

Reflections 2021-2022

Holmes Community College

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Reflections is a literary magazine published by the English Department of Holmes Community College. It contains poems, short stories, essays, and drama written by Holmes Community College students. The students whose works are featured here are winners from the 2021-2022 literary competitions held on the individual campuses. The entries of the top two students in each category are then submitted to the Mississippi Community College Creative Writing Association (MCCCWA) annual literary competition.

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Poetry

The Grass is Green in the Dark

by

Gladys Wilson

First Place Poetry, Ridgeland

The grass is green forever to be green,
Even though everything is not,
Let the smells of nature be my light,
Let the sounds of wondering animals be dead,
Let the wind roar through this empty forest,
Let my wandering soul find peace and rest,

Let this forest ease my pain,
Let my tears be its rain,
Let this be my resting place,
As my body shimmers with a glowing light,
Let my spirit take flight,
Let there be flowers,

Let in the rain and sunlight,
Let there be happiness,
I shall always be part of this forest,
Even though I am dead.
The grass is forever to be green,
Even though everything is not.

Let the smells of nature be my light.

Little Things of Life

by

Junnah Mondejar

Second Place Poetry, Ridgeland

First Place Poetry, 2022 MCCCWA Competition

Every morning I wakeup
Open the window blinds
The streetlight greets me

A warm bowl of rice
With an egg to the side
And a cup of coffee to fuel the day

A squirrel under the acorn tree
We both stop and share a glance
I say good morning

The warm hues of the rising sun
White clouds scattered through the sky
Today—good weather

Dried leaves
Touches the ground smoothly
Along the blowing breeze

Orange light of the traffic light
Three seconds—a short pause
Tells me good day

Small, little things that I encounter
Puts a smile on my face
Nothing but the warmth of an ordinary day.

Gotta Little Bit of Heaven on My Mind

by

Olivia Pharr

First Place Poetry, Grenada

Hide away and lock the door,
I know it won't find me there,
Relieve my heart of no remorse,
Can you believe I'm not crying yet?

Onward, onward,
The breach is only mild,
Falling, falling,
Don't leave, my only light.

No, believe me, I am fine,
Gotta little bit of Heaven on my mind,
I'm not saying I want to die,
Gotta little bit of Heaven on my mind.

Dream again and then rewind,
Leave behind this reality,
So unfulfilled, please save my life,
Is this forever, my eternity?

Wander, Wander,
Won't follow me this time,
Goner, Goner,
It's coming back again!

No, believe me, I am fine,
Gotta little bit of Heaven on my mind,
No, I'm not saying I want to die,
Gotta little bit of Heaven on my mind.

It will be here in the nick of time,
Just keep your hands and feet in the ride,
We will make it there on time,
Heaven is just on the other side.

Evil Men and Their Fate

by

Benjamin Childers

Second Place Poetry, Grenada

Empires, kingdoms, great nations
Kings, emperors, Dictators
Ambition, Pride, Hatred
swords, guns, nukes
Skulls, screams, cries

Many will come and claim the title of bastard rather it be president, leader or god king
The bastard will claim land long lost to be there's
They will claim power and glory to them and them alone
No matter the death the murder the pain the case.
No amount of human suffering will stop them
To all great bastards of history and the ones in the making

May they know their souls will be taken and forgotten.

Sunday Morning

by

Lakesia Smart

First Place Poetry, Goodman

My husband is playing "Precious Lord Take My Hand" already loud enough to wake me up
Although my alarm diagonal to me lies on the dresser, he pulls my covers off and turns on the
light scorching my face to rise in surrender
Every week I stumble to hop up at 8 a.m. to fight my uncanny fashion sense
My closet is a sea of multicolor egotistic happiness
Jewelry bins filled with a rich woman's nightmare of authenticity sit horizontal on my vanity
I must choose the accessories that will complete my look as eyes are always on me
My pumps threaten to knock over my shoe rack
Piles of makeup lie on my vanity
The bathroom is my happy place
When I am powdering my nose, I am nothing more than a knock off Marilyn Monroe
My husband is ready in a colorful suit by the time I am awake
Most times our attire matches, but occasionally, he loves to show off his custom four-piece
suits
To us, each detail matters because once the doors open, the fashion show starts
Yet here I am searching for a dress to cover my knees, so the ladies in the big hats on the front
row won't hold their snobbish noses too high at me
If your dress is too high, you're a sinner. If you wear pants and you're a woman, you're a sinner
If your shoes and jewelry don't match your outfit, just as a member of the congregation last
Sunday you'd be dead by looks and shunned
"You're a fool with cheap jewelry, who wears knock off clothes and just wants to be seen!"
would say the front row judges
So, I sit at my vanity and prepare myself for the hour the world is segregated

The Vase

by

Lakesia Smart

Second Place Poetry, Goodman

A floral vase that my aunt gave when she took her last breath sat in the middle of the table
Blue and white it reminds me of her presence every day
Brave, dedicated, and true--free as the sky
She was glamour of delicate porcelain, but hard to break
Yet so pure her love was Always so simple minded to the way of life
Just like the vase she was quiet but always there
The world became still
No more "Yassss, Girl!" to wake up to or encouraging words and long melting hugs
She was the world and the world was she
Flowering the world with eternal spring
The set lines of blue and white like the lines between life and death
With endless time for each area
A mom, grandmother, daughter, sister, aunt, cousin
A valuable treasure
So easy to lose but hard to gain
Gain memories of laughter, Gain memories of pain, gain memories of life and of lost lives
Staring at the vase to see the never-ending story, the never-ending face
Forever chanting "Long Live the Queen!"

Creative Nonfiction

Burning Icy Bridges

by

Jillian Craig

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Grenada

Third Place Creative Nonfiction, 2022 MCCCWA Competition

Heroes aren't born; they're reborn. Like a Phoenix, they're forged in fire. None of us come into this world able to fly. Most of us never have to learn. The road stretching out before us

can hold so many views, so many possibilities. And without fail, there will be roadblocks to overcome. You'll need a shoulder from time to time. But for a certain few, there will be a curve you can't handle. And that curve will leave you hanging from an icy bridge. This is where you will have to make your choice. This will be your rebirth, Phoenix.

"He's got a fire in him." That's what I told myself. I wasn't referring to the whiskey, but, the whiskey certainly fueled it, that was for sure. Boy, he sure knew how to belly laugh like Santa! I loved 8:00 pm Daddy! I enjoyed the jokes and the show he put on for the extended family. Eight p.m. Daddy stuck around longer when he had an audience. "Yes ma'am. B'lieve I will" he beckoned, as he rattled the ice in his cup. Ice. Damn you, ice. If only there were no ice, maybe then I wouldn't have had to worry. But there was ice, ice everywhere, and she poured him another drink.

"Another damn shirt!" he cackled, as if there was a humorous way to be ungrateful for a gift. The whiskey was whispering in his ear by now though. The fuse had been lit right along with Daddy.

"Bridge!" my step-mother let out, as she shifted nervously. "Bridge, that's not funny, please." By 11:00, those red eyes burned me just to look at him. I thought he must be completely consumed by fire inside. I dared not provoke him - this dragon with glossy, red eyes - lest the fire from his words, his breath, completely consume me too.

Santa would be around soon. We had to go. "Emily, Jilly, you got your presents?" No one told us to, but we knew to buckle our seatbelts. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night, Amen.

It was ten years after that night before she and I ever spoke of it. We had both been changed by that trip home. It was a Christmas Eve night when Emily and I realized our father wasn't infallible. He wasn't even sober. Nonetheless, he drove the whole family home, never considering the impact it could cause. There in the backseat, my sister's hand, cold as the ice outside, gripped mine with a knowing panic. We couldn't speak up. Silenced by years of belittlement and alcoholic rage, we could do nothing but tighten our seatbelts, hold hands, and

pray. While most kids were watching for Santa, we were covering our heads; we didn't want to see what was coming. He was beyond the jovial stage. To suggest he shouldn't drive us home would have been an affront like no other. So, we "prayed it safe." We held in the emotions, held onto each other, and hid behind our gifts.

We made it home safely that night, but not without losing our sense of what a safe home actually means. We knew we had to be our own role models from then on out. We had to lift each other up. He likely remembers nothing from that nearly fatal, yet only fateful, Christmas Eve. I don't remember the actual presents, but I'll never let go of the gift he gave us that night. I remember his presence. Seeing him for who he is, even at such a young age, was truly a gift. I'm not hiding behind it anymore.

Emily and I, in spirit, flew out of the car that night. We flew holding hands. We jumped into the frozen night of a Savior's birth, ignited by a fire in our blood. We threw our gifts to the wind. All that mattered was surviving an icy bridge.

Twenty-five years have now passed since the bridge that got us home was revealed to be a hazard. Had it not been for the warmth of my sister's hand that night, and during every cold night since, I would never have made it this far. Today, I set fire to the bridge that burned me. Sorry, Daddy. We had to fly away. I won't be there to see it, but please go to a meeting.

A New Life

by

Emily Huff

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Ridgeland

In 2008, I became an orphan and lived in an institution. The institution is in a tiny city called Maoming, that is in the Guangdong province of China. I remember the first few days were very difficult because at the time, I did not know what was happening, and I really wanted to see my family. My family spoke a different dialect, so I could not understand the people around me that spoke Cantonese. Maybe it was because I was very young, but I picked up the new Cantonese dialect quickly.

Before I knew it, I made some friends at the institution. There were four of us that were friends, and we all had disabilities. Every day we would play pretend with each other, sing songs, play games, or watch television shows. It was like that for a few years until we heard that we could go to “school”, which was not an actual school, but we could receive some basic education at the institution. The reason we could not go to school before was because we were disabled. In China, disabled individuals cannot go to school. I later found out that Americans donated money, so that children like me could receive some education. School started in 2013, and I remember how excited I was for this new and different experience. Every week the teachers taught us about basic math and reading, then we would have an exercise period, as well as a music class.

During that school year, I saw Americans for the first time in my life. I was taken to the floor where toddlers were kept, since that was where the Americans were. I did not know at the time, but they were checking to see if I qualify for adoption. I remember peeking at my paperwork and seeing that I was probably twelve years old. Weeks, maybe months later I received the news that I was getting adopted. It took my brain a few minutes to process the news. I was really excited that I was going to have a family! My new parents wrote me letters and sent me gifts when other adoptive parents came from America to get their children, and the teachers would translate the letters for me from English to Cantonese. I was always excited to receive those letters from them.

One of the most memorable events during the year long waiting process was celebrating my thirteenth birthday. This was my first birthday celebration that I can remember. My new parents sent some money and asked the teachers to buy me a dress and a cake. All my classmates sat in a big circle and sang happy birthday to me, and then we all shared the big, beautiful cake happily. My friends, teachers, and nannies told me that they were glad that I am going to have a family, but that they would miss me.

Saying goodbye to everyone was hard, especially my friends. I knew I was going to miss my friends, but I did not feel sad until I was on the way to meet my parents. During the four-hour drive to meet them in Guangzhou, part of me felt a bit scared and uncertain about going

to America, because the thought of a new life just dawned on me. My mind started to think “What if I can't communicate with them?” or “Will I hate this new foreign life...?” my mind was going through all the what-ifs. We finally arrived at the destination, and I saw my new parents, along with my little sister. I recognized them from pictures, and I was excited to meet them. The nervous thoughts were gone, and I thought “Wow... there's my new family”.

We stayed in Guangzhou for two weeks while we were taking care of business and waiting for my passport. Then it was time to go to America – we packed everything, and I got on to an airplane for the first time. Sixteen hours later we landed in Jackson, Mississippi with all of the family and friends welcoming us with big signs and hugs. I could not understand anything spoken, but I knew everyone was very happy. My new family was huge- my parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. After I met and said hello to everyone, we went home. As we pulled in the neighborhood, the houses were so different from what I was used to. They were one- and two-story suburban houses in Madison rather than tall city buildings. My first home in America was super cozy with a family that loved and cared for me.

