

Salem Community High School's

Thoughtwell

2021-2022

A collection of student creative writing

POETRY

Seventeen
by
Madigan Wildman

Years have gone by
Already seventeen
So much homework
Yet no sleep
Can't you see we're tired
Always dragging our feet
Please go easy on us
We're only seventeen

Fading From You

I know your life is in a time of despair
and mine is slowly draining me with barely any time to spare

I keep waiting but the water is rising higher
unable for me to breathe
and you're in a completely state of mind, and a
completely different sea

i take my last breath and hope for the best
taking in all of our memories and locking it in a chest

i ran out of air
and you ran out of time

maybe this time in the afterlife, you'll finally be
mine

- Emily Abrams

I Hear America Singing
By: Alek, Logan, Masie, and Daniyal

I hear America Singing, the buzzing of the vivacious city,
The sea of red awakening at the break of dawn,
The singful cries of pedestrians as they scurry across the avenue,
The huffs of exhaustion from the construction workers evolving the city,
The ring of light reflecting on the elevator walls at the click of a button,
The repetition of typists, as if they are scavenging woodpeckers,
The mounds of paper flowing infinitely from the mouths of printers ever at work,
The thumping of drum sticks on lids as street performers scrounge for a penny,
The wearisome employees return home in the thundering subway,
As buildings go dull, streets begin to teem with life,
The tuneful heartbeats of daily life never die, as the city never truly sleeps.

Vision

Poem by: Crystal Jackson

It's blurry
Life, I mean
It's blurry and blue until
Somebody give you glasses.

Then you see clear,
You breathe fine
And not a single worry,
Can ruin this vision.

But the glasses fall off,
They shatter,
Or you lose them
And sometimes, your eyesight gets worse.

And it's blurry again
Blurry and dizzy
It seems so long
And stretched out

Finding glasses is hard
Finding purpose is hard
Vision is an issue sometimes
An issue a different view can fix

Feeling to Feeling:

By: Autumn Butts

Pressure

It's all up to me.

Fate is in my hands.

People expect the best from me.

I can do better.

People trust in me.

People believe in me.

Stress

I have to do this.

I have to make the right decision

I have to be the best.

I have to do better

I have secrets

People rely on me.

Anxiety

I can't do this

I am wrong

I am the worst

I can't do better

No one trusts me

Everyone hates me

Depression...

Hidden beasts
Behind the eyes..

Seem to wear
a beautiful disguise..

Shadows scream
Inside our minds..

Different dreams-
The light
Dies..

Try to run,
They will find..

Destroy the minds
Of human kind..

The reason there,
Behind closed eyes..

Shadows forgotten
With opened eyes..

There is a reason the mind forgets your nightmares

By Damien Soles

Jennifer Lopez - A Poem by Jerrin Russell (AKA Big J Money Way)

Her hair is as shiny as the sun,

it shines in the light.

For me, she is the one,

I'd treat her so right.

She sings like a dove,

and dances so well.

I love her a ton,

I bet you can tell.

ANOTHER POEM by JERRIN RUSSELL

My memory is a silent curse,
It haunts my mind a lot.
The more I think the worse,
Because my mind has crazy thoughts.
There is good, there is bad,
But the bad gets to my core.
The more I think of crazy thoughts,
I pray my curse is no more.

SHORT

STORIES

The Bumpy Journey
by
Jazmyn Guenard

Do you ever sit and wonder what your life will be like in the future? Where will you live? What career would you have? The questions go on and on. The truth is you will never truly know until it begins. You have to work for your dreams, that's what I did. My name is Mayva Wilmington. I live on the west side of Chicago, in a big apartment. My mother moved here when I was 4 years old (I'm now 17, 18 in 2 weeks!) and we have been here since. The apartments were definitely not the cleanest; garbage everywhere but the dumpster, cigarette butts scattered all over, raccoons digging in the piles of trash, and I can not forget the moldy smell coming from room 209. They were the dirtiest apartment of them all. Our apartment was the cleanest, thanks to me and my big brother Mike. Our mother was never home though she did not have a job anymore, she was a partier. Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a model. I got an offer at 8 years old but my mother could not afford the 2,000 entry fee. I had many dreams that my mother could not help me with. That is when I knew I would have to start working for my future on my own. Nobody besides myself would get me where I want to be.

The sun poured through my window, birds singing loudly. It was not just any other day, it was MY day. The day I dreamed of for the longest. It was finally my 18th birthday. I had saved all the money I could from my 9th birthday and finally had what I needed. I can buy my dream car and move to my dream state. I went on vacation for one year, with my aunt and her children to Miami, Florida. It was everything I ever dreamed. That moment, I knew where I wanted to grow old. Every night I closed my eyes and envisioned my life in the sunshine state. I headed to the DMV and got my dream car, a Subaru Outback. It was the perfect car for my new Florida life. When I got home my brother awaited me. It was time for him to make a decision to either move along with me or stay with our not so great mother. He felt terrible to leave her behind, as did I, but I knew what was best for me. We walked into the dark living room and flopped on the couch. With a sigh, my brother began the hard conversation.

"I love the new car!" He started off slow.

"Thanks! It wasn't as much as I thought it would be. I love it."

"Good. So.." He lifted his head off the armrest and looked into my eyes. "I think I am going to stay with mom. She needs someone to look after her, you know she can do this life thing alone. She'd never make it."

"I understand, bub. I'll come visit as much as possible and call every night! It'll be okay. You do know I am leaving tomorrow at noon though, right?"

His eyes widened. "Why so soon? Mom won't be home for another two day, she won't get to say goodbye." I knew it hurt him that mother and I didnt have a close relationship but I could not force it anymore.

"I know. Have her call me when she gets home. I cannot wait for her to finally show up on her own time. I have an interview this week and have to get situated in my new house as soon as possible." I looked at him for a while and took a deep breath. "I love you. I will always be there for you no matter the distance."

"I love you too, I know."

I woke up early in the morning, the sky was still dark, the birds still hadn't woken for their daily song. It would be a long couple of hours. I should have gone to bed earlier, Mike and I were up all night reminiscing about all the memories in the apartment and watching our favorite horror movies. I went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. I had to be at the airport by noon, my flight will take off at two. I am always early to make sure there is not a chance of being late. I headed back to my room and grabbed my things and organized them to be loaded up. Mike said he'd pack them in the car for me. As I was pouring my cup of coffee, Mike joined me and started breakfast. No matter the circumstance Mike and I always sat down for at least one meal together, whether it be breakfast, lunch, or dinner. We plopped on the couch to eat and watch our favorite show, Shameless. I will definitely miss these moments, I will always appreciate my big brother.

It was now nine o'clock and I had to start saying goodbye, the airport was an hour away. My adventure is about to begin! As I headed out my house, my neighbor, Tomas, was outside. He took one last, long puff, threw his cigarette, and looked my way.

"On your way?"

"Yeah. Big move. You be nice to my family now, I'm not here to protect them!" I laughed. He smiled and gave a big wave. It was finally time to hit the road, I couldn't help but smile. It was finally my time to shine.

The night was aglow with bright city lights, I pulled over into a hotel eight hours into the drive; my feet were cramping, back on fire, and my eyes wouldn't stay open no matter how much I tried. I looked out my window to see the pale crescent moon shine bright into the night. I was closer to my dream than ever. My eyes still laid low, but my body felt relieved. I took a bubble bath at the hotel and rested all too well. In the morning, I was woken by a sweet, older woman knocking, asking which breakfast I would like. After I ate, I hit the road, twelve hours to go.

Entering Florida, the ball of fire seemed to be hanging in the sky, tarcoal spread on the road melted at places, sleep was out of the question. I was a block or two from my new house and could not wait to get there. First thing first, no questions, is a long bath. My whole body cramped from the twenty hour car ride. At last, I am finally home!

As I walked in the front door, the smell of a candle warmer, vanilla, with a scent of butterscotch, traveled up my nose. I was already in love. First stop, the master bedroom, with the master bath! I practically ran. Soaking in the heated water, feeling it hug every inch of my skin so gently, breathing in the aroma of the bubble bath... it is my heaven... a place to breathe deeply and let my inner peace return. This was the start of a new life, a new adventure, most of all a fresh start.

The first rays of sunlight lit up my room. The dawn chorus of melodic birdsong drifted in. I rubbed my bleary eyes and walked to the window. There was a pearly glow in the sky. The first day in my new life, let it begin. I have to head up to the college in a couple hours. I want to be a businesswoman. I have always dreamed of owning my own business, but now it might come to life. My biggest worry has always been my family getting in the way, that cannot happen. As I was sitting there thinking of all the ways my family could ruin this opportunity, I got a call. My mother... I hesitate and pick up the phone.

