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New Voices

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New Voices

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Winner of the 2020 Creative Writing Award,
and

Angel Turner,

whose artwork *Garden of Youth* was selected as this year's cover.

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Indonesian Rice Terraces
by Valencia Haynes

**“Beneath the Mercy of the Carolina Loblollies”
by Anna Hyatt**



Dad left my Mama when I was seventeen, and the swimming pool went to shit. With each week, each day that passed, its water turned a deeper shade of green, then amber, and the moss crept from the yard across the deck in soft patches, subsuming the sandstone tile which had once spread groomed and smooth, hot against bare running feet under the Carolina sunshine. Broken branches from the loblolly pines that towered around the deck’s edge lay untouched, tangled and knobby, in the pool’s raised flowerbeds—fruits of the rainstorms that washed through South Carolina that spring, unrelentingly, over and over again. In the wind, tall and skinny, they bended and straightened in unison, in slow motion, under the weight of the storm. Their florets clanged together at their tops, rustling and roaring, soft and powerful, small and huge. In the years that have passed, when I’ve come home, I’ve often laid in the soft grass of the front yard late at night and watched them move furiously across the purple skyline and considered how silly it is that we think we own anything at all beneath the mercy of the loblollies. But that spring, Mama would open her window upstairs and fall asleep to their roaring, alone now. And, in the morning, when all was still and silent, she would make her bed, sit on its corner, and watch the pool turn green, then amber, converting itself back to its natural state, turning into itself, under the gaze of her abandon from the window.

I’d power up her stairs to say goodbye, in a hurry, backpack strapped to my shoulders, and see her sitting there, watching, straight-backed. “I’m leaving, Mama, I’ll see you tonight.” Moving between her and the window, I’d stand, still unnoticed. “Mama, I love you. I’m leaving. I’ll see you tonight.”

She’d meet my eyes with a detached sort of smile, and say softly, “The pool looks like shit.”

This is a story about a pool.

...

In 1989, my Dad worked as a banjo teacher for a grungy music store in a strip mall in downtown Spartanburg, a few miles from the home where he’d grown up with his parents, Bobby and Wanda, and his brother Steve. Steve had become a good man, a tall man, of six-

two, with a black mustache and a perm hairdo and a baby son who was also named Steve. Dad was the first in his family to leave Spartanburg and go to college, and he graduated from a small one in Tennessee in the spring of 1985, and Bobby and Wanda and both Steves cheered from the stands as he crossed the stage.

He wrote poems, and after college he moved to Columbia where he learned how to write them with James Dickey. Dad packed his car with boxes, books, guitars, and bongos and unloaded them all into an upstairs apartment he'd found in a newspaper ad. At night, he'd sit at his desk under lamp light and write beautiful poems, and during the day, James Dickey himself would sometimes ask him to read them for the class. Dad would call Bobby and Wanda with the news, and they'd take turns talking to him on the kitchen phone. I can imagine Wanda's voice through the phone, cooing, "Well, Mark, I've always told you those poems are *real* good. Pastor Tom has the one you did about Peter and Jesus hung right above his desk at the church. Mhm. He sure does. I told you those poems are real good."

Dad didn't finish writing poems at the university, and instead, only a few months later, he packed his apartment back in his car, all the boxes and books and guitars and bongos, all the new poems, and drove right back to Spartanburg and never told anyone why, which is how he ended up at the music store in the strip mall, teaching kids how to play the banjo. He moved out to a house on the farm in Pauline that was free to rent from a great uncle on the condition that he would keep the grass cut.

The house was a wooden white farmhouse, built by farm hands in the 1800s with the wood of the pines that surrounded it. It had been abandoned for years. Ivy crept along the walls; tree branches pierced through forgotten windows. The house had four big bedrooms, no electricity, no plumbing, and no closets. The hardwood floors had peeled and creaked and tarnished under a hundred years of footsteps. Dad unloaded his things in the corner of one of the first-floor bedrooms and laid a mattress on the worn hardwood floor. In the afternoons, he made good on his promise, working his way with a mower across the rolling fields of the Pauline farmland.

My Mama is named Salley, after a war general. Her father, Bobby, was a fighter pilot in the Vietnam War, who landed and took off from aircraft carriers along the Pacific Ocean. In

1969, he came back home to South Carolina where he and my grandmother bought a bungalow house in a nice neighborhood, had my Mama, and named her Salley. Bobby got a good job as a software salesman, and, at night, after dinner, he would drink beer on the screened-in porch and pick Johnny Cash tunes on his tattered banjo, worn with salt and sun from his years on the Pacific. Mama would sit cross legged at his feet in her pajamas and watch him play.

Mama grew up to be beautiful, and she is still beautiful, the most beautiful person I've ever seen in my life. Dad bought a camcorder in 1993, a year after they got married, and the first video he took was of my mama, lying on the couch in their house in Nashville in the summer time, the windows open, her tan legs propped up, fans running, trying to stay cool. Dad sits on the shag carpet behind the camera and pans up to her lying there, long brown hair piled on top of her head in a banana clip, wearing a Rolling Stones t-shirt, watching tv. She notices him, smiles sweetly, and says, "Are you videoing me?" He waits a moment and replies, "How could I not capture such a thing of beauty?"

Mama is too beautiful, painfully beautiful, youthfully and maternally and eternally beautiful. She has a big wide grin and smooth brown hair. She has soft hands and always walks barefoot. She has a soft, slow, South Carolina accent, full of thought and cadence. She is always tan and never has to paint her fingernails and toenails. All of her life, she has seemed to be some unique amalgamation of a little girl, a mother, and an old woman. When I was growing up, she planted vegetable gardens in the spaces in our front yards between the road and the sidewalks, full of snap peas, corn, and tomatoes, and left signs inviting passersby to pick from it and take home what they needed. She sewed and smocked all our church clothes, hand stitching rosettes into inside seams that only we would ever see. She's a teacher, and for years she taught in the inner-city schools of Nashville and Austin, teaching Algebra and Calculus to high-schoolers in rough neighborhoods, patient and unwavering towards the children who clung desperately to her care, who called her "Miss Honey."

When mama was seventeen, the same age I was when Dad left, she was in a car accident. It was senior skip day, and the better part of the senior class came to her dad, Bobby's, little shack on the lake for a party. They pulled up to the house and lugged cases of

beer onto the dock and spent the day riding on Bobby's boat, pulling water skis behind, dancing under the sun in bathing suits on the splintered wooden dock. When all the beer was gone, mama piled into the car with two of her friends. They rolled down the windows. They played music loud over the radio, and mama rested her elbow on the ledge of the open window from the backseat, watching the tall banks of pine trees whirl past, the summer sun against her forehead.

In only a moment the car would lose control, fly off the road, and send mama's arm out the window, against the bank of whirling loblollies, hitting one after the other until the car would turn on its side in a ditch off the road, mama's right arm hanging onto her limp body by only a few strands of muscle under her shoulder. Her friends ripped cloth from woven seat covers, tied a makeshift tourniquet. Waved frantically for help. Cried and pleaded to oncoming traffic to save my mama under the mercy of the highway 51 loblollies. An ambulance arrived and rushed my mama to the hospital where she was pulled into an emergency surgery room that she wouldn't leave for twelve hours, as doctors strained to put Bobby's beautiful daughter back together.

Mama didn't walk across the stage for high school graduation that spring. A few weeks after the surgery, she would emerge from the hospital and go home, her right arm pieced together with skin grafts, stitches, and casts, never to be usable again. In the next months, she recovered from home, learning to write and eat and brush her teeth with her left hand.

My grandparents say that, after her arm and the loblollies, mama was different. That there was another version of my mama, before the loblollies, that I would never know. That she was once fearless, a fast-talker, but that after, she became much slower in her ways. That she began to seem to whisper when she spoke. That some mysterious, silent force became a part of her. An inner world, inside of the wide grin and warmth, that was heavy and secret and disconnected. In the middle of a conversation, her eyes would drift towards the nearest window, seeing something important and far-off in the world that was only visible to her.

This is the way she looked at the swimming pool.

I want to write a story about love, but it occurs to me that I know a lot more about pools and loblolly trees. Car accidents and old white houses in Pauline. Pieces of stories I've heard

over and over again, been a part of, ruminated over. They all grow, fall, turn, weave themselves together in inexplicable ways.

Two years after mama's car accident, at dinner with her parents, she dropped a fork, and miraculously, a finger on her right hand, sitting numbly on the table, twitched. In the coming weeks and months she would gain back the movement of her fingers, her wrist, and finally, her arm. After her last appointment with her doctor, she rode home in the passenger seat while her mama drove and held her hand in front of her, wriggling her fingers, closing and opening a fist. Struck by the newfound freedom, she beamed and said to her mama, "I want to learn to play the banjo."

So that's how mama ended up calling up a grungy music shop in a strip mall and making an appointment with the only banjo teacher they had on staff, a young fellow who lived in an abandoned old white house in Pauline who spent his afternoons making good on his promise, mowing fields of grass in the hot South Carolina sun. And that's how she learned to play the banjo. And how she would move into the old white house, sew curtains to adorn its forgotten windows, plant vegetable gardens in its beds. And that's how she had three children, who would all learn to talk and walk and play and love under the South Carolina loblollies.

And that's how, when we all got big, Dad would decide to put in a swimming pool. Dad and mama picked out slate and lining and diving boards from choices in a magazine, and yellow bulldozers came to clear the land and to dig a spot in the earth for it to be built. Workers poured cement, smoothed in with metal spatulas. And when it was finished, in the summertime, my brothers and I would play in the cool, light blue water. Dad would blow off the deck, dip testing strips into the water to check the levels, pour salt and chlorine into the filters.