I came home at the end of January in 2015 and started 6th grade in August. Before I started school, my mom taught me the alphabet and some basic words since I only knew three words at the time. When school started, I could not understand any words spoken to me. I would say “I don't know”, “I don't understand”, or “What does this mean?” even though I did not understand the explanations either. I used a translator application for the first year, and then I eventually quit using it because my English had improved. One of the things that dramatically changed my life was getting to know Jesus. My family members are Christians, and I would ask them everything about the Bible and faith. I felt so overwhelmed for the first few years in America adjusting to this new life, but a sense of peace came in my heart when I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I knew following Him would be hard, but I also knew that this life is only an instant compared to eternity. I want to spend eternity with my Creator because I know one day, I will run toward Him in Heaven.

It seemed like the same experience repeated twice – learning a new language and adjusting to a new way of life after leaving the other behind. I knew that this would be the last time because I have a forever family now. I am grateful for everything because this difficult and long journey led me to Christ. Not only do I have a new earthly family, but I also have a heavenly Father who had been looking after me for all of my life.

The Mic

by

Lakesia Smith

First Place Creative Nonfiction, Goodman

To remember when I ever sang my first song or danced my first dance would be like trying to remember the very first thing I ever ate. It's impossible. However, the day I held a microphone will always be in my memory. My mom would always have me in church, and the only thing I wanted to do was sing. All I could see in my head was the scene from *What's Love Got to Do with It* when Tina was a young girl and took the solo away from the older women who were supposed to be singing. In a way, that was me. Music was all I knew. It was more than a hobby; it was my passion.

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to sing. My dad was always on the road with his band. He was a blues singer. He used to have a home studio, and that's when I got a chance to hold it. To this day, no one knows the significance that one moment had on me. He called me in the room as he was finishing a song and told me to get in front of it. I was about seven years old. He said, "Give me your best note." So, I blurted out of one my favorite artist's, Beyoncé, famous runs. He smiled and took the mic off the stand. He handed it to me and played one of her songs. He told me to perform it, and I did. That day I realized I truly had talent.

As time progressed, I continued to sing. The exact same year I entered my very first school talent show. I was in the 1st grade, attending G. N. Smith Elementary. I remember my mom picked out this pretty, blue outfit to wear. It was satin with a pretty skirt with a bow on it and a shirt to match. I sang "For You I Will," by Monica. I did not win that night, but I was still a winner. After that day, everyone knew I could sing. This would lead to various acts and performances until graduation.

By the time I made it to high school, I had won various talent shows and performed many places. My craft created a name and ego. It made me known to others. When I had a microphone in my hand, I wasn't myself. It was like I had an alter ego. I felt like I was on top of the world, and everyone could see me. The microphone gave me confidence, courage, and determination. It ultimately would be the reason I came to college. I want to be something. I will be something. As I reflect, I wonder if I had never held a microphone if would I still have wanted to sing. Some people might say yes because the voice still will be there. I, of course, feel differently. The microphone gave me popularity and fame in a way. It made me who I am today.

I think back to when I was a child sitting in my dad's house, watching him record his songs. I always wonder if I never had seen a microphone or if my dad never sang if I would have still sung. The microphone became a companion to me. From the moment I touched one, I knew we would be unstoppable together. As silly as it sounds, I think it feels the same way about me. Just as peanut butter glues to jelly, we have that connection.

Gone but Never Forgotten

by

Isabella Settlemir

Second Place Creative Nonfiction, Goodman

It was August 18th, just a few weeks after Kayleigh had moved to Grenada, Mississippi to begin her new journey at college. She was not sure if her father would approve, but she decided to do it anyway, and today was the day. She was going to get a tattoo. She figured since it was her money and she was an adult, then it should not matter to him anyway, so she loaded up in her car and drove to the tattoo parlor.

Kayleigh arrived at Badlands Ink in Grenada, Mississippi. She chose this specific place because it was closest to her home. As she walked in, she was beginning to feel slightly nervous but, mostly, excited. The shop's decorations were remarkably interesting and unique. It had comic books hung on the walls and photos of tattoos. The tattoo artist who would be doing Kayleigh's tattoo looked like any typical artist would. He had red hair and colorful tattoos of many shapes and sizes on his arms and legs. The artist asked her what kind of tattoo and where she wanted it to be placed. She knew exactly the answer to that question. She pointed to her wrist where she wanted a halo with angel wings beside it, and below, it would have cursive writing which would say, "Love you, Mom." He knew just what to do and began work. Kayleigh smiled and thought to herself, "This is for you, Mom."

Twenty minutes later, and a lot of little pinches, it was finished. It looked just like she imagined. It was done in black ink, and even though it was small, it was bold, just like how her mother always was. Three years ago, Kayleigh's mother, Misty, had passed away. She missed her mother very much, so she decided a tattoo was a way to feel close to her every day. She chose the angel wings and halo, since she had passed away, and the words below were her mother's signature on the last birthday card Kayleigh had received from her. She chose black for the color because it was bold, and her mother was known as a bold woman who would spread the gospel to everyone, even if they would not listen. We should all strive to be like that. The tattoo was placed on her wrist so Kayleigh would see it every day and know her mother is always with her. Kayleigh told me her mother always made her feel better about herself when no one else could. Her mother brought her confidence, and her tattoo will make her feel she is always with her to support her.

People have many opinions on tattoos. I personally would not get one, not because they are ugly, wrong, or I do not like them, I just prefer not to get one. There are many varied reasons people get tattoos. Some get them for religious reasons, remembrance of loved ones, like Kayleigh, or just get them just because they like the look. My dad, for instance, got his tattoo because he was "Young and dumb." His is a green lizard wrapped around a smiling sun on his upper back by his shoulder. All tattoos have a story; whether it is big or small, it is always an interesting story to hear about.

I have sat back and thought about what kind I would want if I had to choose. I feel like I would choose a little cute, organic bee on my pointing finger. One: it is cute and Two: my name starts with a "B" so it would be a cute wordplay. The other ideas I have had about my own tattoo would include rats in space or toads having a tea party, just a simple yet memorable design, preferably small, on my arm somewhere. Then again, there are so many choices it would be hard to choose just one.

Do not be afraid to go out and ask people about their tattoos. Through researching for this paper, I have learned more about Kayleigh than I would have without asking about her tattoo. I also have a new appreciation for tattoos in general. I have never put much thought into them before, but now I will. A person has to be pretty brave to let someone stick them multiple times with a needle, and I have a new respect for them. I encourage all of you to go out and ask random people about their tattoos. Some may have a little story, or some may have a longer story to tell, but it is never wasting your time hearing a little about someone's life. It is worth the time, and who knows, you may even meet a new friend in the process.

Short Stories

You Can Make Anything Look Like an Accident

by

Bethany Biggers

First Place Short Story, Ridgeland

Second Place Short Story, 2022 MCCCWA Competition

No one will ever find out what I have done. I destroyed all the evidence. I made sure to erase everything that could tie me to my crimes. It all started four years ago. He is the reason I am like this. He made me this way. He taught me that you can make anything look like an accident if you try hard enough.

“Hallie, have you decided who you're going to prom with?”

Lana, a tall beautiful brunette, sat next to me in a coffee shop. She was the person that everyone wanted to be friends with.

“I really want Jordan to ask me, but I know that that’s a long shot.”

I had been fawning over Jordan Michaels since the day he carried my books from home room and flashed me his perfect smile. He was the most popular guy at our school, and wanted to be a civil engineer when he grew up, and did I mention he was the captain of the wrestling team? He was a dream boat, with his golden blonde hair and green eyes.

“You know you are the smartest girl in school and Jordan would be lucky to go with you.”

“Aww, you are sweet, I am so excited to find my dress.”

“Me too! Want to go shopping Monday after school?”

“Absolutely!”

“Yay! Well, I gotta jet, see you in class Monday.”

“Bye, girly!”

I was so excited about the prom, getting all dressed up, hanging out with my friends, and getting that perfect kiss at the end of the night. I was happy, undeniably incandescently happy. I was naive. I did not think about how trivial a dance was. This was high school, my biggest fear was failing my calculus test. Little did I know I would soon find out there was so much more to be terrified of in the world.

I gathered my books that I was using to study for my big Biology test on Tuesday. I picked up my phone to see a text from my mom that dinner was ready. I started walking out to my car, when I heard a voice behind me. I turned around to see a tall man with radiant brown hair.

“Excuse me, I think you might have left your keys.”

I look at him inquisitively, and began to search my purse. I looked up at him when I realized that he was right. Those must be my keys. I felt dumb for leaving them behind, so I flashed him a smile.

“I must have forgotten to grab them.”

He came closer and I realized that he had the most piercing blue eyes. As he handed me my keys, I felt my heart race and a spark of electricity rolled through me as he barely brushed my hand.

“You must like to travel,” he said.

I looked at him and thought, How does he know that? A little unsettled I replied, “Umm yes, how did you know that?”

“Well the ‘I love to travel’ keychain kind of gave away your secret.”

I laughed.

“Oh, that makes a lot of sense. Thank you for bringing me my keys.”

“You're welcome. I'm Lewis by the way.”

“Hallie Gray.”

We shook hands. His hands were cold, which was strange because it was almost April and the temperature was close to 75.

“Well it's nice to meet you, but I have to go.”

“You be careful out there, Ms. Gray.”

“Haha I will,” I finally said as I got into my car.

As I drove home I remember thinking that he was very charming and handsome. When I got home, dinner was waiting on me. My mom and little sister Harper were sitting down at the table with a plate full of spaghetti.

“Hey Honey, how was your day?”

“It was just a normal day.”

I didn't tell her about my run in with the tall and mesmerizing Lewis. I wanted to keep that to myself. Mom always said that strangers can be dangerous, but he seemed so kind. I would probably never see him again, so what would be the point of making mom upset? All he did was return my keys. That was not something I had to talk about, it was my secret.

We sat through a normal dinner, Harper talked about her upcoming dance recital, mom told us about a patient at work, and I sat there and listened.

When I went to bed I decided to write in my journal about my day. How I met up with Lana at my favorite coffee shop downtown. How I managed to leave my keys and finally about Him.

The next morning it was a bright shining Saturday. The birds were singing and I was excited for a new day. The first thing I did was take off on my usual Saturday run through Rose Bud Park. When I got there I began my usual route, but I realized my shoe was untied and reached down to tie it. Then I heard footsteps behind me and they stopped.

“Travel girl? Is that you?”

I turned around to see him, Lewis.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was just headed for a run, you?”

“Same, I run here every Saturday. It's so weird that we both run here and have never seen each other.”

"I know it's crazy, well it was nice to see you again Travel girl."

"You too. Enjoy your run."

He began to run in the opposite direction, and there was something so beautifully strong about him. It was indescribable. What are the chances we would meet again so soon and that we would be running in the same place. Maybe it was fate. I thought about him the rest of my run.

When I got home there was a letter addressed to "Hallie Bear." I refused to open it and stuffed it in the drawer with the other thirteen I had received in the past few years. I do not know why my father could not just come visit or call me, or even send a text. I used to open every letter hoping to understand why he deserted my mother, little sister, and me. Now I don't open them, I won't give him the power to hurt me anymore. He did that plenty when he was here.

Before I knew it, it was Monday and it was back to normal school. I met up with Lana in home room.

"I think I want a purple dress for Prom. Like Lavender or Magenta. What about you?"

"Hallie, Hellooo? Did you hear me?" she said.

I was in a world of my own and all I could think about was him, his strong jawline and the way his lips moved when he talked. There was something so mesmerizing about him. He was all I could think about.

"Yeah Lana, purple would really bring out your skin tone."

"What color do you want?"

"I'm not really sure, I feel like I will know when it's the one."

"Okay, that makes sense. We are still meeting at the Oak Ridge Mall at four?"