"Hey darling, how is the move?" my mother asks.

“Good. So, what’s up? Need something?” I answered. I love my mother but her phone calls would go for hours if I did not force her off the phone.

“Oh well, um, I uh, I have some sort of problem,” She stutters. Oh my, here we go..
“Mom what’s going on, I have to go to school soon.”

“Well, I am in the hospital. Your brother does not know yet but I have cancer. I think you should come home. I need to be well cared for.”

“Mom, you know I cannot do that. I just moved in, and I just started college. I cannot just up and leave. My cannot be based off of yours all the time. I love you but I am an adult now, I have to get my stuff together. I waited for a response but then heard beeping. She hung up the call. My mother tends not to be able to take no for an answer. Don’t get it twisted, I care, I want to be there, and I want to take care of her. But I have to care for myself too. It was going to be a tough decision. Go home and leave my new life behind, or stay and stay in touch more. I had to choose, but I also had to go to my first day at college. I will decide this later on tonight.

School went by slow and long, especially after the phone call from my mother. Sleep was screaming my name but my stomach was also screaming. Another decision, this is getting annoying. Why can’t there just be one choice once in life. I decided to check out Marion Miami, the best restaurant nearby. After some delicious food, I went home to sleep. Mom will have to wait on the decision, I can’t even think right at the moment.

Bright and early, I called mom. She sounded tired so I asked if she slept alright. She said she didn’t but she will nap soon. She mentioned how Mike brought up moving out to Miami instead of having me come all the way home, we both liked the idea. I have school today and plan on booking them a flight at lunch. The plan was set and they would be moving to the nearby apartments. I wasn’t too excited but it’ll have to do, I can’t just ignore my mother needing help. It was going to be a long week.

I got out of school around two thirty. The flight was made, they will be flying out tomorrow morning. I didn’t have time to eat lunch after making the flight so I am starving. Breakfast food sounds delicious, so that’s what it will be. Next plan for the day was getting their apartment ready for the move. I know the guy who owns them so it was not hard to get one for them. The hardest part will be getting their furniture inside. The move was quick so they won’t be bringing most of their belongings. I hit a couple garage sales to grab them things that I will set up for them, trying my best to help.

I woke up early in the morning. The sky as bright as ever, too bright to look at but too bright to look away. I stood by my window for a minute and enjoyed the heat seeping in through the glass. My mind was blank all morning, completely dazed by the beautiful day. All of the sudden, I hear a couple knock on my door. As I opened the door I realized what I was forgetting all morning. On the other side of the doorstep, was Officer Hopkins. The words came out slow and long, it was like a dream. It felt like I was moving in slow motion as I fell to my knees. My mother and my brother had gotten into an accident after getting off the plane, they did not make it. As their Uber was turning on a red light, a semi slammed into them, hard. It was so unexpected, my heart was crushed.

On the way to the hospital; the world was a blur, road signs unreadable, cars slowly passing, it was like the world had crushed beneath me, nothing felt real. This could not be real, please do not be real. I closed my eyes and repeated the words in my head.

“Just wake up”

“Just wake up.”

“Just wake up.”

I woke up being shaken by a doctor, apparently I slept the whole way to the hospital. It was him repeating to wake up but it connected with my dream. I walked in the hospital, scared of what I was about to see. When I turned the corner I saw my worst nightmare, my mother lying next to my brother, lifeless.

Toiler
by
Kelli Knight

For a building so dead, life crept out in various ways. *Ticktock*. The ringing of the clock flooded the now empty office room as lights from nearby buildings faintly pooled in, disrupting the darkness of the night and tainting the dimly lit room with signs of said life. A rhythmic pitter patter joined the clock's soft ticking as Kiwi's fingers flew across her keyboard, stopping only whenever she needed to use her mouse to click back and forth between tabs. Her brain felt like it was pounding on her head, along with the way she felt so intolerably hot but her body shivered and the churning in her stomach discouraged her work but didn't stop her from trying to move forward. How long had it been since her last coworker left, minutes, hours? It had to have been quite sometime, she remembered the sun was just fading when they bid her farewell, wishing her the best of luck and saying she should wrap up soon out of concern.

Time spent researching this case was immaculate, she'd found plausible witnesses and possible evidence but none of them had worked, it all led to nothing, and before she knew it her fingers halted, her mind went blank with the exception of the forsaken knocking it hit her with. If only she could simply work harder, do more, but of course her brain had to fail her, useless. There was no way this could possibly be happening, she'd hardly progressed in this case and now her feet were frozen in the ground. Letting out a dejected sigh Kiwi turned off her computer and stood, collecting her things to head home. No use in wasting time sitting there, plus who knows, maybe the fresh air will do her head some good?

Algid weather had taken over New York like it always had when winter took its course, the same reason the ever so strong detective was pulling her coat closer for warmth, losing to the cold on top of infamous con artists would be almost unbearable for one's pride to handle. Who would've thought tracking down a couple of con artists who had scammed people across the world and were rumored to be in your city for, well, business, would be so incredibly difficult? The lead was as reliable as they could get and they'd been waiting for this opportunity but oh how it had so little information on it. Nobody had blamed her for her lack of advancement, in fact multiple had considered her unlucky for being the one to receive it, yet she couldn't bring herself to stop until these crooks were rightfully locked up. Her own sneeze pulled herself out of her train of thought, the sniffing of her nose distracting her from further thinking on it. On the bright side the apartment was coming closer, she was almost there.

Keeling over Kiwi leaned her weight on the door of the apartment, it took her a few moments to push herself back up properly and take in everything. She hadn't expected to see light peeking from the windows or underneath the space in the door, to hear the faint sound of dishes clinking, or the softness of her roommate and friend Mírela humming to whatever song was being played on the radio. It was much too late, Mírela would usually be fast asleep by now. As she pushed open the door she was welcomed by the warmth of the apartment, the smell of a delicious sweet cake and a smiling Mírela who'd ended up staying up for her.

Effortlessly Kiwi received a bright smile at her presence being noticed followed by an explanation, "I know it's been rough for you lately, I was thinking we could watch a movie while indulging in sweets. Oh- and dinner's leftovers are in the fridge, if you'd like some."

Brushing the guilt that panged her chest aside, Kiwi thanked her despite knowing she hadn't done nearly enough to earn all of this. "Mírela, I, you,... thank you, but I really should try to do some more work on my laptop." The other tsked, and shook her head, she could tell her friend was going to say something in defiance so Kiwi tried to move; if she made an exit now it'd be less disappointing than later. Her legs were so unnaturally heavy. Each step weighed her down greatly until the room was spinning and the world came crashing down- or more accurately put, she was the one crashing down.

"-ready?" Suddenly Kiwi was back in her highschool classroom, her old friend was talking to her but she'd missed it. "Hellllo? Earth to Kiwi, I asked if you were ready for the exams?" Right, the exams she'd studied weeks for, the ones that if she failed she'd rather not go home to face the disappointment of her parents, or see the flash of the same emotion in her teacher's eyes, those ones. Getting anything less than an A+ really wasn't an option, she had to do perfect, doing so was who she was. It was what made things easier for the others she knew, it made them happy which made her happy. Kiwi nodded, confirming her friend's question without saying a word.

Eventually her eyes fluttered open, whenever they properly adjusted she saw Mírela sitting at the end of her bed reading a book. "Good, you're finally awake. You know you're really lucky I'm in the medical field," she sighed. "You've been overworking yourself," Kiwi was going to protest but was cut off by Mírela finishing her statement, "no more work until you're fully healed, as a doctor I cannot condone you even trying. Do try to get some more rest though, and call me if you need anything. We can watch some of the movies later when you recover more." With that she took her exit, leaving Kiwi fading in and out of slumber facing her past memories.

doing what many deemed impossible off the original lead- a witness who was only semi certain they'd seen them in the area.

Her walk went by in the blink of an eye as usual, her hand was already on the door knob as she pushed open the apartment she'd shared with Mírela. "I'm home!" She called and exhaled content at the smell of something delicious baking, "Can I help you? Maybe we could watch a movie and play a game afterwards." Kiwi offered, lately she'd started doing things she personally wanted to partake in.

"Of course, I still have another batch of cookies to make, you can help with those." Mírela gave her signature mood lifting smile that could warm anyone's heart, "I'd love to spend time with you." They weren't frequent breaks but they were a lot more common, a satisfactory start to breaking bad habits.

It's a Journey

by

Makayla Sanders

BANG...as the door slammed shut you could hear the metal of the lock hit the wooden frame.

