Serendipity
—2021—

Ser-en-dip-i-ty (ser’ en dip’ e te) n. [coined by Horace Walpole (c. 1754) after The Three Princes of Serendip (i.e. Ceylon), a Per. Fairy tale in which the princes make such discoveries] an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally ----

Ser’en-dip’ i-tous adj.

Serendipity (ser’ en dip’ e te) n. a collection of student writing and art from Bay de Noc Community College funded by the Student Development Fund and the Arts and Humanities program.

—Dedication—

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Cover Image: Alyssa Alquist, Self Portrait, Acrylic on Canvas

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“Haiku” by Macy Leisenring
Wearing a fake face
My smile is gleaming bright
No access to the truth

“When She Came” by Lisette LaFave
The boy woke up at midnight.
And he opened up his eyes
Saw a person in the corner
Who was very great in size.
The person crept on toward him
And he found he couldn't speak
So when he also couldn't move
The poor boy felt quite weak.
He could see it was a woman
Who was terrorizing him
And as she kept approaching
Still he couldn't move a limb.
When she made it to his bedside
He'd succeeded in one thing He tried so hard and then he found
His mouth was now moving.
The woman bent toward him
As she reached her hands on down
The boy shouted, "Please, I need help! Someone come save me, now!"
His parents ran into the room
And he could move again
But the old woman disappeared
And no one believed him.
He fell asleep, somehow, that night
The woman wasn't gone
Tomorrow night the poor young boy
Faced the same nightmare spawn.
Now every night he waited for
The woman to appear
And even when she didn’t come
Still the boy lived in fear.
Sleepless nights soon took their toll
He couldn’t focus right
All through the day he thought about
His terror in the night
Even when she didn’t come
Still the boy didn’t sleep
He waited for the woman who
Into his room would creep.
She seldom came, but when she did It wasn’t quite as bad
As what he’d been preparing for
For all these days that passed.
He couldn’t get her off his mind
Her mission was complete
Even now when she never comes
The man still hardly sleeps.
“Thirst” by Benjamin
LAND Contest, Local Winner – 1st place, Fiction

Rikes’ fingers stirred rivulets of photo-reactive plankton from slumber to brilliant green phosphorescence beneath the faintest scrim of the cold ocean. The star-filled chill of the night sky was a welcomed reprieve from the brutal sun that filled his days through a million miniscule, oscillating oceanic reflections, all sighted in on his eyes like miniature flak guns blasting away at his vision. “Blam! Blam! Blam!” was the sound his pulse made in his temples as his head throbbed in time to the waves, just like the exploding shells filling the air around the German Luftwaffe destroying London. He could picture it: the Stukas raining death and bombs, the flying rocket bombs leaving behind clouds of pain and debris, the twin engine bombers whistling while they poured destruction from their pregnant bellies. Their craft was to un-make everything and they were masterful practitioners of their art. London was a ruin. He watched the newsreels every time he was on shore and they were full of the war. He was losing a war of his own, and he could barely move. It wouldn’t be long; it was just a matter of time. He’d been drinking the wrong kind of water for a day. The kind that only existed in mirages and miracles. He daydreamed.

Adrift for the past five days, his simple inflatable raft felt massive, and he felt utterly alone. As far as he knew, he was the only survivor of his ship’s destruction now. His mind began to drift unpleasantly without people around to talk to. He missed the sounds of men in their bunks, chattering and arguing, playing cards and wrestling, and the shapes of people moving around him. It was a bombshell onto itself to be so alone after the sardine-like can he’d been adrift in.

His merchant marine ship --the USS Victoria; the Vic’ to her crew--had sank, a victim of the incessant wolf’s pack of U-boats. They were German submarines known for decimating Allied ships during their trans-Atlantic voyage, and as far as he knew, he was the only swinging dick to make it off the doomed freighter aside from Jones. Nearly a hundred good men had gone down on that tragic day, sank to the bottom like they had stones tied to their feet, and never to be seen again as the song said. There was time to mourn them, he knew, but this wasn’t it.

Rikes made it off the sinking ship with the inflatable raft. Jones made it off the ‘Vic with an emergency ration bag. He had all the water. They agreed to pool their resources until they were rescued, which couldn’t be too far away.

The food went fast. Neither of them could eat the iron heavy sea rations without more water. Goddarned corned beef hash. On the fourth morning they had three one-ounce cans of drinkable water left. They were surrounded by water. Jones had them under him like a cushion. They had to hurt his ass, but the bastard was guarding them with his life, literally. The cans of salty corned beef hash were like mush and the last of them were in the no-man’s land in the middle of the raft.

Rikes had a boat spike with a folding blade. He took it out and looked at the way the light played on the steel, gleaming like white light from the heart of infinity, and remembering who gave it to him. It was the old-fashioned kind that sailors used to pull apart knots when everything was held together by ropes and prayer. It was a gift from his sweetheart, Geraldine, given with tears in her eyes the last time he shipped out. The inscription read “Come back to me, Rikes. –
“Love Always.” There wasn’t a name on it, and he didn’t need one. He knew who put it in his hand, pressed it into his calloused skin with her red gloss nails and her perfectly tapered fingers.

She gave it to him after the last time they laid together in a swanky downtown New York hotel room. He watched her on the dock until she was small, a speck of blue from her coat that grew hazy and then faded from view entirely. He was afraid he’d never see her again or hold her soft hands in his gnarled mitts. He was afraid of a lot of things, especially lately, and it seemed like the whole world had lived in fear since Germany began gobbling up Europe through conquest. America had just joined France and England in the war, and ships like his supplied the G. I.’s fighting for freedom and democracy by keeping them warm and fed. Guns take bullets and his ship was full of them. They’re probably what made it explode after he bailed off the side. He was afraid he’d drink the salt water in desperation. If he did, he was just as dead as dying of thirst. The first piss was the cork being pulled on your life. You’d literally piss yourself to death by dehydration. He’d kill Jones before he let that happen.

Capture and torture by the Germans was Jones’ greatest fear. He wouldn’t shut up about them. Jones said he wasn’t scared when they sank the USS Stark on his first voyage, he wasn’t scared the time a torpedo streaked by the stern of the ‘Vic within spitting distance as he dangled helplessly over the side in a bosun’s chair, scraping away at the barnacles on his beloved ship’s hull, and he wasn’t going to let his fear rule him just because he was trapped on this raft. He didn’t shake, as they said in his neighborhood, but he was terrified of being taken prisoner by the Huns. There was no hiding that, just the thought made his skin prickle and break out in goosebumps. It shook him.

All the other guys talked about the Germans a lot. The worst thing in the world was to get captured by them. They’d peel a man’s skin right off his bones, they said, and then make him eat it if he wouldn’t talk. They’d leave a man naked and adrift, tied to a piece of wood or a life preserver, they said, or take him back to die in Germany. They didn’t even care about the intelligence, they said, because the Germans were just barbarians. No one knew much about them aside from the newscasts in the picture houses, but everyone knew the U-boats already knew where the good guys were and were sinking them with utter impunity.

Two cans left. Half and half, fifty-fifty. That meant they’d each have a half ounce of water a day, and it would only last two more days. Rikes knew he was dead unless a plane or a blimp showed up looking for submarines. At this point, he’d take the Germans. He tried to sleep all day. Instead, he thought about Jones.

Jones was the kind of guy that would slip it in if you bent over in front of him. He was ignorant like a pig in shit and wallowed in it. He knew everything about everything. Even when he was wrong, he was right. Jones was a world class Grade A asshole, and he didn’t he know it. He laughed like a choking balloon being bled from the tit by a child. High and tittering with the distinctly acrid tang of whining. It was right on the edge of hysteria. Pure desperation. He sounded like a jackal. He was the kind of guy that took with both hands, never giving back, and always having more than he needed. He smoked when no one else did and smoked in your face. He’d never offer one. The guys used to say he wouldn’t even do you the courtesy of a reach around. A real jerk. Rikes had avoided the guy on the ‘Vic. Now he was trapped with him.
“Most people would talk about their lives in these circumstances,” Rikes thought. Instead, they sat there, silent, letting the seconds drip slowly down the leg of Time, eternally running away. Rikes didn’t know what would happen when the water ran out, but he was sure someone was going in the water. And he was certain it wasn’t him.

Rikes fell into a troubled sleep, tossing and turning in the scrim of water in the bottom of the raft. He thought he pissed himself several times, but eventually he fell asleep.

Rikes heard a strange tapping sound. It was something soft on hollow metal. He thought they might be rescued, and he was so thirsty. The sun was almost up, he gagged and spat out thick mucus, and his head instantly swam. He was dizzy and it was hard to focus. The tapping stopped as soon as he sat up. When he saw what it was, he knew what he had to do. He’d always known. He’d gone unconscious and dreamt about Geraldine again.

The raft was leaking. He’d popped a tiny hole in it with his knife. He knew it was just a matter of time until the thirst got to him, the salt killed him, or the raft deflated, and he was in the cold Atlantic waters, unprotected against hypothermia and the sharks that swarmed the shipping lanes, looking for men like him and sinking ships. Jones was a shadow in the far corner of the raft. He was face down in a small, expanding puddle of water that was commingled with his blood, the deck knife sticking out of him like a flagpole. Rikes would roll him over the side in the morning so he could see his body drift away into the ocean’s unmarked burial ground. Maybe a shark would eat him. He almost didn’t want to risk making the shark sick.

Jones drank the last of the water. Rikes woke up to him holding the can over his mouth, knocking the last drops of water out with his fingers. They’d fought. Rikes hit him right in the mouth and Jones got him to the side of the raft. There was a tie off cord around the perimeter of the raft and Jones choked him with it. Rikes slipped his hand in his coveralls and pulled out the knife as his mind shot to Geraldine and her blue coat. He’d never see her or her red nails again. Jones went white when he flicked the blade open. “Come on, Rikes. Don’t do this,” he said. Rikes knew he had a lying mouth and told him so. He stuck the knife into Jones’ stomach over and over, pushing farther and farther into the heart above. Jones had killed Rikes just as sure as if he’d stuck a knife in his heart too.

His thirst was so intense. Rikes couldn’t help himself. ‘Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink,’ the poet had said. “Not for long,” Rikes thought. The ocean was cold in his cupped hand, salty when he poured it onto his Saharan tongue. It burned all the way down, into his stomach, and he felt like he was going to vomit from the heavy salt. He would keep drinking. Death was better than the things ahead if he tried to wait it out. Death was really all he had left. It, too, was just a matter of time.
“Image” by Kaitlyn Hardwick
You used to adore me
Now you ignore me
Followed in my footsteps
Step one, step two
Now you follow someone new.
Your friend led you astray
making bad decisions
right and left that stay
I reach out, getting so close.
Almost back to the connection we once had
To suddenly drift apart again.
You are ignoring me more and more.
Because you think I’m perfect, like a clean glass door
I’m starting to crack, perfect no more.
I uphold my image
Kind of like you
But you maintain your appearance by
Not telling the truth.
Secrets and lies
You can disguise
Behind a mask, you must hide
I am wrong about you.
A little sister I do not recognize.
“My Body: The Temple” by Spencer Robinson
LAND Contest, Local Winner – 2nd place, Poetry
My body is a hidden temple
- A beautiful, holy church -
Adorned with sacred art and divine text.
And in the most intimate moments,
Robed, angelic choirs sing glorious hymns
Reverberating within me.
You.
You are a desperate sinner.
Forcing yourself through my doors
With all your painful, rough sins,
Tearing me apart board by board,
Dismantling MY temple.
You didn’t even ask.
You didn’t bother to check if I served your God.
You just entered without asking,
Trespassing my sacred land.
And I was too afraid to tell you no.
After a while, I even acted as though you were welcomed.
In whispered gasps,
As the most holy blood
Seeped from my once white walls,
I prayed to any and all Gods.
Silently screaming for my trespasser to have mercy,
But the sinner continued to invade my hallowed grounds.
Forgive me Father,
For I have sinned.
I let the sinner inside.
I didn’t cast them out.
I even gave them a warm place to sleep.
But the sinner didn’t ask if they were welcomed-
If I wanted them to come to me.
I’m sorry father.
My body is a temple
And these hallowed grounds are now polluted.

Knot
Garrett Van Nett
Charcoal
“Mangled Curiosity” by Keisha Fox

I am constantly finding my interest peaked by danger when instead I should just sidestep it altogether. Often, I wonder why I flock to it instead of running from it. I truly think it is fascinating just how quickly children can find themselves in situations that cause their mothers to gain yet another grey hair. I, Keisha Fox, was a juvenile that caused my mother yet another grey hair. Shortly after my mother had attained enough strength to pick apart the mundane items of her deceased soul mate, my lack of fear that piqued my interest had landed me in a bloody situation. Unfortunately, this almost cost me a finger.

It was a blistering, hot summer day, and I was running about my grandparent’s property and trying to find some joy after losing my father the week before. While I was galivanting around in my nothingness (my boredom), a flash of movement between the house and the barn caught my eye. Of course, being a slave to my curiosity, I quickly dashed across the yard seeking to placate my interest. The movement had come from my mother inside the pole barn. I had never been interested in where all my father’s belongings had been placed, but I now saw them displayed in towering boxes in front of me. That excited me. My father had always been a very closed-off person, only letting you know just enough—even with his family. Therefore, seeing all that he left behind open to anyone who was meddlesome enough to meddle, my young mind was intrigued.