"Yes. I have to run Harper to her dance practice and I will meet you there."

Prom was coming up soon, next weekend in fact. It was every senior girl's dream. The Theme was "Hollywood Glam" and I was thrilled to get the red carpet ready.

"Sounds like a date!"

A new voice entered the conversation.

"Who has a date? Because I am free to take either of you lovely ladies out."

It was Mason Marks. You know the guy that thinks he is hot stuff, but you are friends with him anyway. He was new last year. He came off a little strong, and Lana claimed that he had been in love with me forever, but I thought he loved anyone with boobs.

"In your dreams, Marks," replied Lana.

"We are dress shopping for prom," I let him know so that he would stop making goo goo eyes at us.

After school, I picked up Harper, and it felt as if I were looking into a mirror at my twelve year old self. The same long blonde hair, innocence, and excitement about life.

I hoped she would not lose that sparkle like did. That she did not have to experience what I did because of him. He stole my sparkle, he stole my light, he stole my innocence and I could never forgive what he did.

"Hey Harp, how was school today?"

"I made a 98 on my physical science test, and I heard that we are going to start practicing for the end of the year recital today!"

"That's awesome, bug. What do you want to listen to?"

"Duh Dolly."

I turned the radio to play "9 to 5" and we sang along at the top of our lungs. After performances from Dolly Parton, I finally dropped her off at Murkoff Dance Academy, and I drove to the mall to meet Lana.

"Hmm, maybe I want to wear yellow and be like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*," said Lana.

"Do you want me to be really honest?"

"Well, duh!"

I hesitantly replied, "That dress makes it look like big bird"

"The mask is too much, isn't it?"

"It might be the 6 feet of feathers"

"You're right, I'm gonna try this black one"

I looked through the dresses. There was something so magical about them, I had been dreaming about going to senior prom for as long as I could remember. My dad used to always talk about how beautiful I would look, but that was before he left us. He was a sucky dad, but he always talked about how I would look just like mom. I shook my head and decided to try on a long red gown with a rhinestone belt. I looked into the mirror and memories flushed in. Then I heard Lana,

"Hallie, look at that guy, by the door. He's really cute and those eyes are so blue"

I looked over to see the person I least expected to be at the mall, him. I walked towards him.

"Lewis, is that you?"

Lana followed me towards the door and watched. Her face spoke for her, 'Who is this and how do you know him?'

"Travel girl, what are you doing here?"

"Just shopping for a Prom dress."

"Well it looks like you found the one, you look breathtaking in red."

Just then Lana peeped her head in.

"I'm Lana Krebs, Hallie's best friend. How did you two meet?"

"Nice to meet you Lana, I'm Lewis Potter."

"Again I ask how did y'all meet? You look like 26?"

I interjected and talked through my teeth and was a little embarrassed. "Lana, don't be rude, he brought me my keys after I left them at the coffee shop on Friday."

"That's alright she is just looking out for her friend and I respect that, I actually just turned 21," he added politely.

"Oh okay" she said, backing down from her guard dog position.

I began to talk trying to ease the tension that was just created in the air.

“What are you doing here Lewis?” I asked, trying to make the situation less awkward.

“Just looking for some new running shoes, are you going to be at Rose Bud this Saturday?”

“Absolutely, could we meet up? That is if you want?” I said as my heart was racing again.

He hesitated and I instantly regretted even the mere suggestion. He was tall, handsome, and 21; why would he want to go out with lanky, nerdy, 18 year old me?

After what seemed like eternity he spoke, “I have a few things to do that morning but what about a run Thursday at 4?”

“Sounds perfect!!” I said a little too enthusiastically.

“See you then, travel girl, and by the way, I would definitely go with the red.”

“I just might.” I threw a flirty smile in his direction. “Bye Lewis!”

I slipped into a daze as he walked away, and Lana waved her hand in front of my face.

“What was that?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“You were totally fawning over him and how does he know you run at Rose bud Park on Saturday?”

“We ran into each other running the other day.”

“Wait, so you met him Friday and he just happens to be at the same Park at the same time you are? And again at the same mall two days later? Doesn’t that sound a little weird to you?”

“No, he lives around here, Franklin is not a huge town.”

Just then Mason walked up, chowing down on a Pretzel. “Who was that dude?” he asked.

Lana replied before I had the chance, “It’s Hallie’s Stalker.”

“Lana! He is not a stalker! His name is Lewis Potter, he is just a guy.”

Mason looked confused but let it go.

“I’m gonna go take this dress off, I’m done shopping” I replied, trying not to look as angry as I actually was.

When I got home, I was furious with Lana, Of course she would be jealous that an older man called me beautiful. She always had to be the center of attention. Always. I looked on the front porch and saw another note labeled “Hallie Bear” and it sent me over the edge. I decided to open it, I couldn’t get madder than I already was.

The letter simply read, “DO NOT TRUST HIM,” in all capital letters.

I stood there for a second, shocked and confused. Why would my dad write this? Why would he tell me not to trust him? Who is he? Why after seven years does he send this? The first few letters were not like this. They were about him. They were about the wonderful life he had without us. It was the usual narcissistic Graham Gray. I did not like this letter, so I decided to open the others in my drawer. And they were blank except for one that said, “He is coming for you,” labeled a year ago. What did this mean and who was he talking about?

My brain raced until about 4 o'clock when I finally managed to fall asleep.

Tuesday, the day of my big biology test, the thing I had been preparing for for two weeks, I had completely forgotten. The thing with Lana and the letter last night had me confused and disoriented. I could not focus on my test. I just walked out. It was so unlike me, I loved school.

Lana and Mason came running,

"Are you okay?" Mason said.

"I got this weird letter last night."

"Was it another one from your dad?" Lana chirped in.

"I think so but it was weird. It said, 'Do not trust him.'"

"That's weird. WHAT IF IT'S THAT LEWIS GUY?"

I started to think, it is weird that my dad sent me a letter, right after I met a stranger and he did pop up a lot. I started to think about the chances of him being there. I brushed it off and decided to go home.

I was just getting settled when I heard a knock at the door. I opened it to see an officer.

"Are you Mrs. Gray?"

"Yes"

"I regret to inform you that your father was found dead two days ago."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm so sorry for your loss"

I stood there stunned, so in shock I could not breathe.

Then I heard the words, "He was murdered."

The rest of the day was a blur and so was the day after that. all I could hear was my sister and mother crying. He was an awful dad, but he was still the only one I had. He had always been an alcoholic, but up until six years ago, he was a fairly good dad. He took us to ball games and to the park. Mom was happy for the most part. We had family dinner, but something changed that summer. He left mom. He left us. He never called. He was just gone except for the occasional letter. I was so confused, but after six years of asking for answers, I finally accepted it.

Now there was a reason my father sent that note. Could it be tied to his murder? Was he trying to tell me something? Was that why he was murdered? Could it be a coincidence that my father was killed the day after I met a charming stranger, could he have done it? Could the guy I have been fawning over have killed my father?

Then I got up the courage to beg my mother to tell me the truth about when dad left. She was silent, but she finally gave me the truth I did not know I was looking for. The reason dad had changed was because of his wreck.

Apparently my father got really drunk one night which he was known for and he got into his car. My mother finally came clean.

"He should not have been driving, but you were sick and he went to get you some medicine from the pharmacy. He ran a stop sign and ended up colliding with a car that had a

man and his son in it. The man died, and your father never forgave himself. After that he changed, he did not feel worthy of you girls anymore. So two weeks later he packed all his stuff and left. The only thing he left behind was a letter. That said, "Tell Hallie Bear and Harper Bug, that I love them, but never tell them what I did. I don't want them to know. With regret, Graham."

I was shocked I had never been told about this. I could not remember it. I don't know why my mom kept that from me. It would have been better to know that, than just to think my father abandoned me.

"What was the man's name?"

"Honey, it was so long ago I do not remember."

After the funeral, I cut all ties with Lewis. I even skipped our running date. I was convinced that he was my father's killer, it was just too convenient for him to be there. That was the man that my father said to not trust, and he ended up dead. I did not take it lightly. I even called the police, and they said that unless I had proof that what happened to my father was his fault there was nothing I could do.

I looked at the red dress from the mall that I had bought. There was something about the way he looked at me in that dress. I could not believe that I was actually interested in him.

Mason ended up asking me to the prom, but I did not really wanna go. I felt like it was wrong. I ended up telling mom about my run in with the stranger, known as Lewis Potter. She was concerned but glad to hear that I had cut off all connection with him. Finally, with the persuasion power of mom and Lana, I decided to go to the prom. One week earlier I had been so excited. It was all I could think about, but now it seem kinda stupid. I could not let everyone down, especially Mason, who had been extra sweet to me lately.

Finally it was Saturday, I decided to wear my mom's old prom dress, the one from the night she met dad. I wanted to remember the man he was before his wreck happened.

"Your makeup looks perf! I claim to be a little of a makeup artist."

I laughed, "As long as you do not glue my eyelids shut again, I will be okay."

She smiled, "No promises."

Lana looked radiant in her white ballgown with her brown hair tied up with a ribbon. I looked into the mirror and barely recognized myself in the dark blue, 1980's style dress, long blonde curls running down my shoulder, and the last gift my father had ever given me, a bracelet that said 'Hallie Bear.' For the first time in a while, everything seemed normal again.

Lana and I came down the stairs to our dates. Mom gushed, Harper wanted me to take a picture with the cat, Scooter, and Mason just stared. He had never looked at me like that before, and I thought that maybe there could be more than friendship.

"You look radiant, my lady," he said, bowing to me in the cheesiest way possible.

I smiled. "Why thank you, kind sir," I replied, extending my hand to him.

We took thousands of pictures before finally making our way to the dance. Like every high schooler's dream we rode in a limo and got the chance to step out onto the red carpet. I knew this would be a night I always remembered.

It would be a night I would always remember but not for the reason that I thought.

Mason and I danced, then they announced prom king a queen, which was Joran and Lana of course. I was so happy for her. Then as the lights brightened again, I saw him.

Lewis Potter was standing in the corner of the room. I immediately felt my stomach drop. I could not let his eyes catch mine. I ran up the stairs as fast as I could in my black glosed stilettos, up 7 flights of steps to the roof of the school. I felt like I was gonna throw up, like my whole world was spinning.

Was Lewis here to kill me too, like he had my father? Was taking me out part of Lewis's plan? Was I about to become a victim?

Once I got there I noticed the shadow of a man had followed me to the roof. A wave of relief rushed over my body when I saw that it was only Mason.

"You scared me"

"Is everything alright?" he asked looking genuinely concerned.

Just as Mason was coming closer my phone rang. It was my mom.

"I hope you are having fun, honey. I just wanted to tell you that I remember the guy's name that died in the car accident, 'David Marks' and he had the cutest little boy... Michael, no, Miller, no..."

I quickly replied with a stunned facial expression, "Mason? Was it Mason Marks?"

"Yes, Mason, how did you know that?" my mom replied.

"I have to go.."

I quickly hung up the phone.

"So you finally figured it out.. It only took you a year," said Mason.

I thought back to my father's note that was dated a week before I met Mason. "He is coming for you." I stepped back slowly until my back was up against the ledge.

"You are the little boy from the car accident six years ago."

I froze.

"You killed my dad, didn't you?" I said with my teeth gritted.

"Well, your father killed my dad first. His death broke my mother and she was placed in a mental institution. I grew up in foster care because of you and your father."

"It was an accident, Mason. We are friends. We have been friends for a year."

"You were never my friend, I was just looking for the perfect opportunity to make you pay, but we can't forget your perfect midnight kiss, now can we, Hallie Bear?"

"Don't you dare call me that."

He walked closer to me and pushed me up against the ledge, forcefully trying to kiss me, pushing his body to my stomach and trying to pull my dress off my shoulder.

"Come on, Hallie Bear, isn't this what you wanted. I see the way you look at me and daddy is not here to save you now, is he?"

