I smiled back at her. Even in her old age, she was still so beautiful. Her face was always rosy because she smiled and laughed often. Her beautiful black hair, which she always tied into a bun on top of her head, showed strands of silver, showing her wisdom. "Puj, no one believes in those stories anymore. We're in America now."

"Why do you keep on saying that whenever I tell you about this Kalia?" My Grandma asked, showing her disapproval.

"Puj, those stories are so old now," I exclaimed.

"But still true," she cut in.

There was no use arguing with her so instead I leaned over and gave her a big bear hug. She laughed, hugging me back.

"I'll see you later Puj. I need to go to school."

"Okay, see you later sweetie. Don't forget to pick up your little brother, Kong Meng, like last time."

"I won't forget this time," I said.

It was a beautiful cloudless spring afternoon. I peddled down our drive way and down the abandoned road, heading to school. Even though it was hot and a little humid, the canopy of tree branches combined with the soft breeze kept me cool.

Taking the same route I took every day, I went through the neighborhood park. That way, I could avoid the heavy afternoon traffic. As I biked down the winding concrete path, joggers went past, giving me a slight nod. I smiled back in return. I looked for the elderly lady that always sat on the same bench feeding the pigeons but she wasn't there today. This route also took me past the elementary school that

my little brother, Kong Meng, goes to. Biking in the street, I saw that the children were outside playing, probably having recess. Some of the kids by the fence waved at me. One of them was my little brother. He smiled brightly waving his arms. I turned my head and smiled at him

“Hi Kalia,” he said cheerfully.

“Hi Kong Meng. I’ll remember to pick you up,” I replied back.

“Kalia watch out!” He screamed.

I looked at him confused. “What are you-”

It was too late. By the time I looked away from him, the car was inches away from me. I tried turning my bike to hopefully miss the car but it didn’t work. The car hit the back of my wheel. I was propelled from the seat of my bike and into the air. Everything happened so fast I didn’t even have the time to think. I heard the crunching of my bones as I landed on the black asphalt. My head snapped back from the impact of the fall and then I hit the ground with a thud. I remember seeing Kong Meng’s horrified face. I remember hearing the muffled cries of the young children witnessing this all unfold in front of them. A teacher nearby ran over to me, trying to get me to respond.

“What’s your name?” she asked me, holding me in her arms. “Can you tell me your name?”

I tried to respond, but I couldn’t. Perhaps it was the shock of the impact. I didn’t know. I just wasn’t able to respond. Everything became cloudy after that. The teacher’s face and everything else began to fade getting blurrier and blurrier, until it became total darkness.

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I didn’t want to wake up. I was expecting to have major headaches and a broken bone, but now, there was no pain. There was no pain. Instead I felt comfortable and warm. I knew I was laying on something very soft. In fact, I was so comfortable I actually let out a sigh. That was when I heard a chuckle; a very deep masculine chuckle.

Confused, I began to wake up. I opened my eyes expecting to see the white walls of the hospital; to see my parents sitting nearby worried sick, but I didn’t see that. Looking up, I saw a figure looking down at me but I couldn’t make out the face; my vision was blurred from waking up. When my eyes finally adjusted to the light, they widened in alarm.

“Took you long enough to wake up,” he said with a smirk. “Too comfortable?”

I shot out of bed knocking him over in the process. “Where am I?” I demanded, scared. I looked around frantically for a way to escape. There were no white walls or hospital bed. Instead, the walls were made of bamboo weaved together. The ceiling was made up of straws. I noticed that the door was opened but standing between me and the door was that stranger.

“You’re pretty strong for being sick,” he laughed getting up, brushing his pants.

That was when I noticed his clothing. This stranger wasn’t wearing normal street clothes but traditional Hmong clothes. He was wearing black satin pants. On top of the pants, he wore a red sash,

which he tied into a knot in the front. He also wore a long sleeve jacket made out of the same fabric as the pants. Around his neck was the heavy traditional Hmong necklace, made up of metal.

“Why are you dressed up in Hmong clothes?” I asked. “The New Year passed already.”

He looked at me, confused. “What are you talking about? I always dress like this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You must not be feeling well. Maybe you should go back to bed and rest some more.”

