

Salem Community High School

Thoughtwell 2020-2021

The 2020-2021 school year was unlike any that has ever come before it. Between e-learning, lockdowns, and quarantines, it provided students with an unusual and challenging background. But out of adversity comes creativity, as the saying goes, and it was evident in the writings of the students this year. You will see some themes immediately associated with the pandemic; loss and sadness. Yet you will also find the positive that the students found. Other themes shine through, such as new experiences, overcoming obstacles, and the importance of family. Please enjoy the writings of these talented young authors.

Matt Donoho
Thoughtwell sponsor

Fender Bender
By
Emma Woodward

It was a rotten rainy day
The road was slippery and wet
Day was turning into night
I just knew something wasn't right
I kept driving hoping for the best
But something didn't sit right with my chest
With the long road to follow
I had to take the bad thoughts and swallow
The road I took was long and narrow
Any other day it felt pretty mellow
The curve ahead wasn't a delight
This time it definitely gave me a fright
The car in front of me wanted to turn
Without any notice it made me concerned
I slammed on the brakes quickly
Just for the them to give in against me
Before I could even blink for a second
The cars collided with no guessing
It made a big bang
Good thing I was restrained

I heard you howling
Deep from the depths
Inside of me
You were the screeching scream
And I
Was still dark night air.
You whispered from
The depths inside,
The easy simple truth
That there isn't a priest
With a cross big enough
To exorcise you
To get you away from me.
You will haunt me
And slam shut,
In the middle of all
My nights,
The doors inside me.
I will count your footsteps
In the cellar of my soul and bottom of my heart
And beg you
To pass through me
Just once more
Just once.

By Jasmyn Pas

Cloud

You are like a cloud
You blocked my sunshine
You made my days rainy
You gave me sadness
You rained on me, and then I felt bad
Because you blamed your rainy days on me
On *your* rainy days, *I* had rainy nights
Your rain made my eyes rain every night
I started believing that it was my fault and I felt horrible
I felt angry
I felt hatred
And it wasn't my fault
Your rainy days took things from me I valued most
My mind
My greatest assets
My freedom
And I wondered
Why was *I* letting *you* rain on me?
Why was *I* letting *you* take from me?
Why was *I* letting *you* blame me?
And when I told someone, *anyone*, **everyone**,
Why weren't they helping?
Eventually
Eventually, I forced your rain away
Eventually, I made the cloud go away
Eventually, I found happinesses
My sun was shining everyday
My flowers were blooming beautifully
Eventually
Eventually, my sun shined even brighter
I was even happier than before
To where it traveled to my nights
And there he was
My moon
My moon makes my darkest nights bright
My moon makes me stargaze
My moon makes me sleep peacefully
And most importantly
My moon makes me feel loved
And protected
And trusted
And happy

Kidnapped

by

Tessa Bandy

The air turned ice cold, and all she could see was darkness. Amy was a twenty five year old woman with black hair and green eyes. She grew up in an orphanage and caused a bunch of issues when she was there. She would get in fights with other children, but all she really wanted was to be adopted. She went through great lengths to be adopted because she wanted to feel love that she never got. One night she went to the file room and switched files with another girl so hopefully she would get adopted. The next week an old man came in with his son and wanted to take a little girl in. That day Amy got to go home with a family.

Amy grew up always wanting to be a school teacher. When she grew up she went to college and got her degree in teaching. Amy is now a first grade teacher, and she goes to work everyday with a smile on her face. She has a husband and his name is Jake. Jake has brown hair, blue eyes, and has a great sense of humor. Amy has two kids that are ages five and three. They both are very adventurous and they look like Amy. Amy's kids are her world and their names are Ally and Michael. One evening she was working late at the school to get the lesson plans done for the week. She heard a noise down the hall, so she went to go check it out. Amy saw nothing so she entered back into her classroom and proceeded with her work. Suddenly a person in black put a cloth over her mouth with chemicals to make her sleep.

Amy woke up in a room, and she could see nothing. At this point she realized she had been kidnapped. She sees the kidnapper left food on the floor, but Amy could not get to it because she

was chained to the wall. Everyday the kidnapper came into the room and gave her medicine to hallucinate things. Amy would wake up every morning and not remember what happened the day before. The kidnapper would torture her by either drowning her or hitting her so hard she would pass out. This scene would replay everyday for another 5 years, and she would wake up and not remember a thing.

Amy woke up shivering on the concrete floor, and all she could think about was her family. She decided that she needed to build up the strength to try and fight this person. When the person entered the room later that day she tried to talk them into letting her eat. The person took off the chains and let her eat a meal. Amy repeated this for the next week to try and build up strength to maybe escape this madness.

Amy tried to make a plan in her head to figure out how to escape. She didn't know where she was, or how she got there. All she knew was some days she woke up on a concrete floor, and some days she woke up with something worse. She would wake up in a locked box with water flowing in it. Amy decided that she was going to try and make a run for it, and she hoped she could find her way out. When nightfall came the person came into the room to release her, and Amy hit them and made a run for it. The person got up and shot her with a tranquilizer. Amy would now be taken back to her room, and she was tortured more than ever before.

After being tortured for many more weeks Amy had the thought in her mind to try again. Amy thought, "What could I do differently this time?" Amy thought about it for many days, and during her dream she had an idea. Amy knew that if she hit the person hard enough it would give her enough time to shut the door. Amy knew the door could only be opened from the outside, and she thought this might actually work. Later, Amy got the person to enter the room and she hit them. She closed the door and ran as fast as she could. She was running through paths

underground that all looked the same. Amy kept running, and finally she saw an exit. She took the exit and she realized she was in the middle of the woods.

Amy was running through the woods as fast as she could, but couldn't help but hear the noise behind her. She glanced back and caught a glimpse of the person in black. Amy was frightened because she didn't want to be caught once again and tortured. The person in black got close to her and Amy came to a cliff. She had to choose right then if she wanted to jump or get taken back. Amy made the decision to jump, and made her way back to town.

Amy came across the police station, and she decided to go in. They asked her if she had someone they could contact, and she thought long and hard about it. Amy didn't know if her husband had moved on since it had been five years, and she didn't know if she could see her kids yet. Amy came to the conclusion that letting her husband know she was alive would be a good idea; even if he has moved on. Amy knew she was not exactly mentally stable because of everything, but she really wanted to see her kids.

When her family arrived at the station the husband was with a new wife, and he brought the kids with him. Jake just got married to her a couple months ago, and her name is Alicen. Alicen looked totally different from Amy, and she had a weird personality. Amy was very excited to see the kids because she hasn't seen them in five years. When she walked up to the kids they became frightened because they didn't remember her that well. The kids didn't want to see her because they now saw her as a stranger, and this really hurt Amy. Amy started talking to her husband and became upset because they couldn't remember her. She wanted to start seeing them more, and Alicen was not fond of that idea. Alicen told Amy that she wasn't mentally stable, and shouldn't see them.

Amy went through a dark time, and started getting into bad drugs. She was depressed because she couldn't see her kids. The police came to her house almost every weekend because she ran a drug house. Amy never went for help because she never thought she could get to the point of seeing her kids. At this point Jake and Amy didn't like her, and they didn't want Amy in their lives. Amy fell deep and she thought to herself that the drugs were helping her not remember her past. She came to the conclusion that there was no point and trying anymore.

After months passed Amy decided to quit being negative and try a little. The one goal Amy set for herself was to find the person that did this to her. So Amy went through a bunch of profiles to try and find someone to fit what she saw. She spent many weeks looking for the answers, and

Amy finally decided to go and get help. Amy wanted to be able to see her kids again, and possibly go get her teaching job back. After months of searching Amy thought she might know who did this to her. She went to the police and begged them to look into the person because she was almost confident it was them. The police ended up blowing her off because they found out Amy was not mentally stable. Amy decided to find out for herself, so she tried to find the spot where she was being held. This adventure held off a very important thing in her life; which was her kids. Amy got to start visiting them, but the kids were still very unsure about her. Amy thought to herself and decided that she couldn't give up on either of her priorities, so she had to work extra hard to achieve them.

After some time the kids started to be more comfortable around her. She gave up on the case, and decided it would be best to leave it in the hands of the police. Amy was only a school teacher after all. Being in that school brought back so many bad memories for Amy, and she realized that she might not be able to go back. She went looking for jobs, and finally she found one at a bakery. Amy thought to herself, and decided this job would be the best course of action for now.

Amy was working hard at her new job, but some days were better than others. She would be fine one day, and the next having a panic attack in the bathroom. Things started to become worse so she decided to go to the doctor. The doctor decided to prescribe her pills to help with the panic attacks. Amy began feeling better, but she realized that she has to rely on the pills to get her through the day.

The kids began asking questions, and they wanted to go see her more. Jake and Alicen didn't want to freak them out so they decided not to tell them about her issue. They thought that she could handle an hour visit with them. One afternoon, the kids went to visit Amy at the bakery. She got them sweets and hot chocolate, and she asked them to come over tomorrow to watch movies. The kids loved that idea, so they went home and picked out a bunch of movies.

The next day, Amy wasn't feeling well, but she didn't want to lose time with her kids. They came over, and they started watching movies. Amy started to relapse and thought she needed pills. She went to the bathroom and took them, and took way too many. Amy came back out of the bathroom and began acting weird around the kids, and they began to get scared. They didn't have a way of getting a hold of their parents so they decided to stay.

The next morning came around and the kids saw Amy on the couch not moving. Michael and Ally were scared because they saw no movement in her. They decided to leave and try to make it home by a bus. When they arrived home their parents were furious that she let them leave alone. The father went over to her apartment, and saw Amy there lying there unconscious. He called the ambulance and they rushed her to the hospital. The kids arrived at the hospital and didn't know what was happening to their mom. They became scared but all they could do was wait.

During the night the doctor came back and said they couldn't save her. She had been gone for too long, and the cause was an overdose of the pills. The kids were in tears and the step mom was

still angry her kids had to see that. The funeral came around, and they all said their goodbyes.

Later the husband got a call from the police saying that they had an ID on the suspect that took her.