"Mason, stop it!" I screamed as loud as my lungs would allow.

He pushed me further over the ledge. He was so strong I felt as though I was about to fall over the ledge, but I managed to struggle free.

I pushed with every ounce of rage in my body, I wanted revenge, I wanted him to pay for what he had cost me. I let my anger take hold and I pushed him with all the strength I could muster. He went tumbling off of the ledge. I saw him fall and it brought me intense pleasure.

When the cops arrived, I claimed that we were up there just talking. After all, it was just an accident and he happened to trip and fall. Clumsy Mason.

We were two high school kids, who could believe that either of us was capable of murder? I cried in front of everyone, not because I felt remorse but because I missed what I should have had with my father. Mason deserved what happened to him, he ruined my life and stole my sparkle.

Before him, I was innocent, naive. After him, I was cold blooded and unforgiving. He broke me and the goodness and purity was stolen from inside.

As for Lewis Potter he was innocent, just a normal guy who met me at the wrong time. Although I would never see him again, he still haunts my memories. What could we have been?

I was never the same. It has been four years but the Hallie Gray that everyone knew and loved is gone, just a former shell of the beautiful blonde, who loved school and loved to travel.

My father broke Mason and he broke me—I guess that is how murderers are born and that was the first of many “accidents.”

Sweet Loretta

by

Laura Reilly

Second Place Short Story, Ridgeland

“She’s a sweet girl, Loretta is.” This was a phrase often overheard in the small New England town she was raised in. At only eighteen years old, Loretta was known for her radiance. She was the pretty girl, and everyone knew who she was. Her father was a prominent figure in local government, and her mother was deemed the best schoolteacher in the area. She had never finished high school, but it was always assumed that she would be able to marry rich and never have a worry in her life. She had found a job at her town’s only restaurant, a small diner that had seemed to be there before the creation of man. Here, her big smile and warm personality had monetary value placed upon it.

It was at that same sleepy diner that she met Ralph. He was older than her, ten years older to be exact. He had moved recently to their town for work and became a regular at the diner, always asking for Loretta. Usually, only the other teenaged girls would gossip about these matters, but it quickly became the talk of the entire town when Loretta would start to introduce this man as her boyfriend.

From the outside, it seemed like something out of a romance movie. After Loretta would get off work, she would hop into his fancy car to be taken on fancy dates in the city. Her parents loved Ralph; he was a “fine gentleman” they said. He would ring the doorbell with a bouquet of flowers in hand and would talk politics with Loretta’s father until she came running down the stairs to greet him with a hug and the biggest smile she could physically give. Ralph loved that smile, just like anyone who knew Loretta did. He loved the innocence and sparkle in her eyes when she would look at him. He knew that he had her wrapped around his finger.

In the beginning, it was like Loretta blossomed. Her big smile got bigger, and she soon would be even more admired when she was always adorned in the finest clothes and jewelry that Ralph would buy for her. The nicest thing he would buy for her though, was an unrealistically sparkly engagement ring gifted to her on her nineteenth birthday. It was the best day of her life. The next best day of her life was just a few short months later when she was walking down the aisle in the same church she grew up in not so long ago. The whole town seemed to be there, because no one wanted to miss sweet little Loretta’s big day.

In the back pews, some of the older ladies would voice their disapproval. “He’s too old for her.” or “How could her parents let this happen?” they would whisper. But it would go

unnoticed because all eyes were on the door when Loretta walked in with her father by her side, boasting that big smile and wide eyes everyone fell in love with. She was the most beautiful bride, and her dress, hair, and makeup would be talked about for years. Many would reminisce on the look that she gave Ralph when she got closer to the pulpit, and the single tear of joy that fell down her cheek. He looked back at her with a slight grin.

It wouldn't take long for the townspeople to notice that day by day, Loretta's smile would get weaker. They would ask how she was. The answer to that question would progress from "Oh, just adjusting to being newlyweds!" to "It's been a stressful week for Ralph" to "Well, he's never put his hands on me". She would soon say teary-eyed goodbyes to her coworkers and customers at the diner. She told them that Ralph said it was embarrassing to him for her to work instead of taking care of the house, and that it made him look like he couldn't financially support her. Sightings of sweet Loretta became fewer and far between. At first, she would host dinner parties for her and her friends and their mothers, but Ralph said it annoyed him when he heard them laughing while he was trying to watch the news. She then began to volunteer at the school her mother taught at, helping plan events for the kids. Ralph soon put an end to this, accusing Loretta of sleeping with some of the students' fathers. She smiled at them too widely, and that wasn't okay.

Sunday morning church service would become the way to get in touch with Loretta, she never answered the phone, or the door. More and more people grew concerned about the two, but Loretta would talk on and on about the nice car he just bought her and how he allowed her to redecorate the house. When asked about kids, her face would light up. "I hope so!" she would say excitedly, until making eye contact with Ralph. He'd always roll his eyes and chuckle, and that small glimpse of sweet Loretta would fade.

As the Sunday services came and went, she would begin to hide a baby bump along with her bruises. Ralph never liked kids. The time came when Ralph decided to finally announce to the congregation with glee that he and his beautiful wife Loretta were expecting their first bundle of joy, and he said he was so blessed that God chose him to be a father. The congregation would applaud and congratulate the couple. "Ralph will make a great father Loretta! Aren't you so happy?" they would ask. "Of course!" she would reply with a feeble grin. On her own twentieth birthday, it would read in the paper the birth announcement of Ralph and Loretta's healthy baby girl weighing seven pounds eight ounces and nineteen inches long.

Loretta began to attend church less and less. "The baby has colic; it's been very hard on us both." Ralph would say to the members of the church. He was met with the utmost sympathy and was told to send their best wishes home to Loretta. One Sunday the congregation would be shocked when Loretta and the baby came walking into the narthex. She

must have gotten some much needed rest they figured, because she was looking radiantly beautiful in her best Sunday dress. The baby was adorable and seemed like the happiest baby ever born. "She has your smile, Loretta!" they said. Ralph was on a business trip that week, and Loretta decided she needed to spend some time with the Lord.

"She's a sweet girl, Loretta is." That's what would be said in court. Ralph's body was found in his fancy car that following Monday at the end of their driveway, engulfed in flames. "She was just a young girl trying to defend herself." they said. Under her best Sunday dress that was so highly talked about after the service was a field of purple and yellow. The older ladies in the back of the courtroom would voice their approval. "I always thought Ralph was bad news" or, "I can't believe we never knew" they would whisper. But it would go unnoticed because all eyes were on Loretta boasting that big smile and wide eyes that everyone fell in love with as the judge would call out the phrase, "not guilty", and the sound of the gavel echoed throughout the room.

The Beautiful Release

by

Dakota Chance

First Place Short Story, Goodman

Third Place Short Story, 2022 MCCCWA Competition

There is a certain beauty in wanting to leave this world. I do not mean how roses bloom in spring or a baby's first giggle. It is not that kind of beauty at all. When you want to die, you are not viewed as magnificent as a daisy in the early months of spring. It is the beauty of feeling like you deserve better than this world. The feeling of confidence that your actions don't warrant being in a world with pedophiles and murderers. I first felt this at the early age of seven. Now as a second-grader, I couldn't put a word to what I was feeling. Suicidal was too long for me to spell.

My dad died from cystic fibrosis the summer before I started the second grade. I didn't have a concept of death at that age. All I knew was that I didn't want to be living if my dad wasn't. My world, though it was only learning addition and my light-up shoes, seemed too difficult to navigate without him. The surrounding people told me "Ari, just close your eyes. He is with you whenever you need him." Except he wasn't. That is what everyone says when someone dies. Once someone leaves here, they don't come back. They become a simple, painful memory that for the lucky ones doesn't fade over time. For years, I felt angry at him. It wasn't his fault he died, but the flower of depression had been planted in me, and nothing would ever be the same.

My mom never noticed the symptoms of depression I showed when I was a child. She started dating again about a year after my dad had passed. Most nights, I would be alone at home while my mom went out. Looking back now, I think she was trying to fill some hole in her heart that my dad left. Sometimes, my mom would be out with her suitors for days. I learned how to fend for myself quickly. Only one of my parents died but, I lost both of them.

At fifteen, my mom decided to remarry. Some guy named Jimmy. I never liked Jimmy. He wanted to be "the man of the house" in a house that was not his. He expected to infiltrate my home and get respect. He wanted to automatically replace my dad. What made me angrier than anything was that my mother allowed it. She permitted this alien to brainwash her and forget about Dad. I would much rather her be out every night than this 1950s style living. So, I left. I packed a suitcase and walked out the door. I went to my grandmother's house. She lived three blocks away, but welcomed me with open arms.

She was seventy-four and had every medical condition that older people have. Arthritis, osteoporosis, and cataracts in her right eye. The real kicker was that she needed a new liver. All it took was one pill bottle left on the bathroom counter and never-ending curiosity. It started with one Oxycodone before school. Then, it grew to taking a handful to school with me. I would wait for the perfect time to run to the bathroom and take them. It took a whole year before I

was caught. I got sloppy. Grammy noticed that her medication bottles were missing more than she was taking daily. At first, she thought she was just getting old. That was until one day, I grabbed too many and left the bottle empty. After shouting and things being thrown, she kicked me out. I was at rock bottom. I had to go home.

To my surprise, Mom let me move back in. Jimmy was still there, but it was better than being on the street. It also helped that they would go on spontaneous trips to Mexico or Hawaii. While they were on these trips, I would sneak into Jimmy's liquor cabinet and fill up a water bottle with vodka. That became my new school companion. It was the least my new stepdad could do for moving my entire life around. I think he always knew that I was stealing from him, but he never said anything in fear he would get kicked out of the fantasy he made with my mom. My secret indulgence was going great until I flew off the handle. I went to a party that some football jock was throwing right before school started. There were drugs I had never even heard of. I was a little scared to try cocaine for the first time, but before I knew it there was a line on the table in front of me. I snorted it. It was a feeling of joy that I had never experienced before. I ended up not going home that night. I woke up on a park bench with a cop staring me in the face. Oh god.

"Young lady, how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Come on, up. Let's get you home. I'm sure your parents are worried about you."

Shoot. My mom. After trying to give him the worst directions possible, to buy me some time to figure out an escape plan, I was at my front door. The next moments were a blur. I heard faint knocking and the door open, but the next thing I knew I was looking at the cops shiny shoes that had been tainted with vomit. Six months passed, and my mother still would not talk to me about that situation.

Last week was my seventeenth birthday. The universe has gotten more complicated. I had no preparation that nothing was going to get easier, just harder in a new way. School right now is worse than any horror movie produced. Adults say these will be the best years of my life and question why I don't want my life. The entire student body ignores my existence, but that does not bother me. I try my best to stay to myself. Unlike the hormone-filled teenagers of my high school, I don't crave attention. It doesn't fuel me. If I had no one to notice me, then I had no one to worry about me. The issue with doing your best to go unnoticed is that you always get noticed. If you don't talk to anyone, then people make up their ideas about you. I've heard rumors that I was a serial killer or a freak that collects hair off barbershop floors. Maybe, my family are freaks and that's why I don't talk much. In fear that my dark, twisted secrets could be exposed. When you don't feed the flames of rumors, then the fiction novels basically write themselves. After this ordeal, I know my existence will be known to everyone on the face of the Earth and some of their theories about who I am will be confirmed.