The second my mom turned her back and started to emerge herself into the memories of the past that each box had held, I quickly began to do the same. While searching through boxes, I stumbled upon the hedge clippers. Skeptical of what exactly the hedge clippers were and wanting to learn more, I began to tinker. I then stretched my hand over the clippers. It had two blades, and I did not understand that when I slowly squeezed the trigger, my left ring finger would become entrapped within the blades. My first initial feeling was bewilderment at how this had happened. Thankfully, the hum of the hedge clippers had not been loud enough to alarm my mother, and my dilemma had not yet come to light. I clutched the trigger again, and a familiar crimson color began to flow. Once the shock had worn off, the droplets of sudor rapidly began to progress across my forehead. I realized I was now in trouble. I decided to again clasp my right hand around the trigger, moving the blades in reverse and praying that this would somehow be the solution I needed to remain hidden from my mother.

“Mom, I think I’m going to faint. There is just too much blood. I tried to fix it, but I made it worse. PLEASE come over and help. I don’t know what else to do. Don’t tell grandpa. He will kill us,” I pleaded.

I have cut and cleaned many animals. I have seen their muscles, tendons, bones, and flesh torn. However, who knew human bone would be that white or blood so red. I have never seen white and red so bright before, yet the colors felt so collectively dark. My curiosity once again left me in a fog. Deaf to my surroundings, I peered upon my finger being torn apart. The clippers sounded as if they were whispering a song of annihilation. My mother’s cries murmured the melody, and my screams were their lull. Seeing myself disfigured had altered my state of mind. It was not until my grandpa ripped my mangled finger from the blades, and it began to start pulsating again that I was drawn back to my senses.
I was left with a finger that was shredded into pieces all because I had allowed my thirst for knowledge, snoopiness, and lack of fear to get the best of me. Although Albert Einstein did once say, “The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing,” I learned that not all curiosity should be placated. I was a child who had easily taken years off my mother’s life. Thanks to experiencing the horrid rupture of flesh, muscles, and tendons, I was able to avoid a table saw, nail gun, and many more. My advice to anyone who is just as easily intrigued is to know that it is okay to not always find an answer or a reason why.

“Reversing Downward Spirals” by Molly Wahoviak

Sitting at a bar stool in a pub that suited only the very dregs of society, Max looked down at his empty glass. Every day after five o’clock, this is where he could be found. Usually, he shut the place down, and sometimes the bar manager let him sleep it off in the back room. He could tell by his hazy appraisal of the establishment that the alcohol was slowly working its magic. Max, drowsy with contentment that only liquor could provide for him, looked across the bar and tried to ascertain who the bartender was chatting with. It was a woman, that much he was certain. Max could see the bartender gesturing towards him, and suddenly the woman was beside him. Without looking at the woman and with whiskey acting as a buffer, Max stated, “I’m not here for company.”

The woman replied, “I didn’t think so.”

Max automatically straightened in response to hearing the familiar voice.

“I’m your ride,” his sister steely stated.

Max, concluding his night of drowning in liquor was being put to an abrupt end, reluctantly replied, “Great.”

Max stumbled out of the barstool while his sister calmly shouldered his weight and practically dragged him out of the bar and into her car. In the car, his sister exploded with fury, shouting curses and epithets that Max agreed with unequivocally. Max could not even find the wherewithal to reply to her, and he let her continue her diatribe. His sister parked outside Max’s apartment, and she proceeded to finish her tirade with one last blow to Max’s ego, “You’re a drunk, Max. That’s why Jess left you.”

Max sobered slightly at that and tried his best not to hurl up the remaining liquor swirling around his digestive system. After his guts settled themselves, Max quietly informed his sister, “Jess didn’t leave me. I left her.”

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Max saw confused emotion well up in his sister’s eyes, but he rigidly turned away from her. With those parting words, Max opened and slammed the car door and weakly staggered towards his apartment building. Behind him, he heard his sister’s car burn rubber away from him. It was a relief to no longer be near his sister and her vocal judgments of his life. But he felt a pang of sadness. Max and his sister once had a close relationship that he valued intrinsically. That relationship dissipated because his sister did not want to compete with liquor for his attention. He did not blame her.

Max entered his apartment and looked around with a critical eye. Even in his inebriation, Max could tell his living space reflected himself and the man he was becoming. His living room
was a mess with dirty clothes littering the floor and empty takeout boxes from various diners resting on the coffee table. There was a layer of dust on his desk that he had not worked at since his employer informed him that he was fired. His white carpeting had stains of various dark liquors that he imbibed upon. What was especially concerning was the trail of stains that led from the living room to his bedroom. Dazed, Max could remember himself drunkenly walking from the living room to his bedroom with a bottle of scotch in one hand and a joint in the other. Although Max remembered drinking more than usual this week, he could not imagine himself making such a mess of his once tidy apartment. Deeply ashamed of himself, but with no energy to start cleaning his apartment, Max laid himself on the couch and tried his best to get some sleep.

Around noon, Max woke with a start and promptly heaved his aching body towards his bathroom. Shakily, Max got down on his knees in front of the toilet and abruptly let his body expel the choices in which he made last night. He prayed hard, not only to some guy with a beard up in the sky, but to the gods of porcelain. He hated to throw up. After his body was done berating him for his weakness with liquor, Max slowly stood up and flushed the evidence of his problem. He thought of his sister and wondered if he could actually be considered an alcoholic. Max usually was able to rationalize anything, and he used to think of his heavy liquor consumption as temporary. Although he was drunk last night, he could remember his sister’s exasperated remarks, and they echoed inside Max’s mind. He finally realized that he blew past a “temporary drinking habit” a while ago. Max situated himself in front of the sink and was trying to work up the courage to look at himself in the mirror. Max had an innate sense that he would not like what was reflected at him. Summoning a sense of calmness, Max looked at his reflection and felt a disappointment so acute, he found himself dry heaving into the sink. Warily looking into the mirror again, Max studied the creature looking back at him. His overgrown beard dominated his features. His worn skin had a paleness resembling someone with an olive-toned skin coloring in the midst of the summer season. Max regarded the frown lines marring his skin and wondered aloud, “How did I get so unhappy?”

His sister, Marie, thought his problem with alcohol started when Jess, his wife, left him for his boss’s son. However, Jess did not leave him. Max found out about Jess’s affair through a colleague at work that delicately informed him of Jess’s infidelity. Max originally did not believe his coworker, but then she showed him the picture she snapped of Jess and their boss’s son, Ted. That picture made Max a believer. The picture showcased Ted and Jess in a heated embrace in Ted’s office. When Max confronted Jess about the picture, Jess admitted the affair, but she calmly stated she did not want to divorce Max. It was Max who adamantly and vehemently refused to stay with his adulteress wife. Months after the divorce was filed, Max was called into his boss’s office and fired for “poor work ethic”. But Max knew the real reason why he was terminated from the engineering firm. Max wholeheartedly understood that Jess and her now fiancé, Ted, were the sole reason that perpetrated his termination at his dream job at his dream firm.

Max, considering the events that assisted in his downward spiral, quietly walked out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. After swallowing a couple aspirin, downing a glass of water, and sipping some coffee, Max had an overwhelming thought and immediately headed towards the liquor cabinet. Opening the cabinet, he looked upon the bottles filled with various liquors. He
had an immediate urge and longing to start drinking. He desperately wanted to feel the numbness that accompanied inebriation. He picked up a couple of bottles, wondered why he felt this godawful weakness towards them, and then unceremoniously threw them away. One by one, each bottle of temptation was trashed. He willed away the regret that was surely coming. He tried to feel optimistic in his reversal. To ensure he accomplished sobriety, he picked up the phone, called his sister and rather blandly stated, “I guess I need some help, Marie.”

Untitled
Garret Van Nett
Found Object

“I Like to Think” by Macy Leisenring
I like to think
that I am okay.
I like to sit and drink
in silence at a local cafe.
I like to presume
that I will make it on my own.
I use to laugh and dance around with you in your room
but now I’m stuck dancing alone.
I like to dream
that I am doing better than you.
I imagine that I am swimming with the stream
while you struggle to find someone new.
I like to think
that I am okay.
I like to sit and cry and drink
while the new girl takes your breath away.

*Boxed In*
Jane Karweick
Digital Art
“An Electrified World” by Charles Kleiman

Thomas Fredrick is a very good engineer. In his free time, he tinkers with animatronics and robotic prosthetics. Thomas is a very large Caucasian man, weighing over 250 pounds. As a well-educated individual, Thomas’s attire is quite important to him. Even when working in dirty environments, he always wears a full tuxedo. He always wore a tuxedo because he always wanted to look at his very best. After a long day of working on his invention the destabilizer, Thomas gets tired and decides to head to bed for the night. The destabilizer was supposed to be an electronic coil with enough energy to rip a hole into alternate realities and timelines. While Thomas is asleep, a baseball comes flying into the garage window where Thomas works. It came from his neighbor’s kids playing outside. The only problem is that the baseball hit the destabilizer, causing it to activate. Suddenly, there is a bright flash of blue light.

Thomas wakes up inside of a dark box. After feeling around, he realizes that he is in a coffin. After hours of screaming for help, he realizes that he is on his own. Then, Thomas tries to calm himself and figure out more information about his situation. He pushes on the lid of the coffin and it opens about an eighth of an inch. As Thomas opens the lid, soil begins to pour into his coffin. He stops pushing on it as that may have quickly seal his fate. Thomas thinks for a minute, knowing quite well that the oxygen inside the coffin must be running low. He realizes that he is certainly buried, but he knows he must have been buried recently because the soil was so loose. Thomas examines around him for something to use, and he finds a metal pin inside his lapel flower. Furthermore, he feels that the coffin is made from pine. When he was a boy, he used to used to carve pine. Thomas begins to dig at the wood above his head. He gathers small amounts of dirt and then pushes it to the bottom of the casket. Once Thomas breaks through the surface of the casket, only a small amount of dirt flows down onto his face. Once he clears the dirt out of his way, he sees not only dirt, but a yellow glow. This didn’t make sense because if Thomas was fully buried, he should have had at least another 5 feet before he reached the surface. Thomas decides to take a risk and push the casket lid entirely open with all his might. Dirt funnels in at a rapid rate, but then suddenly stops. Thomas realizes that he is only buried about a foot below the top of the lid, so he pushes through. As Thomas opens the lid, he sees the yellow light from before. It is not the sun like he had hoped. It is much worse.

When Thomas looks around, he finds that he is no longer on the earth that he once knew—at least not how he left it. He sees a yellow-orange haze filled the sky with no sun nor moon in sight. With this, he sees only crumbled buildings and a frozen lake in the distance. Thomas stands up and spins around for any sign of humans or life of any kind. Once he steps away from the casket, it begins to glow blue and vibrate. Suddenly, it spins into a 3-foot-tall cyclone before zapping into a blue electrified blast. *Zvwooom*. Thomas gets thrown several feet from the blast and lands next to a beachball. Thomas is confused beyond belief and begins to stammer and stutter a madman’s ramblings. Since he is an engineer, his whole mind is based around logic. Now, Thomas finds himself in a place without reason and most certainly without any logic. Thomas collapses, and his ramblings begin to control him. Just as Thomas is slipping into the dark clutches of madness, he sees something familiar. It is his destabilizer, and there seems to be some char on the outer ring as if it has been activated. In a fit of rage, he realizes that this is all his fault, and throws the machine on the ground. The machine whips and whirs, spinning dirt around it. Thomas realizes that not only the machine works, but it is the reason for these blue
electrified cyclones. Thomas watches as the dirt spins faster and faster until a portal appears on the ground at his feet. Thomas decides that wherever this would take him it couldn’t be much worse that the ruin his was in currently. Without another thought, he plunges into the blue void. Thomas looks around inside of this electrified tube he is now in and sees the most beautiful colors. These colors are reflecting the different shades of the irises of his eyes. There are different shades of blue, green, and yellow. He then feels an odd sensation as his body seems to turn into individual atoms. Before Thomas has the chance to scream, he turns into a cloud of dust. Thomas then sees a bright light and a flash. In a single instant, Thomas is reassembled into his normal body and shot out of the portal straight into a gravestone. Thomas is knocked out cold due to the impact. Next to his limp body is a gravestone labeled “Here lies Thomas Fredrick, our ever-loved ruler of all.”

Thomas awakes with a throbbing headache, and some double vision. Even with the double vision, he can read his own name on a gravestone. He looks around and sees a billboard advertising a company with his face on it. Thomas asks, “Do I own this?” Thomas read further.

The sign says, “Bird Enterprises, obey or perish!” The sign seemed old but there was a date: 10-05-3090. Thomas begins to weep. It seems like he had been sent into his future where he is not only dead but is also a crazy dictator. Thomas’s sobbing grew louder. The success of his invention has created a way to travel through time and space, but at a terrible cost. “If only I am able to control it in some way and share it with the world,” Thomas thought. Thomas is stuck here, in a world he has never known, and he cries, “I wish I never made this stupid machine!”