And then, how some years later, the earth would reclaim it, the water turning to amber, the deck turning to moss, as mama watched from her bedroom window. And it would seem fitting, appropriate, that the earth would recover the things it had loaned to us. It would seem to be some inevitable part of the cycle of love, of my mama—the recovering. The new, soft, earth-filled pool seemed to have some redeeming power of its own. And mama would look at

it, caught by the amber glow in the middle of conversation, washing the dishes in the kitchen sink, planting her gardens.

And mama and I would go out with bags of salt and chlorine, watch instructional videos, call a handyman, and try to put the pool back together, but it would never give itself back over completely. And when we were done, at night, we would lie back in the pool chairs, her tan legs propped up, her graying hair piled up in a banana clip, and she would tell me stories about her dad playing banjo on the screened in porch, living in the old white house, all the moments that tangled together to lead us to one another, lying on pool chairs on the moss-covered deck, next to the pool that looked like shit. And, together, we'd watch the loblollies above move furiously across the purple skyline, all-knowing, powerful, alive.

**“Whispers in the Dark”
by Jordan Morse**



“Shit,” Lexi cursed, looking from side to side for witnesses. The hallway was deserted except for a cockroach that had to be at least the size of her thumb. Lexi’s back protested as she bent down to retrieve her fallen keys. She slid the key into the lock, grimacing as the sound of the turning deadbolt echoed loudly in the empty space. The door moaned as she pushed it open. She would have to buy lubricant if she ever got around to going to the store.

The apartment had been considered posh when the building was first built. However, time and revolving tenants had taken its toll on the place. The wood floors were worn and faded, the polish long gone from decades of harsh chemicals. The walls were dingy with tar stains that bled through the white paint. It wasn’t much to look at, but it was the cheapest she could find close enough to the hospital. With her crazy schedule it wasn’t like she was there much anyway. Why should she care that the kitchen countertops had seen better days so long as there was enough space for her coffee pot?

Lexi trudged tiredly through the apartment, yelping in pain when she hit her shin on the cardboard box that served as her coffee table. She had been living in the apartment for four months already, but she still hadn’t gotten around to unpacking everything, or purchasing grown-up furniture, for that matter. She limped her way toward her bedroom—using the minimal moonlight that shone through the windows to navigate the labyrinth of boxes and bags. Maybe if she ever got a weekend off, she would finally unpack.

The twenty-seven-year-old had graduated from medical school in the top five percent of her class and had pretty much had her pick of residency programs. Rather than stay close to home in North Carolina, she had applied at several larger hospitals in the hopes of expanding her horizons. Her aunt hadn’t been too thrilled when Lexi told her she was moving to Chicago. Despite being warned of the high crime rate associated with the bigger city, Lexi was set on going—no matter how fervently the older woman had advised against it.

She was beginning to think Aunt Betsy had been right.

Lexi had been on day rotation at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for the last several days, and, in that time, she had treated twelve gunshot wounds and fifteen stab wounds, lost

five patients to gang violence, and examined eleven patients from violent sexual assaults. Chicago was known for its violence for a reason. She hadn't really given it too much thought before it had become a constant in her life.

That day, however, had been particularly awful; it always was when children were involved. A whole family had come in through the ER, all with gunshot wounds. The father had come in with a police escort and a missing ear. It seemed that he was going to be arrested for some crime or other and had decided that, instead of being taken in by the police, he would take his family hostage. He had intended murder/suicide, but the police had startled him when he tried to turn the gun on himself, causing the bullet to destroy his ear. The mother had been DOA, having succumbed to her chest wound en route. The 10-year-old twin girls had nearly matching gut shots. They had only been able to save one of the twins.

Lexi groaned as she tossed her duffel bag on the floor next to the bed and fell, still fully clothed, onto her bed. Pressing the toe of one white sneaker into the heel of the other, she managed to release one of her feet from its prison. One more push on the opposite heel freed her other foot. The sweet release was almost enough to make her cry out in relief, and she might have if it hadn't been for the throbbing that followed the momentary bliss. She really needed to try out the insole finder machine at the store... if she ever got around to going.

A small bell jingled somewhere near the bed, and Lexi felt something furry rubbing against the tops of her dangling feet. There was a sudden weight on her back, and the sensation of small paws making their way up her back made her smile despite her exhaustion.

"Hey, Yang," Lexi cooed at her cat as he rubbed his face on the back of her head. "Did you miss me, buddy?"

The white and black cat purred as he settled down beside her. Sometimes Lexi swore he understood her completely, especially times like these when he seemed to know she needed his company. She had thought that being away from home would be exciting, but it had ended up just being lonely. If it weren't for Yang, she wouldn't have any friends. Hell, she hadn't really had time to make any. Her life consisted of work and sleep.

Lexi begrudgingly got up to change out of her street clothes. She debated briefly over whether or not to dig through the unfolded laundry in the basket for pajamas. Ultimately, she

climbed under the covers pajamaless. She didn't even have to call the cat; he had moved to his usual spot as soon as she'd lay down.

"G'night, Yangie-boy," Lexi bid, yawning as Yang's rhythmic breathing next to her lulled her to sleep.

Lexi woke up cold and disoriented. The room was dark. The only light was the dim haze from streetlamps filtering in through thin, red curtains—creating an eerie aura. She wasn't sure what had awoken her, but, as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, a sound seemed to creep out from the cracks between the floorboards and in the walls.

It was a low hiss at first, barely noticeable above the hum of the heater, but it gradually got louder and more defined. It rose to a whisper, and she began to pick up on what sounded like words and bits of a conversation.

... stay away... won't hurt... would never... ever again...

At first, she tried to ignore it, assuming it must be someone in one of the adjacent apartments. The walls were rather thin, after all. However, the whispers just continued to get louder, repeating and growing until it was like someone was in the room with her, whispering with others.

Stay away from me... Please.

I told you before, I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you.

He won't hurt you ever again.

Should she call the police? But what would she tell them? That she heard voices? They would think she was crazy. *Chances are, it's just the neighbor's television,* she reassured herself.

Lexi looked at her nightstand clock. It was four in the morning. She needed more rest. She had to make the most of her days off if she was going to make it through her residency. The noise had stopped sometime after she'd looked at the clock, so she turned over and tried to fall back asleep. It took her a while, but she managed to drift into a fitful sleep filled with vague images washed in red.

Lexi groaned as her alarm buzzed from her nightstand. She felt like she had been put through a grinder. It had been two months since the whispers had begun. At first, she had been able to brush it off as something from one of her neighbors' apartments, but the second and third times were harder to explain away. The conversation grew every time, and, as more was revealed, she became more uncomfortable. At this point, she had heard them twenty-five nights, and they were becoming more frequent. In fact, she hadn't slept through the night for a week, and when she did sleep, she had unsettling dreams.

Last night's dream had been the most upsetting yet. A girl cowered in the corner of the room as a man approached her. There was a struggle, and then there was blood. Bright red splattered the walls and puddled in the floor. At the end, a figure with a bloody knife stood over the man lying on the floor, in the middle of it all. Lexi hadn't been able to make out the girl's or the man's features, but the figure at the end was all cruelly satisfied smiles and hollow eyes, and that was what disturbed her the most.

Lexi rolled over to cuddle with Yang for a few minutes before she had to get up. The cat purred in her arms, momentarily content with receiving her affection. She had begun to drift back to sleep when her ringtone blared from her phone's speakers. She thought about letting it go to voicemail, but when she looked at the caller ID, she knew she couldn't. Her aunt would just continue to call until she answered. Clearing her throat, she swiped right.

"Hey, Aunt Betsy," Lexi greeted, attempting to sound cheerful.

"*You sound awful,*" Aunt Betsy said, a hint of worry apparent in her voice even over the phone. "*Are you sick? Do I need to fly up there and make you some of my chicken noodle soup?*"

Lexi thought of the empty take out containers and pizza boxes that cluttered her countertop. Her cooking skills consisted of reheating fried rice and microwaving ramen noodles. She missed her aunt's cooking. She could almost taste the salty goodness of the homemade broth and the sweetness of the chopped carrots in that soup. It was tempting to agree to let her aunt come take care of her, but Lexi knew she couldn't do that. Her aunt had looked after her for over fifteen years. It was time for her to be independent.

"I'm ok, just tired," she sighed. "I knew it'd be like this when I started Med school."

"But still," Aunt Betsy cautioned, "you need to take care of your health. You know how you get."

"I know, Aunt Betsy," Lexi replied, her voice tight as she absentmindedly scratched behind Yang's ears. The feline pushed his head further into her hand, and some of the tension left her body. She knew her aunt was coming from a place of concern, but Lexi still felt the implication that she was deficient in some way.

"If you're really stressed, maybe you could find a good therapist there," she continued. "I'm sure Dr. Shelley would fax your records over. She helped you so much after... well, you know..."

Aunt Betsy trailed off. She always avoided talking about what had happened to Lexi's parents. Lexi never understood why she was so hesitant. People have car accidents every day. In fact, she saw at least five on a good day in the ER.

"Really, I'm ok," Lexi assured her.

"Well, you might oughtta try to make some friends," Aunt Betsy suggested. "You keep to yourself way too much."

"I don't really have time for friends, but Yang keeps me company." Lexi smiled as she ran her hand along the cat's back.

"Well, if you need anything, you be sure to call me," her aunt insisted. Lexi could clearly picture the pout the woman was likely sporting.