The person that took her was also a kid in her orphanage. They began a case to find her, but it was really hard. One night the family was sitting on the couch and they heard a knock at the door. This woman was at the door, and she asked if she could come in. The husband let her in being nice, and the women pulled a gun on them. The woman was the girl that kidnapped Amy, and she said she wanted the kids. The mom was upstairs getting ready for bed, and she heard talking downstairs. She went halfway down the stairs, and saw a gun pulled on her husband, so she went upstairs to find a gun. A few minutes later she went halfway down the stairs and took a shot. She hit her in the arm so it gave the family a chance to get out and call for help. The police came to the house and took her into custody. They now think they have the person who took Amy for so many years. All Amy wanted was justice, but unfortunately she chose a different way out. Now the family lives peacefully knowing that they caught the kidnapper, and that they would see their mom again someday.

Final Shot

By

Ryne Clark

The summer of 2015 started like all others. Hayden Miller was at his summer basketball league, which always starts during the first week of summer. Hayden is a 6'4" point guard, with a black afro, above average muscle tone, brown eyes, and perfect teeth. Hayden just finished high school, and didn't manage to get any basketball scholarships, despite averaging 23 points, five rebounds, and seven assists per game. This is his last year that he is of age to compete in this basketball league, and he knows he has to give his all if he wants a chance to keep playing ball. Hayden plays for the St. Louis Ravens, and has been the second best player on the team for the last three years. Now that Richie is too old to play in the league, and is now playing at Mizzou, Hayden knows it is his time to shine.

The first week of the season is always the toughest. Each team goes through intense training, in which they run sprint after sprint. The only time they are allowed to stop is whenever somebody pukes or passes out. The coaches in the league are rough, which is why college and NBA scouts come to the games. With the level of roughness the coaches bring, only the toughest players play in the league. If it weren't for this league, Richie would be playing D3 basketball instead of D1. After three rough weeks of training, Hayden's first game was approaching. Coach Nurse asked if Hayden was ready to be the primary scorer and passer, instead of being simply the primary passer this season. Hayden had been waiting for this opportunity for years, and was very

excited to take on the challenge. The Ravens played their first game against last year's champions: the Cougars. The Cougars had Mikey Fox, who had a scholarship offer from almost every team in the Big Ten and PAC 12. Mikey averaged over 40 points per game last season; almost double Richie's points. Richie was second in points per game in the league, too.

"You ready, champ?" Hayden's teammate, Derrick, asks Mikey as the buzzer sounds for tip-off.

"Of course I'm ready, chump. Get ready for a sixty piece," Mikey snarled.

Hayden did not appreciate that sort of attitude toward his teammate. The Ravens won tip-off, and Hayden took the ball right to the rim for a tough layup. He immediately stared down Mikey. Mikey simply laughed, and took the ball up the floor. Mikey picked up his dribble at the volleyball line, and bricked it. Hayden smirked at Mikey, and brought the ball up the court for an easy three-pointer. At half time, Hayden had a career high 31 points, compared to Mikey's 13.

"Great half men. Do not let your foot off the jugular, we haven't finished them just yet," coach Nurse says to the group, "Hayden, take the ball to the rim more often. You're stronger than they are in the paint, so it's easy points."

After the players are sent back out to the court, Nurse makes Hayden stay back in the locker room. He tells him that scouts for Minnesota, Purdue, and Mizzou are in attendance, and that they had already approached Nurse for Hayden's information. This just added fuel to the flames for Hayden, and he continued to torch the Cougars. With five minutes left, the Ravens led by 16 points. Hayden had 49, so Nurse wanted to keep him in for the 50-piece.

“You’re not scoring fifty on me, kid,” Mikey tells Hayden while waiting for the inbound pass. He seemed to nod at his teammate and point to Hayden’s foot.

The Cougars seemed to purposely throw it to Hayden, so he sprinted up the floor. A scrawny white kid on the Cougars bolted down the floor after him, but Hayden knew he could jump higher than him. Hayden jumped up for the slam, but noticed the kid kept running at him, not stopping to give up or jumping to block the shot. Hayden looked back up at the rim, and then felt his legs get swept up from underneath him. Hayden fell to the ground, and felt the worst pain of his life as he landed awkwardly and watched his leg snap in half as it hit the ground. The weight of his body seemed to completely snap his shin bone before he passed out.

Hayden woke up in the hospital, with his casted leg lifted above him. The doctor says that Hayden has a severely fractured leg, and will not be able to walk for at least a month. This is the most devastating news Hayden had ever received. He hadn’t even finished his first game of the summer, he definitely didn’t begin to think that it would be the last of his career.

After weeks of physical therapy, Hayden could finally walk around on crutches, instead of being forced to sit in a wheelchair all day. The Ravens, along with coach Nurse, had visited Hayden every Friday, with updates on their games. After four weeks, the Ravens had only won the game that Hayden had played in. Nobody on the team had scored over 15 points, and the Ravens lost every game by at least 25 points. Each summer, there are 15 games. As of now, the Ravens were 1-8. Hayden told Nurse to stop coming to visit, as he was no longer part of the team. He tried to turn his jersey in, but Nurse told him to keep it.

When Hayden checked the pockets of the jeans he wore to his game on that dreadful day, he noticed that he still had the number that the Mizzou agent had given him. He decided to give it a call, and when he told the agent what his name was, the call ended. Hayden began to realize now that his career was truly over. He had no plans for what to study in college, as he had been very optimistic that this summer would get him a D1 scholarship, which would be followed by him being drafted into the NBA. Now, Hayden had to start thinking about what he would have to do for the rest of his life.

This was the lowest point of Hayden's life. Everything he had been working for ever since the age of five had shattered before his own eyes. No colleges would reach out to him for a basketball scholarship. None of the Ravens had visited him ever since summer ended, and Hayden still couldn't walk without crutches. He still had until at least September before he could walk again. Hayden had decided to study to become a physical therapist, as he had really appreciated the amount of help that his had done for him. Without his physical therapist, Hayden doubted he would have ever been able to walk the same again. With that decision, came yet another. Hayden decided that he would study at Purdue, the only college whose agent would still answer Hayden's calls after his incident.

As October approached, Hayden was still working his way back to where he used to be. While sitting in his bed over these past few months, Hayden realized that he should never give up on his dreams. Colleges have walk-on athletes, and Hayden was determined to be one. He planned on running 100 kilometers throughout the month, and he needed a jumping program, as he could hardly touch the net now. He hired a trainer for his jumping and basketball skills, and started running four days a week.

With two weeks until walk-on tryouts for the Purdue Boilermakers, Hayden had regained his speed, could sort of dunk, and was as good as ever from a shooting perspective. He called the number that the Purdue agent had given him over summer, and said that he was ready to play for the Boilermakers. Classes had been rough all year, so Hayden wanted to play for Purdue more than ever. Hayden had already made friends with a few players for the team. Apparently, physical therapy is a pretty common career path for student athletes.

Hayden sat in the locker room, as the players were given a five minute break before the second half of tryouts. There were only seven players trying out, but the team is not required to take even one of them. This whole tryout could be a bust for Hayden, and he could be stuck studying for physical therapy, or he could be on his way to his NBA dream. The drills had gone well so far, but all of this jumping was really tiring Hayden out. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this up. Nobody else at the tryout was even close to Hayden's level of skill, so at this point he was competing with himself.

"Alright boys, let's wrap this up!" Coach yelled from outside. It was time for Hayden to shine.

As the tryouts wrapped up, the coach made the boys do killers until one of them threw up. Hayden had experienced this exact type of torture with Coach Nurse, so he knew he wouldn't be the one to fail. Luckily, Bryan was not the least bit prepared for even more running, so he had two full Gatorades before they started and puked after just five sets. Coach came up to Hayden after everyone else was dismissed, and told

him that there was a very good chance that he would get a call in the next few days. If not, there was always next year. Now Hayden just had to wait.

The call came earlier than expected. Actually, it wasn't expected at all. Only two days had passed before the coach called Hayden to inform him that he had made the Boilermakers Men's Basketball team. All of Hayden's hard work had finally paid off. Now, he had to make something of his opportunity. He knew that just because he had made the team, that didn't mean that he would be playing. As far as he knew, the coach just wanted him on the team so that they could have a full roster. Hayden could be the waterboy if he didn't continue to show Coach his worth.

At the first practice, Hayden wanted to impress his coach, so he volunteered himself to guard the team's starting point guard, Carsen Edwards. Edwards was named All-American last year, and was one of the deadliest shooters in the NCAA. This matchup was no joke. On the very first play, Edwards pulled up from the logo, and hit the shot right in Hayden's face. On the other end of the floor, Hayden tried his signature shammgod, but Edwards stripped the ball away immediately. After the game, Hayden had five points, three turnovers, and allowed Edwards to score eighteen of the other teams twenty-five points. What Hayden thought would be the showing he needed for playing time, ended up being a major embarrassment in front of his coach.

"Hayden, come here," Coach said after practice.

"What's up Coach?"

"I like the initiative you took in wanting to guard Edwards. But, you haven't played competitive ball in half a year, and he's an All American. You can't just come back into the game by throwing yourself into the best player around," Coach laughed, "I know

you'll be seeing some good minutes this year. You've got heart and skill, and I know that our staff will make you great."

Apparently the failure of a practice wasn't as much of a failure as Hayden had originally thought. Now that he had impressed the coach, he knew that it was time to prove his real skills. When Coach called him into the first game of the season, Hayden was more than ready. First play, Hayden ran down the floor, crossed past his defender, and threw a dunk down. The crowd started cheering loudly, and Hayden's adrenaline went through the roof. He got a block off of the backboard on defense, and threw a pass across the length of the court to get a nice fastbreak assist. Hayden finished the game with ten minutes of action, eleven points, two assists, one block, and he shot one hundred percent from the field, along with one made three on one attempt.

As the season progressed, Coach gave Hayden more and more minutes. It only took six games for Hayden to become the starting shooting guard, alongside Carsen Edwards. Carsen was already on track for another All-American season, and Hayden was determined to be All-American with him. As March Madness approached, Coach started to shorten the rotation. He said the time to learn was not now. Now was the time for experienced players, not ones who still needed to figure out their game. Hayden was the only freshman to keep his minutes, as the other four were stripped of all of their minutes.