Suddenly, with a blast of blue electricity, the machine powers on again. This time, the portal is bigger than ever before. The machine sucks Thomas into it. It doesn’t stop there, however. The machine continues to suck in the entire city before disappearing into a bright flash of light. Thomas jolts awake. This time, he is in his bed in his house. With the dream still vivid in his mind, rushes to his workbench. This time, Thomas was determined to make the machine the right way.
“Passing Bye” by Leah Kraniak
For all that passes
And all that comes.
I will hold dear the story of us.
Though time has evolved
And memories will fade,
Our lives will be documented page by page.
When days filter by
And years conclude,
My heart will keep all of me and you.

Laura & Dad
Christian Stappert
Digital Photograph
“What We’re Taught” by Madison Quinn

I was young when everything first started. I was just a child when I was taught things about womanhood.

I was eight. I was in elementary school. My teacher had asked for “strong boys” to move things around. I volunteered. I was so excited to help and be a part of something. I jumped out of my seat to raise my hand as high as it could go, trying to out-shadow the boys that she had asked for. I wanted to show her that I, a girl, can help too. The teacher looked at me, giggled, and then just plain out ignored me. She proceeded by picking out my male classmates to move things. What does this teach young women?

I was twelve. I was in seventh grade. I had transferred to catholic school after my first semester at public school. One of my first days there, it was a “NUT” day. This stands for “No Uniform Today.” I could pick whatever I wanted to wear because I didn’t have to wear the uncomfortable uniform. I wore one of my favorite outfits at the time. It was a black and white horizontal striped long-sleeved shirt with black high waisted pants that were missing a button. I would tuck the shirt into the pants because I thought it looked really cool that way. I was walking with my teacher to the mass when she looked at my outfit. My teacher told me that I can’t wear something like this again. If I did, I would get in trouble and be “written up.” I was so confused on why I couldn’t wear this: it was a long-sleeved shirt and pants. No skin was showing at all. I asked her why, and she laughed in my face. She said, “You can’t have your butt showing. It must be covered up. Otherwise, the boys will go crazy.” I was twelve, and I didn’t even know boys did that. After that, I was always insecure about wearing anything that accentuates the curves of my hips or the arch of my back like those pants did. I’m too afraid men will look at me like I’m their prey. She told me I must dress according to what’s more convenient for men. What does this teach young women?

I was freshly sixteen. I was a junior in high school. I had just gotten my first job. It was at a popular fast-food place. I was so excited. The first time it happened, I was putting food into bags. I had looked up in the kitchen, and he was staring at me. He looked me up and down, and then he went back to work. This happened a lot. All I could think about was, “What was he thinking?” I was scared I was getting looked at like prey in my fast-food uniform. I had just learned that he had a fiancé and a kid. Another time, I was walking into the back to grab cups to stock up in the front. He asked me if I wanted to go “make-out” with him in the back. Him and his buddies in the kitchen laughed, but I could tell that by the way he looked at me that it wasn’t a joke. He knew he could control me by fear. It got worse. Once again, I was packing food into bags. He had to get behind me and to the back. To get behind me, he grabbed my waist with both hands, pulled me closer to him, and proceeded to rub up against me. I was paralyzed, and I didn’t know what to do. I just let him do it and didn’t say anything. I knew I couldn't let him do this to me anymore, and I didn’t want him to do it to anyone else. A month later I finally worked up the courage to confront him. I said his name and remarked, “Do you love your fiancé? Do you love your kid?” He proceeded to say, “Yes.” Then I asked, “Then why do you act this way towards me?” Everyone laughed but me and him. He knew I was serious. I looked him dead in the eye and watched him lie to me and say that he had been joking all along. Nobody believed me that he was doing these things to me. When nobody believes a woman, what does that teach her?
I know that I’m not the only woman who has had experiences like this. What did they teach you? Did they teach you to conform to what society says about women? Did they teach you to dress in fear of men? Did they teach you to silence yourself in fear? Not me.

When my teacher didn’t let me move things, I kept trying until she let me. I showed her that I’m not a weak, fragile woman that society says we all are. I’m strong and powerful. When my other teacher had told me that I had to dress in fear of men, I did for a while. But now, I don’t dress for anyone but myself. I am confident in what I wear and who I am. When my co-worker harassed me, I showed him that I’m not soft and insubstantial. I showed him that I am unsilenceable. This is why I am, and always will be a feminist. I am strong. I am powerful. I am confident. I am unsilenceable.

_Echo_

Kayla Wenzel
Digital Art
“Book” by Benjamin Guinn

LAND Contest, Local Winner – 1st place, Poetry

I saw your bluebird this morning, Chuck. I let him out for some air
And he sang the saddest song.
I think he misses you, I know
I do. We sat down in front of
The screen and thought of you;
Letting sighs pass like clouds over
The face of Ankhenaten’s dog,
And the weight of Invictus on
My tired-ass soldier’s soul
Bear down on the keys;
Sharing the cracks in
The sidewalk as I lay
At eye level in the
Gutter, Chuck. I wish
I could have known
You better. We could
Lie here together on
The page. I’d use
The toilet in a shitty
Bar after you, and I’d
Let you hold my wallet
While I puke, and I’d
Laugh at your misogyny,
And you can drive
My car drunk,
And sing off-key
Songs from your
Youth, as if
I would
Know them,
As if
You were
Ever young,
And I’ll laugh at you
And with you, at your
Hundred-dollar whores
And betting at the track,
And the thought of you
In a postal uniform still
Makes me smile, and I
Wish you could see this
Bluebird, I think he might
Be mine, not yours, and I
Might name him one day.
For now, back in the cage,
My finely feathered friend,
And rest assured, we’ll talk
Again soon. I can’t live without
You.
And I think
I’m finally
Starting
To see
The
Sun.

Untitled, Anna Leblanc, Digital Art
“After Math” by Grace Krania

LAND Contest, Local Winner – 2nd place, Fiction

In a few rare cases, one plus one equals one. Although I’m taking a college level math course, I had to learn that elsewhere. Like when two people hold hands and suddenly it’s one intertwined mass of hand. I don’t understand most math. You go through this complex step-by-step formula only to come out with something so simple, so natural, and you can’t even explain how you got there. I can’t explain how I’m gazing at the pretty stones in the grass with thoughts of you whirling around in my head. I don’t know how fast the dew forms on them if it’s thirty-four degrees Fahrenheit and increasing in the sunlight. You’re much better at math, but you never let me say that out loud. You don’t like to be called out as special at anything. But that’s the aftermath of everything you do—people just can’t help but say it. You always do everything perfectly in my eyes. When we started hanging out, it was just studying after math class. You helped me with my order of operations and just about followed the order of hearts falling in love perfectly from there. I still don’t know how to explain that.

It was just over a year ago when we met. My first day of math class, a Monday, and I was shaking so bad it hurt my backbone. Worse yet, I had to pick my own seating with a quickly filling room. It was so open, leaving me to feel vulnerable, as if anyone could look right through me and see how stupid I was. My hands sweated, my socks damp too. By no means was it the way I wanted to meet you, but if you noticed you didn’t say a word. When you sat next to me, you extended a hand as if we’d been old acquaintances just catching up. You could say I didn’t expect it. We were made partners on all of our assignments because we were paired at the same table. Most of us found math partners that way. Although some people would switch seats just for the fun of confusing our instructor. He would laugh every time. We did too. It made things easier when we started with a laugh.

Something else easy was how you just flowed through your papers. I got lost every time. Eventually you just started going through them with me and we saved a lot of time. More than a few times, I told you I was sorry for always needing help. You understood. Actually, you used to be the same way and I was surprised to hear it. You failed this course once before, even repeated a year in high school. That’s something to be proud of, because if it were me, I might’ve given up on ever going to college. Turns out, we’re not too different after all. And it’s not like I had nothing to offer, because you always needed the favor returned in English. To this day, I still wonder how you read your own handwriting. That’s not even considering the misspells. It took me weeks to figure out why you wrote random 8’s where S’s should be because I didn’t want you to feel ashamed of yourself. Call it silly if you like. I wanted to help you succeed in other areas and that meant keeping my big mouth shut.

After a few weeks, we were talking on social media. Between keeping it class-orientated and never having enough time, there was no room for friendship while on campus. Busy schedules got in the way too. You asked first. I remember it clearly, because not many people cared how to spell my name. They barely asked how to pronounce it correctly. That still drives me crazy. How hard is it to break up a word in sections? I guess it was pretty hard though. You had to ask. You’re not bad at reading at all, but you did have to ask. I played it cool at first when
we talked. Sure, I liked you as a friend. No, I wasn’t going to just come out and ask you if you were seeing anyone. It might have slipped out on purpose that I’d yet to go on a date, hold hands, or even kiss someone. That’s when our feelings really started to add up. We were always so open and honest that we found nothing too awkward to talk about that we couldn’t laugh off afterward. I like that about you. You’re not afraid to dig deep into your past and discover what you really feel inside. No, you never had problems expressing yourself. Didn’t have many problems at all. That’s something that hasn’t changed. The only difference now is that I don’t feel so flawed myself. Love does that. We share our burdens. Like stones, they weighed us down, but together we can make it through anything. Kind of like water if you think about it. The dew on the grass leaks down into the soil around the stones. It’s a precious thing to feel truly loved and to truly love someone in return. There’s no other feeling that can compare to it. Not the sunshine as it flickers through the gray clouds of November, nor the profound openness heard in the wind like some kind of mountain breeze that goes on forever. Being in love is like being as bubbly and excited as a stream, anxious as a buffeting wind, but as light as the leaves blowing and warm as the sun on a summer’s day. Everything is tranquil. But it feels rather cold right now. The weather doesn’t help the situation. I remember there being days like this last fall when we went for walks after math.

After math, we each had a half hour. Granted, it wasn’t much, but any amount of time with you was worth it. You wanted every second of my free time and I was happy to give it. We walked along the campus flowerbeds and down every walkway, long after the flowers faded and leaves covered up the lawn, hiding what remained of the green summer. We were dreaming about Thanksgiving break and spending some more time together. Unfortunately, when I called my family, they weren’t excited to hear I was dating. They’re traditional and thought we should be friends for much longer. Broken up, somehow, I was still comforted to know you were there. We kept it quiet. Pretended to take it slow but found that love didn’t work out that way. Every lunch became something we did together. Sometimes we’d fall asleep in each other’s dorms while working on math or English, then wake up in the morning and rush out the door, already going to be late. Love messed with our sleep cycles. I slept more, you slept less. It was opposite to what was normal of us. We dreamed more too. Stupid dreams, but always about the two of us together. For me, I dreamed about the aftermath of hanging out rather than studying for upcoming exams. I’d wake up thinking they were real, and I’d failed entire courses despite having good grades beforehand. Gosh, I never want to have those dreams again. You were there to remind me what day it was every time. My saving grace.

We grew together. We fell too hard, too fast, but it was all okay. Eventually, I just knew we’d end up married. It’s a weird concept but true. You just know sometimes that someone is in your life for more than just a short time. Even though love is crazy at first and biology says our hormones are completely messed up, the feeling never went away. It felt natural, or maybe it was just right for us. Neither one of us felt like it before. We were in love. That’s why it was no surprise when a year after meeting you asked me to marry you. I’m so glad I didn’t go into shock and hesitate. I really do love you. I know you love me. We’re good… We are good… We…”

No one understands why I just stare at these stones as if something good will jump out of them. They’re not Easter eggs. There’s something so cold about them despite their beauty. It’s frightening. It was frightening to feel lost, alone, worse than I’d ever felt before. No one should
ever have to be depressed like that. Depressed like November came up in July and the snow fell. Snowfall and wind like a mountain landscape. It just kept piling up. And me, ever trying to be the best I could be on the surface, didn’t have a way to cope. I thought I had a way to cope with my troubles in long walks after math class. Turns out, the aftermath was far more harmful for my heart. No one understood the aftermath like I did; the worn out and pained feeling. You were the only one who did. Now I’m alone. I just feel abandoned. Guilty, without having done anything wrong. Everyone tells me to grow up. He was a friend, nothing more. You saw each other, but that didn’t mean giving up on college and taking time off your job.

I take a seat on a bench and stare into my reflection on the marble. Sometimes sunlight flickers across it and I have to look away before it hurts my eyes. I rub my cold hands together in an effort to stay warm. I just wish you were here. It’s been long enough to get my life back on track. Still, I don’t know how to feel anymore. For the longest time, all there was was this numbness. I couldn’t tell if I was sad, mad, or both. Then it became both, depending on the day. I couldn’t stare at your name for the longest time. As I finish yet another math course, coming here to see you as soon as class lets out, it brings me comfort to read it over and over again. I almost had your last name. No one knows that. We never got the chance to tell them. I just read your name over and over and think about how we were going to tell them, but you never showed up at my house to take me to dinner with our parents. Between the ice and the speed of the other vehicle, spilling over the embankment, there was no time to react. At least that’s what the police said to comfort me.

I can read the dates clear as day. Born on one. Died on the next. I don’t know how to explain it, but it feels like you’re still here. It feels like even though we are two, divided by heaven and earth, we are still one. One plus one equals two, except when you’re in love. Two hands holding each other become one. Two last names should’ve become one. It will always be my greatest achievement to have shaken your hand on that first day of class, sweating and shaking and all. You are the one thing I will never regret. I might be the only one who ever understands this feeling, but I know I wasn’t the only one who did. You understood math better than I did. You knew what it was like. We don’t have to justify that to anyone. And even now as I have to go, I feel your presence and your understanding like before. But I’ll see you again soon. I’ll stop by after math, my thoughts of you to keep us both warm. We’ll pretend for a little longer that we’ve got nothing better waiting for us, that we’ll wake up with more time.