Slamming doors is one thing my mother never allowed

“Leave Me ALONE, Just GO HOME Charles,” I yelled through the front door of my small one bedroom apartment.

“Get some help Sam, I'm gonna miss you.” is the last thing I heard my best friend say in that dark chocolate voice, before he retreated to live his life in peace. Of course Chuck couldn't handle me, no one can. I have my own views on life and society as a whole, and I stuck with that. I can be pretty aggressive if I need to be..life can't always be peace love and happiness, peace love and bs maybe.

I don't like the way the people in this world work. Everyone lies and steals, they're a very jealous species.

I prefer to ground myself in my own positive energy and to feel the frequencies of the earth.

Two years ago was the last time Chuck and I talked. Two years ago was the last time I talked to anyone for that matter. The room is dark and cluttered with clothes and poptart wrappers. I lay on my twin sized mattress that sits on the floor with one old, greezy blanket. The walls are gray, stained with pneumonia and grief. I don't have hot water. It's kinda hard to shower without it. My apartment is bare, but what's the point of having anything if it's just going to go to waste. I have no money, no job. I'm losing my house next week but that doesn't matter. Nothing really does matter though. Everything will be okay.. Yeah... if i keep telling myself that. My bones ache at the slightest movement, but maybe that's just my restless body being restless. I need to get up and get a job. I have bills due, but why don't I care? I need to get out of my head. I'm going back to sleep..goodnight.

I lay on my bed, somewhere stuck between being asleep and awake. I hear keys and shuffling around, but no bother to me. I sink into a deeper sleep without a care in the world.

BANG BANG BANG!...my door flew open, it was about 9pm but the door was almost never locked. I got out of bed calmly. “What's going on Chuck? Long time no see.” I smile an awkward smile

and glance around to analyze the room, but it's empty. It's not supposed to be empty. What happened to all my stuff?

“Listen, why are all these people here and what are you doing?” he had a look of concern and confusion come across his face. For a second my world stopped, it's not the first time this is going to happen, nor will it be the last. Adrenaline shot through my body.

Just outside the front door I can hear my landlord shuffling up the stairs. His bundle of keys are the first thing you meet about him.

“SAM!” Chuck yells at me again to bring my back to attention.

“Why are you here?” I asked him with a slight attitude, still confused, my mind boggled at the constant haze.

“I was..was going for a walk..and..uh. This guy had the bright idea to break into your house, I heard him talking...” he stammers as he gestures toward my landlord who had a look of shock. I'm too tired to deal with the situation. I know exactly what was happening, Chuck was wrong . I grab my suitcase out of the closet that was half packed from a trip I took almost three years ago and hand it to chuck. I then grab my keys, my phone, and the charger to my phone. I hand my landlord the keys to the small apartment. I won't miss the apartment or the smug whiskers on the landlord's face, I never bothered to get his name but it's okay it doesn't matter now.

“Hey Chuck?...Can we go now?” I didn't say a word for the rest of the night. We went to his truck where I fell asleep in the cold of the night. I think that he knew what had happened, but hadn't asked me, he just went along with it. I lost my house that night but I genuinely didn't care. I would have been perfectly fine on a park bench. Though I'm not actually sure why he's here, I'm glad I'm sitting next to Chuck. I missed him. Mom probably missed him too.

The sun is warm, like the touch of my mother. Her energy is strong, and the air is safe. My body feels heavy in the cushions of the blue chevy. I won't open my eyes yet. I feel alright. Calm right now. No need for him to know I'm awake yet. I can hear the music beat low, maybe he doesn't want to wake me up, that's nice. Normally you can hear Tupac from miles away. The low of his voice is humming to Kendrick

Lamar right now. It's nice to hear his voice again, last time things weren't quite so nice. I told him to leave me alone over a silly argument. How could I tell my best friend, my only friend, to leave me alone just because he wanted to help me. He was right. He's always right. I need help. But genuinely not how he thinks, I see the way he looks at me sometimes. Until this moment I never cared. But now I really don't have anything, I never thought I'd actually get here.

I'm 22 years old and I have no job, no vehicle, no home, no friends. Nothing.... The list continues. I miss my parents I lost a while ago, though you learn to live on your own and deal with it. It's just me left. My sister flew to Louisiana when everything happened and I haven't seen her since. We have no more family, other than our dad who left too, that we socialize with.

“Cinnamon rolls..” my voice croaks out. I smile when the sweet smell overwhelms the cab of the chevy. The sweetest aroma I've smelled in a while. My body seems to crave it.

“ She's awake!” I see the smile gleam across Chuck's face, happy to see me. No angry vibes, it's all peaceful here. He hands me a pastry the size of my fist. It was huge!

“Look how big this thing is, man!” I shout as we both laugh.

“Yeah, and they're blueberries. You have always liked all things blueberry. Now remember, you are what you eat!” He's always been an asshole. I don't like when he talks about my weight, but I know he didn't mean it like that, we all have our own issues sometimes. Mom used to call me her little blueberry, I thought that was because of my weight too. For a moment we are silent as we eat the purple cinnamon rolls.

“ So what happened last night?” He sounds concerned, but he shouldn't be.

“ Do I even have to explain, I mean come on, Chuck. We left in the middle of the night and I had to hand over my keys to the landlord. We're not going back today or tomorrow because we can't. I have no home but that's what happens whe—...” I'm just gonna stop. There's no point in getting angry at him, I can feel my words getting louder at him.

“My parents are gone.” I want to see how he feels, but I won't look away from the hands folded in my lap.

“Sam.. I didn't know.” The sound of worry and loss coats the words he speaks.

“Of course you didn't, no one did.” I tell him, still looking at my hands twiddling my fingers.

“Im so-” I know exactly what he's going to say because everyone has already told me.

“Don't. I know and I get it, just don't.” I wish people had more words in their vocabulary, because all they know to tell me is ‘I'm sorry’.

“Mom?” he grabs my fidgety hands. I can't stop my eyes from tearing up.

“Went to her funeral a year ago.” I had to pause to collect myself. “The big C ” I don't want to go into detail with him, or anyone for that matter. My information is my information.

“Dad?” he said, gripping my hands tighter.

“Left two days after the ceremony. Haven't heard from anyone since. Sis went to stay with some friends. Haven't seen her either.” Now there are tears streaming from my face, but I can't get any sounds out. The silence in the air is harsh. I'm not going to say anything, if he wants to break the silence, he will.

Suddenly, he let go of my hand. There's a tight restraint around me now, but it's not threatening, so I don't feel the need to move. Should I look up? Or should I curl into a ball? I look into his big blue eyes, full of nurture, as he's hugging me. This is the safest I have felt in a long time.

“Thank you.” is all I can manage to get out, still whimpering .

“Everything is going to be alright. We'll figure something out. We're in this together. I've been living in my truck for about a month now..” his voice trailed off for a moment. “Let's go on a trip.”

I sit up in my seat faster than I have in a while, forgetting everything we just talked about, “Where are we going? I'm ready, as long as I don't have to drive.”

“Well, Sam.. Where would you like to go?” A charm follows every sentence he speaks. It excites me! I haven't been out of the house in so long, and now I'm going on a trip? I'm honestly scared but like he said, we'll get through this.

“I’ve been in Florida my entire life, here in Tampa, stuck in what seems like the ocean, come on you know. The raaiinn. We love it! We ground our energy in it! But sometimes I don't wanna be cold and wet. Can we go to Georgia? Can we start small, please? Chuck, this world is so big, we can't explore it all in one day!”

Oh no, he is just staring at me. Did I say something wrong? He looks stuck in a daze but I don't want to interrupt his thought process. He's cute. No one's gonna deny that. He's goofy too.

“Are you ready to go, or did you wanna go home and grab a few things first?” The cab of the truck fell for a moment. We broke out into laughter and he exclaimed, “Hahaha! I'm sorry, hun. We can just go, I'm ready whenever you are!”

“Hey, it's not that far of a drive. Is it okay with you if I were to sleep on the way? I know I sleep a lot, but I'm just tired.” Exhausted maybe, I don't even know what we would talk about on the way. I can't stay awake in a vehicle anyway. It just knocks me out.

“Yeah, go to bed, sleepy head” He just winked at me.

It's the next day now. I surprisingly got good sleep in the truck. It was nice. I feel refreshed. I haven't felt this way in a while.

“Okay, listen. I know we're in Georgia, but what are we doing today? I'm honestly so excited, Chuck!” I look into his eyes and keep talking. His eyes always sparkle. “There is so much to do! And it looks different too! Like peaches almost. Ooh can we go get peaches they would be so juicy? Chuck. Please?” We both laugh at the constant ramble.