"Ok, I will," Lexi agreed. Yang jumped down from the bed and meowed loudly, pacing from the bed to the door and back. "Well, I gotta go. Yang is hungry, and he ain't gonna shut up until I feed him."

They said their goodbyes and Lexi ended the call. She stretched before swinging her legs out from under the covers and standing up, wincing as her bare feet touched the frigid floor. Following the cat to the kitchen, she set about filling his bowls and starting a pot of coffee. She wasn't really hungry, but she had a long shift that day and would need energy. She poured a bowl of cereal, grimacing as she forced herself to eat the sugarcoated cardboard. Even her coffee tasted off.

Lexi blinked as she got off the bus in front of the hospital. Where had the time gone, and how did she get there? She had been on autopilot most of the morning, not even registering the clothes she'd grabbed from the basket. She'd wandered all the way to the bus stop without really seeing her surroundings.

She had started losing periods of time. At first, the gaps had been tiny, several minutes here and there. She'd brushed it off as the lack of sleep catching up to her since she still hadn't been sleeping well. The voices and dreams plagued her to the point where she was afraid to stay awake, but she feared the nightmares more. Recently, the gaps had gotten longer, spanning up to a couple of hours. She would zone out at one place and find herself somewhere completely different or doing something random.

It scared her, to say the least. What if she were to zone out at work? Or walk out into traffic? She had to do something, but seeing a psychiatrist was out of the question. Rumors travelled fast. Her residency program was extremely competitive. If she were to show a weakness like that, the other residents would jump at the chance to thin the herd.

If I could just get some decent sleep and settle all my sleep debt... Lexi's eyes fell on the locked medicine cabinet. It seemed to glow, as if it held the answers to all her problems. Of all the medications in it, there had to be something that would knock her out. The over-the-counter stuff hadn't helped, but hospital strength stuff might. Tomorrow was her day off, so she could sleep all day and come back to work refreshed and sane. *Just one dose won't be missed, right?*

Lexi yawned and stretched. Glancing at her alarm clock, she smiled. It seemed that the Triazolam had done its job. She felt better than she had in months and had slept for sixteen hours. She was still a little foggy, but she was sure it would go away once she started moving around.

She had been nervous about stealing the medicine, but now she knew that she'd done the right thing. She was a doctor, after all. Why shouldn't she be able to fix herself? Don't her patients deserve to be seen by someone capable of doing what it takes to solve a problem?

Lexi walked into the kitchen, the fog dissipating more with every step. She looked around, wondering what was missing. As her eyes fell on the cat food in the corner, she realized what it was. She hadn't seen Yang since she'd woke up.

"Yang?" she called out in a singsong voice. The cat had been in bed with her when she'd fallen asleep. Usually, he would insist on being fed as soon as she woke up. She poured a cup of food into his empty bowl, hoping that the sound would bring him running. "Yangie-boy? Come out kitty, kitty."

Nothing. Lexi scratched her head and tried looking in the living room. The apartment had plenty of places for a cat to hide. There were boxes sitting around. Maybe he had fallen asleep in one of them. She checked all of them, even the ones that were still taped shut, but there was still no sign of Yang. She checked the front door and the windows, in case they had been left open and he'd escaped, but they were all locked tight.

She had checked every nook and cranny she could think of. She looked in closets, in cabinets, and under the bed, but the cat wasn't in any of those places. There was only one place else to look. The only reason she hadn't checked the bathroom before was that Yang never went in there. He associated it with baths, and he hated them with every fiber of his being. Still, she had exhausted every other possibility.

As soon as she got to the closed door, she knew something was off. There were no desperate meows coming from the other side of the door, no frantic scratches, only a slight metallic scent. Dread washed over Lexi as she reached for the handle. Whatever she was about to find, she knew it wouldn't be good. Swallowing the lump in her throat and closing her eyes, she slowly turned the handle and the door creaked open.

That wet iron smell she'd associated with blood bags washed over her, bidding her to stay away. She knew she had to look, even if she didn't want to. Lexi tried not to breathe too deeply as she stepped forward into the bathroom and opened her eyes. She couldn't hold back the scream that forced its way from inside her.

There, on the shower tile, were two words scrawled in red, dripping letters.

Hi, Lexi

Once she regained her faculties, Lexi rushed forward toward the bathtub, nearly slipping on a streak of blood in her haste. She knew what she would find, but she hoped she wouldn't.

"Yang!" she wailed as she saw mangled pink and black fur floating in red-tinted water. There was a pair of bloody handprints on the edge of the tub and bloody scissors lay nearby. "My poor baby. Who did this to you?"

She was about to reach in and grab her murdered pet, when banging on the front door stopped her. *Who could that be?* What if it was whoever killed Yang returning to finish her off too? Or what if the hospital had actually missed that dose of sleeping pills and called the police?

Scenario after scenario raced through her mind as she made her way to the door. They were still knocking. She checked the peephole. A lanky man with glasses came into view. She had seen him briefly before, bringing bags of groceries to the octogenarian next door. He must have heard her scream and come to investigate. Lexi opened the door just enough for her body to block the way in, leaving the man's fist hovering in the air, knocking on nothing.

"I'm Tom from next door. Are'ya ok?" the man asked, peering through the crack at her. "I heard a scream."

"Yeah, I, uh, that was me," Lexi replied. "I was watchin' a horror movie. I'm not too good with jump-scares."

She must have looked a mess because Tom squinted his eyes, as if studying her for any indication of a lie. Lexi held her breath and tried to seem in control of herself, even though her heart was pounding. He seemed satisfied with her answer until he looked down at her feet.

"Miss, you're bleedin' on da floor," Tom said, pointing to her bloody footprints. She looked down, momentarily letting go of the door. It was long enough for him to push it further open and start following the footprints toward the bathroom. "I'm an EMT. Where d'ya keep your first aid kit?"

"That's not necessary! I'm a doctor; I can patch myself up," Lexi insisted, running after him to try to cut him off before he reached his destination. But his long legs covered more distance than her shorter ones.

"What da fuck?!" Tom exclaimed as he entered the bathroom. "What kinda sicko are'ya?"

Damn thin walls and nosey neighbors! What if he calls the cops and they find the medicine and think I did this? Lexi's mind swam, panic overtaking her senses as Tom continued to interrogate her about the dead cat. Then she stilled when she heard it, a familiar whisper.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you, just like I always have."

Blood.

Lexi looked around in horror at her once white bathroom. There was blood everywhere. There were sprays of it on the shower curtain, puddles on the linoleum, and smears of it down the walls in the shape of fingers leading down to where Tom lay, still and open-eyed on his stomach with blood seeping from his back and temple.

She clenched her hands into fists, only to realize that one of them held the pair of scissors. Her hands were covered in sticky, cooling blood all the way up to her elbows. Shocked, she released the weapon, allowing it to fall to the floor with a clink. She backed away from Tom's body. She turned to leave the bathroom, but something caught her eye.

From the mirror, hollow eyes and a satisfied smile stared back at her. And yet, it looked a lot like her.

"He can't hurt you now. I told you I would take care of you," the doppelgänger whispered, *"just like I did back then."*

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" Lexi asked, trembling.

"That asshole wasn't satisfied with your mother. No, he was always coming to you once she was asleep. But I took care of him for you," it responded.

"My parents died in a car crash. Aunt Betsy said--" she began.

"Aunt Betsy is a liar. She never told you because she thought you were weak. That's why she didn't want you to leave her side," the doppelgänger scoffed.

Deep down, she knew. Somehow, she had always known. Bits of memories flashed through Lexi's mind. Her stepfather's late-night visits, the blood on her then smaller hands, her mother being led away in handcuffs as she told Lexi it would all be ok; it all started to come

back. Everything she had forgotten or locked away came rushing in like flood waters breaking a levee.

And Yang, poor Yang, was among them. The horrible things she had done to him. The cat had hissed and struggled as she grabbed him by the nape of his neck and held him under water until he stopped moving. She had dragged him out of the tub and carved him up on the bathroom floor using the shears she had bought for trimming her bangs. How could such a small thing bleed so much?

"Oh, now you remember," the mirror image remarked wryly. *"To think, all this time I just had to get rid of that stupid cat."*

"What did Yang do to deserve that?" she cried.

"He got in the way of us," the copy retorted. Lexi could feel the underlying anger. *"After everything I did for you, you forgot me. You put me in a box and never let me out!"*

"You said you would take care of me, but you killed my only friend!" Lexi yelled, her body shaking as she white-knuckled the sides of the sink. "I don't need you! So, just fuck off!"

"I'm not going back in, Goddamnit. I'm here to stay," it seethed. *"You can go in the box this time."*

Lexi felt a push at the edge of her consciousness, and her vision blurred.

"You should have stayed gone!" she said, resisting the urge to give into the pressure behind her eyes.

"Ungrateful little bitch," the doppelgänger sneered. *"That man was right about one thing. Your body is the only useful thing about you."*

Lexi felt like she had been kicked in the gut. Now that she had remembered, she couldn't forget the way he had made her feel worthless and dirty. She couldn't forget how she'd spend an hour in the shower after every visit, scrubbing her skin raw. Her skin itched at the memory. She closed her eyes and swallowed down bile.

"You know, I think I deserve to have some fun," it continued, its tone changing to gleeful. *"That old lady next door might miss that lump over there. I think I'll start with her."*

"No!" Lexi yelled, her eyes popping open wide. She couldn't let that happen. That thing needed her body to do anything. She frantically scanned the room for a weapon. Her eyes landed on the scissors.