Why am I blamed for trying different methods of getting the missing happy hormones in my brain. That's a pleasant way of saying I was now a full blown drug addict. The drugs would either give me the happiness my childhood lacked, or it would finally take me from this world

that didn't deserve me. That was a bet that to me had good outcomes either way. I am not doing heroin or anything crazy like that. Needles scare me. I just found that pills take the pain away for a small amount of time. When I couldn't find pills, then alcohol did the trick. It elevated to cocaine, but there are definitely worse things I could do. I don't understand why these doctors can't process that. Doctors are supposed to help you. They can't be so delusional to not see that they are doing more harm than good. My mom freaked out when she found prescriptions that weren't mine in my room. I destroyed the image of the perfect little girl in her head. I know she is just worried, but that is exactly what I wanted to avoid. It hurt me enough to see my dad pass and leave me alone. Now, the overwhelming feeling that I disappointed her is eating me. So, now I'm here, in rehab. A place for criminals who sell their kids for drugs. I keep telling her I don't belong here, but she doesn't understand. This is why I didn't want anyone to fight for me.

The fluorescent lights are hurting my eyes. This nurse is holding my arm way too tightly. If she grips any harder, then a bruise will form. I am not a danger to anyone. She can let me go. I am in no shape to run. I can hardly keep my body upright. Even if I decided to run, the cement-framed halls are too complicated to navigate. I let my eyes wander off the white tiled floor. I glance at the nurse escorting me like I'm a convict. Her name tag reads 'Kaleigh Miller.' She has long, red hair that's pulled up in a loose ponytail. Her deep brown, almost black, eyes are focused on our destination. She looks exhausted. It doesn't look like she has slept in weeks. The bags that have formed under her eyes match the color of freshly bloomed lilacs. She attempted to cover them with makeup, but the sleep deprivation marks still shined brightly. She catches my eyes observing her, and they dart back to the floor. It smells like desperation and fear in the air. I can hear the chatter of what I can only assume are other patients. They are almost whispering. This feels like the start of a bad movie. It feels like we've been walking for miles, and if we don't stop soon, I might hurl all over her overpriced sneakers. My muscles begin to burn with every step we take. The nurse finally opens her mouth and breaks the silence.

"We are almost to your room. On the desk, you will find your agenda for the day. Everything is scheduled for you, so don't get any ideas that you can just do as you please here. I will give you a tour of the facility tomorrow. Today, you can rest, but don't get used to it." I could feel the venom in her voice hit me like acid.

While I find death appealing, this seems torturous. I don't want to die here. I want to leave this world of my own accord. Not by the hands of forceful doctors taking care of me just to get their paycheck. We finally come to a blue-painted door with bars over the small window on the front. Nurse Miller gestures to me to open the door. What lies behind this door seems scarier to me than any drug I've ever encountered. I forced my hand forward until it connected to the metal door handle. Peeping in, all I see is a singular twin bed with one pillow and a very thin, blue blanket. A pairing nightstand was beside it. A desk is on the other side of the room with a single sheet of paper on it. The nurse spoke, but my brain was too fogged to comprehend what she said. I hope it wasn't important. The door slammed shut, and there I was. Alone.

My feet move before my brain can tell them too. Out of curiosity, I let my feet lead me to a wooden desk in the corner. My eyes scanned over the itemized and color-coded agenda before me. It read:

'7:00 AM: Wakeup call
7:30 AM: Breakfast
8:00 AM: Daily medications
8:15 AM: Morning meditation
8:45 AM: Relaxation
9:45 AM: Group Therapy
11 AM: Lunch
11:30 AM: Individualized Therapy
1:00 PM: Relapse Discussion Group
2:00 PM: Exercise
3:00 PM: Family Therapy
4:30 PM: Personal Time/ Medications
6:00 PM: Dinner
7:00 PM: Personal Time
8:00 PM: Bedtime'

Oh, this is amazing. Even my personal time is scheduled out for me. I don't need all these therapy sessions. I took several deep breaths to calm me down. I was losing my mind, and there was no escaping this hell. I can do this. I just have to do what they want me to do like a robot, and I get to go home. It cannot be that hard. I set the paper back where I found it on the desk. They weren't kind enough to give me a clock, so I have no idea what time it is. My body is drained from the four days of medical detox. I have had so many medications put in my body to stop the shakes and nausea that I am thoroughly exhausted. I could lay on the floor and be sound asleep right now. I decided that probably wasn't the most hygienic thing to do. For once, I let my better judgment win. My feet set off on another adventure to the small bed they so graciously gave me.

My small frame plops on the bed, and I feel a slight enhancement of relief surge through my body. I let my eyes drift shut with one lingering thought before I fell asleep.

'God, if you're there, please let me make it through this alive.'

The Drama Within

by

Rochelle Easterwood

Second Place Short Story, Goodman

After Jeremy left, Hope cried her heart out. She finally admitted her love for Jeremy, and he just breaks her heart by telling her things she didn't want to hear. Maybe Jeremy's right though. Maybe God really does have other plans for her and the baby somewhere down the road. Hope didn't know what to do, but she could only hope the best for her and the baby. During the midst of all these thoughts, her phone rang. Hope looked at the caller and hung up. She didn't want to talk to Dimitri after everything he's done. But he called right back, something he did when he demanded an answer. So Hope answered the phone only to hear the lies that she knew would come.

"Hello," Dimitri said.

"What do you want Dimitri? Haven't you done enough?" Hope replied.

"I just want to talk," Dimitri said.

"What is there to talk about Dimitri?" Hope asked.

"Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been a jerk, and I should have told you the truth," Dimitri replied.

"Truth about what?" Hope replied hysterically.

"The truth about how I met her on a business trip I had a while back," Dimitri had said.

"So that's why you've been telling me maybe God has other plans, but it's not God; it's you Dimitri, and you had the nerve to test my faith and loyalty to you," Hope replied.

"I can trust her Hope," Dimitri said calmly.

"That's nice to know that you can trust someone after meeting them only once and the fact that I was your fiancée and you couldn't trust me," Hope replied. "I have to go Dimitri; enjoy your new life with someone you hardly know." Click. Hope couldn't believe he had the nerve to call her, talking about how sorry he is. Hope wanted the truth, and the truth stabbed her in the heart.

Meanwhile, back at the gas station, Jeremy continued to think about Hope; never in a million years did he ever think someone like Hope could change his heart about women. His ex-girlfriend broke his heart into a trillion pieces for his best friend. Jeremy didn't know what to do; he always said he would keep his heart locked away forever, until he saw Hope. Hope really changed something inside of him to make him see something he's never seen before: Love. Jeremy wanted to call Hope so badly that he decided against it. He finally went to sleep thinking about what tomorrow would bring.

At work the next day, Hope thought about meeting up with Jeremy later on that day. She thought about taking him to one of her favorite restaurants in town, Las Cascios. Las Cascios was a Mexican/Italian restaurant, one of the best restaurants there. Many people travel the world just to eat there. She really hoped she could get to take Jeremy out; it would be a treat, something they

could do as friends. Hope was so caught-up in her thoughts that she didn't notice Jeremy was standing right in front of her until she heard someone clear their throat. Hope immediately pushed away her thoughts until she could get herself under control.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you. I wanted to know if I could use your stapler?" Jeremy asked.

"You didn't bother me. I was just thinking about some things I needed to do," Hope replied.

"Um, do you happen to have any plans for this afternoon?" Hope asked.

"No, now that I know of; my aunt might call, but other than that, no," Jeremy said.

"Can I pick you up at your aunt's store later if there's no change of plans," Hope asked.

"Do you mind telling me why," Jeremy replied.

"Just be ready at three, and I'll pick you up," Hope said sarcastically.

"Um, ok," Jeremy replied.

Around 2:00 Hope gathered her things and headed home to change. At 2:30 Hope texted Jeremy and told him to make sure he dressed nicely.

Jeremy had no idea what Hope had planned; whatever it was, he was in for a surprise. Jeremy received Hope's text as soon as he walked through the door. Jeremy thought really hard about what was happening. Hope was taking him out, and by the way she said dress nicely, she was taking him somewhere special and maybe fancy. Jeremy didn't like the thought of Hope taking him out. It was a man's job to ask the woman. He wanted to take her somewhere special somewhere; he thought she would like Las Cascios.

Everyone likes Las Cascios, and it was a nice place to take someone you planned on dating. Jeremy was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he forgot he had to get ready. Jeremy walked down the hall to the bathroom and started his shower then went to his bedroom across the hall to pick out what he was going to wear. Jeremy finally picked a black suit, a blue dress shirt and a black tie. Hope wanted him to dress nice, so he hoped she liked it.

He wasn't the type to impress someone, but Hope changed things. He wanted to look his best. After taking a shower and getting dressed, Jeremy was finally ready to leave and meet Hope at his aunt's store.

Meanwhile back at Hope's hotel, Hope couldn't figure out what to wear. She had so many things, and she was running out of time. Finally she picked a dark blue dress with lace at the top and some blue heels she had just bought a week ago. She wanted to take Dimitri out, but things turned out differently. She really liked Jeremy and hoped with all her heart that he was the one for her. As Hope finished getting ready, Dimitri called.

"Hello," Dimitri said.

"What do you want Dimitri?" Hope asked.

"I want a chance to explain things," Dimitri said.

"I thought you already did that Dimitri," Hope replied.

"You didn't give me a chance to finish," Dimitri replied.

"Well, I have to be somewhere. and I'm running behind. I'll call you later," Hope said.

Click.

On the way over to the store to pick up Jeremy, Hope wondered about what was left for Dimitri to explain. He cheated on her with a woman who cleans motels, and he wanted to explain. There was nothing to talk about; he admitted he cheated, and that it was more about him moving on than anything. So what was left to talk about.

At the store while Jeremy sits there and waits on Hope to appear, Jeremy's aunt is constantly asking him questions about where he's going, but all Jeremy could say was he didn't know. As Jeremy looks out the window he sees Hope pull up and LORD did she look good. The only thing Jeremy could think about now was when was the perfect time to ask Hope to be his girlfriend.

"Hi," Hope said as she got out of the car.

"Hey yourself," Jeremy said.

"Are you ready," Hope asked.

"Yeah, let's go," Jeremy replied.

While on the road, silence filled the car. Hope didn't know what to say because every time she says anything, it seems to run Jeremy off. Just looking over at Jeremy in his black suit with a blue shirt with a smile on his face made Hope nervous. *What would people think seeing that we have the same color? Would they think we were dating?* With only a block to go, Jeremy finally said something breaking the silence.

"Do you mind telling me where we are going," Jeremy asked.

"Um, we're almost there. Can you wait just a little bit longer?" Hope replied.

"You surprise me more and more each day, you know that right?" Jeremy asked Hope.

"Yep, so tell me something about you?" Hope replied.

"What do you want to know?" Jeremy asked.

"Anything," Hope replied, realizing they had made it to the restaurant. "But tell me once we get inside I'm starving," Hope said, getting out of the car.

"Hope, you didn't have to bring me here," Jeremy replied.

"I know, but it's one of my favorite restaurants here, so I decided to bring you along," Hope happily said with a beautiful smile on her face.

"Well thank you, I always told myself one day I would take a beautiful lady like yourself on a date here one day it brings people together. So do you have a reason for bringing me here or is it just to get something to eat?" Jeremy replied.

"Jeremy, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for how I treated you the other day. You did nothing to deserve how I treated you. Dimitri had called and had my mind all in a twist. I just wish he told me the truth instead of keeping it from me for months and hearing the truth then wouldn't have hurt me as much as it does now *you know*," Hope answered. "I'm sorry for putting all my problems on you."

"It's okay, I understand what you're going through. We're friends, and I would love for you to talk to me about whatever's on your mind," Jeremy said.

"Jeremy, when I first met you I thought after our encounter in the store you wouldn't even talk to me anymore. The saying 'Love at first sight'" really got to me because I didn't think it was

possible to fall in love so quickly. I realized that I wanted to get to know you better after that day and the fact that my heart is racing now proves how you affect me deeply,” Hope replied.