Hayden had an excellent game for the first matchup of March Madness. Purdue played Old Dominion, and Hayden was the leading scorer for the whole game. He had thirty-six points and seven assists. Purdue won by seventeen points, and moved on to play a very tough Villanova squad in the second round. Edwards struggled against Old

Dominion, but picked it up for game two. Carsen finished with twenty points, three more points than Hayden had scored. It was a close game, but Purdue managed to squeak past Villanova on a game-winning three by Edwards.

Hayden got a call at nine o'clock the night before Purdue's game versus Oklahoma. It was Mikey.

"Hayden. It's Mikey. I hope you're ready for tomorrow. I know you've made a recovery from breaking your knee, but do you think you can make that same recovery again? Who's going to sign you to their college team after you've broken both of your knees within a year of each other?" he laughed as he hung up the phone.

Hayden didn't sleep more than two hours that night, paranoid about what Mikey had said. Mikey was going to break Hayden's leg again. No school would accept a walk-on with that type of injury. It was hard enough to be a walk-on after one broken leg, it would be impossible to do it with another. As the players were lined up for the National Anthem, Mikey stared straight into Hayden's eyes. If he was going for intimidation, it was working. The buzzer sounded, and Boilermakers won the tip-off. Hayden ran to the right corner, ready to catch and shoot the ball when Edwards cut around. When the play went to success, Hayden went into his shot form, when he noticed Mikey staring at him across the court. Distracted by nothing but Mikey just standing there, Hayden missed the shot badly. He shook his head, trying to clear himself of a distraction that he had placed in his own mind, but it didn't work. Hayden only made one shot the whole first half, and it was an open fastbreak layup. He was shooting 1-9 and the Boilermakers trailed 46-31.

"What in the world is wrong with you Miller!" Coach screamed.

“I don’t know, Coach, something’s in my head,” Hayden muttered.

“Well you better get it out before you sit out!” Coach was fuming.

At the start of the second half, Hayden was determined to score. He took five straight threes, and hit all five. Now that he was on a fiery groove, he was ready to win this game, regardless of Mikey’s intimidation. With four minutes left, Oklahoma inbounded from the sidelines. Mikey nodded his head toward Hayden, and Oklahoma seemingly threw the ball straight to Hayden. He saw Mikey point at his leg as he turned to run on the fastbreak. Hayden knew what was coming, but this time he knew how to stop it. As he ran down the floor, he did a step-back, making the defender who was coming to take him out fly past him. Hayden threw an alley-oop into the paint, and the Boilermakers took their first lead of the game.

Hayden finished the game with twenty-six points, and one assist. Oklahoma never took the lead back, and Purdue went on to win the rest of the March Madness tournament. Carsen Edwards and Hayden were both named All-American, and Carsen declared for the 2019 NBA Draft. Hayden had received calls from zero NBA general managers, which he thought was fine for entering the Draft, until Carsen told him that all of the teams in the NBA had scouts call him. Hayden decided to remain at Purdue for the next season, while Carsen Edwards and Mikey Fox committed to the NBA Draft.

With less than a month until the NBA Draft, Hayden’s agent notified him that an NBA scout had called him. The San Antonio Spurs had offered Hayden a spot on their G-League affiliate, the Austin Spurs. Hayden was ecstatic, and told his agent to accept the offer. Hayden thanked his coaches and teammates at Purdue, for allowing him the opportunity to play as a walk-on this year. It was an experience that he would forever be

grateful for. Now, he was on a first class flight to Austin, Texas to start his professional career.

Last Friday

By: Abigail Smith

It was a normal Friday—well, as normal as it could be given the fact there was a wide spread pandemic. I sat in my car, the heat consuming me and listening to my music. The sun was bright, it shined just over the top of our two-story school, blinding me for a moment. My friend, Alli, pulled up next to me in her silver Nissan Altima. We both opened our doors in parallel timing and stepped out into the biting November air. “Morning” Alli called before ducking her head back into her car, reaching for her backpack.

“Hey—did you hear about basketball?” I said striking a convo as we began walking on the sidewalk towards the main doors. “Apparently the season is canceled until the spring now.” Alli tilted her head, her blonde curls falling across her cheek.

“Honestly, I’m not surprised,” she said in a matter of fact tone, “It’s only a matter of time until we are full remote again anyways.” We reached the main entrance and pulled our face masks up, covering our mouth and nose. The temperature scanner recited “*Temperature Normal*” as each student stepped up to the screen—a background noise we had become accustomed to in this new normal. Students flowed through the hallways heading to their first hour class. The sounds of opening and closing lockers rattled down the hallways. Alli and I made our way down the hallway to our lockers.

“When is that English essay due? I have Mrs. Desjardin first hour and I’m not finished.” I asked Alli as I reached to grab my books from my locker shelf.

“The 13th, which that would make it...Today” Alli said as she looked in her planner.

“Oh crap! What time is it—Maybe I can hurry and get it done.” I said fumbling through my binder as we walked to the main staircase. I looked up towards the clock, hung on the wall just above the stairs. A janitor was on a ladder, fiddling with the hour hands.

“They must have just now remembered to change the clocks from daylight savings,” Alli said as we climbed the staircase, “I’ll see you in second hour.” She started in the direction towards Mrs. Humphrey’s room. As I was making my way towards English the bell rang.

Great, another tardy.

I entered the room and took my seat. “Marlene?” a voice asked from behind me. I turned and saw Bree.

“Oh he—“ *wait Bree graduated last year... What is she doing here?*

“Aren’t you supposed to be next door in Mrs. West’s class? This is senior English dork.” Bree said as she lightly laughed. It took me a moment to notice, but Bree wasn’t wearing a mask. I looked around and noticed no one was.

“Why is no one wearing their face masks?” I turned around to question Bree, the confusion clear in my expression.

“Uhh... why would we need to?” she laughed not understanding I was serious. I gathered my things, my mind distanced itself from the moment. I stood and walked to Mrs. West’s room, my mind focused on the thoughts consuming me.

“GOOD MORNING CHS” the morning announcements cut through my thoughts as I took a seat, “It is March 13th, 2020...” The sounds around me muffled, my thoughts sharpened.

March 13th?... Did he just say...March 13th. This is a joke right? Or maybe a dream? My hand... Can I see my hand?

I looked down to study my hand--moving my fingers, feeling the sensation of touch.

Surely if this was in fact a dream I wouldn't be able to see my hand, and have the sense of touch for that matter...right?

I looked around the classroom, looking for any indication if this was real or not. I studied my classmates-- Clare's hair was a honey blonde (her natural color), but she had just recently dyed it brown. Or at least I had thought so. I looked at the board, scanning for a time and date. The bottom corner of the screen read "3/13/2020 8:07 am".

March? I am back in MARCH! I can't go through that again... and today's the day the governor announces school closings, right?

I turned in my seat to face Clare. "Hey Clare--can you believe all that covid nonsense?" I said in a light tone. Mimicking how I acted when we all had thought it was a joke, something that wouldn't affect our lives.

"Are you talking about that one virus? Like the one that is like a small cold? She asked, confused.

"I mean, I wouldn't say a Pandemic is a small cold," I laughed, making light of the conversation.

"I don't think I know what you are talking about," Clare said as she reached under her desk, pulling out the assignment that was due, "That covid basically disappeared. Anyways, what did you write down for the prompt on number 2?"

"Oh, um, let me look," I opened my binder and flipped through the dividers.

If Clare doesn't know what I am talking about... did it even exist like it did in the past... well present now. But I still have all my stuff from November 2020, so am I really in March.

I raised my hand as Mrs. West entered the classroom. She nodded in my direction "May I go to my locker? I forgot my book?" I asked.

"Yes, go ahead." Mrs. West said began taking attendance. I had to keep myself from racing to my old locker from Junior year. Thankfully I remembered the number and combination. Slowly, I opened the locker, not quite sure what to expect.

It must be March again.

My lunchbox and backpack was on the hooks, and all my belongings from March were there. I grabbed for my backpack and took out the binders. It was as if it was frozen in time. All my assignments were there, my things, my lunch I had made that morning which should have been 8 months ago. I placed my binders from November at the bottom of my locker, and grabbed the old binders.

Okay. So it's March...which would mean everything that has happened over the summer and next school year, hasn't...and I am the only one who knows? I need to find Alli.

I hurried back to Mrs. West's room, and took my seat. Time seemed to slow, like it knew I was waiting for the next possible moment to find Alli. The bell rang and I quickly gathered my things and headed to the gym. Second hour junior year was P.E and thankfully Alli had it with me. "Alli", I hissed before she could enter the locker room.

"Mar, what are you doing?" she asked, laughing at how ridiculous I must have looked standing around the corner. She walked over, wondering what I needed. "We need to hurry or we will be late for P.E, what's up?"

"I don't think you will believe me." I said, not sure how to explain what was going on. If I even knew what was going on.

"Try me," Alli said. I peeked around the corner, looking to see if anyone was in earshot.

In a hushed voice, I whispered, "This morning it was November 13th, 2020, not March." I watched as what I said registered across her face.

"Is this a joke," she looked at me, annoyed.

"I told you wouldn't believe me. I can prove it—but we might have to skip class." Alli seemed hesitant. Clearly not wanting to miss class, but her curiosity overcame her.

"Okay, lead the way," she said as she gestured with her hand for me to lead. Alli and I hurried through the halls, back to my locker.

"My things from November are in here," I said as I lifted the handle, opening my locker, "It's right—" They were gone. "They were right here, I could've sworn. I had just put them there."

"Mar, this really is not funny. We are late to class for this?" She said exasperated not wanting to get in trouble.

"But it was right here, Alli. Right here. Unless, it vanished. If it's March 2020, those things technically don't exist yet right?" I said, trying to form an explanation for it. "I need to call Finn, maybe he knows what's going on."

"Finn? Like the boy you were crushing on... that has a girlfriend--Finn?" Alli looked worried for me. Not quite sure if I was being serious with her.

Finn...No, no, no...he wouldn't remember me...He doesn't even KNOW me.