"What are you doing?!" the doppelgänger screeched. *"No, put those down!"*

"I am ending this once and for all," Lexi said. She took a deep breath and plunged the scissors deep into her neck, severing her carotid artery. She fell to the floor, her vision tunneling. Warm blood poured down her chest, but she was cold. *I'm sorry, Yang.*

The apartment was left silent.



**“Black Plague Doctor”
by Berrenger Franklin**

**“The Teacher with No Classroom and the Boy from the Fields”
by Itzel Sanchez**

Lately, in the news, immigrants have been presented as murderers, rapists, and thieves. Although this may be true in some cases, I am here to explain how two immigrants have inspired me to be who I am today and to work hard to one day accomplish my dream. These two immigrants, who are now American citizens, are my parents. I have seen my parents go through so many obstacles such as financial instability, class stratification, and work-related injuries, and not only have they overcome these obstacles, but they have exceeded all of my expectations and have given me more than what I deserve.

One of the reasons many immigrants come to America is to have the financial security that they cannot have in their home country. This is the exact reason both of my parents came to America. When my father arrived, he was only thirteen years old and was soon enrolled in a local middle school. While attending middle school, my father would often go along with my grandparents to the fields and help them pick leather leaves in order to help out with costs. Life was hard in Florida for their family, and they decided to relocate to South Carolina, although much did not change for his family as he went on to high school. As a sophomore in high school, my father made the decision to drop out of school in order to work in a factory to help provide for his family. Not being able to graduate high school caused my father to never really have a well-paying job, but my father was blessed with people in his life who helped him get jobs, and that way he was able to provide for our family. My father has now followed his passion for cars and has opened his mechanic shop, but in the beginning, it was not easy. There was more money going out of our home than coming in, he spent many late nights working instead of being home, and many band concerts and soccer were games missed, but not once did I ever see my father give up and neglect his responsibilities at home as head of household. Because of all my parents' hard work, my family has a comfortable life, and I will forever be thankful for that.

My mother is the daughter of a house maid and a well-known politician; as a result of this, she was able to experience two very different ways of life. During the first part of her life, she was raised by her grandparents and lived life as lower class, but by the time my mother

turned six, she met her father. It was then that my mother experienced things of the higher class. She started attending a private catholic school and was given the best resources to finish out her career. When my grandfather died, my mother was only sixteen years old, and with her being the youngest of sixteen children, my mother did not get her part of the inheritance. This meant that she had no money to pursue her career of being a lawyer. When she applied for a position in a school that helped lower income students, she was denied because of social stratification; she was known to have money because of who her father was. My mother was then allowed to continue her degree in teaching because her father had never missed a payment when he was alive. When my mother completed her degree, she did not have money to buy her own classroom as was necessary, so she chose to drop her life and everything she ever knew to begin a new life in America working in a factory.

Not working has never been an option for my parents. Even with my mother being in her pregnancy full term, she worked twelve hours in the same factory along with my father and even continued after I was born. After many years of enduring factory work, my parents' bodies have deteriorated and become weak. Even with this, they never stopped working; they never missed a day of work. I watched my mother go to work with a torn meniscus for a week straight until she could no longer physically walk. I have seen my father break his arm and go to work the very next day. If it wasn't for their work ethic, I wouldn't have all of the nice things I have today, but most importantly, I wouldn't have the motivation to follow my dreams and finish my career.

So today as I sit at my desk of my dorm room dreading going to class, I think of all of the hard work my parents have done to get my two younger siblings and me where we are today. Not only did my parents show me the value of work, but they showed me compassion and always had a smile and a hug to offer when I was feeling unmotivated. It is because of them that I believe in my crazy dream that one day I can become a plastic surgeon. But I know that, with my parents by my side, anything I put my mind to is possible. With my parents by my side, I know that the only leather leaves my hands will ever touch are those of a rose bouquet, I know that I will get my operating room, my sister will get her spot she deserves in a courtroom,

and my brother will get the lab bench he deserves. To the two immigrants who never got to live out their dreams but worked immensely hard so I could, thank you.

“girlfriend”

by Avigayil Mudd

5am rosary

clearing dust out your head

summertime rope choking tree

but it already fell down dead

and you love her

even in the fear of rapture

and you pray

but you don't ever receive no answers

cause she brings you down to your

knees

bone pressed against

wood

adoring her forever

“no gods, no masters”



Autumn Range
by Angel Turner

**“Clear Skies Ahead”
by Alison Rodriguez**

My sister had the largest room in the house and filled it accordingly. From floor to ceiling, she stockpiled and hoarded until the floor couldn't be seen and one could never be quite sure what color the walls were. Her queen bed was large and imposing, with its oversized box springs, mattress, and thick foam topper. The bed frame itself stood white and proud, covered from head to toe with a surplus of pillows, covers, throw blankets, and quilts. Somewhere among the chaos was a lumpy, uneven throw blanket that I'd crocheted for her in Home Ec. The walls were covered with mirrors, photo boards filled with pictures of her and her current boyfriend, picture frames that housed her high school diploma and graduation portrait, magazine cut-outs of delicately pretty women and the buffest dudes imaginable, and a fabric Elvis Presley poster from our Aunt Norma, which stood out from the rest with its large size and blinding neon colors. At the foot of the bed, a large armoire, a mirrored dressing table, and a plush armchair were squished into the final three feet of the room before being met by the unrelenting force of the wall, outside of which there was a large oak tree and a slightly smaller sweetgum tree. And, when the winds got high and the rain pounded into the ground as thunder roared through the sky, these two trees held onto each other and swayed with reckless abandon, which always caused the little girls watching out the window to shiver in fear.

After the storm was over, we'd forget our fear and move on to arguing with each other while our parents' louder, more dangerous argument reverberated through the thin walls that separated the living room from her bedroom, which was our safe haven when anything became too much to handle. We'd huddle on her bed, ignore what our ears wanted us to acknowledge, and focus on the movie playing on the TV above the mirrored vanity. We looked like two bears roused from their hibernation cycle, disoriented, bleary-eyed, and confused as we propped our knees up and slid lower into the bed to hide from our reflections. Our eyes would trail from the movie to the groups of ridiculously large tissue paper balls that were suspended from the ceiling and swaying at the will of the ceiling fan, which one tended to overlook until everything else had been looked at and digested because it was white and

underwhelming in my sister's magnificent world of color. We could converge naturally underneath the comforting warmth and weight of the blankets stacked high above us and fall into a moment of peaceful sleep. When we woke up, everything would be okay again.

Her closet was separated from her dressing table by two large hampers that sat underneath the small window overlooking the pair of swaying trees. It was always stuffed to the brim with things both ordinary and curious, and I was so enthralled by her possessions that I often snuck into her room to dig through and admire them for just a moment before she got home from a date with some guy whose name I never cared to remember. Her clothes were crammed on the clothing rod from one side to the other, with no room to spare. The shelf above her clothes housed all her decorations, which included a Christmas tree, a nativity scene, a plethora of Christmas ornaments, turkey and bunny figurines, and enough Halloween pumpkins to supply every one of our neighbors with two or three of their own. On the bottom shelf, underneath her imposing wall of clothing, there were countless shoeboxes that contained both shoes and her never-ending supply of secret, purposefully hidden curiosities that I was so endlessly enthralled by. But, to get to these shoeboxes, one had to work hard indeed. There was a mountain of clothes that couldn't be contained on the clothes rod, and, as a result, spilled out of the closet in the way an overstuffed belly spills over the waistband of a pair of skinny jeans that are four sizes too small. The clean clothes often mingled with the dirty ones, which overflowed with equal vigor out of her oversized hampers.

The mess of clothes came to a haphazard end at my sister's dressing table. But this table was covered with its own distinct chaos, overburdened with excessive amounts of makeup, hair products, and lumps of tangled jewelry that gathered around the naked jewelry tree she bought specifically to avoid such messes. Despite its mess, this was the spot she treasured. It's the place where she spent so much time adorning herself with heavy makeup and cheap jewelry with the anticipation and relentless desire of finding true love in her new boyfriend.

In the small square of space in between the armoire and the dressing table, there was a crate filled with lacy underwear and push-up bras, which were often shuffled through and found to be unsatisfactory and uncomfortable as my sister nursed her broken heart after being

unable to find any lasting love in a long succession of insensitive, abusive, and quirky teenage boys.

Squeezed beside the dressing table was a large mirrored armoire, the house of practicality. It was filled to the brim with quilts, extra pillows, Band-Aids, rubbing alcohol, Lysol, Noxzema, and anything else my sister could catch on sale when she had enough cash to pay for it. And, in the bottom of the cabinet, weighed down by the disorder of the materials above, my sister hid her diaries, which I often searched through after I discovered them while searching for more things to satisfy my boredom and insatiable curiosity. I never told her I found them, but I learned more of her private thoughts than I should have. I learned of her want for love, her willingness to submit to the pleasure of a man for the moment of physical love and affection that came with it, and her hatred for our father for treating our mother like she was nothing more than dirt under his feet. But I was too young to help her. I had no knowledge and no words of comfort that could soothe her perpetually broken heart. And, many years later, I've realized that I've been running from that same brokenness all this time. It's a weight I'm still under, and a weight I'm nearly certain my sister is still desperately yearning to escape.