“There's not much we can do honestly. We don't have any money. We will figure it out though. It will happen.” He’s wrong though. We do have money, I just don't want him to know yet. We can't be too careful with what we do have.

“We could get jobs. Just a thought.” I see the way he feels about that. It's written all over him that he doesn't want to. Or maybe he has tried before.

“Riiighttt...” He pauses to laugh. I'm honestly just confused. I was serious.

“We just left everything to take a trip, nowhere close to home, and you decide ‘Oh, let’s get our life together. I mean Sam, where are you really gonna get a job?’”

So much unnecessary anger..

“Why are you being rude? It was your idea in the first place. I just genuinely would like to have fun instead of being a broke pile of shit. We can get a job anywhere, have you met me? I hustle. We can get it.... And it's not like we just left everything, we already had nothing. Home? What home? No. This is *not* how it's gonna be. We can have fun and we can go on this trip and be civil or not at all.... I'm gonna go for a walk. You're gonna sit here and think about things.”

This trip has got to get better.. I thought that everything was going to get better when Sam came back into my life... . We've been through so much throughout our entire life, from blood buddies to her putting me in the hospital. I can't just leave. It took so long to get here. It's been so lonely since we fell off. I love her. I can't just never see her again. I've risked my entire life for her. I can't waste all those nights I spent outside of her apartment. I've watched her get this bad. I can help her get better. It hurts to see her like this, she's so back and forth all the time but i think she's honestly just conflicted within herself. I wish I could talk to her mom, no I wish she could talk to her mom. It would help a lot. I miss the way Sam used to smile. The way she would run and laugh with her sister Faith. Faith was a cool person, she is so down to earth. The two used to vibe together and now Sam seems like her whole world is ending. I think it's time we go see faith, she's honestly probably wondering where Sam is anyway.

“Ouch!” I hit him right on the head! I didn't really mean too though.

“Are you okay? I was just playing around.” I finally got my peaches. I don't think he expected me to.

“How did you manage that?” he's looking at me confused but he still seems mad. I thought I gave him enough time to think.

“I told you I can manage anywhere I want too. Are you okay chuck? I'm sorry I upset you hun.” I really wasn't trying to hurt him. I miss the way he used to look at me. His eyes are in a constant state of anger. “Did I do something?”

“No, you're good. We can go now if you'd like. These people have a sarong problem.” He was definitely right. They had a major staring problem. But he was definitely mad about something and whether he's going to admit it or not I know it's me. I'm crazy.

“Where are we going?” I'm not scared but I can see that he has plans.

“Louisiana” he's not gonna say anything, but that doesnt mean I can't try

She needs help. She needs help. She needs help. Her sister can help her. We can be happy together. All I need to do is get her to her sister. Lousian? Why so far away? The drive is too long but I'm sure we can get there faster than 10 hours. Yes, a race car. I am speed. I wonder why she is the way she is, she's so angry all the time and she's lonely so I know I'm useful to her.

“ I would love to know why all of the sudden you wanna go there. I told you i didnt wanna go. It's not a good idea.. She doesnt wanna see me.. Listen I know I'm crazy but I really haven't done anything wrong. We might argue but that doesn't give you room to dictate my life.” is he going to say anything? He's honestly upsetting me. “Hello?” Why is he accelerating? Why is he in such a hurry? 40. “Can you at least talk to me?... Chuck?” he has so much going through his head I dont think he's even listening to me. 50 “ was it the peach, it wasn't supposed to hit your head. I'm really sorry. Dude, say one thing to me. He finally blinked. He looked at me, paying no attention to the road. 60.

“We're both crazy.” And yet he is just smiling. “And we both need help.” He turned his head back facing the road. 70.“Louisiana.....Louisiana.” 80.

“I think it’s time you let me out. I want to go home, Charles.” He’s not showing signs of stopping anytime soon. I don’t know what else to say I need to get out of here, this is not the place for me. ‘Tuck and roll’ is what my mom always told me, i could jump out and be fine. Great even, because I can survive that and still go see my sister without this psycho. 90. I’m running out of things to say. That’s a stop sign. Chuck. 115.

“Sto-”

BAM....

...

....

...

Past. present. Future. Look at it. Analyze it. The future- could be bright, could be dark, I could have gone to see my sister and everything could have been great. Or she didn’t want anything to do with me and that’s why she left. It is what it is. We’ll never know. The present- the present, in any situation is going to be scary. Because you never know what’s going to happen next. The past- it’s a rollercoaster, full of its ups and downs. Everyone rides a different rollercoaster.

‘We’ll get through this.’ ‘It’ll be okay’ is the reassurement of empty promises. But that wasn’t it at all. I spent a lot of my time blind at the perception of illusion. Nothing was as bad as anyone ever thought. I just needed to open my eyes and see what actually was there. Every choice made, makes a difference, every thought u make changes your process. Don’t move too fast, pace yourself, figure out what you actually want for yourself and make it happen.

Alone and Afraid

By

Felicia Phoenix

The day started off sunny with a high of 83 degrees. I just rolled out of bed hearing my phone ring. I looked over to see who it was, it was Camille.

“Heyyy ready to get out on the water today!”

“Ready than ever.”

“How about we go eat some breakfast first.”

We met up at the Waffle Company before heading to the docks. Every day of summer we come here before we head out on the water. Today was the first day of summer. I really couldn't be more excited to go sailing.

We get out to where the sail boat is stored by the docks. We put the boat together and we are ready to hit the ocean.

We have just now cast off. It's been a little while since we've been out here so we stopped and went swimming for a little while after a while then we decided to get back on to the boat and start sailing until we both got our eye caught on a big storm coming right over us coming very quickly. Camille and I looked at each other with a worried look. Did not look like a storm you wanted to be caught in.

Camille and I both hurried and got on the boat we set sail and started moving. The wind was picking up too fast for the boat. The boat rocking back and forth, waves getting higher and higher to reach as tall as the boat. Lighting in the sky, thunder that could be as loud as a roar.

There is not much of an option for Camille and I. We sailed pretty far out so what it looks like is we can't outrun the storm in either direction. Camille looks at me terrified with tears almost in her eyes.

We set sail doing what we can to get out of this storm or try one hell of a fight to get past it.

We both look up and see all black and gray clouds just coming down with rain, the water and the wind is just everywhere pushing the boat to want to tip.

“ari what are we gonna do!” Camille says shouting

I looked at Camille, looked down, then looked back up and said “we are going through it.”

Camille looks at me like, are you crazy? But we don't have another way. I might be scared and can't even look back without having 100% fear.

We headed straight into the storm, nothing but black clouds and water going everywhere, the boat rocking hard back and forth. The thunder getting louder and louder, stuff flying out of the boat, trying to hold on to anything possible for us to not fall out of the sailboat ourselves. I see our own stuff flying everywhere into the ocean, all the vailbles my whole life in this boat. I'm holding on for dear life and can barely keep a grip. Camille is almost hanging out the boat holding on with everything she has while it's going back and forth trying to throw us off. I try to take control with the wheel holding on super tight trying to fight back. Next thing I know my head is flying towards the wheel and I was knocked out.

The next day..

I woke up coughing on water barely hanging on just a piece of the sailboat. Last thing I can remember was trying to fight back the storm. I started looking around for Camille but I was not seeing her anywhere.

“Camille” I yelled

“Im *coughing* over here” Camille says

I swim over to her to make sure she is okay. She was okay, we both were still in one piece. Now just figuring out what to do next.

“Come over here on the piece of wood” ari says

“What is going to happen to us now?” Camille ask

“We need to find an island. Fast.” I says in a stressed tone

“Look I see one over there!” Camille says excitedly

We had to start hand paddling to get moving. We don't have any resources or tools to help so we do what we have too. The island is pretty far away. When I seem to think we are getting closer it feels like it is floating away.

“There's a a a SHARK!” she cried out

“And I dont think it's a lone Ari!”

“PADDLE FAST” I shouts

“We can't outrun sharks, Ari, we're gonna die here. In the middle of the ocean by sharks!”

“Come on, start paddling!” We both start paddling as fast as we can go. We seem to not see sharks anymore.

I turn to look behind me and Camille is just gone.

“HELP please help!” Camille is saying from in the water

“Camille reach for my hands!”

I put out my arm as far as I can to try to grab her but she kept getting dragged out further by two sharks fighting over her body

“Ari plea-”

“CAMILLE, NO CAMILLE”

She's gone.. She's really gone. “A shark just ate my bestfriend...”