"Alli—I know it seems crazy, but I'm telling you, this morning it was November, and COVID basically took the rest of our junior year. We barely had a prom at the end of July and everything was closed for months," I began speaking faster, panicking, thinking the words would all disappear if I didn't say them now. "Finn broke up with Kenna in March and we had been dating since May, and now I'm stuck back here—and you're telling me COVID doesn't even exist anymore? I lived through all that to be back at the start? All for nothing..." My world once again felt turned upside down, but this time it was set back to what normal life was.

There was no pandemic, no masks, no temperature scans or social distancing. This was what normal was—what normal should be. Normal was a chance to play in soccer matches and basketball tournaments. Normal was a chance to go to prom and dance with your friends. Normal was a chance to graduate high school with your classmates you had grown up with. Was normal worth it. Here it was, the opportunity to have the rest of my junior year and a real senior year. All I had to do was stay. I couldn't help but think of the memories I had made though since March 13th that day so long ago.

Okay—if I stay, that would mean I wouldn't even know Finn. All that time we spent together—gone. The moments that had made me into a better, stronger person—gone. But life would be normal... right?

I knew that the normal life would be great, the perfect opportunity to have everything I ever wanted as a high school student. I just had to give up everything that I had gotten since, and I couldn't. Although life wasn't normal, and COVID affected the world in rippling effects, I was genuinely happy in November. I was closer with my friends, and had new ones too. As selfish as it was, I needed to find my way back to them. "I can't stay here Alli, I have to go back." I said, desperation leaking into my voice.

"Go back where? Go back to November?"

“Yes, I just need to figure out how...”

What did we do this morning... Okay, we went to our lockers, walked up the mainstairs. I was running late to class and needed more time to get English done...time...THE CLOCK!

I took off down the hallway, Alli followed closely behind not sure what I was thinking. I stopped at the center staircase. The clock hands were an hour ahead, as if it was November. “We need to change the clock hands to the right time. That’s how I will go back, I am sure of it.” I said, looking at the clock.

“Okay then... I’ll get the janitor?” Alli said as she looked around. Alli and the janitor returned with a ladder. He didn’t seem too confused about why we were so worried about the clock. He began fixing the hands as the bell rang for third hour.

“I’ll catch you later I guess,” Alli said as she started down the hallway. I began making my way to third hour, not sure if it had worked.

“Mar! Hey—where have you been?” Alli asked as she walked towards me, “Why weren’t you in second hour?” I only responded with a smile. I was back.

The New Beginning
By
Karissa Durham

I decided I needed to move because my acting career is over now. I'm deaf and I knew this was going to come one day. Here I am, I'm 20 without a career. I decided to buy a house. I know! With what money? My parents helped me buy it. My parents live all the way in New York and here I am in the mountains. I just had to get away from everything. I bought a big 2 story log cabin house. I don't have very many neighbors around because they live about 10 minutes away.

My past relationship wasn't good. I've been talking to a new guy off and on, but I'm not sure if we just click. He keeps calling me but I ignore it. It's like I basically left my life behind. I have been signed up for ASL. My house has custom things built in it to help me. Tonight is my first night dealing with all this. I decided to make dinner for myself, and I felt a vibration knock from the window. It was my neighbor and she brought me some apple pie and welcomed me to the neighborhood. Since I live near a small town, people already know about me.

"Hello! I'm Casey. I brought you some apple pie." She said.

I knew I could still talk because my hearing had been going out for a bit and I learned to cope with it. I'm trying to mumble to her along with sign language.

"I'm sorry. I'm deaf, and trying to talk is hard for me." I said.

"Oh! I forgot. I'm so sorry." She said. Casey knew sign language too. "I can teach you! My dad had to learn it a while back so we all did."

"That would be great. Would you like to come in?" I asked.

"Yes!" She said.

We had an excellent night, and sat down and had dinner with me. I made my famous Parmesan chicken and noodles. She taught me more on ASL.

"I'll see you later?" She asked

“Definitely!” I said

I decided to clean up and get ready for bed. I thought I felt something hit my window because I felt vibrations hitting off of it. I didn’t see anything. So I went on with my night. I decided I was going to watch a couple movies. Of course it’s hard remembering their voices but subtitles help sometimes.

Casey left to go home. She didn’t bring her car because why not just walk for 10 minutes. Casey was leaving and heard something in the woods. She continued walking.

“Hello?” ...”Hello?”

Casey was trying to scream behind a strong hand over her mouth, but all you hear is muffled screaming.

You never see Casey again.

I went to turn all the lights off. That’s when I saw blood on my sliding glass door. “What in the world.” I said. I started locking all my doors, and my windows. I was out of breath by the time I came down from the 2nd floor. I went to grab my phone to call 911. Then suddenly the power went out. My phone has no signal out in the mountains without wifi. I ducked down and grabbed a knife. I saw my laptop and decided to get on it and message my mom.

“You stupid idiot,” I thought. The wifi is down too. I then see a light shining through my door. I quickly hid behind the island grabbing some pepper spray from the cabinet underneath. “Who could it be?” “How can i get help from all the way out here?” “What am I going to do?” I thought to myself.

I’m hiding behind my counter as I’m watching the guy walk around. He’s got a white mask on, and has a crossbow. He suddenly looks at me like he knows where I’ve been hiding this whole time. I was frozen and I couldn’t move at all.

“He looks familiar,” I thought to myself.

That’s when I really couldn’t move. It was my ex boyfriend Jake from New York. I didn’t stay with him because he was psycho and abusive.

He came and tapped on my window with a knife he pulled out of his pockets. He tried breaking the windows, but little did he know they were unbreakable glass windows. He then started going around the house taunting me. I followed to see where he would go. Jake then disappeared into the woods and was gone. I then tried to see my wifi box outside, and of course he only unplugged it. I looked around from behind the window and I saw no sight of him. I decided to open the window to plug it back in. I saw a bow hit my log cabin house and that's when he started running towards me. Luckily I got the window closed in time but I didn't get the wifi plugged back in. I go sit down to see if anything has turned on my phone or laptop. Jake was gone again. I go into a room and look out my window. There was Casey, lying on her stomach over my AC fan outside. Blood everywhere and she was dead.

"Jeesh! My first day out here and I don't have anything left," I thought. I saw something in Casey's pocket.

"Her phone!! Yes!" I thought! I went to grab without thinking and he was right there. I dropped the phone while he hit my hand pretty bad. With my left hand I closed the window quickly, and left. I sat there sobbing not knowing what to do.

"Why is he doing this? I left him for a reason..." I said to myself. I was looking around the house for stuff to help me. That's when I remembered my car keys. Jake was behind the house.

"Ok, if I just unlock my car, run and drive out of here, I will make it." I thought to myself. I sneaked quietly out of my house and saw a light shine. I then got under my porch because I knew he was coming. I tried holding my breath, and I saw his feet go by. He was gone for a few minutes. I decided to get out and run to my car and another bow hit my porch. He was running so fast, I got back into the house. My car was so far away I wouldn't have made it. I'm not sure what to do now, it's midnight and it's silent in my head. I started to feel dizzy and felt like passing out. "I'm done for," I thought to myself. I had no fight in me left at all.

I wasn't going to pass out. I still had enough fight in me. Jake was still banging on the door trying to get in. I ignored him, I needed to sit down and catch my breath. He then got off the porch and started walking around the house again. I did not have any care to continue to look for him. He was gone for a bit, and I realized something.

"MY KEYS!" I thought to myself. I was going to set my car alarm off hoping someone would come! Jake then heard it because he was instantly right next to my car bashing out my windows. He even slashed all 4 tires. While he was doing that I went to the back and finally got the wifi turned on from the box outside. I got my phone and called 911.

"911 what's your emergency," the lady said.

"Hello?...Hello?... I'm a deaf person I can't hear, but I need help."

"911 what's your emergency?" The lady said.

"Hello! I need help! I'm being taunted out where I live. This guy won't leave me alone. He's trying to kill me!!" Crying out loud, I was sobbing so much.

That's when I dropped the phone. I saw Jake climb on the roof up to the 2nd floor.

"Oh my god! I forgot I had a skylight window!" I thought. I ran up to the bathroom. I saw no one. I turned back into the room and he was standing right there. I then started running down the stairs, and he caught my foot. That's when I fell down the stairs and twisted my ankle. It was hard to get up, so I started scooting like an army crawl. He was coming down the stairs like something in a horror movie. I tried grabbing my keys and scooting to my sliding glass door. He then grabbed my legs and dragged me underneath him. He started choking me with his hands, And I couldn't breathe. I thought to myself "I need to fight for my life!"

I finally thought of something. My keys were beside me, So I tried reaching for them and it was a struggle. He was so focused on choking me, I got the key and stabbed it in his eye.

"AHHHHHHHH" he screamed. I could see the pain in his eye, but at this point I don't care if he dies. I got the wasp spray from underneath the sink and sprayed it in his eyes. I looked for the matches and lit one off. I threw it on my stove burner and the house started to

catch fire. I then took off running with my broken ankle. I tried to get as far as I could. I saw police lights coming towards my way. I fell right in front of them, and they stepped out to help me.

“Help! We need to go.” I said. They were trying to speak to me, but I couldn’t understand their lips without passing out. I’m not sure what happened with Jake, but I was sent to the hospital for losing too much blood.

I woke up the next day, and everything was blurry. Mom and dad were here, so I knew I made it out alive.

“Oh sweetie... everything will be ok. You need some rest.” Mom said in sign language.

“Yes...you do need rest. We’ll be right here with you.” Dad said too with signing. With that I then drifted off to sleep.

Turn the Page

By

Emilie Hotze

The world is a mysterious place where many different things take place. New specimens are found every day, we find things out from the past, and even try to predict things for the future. What if the predictions and hypotheses we come up with aren't real? Who's to say everything we know to be true isn't just a lie? Hello, my name is Justus and those are the types of things that keep me awake at night.

There's not many people I can express my thoughts to without them thinking I'm insane. My family thinks I'm crazy, they're constantly telling me to grow up and focus on what I'm going to do with my future. Although I'm a senior and I know that's what I should be worried about, I can't help my mind from wandering. My best friends Aspen and Alex share the same thoughts that I do. They're also curious about the world we live in and are the only people I can share my thoughts with knowing I won't be judged. If anyone is going to uncover something about our city of Atlantis, we're the only ones that care.

"Time to get dressed for school honey!" yelled my mom from the bottom of the stairs.