Underneath all this mess, there were two large rugs. One was red and the other blue, but both were elaborately patterned and always exquisitely dirty. They were covered with discarded shoes, mismatched socks, broken hair bows, soggy sucker sticks, and crumpled-up school newsletters filled with stale chewing gum. My sister was nimble on her feet and able to maneuver her way over all these obstacles. I was not so lucky, often stumbling over a particularly heavy pair of platform heels or stopping to peel a price tag sticker off the ball of my foot as I chased after her. I was always ready to talk to her about food and toys and complain about the scrape on my knuckles, which I got from jumping on my bed and letting my hand dig into the popcorn texture on the ceiling. We'd laugh and talk about nothing much at all as we tried to ignore the vibrating walls, the booming voices. She'd often dress me up and cover my face in her least favorite make-up as we passed the time and tried to ignore the empty, nervous pit in our stomachs.

My sister was twenty when she graduated from college, twenty-one when she married a guy that she'd only known for two months. Six years her junior, I was still in high school, still dazed and confused about the reality of the world. I was so surprised at how easily she managed to pack her whole life into thirty-three moving boxes. She left quickly, leaving no trace of herself behind. After she was gone, I couldn't help but feel lonely. All the time she used to spend with me was now being spent with some guy who knew nothing about her, knew nothing of her deepest, most private wants. I knew her better than anyone else in the world, more than my sister even wanted me to know. I was upset because she'd left me for this random goon who would never be able to understand her. I felt betrayed and conflicted. I still do.

The day after my sister was gone, my parents moved me into her newly emptied and freshly cleaned room. They said a change of place would be good and helped me pack all my things away. But, with my twin bed, small stack of clothes, and two boxes full of books, video games, school awards, and trinkets, the room was depressingly empty. I had no desk, no chair, no bookshelf, and no posters. I had nothing because my sister had always had everything I needed. I had never felt the need to decorate or collect things; she had always done it for me. So, my possessions, in all their glory, hadn't the power to spark life into the room as my sister's never-ending piles of stuff had seemed to do.

I hung up my clothes in her closet, but they only took up a third of the space on the clothing rod. In an attempt to rectify this, I spread the clothes out evenly along the bar to make it look full, but that only made me feel like a sick imposter, so I pushed them flush against the left side once again. I sat my two pairs of shoes underneath the clothes and made stacks on the top shelf of the closet: one for the few books I owned, one for awards that my mother wouldn't let me throw away, and another for everything else, which was a haphazard pile that could not be picked through without disassembling the mass in its entirety. I undid the cardboard boxes, flattened them, and slid them underneath my bed. My moving job was complete, but I felt displaced, and, in a spark of realization, I felt my own boringness in the face of my sister's overwhelming personality. I was young and severely uncomplicated in comparison to the deep, complex problems she had as a new adult.

I stayed in the room for exactly one week and acquired a white plastic folding table and a matching folding chair before retreating back to my old room, with my tail between my legs like a soldier stripped of his pride time and time again during the course of one particularly fierce battle. I could never live up to the legacy of physical items my sister had amassed. I tried collecting things, wasting all my money on keychains, figurines, puzzles, and anything else that caught my eye in an attempt to recreate what had been lost, but it was impossible.

It took a long time before I realized that it wasn't the things that made my sister's room so pleasant and lively. It was my sister herself. She was the comforting warmth, the glue that held us together when there was nowhere to go but forward. She sacrificed so much and was desperate for love, so she gave everything all she had. And, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recreate myself in her image because I was already so content in the comfort of her shadow. Now, times have changed. We've gotten older and grown apart, but we are slowly finding lives that mean something more than hiding and waiting for the storms to pass.

“Love and Duty in *Notorious*”
by Joey Plyler

The conflict between the concepts of love and duty is a common motif in storytelling. Perhaps no better an example of this motif in film lies in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1946 film *Notorious*, in which passions broil between two American spies as they try to infiltrate a Nazi operation in Brazil. The characters caught in the crossfire of this conflict of love and duty are T.R. Devlin, Alicia Huberman, and Alexander Sebastian. Throughout the film they are shown to grapple with this choice between obligation and desire, as Hitchcock portrays these concepts as exclusive of each other. Ultimately, each character must make a choice; the romantic leads choosing love, and the villain choosing duty. While it is the conflict inherent in making this choice that drives the plot, the consequences of which ideal is chosen implies an interesting commentary on the value of each.

First we must consider the film’s romantic leads, Devlin and Huberman, played by Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, respectively. In the case of Huberman, her struggle begins before the events of the film when she is forced to choose between her duty to her country or her love for her father. While she ostensibly does not make a choice, neither testifying for or against her father, she also refuses to help in his plans and, revealed through Devlin’s recording, professes a great love for America, which places her choice more on the side of duty than love. As a result, Huberman falls into drinking and pleasure-seeking to deal with the pain caused by this conflict. News of her father’s death later in the film briefly relieves her of this pain, as she no longer must make a choice. This reprieve is short-lived, as the subject of her love-duty conflict changes from her father to Devlin. In the moments when they allow themselves to accept their feelings, both parties are shown to be happier and more fulfilled. Huberman’s alcoholism, another motif which is explored throughout *Notorious*, recedes in these moments and worsens when she is faced with the reality of her duty.

In Devlin’s case, his feelings for Huberman interfere with the requirements for their assignment in Rio, and to mitigate the pain of this, he distances himself from Huberman. A symbol of this distance comes in the form of the bottle of champagne Devlin purchases for a romantic dinner with Huberman, a bottle which he leaves at the embassy office after learning

that Huberman is to act as a honeypot for this assignment. This bottle, symbolizing Devlin's feelings, is forgotten and left behind in the face of his duty. He adopts a cold demeanor and allows himself to give in to his insecurities about Huberman's promiscuous past to fuel this distance. Devlin excuses this distance by putting the responsibility for the decisions made on other people. He leaves during the kissing scene in the hotel, his excuse being Prescott needing him right away. Following this, despite protesting the mission, he denies to Huberman that he said anything about the assignment, putting the choice of whether to accept the mission completely on her. When he is siding with duty, Devlin is cold, unhappy, and not in control of his own fate. It is only when he accepts his feelings for Huberman that he takes responsibility for his actions, going against protocol and rescuing Huberman from Sebastian. In a sense, he is given autonomy by siding with love.

Sebastian, the film's villain portrayed by Claude Rains, mirrors the journey of our protagonists. He starts out by choosing love over duty, and while this love is unrequited, his choice to pursue his feelings leaves him content. It is also during this time when he is most in control over his life. When he learns his love is a farce, he disregards his affections and returns to his duties as a Nazi agent, giving control of the situation with Huberman over to his mother. By choosing duty over love, Sebastian gives up control over his life, and in the end is punished for it when he is left at the mercy of his Nazi conspirators. Our protagonists, meanwhile, escape a deadly situation as a result of choosing love.

This outcome, which illustrates love as the "right" choice in this conflict, is understandable when one considers Hitchcock's personality and his personal situation during the making of *Notorious*. If one equates love to autonomy and duty to the lack of it, it is no surprise that Hitchcock, who was very particular about how his films were executed, valued personal autonomy and felt stifled by his duty to his contract with David O. Selznick. One could perhaps also interpret these choices as manifestations of Hitchcock's guilt. His mother had recently died, and his brother had killed himself, all while Hitchcock was unable to be in Britain with them due to both contractual obligations and the ongoing war. Hitchcock also faced criticism in Britain for being in America during World War II. When one considers the conflict

between Hitchcock's love of his family and his art, and his duty to his contract and country, one could understand why the motif of love vs. duty was common in Hitchcock's work.

The exploration of the motif of love vs. duty in *Notorious* highlights the dangers of emotional repression as well as the choice between personal autonomy and responsibility. When considering the wartime sensibilities of the 1940's, along with Hitchcock's personal situation, one can understand the relevance of the film's story at the time and the impact it has on film history to this day.

Work Cited

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Pit of Despair
by Katie Newton

“Faggot”
by Jackson Wise

Putting my full faith in the ultra-reliable Wikipedia, I've stumbled upon the word *Faggot*. What a beautiful sounding word, truly the pinnacle of the English lexicon. Its meaning deserves such praise as well. A faggot is a unit of bundled sticks and twigs. How oddly specific of the English language, how playful a word it is. It was mainly used in old, archaic English and was typically spoken to women who gathered faggots and sold them for profit. However, I, a man, can also gather faggots. One could say I'm a professional Faggot-Gatherer. The following is my experience in defining *faggot gathering*.

It was on the dawn of a particularly dull day that I defined the first trait of my job. As all days start, I woke up and became prepared to gather my faggots. When I faced myself in the reflection of a mirror, however, the trouble started. I gazed upon my image, and a gross, horrifying sight confronted me. There, spanning the entire length of my chest, were scars, marks, and blemishes galore. My front was a sickening piece of ripped up flesh. As my thoughts raced, I finally settled on a quite simple explanation—my work. As a Faggot-Gatherer, I had to carry pokey, pointy, and piercing sticks from dusk till dawn. I carried these sticks by bear-hugging them, so this had to be the reason my front looked like a lacerated and chewed-up heap of worn tissue. This was a key experience. I came to note most wounds inflicted upon Faggot-Gathers are ones brought by themselves.

A second trait moved into view shortly after discovering the first. Many define faggots, or rather those that gather them, as wrong in some fashion. From the religious that claim men cannot, under any circumstance, pick up sticks without being punished to the "scientists" who have studied my occupation through casual observation deeming it unnatural. To "psychologists" who claim my fascination with sticks is due to an absent father and overbearing mother. To the people on the street who hold up signs with harsh words and take harsher actions. To the people in my class who start discussing my livelihood as if it were *their* burden. To the distant relatives, ones that will never know the truth, battling against me with glances, as they pass salt over festive dinners. These examples lead to another defining trait of Faggot-Gathers. We will be criticized by occupation alone, regardless of our behavior.