When I look at the ocean it's all red and I see lems limbs of her body floating. I see that the sharks are still trying to go after all her lems and I took off and started paddling fast so I could get away from the sharks.

I just started paddling and paddling not looking back cause this was my only way out of being surrounded by sharks and getting killed myself.

I just sat on the one piece of wood we had in shock that in reality that really happened and what was going to happen to me now. Was I going to make it to the island alive or am I gonna die out here all alone.

I can't even figure out where I am, I can't call for help, I can't let someone know my best friend died and I'm stuck in the middle of the ocean with sharks all over alone and afraid.

It's been two days since the storm happened. I fell asleep because I was so tired and the sun was getting my body exhausted. I ended up drifting near an island. I got out and headed to the island to see if I could find anyone or anything but I was not seeing anything when I was walking towards the trees.

One thing I know I'm going to need is food. It's been two days since I ate and not one sign of food anywhere. I get up into the woods and start walking around trying to scope out the island. The only thing that has me thinking is I need to get the fuck outta here asap.

I head back down towards the beach area to see if I can make anything for a signal in the sky so somebody will see and come save me. Only thing I am seeing though are sticks...

“You need light” “you need light”

Thinking that I heard a voice not seeing anyone around though am I going crazy I thought to myself.

Maybe if I build a fire they will see the smoke from somewhere and save me. I gather up a lot of sticks and then I start to put the fire together. Since I don't have anything to light it with, I'm going to have to start it by hand. I started rubbing the two sticks together and nothing was happening. There's one person who could do this with no problem at all but now I am alone and can't even get a fire started.

I try again and again and soon enough I finally get a little smoke going and I start blowing on it a little slowly and there it is finally a fire. I start to put up some form of shelter for the night just in case I'm not getting out of here. I used pretty much whatever I could find and threw it together to try to keep wild animals and whatever else there is on this island.

My shelter isn't the best and it's getting pretty cold. The wind is starting to pick up. I'm scared sitting here all alone starting to think about Camille. How will I ever say Camille is gone to her parents or grandparents at this point. It will be all on me and I'm so scared how my night is gonna go absolutely terrified but I know just thinking about Camille and knowing I'm going to do everything I can to make her death a thought nobody will forget.

I layed down finally trying to close my eyes with no energy left feeling like I need to stay up though feeling like nobody is actually looking for me and Camille.

I woke up to this noise. I'm hearing sounds kinda far away but still kinda close sounds like Camille so I look over a little down the way and it was. I was seeing Camille with my eyes right in front of me. How is this possible? I was trying to think to myself.

“Am i dead?”

“Not yet” Camille says

“How is this possible your dead, you are dead Camille.”

“Im tired im so tired and have no energy” ari says

“I need you to get up, stand straight up and look at the sky”

“Do you see the sun?”

“Yea”

“Do you see the clouds”

“Yes”

“How about the trees? Can you see the trees?”

“No cause im looking straight up trees aren't in my view”

“Okay so stop worrying about me cause i'm like the tree so wake up right now”

“What do you mean wake up? I am awake..”

“Camille, Camille where did you go!”

I see a big light and I open my eyes and it's night time still. I look up and there is a helicopter, finally someone that is going to save me. I see somebody coming down on a rope to come pull me up. I can't believe it's really happening right now.

It's the next day they took me to the hospital, called my parents and have been putting fluids in my body since I got here. I look over and there is my mom sitting in the chair half asleep from being up all night to make sure I was going to be okay. I haven't said anything about Camille yet cause I don't know how ima put it into words that Camille is dead.

“Sweetheart you're awake, how are you feeling hun”

“I'm okay mom..”

“I'm so glad your okay baby. I'm so sorry anything like this happened.”

“Hey wait, where was Camille?”

“She.. she.. Umm she died in the ocean..”

Ryker 's Story
by
Daniyal Islam

It was as if the very cage around him shook. Ryker Gray was trapped in this endless game, but for some reason he loved it. The very sport kept him imprisoned, never allowing him to escape from its fatal grasp, the game being his captor and him being the imprisoned. Sometimes, however, the unspeakable may occur: the jailed falls in love with his jailer, and soon, he finds himself more confined than ever before.

Perhaps that was why Ryker forgot to invite everyone on the team with the exception of Will; at least, that was the excuse he made when he was confronted with the issue. He was so enthralled in tennis and wanted to play so badly, he completely forgot about Will. Now, per usual, excuses only work the first time. The more you make them, the more cracks appear in the ruse. Ryker knew Will had figured it out; the team just plain did not like Will, and not because he wasn't fun to hang out with, but simply due to his popularity in the grade. You see, high school is a fickle being. It allows passage into the gates of popularity, but once you are inside, there is no association with the lower classes. A higher class may invite a lower class to their popularity level, but you risk high school kicking your butt out the back door, condemning you to a lower standing.

Ryker did everything he could to associate with the popular seniors and by being only a junior, that was an insurmountable mountain to climb, and yet he managed to reach the summit. Therefore, if Will was suffering from loneliness, that was his problem. He was stuck between the highest class and the class below. The former wouldn't open its gates, but the latter was too low for him. Therefore, he was standing in the vast desert of alienation, and that was his fault, Ryker believed.

He was driving to Bryson City, North Carolina for his doctor's appointment when he saw a notification light up his phone screen. He quickly grabbed his Samsung, saw it was simply his mom shooting him a text, and tossed his phone back onto the seat. She could wait a few minutes longer. However, there was a constant barrage of texts that followed, and soon Ryker grew tired of it and finally checked his phone. It was the tennis team wanting to meet up sometime today and play.

Someone asked a question in the group chat, and of course, he had to respond; to him, this couldn't wait a moment longer. There's no way he could associate with him! Why would they even think of this in the first place? Ryker had made his position clear from the start, and he

wasn't about to change his mind. First, he glanced at the road to make sure he was still in his lane, and then started to give his response back.

Xander: *Should we ask Will*

George: *Maybe just for today I kind of feel bad for him. I would hate to be him*

From Ryker: *I feel like he would just ruin the whole group though. theres really no point in asking him*

Xander: *So you don't want to?????*

Ryker: *Not at all. It isnt....*

That was when he felt himself veer off the road. There was a giant groan as the car passed the yellow line on the right indicating the end of the lane, and Ryker gave a giant yelp in shock. Quickly, he swerved back to the left, and for a split second there was a false hope he was safe...that is until he slammed into the car from the other lane. He felt everything come to a standstill, his Honda Civic perched upside down over the vehicle he hit. The phone slowly hit the windshield, and time seemed to rush back into existence-Ryker's head whipped back into the headrest and everything went black as night.

Act 2

“HOW LONG ARE YOU GONNA STAY DEAD?”

Above Ryker, inches from his face, was a man yelling, his mouth wide open, spit flying out. “Well, I can feel your saliva dripping down my cheek, so I would say I'm livin,” he replied.

“I didn't ask for your sarcasm,” the mysterious man said, suddenly having a straight face. However, it wasn't long until that goofy look returned and he helped Ryker onto his feet. He got up from the bed he was lying on and took in his surroundings. Filled to the brim with ornate detailing, the large room was a feat of engineering. Greek pillars rose like skyscrapers to the glass ceiling, sunlight streaming down through it, illuminating the floor, and Ryker couldn't help but gasp. Like a medieval hospital, the room was filled with a multitude of beds. He himself was lying in a little corner along with many other people, also rising from the beds.

“My name's Alfred, the stereotypical old wise guy name. Welcome to Heaven, or Hell, wherever you expected to go, ya know.” He quickly flipped through a thick book the size of an encyclopedia before tossing it aside as quickly as he read. “Definitely the latter, I'm guessing from your records.”

“My records? And did you read all of that that quickly?” He questioned with a puzzled look on his face.

Chuckling, Alfred replied. “Obviously, where do you think we are, Earth!” His guffaws led way to understanding as if he realized a key piece of information. “Ope, yep, I forgot, newlings are stupid. So basically, you’re in the Thought Center-don’t question it. It was a GIANT rebranding campaign done by the Council because apparently the term ‘Eternal Doom’ was too medieval and too accurately represented the situationship you’d be in, and of course, that’s too scary.”

Perplexed, Ryker queried further. “Thought Center?”