I backed away from him, shaking my head. There is no way I was getting back into bed. I didn’t even know who he was and where I was. For all I knew, he could be some pervert trying to lure me into his plan.

“You think I’m some pervert don’t you?” he laughed shaking his head. “I promise you that nothing happened.”

I shook my head refusing to believe him. When he cautiously took a step toward me I started panicking even more. I really needed to find a way out of here. I debated over jumping out the window or running past him to the door. He must’ve read my mind because he laughed.

“I wouldn’t choose the window if I were you, unless you want to break your neck.”

I must’ve given him a confused look because he then replied, “The house is on stilts.”

He stepped forward getting closer to me. I glanced out the window, checking to make sure he wasn’t lying. The house really was on stilts! “Don’t come any closer. Don’t think I won’t do it,” I said, holding my arms out in defense. When I saw my arms, I started freaking out even more. I was wearing a traditional Hmong outfit too! I was wearing the traditional colorful skirt. Around my waist was the red sash that every girl wears along with the “shae”, another article of Hmong clothing worn in the front of the skirt. This can’t be possible! I wasn’t wearing this in the morning. Looking up at him, I came to one conclusion.

“What did you do to me?!?” I accused him. I looked around for the closest thing I could find to use as a weapon which was a pathetic pillow. “Why am I dressed like this?!?” I asked, holding the pillow over my shoulders ready to swing if I need to.

“Nothing happened. I didn’t change-”

“You’re lying! I don’t believe you,” I said.

He took another step towards me with a smile on his face. “Nothing happened okay? Just give me the pillow.”

“You think this is funny?” I asked. “I wasn’t wearing this in the morning.”

“Well,” he paused, “maybe I did peak just a little when I was-”

My jaw dropped in shock. That pervert did change me.

He let out a sigh, putting his finger on his chin, eyeing me up and down. "There wasn't anything too interesting to look at."

I looked down at my body. When he saw this, he lunged for the pillow almost catching me off guard.

I almost let go of the pillow but my mind was too quick. I swung the pillow at his face and then at his shoulders over and over again.

His shouts of telling me to stop were muffled by the pillow.

"How dare you?!" I said swinging the pillow. "You sick man!"

"STOP!" he said, grabbing hold to a corner of the pillow.

I tried tugging the pillow from him but his grip was he too strong.

"Let go of the pillow!" I screamed.

"You let go."

"No, you let go," I said.

He laughed at me. "I'm not letting go. How would I know you're not going to hit me again?"

I let out a sigh of frustration and tugged it even harder. His grip became even stronger than before.

"Kong Pheng, what is going on in here?" a deep male voice asked.

He finally let go of the pillow. Taking that chance, I swung the pillow one more time at his shoulders. The sound of gasps turned my attention to the door. I dropped the pillow in shock. Standing there in the doorway were four people; an older couple and a young boy and girl.

"Nothing, just that our guest has finally woken up." Kong Pheng replied.

The older couple looked at me in confusion. The boy and teenage girl on the other hand were giggling.

"I'll go get Mai. She can help our guest," he said leaving the room. The four bystanders followed him out.

I was sitting on the bed when a young woman walked in with a polite smile on her face. She too was wearing traditional Hmong clothes. I stood up to greet her, but she motioned for me to sit down as she sat down next to me.

"Hi, I'm Mai. I was the one that took care of you. When Kong Pheng brought you here, your head was bleeding. We thought that maybe you hit your head on something and became unconscious. We put some medicine on it and wrapped your head up."

"Where are my parents? Do they know what happened?" I asked.

"Do you remember what happened?" she asked.

I nodded. "I was biking to school when a car hit me."

She looked at me confused at first but then smiled politely. "What are your parent's names?"

"My parents aren't here yet? Did you guys call them? I had a cellphone with me. Do you remember seeing it?"

"Cellphone?" she asked confused. "What village are you from? We can send someone to tell your family that we've found you."

"Village?"

Now it was my turn to look at her confused. For some reason, I felt like we weren't on the same page. First of all, we're all dressed in Hmong clothes. In the U.S, no one dresses up in Hmong clothes anymore unless it's the New Year. Last but not least, why send someone to send a message when there are phones? It just didn't make sense to me at all. It made sense decades ago but it's the 21<sup>st</sup> century now. There are new technologies out there available unless...