“Untitled” by Karen Smearman
I held you close even though you were already gone.
Just a cold shell.
Trying to get words through the tears
Prepared for years, but it hurt like hell.

I know you’re not coming back.
20 years wasn’t enough.
Without you the light fades to black.
Everything is different now, I just wish I could go back.
Watched you slowly fade away, 
getting worse and worse every day. 
I hear your voice in my head, 
so many things I wish I could have said.

Take me back.
Playing baseball in the backyard, 
Father and son. 
Never knew it’d be this hard, 
so I’ll go sit 
in the cemetery where you lay. 
Hoping I build up the strength to say.

I know you’re not coming back, 
20 years wasn’t enough. 
Without you the light fades to black. 
Everything is different now, 
I just hope you’re proud.

*Waterfall*, Christian Stappert, Digital Photograph
As nightfall grew closer, Katie became weak. Glancing out the window, the sold sign blew back and forth in front of our new-old, abandoned house. Remembering a few nights back, she saw something. Something was missing. That night, like every night before, she cleans the silver. Suddenly, she glances over to find a knife missing. Thinking she dropped it somewhere, she frantically searches and searches, but it is nowhere to be found.

Shouting back, “The silv...”

“NO! I HAVEN’T SEEN IT,” he yells before she can finish her thought.

Assuming she just misplaced it, she turns off the light and heads to bed, tripping over boxes as she goes. She gazes at Mike. His eyes are as blue as the ocean, and his hair is as silky-yet rigid as the dark sand. Mike looks back at Katie. He glances at her wavy, beautiful brown hair and looks deep into her golden eyes. She starts remembering that day: the day they got their tattoo’s. He kept calling himself a “beast” for all the bad he had done, but all I could see was the “beauty” in him.

As she lays there, she can hear the faint whistling and see the crashing leaves. She feels the ever-growing comfort, the everlasting aroma, the crackling, and the warm glow of the fire that is coming from the mantle below. She hears the whistling of the wind that slide ever so slightly into the cracks and creases of the window with an insignificant crisp breath of air that follows on this ghastly night. Creak! Crack! Creak! Crack! The house seems empty. The doors stand open. Only the colorful leaves are brushing in from outside. A moment later, an ash that cracked from the warm fire began to fade into the cold, black night. She can feel herself growing frail as her breathes are getting stronger and more powerful than ever. Suddenly, she can hear the creaking and cracking of someone’s footsteps. The darkness overcame with an unpleasant scent that arose with it. The bitter smell of rotting fruit mixed unpleasantly with the smell of nail polish remover covering the whole room.

The overpowering scent of the flowers came from all sides of the room. It was bright, radiant, and traditional. She wore something as blue as the sky on a clear day. The shining of her shoes ricochet from the walls to the ceiling and back at her, making her feel as if she is in a dream. Her shoes look like a million little diamonds glowing like the sparkles that hit the water on a warm and beautiful day. Her long, silky dress covers the discoloration on her arms. As she slowly makes her way forward, all she can see is the big bright smile upon his face, and the delicate flower in his pocket. She sees his blue eyes. They are blue like the ocean on a beautiful, bright day. She can feel his sweaty palms, see his “beast” tattoo, and hear the nervousness in his voice. Yet, all she could do was smile because he was hers, and she was his. As he utters his words, and she utters hers, they are one.

SMACK! The door slammed shut as the shadow grew closer. She blinks and the shadow is gone like it had vanished into thin air. This could only mean one thing. Her voice comes out-loud like in a piercing horror show where the woman yells so loud that it breaks fine glass with every screech. She can feel her body trembling, her knees knocking, and an emptiness in the pit of her stomach. She feels like something terrible is going to happen, so she screams again!


She pauses. She can hear the stuttering of his footsteps coming from their bedroom with every creak and every crack they make. Flinging on each light as he gets closer. Breathing heavily and barely getting out his words, Mike asks with concern, “What happened?”


“Can you define the person? What do you mean you sa...”
“I mean I think I saw someone,” she proclaims! “It was dark.”
“I am going to get some sleep,” says Mike. “You should also.”
She turns off every light with slight hesitation. Turning down the lights and shutting the doors behind, she went feeling a bit agitated. It is a brisk and cool morning. The trees are pretty, and the hot chocolate is on. She starts cooking. The aroma in the room smells like a sweet everlasting candy. Confectioning them, she tries to make them look perfect!

Bang! Her eyes fly open, she grows tense, and her bones feel stiff as if there is a piece of a flat board. Feeling as if she moves, then she will shatter in the weight of a million tiny pieces. These pieces would be hard to pick up, and she would need to be reconstructed. She became numb. She feels numb to the feeling that something was about to happen, and she can’t help but feel a deep, dark feeling in the pit of her stomach.

As she proceeds around the corner, she can see the flickering of a light glimmering below. She moves towards the twinkling of the light to find him. He looks as dark as the night, blended in with the deep, dark cabinets that lay next to him. He looks at her as she looks at him. Her heart is racing even more than ever before. It is racing like she is in a never-ending racing tournament, or that she is in front of a million people looking at her, staring into her soul. You can see with a little glim of light, the blue eyes. The eyes are like the ocean on a beautiful bright day. The light grows brighter, and she can see the Beast tattoo on his wrist. She looks down at hers as he holds up the knife.

“3-0-4" by Grace Kraniak
Mother runs
Baby runs
Tryin’ to keep up
On four hooves that shake
On four legs that yet wobble
Over green hills with clover
Moist with the rain
A chilled breeze blows
It waves the pickers and thistles
That grow in big patches
Around rocks gray and jagged
Grown over with moss
Warm with summer sun
Mother hides baby
‘til light fades
But see I have followed
The swamp grass cannot hide them
But over yonder the grass is short
The trees lean like death
Their bark stripped to silver tones
Standing low in the valley
They cannot hide what was hidden by hills
I have come too close to not now see
The pale branches piled
But see not them as branches but bones
See they are white
Rain and flies have cleaned them
Animals have rearranged them
A skull sits facing north
To ponds full of life, where one should’ve seen from an old fishing spot to help
A mother lay dead
A baby lay dead
Exiting this world for the next
While others still run and hide, full of life
The plight of a farmer
Tears never caught
Pain never seen
Like what hides beneath the swamp grass
A named tag that sits beside the mother’s skull
3 – 0 – 4
There is no name for the body of the calf
There is no excuse for bones nor tears.
When I was in seventh grade, I decided to go for a walk through a little neighborhood called Frei Drive located about five minutes from my house. It was a rather cool, late summer day with the clouds dancing loosely above my head. Down the hill in the backyards of the houses, I could see the Menominee river cutting graciously through the land like a smooth silver snake. In front of me lay a slightly broken up road with a few potholes scattered about. I continued down the road past a little park consisting of a big blue swing set and a red and yellow merry-go-round. In every yard, the grass was cut neatly, and the flower beds were perfectly weeded. Spread periodically throughout the neighborhood were little square gardens with vegetables growing in perfect health. Some were on my left in the yards of the houses, and some were to my right in the woods. Wide gravel paths connected the gardens in the woods to one another. The perfect little neighborhood. Little did I know that someone living in the neighborhood would completely change my perspective on life.

One house caught my eye. It was painted dark brown, and it had a freshly paved driveway shaped like a teardrop. It looped down from the edge of the road, to the edge of the garage, and back out to the road. In the middle of the loop grew two apple trees. One seemed smaller and younger, while the second was older and wiser. I did not realize that I had stopped to admire the house until I heard the quiet buzz of a small engine. Suddenly, three golden doodles whipped their way from behind the edge of the house moving full speed at me. I knew better than to run from them, so I froze in fear. When they reached me, they came up and started sniffing me all over.
“Hold on guys!” yelled an unfamiliar voice. The call came from the same direction the dogs had come from. Emerging from around the corner, an older man riding a golf cart approached from the side yard. He was wearing a white striped shirt, a pair of light khakis, and a pair of rectangular glasses. His white hair was cut short and neatly combed down to reveal a thin section of hair on the top of his head. He called the dogs back over to him, and they obeyed his command. Next, he waved his hand towards me signaling that he wanted me to come over as well. He stopped the golf cart in front of the wiser tree and waited for me to approach him. Despite my family always telling me to not talk to strangers, his presence exuded a warm, family-like feeling that persuaded me to ignore my initial response to walk away. After all, he had just saved me from the golden doodles.

“Why, hello young lady,” he remarked. He smiled and nodded in my direction. “You must be Mark’s littlest one.” I gave a shy nod. My family had moved to the area before I was born because my dad was asked to serve as a priest at the local Orthodox church. It was normal for random people to recognize me because I looked very similar to my older siblings. “Why don’t you let me give you a tour of my gardens. I’ll even let you pick some vegetables to bring back home.” His offer seemed genuine, so I climbed aboard the golf cart and began my tour. He took me past the fenced-off gardens scattered throughout the neighborhood. Each one of the little gardens were ones he had put in himself. Some of them were in his back yard, but most of them were in his neighbor’s yards and in the woods. As we explored the neighborhood, I wondered why he had the authority to place gardens wherever he pleased. He showed me just about every type of plant he had proudly grown. All my probing questions were answered emphatically, whether it was the name of the plant, how it grew best, or what kind of maintenance the plant required. We then drove past his seventy-five-year-old tractor, which he was clearly very fond of. Finally, we arrived at his largest garden, which was placed along the edge of the river in his back yard. I assumed he must have given this tour dozens of times because his words slipped out of his mouth with such fluency and confidence, almost like he had practiced the script with every ounce of his spare time. Throughout the entire tour, a sense of peace and calmness radiated from him and spread to me; any nerves I had previously felt disappeared. When I was in his presence, I felt welcomed into the neighborhood as if I had lived there my whole life.

“Why don’t you go out and pick a few vegetables for yourself,” he suggested. I climbed out of the cart, unlatched the garden gate, and chose a few ripe tomatoes. “Great choices! Why don’t I take you on back home now?” I nodded once again and jumped back into the cart. He drove me all the way home. Once we arrived, I thanked him for the tour and told him I would have to visit him again. “Oh, you better be back young lady! I’ll be expecting you.”

I walked into my house with fresh, perfectly ripe tomatoes cradled in my arms. My mother asked where I had been. At the end of my explanation, I sheepishly mentioned that I did not recognize my tour guide. My mother smiled softly and told me who he was. His name was Dale Frei, and he lived in that neighborhood with two of his daughters who lived a few houses down. The neighborhood was named after him—Frei Drive—and he had several little gardens set up throughout the neighborhood for his family in the area. His other three daughters lived out of town. He and his wife attended our church before his wife passed away and his mobility decreased with old age. Eventually, he decided to start coming to church again for his wife’s annual memorial. I had never noticed him in church before, but after learning this information, I
felt obligated to see him regularly. Besides, I had promised him I would come back to visit him soon.

A week later and I decided to keep that promise. He said he thought I had forgotten about him. I assured him that I was simply busy with other summer activities and realized that he was simply teasing me. That time, he gave me a bushel of fresh apples. His only request was that I made him some fresh apple cobbler for his ice cream. The next day, I fulfilled his request. This pattern continued for the rest of the summer, and every time I arrived, he gave me a hard time for not having visited him sooner. The rest of the year was filled with delicious fresh fruits, vegetables, and conversations about life. I received wonderful advice about not only growing plants but for living a joyful life. He would tell me about his loving wife and how much he missed her; however, he would also reassure me that it was alright because each day brought him one day closer to seeing her once more. He took every day as a blessing and spent his time doing what made him happy: gardening. Once school came around, I forgot about my visitations and I did not take the time to visit him until the next summer. Occasionally, I would see him in church with his daughters. He would see me out of the corner of his eye, signal for me to come over, and sarcastically complain that I had forgotten about him. Other than those small occurrences, summers were when I spent the most time with him. In return for his kindness, I spent some of my eighth-grade summer helping him plant vegetables. I learned more about both gardening and life that summer than I had learned before.

Over the years, my initial feeling of visiting out of obligation changed into a yearning for a grandparent figure in my life. I grew up with both sets of grandparents living far away from me, so I would be lucky to see them once a year. Dale’s kindness and welcoming personality made me start to think of him as my own grandfather. His confidence and peacefulness inspired me, so I wanted to spend more time with him to learn from him. My weekly visits eventually opened my heart and let him fill that role of a grandparent I was missing.

This past summer, I did not get the opportunity to visit with him at all. Every time I thought about it, I felt guilty because my summer was booked. A few months into the fall, I was informed that he was diagnosed with lung cancer and in a critical condition. I visited with him when my dad went over to his house to bring him communion. After spoiling me with a piece of his fresh apple pie and complaining that I had not visited him, he cleared his throat and told me something I will remember for the rest of my life.

“Do you know why I have lived for so long? It is all in your head. The reason I have made it this far is because I never give up mentally. That just drives my body to do the same.” These words stuck in my mind from that day forward.

In late February 2020, after a sudden decline in my health, I was sent down to Milwaukee and diagnosed with Leukemia. With the diagnosis came some of the hardest changes in my life. I had to adopt a completely new lifestyle away from my friends back at home. About a week into treatment, I received a letter addressed to me from Dale Frei. Tears came to my eyes when I opened the card.