I despise those words, not because I have to wake up early like the typical teenager but because I wake up to do something I don't enjoy. The only upside of school is I get away from home and my friends will be there. I threw on my favorite t-shirt and clipped on my gillring to rush downstairs for breakfast. It's my favorite meal, only because of the food.

"What's on the menu Momma?"

"Fish flakes, there's milk on the counter", she said.

I'm tired of fish flakes. Mornings are always the same in my house, I ate my cereal quickly and went back to my room. I got my backpack ready and headed for the door. I took my usual walk down the street to the corner where I met Aspen and Alex.

On our way to school we were talking about what we were going to have for lunch and we all decided on the pizza parlor for our open campus today.

"I wish our side of the city would get some new restaurants," said Alex.

"Me too," Aspen agreed.

"I'm just so tired of living in this place, one day we're going to know if there's more to life than just this city," I said.

"I just don't get how other people don't get tired of it here, or at least question the existence of other life," Aspen said back.

That left us silent for a while until we approached the school front.

"Well here we go," I said.

We all have different first hours so we headed to our classes to start the day. My first hour is History, which is my favorite class. I like to learn about the past of Atlantis and where we all came from.

After the class was over I went to second hour study hall, my friends were in that class with me. Every day we walked in and asked to go straight to the library, the teacher knew so she was okay with it. We just like reading and researching, our favorite thing to do is talk about our conspiracies.

"I wanna find something new in this place" Alex said.

"Yeah that'd be nice, like we haven't been in here 1,000 times.." said Aspen.

I looked over and they had their backs turned to each other. I hate when they don't get along.

Alex walked to the other side of the library and began looking at a dusty shelf.

"You don't have to make comments like that all the time, everything was fine." I told her.

“Neither of you guys can take a joke,” she said then walked away. I hate being in this situation but somehow I always find myself here. Should I say more to Aspen? I walked over to her and began to talk,

“Ya know, even though you think your comments are jokes, Alex has expressed his hate for them so many times. So at this point you just do it to make him mad, you guys are the only friends I-“

“Uhhhh guys?!” Alex said from across the library, disregarding the be quiet rule.

Me and Aspen looked at each other then looked across the room.

“What is that?” I asked

“Is it glowing over there?” she said..

End act 1

Act 2

Aspen and I quickly made our way to that corner of the library to investigate. Alex certainly found something new we hadn't seen before. This book wasn't like the others, not even just in looks, it gave off its own vibe. When we got over there it was almost like the book was pulling us in, without words.

“Well, what's that page say?” I asked

“I'm not looking!” said Alex.

“You guys need to man up,” Aspen stated as she made her way towards the page.

“Read these words, there is no fright, you will be on land by the night,” she repeated.

“Land? like space?,” I questioned.

We all took a step closer to the book to gather a better understanding, it just wasn't making sense. The essence that filled the area was making my stomach uneasy. It smelled very dry and crisp. All of a sudden, there was no one to my left or my right. Everything around me appeared white and all I could see was this book. I walked closer and it pulled me in!

“ASPENNNN!! ALEXXX??? HELLOOO” I screamed as this warp drug me through the book.

SLAM

I hit the ground and felt something prickly under my feet. I looked across the way, and saw Aspen struggling to get to her feet with Alex a few feet away. I stood up and gasped for water, but to my surprise it was still just this essence. Fresh and crisp, it almost hurt to breathe. I felt the side of my face, my gills and gillring were both gone. I could feel what resembled my gillring but it was now pierced into a lobe on the side of my face. Is this, air?

I went to Alex and Aspen and realized I wasn't swimming, but I was walking. How can this be?
"Are you guys okay?" Alex asked.

"I feel fine, but what is this?" I said.

"WHAT DID YOU GET US INTO?" said Aspen lunging for Alex.

They of course go at it, in the meantime I began looking up and around for an answer to all our questions. In the grass I saw the book that started this mess, I opened it up and looked. The pages just seemed to have a bunch of information of what I just experienced. The front page said the book is enchanted, and once you get to page 5 the warp opens. At least it has directions. I skipped past page 5 to page 6 and began reading there.

It has a map with a red line to a destination? I find this so useless, I just want to know how to get home. I broke Aspen and Alex apart to enlighten them on my findings.

"Well," Aspen said "Let's just follow the line."

"Are you crazy?" Alex began "You don't kn-"

"The only reason we're in this mess is because of you so for all you know the line is out way home" she said

"I don't understand why you guys fight this much. JUST STOP, the only way we're all getting out of this is together so your arguing isn't going to happen anymore" I exclaimed. I've been waiting a long time to do that.

After a moment of silence, "Let's follow the line" I said and began walking. The line first took us to a little walkway next to a large road. I was looking around and everything was saying "Welcome to Georgia". Gorg-aGeor-ga? Gerg-ia? Forget it.

"Up here the map says to cross the street, go right" I ordered

We walked up to a group of people also waiting and stood like they were.

"Psst" I said.

"What Justus?" Alex replied quietly.

"What are we doing?" I whispered.

"I think we're waiting on those metal boxes to stop," he said.

Suddenly everyone looked at us. A little human lit up green on the other side so everyone began walking. We crossed the street at the speed of light and continued on the other side.

There's all kinds of things and people here. I saw a man on the ground with some instrument and the case sitting out in front of him. There seemed to be a lot of people paying attention to him, they were putting coins in his case. A few yards up the streets there was an essence that filled my nose.

"That smells great," I said

I looked over and there was an even bigger metal box with "Dan's BBQ" written on the side. I would long to have some of that smell to take home. People were handing that man coins and they were being handed something. Peeking at a customer's plate I realized it wasn't just a smell, it was their food. This is the hungriest I have been in a long time.

"I need some," I said

I went up, ordered, handed him my coins, and went to walk away.

"Hey man! What's this?" The food guy said holding up my coins.

"Those are my coins?" I said.. I really don't understand why this man is so mad.

"Don't show your face around here again buddy!" He screamed. We ran down the block and looked back at the map. It didn't have any turns where we are so we crossed the road and

headed with the red line. I really hope we don't end up being in trouble, if we die here no one in Atlantis will know.

As we made our way down the street, I also realized how fortunate I am to have the things I have. There were people sitting on the street with barely any clothes, they were almost paper thin. People here seem to come in all kinds, while my people of Atlantis have it all equal. I don't know what I'd do if I was that guy on the side of the road.

The red line eventually brought us to this statue in front of a large building. The statue was of a large piece of paper. Although it wasn't real paper, the statue depicted it was ripped out of something.

"That writing looks familiar," I said

"You're right Justus," said Alex holding the book parallel to the statue.

Under the statue it read, "Only known artifact we have of the lost city of Atlantis, shown here in your local Museum". A museum?

"Should we go into the museum?"

"We need to find a way home," said Aspen

"I agree, let's go," Alex said

We finally agree on something and may actually have a way home.

End act 2

Begin Act 3

We made our way into the museum looking for any sign of our home that may help us out. After about an hour of wandering through the museum, I began to think this whole place is a waste of time. There's absolutely nothing here having to do with Atlantis, it's almost like these people don't know we exist.

As we're making our way through the large building we came across a room and at the top it stated, "Forgotten"

"What is this room" I asked

“Seems like all the stuff these people don’t care for anymore” said Aspen

To our surprise it was the largest room in the whole building. We started looking at all the artifacts and I saw some interesting things. A tiny device that flips open with numbers on it, a portable navigation called “GPS”, and even this wired thing with a crank handle called a “mixer”. I understand why this stuff has become forgotten just from my walk down the street, they have developed a greater version of everything.

I made my way to the back of the room and there was another doorway with a curtain over it. At the top of the door there was a sign that said, “Atlantis exhibit-unfinished, authorized personnel only”

“I feel like our answer is in here,” I said

Aspen and Alex came over to the doorway and we all gave each other a mutual look of agreement. We took a step into the doorway.

Behind the curtain it seems they have everything they need to know about our civilization.

There’s artifact walls full of things I see at home everyday, but that just leaves me wondering. If they know we exist, why hasn’t anyone from this world come to ours? It seemed we all had the same question because Alex opened the book and began looking.

As he was looking I started reading some of the things these people have to say about our home. According to them we are “the most sophisticated civilization of the early years”.

“What does this mean?” I asked aspen

“I’m not sure what *the early years* are,” she said

“I think our civilization was frozen in t-“

A glowing began from the corner of the room..

“Alex what did you do?!?” We exclaimed

“NOTHING I JUST TURNED THE PAGE,” he screamed.

Different than the first time, Aspen didn’t read any words for us to get sucked into this warp. This time it just took us on it’s own.

I hit the ground abruptly and looked up at the ceiling. Bright square lights shined in my eyes and I instantly knew where I was. The school library.

“What did we just do?” I said

“We’re gonna have to do that more often,” Alex said opening the page

“Read these words, there is no fright, you will be on land by night”

“ALEX N-“ Aspen and I didn’t get our exclamation out before the glowing started.

Short Story

By

Collin Smith

Greg was an average passerby on the streets of New York. He landed a job as a CPA for an unnamed accounting firm a couple of years ago and had got married to the love of his life, Jane, a year ago. He wasn't the most attractive person with his slick black hair and that little moustache he had that he thought went perfect with his brown eyes. He got up on a hot August morning and smiled when he looked over and saw his lovely wife still sleeping next to him. Her vibrant bright face was so attractive to him and he adored her soft brown hair. He kissed her on the cheek and got up to do the essentials: shower, brush his teeth, make some coffee, and dressed up casual. Today was his favorite day of the week because his boss let everyone slack off a little getting to dress casual and have extended lunch breaks. Nonetheless, he stepped outside his apartment and searched for a taxi to get him to work.

Everyone greeted Greg on his way to his office. It was a perfect day and the hours passed fast. He wondered to himself if his wife had gotten up yet. Jane did graphic design jobs online for people and stayed at home for the most part. It was an hour before lunch and his coworkers were pretty deep into their work. He pulled out his phone and looked at some of his old photos with his wife. He was waiting for her to get up so they could send the occasional texts back and forth. Since no one was free to talk to him, he spent a good amount of time reflecting on the funny and cute pictures with his lady.