“Did you really buy the whole idea of paradise? I thought that started to die out on Earth, but I guess not,” Alfred said with a shrug. “Now, if the Elders just gave you eternal bliss and peace, you’d get bored way too quickly,” he added with a long emphasis on the word way. “It’s basically the premise of one of your Earth television shows-oh shoot, I forgot the name.” After he seemed like he had contemplated all the world’s (or in this case universe’s) problems, he snapped his fingers as the thought returned to him. “The Good Place! Yep, that was one of the better ones you humans made. Quite thoughtful. OH MY GOD IS THAT MY BUDDY SHAKESPEARE!” Jumping up and down like a child, he made his way to a distant figure at the end of the room. The person then turned towards Alfred and his face lit up in recognition.

“Homeboy Alfred!” They both sprinted towards each other as if they were in the Olympics-literally-and hugged each other in an embrace that could have possibly set off an earthquake with the collision they made. Jogging the distance to them, Ryker was left to his own thoughts. *Did he really just say Shakespeare?* As he got closer, he started to listen in on their conversation.

“It’s been, like, a century!” Alfred bellowed.

“Ugh, I know, right?” Shakespeare replied. “We have literally so much to catch up on. Did you hear the news? Marie Antoinette told Taylor Swift who told Mohammad Ali who told Socrates who told Adam who told Eve to...”

“I’m sorry,” Ryker interjected, “did I just hear that your name is Shakespeare?”

The grin from the man gave him the answer. “Yep! The one and only, ya know, ‘To be or not to be’, ‘All that glitters is not gold’, yadda yadda yadda. Are you a newling?”

“That, apparently, I am.”

“Can you delight my fanciful whims for a spare minute?”

“English please.”

“Can ya help a brother out?”

“Sure, Mr. Shakespeare.”

“Oh, please, call me William.” As if to make his persona seem larger-as well as his ego-Shakespeare puffed his chest to an outrageous length. “Do they tell my stories with splendor in your schools? Do the children revere me?” The eager grin on his face almost made Ryker let him down easily, but he instantaneously went back to his usual self.

“No, we kind of hate you there.”

William quickly snorted to hide his embarrassment and shock. “You simply do not understand the language.”

“I guess, but that’s why we have SparkNotes.”

“Spark what?”

“Nothing!” Alfred added. Noticing the sudden change in the room, he steered Ryker out of the conversation. “Well, we should get going, Will. I gotta teach this newling.” He gave out a shaky laugh and it was met with a death gaze from Shakespeare that stared into the depths of Ryker’s soul.

“He does in fact have a lot to learn.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll set him right. Catch you in the new century!” They quickly set off, leaving Shakespeare in the dust. Once they were out of earshot, Alfred calmly explained to his protege the problems with that confrontation. “YOU CAN’T SHOW A LITERARY MASTER SPARKNOTES, YOU IDIOT,” he boomed, suddenly getting all too scary. “Do you want him to go mentally insane with the fact children are reading abridged versions of his life’s work?”

“It’s better than him living his life a lie.”

“Yes, except for the fact HE ISN’T ALIVE!” They both stormed into a separate corner.

“Can you continue explaining where I am, which you were doing before friggin Shakespeare decided to so rudely interrupt us?”

Alfred quickly regained his composure by clearing his throat and aligning his tie. “Just be more careful from now on.”

“I will, continue please,” he replied impatiently.

“Now,” he said, beginning his long tale. “You died, alright, and looking at your file, from a car accident. When humans die, their spirit goes to serving the future of mankind. Sure, you get your castle on the hill that you want, but you still have to work a typical nine to five. You’re assigned to the Thought Center, specifically the…” He flipped through the file once more. “The bullying center!”

“Wait, hold up, so I’m in Heaven?”

“If you would like to put it that way.”

Ryker didn’t know many things, but the one he knew was that he didn’t belong here. *Should I tell him?* He grappled with the situation, his mind fighting battles simply for this one key decision.

“Hey, are you still there?” Alfred questioned.

I’m in Heaven. Of course I’m not gonna tell him. And the bullying center of all places! He couldn’t help but chuckle at the irony of the situation. “Still smiling,” he acknowledged. “So where’s my mansion?”

“More on that later. Your job, contrary to what you’d think, will be to place bad thoughts in people.”

Ryker reeled in shock. “Wait, you’re telling me my job is to bully people?”

“Sort of. You’re programming the bully’s thoughts. The world can’t have heroes without villains. The good people of the world need something to overcome.”

“So I’m dooming people to Hell?” Ryker questioned.

“Oh, no. Just as the hero is expected to overcome his situation, the bully is expected to overcome his thoughts.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Ryker soon realized he was asking more for his own sake than others.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

They reached a giant gate, filled to the brim with ornate details.

Ryker inquired, “Why are there naked people on the door?”

Alfred’s counter put a smirk on his face. “Why not?”

“Touche.” The door opened with a flourish, as if sensing their presence, and Ryker was quickly ushered into the room beyond. Somehow it managed to eclipse the large Grand Central Station like hallway he was previously in. With frescos dotting the domed ceilings, the baroque

architecture screamed royalty: drapes hanging from the chestnut pillars, crystal chandeliers reflecting the sunlight, marble floors shining in spectacular splendor. With his jaw dropped open to the floor, Ryker gave a gasp that echoed as if he was back in mountainous Colorado, even though the room was filled to the brim with modern computers. For some reason, though, the workers sitting in front of the computers seemed bored out of their mind, sad even.

“Everyone has that same reaction,” Alfred chimed. Well, welcome to your office in the Thought Center. You might as well like it cause you’re gonna work here for....” he checked his watch sarcastically, “all of eternity!”

“Great,” Ryker groaned. They walked over to the center of the mass of computers and Alfred eventually stopped at one.

“This is yours, so I’ll show you the ropes and I’ll get goin’.”

“Wait, don’t you work here too?”

“Do I work here?” He said with a laugh. “No, no, no, I’m part of the Council of Fate. Worked pretty hard in my previous life to do this.”

“Wait, is that why you hadn’t seen Shakespeare for a century?”

“Yep! I just carry out the sentence the Council says.”

Ryker began to notice the golden handcuffs on the workers’ hands, and everything took a dark turn. Realization began to dawn on him... “So I’m not actually in Heaven?” Without him noticing, Alfred had placed the cuffs on him too.

“NOPE! SURPRISE! You’ve been lied to! You’re actually in the Land Down Under, and I ain’t talking about Australia.” It all made sense now. Alfred was a servant of the Council because he was in Heaven, and he would be the one going home to a castle on the hill, not Ryker. “You’re gonna sit here until you’ve served out your punishment and that’s around, oh, say, a millennium.”

“A millennium!”

“Now let’s go over the rules, shall we. Talking, restroom breaks, and eating and drinking aren’t permitted! It is supposed to be punishment after all.” Ryker’s head began to feel heavy, as realized the implication of the situation. *A millennium?*

Act 3

“At this point, I don’t even know how you didn’t realize it,” Alfred said with a slight maniacal laugh. In fact, Ryker realized Alfred’s evil side was present through their entire exchange in the Thought Center, like a small shadow hidden due to a larger encompassing the space; sometimes, however, the smaller evil may be more lethal than the larger, simply due to surprise, which is exactly what had happened here. The Thought Center had seemed like the main villain for Ryker, something he had to fit into even though he knew he didn’t belong. It all was given way to be a ruse, and that was when Alfred emerged from his hidden sanctuary and stabbed him in the back. “I mean,” he continued, “you didn’t even see the handcuffs on the others-no memory wipe was even necessary! Honestly, kinda boring though. I do love the exhilarating rush of a challenge, and lemme tell ya, you’re quite the bore.”

Ryker tried to fight back, both physically and mentally, but it was to no avail. “What would you do if you were in my place? It was just not inviting someone to play friggin tennis! It’s not even that big of a deal-it’s not like it matters.”

His mentor’s face suddenly grew dark, a stark contrast from his previous boisterous personality. The conflagration of fireworks in his eyes had turned to smoke. “You have no clue what consequences your actions had.” With a wave of Alfred’s hand, Ryker’s surroundings morphed into a familiar, typical suburban setting-he remembered it all too well. He soon realized he was in front of Will’s house. He hadn’t been here in almost a year, back when they were actual friends, but he still knew the place like the scent of smoke-toxic.

The quiet copy-paste neighborhood gave way to chaos as ambulance sirens came in from down the road, arriving with the judgement of God, decreeing life or death. Left with his head spinning, Ryker was struck with confusion, and then sudden realization began to dawn on him like a golden sunset clearing away the darkness. This was Will’s house after Ryker himself had died, and these ambulances had come for a body. “I believe you’ve figured out what’s happened, but why not see it for yourself?” Alfred remarked.

“I don’t want to go.”