"Excuse me Mai, but, what year is it?" I asked my heart thumping anticipating the answer.

"It's 1949." She confusedly replied.

I suddenly felt light headed. My breathing became irregular. 1949? 1949! I stood up and started pacing the room, thinking to myself, forgetting that she was still in here with me completely.

I must be dreaming. That must be why this doesn't make sense at all. I just need to pinch myself. If I do that, I will definitely wake up. When I did, I didn't wake up. I actually felt the pain!

"If I'm not dreaming, then how did I get here?" I accidentally said out loud.

She smiled at me "The sun was barely up when Kong Pheng found you deep in the forest. He was out hunting with some of his friends. He saw you laying there on the forest floor. At first Kong Pheng thought you were dead but then saw that you were still breathing, so he took you here where his mother and I helped dress your head."

I looked at her alarmed. "I was in the forest lying unconscious?"

She nodded her head. "Yes, he found you and took you here.

I nodded, understanding. "So are you his sister then?"

She laughed a very familiar laugh reminding me of my Grandma. "No. I'm just one of Kong Pheng's friends. He asked me to help you out if you need any assistance."

"Girlfriend?" I teased.

"Oh no! I'm just a friend," she exclaimed.

"So am I in Laos then?" I asked feeling a little foolish.

She nodded her head. "Is there anything else you can remember? Your name? Your family?"

“I’m Kalia Thao and I’m from-” I stopped myself before I said too much. She won’t believe me if I told her that I was from the future and that I’m from the U.S would she? “I’m from, I’m from,”

“It’s okay if you don’t remember. It will come to you one day,” she said.

“So where am I exactly?” I asked.

“Well, when Kong Pheng found you, he took you here..”

“He doesn’t live here by himself does he?”

She nodded her head. “He lives here with his family. Is there anything that you need? Anything I could help you with?”

“I’m fine. Thanks. I was wondering though if this was what I was wearing when he found me.” I asked looking at my state of clothing.

“His sister and I actually changed you out of your clothes. When he found you, you were all wet.”

I felt so embarrassed. He didn’t change me after all.

“Did they look like the one that I’m wearing now?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yep. We hung them out in the back to dry. The ones that you’re wearing now are actually mine.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you so much.”

She smiled back in return. “Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do to help you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I just want some time to think.”

She nodded understandingly. “When you are feeling better, you are more than welcome to join the family.”

She left, closing the door behind her.

Sitting on the bed, I let out a loud sigh. How did I really get here? I couldn’t have possibly traveled back in time because of the bike accident could I? My mind kept on jumping from one question to another. How was I going to find a way back? If there was a way here, there must be a way back right?

The thought of not being able to see my parents, Puj, and Kong Meng ever again scared me more than anything else. My heart got heavier and heavier just thinking about it. Tears started streaming down my face. I threw myself on the bed and started crying like I’ve done never before. “I want to go home. I want to go home,” I repeated over and over again.

That evening I joined them all for dinner. I learned that Kong Pheng really was the eldest son of the village leader and that he had two younger siblings: his brother named Kong Cheng was 12 and his sister, Gao Hli, who was 14. His parents looked like they were in their late 50’s early 60’s. Both were very

warm and welcoming. They didn't ask many questions. I figured that Kong Pheng or Mai already told them the situation before hand.

I tried as hard as I could to remember the traditional Hmong manners. I had to wait for the elders to serve themselves first before I could serve myself. Afterwards, the ladies helped clear the table and wash the dishes while the men socialized, which annoyed me. Is it so hard for them to help us out just a little? While doing the dishes, we were talking about it. Both Mai and Gao Hli just laughed at me, probably giving the excuse that I forgot my memory and with that was traditional Hmong customs. Mai told me that I would be spending the night there, so I just assumed that it was the room that I slept in before, only it wasn't.

When I got into the room, I was comfortable in my bed when Kong Pheng came in. I sat up asking him what he was doing.

"I'm here to sleep," He simply said and plopped down beside me.

"If you haven't noticed, I'm already sleeping here."

"Well I'm not moving." He replied.