"Working hard or hardly working?" asked Greg's boss as he stepped into his office. *I hate when people say that*, Greg thought.

"Ummm sorry boss I promise I haven't been on my phone all day."

"Oh, I didn't see it in your hands. I just noticed everyone is really deep into their work. Especially on a beautiful Friday like this." Greg drew a silent sigh of relief.

“Yeah boss it’s pretty strange. Well, it’s almost time for lunch, isn’t it? I think I’ll go home and eat with the wife for a while.”

“Sounds good to me” said Greg’s boss as he walked away to go bother another employee. He started packing up his things to go home for lunch when his phone lit up with a text from Jane. It said there was an image so he opened up his phone to something that would change his life forever: Jane sent him a picture of her pregnancy test- and it was positive.

Greg rushed outside to get a taxi and told the driver to get him home as fast as possible. Before he knew it, he found himself running up the steps of his apartment and in his living room before he knew it. Jane ran over to him and gave him the most excited hug he had received from someone. He almost couldn’t believe what was happening and almost passed out. When she loosened her embrace, he stepped back and could only say: “Wow.”

“I was waiting for the right time to send you it but it’s as positive as you can get out. We’re gonna have a baby!” said Jane.

“Let me call my boss so we can go get a checkup ok.”

He got the rest of the day off and decided this was an occasion to use their car for. They went hours outside of the city to their family doctor to see how old the baby is. Greg looked over as he drove through the beautiful country and admired how pretty his wife was. He wondered silently to himself how he got so lucky. He was finally going to start a family! He couldn’t wait any longer and drove a little bit faster. They arrived at the clinic and stepped inside.

The doctor performed a regular checkup on Jane before starting an ultrasound. They figured out the baby had been there for about a month, and they hadn’t had a single clue. It was all happening so fast Greg on such a normal Friday. But this day had changed his life forever and he couldn’t be more happy. As the doctor explained more things, Greg held Jane’s hand and they stared deep into each other’s eyes. They talked about how they were going to tell everyone on the way back home and agreed to tell family first. Of course at church that coming Sunday,

word slipped out of Jane's mouth and it felt to Greg like everyone in the world knew before he got to work on Monday.

A couple hours before Greg got off work on Monday, his boss came into his office and closed the door behind him. "Ya know, I've never seen that smile on your face since you got married" he said.

"What can I say- I'm going to be a dad next year. But please don't tell anyone in the office yet."

"Well congratulations, Greg! My kids are all out of college now but I can remember those days buddy. Don't ever let life go fast now. You have to savor every moment of it before your kid is out of the house."

But that was the least of his concerns right now. He only wanted to make sure that he was able to even "have" the baby. That meant planning out a budget to buy diapers and such and finding a good preschool and possibly a nanny. Regardless, the next few months flew by like the autumn wind. Except for, of course, the midnight trips to the store or fast food restaurants for Jane's pregnancy hungers.

In fact, life was really hard for Greg with the baby on the way. His wife required so much of him which was fine, but it was making his job harder considering Jane couldn't work. But what mattered was coming home to his beautiful wife with her slowly growing belly. With all the layoffs from work in the winter, he and Jane stayed inside and had their fake fireplace on at all times. They lost track of time together sleeping in all day and watching movies on their cozy couch in their cozy apartment in their cozy neighborhood. Life was perfect to him and he had everything he could ever hope for.

Greg and Jane made more memories while she was pregnant than he can remember. They took a trip to Disney World, got professional pictures together, goofed around in the city, had multiple big dates and more. They also got closer than they ever have before. The strong bond

of a family had started to bring them together and they were prepared. There was still the couple arguments and the hard times but they stuck together through all of it.

One of the hardest parts for Greg was preparing to become a dad. He believed he could ace the rest of it but he sure wasn't ready to be a dad. So, he went to a group at his church that prepared couples to start families. They used one of those babies that Greg had used in a parenting class in high school. Except, everyone took turns in the class doing things such as cradling and feeding it. These lessons from class only made him even more excited to become a dad for he knew he'd love his child to the end of the earth and nothing could stop him.

The early months of the next year were a bit slow. Greg had to return to work from Christmas break and was facing nonstop work until summertime. Days went by as Greg and Jane baby proofed the house and prepared a savings account to buy things such as formula and diapers. They didn't want to find out the gender of the baby until was born so they just bought some gender neutral baby clothes. Then it came on that one wondrous day in May: Jane's water broke.

Greg carried her with one arm on his shoulder and he decided they would take their car to the hospital instead of a taxi. It was pretty early on a Saturday morning, so there wasn't a terrible amount of traffic on the new york streets. Jane held on to him for life and he had to calm her from screaming from the pain. They finally arrived at the hospital and rushed in to deliver the baby. While they wheeled her to a room, he realized they haven't even thought of a good baby name yet. They had discussed it, but we're holding it off until the baby was born.

The doctors let Greg get some scrubs and gloves on to help deliver the baby. They walked in Jane's hospital room and he was told that the doctors would start pulling it out and Greg would help finish getting it out once the head was out. They pulled and Greg held babes hand to comfort her. They again look deep into each other's eyes as they usually did to comfort each other. Greg was then told to help finish pulling the baby out.

Something felt wrong, though. The baby wasn't making a peep. Then the doctors told Greg to leave the room. He immediately panicked and refused to leave, but they kept insisting. He finally exited the room and kicked the door as hard as he could when they closed it. He was confused and mostly angry. Why wouldn't they let him in? What was wrong with his baby? Was Jane ok? These questions flooded his head as he paced back and forth in front of the door.

When the doctors finally opened the door, they all had a sad look on their face. They let Greg in but said they had something to tell both of them. But he could already guess what they were going to say. He wanted to vomit, even pass out. Anything to get the coming pain away of hearing that his wife had a miscarriage.

6 Months Later

Greg woke up to another Friday morning. He got up, brushed his teeth, etc. He took a long look at himself in the mirror and reflected on his past few months. He and Jane were giving it all for another child. Greg couldn't think too much about it, though, and got dressed. Today was different; he'd exuded he would take his car on the way instead of a taxi. He even stopped to get some coffee and donuts. *Today will be a great day*, he thought.

Traffic was a bum and Greg was starting to be late. He drank his coffee in big gulps as the anxiety of getting there late was filling him. Every green light ahead of him suddenly turned yellow and even quicker to red. Nonetheless, he finally calmed himself down. He thought to himself, *today would not be a good day for a speeding ticket*. He passed the same old buildings he saw every day. For some reason, he couldn't help but get nostalgic on his way there.

Finally, he arrived. The towering building. Not the prettiest in the whole city, but it was there everyday on his adventures to work. He parked in a damp underground parking garage and took no time to get to the top. He ran to the building while trying not to look like a madman to others passing by. He looked around for Jane, and came to the conclusion that she was already inside. Greg opened the door and was immediately greeted by Janes at the front waiting room.

They sat down together and he glanced at the large sign above the secretary's desk: New Starts Orphanage.

Greg sat patiently in the waiting room with Jane. They held their hands together and dreamed of what their new life as parents were going to be like. He thought back in the past few months again in the comfort of his wife's presence. They had tried for kids again, but never succeeded. Greg's boss picked up the hint about what was going on and recommended an African American orphanage to Greg in an email. He was hesitant, but told Jane and she was over-the-top excited. They found some for a while online and had filled out to adopt 3 month old girls that had been named Asia.

A lady that was formally dressed brought out Asia after about an hour of waiting. She had papers in one hand and Asia in a baby carrier in another. As Jane finished filling out the adoption papers and handed her the check, Greg picked up his daughter and rocked her in his arms. He put her back in the carrier and they walked back out to their car (Jane had taken a taxi to the orphanage).

They had prepared a car seat for her and as they were driving home, Greg stared dreamily in the rearview mirror at his beautiful new daughter with Jane sitting next to her and making her giggle. He of course then looked back over at Jane and couldn't help himself from the biggest smile he'd ever had.

Family AT Last

Jenna Middleton

OLIVER:

ITS ALWAYS BEEN JUST ME AND MY DAD. EACH OTHERS BEST FRIEND. WEVE ALWAYS LIVED AT THE SAME HOUSE, JUST ON THE EDGE OF WEST BROOK JUST FEET FROM THE CITY LIMITS. ITS NOT MUCH OF A HOUSE BUT ITS HOME. ITS WHERE I GREW UP. IVE ALWAYS WANTED TO LIVE IN A MANSION, WITH MORE ROOMS THAN I COULD EVER EXPLORE. AND SERVANTS! THAT WOULD BE REAL COOL.

BUT THATS OKAY. DAD DID HIS BEST.

I NEVER REALLY KNEW MY MOM. SHE LEFT WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. I REMEMBER HER SAYING SOME THING ABOUT "AUH-TIS-UM", THOUGH I'M NOT SURE WHAT IT IS. BUT IVE GOT IT, AND SHE DIDNT LIKE IT. SO SHE LEFT.

MY DAD WENT TO WORK MOST DAYS LEAVING ME HOME ALONE. I HATE BEING ALONE. ITS VERY SCARY AND I AM SCARED OF BEING ALONE. THATS WHY I ALWAYS WANTED TO GO WITH HIM, BUT HE NEVER LET ME. IN WEST BROOK, YOU HAVE TO BE 15 BEFORE YOU CAN GET A JOB AND I WAS ONLY 11 AT THE TIME. BUT I NEVER THOUGHT THAT WAS THE REASON WHY I COULDNT GO WITH HIM. IM NOT SURE WHAT MY DADS JOB WAS, BUT IT INVOLVED MAKING A LOT OF RICH PEOPLE ANGRY. I ALWAYS SUSPECTED HE OWED THEM LARGE MONEY AMOUNTS; MONEY THAT WE DIDNT HAVE.

MY MOM LEFT ME FIRST, AND THEN MY DAD. HE DIDNT LEAVE ME THE SAME WAY THOUGH. I WENT DOWNSTAIRS ONE MORNING, AND FOUND HIM ASLEEP IN HIS CHAIR LIKE USUAL. ONLY THIS TIME HE DIDNT WAKE UP. I WAS PANIKING, AND I DIDNT KNOW WHAT TO DO. I TRIED AND TRIED TO WAKE HIM UP. I SHOOK HIM AND A GLASS BOTTLE FELL FROM THE SIDE OF THE CHAIR AND SHATERED UNDER MY FEET. I SCREAMED REAL LOUDLY. I RAN TO TOWN FASTER THAN I EVER HAD BEFORE AND LOOKED FOR HELP FROM THE WILFORDS. I NEW THEY COULD HELP ME.