“How about this for the rest of today? I tell you more about me and how you have the same effect on me. Um, let's see I went to Harvard and got a masters degree in business. I want to run my own company one day. I'm thirty-four years old. I live in New York City where I've been all my life. I have two brothers younger than me that I'm trying to set an example for. My mom walked out on us when I was four. My dad died when I was ten. So, yeah, that's my life. Other than the fact I'm looking for a person to spend the rest of my life with. Hope, I've never in all my years of looking for someone thought they would be as beautiful as you. When I look at you I don't see you as someone looking for money or fame. I see a beautiful woman looking for someone to love her for who she is no matter what circumstances come her way. I see a woman looking for the right man to capture her broken heart and fix it with love and happiness. Hope, I can't make any promises, and I can't say I won't hurt you because hurt comes in many different ways. I would love to be that man who cherishes you for the rest of your life. I realized the same day that I fell hard for you. I wish I could help you overcome your fear of love again. I know you want to hide your love, but don't hide it from me. I'm not perfect, nobody is perfect. I want to be that man who you come to and tell me about your day, about whatever is on your mind. I love you.” Jeremy stated. Looking across the table Jeremy realizes that Hope is crying. He didn't mean to make her cry; he just wanted to be honest with her and show her what it's like to be loved. Jeremy really wants to show Hope a dream of a lifetime.

“Jeremy, I don't know what to say. Nobody has ever confessed their love to me the way you just did. Yes, I want happiness and love. I also want to spend my life with you Jeremy, but I'm afraid to open up my heart again,” Hope replied.

“Hope, I'm not asking you to open your heart now; just don't shut me out. Not all men are the same. Take your time; I'm not rushing you. I want you to take time and think about what I said. Dimitri hurt you, and I understand nobody understands more than me. Okay.” Jeremy stated.

“Jeremy, I really wanna give this a try,” Hope replied back.

“Hope, you are going through so many different emotions right now. I don't want to make you feel as if you have to agree to be with me because I said I love you. We can take all the time we need to not rush into something. I know deep down you haven't gotten over him yet.” Jeremy said.

“I don't care about Dimitri, Jeremy. He made his choice. He cheated, and there's nothing I can do about it. I want to move on with my life and not be stuck on what could have been. I have children growing inside of me. I need to make a choice for me and my kids. I'm not going to keep him out of his kids' life. They deserve to at least know who he is. As you said, I'm looking for someone to love me and not only me but my kids also. Jeremy, I'm tired and I really want this. I've never thought I could fall in love again because of him, but you changed me and showed me what true love should be like without even knowing it. Just by telling me how I should be treated and how I should be loved. Jeremy, I want this more than you could ever know. Please, let's give this a try.” Hope asked pleadingly.

Jeremy silently gets down on one knee and pulls a box out his pocket. "Hope, as I've said before I really love you, and I'm asking you will you be my girlfriend? I know I said I can't make any promises, but I promise to love you and cherish you forever." Jeremy said.

"Yes, I will be yours forever and cherish you until the day I die," Hope said excitedly.

"I promise I will treat you like the queen you are," Jeremy said.

Looking around Jeremy and Hope didn't know they had caught everyone's attention until they heard the applause at the end. Jeremy meant every word he said. He really wanted to change and Hope changed something inside of him.

Deep inside Hope didn't know what to feel after Jeremy confessed and asked her to marry him. Jeremy was a really nice guy, and she hoped she made the right choice marrying him.

Later that day, Hope and Jeremy went to celebrate their engagement with family and friends. Hope told everyone that no matter what she was happy and nobody has ever made her happier. While Hope was discussing this with everyone, Dimitri showed up. Dimitri wanted a chance to explain to Hope that he wanted to be there for her and their baby, but hearing Hope talk about how happy Jeremy made her hurt him inside. Dimitri decided to just text Hope and let her know that he would be there for his child whether she wanted him there or not.

Jeremy went outside for some fresh air. He had seen somebody standing out on the porch and wanted to check it out. Dimitri was startled when he saw Jeremy he stepped back and decided to turn around and leave but Jeremy called out to him.

"Hey, who are you," Jeremy asked.

"Hi, I'm ahh a friend of Hope's," Dimitri said.

"Come in then, no need to leave," Jeremy said.

"Um, no that's ok I don't want to ruin the good night," Dimitri replied.

"There's no way you can ruin this happy moment," Jeremy said.

"Na'll man that's ok. I was just leaving," Dimitri replied.

The screen door to the house opened. "Hey honey, are you coming back inside when the guests are waiting for you," Hope said.

"Dimitri, what are you doing here?" Hope asked.

"Um, I wanted to talk to you, but it looks like you have moved on," Dimitri replied.

"Well, yeah, did you think I would come running back to you after everything you've done?" Hope asked.

"Hope, it was one mistake. People go through tough times when you left and found new love without even giving me a second chance," Dimitri said.

"Yeah, I know, Dimitri, and I came back to work things out, and you didn't care," Hope said.

"Um, sorry to interrupt but babe who is this?" Jeremy asked.

"My ex-fiancé," Hope replied.

"You told me you were a friend," Jeremy stated.

"Might as well say I am; she left me after one mistake and got engaged to you," Dimitri said angrily.

"What happened between you two?" Jeremy asked.

"He freaking cheated on me. That's what I'm going inside. I can't do this anymore," Hope said.

"Babe, hold on, so you didn't give him another chance to make things right," Jeremy said.

"At the time, you were the only one on my mind, Jeremy. All I could think about was how you helped me in the time of need," Hope answered.

"So you just gave up on a two year relationship just because we hit it off," Jeremy asked.

"Um, maybe because I was hurting, and you were there at the time," Hope said.

"So you're just using me? Is that it?" Jeremy asked.

"Jeremy, does it look like I am using you? I love you," Hope responded.

"Do you because you just said I was there meaning you only wanted me for your emotional support?" Jeremy said.

"No, I love you." Hope replied.

"You don't love me, do you? I should have seen this coming. How could I have been so dumb and stupid?" Jeremy said.

"Jeremy, Honey, I swear to you I love you, I'm over Dimitri. He had his chance and ruined it." Hope said hysterically.

"Wow, I'm supposed to believe you no longer love your ex. He made one mistake, and you turned your back on him. Why?" Jeremy replied.

"There was no need to go back to Dimitri; he made it plain and clear when he told the woman he cheated on me that we broke up." Hope replied back to Jeremy.

"Look, I need to get going. I'm sorry for interrupting your engagement party. I just wanted to apologize to Hope and explain my actions. I hope things work out for the both of you." Dimitri said.

The Forest of Shadow

by

Alexander Willoughby

First Place Short Story, Grenada

Darren crept through the twisted trees, making sure his feet didn't make any unwelcome noise to alert anything of his presence. The dark forest around him was nothing he hadn't seen before; he grew up in woods like these. However, as he progressed through the vegetation, he couldn't help but to flinch each time he saw a branch twitch or a twig fall to the ground.

"This place is so damn dark!"

Darren flinched as he turned to look at his companions. Kera was a mighty warriorress clad in high-impenetrable plate mail that bore the marks of previous battles like scars. She was resting her massive battleaxe upon her broad shoulders, and her closed helmet hid her familiar facial features from Darren.

"What were we even supposed to be hunting? We've been creeping around this damn forest for five hours, and we haven't even turned up a single track." Kera said in her trademark restless tone. Darren knew she wouldn't be appeased until they found something to kill, but she would have to be patient.

"On top of that, the wind is brisk. This coat was not woven to withstand such frigid conditions." Nalco pulled at his burlap cloak to better cover his bandaged arms. He then adjusted his face mask to be tighter around his head, leaving only his blonde hair and red eyes visible. His expertly woven clothing of bright colors and stunning patterns stood out in contrast to the natural world around them.

Nalco visibly shivered as he spoke, "This forest... I sense a particular darkness to it, oozing from the earth like a pungent puss. We should not stay here long, or I fear we may never leave."

Darren nodded, "I'd have to agree. Eliza, can you cast a location spell to-"

"Darren," Nalco stopped him, placing a hand on the ranger's shoulder, "Eliza's... not here right now."

Darren looked at his friend and solemnly nodded. In their last hunt, she had been stuck by a poisoned arrow. After taking her to a healer, they gave her a powerful and expensive antidote worth two hundred gold pieces, but the three of them could only rub together eighty.

Darren remembered finding this bounty poster outside of their favorite tavern. When he read that there was a guaranteed payout of three hundred gold pieces, he took it without hesitation. Throughout this hunt, they had all noticed their missing friend, like a human shaped hole in reality.

He looked Nalco in the eye, holding back his tears, as he told him, "She will be next time."

He turned his back to his friends to scan the forest once again. His eyes could pierce the veil of darkness better than any of them. Darren scanned everything, from the bark of the trees to the blades of grass until he found the anomaly he was looking for.

Darren's feet left the ground as he leapt into a sprint. He jumped to grab a branch, flinging himself effortlessly over a thorn bush as he landed in a small clearing, in front of a peculiar set of tracks.

Darren examined the anomaly for any information he could gather. The moist sod had an impression hidden within it, betrayed by the bent blades of the grass. The impression was that of a large paw, like that of a bear. However, large patches of the soil had been torn and rubbed barren, leaving only a thick mud amidst the grass. A low hanging branch was dangling haphazardly from a nearby tree by a thin piece of bark. The break was directed to the side instead of toward the ground, indicating that something had brushed against it and broken it. Behind him, Darren listened as his friends entered the small clearing.

"There was a creature that was either chasing or dragging its prey through here. The prey wasn't wounded, as there isn't blood, and I think it tried to escape in that direction." Darren gestured to the broken branch. "We should follow it to see where it goes."

"Finally, something!" Kera dropped her axe head to the ground, violently shattering a fallen branch. The sound penetrated the unnerving serenity of the forest, as they heard it echo into the dark beyond.

However, the sound that came next was far more concerning than any axe strike. A bloodcurdling scream rose high into the air, only to be followed by the fluttering of frightened birds.

Darren's ears automatically detected the sound's origin, somewhere north of them. His head twisted to look at his friends as they all shared a nod.

The three of them leapt into action as they made their way through the forest. Darren dodged hanging vines and grasping limbs with beautiful dexterity, looking more feline than human. Kera barreled through twisted trees and tangled bushes like a natural disaster, all the while clutching her battleaxe in a two-handed grip. Nalco's sword effortlessly cut away the vegetation as he made his way to his friends, determined to not fall behind.

The three hunters burst through the dense growth into a large clearing. As Darren scanned, he couldn't help but notice the dead brown grass that resided here, untouched by any weeds or extra growth. As he looked further, he could make out the clearing as an exact circle of death, devoid of any living life, aside for them.

Nalco's body started shivering as he tightened his grip on his sword, "w-What is this place? It f-feels so... wrong."

"Listen! Do you hear that?" Kera hissed as she leveled her axe, assuming a combat stance.

Darren opened his ears to his surroundings, perfectly attuning himself to the forest. However, the only sound he was greeted with was that of their own breathing.

"There's nothing." Darren whispered; whether it was to his friends or to himself, he did not know.

"Exactly." Kera responded, slowly turning her head to observe the far edges of the clearing.

The three hunters put their backs to one another, forming a defensive position. Darren retrieved his bow from his back, quickly nocking an arrow as he searched for a target.

Suddenly, a loud snap could be heard from behind Darren. The sound was followed by Kera letting out a mighty battle cry as she threw her axe with enough force to crack the very air itself. The axe flew at breakneck speeds as it tore a thorn bush nearly clean out of the ground before colliding with the trunk of thick oak. Kera extended her right arm, palm outstretched, and the axe dislodged itself from the tree before it flew back into her gauntleted hand. Her fingers wrapped it in an instant as she entered a new stance.

"What was it, Kera?" Nalco asked, slightly turning his mouth toward Kera.

"I don't know; all I saw was a shadow." She said, adjusting the grip on her axe.

Without a word needed, the hunters spun the formation so now Darren was looking at the carnage wrought by Kera's attack. As he scanned in that direction, his eyes picked out something in the now-vacant spot the bush was torn from, something small and red.