“Dear Alexis, I am pleased that you are responding to treatment. We are both in a time that we have a lot of people praying for us. When you get home, I will make you an apple pie. Keep up the good work. All my love, your friend Dale.”
Now, I take life one day at a time. My spirit is driven by my inner voice to go on. His strength inspires me to push forward, even when it seems like everything is going wrong. I live life knowing that if I have people to love, I can make it through anything life throws at me. I knew I would get to see him again, even if that meant listening to him give me a hard time. I came home a month after I was initially diagnosed. As I had hoped, my final visit before he passed was filled with laughter, love, and freshly baked apple pie.

Lady Slipper
Garrett Van Nett
Graphite
Take a deep breath. Imagine holding a curved weapon in one hand and pulling back a waxed cord that its ammunition is nocked in to. The string barely touches your cheek, and your eyes focus on one thing, piercing the center of a target that is 30 yards away. For the past 3 years, this is a small part of the process of a sport I have come to love, and compete in, archery. I could not count the number of arrows that I drew and shot, but I know with every one of them has gotten me to where I am: “The top girl for Delta County” and a personal best of 286 points out of 300. However, even with a small amount of talent and a drive to succeed in a sport in the beginning, I started far from that personal best and had a lot of readjustments in between.

It began in the summer of 2017, when my dad took my siblings and I, to the Great Lakes Sports and Rec. to get off our devices and do something better with all our free time instead. I chose to go through the wooded archery range with a few others, and even though I had only picked up a bow once before then, I was starting to shoot just as well as a few other girls who started weeks before. At the end of the course, even the instructor mentioned I was a natural and should be using something more than a small plastic equipment. When I heard those words, a
dream begun, that I could really go somewhere with this sport. My expectations at first were beyond stars: I would get a bow and then become a world champion within the next decade. My hands became glued to my phone as I scoured the web for all the information I needed. Christmas morning arrived, and I awoke to a purple compound bow with a few light arrows, that had a contrasting cherry red design, from my parents sitting under our tall, evergreen pine tree. We got it all adjusted to my length, and an instructor gave me dozens of tips about aiming. From there I grabbed my new favorite thing and began practicing every chance I got.

At first, I was not the greatest by any means. Every shot was a low score, and several times during a single practice I would completely miss the target, and it would land deep in the wooden post surrounding it. It was humbling to say the least. Since I wanted to go more into the competition field over just hunting, in blue ink I wrote my full name on a sign-up sheet on a community events board for a small, local competition to meet others and gain exposure. However, it was rough. I scored just less than 200 points out of a possible total of 300 while the others were way above it with totals like 280 and 290. I do not know what I was originally expecting, but after the disappointment, the determination coursed through me, like a tidal wave ripping apart a shipyard, to get me where I dreamed of being. Therefore, I continued by making the 12-mile drive to the range in my midnight-colored van, spending hours shooting a multicolored target and walking down to retrieve my arrows a dozen times to practice without the pressure of competition. When the new year rolled around, I decided it was time to try again. This time in a 16-week girl’s specific league. Once a week I would dedicate a practice to drawing and aiming 5 individual arrows, for 12 rounds, and try to mark the cardstock scorecard with the best scores. I would practice on other days of the week too and after a few weeks, each total would end up being better than the other and my hope would double. That, however, came to a crashing halt. After a terrible week, I was back to low totals of 200s, and I did not know what to do. I wanted to still see improvement and be the best again, but I was stuck and crushed. I distinctly remember writing in a journal that “I am a fake for telling my friends I am like Katniss Everdeen, when I am clearly not even close to that good.” After sharing my difficulties with the same woman who set up my bow and has now become a mentor to me, she recommended that I reevaluate everything I knew and readjust my entire form.

I cleared my thoughts so my focus could be nothing but hearing the “thwack” of my arrows hitting the “x”. I adjusted my stance so my posture was straight, and I would not be sitting on my hip while I drew the bow, so it was almost parallel to my petite frame while I was perpendicular to the target. My right wrist moved to rest right in the crook behind the ear where I could feel the back of my earrings, and I loosened my left hand’s grip under the tip of the arrow rest. Due to the fact I am farsighted, I got fitted for special protective glasses that came with a tint that made everything vividly warm, and my bow sights clearer so I could be more aligned with the target. I controlled and steadied my breathing, inhaling while drawing my bow into place, and after a few short breathes, just like with a gun, I timed my sharp exhale with the release. Lastly, I ate more skittles. It was an accidental addition to my routine, but the sweet, fruity flavor of the rainbow packaged candy gave me a simple distraction from any outside commotion. Just like that I had built a better foundation for the sport and I drastically improved to a personal best of 268.
Almost a full moon later, the league ended, and all competitors were invited to a banquet where the organizers would announce the winners. The night of, I was like a mouse compared to my normal demeanor, and my leg trembled like a volcano about to erupt. My thoughts were a freeway, I had done my best, especially for the last 4 weeks, but would it be enough to be anywhere close to the top? The moment the winner’s name was spoken though, my stern look dropped, and was replaced by a smile as wide as a crescent moon. My inner monologue that was minutes ago reminding me that “I was not even good enough to be present at the banquet” was drowned out by applause. I did not come close to the top; I was at the top. I won first place.

While my victories in archery are some of my biggest accomplishments, I found I can use the lessons archery taught me and apply it to every area of my life such as when life breaks you down, take a step back, reevaluate, and attack it again, and again, no matter how many times it takes. Archery has made me an even stronger woman, both physically and mentally, who has more passion for success than before, and it is all because I took a shot and followed the arrow to end, despite the challenges.

"Untitled" by Hunter Lindeman
Your mind is beginning to be fried
Your legs have completely died
You can't keep your hands still
Yet you continue taking pills.
The drugs are all in your veins
It is making you go completely insane
Yet you can't stay away
For you enjoy the pain.
It has finally reached your brain
You have nothing left to gain
And All you do is complain
Yet you are the only person to blame.
Paid By the Word
Cheyanne LaMarch
Found Object
“My Allergic Reaction” by Daren Landis

June 23, 2008, started out as just an ordinary summer day. My dad, a construction worker for Bacco Construction Company, was home for the weekend. We were playing catch in our backyard with my brand new, bright yellow Nerf football that he had just bought for me on his ride home. The sun was shining bright, and I was having so much fun spending time with my dad. I was running routes like a wide receiver, pretending to be my favorite NFL player, Greg Jennings. My dad, who I was pretending was Aaron Rodgers, was playing quarterback and throwing me passes. One of his throws sailed over my head and into the woods. I stepped into the woods to retrieve the ball, and a few steps in, I knew that I had made a huge mistake.

I didn’t see or hear anything, but I was suddenly in a great deal of pain. Without knowing what had happened, I sprinted out of the woods and dove onto the freshly cut lawn. My dad came running over to see what was going on, and as he looked into the woods, he saw a bunch of hornets flying around in a large clump. I had stepped on an underground hornet’s nest and had been stung three times in my left arm, which was throbbing in pain. My dad told me that I was lucky that I made it out of the woods with only three stings. Still, the pain was bad enough for tears to run down my bright red cheeks. Together, we went inside so I could sit down and put ice on the bites.

Considering I was eight years old and spent a considerable amount of time outdoors, I had been stung by hornets a few times before. However, this time was different. About thirty minutes after coming inside, I was sitting on the couch watching SportsCenter when both of my armpits suddenly became itchy. It was an incredibly weird feeling, almost like I had ten mosquito bites under each arm. As I continued to scratch, the itch would not go away. My mom gave me some Benadryl in an effort to reduce the itching. After taking the Benadryl, the itch slowly began going away. However, as the itch began to go away, I began to get a puffy feeling in my lips. I went to the bathroom to look into the mirror, but they looked normal. I went out into the kitchen and asked my parents if they looked different to them. They saw the same thing that I saw in the mirror: my normal looking lips. Thankfully, my lips feeling swollen triggered my mom to have my dad drive me to the emergency room in Escanaba just to be on the safe side in case I was experiencing an allergic reaction.

My dad and I rushed into his burgundy Ford F-150 and started heading for Escanaba—a roughly twenty-minute drive from Rapid River. My dad, who is normally a slow driver, was driving much faster than he usually did. As we neared the Buck Inn, I felt my throat begin to swell. It was swelling slowly, but my ability to breathe was getting less and less. Of course, I began to panic and was freaking out in the front seat. My dad did his best to keep me calm as he sped through Escanaba to get to the emergency room. Looking back at it now, I can only imagine how difficult it was for my dad to keep calm as I sat in the front seat telling him that I could feel my throat swelling shut.

We pulled into OSF St. Francis Hospital in Escanaba and sprinted inside. By that point, I was crying terribly out of fear as I could hardly breathe. The five-minute wait to get signed in seemed like an eternity to me. The nurse came and got me, and she quickly rushed me down a hall and into a big room. The nurse was a middle-aged woman with curly blonde hair whom I had seen a few times before, as this was not my first trip to the emergency room. However, this
room was much different from any of the other doctor’s rooms that I had been in before. It had an uncomfortable, cold emptiness to it. It was a large space with just one bed and a big grey machine. The nurse had me lay on the cold bed, and she, as well as another nurse, immediately began attaching parts of a large machine to me so that they could monitor my breathing and heart rate. The machine had a bunch of tubes that attached to me. They were all over my stomach, chest, and arms. One of the nurses applied an epinephrine I.V. drip into my left arm. As I laid in this room, I was terrified for my life. The strong hospital smell was making me nauseous. Still, the only thing that was going through my mind was, “God don’t let me die.”

By this point, my throat was extremely swollen, and I could barely breathe. However, the epinephrine I.V. drip immediately started kicking in. Within a minute or two, my breathing was slowly getting better. During this time, my mom and sister arrived at the hospital and were escorted to my room. My mom was a nervous wreck. I had never seen her like that before. She kept coming in and out of my room, pacing the hallway of the hospital as she cried and prayed for my life. My dad, still doing his best to keep me calm, sat in a chair across from my bed to keep me company. My sister, who was a little too young to understand what was completely going on, paced the hallway with my mom trying to keep her calm.

There were about five or six doctors and nurses in my room taking care of me and monitoring my breathing and heart rate. Within a few short minutes, my breathing ability slowly began returning to normal. As it did, I experienced the greatest feeling of relief that I had ever felt in my entire life. One of the doctors explained what had happened to me and my parents. He told us that it was indeed an allergic reaction to the hornet’s stings. We were confused because I had been stung by hornets before without experiencing an allergic reaction. The doctor explained that it is a common occurrence, and I was officially diagnosed with an allergy to bumble bee, hornet, and wasp stings.

June 23, 2008, changed my life forever. Following the incident, I was just thankful to be alive. I was prescribed an epinephrine auto-injector, better known as an EpiPen. I have had to carry an EpiPen with me everywhere I go ever since my allergic reaction. My EpiPen is literally my lifeline. If I get stung by a bee, hornet, or wasp, I must inject it into my thigh immediately. If I do not have an EpiPen on me when I get stung, my throat may begin to swell shut again, and it would be another race to the emergency room. Thankfully, I have never been stung by a bee, hornet, or wasp since this incident. June 23, 2008 was the day that I nearly experienced death. Even though I have to carry an Epi-Pen with me, I will continue to do the outdoor activities that make life in the Upper Peninsula so much fun.
Wasp, Alyssa Alquist, Watercolor

Untitled, Garret Van Nett, Wire & Wood
“Love’s Iniquities” by Abigail Ollila
I take one stone and throw it in the eye of my lover
And there I say, “Take that for your lies,
For your treason and brutal cold stabs of my heart,
For you made me into this spiteful, bitter, broken woman,
You’ve tainted my spirit, brought pain to my dream,
Saw this loyal love and all its potential,
Took your fire and turned it on me.
You’ve made it your purpose to ash my faithful wings.
Well look what you’ve made,
Look at this godforsaken desolation before you,
This hateful beautiful despicable creature,
You’ve created this monstrous madness,
This malicious heart with its searing red eyes.
You revolt and erase the hopeful smile on this pretty face.
A tenfold and more,
May your eyes be cursed to never again hold the sight of my generous beauty
And may your hands burn,
To be forever denied the touch of my breast.

“Freedom and Independence” by Sheri Waite
My life had not lacked adventure. In my twenty years of marriage, I had honeymooned in the romantic Niagara Falls, swam with crocodiles in southwestern Mexico’s Pacific, and belly surfed the rough Atlantic waves of Cape Cod. These experiences, however grand, were shared with my ex-husband who called the shots. I went along with what he wanted. I was on his time. He chose the restaurants. He did the driving. Of course, he drove better than all those he labeled “Crackheads” and “Richard Craniums.” He left me crying in bathrooms at beautiful hotel rooms. When I decided to leave him, he barked at me, “You’ll never be able to take care of yourself.” Therefore, when I agreed to take my niece Julia on her spring break vacation, I was a mess of nerves and burning excitement. We would be two free, independent ladies traveling from Iron River, Michigan to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The driving of 1300 miles to our destination would be done by me. After depending on a man for over 20 years, this would be an entirely new experience for me… an experience of independence and freedom… an experience that would be the example I wished to leave for my niece.