Elijah:

It was a cold day when Oliver came to us. He had been crying and rambling, hardly understandable. Something had happened to his father— his best friend. Despite my wife's wishes, I followed Oliver back to his home to see if anything could be done to help his father.

There was nothing we could do. His father had passed away— drank himself to death. Oliver cried and cried. He had no family left, no money to take care of his father's expenses, nor his own needs. Being in charge of the funeral home, I decided to wave his fees altogether. Lora was

not happy with me. Then again, she never was. Only on our wedding day have I ever seen her smile.

The funeral was honorable and reserved. It was everything his father deserved and more. Now the question remains: what will happen to Oliver?

OLIVER:

I MISS MY DAD MORE THAN ANYTHING. I'VE ALWAYS HAD HIM WITH ME BUT NO MORE. I MISS HIM AND WISH I COULD SEE HIM...

GUESS WHAT?! GOOD NEWS! THE ADOPTION IS FINAL. I AM OFFICIALLY A WILFORD THOUGH MY LAST NAME IS STILL GREY. I LIKE MY LAST NAME. ANYWAY I AM VERY HAPPY! I HAVE A FAMILY AGAIN, WITH A MOTHER AND A FATHER! ELIJAH IS VERY NICE TO ME. LORA DOESN'T LIKE ME, BUT I DONT KNOW WHAT I DID WRONG. THEY FIGHT A LOT, BECAUSE OF ME. LORA SCREAMS AT ELIJAH AND TELLS HIM WHAT A WASTE I AM. A LOST CAUSE. SHE SAYS IM STUPID BECAUSE IM "AHH-TIS-TICK". THAT WORD AGAIN. I DON'T GET IT. IM JUST...DIFFERENT.

Lora:

What a waste! Everything we have built for ourselves, gone with Elijah's sudden interest in Oliver. All those years of hard work, down the drain with another mouth to feed and another back to clothe! I will never understand why Elijah has done this. For years we tried to have a child of our own, but no such luck. If Elijah thinks he can replace our unborn angels with that autistic freak, he is sadly mistaken!

Elijah:

Now that Olly is 15, he has begun to help me. He is a tremendous help and is eager to work. I am proud to call him my son.

OLIVER:

I LOVE WORKING WITH ELIJAH! IT'S SO MUCH FUN! AND HE TOLD ME HE WAS PROUD OF ME AND THAT I WAS HIS SON! I HAVE NOT STOPPED SMILING SINCE! TOMOROW, I GET TO WORK WITH LORA. ELIJAH SAYS ITLL HELP US GET CLOSER TO EACH OTHER. I CANT WAIT! I HOPE THINGS GO WELL! I WANT THINGS TO GO WELL SO THAT SHE WILL LIKE ME AND LOVE ME LIKE HER SON

OLIVER:

THINGS DID NOT GO WELL. SHE GOT VERY ANGRY WITH ME. SHE HIT ME. THREE TIMES REAL HARD ON THE CHEEK. I HAVE A BRUISE NOW AND IT STINGS. I DONT KNOW WHAT I DID TO DESERVE IT. I DID DROP ALL THE PAPERS, BUT I PICKED THEM UP, MOSTLY IN ORDER. IM JUST GLAD I GET TO WORK WITH ELIJAH AGAIN TOMORROW...

Lora:

He can't do anything right! Hours of organizing papers, and he drops them all! I don't know what we're going to do with him! I wish he would just stay out of the way. My husband always takes his side. "he's just a boy" and "you know he's trying his best, dear." The boy is a menace! He deserves more beatings than I could give him in a lifetime!

Elijah:

I knew at some point Olly was going to have bullies. And today was the first day. He came to dinner tonight with a red welt in his cheek. I asked him what happened. He glanced at Lora, but would never meet my eye. He fidgeted and shifted in his seat. He picked up his fork and studied it carefully, tracing each prong over and over. He wasn't going to tell me. I was just going to have to watch him and find out who had done this to my son.

OLIVER:

I WAS TOO SCARED TO TELL HIM. I DIDN'T WANT LORA TO GET MORE MAD AT ME. SO I KEPT MY MOUTH CLOSED. I DON'T THINK HE KNOWS WHO DID IT. I HOPE NOT. I DON'T LIKE BEING HIT, BUT IF I SPEAK UP, THEY COULD LEAVE EACH OTHER. LORA COULD LEAVE JUST LIKE MY REAL MOTHER DID. I DON'T WANT TO LOSE ANYONE ELSE. SO I JUST TAKE WHAT SHE GIVES ME OR I COULD LOSE HER AND ELIJAH

Elijah:

It does good to see Olly working with Lora. So, they are working together again today. I have many errands to run, and Lora can keep an eye on Olly and have a helping hand. I do hope their relationship is close to that of a biological family.

OLIVER:

I THINK LORA'S CHEATING. NOT AT CHECKERS OR ANYTHING. BUT BUSINESS. SHE HAS WHAT SHE CALLS BILLS FROM WHEN THEY DID SERVICE FOR SOMEONE. SHE WRITES THEM OUT TO SEND TO THE FAMILY BUT SHE PUTS MORE THAN WHAT THE OTHER PAPER SAYS. TODAY, SHE SENT ONE TO SAM JEFFERSON. I DON'T KNOW HIM, BUT THEY APPARENTLY BURIED HIS MOTHER A FEW MONTHS AGO. LORA TOLD HIM HE OWED £45, BUT THE PAPER RECORDS SAID ONLY £25. BUT I COULD BE WRONG, I'VE NEVER BEEN GOOD WITH MATH. SO I ASKED HER ABOUT IT AND ASKED IF SHE COULD TEACH ME MATH AND NUMBERS SOME DAY... SHE DIDN'T LIKE THAT IDEA. SHE RAISED HER HAND AND...

Elijah:

Another night and another bruise on Olly's cheek. Lora said she was with him most of the day, but "children can be cruel". I have suspicions that it could indeed be her who is harming Olly. I don't understand my wife sometimes; for years we tried to have a baby. It was her only wish.

Now we have one, and she does not want him. She should be thankful we have been blessed with Olly.

Lora:

Oliver won't tell Elijah. I made sure of that. If he misbehaves, there are consequences. He knows that well by now. But I have a problem. He saw the "miscalculations" in my work today. He has no idea what it's like to marry someone like Elijah. Women these days are always left without their husband, and I need to start planning now. A little money saved away is nothing uncommon! That little rat needs to keep his nose out of my business!

OLIVER:

TODAYS THE DAY. IM GOING TO TELL ELIJAH ABOUT LORA. IT IS BEEN GETTING WORSE. SHE HITS ME FOR LOOKING AT A PAPER OR FOR FOCUSING ON THE THINGS AROUND THE ROOM OR ROCKING BACK AND FORTH ON MY HEELS. THINGS I'VE ALWAYS DONE. ONCE I ASKED IF I COULD GO OUTSIDE AND PLAY. MY EYE WAS SWOLLEN SHUT THE NEXT DAY. SHE KEEPS SENDING OUT "BILLS" TO PEOPLE IN TOWN. I DONT ASK HER ABOUT IT ANYMORE. BUT THIS CANT KEEP HAPPENING. IT'S NOT RIGHT.

OH NO...

ALL THESE MONTHS, I'VE BEEN SCARED ABOUT ELIJAH AND LORA BEING APART. BUT WHAT IF THEY DONT? WHAT IF ELIJAH DOESNT BELIEVE ME OR HE TAKES HER SIDE. WHAT IF IM THE ONE WHOS SEPARATED? ILL HAVE NO FAMILY AGAIN. I DONT WANT THAT!

IM NOT TELLING ELIJAH

Elijah:

We had an odd day today. Many times, Olly came up to me, yet never spoke. I think he is hiding something from me. I do hope he knows he can tell me anything. And if not me, then Lora. But that was not the only odd thing. A woman came in today, one I had never seen before, yet she looked faintly familiar. I know everyone in town, so you can imagine my surprise. I asked her what I could do for her today. She wasn't even quite sure what she was doing there. She looked around nervously. Then, she looked me in the eyes and told me she was looking for her son. I asked for his name, hoping I'd know where he was buried on the plot. She looked at me, tears swelling in her eyes. *No, you don't understand....My son's not dead.*

OLIVER:

I WAS IN BED WRITTING WHEN ELIJAH CAME IN. I THOUGHT IT WAS TYME FOR WORK, SO I SPRUNG UP AND GREETED HIM. BUT HE TOLD ME TO SIT BACK DOWN. SO I DID. HE SAT RIGHT NEXT TO ME. I WAS SCARED HE WAS GOING TO ASK ME SOME THING ABOUT LORA. HE SOME WHAT DID. HE SAID WE NEED TO TALK BUT THAT WE HAD TO EXCHANGE SECRETS. AND I HAD TO GO FIRST.

WE SAT THERE FOR A LONG Tyme BEFORE I FINALLY STARTED TO CRY. I DONT KNOW WHY. I WAS SCARED AND I DIDNT WANNA TALK. SOME HOW HE GOT IT OUT OF ME. I TOLD HIM EVERY THING ABOUT LORA AND THE MONEY AND HOW SHE HIT ME AND HOW I WAS SCARED TO LOSE THEM. HE CALMED ME DOWN AND FINALLY IT WAS Tyme FOR HIS SECRET. HE WHISPERED REALLY QUIETLY AT FIRST. BUT IT FELT LIKE A SCREAM WAS TRAPPED INSIDE.

MY MOTHER HAD COME BACK FOR ME. SHE WAS HERE. SHE WANTED ME. SHE...LOVED ME.

Elijah:

I didn't want Olly to go. Of course I didn't. His mother had left him, and I raised him as my own son. I also wanted Olly to go. He needed his real family. He needed to be with his mother. He needed a family with people who loved him. Thanks to Lora, our home could not be that place. But the decision is Oliver's. Whatever he may choose, I will respect it. I only hope he knows how much I love him.