"I see something in the exposed dirt, can't tell what..." Darren strained his eyes to see further, but no matter how hard he strained, the thing seemed to twist and alter to avoid identification.

"Check it out; we'll cover you." Kera told him, putting her back against Nalco's.

Darren broke away, swiftly making his way towards the thing. He slid his arrow off of the bow string and slid it back into the quiver. As he approached, Darren reached the realization that the red color was not that of a ripe fruit or a patch of dying leaves, but it was instead the color of blood.

There in the soil lay a small girl, surely no more than seven years of age. Although her abdomen faced the sky, the girl's neck had been violently twisted, so much so that her face was stuck in the dirt. Her abdomen had been torn open, as if by a wild animal, but none of her flesh was missing. It was all senselessly ripped and scattered, as if the animal didn't eat a scrap.

Staring at the body made Darren's stomach twist itself into knots. No child should have to meet their end, especially not to a fate like this. She was probably taken from her home and tortured until the monster got bored and ended her. The mere thought filled Darren with a boiling hot rage.

However, as he stared at this poor body, he couldn't help but notice the beautiful pale shade of her untarnished skin, or the allure of that raven-black hair. He wondered what her face looked like...

As he reached for the girl's shoulder, his hand barely grazed her shoulder before he was overcome with a dreadful feeling, one not truly able to be described as anything but a primal

fear. His limbs locked in place as he felt a hundred- no, a thousand malevolent eyes look upon him. He felt cold, dark fingers wrap around his heart and squeeze as his heart began to pound. The blood in his ears became deafening, and his eyes were stuck open staring at that hideous, contorted flesh.

“Darren, get back over here! Something’s happening!” Kera’s call snapped Darren out of his panic just long enough to get up and run as fast as he could back to his friends. He felt his feet slide as he entered the formation.

His eyes darted around as watched this terrible fog, a suffocating and blinding blanket of doom, flood into the clearing like a swarm of horrific unified insects. He drew his bow and nocked an arrow off of pure instinct before pulling the string and aiming into the mist.

Darren listened as Nalco chanted words in that forbidden language as his sword curved and contorted into a sickle with a metallic groan. The bandages around the man’s arms unraveled by themselves, revealing the hideous scars that decorated them. Kera’s massive frame held steadfast, scanning the mist for any threat as she grasped her axe in those ironclad hands.

The three hunters stood at the ready until the mist filled the clearing completely, seemingly erasing the forest beyond.

Darren’s emerald eyes anxiously searched the fog for any sign of movement amidst the mist. As soon as his eyes caught a glimpse of a moving shadow, he loosed an arrow into the foggy abyss. He twisted his fingers to cast an arcane rune and watched the arrow curve to follow the shadow. Darren thought- no, he knew his arrow had struck true, but there was no sound to back up his claim.

Kera let out a roar of defiance as she raised her axe above her and slammed the head into the ground. The tremendous force of such a blow shook the earth beneath them, but none of them cared. Kera ripped the axe from the ground and threw it into the ocean of mist, only for it to miss its target and fly back to her.

Nalco slid the blade of the sickle down his arms and felt the warm blood seep out. He muttered more of those terrible words as his blood began to levitate in the air. Suddenly, the blood solidified into sharp, jagged spikes, and Nalco launched them into the fog. He felt as they entered their target, but his normal magic took no effect.

“It has no blood! I can’t control it!” He cried to his friends, but Darren’s focus was only on his next target.

Darren nocked another arrow and shot, but he couldn’t see his target. Shadows now swirled in the fog like a poisonous infection as the hunters made their stand. Kera swung and threw her axe with all of her might, but time after time, it returned to her hand slower. Nalco hurled his spears of blood, but his feet began to shift and legs staggered, for one’s body only contains so much blood.

And, even worse still, now the fog lashed at them, tearing at skin and ripping at flesh. The shadowy blade hurt far worse, for they lashed at the hunter’s minds as well as their flesh. One slash took Kera’s right arm, but that served only to strengthen her rage. She was no

stranger to swinging the axe one handed, and she'd lost an arm before, but there was no healer here to reattach it.

Eventually, the hunters grew weary. Darren's quiver ran dry, leaving him desperately swinging the bow like a staff. Kera's mountain-like armor fractured and cracked, until her skin was clearly visible underneath, as was the seeping blood. Nalco's veins grew dry as he staggered and fell, unable to pick himself up again.

Then, as the last traces of fog made way for that terrible shadow, all was silent. The swirling chaos around Darren came to a complete halt, as did all the noise that it and his friends created. Darren's eyes widened as he heard Kera's roar turn into a terrified screech. Darren ran towards the sound, but it was as if he was running in place, for nothing changed with the darkness. Eventually, he felt his foot step in something wet, only for him to look down at a small puddle of blood and a broken sickle.

Defeated, Darren fell to his knees, for there was nothing he could do. With his friends gone and his quiver empty, he had nothing left. All was lost.

He could hear *nothing*. He could see *nothing*. *Nothing* but that dreadful black.

As he knelt there, broken and alone, he couldn't help but think of Eliza. Would she be sold as a slave to pay her own debt, or would she be outright killed? Would there be any way for her to learn what happened to them?

As thoughts filled his mind and clouded his vision, one sound broke the perfect silence.
drip... Drip... DRIP

Darren lifted his shaky head only to see the body of that girl standing in front of him, twenty paces away. Her abdomen was still torn asunder, neck still twisted and bulging, but there she stood, perfectly still.

Darren's mind, his very soul, screamed at him to look away, to avert his eyes, to gouge them out; *anything* was better than looking at this... this... *thing*.

But, he couldn't make himself, for inside of this void, it was the only other thing. The blood, the sickle, the splintered bow had all disappeared, or perhaps Darren only lost sight of them.

As Darren stared at the thing that looked like a girl, he heard-. No, that would describe this feeling. He *felt* a voice in the back of his mind, liking inky tendrils of evil wrapping around his very brain.

Broken mortal mind, Gaze into oblivion, Gaze at your folly.

Out of the shadow rolled a small rock, first tiny but quickly grew larger as it drew closer. Darren couldn't break his stare at the thing, even when the rock hit his own knees.

Gaze at your folly, The one who sought to protect, Ripped and ruined.

Darren felt something grip his head and slowly move it to look at the rock, now the size of a large ball. But, it was no rock; it was Kera, or, at least, her helmeted head.

Broken and battered, All who stand fall in the end, Like rocks in the tide.

Darren watched as part of her head left her helmet, revealing a face that he may have once recognized, but what was before him now was so contorted by fear and pain that he only saw a trace of the Kera he knew.

Darren wanted to close his eyes, but the thing wouldn't let him. His eyes stayed open, and the longer that he looked, the more he cried. Why did this have to happen? What did they do wrong?

Was it all for nothing?

The will of mortals, Some cannot be shattered, Yet still so weak.

Darren wanted nothing more than to undo all of this. They could've just been hired as muscle for a trading caravan, or they could have stolen the antidote and been on their way. He wanted to go back.

To go back in time, So far away yet so close, Yet I could do it.

Darren looked back up at the thing, and he was answered before he could ask.

Gaze into my eyes, If you so wish to return, Gaze into my eyes.

Darren felt himself stand, his weakened knees beginning to buckle under his weight, yet still he walked. Five paces, at first, then ten, until he was standing in front of the thing. He knelt down and stared into its dark hair.

Rip and tear the flesh, Bleed onto eternity, To bring back your friends.

Darren raised his arms, his hands shaking more violently than he had ever felt before. But, he thought about Nalco, then Kera, then Eliza, and he knew what he had to do.

Rip and tear the flesh, Scream out to eternity, To bring back your life.

Darren took the thing's head in his hands. He shivered, but he didn't close his eyes as, with a sickening crack, he ripped the creature's head around.

The England Killer

By

Kevion McGee

Second Place Short Story, Grenada

It was a typical October night in jolly ol' England, if you can even call it "jolly" anymore. The air was brisk with a hint of musk, the cool breeze was blowing ever so calmly while carrying leaves across the cobblestone streets. The moon shone with an eerily light as it displayed its natural glow on top of the compacted houses that seemed to stretch beyond reach with its dull color. Times were tough right now, a mysterious serial killer was loose in the streets seemingly targeting anyone within his reach. Even if you tried to run away, it seemed as if he always found a way to find you. But this serial killer was no stranger to me. I knew him too well but didn't have the guts to tell anyone out of fear that he might decide to *hunt* me down once he found out that I shared his identity. This might seem like random paranoia getting to me, but it is actually something that almost happened to me. The first time I tried to alert the authorities, the serial killer jumped from the top of the building and stabbed his sharp dagger that was meant to penetrate me into a small section of dirt for the garden near the entrance of the building. While he was busy coming back on his feet, I took the opportunity to run away as fast as I could. However, my own thoughts were going to be the death of me before the serial killer even had the chance to try to kill me again. Ever since that close encounter with him, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I began to wonder about his motivations. *Why would he go on this rampage and kill all of these innocent people? What went wrong in his life that made him change so abruptly? What did I do wrong?* These thoughts kept pounding in my head as I continued to walk towards Daves who agreed to meet with me beside his house tonight. It might sound strange that we were having our conversation outside of the house instead of inside of the house which would be safer for both of us, but Daves told me how his wife no longer wants to hear about the serial killer since the thought of him killing people without warning makes her nervous for her and Daves's lives. Deep down inside of my mind, I couldn't help but feel as if I really were putting my friend in danger. I know that I am the real target that the serial killer wants to kill. By me talking to the people closest to me, I'm putting them all in harm's way. I know there is a high risk meeting up with Daves late at night but I just can't take it anymore. This silence that I have been carrying for so long is finally getting to me. I have to tell someone that I can trust. I've known Daves for so long that he is the only person that I can truly trust with a secret like this. I approached Daves and began to greet him first.

"Hey Daves." I said with much enthusiasm that I could muster.

"Hey Max. Let me guess, you want to talk about the serial killer again." said Daves in a more of a statement kind of tone rather than a question. I could tell he was getting annoyed by me. I don't blame the guy. I pester him day and night about this serial killer rather than have a

normal conversation with him like normal long-term friends should. But Daves is nice enough to just listen to me rambling on with my nonsense. But even nice people have their own limits.

“Yes.” I said in an apologetic tone. I began to look at my feet while becoming increasingly ashamed. “Listen, I know I haven’t been the greatest person to hang around with these past couple of days but I can’t help it. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t even walk down the streets without feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This serial killer can attack at any moment.”

Daves put his hand on my shoulder. “Max, I know you’ve been nervous ever since that incident happened to you, but you have to grip onto your sense of reality again.” said Daves trying his best to console me.

I know Daves could easily see how fragile I became over the past few days we met. Even a blind man could see that. But it’s not like I wanted anyone to feel sorry for me, especially Daves. But somehow I managed to do just that without even realizing it. But I knew that he wouldn’t understand the struggle and fear I’ve been going through on a day to day basis. The truth is, the serial killer has been stalking me even more ever since the day I tried to report him to the police. The thought of him just stalking me without actually trying to kill me is getting to my head. It’s like he wanted me to live in fear. However, if I do decide to go through with telling Daves my secret, then the serial killer would be going after him as well. I didn’t want to tell Daves, but I had to tell someone. I know it’s a selfish idea, but I at least wanted to relieve some of my fears on a person that I could trust. In fact, telling Daves my secret may even save our friendship that became fractured over the past few days as well. And even if the serial killer does go after Daves, it’s not like he would kill him. It’s me that the serial killer wants. Or at least I hope that is the case. All I had to do now was find a way to lean into the general direction of telling him without being so abrupt about it. I looked back up at Daves and began to start a conversation that would eventually lead into the revelation of my secret.

“I have some new information about the serial killer.” I said.

“What is it?” Daves said with a long sigh at the end of his question.