It was Sunday, March 31, 2019, 2:30 pm. I scooped my anxiously awaiting, blond, blue-eyed copilot from my mother’s modest mobile home. After tossing her duffle bags into the trunk of my slate Chevy Impala and seeing she was buckled in, I draped a black army whistle around Julia’s neck. She rolled her 17-year-old baby blues and whined, “Aun-tiee.” Auntie replied, “You’re blond, light as a feather, and too easy to steal.” We would be stopping at multiple gas stations on our journey, and her looks put her at risk of being tossed into the back of a white van.
We rolled down I-41 through Wisconsin to the be-boppy rhythm of Julia’s playlist, leaving the crisp and snowy U.P. behind us. The same black and white cows in the rolling fields for miles on end grew hypnotizing. This trance was suddenly broken, however, as my heart fluttered at the “Illinois Welcomes You” sign. We spotted an oasis with a gas station and Starbucks near Chicago. Pumping my own gas, I glanced to see the black whistle still in place as Julia puffed her Marlboro at the edge of the parking lot. It was night now, so I was more cautious. There was no snow here, but the air was chilly enough to sport our new spring jackets as we strutted into Starbucks. We leisurely savored our creamy Vanilla Bean Lattes as we shared our exciting expectations. Julia had never ventured further than Chicago, and without the supervision of a man, neither had I. This was a new emotion for me. I was a feminine badass… a real badass. We did our check-ins, a selfie, and hopped back in the car for a long, dark ride through Indiana’s farmland, which even in daylight is painfully monotonous. The speed limit signs were mere suggestions this time of night, as we had I-65 mainly to ourselves. Coasting 80-90 miles per hour down the straight and gently rolling highway was fuel to my adrenaline. I wondered where Indiana kept her cops at night. I did not see one the whole stretch to Scottsburg.

We exited at Lafayette, Indiana to a Circle K for gas. Julia relieved her nicotine withdrawals just outside the orange and red entrance as I relieved myself in the ladies’ room. I searched for Julia inside the station so I could ask her what kind of drink she preferred. She was nowhere in sight. I went back and checked the lavatory. She was not in there. My pulse raced. I hollered outside for her. There was no answer. I zipped back inside and belted “Julia!” There was no Julia. Then, just before the tears began to spill from my eyes, out popped Julia through the door of another ladies’ room, beside the one I had used. What gas station has two ladies’ restrooms? I survived my first scare of the trip, and without a man. After a few calming breaths, I purchased our three C’s (Cokes, chips, and chocolates) and we raced the next few hours towards our Scottsburg hotel, near the Kentucky border.

At 3 am, the sweetest words I had ever heard were “Your destination is on the left.” I had brought us half-way. The celestial pillars of the Quality Inn greeted us with their southern charm. There was no time to enjoy our gracious, country-style room, as my stiffened bones were sucked deep into a downy king-sized bed. After a 3-hour snooze, we sprang, scurried to freshen up, and tossed our bags in the car. Perked up by the warm, earthy scent of spring mixed with a neighboring Waffle House, we dashed across the parking lot for my favorite pecan waffles. While getting my rich Waffle House coffee refill, Julia meandered outside for a draw of that first morning smoke mingled with her first taste of a misty southern morning. Full as a tick, I waddled slowly back to the Chevy to allow Julia a few extra minutes of indulgence. After readjusting my seat, I searched the radio and found a modern bluegrass station out of Louisville. The banjos banged as Julia swung herself into the car, and through her relaxed smile, said, “Myrtle Beach, here we come!” Sunroof opened, we basked like two lizards on a log in the Southern sunshine. We crossed the bridge into sweet Kentucky’s white-fenced horse farms and rolling bluegrass hills. As we approached Tennessee, I passed Julia a stick of Dentyne to alleviate the ear pressure accompanying the changes in altitude. We chomped to Kid Rock’s “Born Free” blaring over the peaks and through the valleys as we cruised through the ruggedly pristine Smoky Mountains. In every direction, the hillsides and cliffs were abundantly dripping with springtime waterfalls.
Nearing Asheville, North Carolina, our bellies rumbled at the sight of a Cracker Barrel sign, and we made this our pit stop. Hank Williams’ “Hey Good Lookin’” invited us in, and after being informed of a 15-minute wait, we browsed the attached store. Dainty dresses, Easter ornaments, goat milk lotions, jams, and wooden signs called my name. I wanted everything and decided on nothing. Soon seated by Dolly Parton’s clone, we ordered the fried chicken special, and chose fried okra, turnip greens, and fried apples for our sides. After receiving our juicy, crispy-fried heavenly morsels and washing them down with sweet tea and lemon, we tipped our high-haired waitress, used the “facilities,” and fueled up at a nearby Pilot station. A quick smoke for my co-pilot, and she was back to be-bopping in the passenger seat. By late afternoon, we had left the mountains behind us and entered chartreuse South Carolina, abloom with white dogwoods and a spectrum of yellows and magentas. Just over the border, an I-26 BMW “diva” on her cellphone dropped us to a snail’s pace, and I said, “Go ahead, Julia.” The one-finger flag was flown as we passed and regained our 80-mph groove. The rest of the journey, however, would have us sitting in at least three traffic jams along a 4-lane freeway. Apparently, half the nation chose to reach Myrtle Beach at the same time as we did.

Finally, in the middle of the night (about 1am), we reached the golden Holiday Inn at the Pavilion. Julia’s jaw dropped at the palmettos swaying and glistening above the streetlights of Ocean Boulevard. We fetched our bags and entered the fountainhead and flower-gardened foyer. After check-in, we scurried to our nautical-themed room on the third floor. We dropped our bags and slid open the glass door of our balcony which overlooked the sea. It was too dark to see the water, but the crashing of the waves assured us it was there. Despite the darkness, we slid into flip flops, and sprinted 50 feet through the cool, powdery sand. Inhaling the salty air, we allowed the chilly black and white Atlantic to swirl around our feet and flops. “Touch the water, Julia!” I hollered over the roaring wind. She bent down, dropped her hand in, and pulled up a white half-dollar sized seashell. “Look!” The corners of her mouth nearly reached her ears. We stood there until we shivered, and then stood there some more. There was nobody to tell us to get out of the cold. We had nobody to remind us that it is dark outside, and that we should get back in the hotel. We were living our moment at our own pace and on our own terms. It felt so liberating! We splashed, we froze, we giggled, we had fun…and this was just the beginning of a week of excitement that could fill a novel. We were two badasses on an adventure, learning freedom and independence.
Money grows on trees,
For you and for me if we please.
Money is, in fact, the leaves,
Swaying away with the breeze.
Sapling green to auburn glean,
Can there be a more beautiful sight
Than the scarlet maple scene
Radiating in daylight?
If wealth is to be power
Why does it make one so sour?

“Money Grows on Trees” by Katherine Erickson
Money does, in fact, grow on trees,
For you and for me if we please.
Money is, in fact, the leaves,
Swaying away with the breeze.
Sapling green to auburn glean,
Can there be a more beautiful sight
Than the scarlet maple scene
Radiating in daylight?
If wealth is to be power
Why does it make one so sour?
Yet the trees grow flowers
Which possess real powers.
With their beauty and poise,
Colors making such noise,
The trees are the capital,
Of a life so incredible.
To those who may see
The marvelous trees before me
Acknowledge wealth this free
Does, in fact, grow on the trees.

“Caramel Sauce and the Cool Kids Club” by Lisette LaFave

It seems like a thing with children that they like to show off their injuries. It’s like, the bigger and badder your ‘battle scars’ are, the more respect you can gain from your peers. Yeah, there’s the routine knee-scrapes and papercuts, but then there’s the real injuries--the ones that get you put in (the young eyes widen at the thought) the emergency room. Basically, if you didn’t at least sprain something as a child, you’re not even worth swapping juice boxes with. Although, getting stitches, well, I’ll give ya that one, because getting stitches is kinda cool. Not really, because it’s so common, but still--it puts you up for consideration into the cool kids club, where they have real Uncrustables instead of homemade PBJ (no offense, Ma--your jam-spreading abilities rival those of Mr. Smucker). Getting stitches is so common, in fact, that it seems like lots of people have similar stories to tell about them. Maybe it’s just a me thing, but it always seems like everyone’s got one person, be it themself, a family member, or a friend, who’s had stitches in the very tip of their chin.

Anyway, this is my personal story of admission into the cool kids club: my run-in with the sewing surgeon.

I was just starting the fifth grade, which I remember because I can vividly recall the laugh my teacher and I shared when he saw the black wiry goatee protruding from my jaw. But I’m gettin’ ahead of myself: So, yeah, I was nine years old--no, wait, I was ten, actually. At the time of the injury, I was at home brushing my teeth. And while I was walking around my room with my toothbrush, counting my dolls or my eyeing up the old Halloween candy in the corner or doing whatever it is ten-year-olds do, my dad walked in, and--

Well, to explain the rest of the story to you, I guess I gotta provide some backstory for you about my dad.

He and I have always gotten along well, mostly ‘cause we have similar senses of humor. But my mom, now she hasn’t always appreciated the stupid, offensive sarcasm that my dad and I chortle at. (And let’s be real here; Ma is probably better off. She at least knows how to handle herself in more professional, diplomatic sort of settings. Me, not so much.) So my dad and I have had this ongoing thing all through my childhood. It’s kinda sorta a joke. Basically, he says something crude or ridiculous, or fills me in one some dumb, borderline illegal thing he did
during childhood, and my mom yells ‘Todd! Don’t tell her things like that!’, because her hearing magically gets better when we’re discussing “inappropriate” stuff”.

So, on the night of my ‘incident’, my dad was, not surprisingly, teaching me another of his favorite dumb pop culture references. As I said, I was brushing my teeth and walking around in my PJs. My dad, who had been reminiscing about his old favorite shows (I think he’d seen a commercial for the Brady Bunch or something on TV), ducked his head into my room. Then, in traditional my-dad fashion, he said something, and I had no idea what it meant.

“Y’know the Curly Shuffle, Lizzy?”

I stopped, my toothbrush dangling from my mouth, and looked at his mischievous grin.

“What?” I said, blankly but eagerly.

“The cur-lee shu-full?” he enunciated.

Of course, I still had no idea. So, my dad started to demonstrate a motion similar to moonwalking, but faster and more vigorously--basically backwards running in place, I guess--so that his body was at a 70-degree angle with the floor instead of a 90. When I still didn’t seem to understand, he said,

“Curly Shuffle is a dance! Named after Curly from the Three Stooges!”

“The Three Stooges?” I laughed at the thought of such a ridiculous show.

“Todd!” (There, see? Told ya! That was my mother coming from downstairs where she had been making caramel sauce, immediately upon hearing the phrase ‘Three Stooges’ come out of my mouth.) “What are you teaching her now?”

Dad put on an exaggerated frown and widened his eyes in pretend fear as my mom walked down the hall.

“What about the Three Stooges?” she laughed. Apparently, this type of stupid humor was okay.

“The dance! The Curly Shuffle!”

She jokingly slapped my dad--“Todd LaFave! That ridiculous show is terrible for your brain!” --as he started to do the dance again. “I’m going back downstairs,” my mom chuckled., and she turned to attend to her caramel sauce.

“What?” I said, still confused. “I want to learn! Teach me!”

“Okay, okay,” my dad said, finally pausing from his ridiculous routine (I mean, it didn’t even look cool. In retrospect, what a waste of time!), “keep your feet there,” he said, pointing to two spots about hip-distance apart, “and just slide ‘em back!” A bit cautious (though, apparently, not cautious enough), I said, “Just slide ‘em back?” My dad nodded, but my mom (who had paused on the staircase to watch) said, “Oh, Lizzy, no! You’re going to hurt yourself!”

She had stopped laughing and now seemed genuinely concerned, even sticking her hand out as if reaching for my shoulder to stop me. Fortified by mother’s doubt, however, sassy ten-year-old Lizzy knew what she had to do. I ripped my toothbrush from my mouth, spattering little white drops of toothpaste all over the walls, and rudely shoved it into my mom’s outstretched palm. Ignoring both my parents’ objections, I furiously dragged my slipper sock-ed feet
backwards across the hardwood floor, gaining more speed by the second, until I could physically feel the static I was generating.

“There you go!” said my dad, starting to do the dance along with me. I believe my mom was visibly cringing, as if she knew what was about to happen. Then, of course, was when I wiped out. The grippy thing on my left slipper sock got stuck on the hardwood floor, but my right foot kept moving, so I was thrown off balance, and bam! I was heading for the floor. I managed to move the top of my head away from the wooden closet door nearby (and probably avoid a concussion, or a bad headache, at the very least) and I landed on my chin instead.

Ooh!” my parents winced together, coming to help me up.

“Are you oka--” my dad stopped when he saw all the blood dripping from my chin, right below my proud grin.

“Oh my God, Lizzy!” my mom said, covering her mouth. She looked frantically at my dad. “What should we--I mean, does she need to get--” at this point she sorta whispered, which I don’t really know why, because I was right there--“stitches?”

“I’m fine!” I objected, quickly heading to look in the bathroom mirror. “See, it’s just a little bit of blood!”

My mom looked skeptical; my dad was sheepish.

“Just hold this to it for a minute,” he said, giving me a dry, clean cloth, seemingly conjured out of thin air.

“Let me see,” said my mom. I pointed my chin toward her, and she breathed in sharply.

“Lizzy, you’re gonna need stitches,” she said.

I was going to object, but then my jaw actually started to hurt--something like a bad bruise. Also, the cloth I’d been holding for a couple minutes was already saturated with blood.