"I'm not moving either," I said. I'm not putting up with this. I'm a young independent woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"Fine," he stubbornly said.

We laid there side by side on that bed waiting for someone to give in. It wasn't until I heard Gao Hli looking for me that I actually got up.

"I'm right here," I said opening the door.

She looked at me shocked. "What were you doing in brother Kong Pheng's room?"

I looked at her confused. "Kong Pheng?"

"Yeah, that's Kong Pheng's room. You're sleeping with me in my room."

I turned back to look at Kong Pheng who had a smug smile on his face. I mentally hit myself; so embarrassing. I left the room and joined Gao Hli in hers.

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I woke up feeling dazed. I was in a dimly lit room. I heard a beeping sound and some muffled voices. Looking around I noticed yet again that I was someplace new. I saw my Mom sleeping on the couch with the remote control in hand. A late night news show was on. Relief flowed through me when I realized that it had only been a dream. I didn't travel back in time.

"Mom," my voice croaked. "Mom."

She stirred a little but didn't wake up.

I tried again saying it a little louder. "Mom."



She stirred a little more and then stretched, yawning. She turned to look at my direction and leaped up from the sofa and ran over to me.

“Kalia, you’re alright! You’re alright!” she hugged me, tears of joy flowing down her face. “We were so scared. The doctors said that you may not be waking up any time soon but you are.”

I smiled at her. “Mom, I’m fine. You don’t have to worry about me. How is Kong Meng doing?”

“He’s better now. He always asks to come visit you after school.”

“Do you think I could be going home soon?” I asked, “I just want to go home.”

“Your father and I could ask the doctors tomorrow.”

I nodded and went back to sleep.

I was able to leave the hospital later that week after going through multiple tests. According to the doctor’s order, I was not to listen to loud things, if headaches were to occur, I was to take naps, and above all, I was not to overwork myself. This meant no school.

The first week of being home all the time wasn’t too bad. Instead of going to boring lectures, I got to spend time with my Mom and my Grandmother. There wasn’t too much I had to worry about. It was the second week that things started to change.

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I woke up to the sound of a rooster’s call. I was confused at first but then realize that I was dreaming.

“Kalia, it’s time to get up now. We have to go to the garden and harvest the rice,” Gao Hli said.

“Okay,” I managed to say through a yawn.

I helped Gao Hli prepare the lunch for us, wrapping the boiled chicken and rice with banana leaves and putting it in the basket that we were carrying to the garden. The entire family left for the garden. Mai along with her husband, Blong, was coming to help us out.

“So how long is it from here to the garden?” I asked.

“About a mile,” Gao Hli replied. “It’s not too bad. Some people have to go even further.”

I started getting tired just thinking about it. It’s not too bad but we have to go through jungles and cross streams on the way there.

“So what happens after you cut down the rice plants?” I asked.

“You really must’ve forgotten a lot when you hit your head,” Kong Pheng said from behind us.

“Or maybe I’m just not from here,” I remarked back

He laughed when I said this. “Are you suggesting that you’re a goddess that fell from the heavens?”

“Maybe. Did you think I was some wild girl from the jungle?”

He laughed again. “Something like that. Looking back at yesterday would definitely confirm that.”

“Why? What happened?” I turned around asking him

He stopped in his track and gave me a disbelieving look. “You don’t remember?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He let out a sigh. “Nevermind.”

Gao Hli laughed, finding our arguing very amusing. She stopped me, letting Kong Pheng go first in the path. He was grumbling when he passed us. “I think brother is frustrated.” She whispered.

“Why? Because of me?”

She nodded her head smiling. “He’s use to girls liking him. You’re the first to argue with him”

I laughed understanding. “So he’s a player then?”

“No, he’s just use to getting attention from the village girls. You’ll understand what I mean later.”

When we went past a stream to take a break, I couldn’t wait to get a drink of water. Seeing that they all had folded up leaves to improvise as cups, I grabbed one from the ground and followed them. I was about to drink it when Kong Pheng knocked it out from my hand.

“Hey, it’s not funny,” I said. “I’m thirsty too.”

“You’re not supposed to use leaves you find from the ground, Miss. Goddess.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s bad for you. You’re supposed to pluck on from the trees.”