“I’m making you.” Alfred grabbed his hands and with superhuman (or superspirit) strength, pulled him, kicking and screaming, towards the house. They passed through the wall as if it wasn’t there, and Ryker noticed streaks of red spilling down the floor.. The house was built on a slight slope-the engineers Will’s parents had commissioned did the job wrong, and it would cost more money to fix it.

They were standing in the foyer and there were three bodies in the foyer, but all of them were dead. Of course, there were themselves, two of the three dead bodies. Ryker and Alfred glanced up at the crystal chandelier next to the balcony, and they saw a dark shadow swaying back and forth in a pendulum motion, blood dripping to the floor like wax falling from a candle.

All Ryker could do was watch and cry.

“It pains me every time to show things like this, but now you know why you have to stay here.” They were back in the Thought Center and Ryker was chained to his desk, but for once he wasn’t fighting back. “You committed an atrocity through your actions, and for that, you have to give your time. Life is given to you, but to take another’s is not in your hands. Don’t worry too much-you’ll be free in a millennium.” As if not letting Ryker gain even a moment of happiness, Alfred added, “The guilt, however, even we can’t get rid of.”

With that, Ryker’s mentor snapped his fingers and vanished in an instant.

It went on like this for centuries; he continued to add thoughts into the minds of people, the endless cycle repeating itself. He monitored the status of the individuals-most times the bullies overcame their situations, but sometimes, they became even more washed up than the ones getting bullied. Ryker knew that feeling all too well, and it was as if his heart was shattered into pieces. However, with time, those shards of glass are able to come together to form a beautiful mosaic, shining even brighter than the work before. He knew not when that would happen, when he would shine, when he would be able to illuminate the darkness within, but the one fact he did know the answer to was that it would happen one day. Why? Because that was the one last bright spot of good left in his heart, and sometimes, that’s all that it takes.

An excerpt
by
Marissa Wooters

October 6, 2017
Franklin, Illinois 10:26 A.M.

Chilly. That was the only way to describe the weather that day. It was a high of 61 degrees that day, and it was cold enough for a sweatshirt or jacket, but not cold enough to wear your winter coat. I looked at my little sister, Mia, as she ran down the stairs. She had on a bright pink hoodie with little butterflies on it. Her blonde hair was pulled back into pigtails by my mother. It was the day of the Fall Festival. Franklin was a small town. An everybody knows everybody type of town.

Every year in the first week of October, the town holds an annual fall festival. This festival was huge, for a small population town, and it always brings people from all over the state. Every year my family went. Our favorite activities were pumpkin carving, apple bobbing, and the haunted corn maze. My little sister Mia always got scared in the maze and would hug one of our legs the whole way through. She's so young and innocent, it makes me miss when I was younger and didn't have to worry about anything.

"Alyssa," said Mia as she entered the kitchen, "look at my piggy tails!"

"I see them. Very cute."

My mother then entered the kitchen with her sweater and purse in hand. My dad had previously gone to the car to warm it up for us. I grabbed my shoes and slipped them on my feet. I looked down into my sister's bright blue eyes. She slipped her hand into mine and we walked out the front door to the car.

My dad had the radio tuned in to the local radio station where they were talking about the festival. The mayor was talking about all of the activities and telling everyone to "come on out for a great time." We waited patiently for my mom to lock the front door and get situated in the car, then we were off. As we backed out of the driveway, the radio station then began playing a classic Halloween song, *Monster Mash*.

"Well here's a good song to get us in the Halloween spirit," stated my dad as he turned the radio up.

"Not so loud, Phil. We can still be in the Halloween spirit at a softer volume," said my mom as she turned the radio back down to the original volume.

"Sorry, honey. Mia likes it though," he said as he glanced over his shoulder at Mia who was wiggling and dancing in her car seat.

We all laughed and began discussing what we wanted to eat once we arrived at the festival. I was craving a turkey leg from the food truck we went to every year. I really didn't know why we were discussing where we would eat, we all knew we would eat at the same place we always do. I would get the turkey leg, Mom and Dad would get a Thanksgiving meal to split, and Mia would get mac and cheese. We then would all split a piece of pumpkin pie because it was a huge piece, and we all knew we would eat other sweets throughout the day. Same as every year.

Then after that we would go to the pumpkin carving station. We would pick the biggest pumpkin we could find and carve it as a family. We carved the same face every year because we are not very good at it. Then Dad would carry it around the rest of the day and complain how heavy it is. Same as every year.

Next we would do apple bobbing. Mia and I were the only ones who participated in the apple bobbing though. We would take turns, that way we could cheer each other on. If you win the apple bobbing, you win a free caramel apple which is always another addition to Mia and I's sweet extravaganza. Same as every year.

"We're here!" Exclaimed Mia, drawing me away from my thoughts.

"We have to find a parking spot," said Dad as he slowly pulled into the parking lot.

"Woah, I think this is the busiest the festival has ever been," I said, glancing around at all of the cars, "there's a lot of out of state license plates too."

"Yes there is. Make sure you girls stay close, there's a lot of strangers," said Mom glancing up from her phone.

**Falls River Park
Franklin, IL 11:47 A.M.**

We had just finished lunch, and Mia was insisting we go to the pumpkin carving. Mom and Dad told us to go ahead without them and that they would catch up. I thought this was weird considering we always did this activity together, and because Mom had stressed before we even got out of the car to stay close to them. They were going to find a restroom I believe, but Mia was too impatient to wait so we scurried off in a different direction along through the crowd.

"We have to get the biggest pumpkin to carve!" Exclaimed Mia dragging me along.

"Slow down, Mia," I said, retracting her back like a dog on a leash, "there will be plenty of pumpkins to choose from."

"But we want the biggest!" She said picking up speed again.

We arrived at the little pumpkin patch next to the carving station, and Mia let go of my hand to start walking down the rows to pick a pumpkin. I picked up pumpkins left and right showing them to Mia waiting for an approval.

"Too small."

"Too lumpy."

"Not big enough."

Finally I picked up a pumpkin that was perfect in my eyes. It would be a perfect carving pumpkin. I showed it to Mia awaiting another decline, but she actually approved.

“That’s perfect, Aly! Wait till I show Mommy and Daddy” She yelled jumping up and down clapping her little hands together.

“Let’s see if we can find a wagon for it, so we don’t have to carry it,” I said, glancing around for a wagon.

“Oh, there’s one over there. Come on, Mia,” I said looking back at Mia, but she wasn’t there.

“Mia?”

Silence. The only thing I could hear was the yelling of kids and chattering of families back in the heart of the carnival. There weren’t many people at the carving area, so she couldn’t have gone far.

“Mia! This isn’t funny, if you’re hiding get back here now.”

I stood there in the middle of the pumpkins by myself. It was like everything had frozen and gone silent. Even the screaming and chatter of the carnival had disappeared. All I could hear was the pounding of my heart in my head.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

My heart thumped. Where could she have gone? I have to find my parents. No. I have to find Mia, then I’ll find my parents.

“MIA! Come on, this isn’t funny!”

I look over to a worker that is in charge of the pumpkin carving section. He was an older man sitting on his phone playing a game. He definitely wasn’t paying any attention, but maybe he saw something.

“Sir! Did you see a little girl around? She had pigtails and blonde hair! Blue eyes! Did you see her?” I bombarded this guy with questions hoping that he saw something.

He glanced up from his phone, his eyes scanning the surroundings, “Nope, didn’t see anybody.”

Seriously? This guy didn't see anything. You work here to supervise, and you're not even paying attention.

"Okay, thanks," I said, rushing off to look for Mia again.

I looked around the area again, searching for Mia. Hoping to get a glance of her blonde hair. I didn't know what to do anymore, so I ran. I sprinted as fast as my legs could carry me. I was aware everyone was looking at me wondering why I was running through the festival. I didn't care, though. I had to find Mom and Dad. I saw Mom's blonde hair standing next to a vendor's booth.

"MOM! DAD!" I yelled, catching their attention. Mom turned her head frantically and had a deer in headlights look. I saw her glance down next to me, as if she were looking for Mia. When she looked back up her eyes had widened.

"Honey, what's wrong? Where's Mia?"

"I don't know! We were picking out a pumpkin and then I went to look for a wagon and turned back and she was gone! She was right next to me. I don't know where she went," I said, starting to cry. I had a lump in my throat and I could feel more tears building up. "I'm sorry Mom, I don't know where she is."

"Baby, this isn't your fault. We will look for her before we freak out," Mom said. I could tell she was freaking out already but was trying to act like it was okay to make me feel better.

My dad had already started walking around and questioning people if they had seen Mia. Mom and I were walking around looking everywhere. We made our way back to the pumpkin carving station where Mia disappeared. I was hoping she would be there looking for me. Maybe she just wandered off.