“Yeah, we’d better take you to the ER,” my dad said, still pretty embarrassed. Just then my brother came out of his room down the hall.

“What’s going on? I heard--oh,” He said, his eyes landing on the dark red cloth I was pulling away from my face.

“I guess we’re going to the hospital,” I told him, trying to make it clear to my teenage brother, already in the cool kid’s club just because of his age, that no, I did not need stitches, thank you very much--this ten-year-old could take care of herself! Heck, if I needed stitches, I could give ‘em to myself; I know how to sew, and I’ve pulled out a sliver or two in my day--how bad could it be?

Whatever. To the ER we went.

As we left the house, my mom frantically turned off the stove that was still cooking her pot of caramel, and then we rushed outside. The chilly October wind tugged at my hand-me-down Old Navy sweater. After making absolutely positively sure not to drip all over the cloth seats, I hopped in the van for a family trip to the emergency room.
When I got there, the doctor sewed me up good (seven stitches, I think, or five maybe) and sent us on our way. We ended the night with some apple slices dipped in my mom’s caramel sauce.

The next day at school, I proudly strutted in with the little black wires sticking out of my face. The stares and whispers from my classmates felt like my initiation into the cool kids club, and my wild, extravagant explanation of the stitches was a sacred ceremony.

Needless to say, none of my classmates were able to focus much that day, amid all my overblown recounting of the previous night’s incident. And in the fifth grade, it was enough to make you a celebrity, especially when you’re a part of the oldest grade at your lunch hour—I mean, people already respect you for that. I will admit, though, that after a few days, I wised up and started wearing a bandage on my jaw. Wouldn’t wanna embarrass anyone, y’know.

Looking back, of course, it wasn’t the stitches that made me a ‘cool kid’, nor was it the whispers and the stares that came my way whenever I walked by one of my ultra-nosy classmates. Nah, what really made me ‘cool’ back then was my willingness to try that stupid dance—my fearlessness, in short. That right there is lifelong, irrevocable admission to the cool kids club.

(Oh, yeah, forgot to mention--a few years later, I had to go to the ER for nine stitches in my finger (long story, one for another time), and the doctor was the same one who fixed up my chin! He still recognized me, too--‘Hey, look, it’s the girl who split her chin open dancing!’)
The first time I met her was on a warm, sunny day in the middle of July. I was a seventeen-year-old junior in high school at the time, and I was helping the Bayside Soccer Club take team photos for all of its summer recreational teams before my high school team began its practice. I was organizing the next team for its pictures when I turned around to see my boyfriend Colby walking across the field for practice. He had been my teammate for two years, so I was used to seeing him around the fields, but I noticed that this time, he was accompanied by a small stranger.

Colby introduced me to Nika, short for Veronika. She was nine years old, and she had long tan legs with the prettiest blonde hair that flowed down her back with just the slightest natural wave. Although it was obvious that she wasn’t from this country, she was probably one of the most outgoing kids I had ever met. I learned that Nika was in a program created for children who came from unfortunate backgrounds. For a couple weeks each summer, these children would be able to live with families across the globe who would care for them, in this case, my boyfriend’s family. These families would allow them to be kids again and show them the fun in life before they had to go back home and continue their responsibilities of taking care of their younger siblings, cooking, or cleaning. Ideas most people would think children are not mature enough for, but some children are forced to pick up adult responsibilities at a young age in order to survive. That was the case with Nika. Her family included herself, her five younger siblings and her mom who couldn’t truly afford all of the kids she had. I felt bad for Nika; I expected her to not be able to act like a kid with the way she was brought up. I would have expected her to be shy; not only did she not know the people around her, but she didn’t know a single word of English besides “yes” and “no.”

Nika came to America from Ukraine, a large country in Eastern Europe. Much like most parts of the world, there are places within these countries where people are barely getting by. Sadly, Nika is a part of that group of hard-off people. Her family struggles with money and as a result, Nika is forced to spend some time in a local orphanage just to get adequate care. The orphanage has a small school where Nika is able to attend class and be with other kids her age, but outside of the orphanage, she is forced to take on a motherly role for her younger siblings in her family despite the fact that she is merely a child. Because Nika has hardly felt what it’s like to be carefree and young, she was able to join the program and be able to come on amazing adventures to the U.S. for visits.

I introduced myself to her by passing a soccer ball to her feet as if to say, “Let’s play,” She recognized what I was doing right away, and she kicked the ball back to me as a big toothy grin spread across her face. We started to play around, and it seemed as though soccer was a universal language. At one point, I held the ball under my foot, and gave her a look that said, “Try to get it.” she came running at me, trying to get the ball away from me, but I kept it just far enough out of reach from her! We both ended up laughing so hard we didn’t care about the ball anymore, and our relationship only grew from there.

Mrs. Torvinen, my boyfriend’s mom, saw how well Nika and I hit it off that night at soccer, so she texted me a few days later to see if I would want to come and watch Nika for a
few hours while she went to work. I gladly took the offer, yet I had some doubts. I often work
with kids as a coach in the YMCA Youth Sports Department, but they all speak my language, so
I was a little nervous to be alone with Nika since I did not know a word of Russian, and she
didn’t know a word of English.

Despite my doubts, I was eager to make Nika’s day fun and exciting! Little did I know,
she would end up making mine just as unforgettable. I arrived at the Torvinens’s house around
11 a.m., so we had an hour to kill before lunch. I remember walking in and hearing, “Sara!” from
the stairs that led to their kitchen. Then I heard footsteps running down the hall to greet me at the
doors. It made me feel so good that she already knew my name and that she was so excited to see
me! She met me at the door, grabbed my hand, and led me into the basement where a pile of
multi-colored Monopoly money lay scattered across the carpeting. She sat me down and pointed
to the game. I felt so sad; I was looking at a game most people should know by heart, but I
wasn’t sure how to play it anymore. It had been ages since the last time I had touched a
Monopoly board! I looked at that big toothy grin again, ready to play. I looked at my watch
which only read 11:15 a.m. and I knew I couldn’t tell her no. I made up some easy rules that both
she and I could understand without any need for talking. It took a while for us to get the hang of
it. We probably should have just played charades at that point since we did more guessing of
what each person was talking about than we did playing, but she loved the game! I doubt it
would have still been considered Monopoly after all the fake rules, but it was a good way to fill
time before we were off to lunch.

Another word Nika had learned in her first few days in America was “chicken” She is a
tiny girl, but she can eat when she wants to! Her favorite American food, besides candy, ended
up being chicken. So, when I asked her what she wanted to eat, by pointing to my stomach and
then my mouth, of course her first response was chicken. I decided to take her to Culver’s
because Mrs. Torvinen had told me that Nika liked the chicken tenders there, along with
strawberry ice cream, which she just referred to as “pink.”

We arrived at the restaurant and Nika recognized it right away. Her face lit up, and she
looked at me to say, “chicken,” before we walked inside. While we waited in line, I tried to ask
Nika if she wanted French fries with her chicken. That didn’t go too well, she didn’t know what I
was saying, so we both ended up laughing at the struggle. Then I remembered the pink ice
cream. I asked her if she would like “pink,” she shook her head excitedly and she repeated the
word back to me. I was so relieved to have gotten her order in. It was a little more stressful than I
thought to try and ask someone questions in a language you have known all your life, yet that
person has no idea what each word means.

To my surprise, when we sat down with our food, we were able to have some
conversation. I strongly dislike awkward silence, so I tried to ask her questions about herself
while we ate. I only asked her questions that she could reply to using “yes” or “no” to make it
less hard to explain for either one of us. I asked her if she liked America, if she liked to play
sports, and if she liked to go to the beach since it was summertime. She said she liked America,
she did play sports, such as “futbol” as in soccer, which I was happy about because that’s my
favorite sport, so it allowed me to have something in common with her.
As we ate, I thought about what made the little town of Escanaba so beautiful. I wanted to show Nika a part of my home, something that distinguishes us from a lot of the world so that she could remember this place by something that she found unique or interesting. I decided to take her on a drive down by the lake in Ludington Park so that she could see the beautiful blue water that seemed to go on forever out into the unknown. The Great Lakes are Michigan’s symbol. They are huge, beautiful and give a home to many life forms. As we drove slowly through the park in my crusty, rusty minivan, I could see the awe in her face through my rearview mirror. She gasped at the sight of the beautiful water with the ducks and geese grazing along its edge. She thought it was just as beautiful as I did! I was so happy to be able to show her a part of where I come from.

When we finally made it back to the Torvinens’s house, Nika ran inside to tell Mrs. Torvinen about her day. I was sad to leave her, but I was happy for the memories we made, and I knew that there were more to be made with her. After that day, I wasn’t able to see her again before she left to go back to Ukraine. Nika was only allowed to stay for a little over a month, and although she likes to not worry about her home-life responsibilities while in America, her family will always be in Ukraine, and she couldn’t wait to see them all again, especially her mother. I don’t agree with the way her family is run back in Ukraine because personally, I believe a person should know how many children they can afford before they have any at all. I feel bad that Nika’s mother neglected to do this and as a result her children are missing out on their childhood, but it made me happy that Nika could care less what her home-life was like as long as she was with her family. Family is the most important thing to many people, and it looks like that is a universal concept as well as soccer. I missed her more than I thought I would. I started thinking of her as a little sister or cousin. We had a lot of fun together, and I only had a brother at home, so it was nice to have some girl time with her.

Nika came to visit twice more after that, once in the winter for Christmas, and again in the summer. The last time I saw her, she had just turned eleven years old and gained about five inches of height. I almost didn’t recognize her with the way she towered over me after just two short years. Each time she comes, our relationship grows a little more. She has learned a lot more English in her time here so it’s much easier to talk to her! Her new favorite thing when she comes to visit is to go to the store and stock up on fake nails to take back home to Ukraine. She is really into fashion, and she feels that cute nails make any outfit pop.

Although I don’t get to see her that often, Nika and I have a bond that doesn’t fade. I don’t have any way to keep in touch with her besides face to face, but each time we see each other, we just pick up where we left off. That takes a special kind of relationship, and I am so happy that I said yes to take her to lunch and start a friendship that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to replicate in my lifetime. She is my sister, just from a different family.

“Making Music” by Karlie Wagner

I sit down in my chair, placing the instrument case on the floor. I unclasp the small golden buckles of the case and carefully remove the sleek wooden cello that is mine, admiring its beautiful shape and design. I move my cello in front of me, holding the top of it in my left hand and resting the base of it against my knee. I assume my position: a straight back, feet on the
ground, and my shoulders, elbows, and hands ready to play the first note. The bow is angled, ready to move across the strings of my cello. In an instant, my hand flies across the strings and results in the most beautiful sound my ears have ever heard. The strings let out a melodic, vibrating noise, resonating within myself. My fingers move quickly at the top of this divine instrument. My movements create unique musical notes, and they blend together as a perfect melody. The anticipation builds within me as the notes become harsher, as if they are telling a story with an immense amount of passion. My body shakes and begins to sweat as the beautiful song comes to an end, leaving its listeners feeling as though they just witnessed a beautifully tragic story.

In reality, there is no audience. I am just playing my cello by myself in my third-floor apartment for nobody at all. That is, unless the mouse in the kitchen is listening to it. I have never played for anybody. I love my cello and the beautiful songs that I play on it. However, not many people think the same as I do. Not many people are interested in classical music anymore. People just want to turn on their radios and listen to artists like Justin Bieber or Taylor Swift. The real heroes in the musical industry are actually Beethoven and Mozart. They are the iconic leaders of classical music, and they will forever be my favorite artists. Nobody I know understands that though. Everyone is too quick to judge this style of music as “boring” or “meant to put you to sleep.” Little do they know, classical music is what shaped music into what it is today.

Instruments like the cello, flute, and piano are some of my favorites. They all create beautiful and divine sounds; some are higher pitched, some flow together more smoothly, and some I just find more exquisite. The cello is my favorite by far. I have known how to play it since the ripe age of five. It holds the most familiarity with me, and I honestly consider it to be my best friend. Nobody I know shares the same interests with me, which makes it very hard to have a friendship with anyone.

A knock at my apartment door brings me out of my thoughts. Who could it be, I think to myself. I only have visitors when my family comes from out of town. I carefully place my cello back into its case and close it before standing to open the door. I walk up to my door, smoothing out my clothes and wiping the sweat from when I was playing off of my forehead.

“Hello?” I call questioningly, wondering who is on the opposite side of my door.

“Hi!” a chirpy voice sounds, slightly muffled from the wooden door between us. I unlock the door and open it just a crack.

“Can I help you?” I inquire, locking eyes with a ginger haired girl who has dirt brown freckles littering her face.

“Was that you playing the cello?” this mysterious girl asks, smiling a crooked smile. This baffles me. How would she even know it was a cello? She wouldn’t know that unless she played herself. That, or she listens to a lot of classical music, I think to myself.

“Yes…” I reply as I push my chestnut brown hair off of my forehead, wondering why she knocked on my door to ask me this.

“I just wanted to say that the song you played was heart wrenchingly beautiful,” the freckled girl practically squeals. My jaw nearly hits the floor at her words. I am finding it very
coincidental that the moment I am thinking about how nobody enjoys the cello the way I do, a
girl knocks on my door to tell me how good the song was.

“Well… thank you,” I reply, not entirely sure what to say to her.

“You’re totally welcome,” she says, smiling even wider. “I just wanted to compliment
you. You sound very talented, and you must work very hard at your music.”