“The serial killer wears a white makeshift mask to hide his appearance. His wardrobe consists of a long black leather fitted coat with the collar being turned down. His sleeves are equipped with a simple cuff-like style. He wears black gloves to prevent any of his fingerprints from being left behind whenever he commits a murder. At night, he hides in the shadows concealed by the darkness only to come out to the light to kill his victims. The only sign of appearance that you can see from the serial killer is his blue eyes that contrast the red anger that fills his body and motivates him.” I said all of this without realizing that I was rambling on with nonsense again. I could tell that Daves was becoming more annoyed with me as time moved on.

“Max, you already told me all of this before. Why are you telling me again?” said Daves. I suddenly remembered that I did tell Daves this information the day after the serial killer attempted to murder me.

"I don't know. I guess it just slipped my mind. I'm sorry." I said. I couldn't think straight anymore. Sleep deprivation and hunger were slowly eating my mind away from me. Daves looked even more concerned about my well-being.

"Look at yourself Max. You're becoming an empty husk of your former self." said Daves.

"What are you saying Daves?" I was starting to become a little annoyed with Daves for making this all about me again. I know that he was just looking after me, but now wasn't the time to do it.

"I'm saying that maybe it is time for you to take care of yourself again Max. You're losing yourself in all of this nonsense. I'm losing the person that I became friends with all those years ago when we were just children." said Daves. The thought of him worrying about me tore a hole into my heart.

"Daves, I've been trying my hardest to get some rest and tend to myself. But everytime I manage to do so, I'm either awoken from my sleep by a loud creak in my kitchen or nauseated when I think about his gruesome murders while I eat. I can't just lay and close my eyes Daves. I'm afraid if I do, I won't wake up to see another morning." I said. This was going on long enough. Daves began to shake his head slowly while looking down at the ground. He looked back up at me.

"Why are you so interested in the serial killer Max? How do you know so much about him?" said Daves. This was my chance to reveal my secret. To finally relieve some of the stress that I have been feeling.

"Listen Daves, I know you believe in the concept that no one is immortal. That they can easily be defeated like any other human being. But this serial killer is no ordinary human being. The reason why I'm afraid of this serial killer is because I know his real identity." I said. Daves took a step back. His face was in complete shock because of the surprising revelation I just told him.

"What?! But how? You have to tell me everything." said Daves.

"The reason that I know this serial killer is because---" Before I could finish my sentence, I saw him. The foundation of my skin grew pale as my stomach churned from anxiety and fear. I wanted to warn Daves that the deity of evil himself was standing right behind him with a sharp dagger in his left hand that glinted in the moonlight as he slowly lifted it into the still, cool air. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't muster a single movement nor sound from within my body. My body was in complete shock, I couldn't do anything.

"What are you---" Daves began to say as he turned around to see what I was staring at. But before he could even catch a glimpse of what I was looking at, it was too late. The killer covered Daves's mouth with his right hand and stabbed him in the back. The dagger pierced through Daves's chest and the blood covered point of the dagger stuck out from the other side of his body as the life in his eyes slowly began to drain away. The evil deity pushed Daves to the ground to free his dagger from his body. He chuckled maniacally as he now focused his gaze upon me with his dagger still in his left hand that was now dripping with Daves's blood.

“You’re next Max!” the serial killer said. His voice sounded so strident that it sent a chill down my spine. I began to bead out sweat from my forehead as the fear inside my body began to be replaced with an immense amount of adrenaline. I knew that I had to get away from him as quickly as possible before he had the chance to kill me like he did Daves. The serial killer lunged at me with his sharp dagger in an attempt to kill me in one devastating strike. I managed to avoid the attack at the last possible moment while at the same time, I reached for his arm and pushed him to the ground. This was my chance. Before he had the opportunity to get back onto his feet, I immediately began to run as fast as I could towards a crowded alleyway. I looked back as I ran, the serial killer was now visibly furious as he watched me make my escape. The serial killer scrambled onto his feet.

“Run Max! Run while you still can! You can never escape Jack the Ripper!” said Jack. His voice was now filled with anger as he began to run after me like the maniac that he was. I looked back in front of me as I inched closer to the crowded alleyway to make my escape. This will be the last encounter I will have with this freak before I could end this nightmare once and for all. The final showdown that would determine life or death itself.

Literary Essays

***Passing* by Nella Larsen Analysis**

by

Lakesia Smart

First Place Literary Essay, Goodman

They say everything that glitters isn't always gold. We quickly learn this while reading *Passing* by Nella Larsen. This book is all about one's perspective and how they see things. The climax and demise of this story is the conflict between individuals' ways of thinking. "I'm not such an idiot that I don't realize that if a man calls me a nigger it's his fault the first time, but mine if he has the opportunity to do it again" (Larsen 1106). This basically means people only do what we allow. Passing for instance was allowed by blindness. Many criticized Clare for passing, but Irene in a way was also passing. In order to live amongst whites, Clare must never advocate for the rights of Blacks, and she must not be seen too much in public with blacks, in case her husband will ever catch on to her truth. Irene's wealth allows her to enjoy things that are stereotypically "white." The story *Passing* not only reflects the act of passing by the way of color but also in life by actions.

Initially, the focus was going to be on Clare and her not being happy with her life, but reading on, one could not simply pin point just her. In this story, so many are on the outside looking in and being very opinionated about how they feel a person should act being in their predicament. Larsen wrote blacks could easily pass for whites, but that it is harder for whites to pass for black. I found a great deal of valuable information and understanding in Catherine Rottenberg's Article "*Passing: Identification, and Desire.*" Rottenburg mostly talks about how race is a "performative reiteration." For example, John hates "niggers" because that is how he was raised. In the book *Passing* where Jack Bellew says, "Black people always robbing and killing," there's irony because John Bellew had so much hate towards black people and denied any family ties with them (Larsen 1100). He is passing through life with ignorance of race and morality.

At one point Clare invites Irene over for tea and upon arrival Irene is greeted with a familiar presence. This person would be non-other than their old classmate, Gertrude, who is also passing. As the tea goes on discussion of kids occur. She admits she is scared to have kids in case they come out black, and Clare agrees. In a white society, whiteness is the only good option. It is thought that everyone is supposed to mimic whites or comply with the rules. Nonetheless while Gertrude lives in fear, Clare carries herself around like she doesn't have a care in the world. It seems in a way Irene was jealous but yet afraid of the life that Clare had. Irene was biased towards Clare's choice of passing, yet she did it to enjoy thrills of restaurants and outings around the town. Their cover of true identities connected Clare and Irene directly because both were passing. One was more extreme than the other, but no one could afford to judge. Irene says, "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of

revulsion, but we protect it.” (Larsen 1107). Even though Irene still considers herself of black heritage, she still wants to be with middle class and be above the poverty and discrimination (Larsen 1055). Clare rose to the higher levels very fast surpassing Irene by marrying a rich white guy.

Focusing on Irene, she has lived a pretty decent life. It wasn't until Clare came in the picture that she felt like she was losing control of a world she'd become accustomed to. She wanted stability and routine while her husband was more of a drifter. Brian liked opportunity and truth. He often dreamed of moving and having a happy life, but Irene would hush him. She felt very threatened when a carefree person such as Clare came into their lives. This made her doubt herself, but Brian was passing through life not being happy by accepting his fate of being underprivileged and overlooked. Brian states, "Instinct of the race to survive and expand." (Larsen 1107). This shows his acceptance of always being the underdog as race was an indicator of how someone can belong to specific social class in society. Clare wanted Irene's life because of her being family oriented and "happy," but, in actuality, Irene was willing to live with Brian's accused infidelity as long as her boys were straight. Clare was jealous of Irene's carefree nature and beauty, but Clare herself was not happy with that alone. Everything in life has a cost, we quickly see that with the death of Clare Kendry. Although readers were left with the mystery of who killed her and what exactly happened during the moments of her death.

While race is the main aspect of the story, desire is also an aspect. Clare had the desire to live the life that she wanted and freely, while Irene wanted the stability and assurance of the life she grew to love. Just like Brian and Mr. Kendry, all of them had the desire to get through life as best as they knew how. Passing can be seen as not only passing by color but also by putting on an act to get by in life. Irene has to live with the fact that Brian might have cheated on her with Clare; therefore, she is passing everyday by being happy when she isn't. Brian wants to move and try a new start but is stuck in a place of being perplexed. Gertrude is scared when she has her twins that they will come out a darker shade which will change the outline of their lives. Jack has been passing by being blind to his wife's needs and race. This leads to the climax and end of the story where Clare dies. Although Clare has passed as white and developed a life and family to better herself; she only ends up making it worse for herself in the end. Whether one is getting over by lying or pretending through life, you can only pass for so long without getting caught. Everything in life has a cost, good or bad.

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Love Beyond Tension

by

Macie Manasco

Second Place Literary Essay, Goodman

It is true when people say that everyone is different. Because of our differences, we tend to be divided and that causes tension. *The Coquette* is a story about a lady named Eliza whose fiancé has just died; therefore, she decides to not settle down right away. Her community, or loved ones, try to consult with her and get her to marry the right man, but she does not listen. This creates tension between her and her family and friends because she is doing the opposite of what they have given her advice to do. In Hannah Webster Foster's novella, *The Coquette*, conflict is created between individualism and community when Eliza Wharton's actions do not match up with their standards.

The words of Eliza's community illustrate the tension between Eliza and her community. Her community wants her to meet a great husband who will be loyal to her. Since Eliza has made the decision to not get married quite yet, she goes to all types of parties and meets different men. Two men in particular have become very fond of Eliza and try to win her over. The first man is Mr. J. Boyer. He is a nice gentleman who is about to be ordained as a preacher. The second man is Peter Sanford who has a bad reputation of seducing women. Her family and friends want her to marry Boyer because they believe he will be a good husband to Eliza. This is shown through the words of her best friend, Lucy Freeman, when she says, "...you will not find a more excellent partner than Mr. Boyer. Whatever you can reasonably expect in a lover, husband, or friend, you may perceive to be united in this worthy man" (Foster 856). On the other hand, Eliza's family and friends do not think highly of Peter Sanford. Lucy Freeman describes him as "a rake" and warns her by stating, "and can a lady of your delicacy and refinement think of forming a connection with a man of that character? I hope not" (Foster 856). She is telling Eliza that she should not get involved with Sanford because she does not want her to get hurt. Lucy's advice to Eliza is helpful because she wants what is best for her friend. She does not want her friend to be shamed or end up in a situation that she could have avoided. Her heart for Eliza is in the right place because she loves her and wants her life to be good.

Conflict can also be demonstrated between Eliza and her community through the consequences of Eliza's decisions. Eliza's family and friends tried to make an effort to be there for her and direct her to what they thought was right for her. However, Eliza chose to neglect their advice and ultimately had to face the consequences. The reason there is tension here is because Eliza's family and friends love her and do not want to see her suffer. When Eliza gets pregnant out of wedlock, runs away, and dies during childbirth, her loved ones are devastated by what has happened to her. This is shown through the words of Lucy when she says, "Is she then gone! Gone in this most distressing manner! Have I lost my once loved friend; lost her in a

way which I could never have conceived possible” (Foster 938). Lucy still shows that she loves her best friend, Eliza, when saying this because she is mourning her through her words. Eliza’s cousin, Julia Granby, also talks of Eliza’s friends and mother mourning over her death by stating, “How sincerely, my dear Mrs. Sumner, must the friends of our departed Eliza sympathize with each other; and with her afflicted, bereaved parent!” (Foster 935). Eliza’s loved ones clearly cared for her and wanted her to live a good life. Her loved ones’ intention was to help Eliza to make the right choice because they loved her.

The tension between Eliza and her community is shown throughout the story in several ways. This tension is not necessarily based on Eliza, but on her actions. Her community did not like that she got involved with a man who had a bad reputation. To try to prevent Eliza getting into trouble, they tried to guide her to do the right thing, but Eliza did not listen. Although Eliza’s loved ones do not agree with her actions, they still loved and cared for her no matter what she chose.

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