"I don't see her anywhere," Mom said, looking around.

I didn't know what to do anymore. I felt responsible for this whole thing. If I wouldn't have looked away from her she wouldn't have disappeared. My mother and father probably hate me. I lost their baby.

"Mom, what do we do now?" I asked the nail biting question. We can't look anymore. We have looked everywhere.

She sighs, "I guess we will go to the police station to file a missing persons report. That's all we can do. I don't know what else we can do."

"I'm sorry. This is all my fault. Please don't hate me," I said tears welling up in my eyes and I had a terrible feeling in my stomach.

“We will find her, honey.” My dad said pulling my mother and I into his embrace, “all we can do is wait.”

Two Days Later

It’s been two days. We are all sitting in the living room. No one has hardly slept at all. Dozing off occasionally. We filed a police report the same day as the carnival. We have been sitting by the phone waiting for the police to call and give us news. We had just got done eating soup and I was getting ready to head upstairs to take a shower. I slowly made my way up the stairs to the bathroom.

I was hoping to take a shower and wash the past three days away. Almost like it was all a dream and the water would wash it away. I started the water, occasionally checking to see if it was getting warmer. I got undressed and stepped in the shower. I let the water run down my back and rush over my head. I was thinking about everything that had happened over the past two days, when my thoughts were loudly interrupted.

“Honey, come here for a second! Hurry!” My mother hollered at me while banging on the door.

I hurried up and jumped out of the shower, grabbing a towel and drying off. I grabbed my hoodie and shorts and put them on. I swung the door open, sprinting down the stairs. My mom and dad were sitting by the phone looking frantic when I got down stairs.

“What’s wrong?” I looked back and forth between my parents.

“There’s a man on the phone,” whispered my mom, “he says he knows where Mia is.”

“What,” I said, my eyes widening, “well what’s he saying?”

“He wants to talk to you,” my father answered.

I hesitated to grab the phone from my mother. What if this wasn’t the person who took Mia, and just someone who had seen the news? What kind of sick person would do that though, but then again, what kind of sick person would take my little sister? And why do they want to talk to me?

“Hello?” I croaked as I spoke into the phone we had had for years. The phone in all these years had never been scary to talk into, until now.

“Well hello there, Alyssa, the voice on the other line spoke. The voice rang into my ears. It sounded strange and forced, almost like the person was trying to disguise their voice.

“What do you want?” I said, rudely. There’s nothing nice I have to say to this person if they really did take Mia.

“You listen to me right now, little missy. You better be nice to me or you’ll never see your sister again.” He responded quickly and aggressively. “You’re the one I wanted, you know. I didn’t want your lousy younger sister. I wanted you. You’re older, mature, *beautiful*.”

A shiver went down my spine. What a creep. I didn’t know what to say. I was just breathing heavily into the phone. My dad’s phone rang, signaling that he received a text message. He looked down at it and then up at me and Mom.

“Keep him talking,” Dad whispered. “They are trying to track the call.”

I nodded my head and began speaking into the phone, “If you want me so bad, then come get me. Bring Mia back, and come get me. That’s what you wanted.”

“Now that would be nice. I don’t know though. I enjoy your sister’s company, ” he said creepily.

“You better not do anything to her!” I yelled. Nothing makes me angrier than knowing Mia is god only knows where with this creep. “We can meet somewhere, it’ll be like a trade. Mia for me. How does that sound?”

“You must think I’m a dumbass,” he snarled. “I know you guys have cops and detectives looking everywhere for that little girl, but let me tell you. You’ll *never* find her.”

“We will find her,” I remarked, looking at my parents frantically. My mom used her hands to signal to keep talking to him. “We will find her, but most importantly, we will find you, and you will suffer the consequences.”

“You better watch yourself, little girl. You may think you have the power and control here, but I do. Just remember who has Mia,” he said in a hushed tone.

“You’ll never get away with this,” I answer.

“I already have,” he snarled and I heard the click of the phone call being ended.

What the hell does that mean?

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“What did he say?” Dad asked frantically.

I didn’t know what to say, I was in shock. What does that mean?

“I already have,” rolled off my tongue.

“What?” Asked mom.

“That’s what he said. I said you’ll never get away with this, and he said he already has. We have to find Mia, she’s not safe there. Were the police able to track the call?”

“We don’t know yet, they haven’t notified us again,” Dad answered. “What else did he say?”

“That he wanted me. Not Mia. He wanted me because I am older, mature, and beautiful. He didn’t want Mia. He wanted me! Why didn’t he take me over her! She wouldn’t be there right now! I can defend myself, she can’t!”

My mother grabbed my hands, “Honey, we wouldn’t have wanted him to take you either. You’re our girls, we need you both. We will find Mia.”

“He didn’t seem so sure we would. He said he was in control,” I said.

“He’s just trying to mess with your head,” Dad replied, “he knows it will take a toll on you.”

DING.

Dad’s phone buzzed startled us. He received a text message. We all huddled around to read the message and to see who it was from.

“It’s the detective,” he announced.

Mr. Collins. We have a ping for the recent phone call. We are going to try and track it, we will let you know when we arrive at the scene.

...

We want to come. We want to know where this filthy scumbag has our little girl.

...

Are you sure? This may be hard on your other daughter.

Dad glanced up at me. I nodded yes, signifying that I wanted to go.

We want to go.

...

We will pick you up in a squad car in 15.

My dad hurried and ran up the stairs to change clothes. I am pretty sure he hasn't showered since Mia went missing, nor changed clothes. Mom sat on the couch silently, staring off into space.

"You okay?" I asked my mom. She sat there blankly. "Mom?"

"I'm fine, Honey. Just thinking," she responded.

"You better change, you've been in your pajamas the past two days," I told her, hoping to snap her out of her thoughts.

"I don't want to," she sighed.

Dad came back down the stairs with a pair of jeans and a hoodie. He scurried around grabbing things he thought he might need. It was like someone lit a firecracker under him, he was everywhere.

Ding Dong.

"Okay, guys they're here," Dad said, "let's go."

We walked out the front door to the squad car parked out front. The detective got out and opened the passenger door for my father, then proceeded to open the back door for my mother and I. I sighed as I sat down and buckled my seatbelt. The car was warm and smelled like leather.

"The location was pinged as being five minutes away," said the detective.

"What!" exclaimed my mother. "That's so close."

"So it's someone close?" Dad asked.

"It appears so," answered the detective.

Mom gasped. "She's been this close the whole time?" Mom asked.

"That's not a definite thing, but maybe," the detective said.

"Oh my goodness," Mom sighed.

**East Bend Avenue
Franklin, IL 5:47 P.M.**

We pulled up to a brick house. The area was familiar to me. I remember coming here when I was younger. Then it dawned on me, this is my grandma's neighborhood. My grandma who passed away three years ago that is. I remember being here all the time. Riding my bike, playing with the dog, drawing on the sidewalk with chalk. What if this person knows who I am?

"You guys stay out here. We will knock first, but if no answer or he refuses to come out, we will bust the door down," announced the detective.

He got out of the vehicle quickly. I watched him walk around the car and meet up with some other police officers and FBI agents. They all discussed for a quick second, then they all proceeded to walk to the door. I saw them pound on the door a couple of times then they stood there waiting. After about a minute, the door slowly opened. I saw a head pop out. Oh my god.

I caught a full glance of the person. Dark hair with streaks of grey popping through, bearded face, grungy clothing. I knew this man. It was Mr. Roberts. The old man who had lived next door to my grandmother all her life. I used to ride my bike by his house. Grandma even used to talk to him. He always seemed so nice. Maybe even too nice.

I watched as the detectives spoke to him. I couldn't hear what the detective was saying, but I could see the aggression that was being displayed. The silence in the car was suffocating. I wanted to know what was being said. I saw Mr. Roberts speak, I could see the hatefulness dripping off of his face. Suddenly, they grabbed Mr. Roberts and shoved him against the house, handcuffing him. They walked him to the car as the remaining police officers and detective began entering the house.

I hated the waiting game that was being played right now. I was waiting for the detective to come out with Mia in his arms and to say that she would be okay. We waited and waited. Finally, the detective came back out with a distressed, saddened look. He had nothing in his hands but a piece of material. It was pink. Then it hit me, it was Mia's hoodie. I recognized the butterflies on it. It also had a red stain that looked a lot like blood. The detective opened the car door and stood there. He rubbed his face, ruffling his neatly gelled hair. He sighed heavily as he made eye contact with each one of us.

"I'm so sorry," he spoke.