“Talented?” I almost scoff at her choice of words. Nobody has ever called me talented
before.

“You were really good. I haven’t heard anyone play that well before, especially just in
their apartment,” she replies.

I nervously scratch the back of my neck. I am not quite able to bring my icy blue eyes to
hers.

“Um... Would you like to come in?” I ask her, not really sure why. “I could play you an
even better song.”

“For sure!” she says. “I would love to hear another one!”
The ginger haired girl pushes past me and finds a seat on my couch. Maybe I can have a friend
after all.
Still life
Janeen Fulkerson
Acrylic

“My Nephew’s Drum” by Abigail Ollila
He walks now Never bothered by the cold
And I wonder how
He will ever grow old
Painted the sky blue
Turns me up on my toes
The way the weeds grew
In the face of our woes
And yet another one coming
To join in on the beat
And still he’ll be drumming
With the sound of his feet
“Thank Goodness I Covered the Couch” by LeeAnn Yates

“One more push. Come on Tasha, you can do this,” I said. Her eyes told me that she was very tired, as was I. It had been a long night of discomfort for the both of us. Neither of us had gotten much sleep. Our eyes were heavy and drooping. Our minds were foggy and yet filled with excitement at the same time.

Unfortunately, I cannot remember the date that I experienced my first birth. I do remember that it was in the Spring. The air was fresh with a gentle breeze. You could smell the blooming of the flowers in the air. Honeysuckle is such a sweet aroma. I anticipated the moment with bated breath.

I am getting ahead of myself though. Let me start this story on the evening prior. I was trying to relax when I noticed that Tasha appeared to be anxious. She would not relax and settle down for the evening. I asked her, “Baby girl (that was what I called her sometimes) are you all
right?” Not even a bark. She did not answer me, and she continued with her pacing: 25 steps down the hallway and 25 steps back. Her pacing continued forever. I could not take any more of her pacing, so I told her, “Come sit by me and I will rub your belly.” She did so and appeared to relax. Her muscles were not as tense as they were before. She closed her eyes for a short time and appeared to rest. Around 10:00 p.m. I announced that it was bedtime.

We both went into our sleeping quarters and attempted to go to sleep. That was not going to happen. Tasha was not having any of it. She started pacing again. I could hear her through the door. I had left it cracked open a touch. I attempted to ignore her and get some sleep, but she kept trying to get into my room to be with me. I acquiesced and opened the door. As she slowly entered the room, I told her, “Relax baby girl. Rest and get some sleep. My Tasha, I am tired and would really like to sleep.” She then climbed off my bed very gently. Believe it or not, Tasha then attempted to seek out a tight dark area to squeeze herself into. “My goodness my dear you are too pregnant to fit into that space. Your belly will pop,” I spoke to her in a soft voice. “Be still my baby and try to rest. What is the problem?” Still, my Tasha would not speak to me. I decided to try a different scenario. I unwillingly pushed my warm blankets aside and placed my feet on the cold, wood floor. Even in the springtime, I found the flooring to be cold. I shuffled us both to the living room. My thoughts were that maybe Tasha would relax again if we moved to a different room. I fixed up the sofa with pillows and blankets for the both of us and attempted to settle in. Tasha laid down by my feet. Throughout the evening, she was very restless. She would turn over, turn this way, wriggle and squiggle all night. She was on my feet between my legs resting on my stomach. The only person in the household to get any sleep was my husband and her father. We could hear him snoring from the bedroom that we had vacated hours before. He was doing it very loudly, I must say.

Then I heard it, buzz, buzz, buzz. His alarm was sounding the beginning of our day. Tasha and I exchanged tiresome glances at each other. “Well baby girl, I guess we had better get up and put our bedding away. No more rest for us.” Still, all she did was look at me with those sad brown puppy dog eyes that we have all seen. Not a single sound escaped her lips. By this time, I was beginning to get quite concerned. I started the morning coffee and attended to my morning routine. Tasha followed me throughout this whole process.

Finally, it was time for the person who was very intelligent, intuitive, and more experienced in these matters to exit the bedroom. As he did so, he noticed our disarray and exhausted faces. He asked, “How was your evening? Why do you two look so disheveled?” I explained the evening’s events. At that time, my husband clued me into why the evening might have been so distressing for Tasha. You see, Tasha was my beloved dog. We had gotten this little Siberian Husky breed when she was 8 weeks old. She spent the entire journey to her new home curled up in the sleeve of my coat. That was a very tense 2-hour ride for me. I did not want to be wet when I arrived at home. But during that time, Tasha and I built a bond that she did not share with anyone else. She was about to give birth to our first litter of puppies. I was to become a doggie grandma.

She then proceeded to jump up onto the couch and would not get down. I attempted to coax her every way I could think of. I offered her favorite toy. I prepared her some food. I even attempted to give her some of my eggs. This was one of her favorite treats. They were prepared
to perfection. The yolk was a deep orange color and it dripped from my toast as I raised it to my mouth. My bacon was crunchy and delicious. Tasha did not want any of it. Then, I had an idea. If that was where my precious baby wanted to have her puppies, I would make it work.

You see, we had just purchased a new mattress. It was very plush and oh so soft. I was so thankful that I had not thrown out the plastic covering that it had come in. I rushed to the bedroom and retrieved it quickly. I was quite concerned for the upholstery. I could not think of a way that the furniture would ever be able to be cleaned. By this time, Tasha had been in labor for quite a while. I gently lifted her off the sofa and placed her on a soft pillow. I then proceeded to place the plastic over my sofa. I was very careful to tuck it in well. I also took those big black leaf bags that everyone gets in the fall and taped them to the plastic cover. I was careful to cover the back and sides of the sofa. If Tasha was determined to have our puppies here, I was going to make she was comfortable and that my sofa was protected. I must have placed every towel in the house under and around her.

Tasha looked up at me with what I can only assume was gratitude when I placed her back onto the sofa. When the time came, she did not even whimper. I continued to talk and reassure her the entire time. I would describe what I was saying as useless blabber. I was so nervous and overwhelmed at this point. My concern for Tasha’s health and that of the puppies was foremost in my mind. Then it happened. Puppy one slid out of the birth canal with ease. I was astonished that my precious little dog was a mother. She began to attend to her baby as mothers are supposed to do. Tasha then settled herself back into her little corner of the couch. I could see puppy two was on its way. The top of the head was visible first, then followed by the body.

There was no time to wait though because puppy number three followed very closely behind. All of the beautiful puppies were delivered safely. Both Mommy and Grandma could relax a little. That moment when an internal life comes forth to see the world is incredible. The sight of a new life is so precious, be it animal or human. My beautiful Tasha had done a fantastic job.

The lesson I have taken from this experience has stayed with me to this day. Do not always go by what someone (human or animal) may be able to speak to you. Watch their actions also. It could be saying volumes that a spoken word cannot. Also, when your dog will not settle down you had better pay closer attention to her. Dogs are often more intuitive than we are.
As Naomi packaged her house away, ready to move into her assisted living apartment, she came across many photos. Naomi shed waterfalls of joyous tears, reflecting on her beautiful life. Recently widowed, 87-year-old Naomi had countless scrapbooks filled with colorful memories needing to be moved into her new apartment. Once relocated, she could constantly reflect on the lovely life she has been blessed with.

While rummaging through the photo albums, Naomi came across a black and white photo with a horrific tear down the middle. One side of the photo was nearly burnt. Naomi was taken aback by the people torn apart in the photo. It was her first love, Malachi, on one side of the dark paper. Naomi was on the other side. With a heavy heart, Naomi dwelled on the heartbreak Malachi had dumped upon her.
In a colorful flashback, Naomi smiled brightly into Malachi’s eyes as he gently knelt to the ground, revealing a ring. After four years together, the star-crossed lovers were finally becoming one. Naomi couldn’t help but smile as she remembered how delighted she was to be marrying her first love; however, a sorrowful stare swept across her face as she pondered the downfall of the engagement.

Malachi was charming. His bright-eyed smile and playful personality shined above the dark, menacing emotional and mental abuse he put Naomi through. She was blind, neglecting to see he was cheating on her with another woman. Saddened and heartbroken, Naomi seared the photo, burning her hand in the process the same way he had burnt a gaping hole in her heart.

A loud crash startled Naomi back to the present; her daughter had dropped one of the moving boxes filled with scrapbooks. Naomi’s memories were littered across the floor, polluting the joyous nostalgia of her home.

Kneeling to pick up the photos, Naomi was taken aback at the mixture of darkness and color from the multiple scrapbooks. Those photos with Malachi were always dull. Despite the happiness Malachi brought to her life, the photos with him were before she received a camera with color. The photos were as dark as their relationship, although Naomi once saw Malachi as the light of her life.

Their broken engagement cast a shadow on the next few years of Naomi’s life. As Malachi moved on beaming without a care for the pain he caused, Naomi fell into a black hole of heartbreak.

Gaining her composure, Naomi gathered her fallen memories, placing each in their respective piles, separating the different time periods within her younger years. Without the short span of darkness Malachi shed upon Naomi’s life, she may have never experienced the dazzling, sunny times with her future husband. Naomi found a way to be a star, shining through the night.
In the news, we are constantly hearing about all the horrid things that this pandemic has brought out, but why not focus on some of the positive things that have come from this period of time? History is going to highlight the death rate and economic decline the pandemic brought, but in my life and many others’ lives, this pandemic brought more quality time with family. For some individuals, it allowed bigger projects to be completed. For others, it allowed the ability to completely relax. There have been many things that have changed our lives forever due to this pandemic, but not all of them were negative.

One positive effect of the pandemic is that many families were able to spend more time together and more time supporting their neighbors. Being laid off from work or even just having to work from home allowed many people to see their kids and family more than they typically did prior to the pandemic. Unfortunately, I was working at the hospital, and I was unable to stay home as much as my mother who was laid off as a preschool teacher. However, due to the pandemic and elective surgeries being cancelled, I lost some hours and was able to stay home more often. I took advantage of that. It was almost like fate. Although I was feeling overwhelmed with life and balancing all things that went along with it, I knew I needed that
quality time with my daughter. We both needed it. My daughter was spending so much time either at daycare and then with my mom that I was only there when she was first waking up and then going to bed. She was starting to go to my mom for comfort over me on my days off, and that truly broke my heart. As a mother, it was very painful to watch her run to her grandma and not come running to me when she needed comfort. When I was home more with my daughter, she was stuck to my hip, but I was not mad about that. We both benefited from me being home more, and that influenced my decision to quit my job at the hospital and begin working at a restaurant instead.

My new schedule would be more flexible and allow me to stay home with her more during the week. I know that I am not the only one who enjoyed that extra time home with their kids and loved ones. I was talking to a family friend whose son lives downstate. She said that because he was home more often, he was able to finally meet his neighbors after seven years of living there. They live in a cul-de-sac where all the houses are close, but they were always on the move and never made time to stop and say hello. Now, they found new friends. Their children found new friends as well, and not only play outside with their new neighborhood friends, but they are even going to start homeschooling together as a “pod” because one of the neighbors is a teacher who is not going back to school this fall. It all worked out so perfectly--almost like fate. It seems that most of our lives are spent at work, and it takes a toll on both the person who is at work as well as the family member at home. During this pandemic, that toll was lessened. Many people were able to spend more quality time with their families.

Another positive outcome of the pandemic is that we got a break from all our obligations. I know that personally I have wished for a break many times, and I am sure I am not the only one who has wished for one. Many people work long hours, and they burn out; it is becoming a real problem this day in age. As I mentioned before, I was working at the hospital for fourteen-hour days. My daughter was at daycare for eleven hours, and then she had to be picked up by my mother and spend three hours with her. It was becoming overwhelming for all of us. This pandemic came at a perfect time. We needed a break from reality. With my mother being home, she was able to watch Everly more. This resulted in her having extra time to make memories with her that will last a lifetime. The pandemic allowed us to step away from all the stressful things that consume our lives and take that time to truly relax. We were not tied to any obligations because they were all canceled. I wish I was able to spend more time away from my work obligations, but in a sense, I was able to because I quit one job and took another with fewer hours. This allowed me to spend more time at the beach with my daughter and relax. For some, this period of quarantine might have caused more anxiety. For many, it provided a sense of relief. I always hear, “I just need a break.” Well, we got one, and it allowed many to have a good mental reset from their everyday reality.

One final benefit from the pandemic was that we had so much time at home, we were finally able to get the tasks we put off completed. Some of us were even able to pick up a new hobby. Some might have tried out painting for the first time or even found new crafts to make. I know many people who took this time to clean, redecorate, or even renovate their homes. Having a big project to do, such as redoing a bathroom or basement, always tends to be pushed to the end of the list because it takes the most time. In having so much free time and no obligations,
people were able to move those projects to the top of the list. Because I was not laid off, I didn’t have time to finish major projects, but I used that extra time to relax.

Overall, this pandemic has been hard on many, and it is so easy to focus on all the negative things. For a lot of families, however, this was a positive season in their lives. Personally, I was able to spend more quality time with my daughter. This relieved some of the stress that was building up and gave us a mental break from our obligations. While some people were able to tackle major projects or pick-up new hobbies, others like me used the extra time to relax and appreciate life. At least for my family, the pandemic of 2020 was not all negative.

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

Lydia Johnson

Acrylic
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