I was about to go pluck one from the tree nearby but he handed me his instead. “Just take mine.”

I looked at him suspiciously. “How do I know you didn’t do anything to it?”

He shrugged his shoulders, dipped it into the stream, and drank from it. After doing so, he handed it to me. “There, now you know.”

I took it from him and got myself some water too.

“Thought you didn’t want it?” he said.

“I never said that,” I pushed past him and went over to Gao Hli, who was just laughing. “Your brother is being very annoying.”

“I can see that,” she laughed. “It’s very amusing though.”

The rest of the way there, Gao Hli patiently explained to me the whole entire process of getting rice grains. "First you have to cut the rice plants and bundle them up for threshing."

"Is it true that you have to cook the grains too?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, it's true. To prevent the rice from molding, we have to cook it."

"I remember my Mom telling me about the rice pounder," I said. "Is that the next step?"

"Yes. At first it looks like a lot of fun, but you get tired because the rice pounder is very heavy."

"My Mom told me that too." I laughed.

When we finally reached the rice field, my jaw dropped. I was picturing a flat field but I was not even close. The rice field was on a side of a hill, so we worked our way up the hill. I followed Mai and Gao Hli reluctantly into the tall rice field. Mai tried teaching me how use the tools to harvest the rice plants, but I wasn't good at it. Kong Pheng laughed at me when I first tried using the tools, so I gave up trying. Instead, I was put in charge of tying the bundles of rice plant that Gao Hli and Mai handed to me.

Kong Cheng, Kong Pheng's little brother, helped me. Unlike his brother, Kong Cheng was a very sweet boy. He kept me busy listening. Being a young and adventurous boy, he told me about how Kong Pheng and him would go and crayfish with their bare hands. Most of his stories made me laugh. Sometimes, I laughed louder than I really needed too just because I knew that Kong Pheng was listening to our conversation.

"So Kong Cheng," I asked, "is there any girls you like here in the village?"

He began to blush and then smile.

"You do have one huh?" I teased. "Who is it? Maybe I can help you."

"She's very pretty," he said. "I like her a lot. I think she might like me too."

"That's good," I said. "Just don't be like your brother. Don't break hearts okay."

"Oi, what are you saying?" Kong Pheng said, coming down by us.

I smiled at him. "Nothing. We're not talking about anything."

He cocked his eyebrows. "I heard something about me."

I turned to Kong Cheng. "We didn't talk about him did we?"

Kong Cheng smiled, shaking his head.

"Hey, you're supposed to agree with me. I thought we were on the same side."

Kong Cheng burst out laughing and ran up the hill towards his parents.

"Someone's jealous?" Kong Pheng laughed.

"Stop amusing yourself," I said getting back to tying the bundles of rice plants together.

He laughed shaking his head and grabbed the bundle of rice from my hands.

“Hey, stop playing around.” I said annoyed.

“I’m just helping you.” He said innocently.

We didn’t get back home until later in the afternoon. As much as I want to take a break, there was still more to be done with rice grains we collected. Mai and Gao Hli cooked the whole grains. Mai asked Kong Pheng and I to go and pound the cooked rice grains. We both argued to switch spots but in the end, we ended up going together. Kong Pheng carried the basket with the cooked whole rice grain while I carried the empty basket. We started walking to the edge of town to use the community rice pounder that one of the craftsmen in the village had built out of wood.

“You remember how to use the rice pounder right?” he teased, walking ahead of me.

I shook my head. “I actually don’t know. I’ve never had to use one before.”

He laughed, thinking I was joking.

“No, I’m serious. I don’t know how to do it.”

“I’ll be stepper and you’ll be the mixer.”

“What-”

“Hi Kong Pheng,” a young girl said, blushing. A younger girl next to her was also blushing.

“Afternoon Pa Nhia.” Kong Pheng replied. He turned to me and introduced them.

He introduced me to the girl he called Pa Nhia. She looked like she was around my age. I smiled politely at her. She didn’t smile back in return though. Kong Pheng then introduced me to the younger girl.

“This is Pa Kou, Pa Nhia’s younger sister.” Kong Pheng said.