Another trait I find common among other male Faggot-Gatherers is an initial desire to change occupations. I have, like many others, tried to hide my faggots. I have tried to brush it off as a hobby. I have yelled at other collectors for being themselves. I have tried to burn my faggots to indistinct ash. I have screamed at the sky asking questions—all to be met with no answers, a recognizable bundle of sticks, hurt feelings, and someone there to see through the horde of lies. I've exhausted all options of escape from this career. Yet, I knew from the start that these methods would not work. Just as I cannot pull away from collecting sticks, a crafter cannot hope to destroy day in and day out. I am ingrained, through some power unbeknownst to me, as a Faggot-Gatherer whether I like it or not.

Faggot-Gatherers, like myself, have it tough. Not only is it physically damaging, but also we are highly criticized by ourselves and others. Over and over, society demands us to be different. Most of us attempt to change to no avail. However tough it gets we push through, find another stick, and move on. A single definition for being a Faggot-Gatherer is not an easy task because every Faggot-Gatherer is different. The same could be said for only using one definition for *Faggot*, as it is not beneficial to ignore the oppression we face.

“Breaking into Freestyle”
by Kailey Haynes

It’s December, the first Christmas break back home. You park the car, and I clarify for the third time that I can be the designated driver. You refuse, but I know your newfound habits.

The air is void of any warmth, and I shiver even though I’m wearing the most clothes out of everyone present. We hide our hair in black beanies we purchased nonchalantly a few hours ago. At the Walmart, I twirled waiting for the purchase to be complete. The cashier asked for your identification. “Why do you need that for beanies?” I asked, turning in time to see you exchange your identity for cigarettes.

Now, I follow you through the dark and overgrown parking lot. We arrive to a worn arch sign that reads “Freestyle Music Park” or something similarly unwelcoming.

But this place *used* to be welcoming, buzzing even, from a nine year old’s perspective. I begrudgingly came, like I did with every amusement park my father dragged me and my sister to, expecting the same outcome. My father and younger sister would ride everything that had steel tracks, and I’d move to the sidelines or even to a small waiting room fittingly titled “The Chicken Room.” Amusement parks hardly granted me joy. But I did go on at least one ride to appease my father (he did purchase my \$29.95 entry fee against my protests after all), and that happened to be the “Iron Horse.” I only agreed to that one in particular because the ride lacked any immediate threats or fun death-defying stunts like loopy-loops or tall drops, and the iron statue at the end that was supposed to breathe fire above riders was inexplicably out of commission that day. Freestyle became one of the few amusement parks I actually relished in good memory with my father because of that ride. Of course, it had to close down, and the Iron Horse has been uprooted from this place. “*Too far away from the beach,*” the reports blame. Too far from anything really. The only recognizable attraction I might mention and receive an understanding nod is Medieval Times next door, but it’s closed now. Life does not exist here past sundown.

I guess an independently-owned amusement park cannot sustain itself when it’s a good thirty minutes from the strip of hotels, but the aftermath makes a great attraction for edgy

teenagers, sheltering homeless citizens, and the like. The park layout is foreign almost a decade later, but I'm not worried. You know the way.

We walk deeper into this ghost town; clearly, it has been visited before. Graffiti in warped shapes paint the walls of the faux-villa buildings. You point to one with a small crown that designates your signature. Shadows inhabit the spaces behind broken windows. A long section of one of the nearby buildings has peeled away from its foundation, shaking in the harsh and persistent wind. I involuntarily jump and move closer to you.

We reach the large stagnant lake. What's left of small red and yellow colored buildings live along the bank, including a playground. The wind picks up, and we find shelter in the remnants of a bright yellow box that resides on top of broken concrete bleachers. Our very own palace. There are two large openings like eyes that give us a landscape vantage point, and suddenly, I'm transported to a different reality where this run-down amusement park is our hide out, a base of operations within a dystopian universe.

We used to sketch out plans for the eventual zombie apocalypse together, hiding ourselves in foliage for hours discussing strategies. You even taught me how to climb the trees in your trailer-park neighborhood to avoid any fast biters, and you were an expert in canoeing the pond behind your house for food catching. You always carried a knife with you, too, because you didn't like the idea of being seen as dainty or small or like me.

You carry a knife now, even though Robert is carrying a loaded gun. He shakes one of the three wine boxes you helped him steal at a convenience store earlier today. I sat in the car, waiting and hoping alarms didn't go off. You bought me a snickers bar, a distraction for the wine boxes to be stolen, but a tasty distraction nonetheless. The unhinged door of our sanctuary slams against the side of the building, but you, Robert, and Gavin are too busy getting drunk to be bothered. I politely ask for a sip from your box, but I regret my decision. My face scrunches up from the foul alcoholic taste in my mouth the same way I wrinkled up when your mother offered a taste off her extensive collection.

After careful scrutiny, I decide to follow you across the lake. The full moon helps us steer away from the rotting splotches of wood and glistens off the black water. A line of fake

rocks line the sidewalk, and you and Gavin prop yourself up on one. I manage to do the same. Robert lingers and disappears.

“Where did he go?” I ask. The darkness begins to swallow the sky as a cloud passes.

“He’s checking the parameter,” you respond casually, rummaging through your jacket pocket. You take out a cigarette purchased earlier that has since been scooped clean of its tobacco contents and replaced with marijuana. You lovingly refer to Robert as your Vietnam soldier before lighting a flame and inhaling. You pass the blunt to Gavin who is on the other side of you, and Gavin passes the blunt to Robert once he returns. You exchange like that for a while, the air stagnant of any voice. The wind whispers a soft lullaby in between the nearby trees, the bare branches move in a harmonized sway, the brown and decaying leaves dance delicately on the concrete, and puffs of white smoke form and rise and dissipate from our steady, silent breaths. You do not offer to share with me, and I do not ask.

“Kailey?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you drive my car?”

“Sure.”

Waffle House is the staple restaurant for long-distance car travelers, late-night study breakers, and munchy pot-enthusiasts. You help me get there from the passenger seat; the directions imprinted somewhere along the curves of your consciousness, determined by the primal urges that accompany your foggy mind. The headlights reflect off a bright blue police car, the only other vehicle on the road at this ungodly hour, but I make sure everyone is buckled-up before departing. We pass without incident.

Pulling into the Waffle House and parking raises no suspicion, and the third shift staff straighten like soldiers when their commanding officer enters. There is one other patron in the restaurant, a large hairy man who doesn’t look up from his 3am breakfast. He leaves silently a few minutes later, the turn of his ignition slicing the night. His truck chugs away. The four of us push into a booth. I purposely place myself nearest to the aisle where any curious looks catch my image first. I make sure to chat up the staff and make eye-contact to prove my sclera are the white milky color they’re supposed to be. But your appetite is a monster I cannot suppress.

A long demand of coffee, water, eggs, bacon, hash browns, and classic waffles fill out the waitress's notepad. I ask for a coffee and chocolate chip waffle for lack of any real hunger. I take in a long sip as the three of you devour like wolves tearing through a successful hunt.

Earlier today, we shared coffee in a more civilized capacity, as we often had in the past. This time, I caved because you asked to meet up before, and I had successfully slithered out of those commitments. A month home doesn't require as much priority planning, though, so I no longer have any excuses. You give me a run-down of your first semester in college: the boys you fucked who declined to get into a real relationship with you, your betrayal to a schizophrenic friend, the parties you attended, the parties you planned, your daily hazy days, slipping grades, rare attendance rates, and other similar crazy stories.

"Wow." It's the only appropriate response to the information.

"Oh yeah, we started sneaking into that old amusement park, too." You start a new adventurous crusade. "Do you remember Freestyle?"

"Yeah, actually," I nod along, hardly fazed anymore. "My dad took me once."

"I never got to go when it was open, but Robert and I have been going lately. It's really cool at night."

We sit like that for a heartbeat.

"So tell me about your semester," you prompt. "What did you do?"

"Oh," I rub my fingers along my coffee cup. "I mostly focused on school. Homework, assignments. You know, the usual."

"Right."

I navigate your car as closely to the speed limit as possible. Conversation gradually softens as you slump over, eyes closed. The rise and fall of your chest tells me you're okay.

Robert and Gavin are visible at the edges of the rearview mirror, lying down in the back. I lower the radio volume. The time reads a little past 4am. My eyes flicker like a lamppost on its last voltage of energy, and I grip the steering wheel a little tighter. At one point, I wake you up with a gentle tap of my fingers; I need you to help me find Gavin's house—after all, he's your friend. I watch him sluggishly move towards his house and successfully close the front door

behind him. You press your face against the cool glass of the passenger window and hold yourself for warmth. I drive in deliberately slow movements towards your house.

We pass by a sandy lot where a golf course used to sit. It was never a popular hot spot because there are hundreds of unnecessary putt-putt locations on the beach, but there were small animal statues throughout the course we could sit on without any repercussions, no lines or bitter children waiting for us to move on to the next hole, and we could walk there leisurely from your house. The kind older gentleman at the kiosk only requested a dollar entry fee, and we would play and get bored, sit down with a soda from the on-site vending machine, and talk for a while. Sometimes, we'd play tourist and take ridiculous pictures leaning against a sun-bleached mushroom sculpture. But the golf course is no longer there; there is no evidence of it ever having existed. I pull into your neighborhood.