OLIVER:

TOMOROW I AM GOING TO SPEND THE DAY WITH MY MOM. SHE HAS A LOT TO EXPLAIN. SHE NEEDS TO EXPLAIN EVERY THING. I DONT KNOW WHAT I WANT. I WISH THE WILFORDS AND MY MOM COULD ALL JUST GETS ALONG. BUT THATS NOT HOW THINGS WORK. IM GOING TO HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THEM. I DONT KNOW WHAT TO DO. WE'LL SEE HOW TOMOROW GOES.

Lora:

That ungrateful brat! After everything that we have provided him with— a home, a family, food, clothing, time, patience!— he just wants to leave with his mother who abandoned him all those years ago. He owes us much more than he has given us, and he's not going anywhere until his debt is paid! One way or another, he will pay!

OLIVER:

I'VE MADE A CHOICE. IM GOING WITH MY MOM. THE WILFORDS ARE COOL, I NO THAT. BUT ITS MY MOM. SHE TOLD ME EVERY THING ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. SHE DIDNT LEAVE ME, SHE WENT TO FIND HELP FOR ME. THEN SHE GOT LOST AND DIDNT HAVE MONEY TO COME BACK HOME. SHE HEARD ABOUT DAD AND ASSUMED SOME THING HAPPENED TO ME TO UNTIL SHE SAW ME WITH THE WILFORDS IN THE PAPER ABOUT MY ADOPTION. SO SHE CAME BACK FOR ME. ALTHOUGH I DONT NO WHAT TOOK HER SO LONG. ANYWAY IM HAPPY BUT ALSO SAD BECAUSE THAT MEANS I HAVE TO LEAVE ELIJAH AND LORA. BUT MOM SAYS WE CAN STAY IN TOUCH. I HAVENT TOLD ELIJAH YET. IM GOING TO TELL LORA FIRST. SHE WONT BE AS UPSET IM GUESSING, SO IM GOING TO GET IT OVER WITH.

Elijah:

I am certain Olly is going to go with his mother. I understand. The boy deserves to be with his real family, though the process will be long. Because we adopted him, things are not going to be as easy as him just going with her. But we'll make it work. I am happy for Olly and wish him the best of luck. He has not come to see me yet, but I saw him heading towards Lora's office. I believe he's saying goodbye.

Lora:

I was in my office sorting papers when Olly Oliver came in. He was looking down, fidgeting with the buttons of his ruffed up, dirty shirt. He was timid, almost afraid. Good.

He walked up to my desk and asked if we could talk. I agreed. He told me he was leaving. I told him he couldn't. He was shocked. "You have not given us everything back that we wasted on you" I explained. "Pay us back, and you'll be free to go." He stuttered. I hate it when he stutters. So I hit him, thinking that'd get it out of him. He stood there, frozen, then said, "I, I c-can't pay you back." The coward.

My anger rose. Everything I had bottled up all these years came out all at once. I started hitting him over and over, giving him what he deserves. Again, and again, and again....and again. He flinched at every hit, curling tighter into a small ball. But I couldn't stop, I couldn't....I couldn't stop....

Elijah:

Olly has been in Lora's office for quite some time. This must be hard for him.

Lora walked by, tears staining her face. I had no idea this would be hard on her too. I went up to her, asking if she was okay. She was jumpy. I asked about Olly, what he talked to her about and where he was now. She told me they had just talked, not really about anything in particular, and then he left for a quick visit with his mother. So I asked why she was crying. All these years, she said, she had taken Olly for granted, and now that they might be losing him, she couldn't bare the thought.

I am ashamed of myself for thinking she could have ever been the one to give Olly the bruises, cuts, and scrapes. Ashamed Olly would tell me such. But I am a man of honesty. I admitted my sinful thoughts, keeping Olly's in the back of my mind. She forgave me. A loving wife she is, really. We went to the family room, sat down, and had a nice conversation ourselves. Something I would have to do with Olly later.

Lora:

I took it too far. I couldn't stop myself. I was so angry, so bitter. Oliver laid there on the floor, flinching at each hit that landed. Until he stopped. He didn't flinch, he didn't cry, he didn't call out in pain. He just laid there. Still. I paused. His chest was static, no raising and falling.

No....no, no, no!

Oh gosh, I killed him...I...Elijah! Elijah! What am I going to tell Elijah? No, I won't tell him. But what am I supposed to do now? Okay, calm down, calm down. I could feel hot tears streaming down my face. Why was I so upset? Isn't this what I wanted? No. Stop it. I am not a killer. It was an accident. I need time. I need some time to think of something. Downstairs— the morgue. I need supplies.

Elijah caught me on my way down. I lied and told him Oliver was with his mother. I didn't know what else to say.

OLIVER:

I'M CONFUSED, LOST. I DON'T KNOW WHERE I AM. I REMEMBER BEING IN LORA'S OFFICE, BUT I'M NOT THERE NOW. EVERYTHING WAS WHITE, A SHEER, BLINDING WHITE. I-WAIT, I- SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT. I... *FEEL* DIFFERENT. I STAND UP AND WALK ACROSS THE ROOM. I STOPPED MOVING. I... STOPPED MOVING. NO FIDGETING, NO ROCKING BACK AND FORTH, JUST LIKE I ALWAYS HAD. I FELT LIGHTER, MORE AWARE OF THINGS. IT'S LIKE I'M IN SOME MAGICAL PLACE. SUDDENLY, ONE WALL IS REPLACED WITH AN ENORMOUS SCREEN, BIGGER THAN ANYTHING I'D EVER SEEN BEFORE. MY CONFUSION INTENSIFIED. I WATCHED AND I SAW....

ME. I SAW ME, LAYING ON THE FLOOR OF LORA'S OFFICE, BEATEN AND STILL.

SHE KILLED ME. LORA BEAT ME AND KILLED ME FOR WANTING TO LEAVE.

I CAN ALSO SEE LORA NOW, SCRAMBLING AND MUMBLING TO HERSELF. PACING BACK AND FORTH IN HER OFFICE UNTIL SHE LEAVES. THE SCREEN FOLLOWS HER, AND I SEE ELIJAH. I CALLED OUT HIS NAME, SOMEHOW KNOWING HE COULD NOT HEAR ME FROM WHEREVER I WAS. "ELIJAH!" I CALLED AGAIN AND AGAIN UNTIL I WAS IN TEARS.

Elijah:

As I sat there with Lora, I could have sworn Olly was right there. I could almost hear him saying my name over and over. But he wasn't here. He was with his mother.

It's getting late and Olly still is not back. Lora was able to distract me when she said the police brought an unidentifiable body. Car accident. She handed me an order form from the courthouse to bury said body, leaving the contents untouched. It was rare, but nothing that hadn't happened before. I did such, and returned to waiting on the couch for Olly to come back home.

Lora:

He believed me! It worked! Oliver is buried, and all traces are gone! I don't know what to do about his mother, but I'll figure it out later. I could suggest he ran away; too much pressure to choose us or her. I could say those bullies got the best of him. I'll think of something.

Elijah:

I waited up all night for Olly, and there was no sign of him. I'm worried about him. Someone out there does not like him, and who knows what could have happened to him. Or perhaps he was still with his mother. Mostly likely he was, but I cannot help but worry.

Lora:

Elijah is getting worried about Oliver. I don't have a full plan yet. I don't know what to do, what to say. I'm worried they're going to find out. Should I tell them?

I think I'm losing my mind. I can Oliver saying my name every so often. Asking me questions. I know what I did was wrong! I know! Just please, make the voices stop!

OLIVER:

LORA? LORA? CAN YOU HEAR ME? WHY? WHY?

I KNOW SHE'S NOT GOING TO ANSWER, BUT I CAN'T STOP ASKING HER QUESTIONS. I WANT TO KNOW WHY SHE DID WHAT SHE DID. I WANT TO KNOW WHERE I AM. I WANT TO KNOW IF ELIJAH IS OKAY. I CAN'T DO ANYTHING, THOUGH. SO, I JUST SIT HERE AND HOPE THEY CAN HEAR ME, HELP ME.

Elijah:

Oliver is missing.

His mother came looking for him. I thought he was with her, but he never was. Lora had lied to me. But why had she? Had something happened after Olly spoke to me in his bedroom? Was Olly telling the truth about Lora? I need to talk to her. Soon.

Lora:

I have to tell Elijah. The voice— his voice— won't leave me alone. I can't keep this to myself. I killed him, and I had to take responsibility for that.

Wait. Oliver....Olly, is saying something.

No, that can't be right....

It can't be....

OLIVER:

ELIJAH, LORA, IF YOU CAN HEAR ME... I'M OKAY NOW. I'M HAPPY. I DON'T KNOW WHERE I AM, BUT IT'S WONDERFUL. I FEEL DIFFERENT, COMPLETE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ME ANYMORE. I'M SAFE.

I GAVE UP ON TORMENTING LORA. SHE WAS DOING A FINE JOB OF THAT HERSELF.

I REPEAT THIS UNTIL MY JAW HURTS FROM SPEAKING. I SLID DOWN THE WALL AND SIT, KNEES CURLED UP TO MY CHEST. I CAN HEAR FOOTSTEPS ECHOING.

Elijah:

I can't believe what Lora did. I cannot fathom she tricked me into burning my son. That she didn't tell me. I miss him already. But...

A strange peace has come over me. I can't explain it, but I know Olly is going to be okay. It's as if I can hear him telling me he's happy; he's where he's meant to be. It's not going to be easy by any means, but all we can do now is begin again. A proper funeral. His mother will be compensated, and Lora and I...

We'll go our separate ways. It's all for the best.

OLIVER:

I STAY CURLED UP UNTIL THE FOOTSTEPS CEASE.

"OLIVER?" A VOICE CALLED BEHIND ME— A FAMILIAR VOICE. I STAND UP QUICKLY AND FACE THE VOICE.

"DAD!" I GASP, RUNNING TO HIS OPEN EMBRACE.

HE LIFTED MY CHIN AND LOOKED INTO MY EYES.

"WELCOME HOME SON"

YEARS LATER, AND I WAS WITH MY BEST FRIEND AGAIN. WE'RE A FAMILY AT LAST.