Unlike Pa Nhia, Pa Kou smiled in return. “Hi.” She said shyly.

I saw the basket of rice grains on their back. “Did you just come back from the rice pounder?” I asked them.

Pa Kou nodded her head and was about to answer but was rudely cut off by Pa Nhia.

“How are you doing?” Pa Nhia asked Kong Pheng.

“I’m doing fine. You guys must be tired from the rice pounder.” He politely said.

“Oh no, not at all,” She replied, giggling covering her mouth with her hand. I could clearly see that this girl really liked him.

Like me, her little sister stood there awkwardly waiting to leave. “How are you doing now Kalia?” she asked me.

“Yes, how are you doing?” Pa Nhia asked. “I hope you’re doing better now.” She smiled at me but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I’m doing fine now thank you.” I replied back, faking a smile myself.

“Kong Pheng,” she began to say, “you should stop by later and have dinner with us. My parents would be delighted.”

“That would be wonderful,” he replied. “I can’t though.”

“Why?” she said, grabbing his arm.

Pa Kou and I looked at each other, eye brows raised. Such a daring move, I thought, touching a guy like that in public. My grandma always told me that Hmong girls back in the day were super shy but apparently this one wasn’t.

“You should come over and have dinner with us,” she insisted.

“There is a lot that-”

“Kong Pheng, are we still going to go?” I asked, annoyed now.

She looked at me with jealousy. “Kong Pheng, promise me that you’ll come,” she whined.

I sighed. I didn’t even want to come with him and now I have to deal with this. “I’m going to go first,” I said. I turned to Pa Kou and smiled at her. “It was nice meeting you Pa Kou.” I said and headed towards the rice pounder.

“Pa Nhia, we should probably get going too. Mother will be wondering why it’s taking us so long,” I heard Pa Kou say.

“Pa Nhia, I would love to but I still have to help my parents first. Perhaps tomorrow.” I heard him say.

I also heard him running to catch up to me. Imagining Pa Nhia’s face filled with anger made me smile. She seemed pretty determined to have Kong Pheng over for dinner.

“Thank you for waiting,” he sarcastically said.

“What? I didn’t want to bother you two.” I said.

“You are jealous of me aren’t you?” he said with a smirk.

“Stop dreaming about it.” I said. “The day I like you would be the day pigs fly.”

“Ouch, that hurts.” He joked. I just laughed at him the rest of the way there.

When we finally arrived to the rice pounder, he explained to me what it was that I was supposed to do. The rice pounder basically looked like a see-saw except for the fact that one end was heavier than the other end. On that heavier end was a short wooden pole that is used to pound the rice grain. Below this pole was the hole that I, the mixer, was to insert rice into. Every now and then, I had to mix the rice grains in the hole so that we were able to remove all of the husk: All the while being careful not

to get my hand caught. Kong Pheng's job was to step on the other end of the pounder to move the pole up and down to pound the rice grains.

"You understand what to do right?" he asked.

I nodded, but was still uneasy about doing it. "What if my hands get caught?"

"Then you'll be in a lot of pain," he said nonchalantly.

"Why can't I do the stepping part?" I asked.

"Because it's too heavy for you," he said.

"How would you know." I argued back.

He sighed. "Just be the mixer. It's a lot easier that way."

"Fine." I grabbed the basket with the grains and scooped a handful into the hole. I tried to catch onto his rhythm but I was too scared to actually mix the grains. I tried over and over again. Sometimes I was quick enough to be able to mix it but most of the time, I missed my chance. Annoyed, he told us to switch spots, making me smile.

"At your rate, we're never going to get this done," he said. "Now watch the pro."

I ignored him and tried lifting up the pounder.

"It's heavy right?" he said.

"I can do this," I said stubbornly. I had to put so much effort just to lift it up.

We were doing fine getting most of it done. I was getting pretty tired stepping on the pounder, when all of a sudden it landed on his hands while he was mixing it.

"Oi!" Kong Pheng said in alarm, jerking away his hand. He covered it with his other hand to help ease the pain.

I couldn't help but burst into laughter. "Not such a pro after all huh?"