We pass the white clubhouse where the mailboxes and unkempt basketball court stand. Every Sunday, throughout senior year of high school, we would meet here, our cars parked side to side. Sometimes, I put it upon myself to bring a pizza from work, and I knew that would make you happy. Thomas, Gavin, and Robert would find their way to the clubhouse eventually, and we'd play campaigns under your command until the sun set. But the parking lot is vacant at this hour, and the clubhouse windows are dark. I pull onto your road.

The wheels turn in practiced movements to avoid the many holes in the road. The car slides slowly into the gravel driveway. "We're here," I whisper. You and Robert groan in protest; sleep tugs at your brain, but the promise of comfortable rest impels you towards the mobile home.

The house is quiet, and you are quiet too. You don't have to tell me what to do. I remember our sleepover routine. I watch you climb into the bottom half of your bunk bed on all fours. The top half of your bunk bed serves the same purpose as a junk drawer, so I remain standing. Your head falls and sinks into the nearest pillow so at peace that I think you might disappear. Light begins to stretch its way against the window pane glass, a new day dissipating the night sky. We blink in long takes.

You mumble a request for French toast, a breakfast I made once.

I sigh, shoulders slouching. "I'll make some later."



Shade in Jerusalem
by Valencia Haynes

“The Revolution Will Not Be...”
by Kamryn Jenkins

You will not be able to live-stream
You will not be able to touch-up your make-up when sweat makes it run
You will not be able to amp up your follow-base just because you attend a parade to support a dying race

Because the revolution will not be

The revolution will not be brought to by your favorite YouTubers in 4 parts with 30-sec commercial breaks.
The revolution will not show you pictures of the Jenners holding ice-cold Pepsis and leading a charge by a fully clad Kim Kardashian Kylie Jenner and Travis Scott to eat Sugar bears confiscated from Instagram influencers

The revolution will be not be

The revolution will not be brought to you by VH1 and will not star the queens of *16 and Pregnant* and Ryan Seacrest and SpongeBob and Brittany.
The revolution will not grant you sex appeal
The revolution will not liposuction the fat
The revolution will not make your waist thinner, because the revolution will not be

There will not be bodycam videos of undertrained officers shooting colored persons on the discovery page
There will be no pictures of the young being run out of voting booths in an Uber with a Cashapp bribe.

There will be no slow motion or still-lifes of Beyoncé strolling through Times Square in a Gold, Black, and Purple Wakandan catsuit that she’s been saving for just the right occasion.

Keeping up with the Kardashians, The Walking Dead, and Friends will no longer be so damn relevant
And girls will not care if Archie finally gets down with Betty on *Riverdale* because oppressed minorities will be in the street looking for a brighter day.

The revolution will not be

There will be no highlights on the *Daily Mail* Snapchat story
and no pictures of voluptuous women liberationists or
Alice Marie Johnson crying.
The theme song will not be written by Drake or Lil'Wayne
Nor rapped by Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, Post Malone, Cardi B, or the Amigos

The revolution will not be

The revolution will not be back after a quick survey
about Pantene, TRESemmé, or white people hair.
You will not have to worry about the fuckboy in your bedroom,
A snake in your clique, or the zero in the grade book.
The revolution will not go better with Starbucks
The revolution will not fight the girl who stole your man
The revolution WILL put you in the driver's seat
The revolution will not be molded to fit your needs

WILL not be industrialized, it WILL NOT BE digitalized

The revolution will not be re-posted, my friends
The revolution will be live

*This poem is based on the Gil Scott-Heron spoken-word piece *The Revolution Will Not be Televised* (1970).

“Mother Knows Best”
by Tonya Hensarling

“I can see the head! One more push!” My doctor’s words will forever be seared in my mind. After 29 hours of labor and 1 hour of pushing, my daughter would be making her arrival. This moment had so many extremes: fear and joy, excitement and exhaustion. I was overwhelmed. Soon, I thought, this would all be over and I would be a mom. A mom. Yet I was still a child.

How did I get here? A good girl with so much potential. For fifteen years, I had been told that. I grew up in a very conservative home. We went to church at least three times a week. My dad was the youth pastor, and my family was a cornerstone in the congregation. Pillars. My family didn’t get into trouble. We were an example. And me? I was the honor roll student who didn’t skip school because I was terrified I would miss something important. A model student. I didn’t have many friends. I was too busy with my church and schoolwork to care about fitting in with the crowd. My only goals in life were to make my parents proud, get good grades, and get into an elite college after high school.

March 1993, my freshman year of high school, was a turning point. One of my classmates, Robert Betancourt, went into a diabetic coma and passed away. I didn’t know him well, but his death had a strong impact on my life. After his death, a new young man started attending my church. I didn’t notice him much until he came to our youth services. He had dark, thick hair and dark eyes. He was Hispanic, but that was common in our city. He was quiet. He seemed to always stay to himself, so my brother and I befriended him since we were the youth pastor’s kids. His name was John, a name I will know for the rest of my life.

John was two years older than me, four years older than my brother. The three of us spent a lot of time together and became good friends. Before we met, John had only one best friend, Robert Betancourt, and they had been closer than brothers. Robert’s death had led John to our church, and to me, because we were the closest church to John’s home. In the brutal California desert heat, proximity was everything, especially if you had to walk from place to place. Even though John was sixteen, he didn’t yet drive, and he didn’t care to learn. His family couldn’t pay for driving school even if he had wanted to learn.

John was at our house every day. My parents welcomed him as part of the group. He ate dinner with us and would only leave when it was time for bed. Before I knew what was happening, we were confiding in each other. I would talk to him about everything, including things about my boyfriend. After three months of spending every day together, John kissed me. At that moment, I realized I had feelings for him (or maybe it was just teenage hormones). But something inside me stirred. I broke up with my boyfriend the next day. From this day forward, I belonged to John. He kissed me just right, he held me so perfectly in his arms, and he said he loved me. I knew I had found the perfect guy.

About a month later, my parents found out about our relationship, and they were not happy. Phrases I didn't understand were thrown out: "Not a good family," "lazy Mexican family," and "he'll never amount to anything." Where was this coming from? I thought they liked him. I thought that I had made them proud by picking a boyfriend from our church. He was a Christian. Just because he didn't have a great family meant nothing to me. He wasn't like his parents. I was sure he would get a job one day and he would be successful. My parents obviously knew nothing about him, I thought. They seemed to judge him only by what they thought about his parents. I couldn't let my parents think this about him. I was going to show them he was perfect and they were wrong. When voicing this to my mom, I saw a viciousness in her I had not seen before. She slapped me across the face and yelled, "You're nothing but a little slut!" Her words pierced me. Slut? Me? I had only kissed him!

"I'll show her what a slut is," I told John. He was on board with helping me carry out my plan. The next day, we put my plan into action. We both skipped school and went to my house. I knew no one would be there. We went to my room and closed the door behind us. John kissed me, hungrily, like he'd never kissed me before. It was easy to let him have his way with me. As we explored new areas, fear set in, but my mother's words rang louder. John played my body like a harp, plucking string after string, making glorious melodies. He eased my pain with soft kisses. He held my hand gently when I told him it hurt. Through the pain and fears, I persevered. I would not change my mind. This was something I had to do at all costs.

I was starting to enjoy myself, forgetting what brought me to this place, when we both heard the front door close, followed by my dad's voice. John jumped off me and hid by the side

of my bed. Just as my dad opened my bedroom door, I quickly joined John. Thankfully, we were both hidden in time. We heard each door in the house open and close. My dad was home for what seemed like an eternity. We held our breath, terrified to make any noise. Finally, he left. We didn't leave our hiding spot until we heard his car drive away. John and I got dressed as quickly as we could and left the house.

Nothing about me changed physically that day, but inside, I knew I was different. I was no longer innocent. I hadn't known I was innocent until I no longer was. I felt this difference so strongly that I thought everyone could see it, that they thought I was dirty. I was sure my parents knew, but they didn't treat me any differently. Why wasn't anyone treating me differently? I was a different person. I was a woman now, an unclean woman. How I longed to not feel this way! I keenly felt the shame, the guilt, and the loss of the person I used to be and could never be again. Even more, I wanted to be yelled at. I needed to be corrected. I thought maybe if someone else was mad at me, I wouldn't hate myself so much and the shame would dissipate, but I couldn't say anything. I couldn't tell a soul. I suffered this hell alone.

The following Sunday, our family went to church, as we did every Sunday. I don't remember what the sermon was about. I don't know if anybody talked to me. I cried silently through service, and when the pastor was done preaching and the altars were opened, I found myself on my knees crying and repenting to God. I had sinned, I knew, and I needed to be wiped clean. My Sunday school teacher knelt next to me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and began to pray for me. I lifted my eyes to her, tears streaming. "Sister Jean, I messed up." She held me and told me that we all mess up and that God still loves me. "No, I really messed up. I gave my virginity away." The disappointed look in her eyes broke me. Jean was the best person I knew, and I had let her down.

She didn't loosen her grip on my shoulders, and she didn't waiver. "Let's not do that again." She spoke very calmly, with all the love of God rising up in her. "People make mistakes, and we move on. We learn from our mistakes and don't repeat them." She gave me a hug, got to her feet, and left me at the altar. I felt like Jesus was saying, "Go and sin no more," as He had done so many times in the Bible. I decided that I would do just that: sin no more.

However, the problem with sin is that once you've eaten of its fruit, you have to go back for more. You never remember how bad you felt after you ate, just how good you felt while eating. This is why alcoholics return to their glass and drug addicts to their dealers. I, too, would return to my new addiction: sex. Each time the sex was better and less painful, and my remorse began to fall away. Soon, it was just a way of life. I still didn't admit to anyone that I was doing it. I knew it was wrong, but I wasn't bothered. I had grown immune to the effects of my sin. I began cutting class to have sex, and I started smoking. After all, I was a woman now.