He didn't say anything. Instead, he released his hand to examine it, silencing my laughter. His fingers were throbbing red. I could tell that it was going to be turning green in a couple of days. I ran over and crouched down next to him. Unconsciously, I took his hand and blew at it. "I'm so sorry. I should've just stuck with mixing."

"Does it hurt a lot?" I asked continuing to blow at it.

He didn't answer.

"Kong Pheng?" I asked him again, now looking at him.

Kong Pheng cleared his throat. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

"We should go back and put medicine on your hand." I suggested.

"I'll be fine, Kalia." He said getting up. "We can finish this first."

"Are you sure?" I asked still concerned.

He nodded. I switched spots with him so he wouldn't have to use his hands. Like before, I was able to get it at times and other times I wasn't. After a while though, I did get the hand of it and actually started mixing it well.

"I'm doing it," I said proudly clapping my hand. "Kong Pheng, I'm doing it."

I looked up at him with the biggest smile on my face. He smiled at me in return, making my heart skip a beat.

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Puj and I were both sitting quietly by the living room window with the afternoon sunlight streaming in. I had her container of beads on my lap. Each color of bead sorted into its individual container. I watched as she tried to put the thread through the eye of the needle. With her shaky hands, it wasn't an easy task.

"Puj, just let me help you," I laughed.

"Fine, fine," she sighed. "Even with these glasses, I still can't see."

I easily put it through and handed it back to her.

She smiled at me and patted my cheeks. "You're always as sweet as always. What would Puj do without you?"

I smiled back in return. "I'll always be here Puj."

While watching her sew a traditional Hmong outfit for my little cousin, I was debating if I should tell her about the dreams I've been having, it was too vivid for me to forget about them.

"Puj, is it bad if you dream about people, you've never seen before?" I asked her.

She didn't look up. "Don't be silly. You can't dream of someone you've never seen before."

"But I have." I said

She stopped what she was doing up and looked up at me. "What were they about?"

"Well, it's just mainly about Laos." I began.

We spent the rest of the time talking about my dreams. I studied her carefully to look for any signs of concern but her face remained blank. "Puj, I don't know why I'm dreaming of them, but I have been."

"Do you know what their names are?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "No, I don't," I lied.

“If he ask you to go anywhere with him, don’t go Kalia,” she warned me. “If you do, Puj won’t be able to help you.”

I nodded my head understanding, but scared too.

“For the meantime, try not to think about it. Try to forget about it,” she said.

After my talk with Puj, I did try to forget. For a while it wasn’t working, but when it did, I started to regret it. I knew that I dreamt about them at night but when I wake up, I forgot everything that went on. I also knew that I felt more and more drawn to Kong Pheng. As much as I didn’t want to, I knew I was. Puj’s warning always played in my head and reminded me not to follow him, to go with him if he asked. Even though I didn’t remember my dreams, I looked forward to sleeping more and more, in hopes that I will be able to remember a dream, in hopes that I will be able to remember his face in the morning when I wake up.

One night while, I was tucking Puj into bed, she did ask me if I’ve been dreaming about him.

I lied. I shook my head. “No, I haven’t”

She smiled and closed her eyes. I turned off the lamp and quietly closed the door. I went into my room and prepared for bed too. I lay in bed for what seemed like eternity before I finally drifted off into a deep sleep with a smile on my face. I knew I was going to remember this dream.

Both Puj and I were in her room when she was telling me about her life before moving here. I could see that it made her both happy and sad remembering all the things in her past; her family, her friends, her village.

“It was a peaceful life, living up in the mountains of Laos. There was really nothing to worry about except for taking care of your family. I, like many other young girls, was married at a young age. It was when I moved to live with my husband in his village that I met my two close friends.”

“Two friends?” Could those two friends be Kong Pheng and I?

“They both died during the war. It was such a tragic story. Both were still so young too.”

“What were their names?”

“Kong Pheng and Kalia,” she replied, smiling. “You were named after her.”

“Who were they?”

“Well, Kong Pheng was the son of the village leader. He was so handsome and very much single too. Every girl in the village wanted to be his wife. Kalia, now she was different. Kind of reminded me of you, Kong Pheng brought her to the village where she stayed with them. She was so different. She was polite and sweet but she wasn’t shy at all like the other girls. She was really strong willed too arguing all the time with Kong Pheng. I remember her rambling on about guys and their superiority.”

I couldn’t help but smile at it. I dreamt about that too.

She looked at me studying me closely. “The more I think about it...the more you look like her.”

“She looked like me?”



She laughed. "Probably not. I'm just thinking too much about it. Well, Puj wants to take a nap. I'll tell you some more later."

I nodded and help her into bed. I closed the door and let out a sigh. It can't be possible.

That night while I lay awake in bed, that phrase repeated over and over in my head. "*The more I think about it, the more you look like her.*" I just couldn't make sense of it. Why would I be dreaming about Puj when she was still back in Laos? Why would I be dreaming about being Puj's friend? I guess I'll just have to go sleep to figure out that answer.

"If you love him you have to go and tell him Kalia," Mai said

"I know but what if," I couldn't bring myself to say it. It hurts too much.

"It's better to let him know than to not know at all."

My breathing became shortened. My heart beat started beating faster and faster. So many feelings flowed through me. I ran out of the house and up to the mountains to the clearing where they were training. If I didn't tell him now...I know I will never get the chance to again. When I got there, I recognized many of the young men but I didn't see Kong Pheng anywhere. I scanned everyone's face looking for him but he was nowhere in sight.

"You're not supposed to be here," one of the young men said. "You have to go back."

"I'm looking for Kong Pheng," I exclaimed. "I need to find him before it's too late."

"Go back," he demanded, pushing me back down the way I came up.

"Stop! I need to look for him," I pushed back. I was near tears now. This can't be. I have to find him before it's too late. I have to.

"He's not here. He left already."

"Where?!? Where did he go."

"A group of young men volunteered to go first. He was one of them. They left early this morning."

The tears that threatened to come came flowing down my face. "I didn't even get to tell him." I said through sobs. I turned to leave, crying on my way down back to the village; all of this excitement for village when I heard a rustling in the jungle. Puj always told me about the wild animals in the jungle. I looked around for a type of weapon. I knew I was just dreaming but I wasn't ready to die in my dream. The only sort of weapon I found was a large stick. I braced myself to have to face a fierce tiger or wild boar. The rustling got closer and closer.

"What are you doing with that stick Kalia?" He asked me.

My eyes widened. I dropped the stick. The biggest smile spread across my face. So much happiness swelled in my heart that I started to cry yet again.

"Why are you cr-" he was cut short when I ran up to him and threw my arm around his neck.

I didn't say anything. I just cried on his shoulders; tears of joy soaking through his shirt. I have never felt so happy in my whole entire life. To make things even better, he wrapped his arms around me tightly too.

"I thought I was never going to see you again. I have never been so scared in my whole entire life Kong Pheng. You don't know how happy I feel right now."

"Come with me," he said. He held my hand in his and led me into the jungle. He took me to the little pond that we were at days before. He pulled me down to sit next to him on a rock. We both sat there quietly listening to the sound of the bird chirping and the insects crying. We both knew what lay ahead. This was war and with war came many casualties.

"Promise that you will wait for me," he said, breaking the silence, looking out into the pond.

I nodded. "I promise." I couldn't look at him. I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back the tears.

"Promise that you will stay strong," he said turning to look at me.

I refused to look at him. I knew that one look at me and he'll know the answer.

I just nodded, being unable to say anything.

He gently turned my head so I was facing him. "Promise me that you will stay strong."

I knew I couldn't change the past. I knew what was going to happen. I had to accept that fact. This is how it was meant to be. Even if I could change it, something in the future will prevent it from continuing. "I promise."

Kong Pheng went to a nearby tree and picked a leaf from the branch. He then took a needle out from his shirt and pricked his finger. He handed me the needle so I could prick my own finger too. This was what my grandma told me about; the blood bond promise. Her words echoed in my head. "If two couples love each other dearly...and they commit themselves to each other...they will be together forever." I closed my eyes and pricked my finger. I dripped a couple drops into the leaf that Kong Pheng rolled into a cup as he did the same. He then added a little water and held it out to me.

I took the cup. "Together forever." I said and took a sip of it.

He then did the same, drinking the rest of it. "Even now in death, it can't draw us apart."

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