My parents ignored what they didn't want to see, like the hickeys on my neck and the smell of cigarette smoke on my clothes. They only mentioned my falling grades. I didn't care. *So I got a B; it's not going to affect my chance of going to college.* If I decided to go. I didn't care about anything except being with John. I even had my brother convince my parents to let John sleep over at the house. John would hang out with my brother until my parents were long since asleep, then spend the night in my bed, only to wake very early to return to his expected place.

It should have come as no surprise to anyone that I found out I was pregnant in March. I had just turned fifteen. How could this be? This wasn't supposed to happen to me. Frantic, I couldn't wait until Sunday to tell someone or repent. I got on my bedroom phone and dialed the only person I could talk to: Sister Jean. I was sobbing when she answered, and I could only bring myself to say two words: "I'm pregnant." Silence on her end. The silence was so loud, I stopped crying. "Please say something. Yell at me, scream, do something, anything!"

"I can't. My husband is in the room," her only response.

"Can you be with me when I tell my parents?"

"Yes." Her answer was short, but all I needed. We hung up.

Sunday came, and I couldn't keep this secret any longer. After Sunday school, Sister Jean stayed with me to talk to my parents. She was nervous, and I saw that same look of disappointment in her eyes that I had seen months before. I had failed her, and I had failed God. I had continued to sin. I didn't mean to keep doing it, but I just got caught in this whirlwind of lust and pleasure and thrills. That time was now over. The whirlwind came to an abrupt halt, spat me out, and left me to clean up its mess.

After church, I grabbed up my parents and Sister Jean, and we went to a room to talk. "What's going on?" my mom asked.

"Mom, I need to tell you something." My hands were shaking, my heart was pounding through my chest, and I wanted to vomit. "I love you so much, and I'm sorry." I began to cry.

"What's wrong?" My mom reached out to squeeze my arm, which made me cry harder.

I looked at Sister Jean who was standing behind me. She nodded her head, telling me to speak on. "Mom, I'm pregnant."

My mom angrily pulled her arm away from me. "You're lying!" She spat the words at me. "How is that even possible? You just had your period!"

"No, Mom, I told you it was due, but I never had it," I spoke quietly, barely more than a whisper while silent tears fell off my cheeks.

My dad didn't say anything, then stormed out of the room. "Joe, where are you going?" My mom chased after him.

"To kill John!" he replied as he exited the building. I had never seen him so angry.

"Joe, no! This is as much her fault as his," my mom pleaded with him as she followed him out of the church.

Sister Jean and I were left alone in the room inside the church. She put her arm around me. "I'm proud of you for the way you handled this. I'm not happy that you got yourself in trouble, but it's too late to change things." This woman was truly a gift from God.

"Can I go home with you? I'm scared to go home."

"Sorry, honey. You need to pay the price at home." She gave me a hug, and we walked out of the church to our cars.

My parents were in the front seat of our blue Delta 88, and my brother was in the back waiting for me to join him. I cautiously got in the back seat, scared to breathe a word. I knew I was in trouble. My mom broke the silence as my dad started backing the car out of the church parking lot. "When we get home, you are to call John and have his parents and him come over right away! Or do they already know?"

"No, they don't know." I knew to keep my answers short.

"That's a shock! Who else knows?"

“No one but you guys and Sister Jean.” I didn’t dare say that John knew. I didn’t want them to hear his name and start yelling. John had been with me when I took the test, so we found out together. We decided that it was best for me to tell my parents first, and he would tell his parents afterwards. He knew his parents would be fine. They didn’t have rules in his house, and with no rules, there are no consequences. At that exact moment, I wished I’d had his parents for my own.

“Joe, before we go home, I need to stop at the store. I’m buying a pregnancy test, and we will see if this little slut is lying to us.” There were those words again: “little slut.” This time, I felt I deserved to hear them. I was just that—a slut.

My dad nodded, too angry to speak. He drove to Walmart, and my mom went in to buy the test, leaving the rest of us in the car. We drove home in silence.

Once home, my mom gave me a cup and told me to go pee in it. She would be administering the test, so I didn’t mess it up. I followed her instructions without question. As the lines started to form on the stick of the pregnancy test, my mom turned to look at me with pure hatred. “Go call John, you little wench! You whore!” I did not dare respond; I simply did as she said.

When John and his parents arrived, we all gathered in the living room. My dad spoke first: “Your son got our daughter pregnant. I’d like to know how you are going to handle this.” He spoke very matter-of-factly.

Martin and Denise, John’s parents, sat stunned. Finally, Martin spoke: “I think Tonya had something to do with it, too.” He wasn’t going to let his son get stuck with all the blame.

“They need to get married,” Denise’s only response. They were shocked that I was pregnant, but not upset. Maybe they were just saving their anger for later.

“Married? She’s fifteen!” My mom was outraged at the suggestion. “Not a chance!”

They argued for hours about us and what to do. John and I were in the room, but my parents wouldn’t let either one of us talk. I’m glad about that. I didn’t want to say anything that could be used against me one day, as would often happen in my home. I stared at the ground, waiting for them to stop arguing. Finally, after several hours and different ideas about

marriage, abortion, adoption, and a hopeful miscarriage, they decided that nothing would be accomplished that night. John's family left.

We didn't go to church that night. God knew what was going on in our home, and, surely, He would excuse us from one service. At least that was our thought. My parents sent me to my room with one final blow from my mom. "Thanks for making us a statistic." I don't know why, but those words hurt more than any other words spoken that night. Those words were my mom's way of letting me know that I hurt and disappointed her. They crushed me.

* * * * *

My pregnancy continued. I carried my daughter full term. My due date, October 28, came and went. On Halloween, my mom convinced me to drink a bottle of castor oil to induce labor. The pain started within an hour. I walked the house, only pausing during a contraction. When my pains were five minutes apart, we loaded up to go to the hospital. My parents called John to let him know we were leaving. His mom answered, and she told my parents that he had school the following morning and needed to get his sleep. She said they would bring him to the hospital the next day. It was in that moment that we decided my mom and her best friend would be in the delivery room with me.

After twenty hours of labor, my doctor decided that they were going to stop my labor and send me home for another week. Before I could be released to go home, though, he sent a specialist in to see me. My water broke while the specialist was examining me. John still had not come to check on me.

Five hours later, I was put on oxygen. The labor had exhausted my body, and I wasn't getting enough time between contractions to get oxygen to my brain. The nurses begged me to take medicine to help with the pain, but my mother wouldn't allow me to do so. "She got into this mess without drugs; she doesn't get drugs to get out of it. I want her to remember what this feels like." Still, no John.

Four hours went by, and I heard the magic words: "You are dilated to ten; it's time to push." The nurse told me how and when to push. After an hour, they paged my doctor and moved my bed to the delivery room.

Within minutes, my daughter was born. An hour later, November 2 at 7:00 in the morning, John showed up to meet his daughter. He had had two nights' sleep while I labored. *Maybe my mom wasn't so wrong about him after all.* Looking back I wish I had heeded her warnings, but I was fifteen and in love. I excused his actions.

Caring for a baby is challenging. I don't know how I did everything that was required of me, but somehow I finished high school with honors, worked, and cared for my daughter. She attended my high school graduation when she was only seven months old.

My home life did not get easier. My mom was in control of every move I made. I could do nothing right. My daughter was my responsibility, but my mom made sure I did things her way. I had the sleepless nights and all the dirty diapers, while my parents had all the fun times. I wasn't allowed to cuddle with my daughter because I always had other things that my mom considered more important. Doing dishes. Laundry. Housework. Chores. You name it. My parents cuddled with my daughter while I slaved. I had no joy in my life.

I had just put my daughter down for a nap, not an easy task since she was teething and fussy. My mom wanted to take her out to a friend's house. That's when I finally stood up for myself. "Mom, I just got her to sleep. She's not going with you."

"Who do you think you are? This is my house, and if you want to live here with your bastard child, you will follow my rules!"

"No! You're not taking her. Not this time."

"You can pack your bags and get out!" *Seriously? This was crazy. How could she throw her daughter and granddaughter out?*

"Go to hell!" I shouted back at her.

My mother lunged at me. She slapped me and threw punches. My father had to pull her off. "May, stop. This isn't right."

"I'm going to kill her!" The look in her eyes said she would.

"She's not worth it," he said.

I lay on the floor, bleeding. I had never defended myself against her attacks. I would never have raised a hand to my mom.

I don't know how I got there, but I woke up in an abused women's shelter with my daughter. We stayed for two weeks until my mom showed up. She came to bring me home, but only after I apologized for my actions. Out of fear, I apologized. When we got back to her home, she laid out my future. "Things are going to change around the here. I can't handle you anymore. Your dad and I have talked, and we think you and John need to get married."

"Okay." I was not going to question anything she said.

"Once you are married, you can go to college. Your dad and I can't send you, but if you get married, you'll be on his income and can go." She made it sound like a gift, but it was just another way to control my life. Even in marriage, I would not be free.

My mom planned my entire wedding, right down to the vows. She even found a gorgeous wedding dress that *she wore to my wedding*. She made herself the shining star that day. As I stood at the back of the church, I begged my dad to let me out. "Please, I don't want to get married."

"It's a little late for that now. You should have thought about that before getting pregnant."

I nodded my head and looked to the ground. I took my father's arm, and he walked me down the aisle, sealing my fate with John as my husband for the next four years.

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Van Gogh Vision

by Katie Newton

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Cheers to the class of 2020!

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