

Reflections 2015-2016

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 2015-2016 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

Autumn Leaves

by

Joelle Young

First Place Poetry, Grenada

Honorable Mention Poetry, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

The leaves of autumn carry with them dreams
That grew a year but perished in the cold.
A final one down from a low branch streams,
A crumpled mass, a hunched recluse grown old.

It softly lands upon the ground, and then,
With its companions in a pile of red,
Rests still, except occasionally when
A blast of wind disturbs the lifeless bed.

How often have I tread on such a leaf
While in a bitter, disappointed mood
And listened as my heart complained with grief--
Yet never thought of having gratitude:

Though all my dreams were dead, I still was here;
I'd live to grow and dream another year.

We Bury Fairest Beauty in the Deepest Earth

by

Joelle Young

Second Place Poetry, Grenada

We bury fairest beauty in the deepest earth.
For Christ, we've lost expression, thrown away the words
That speak of him. The pages we discard
Are priceless, yet his only poets are birds
Who casually sing while plucking seeds of little worth.

Did he not write his poems on our hearts?
He was the scribe of love. His pen was dipped
In his own blood, amid the cacophonous rush
Of violence and temptation, while his flesh was ripped
From peace and stung by evil's punishing darts.

If we knew the value of his love, we'd read
His words in reverent silence—sacrifice, though plain,
Beside ten thousand volumes still more fair,
His offer of redeeming grace our one refrain,
Whose recognition we would always plead.

Our love of God: this is our perfect praise.
Expressing back to him his love for us. All dies
Except our love for him. No words pass through our lips
Except the words that sing his love, which lies
So deeply in our hearts it merits all our days.

The Answers to the Hard Questions

by

Jade Dalton

First Place Poetry, Ridgeland

The words are starting to crawl their way up my throat.
They threaten to expose me for what I really am.
I don't know if you can handle the truth,
Don't know if I want to find out.

I concluded that our souls,
Were meant to be tethered together,
Wrapped in knots,
Confining us to our love for eternity.

So how did I let you slip away from me?
How did I desolate everything that made us into who we were?

Now I've come undone,
With no one to bind me back together.

How do I explain to you,
These awful deeds that I have done?

My lips are contorting,
Trying to hold it back,
A moment or two longer,
And I know that we'll be through.

I don't want to see your heart
Tear apart,
Into pieces.

The words have finally arrived,
They are strangling my tongue,
My spit keeps my mouth sealed,
Like glue.

They are knocking against my teeth,
Pushing out against my cheeks.
If I open my lips,
They will tumble out,
And sucker-punch you.

I'm very good at this,
Destroying everything I touch.

I just want to remember everything,
We created.

And forget everything,
I burned.

I would have done anything to see you smile,
I guess that's why,
I stopped trying,
That kind of love is a burden to bear.

I part my lips,
And drag you down into the abyss.

Single Mother: The Story of My Life

by

Fredrica Sandifer

Second Place Poetry, Ridgeland

I play both roles.
Mom and Dad.
I wear many hats.
Mother,
Father,
Teacher,
Best friend,
Preacher,
Police Officer,
Chef,
Housekeeper,
Chauffeur,
Cheerleader,
#1 Fan,
Motivational speaker.
When discipline is needed,
I wear my prison guard hat.
I often ask myself,
"Who runs my life, me or my child?"
No time for myself.
No time for fun.
But my child is not hurting for anything.
No missed meals.

She's fully clothed from head to toe.
Shelter from the storm.
Transportation to travel.
Lord, give me strength
to continue on this path.
It's not easy.
Her earthly father is not present.
Not sure if he cares.
At this moment, I'm weak.
At this moment, my heart is heavy.
At this moment, my soul is crying.
Being a single mother
is not the path I saw myself traveling.
Nonetheless, being a single mother
is a blessing, never a curse.
Sometimes I feel like screaming.
Sometimes I feel like running.
And yes,
Sometimes I feel like giving up.
But the God in me
won't and REFUSES
to let me give up.
Lord, please help me.
Lord, please give me strength.
Lord, please give me understanding.
Lord, I need You.
A single mother.
My heart is screaming.
A single mother.
My hands are raised.
I surrender to You.
I put my cares in Your hands.
This load is too heavy
to carry sometimes.
I get on my knees
praying for strength
praying for understanding
praying for peace
praying for wisdom.
A single mother,
yet a soldier in Your army.
A single mother.
I bear the weight of the world
but You help me carry the load
every step of the way.
A single mother
Strong and Proud
A single mother.

Blessed and highly favored.
An earthly mother.
Jesus is our heavenly father.
Amen.

Flowers Shaped Like Stars

by

Miranda Burchfield

First Place Poetry, Goodman

Second Place Poetry, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

You should know I'm always here,
lying amongst the bright flowers,
gazing up from my back,
beneath the scattered stars.
The stars have been there forever;
I always think about you.

And I wish I could hold you
every time I lie here.
I could stay here forever,
lost in a tangle of flowers,
counting each of the stars.
I don't know when you'll be back.

The firm ground beneath my back
reminds me of leaning against you.
I make wishes on the stars
every time I come here
and surround myself with flowers.
I will come here forever.

It seemed like forever
Before they finally sent you back.
I pick handfuls of flowers,
and I scatter them over you.
Do you know how often I come here?
In the light from the stars.

No good came from wishing on the stars;
time without you lasts forever,
to be with you I must be here,
I wish I could have you back,

everything is pointless without you,
so I continue to bring you flowers.

You should be bringing me flowers,
together we should observe the stars,
I'm lost here without you,
will I feel incomplete forever?
If I could have our future back,
you'd never have to be here.
But here I give you back,
flowers shaped like stars,
I will love you forever.

Te Odio

by

Taylor Cade

Second Place Poetry, Goodman

Your kisses are like sugar,
but your sugar is bitter and full of lust.
When you whisper in my ear, your breath fills my head with your lies;
It fills my nose with a foul pungent odor like rotting meat
“Sweetie, you can do this,” I whimper to myself.

Te Odio

I hate you,
but I am in love with you.
You are so amazing because you tear me down limb from limb.
I crave that pain you put me through: the tears, the lies, and the deception;
It makes me feel alive and dead at the same time.
Who needs life when we can be at peace with what makes us feel best: drugs?
So do them! I know you will.
Those damned hydrocodone pills keep calling my name;
They make me taste the copper flavored blood running through my veins.
They make me see the weird alien named Tori that shows up every Tuesday night.
These candies make me hear what everyone is saying without a single word.
I can smell the vomit on the ground in front of me.
I can feel my life sucking away from me pill by pill.
You leave me hankerin' for more,
and this is why I must leave these drugs for good because,
Mr. Death, you make me feel so alive.

Essays

Pap's Chair

by

Danielle Deaton

First Place Essay, Grenada

Even though my grandfather is gone, every time I open up the door to go into his room, I am reminded that it is still "Pap's Room." I have lived here without him for several months, but I cannot bring myself to claim the room as my own.

As I open the bedroom door, a part of me expects to have the crap scared out of me when he is standing there saying, "Now, Danielle, I don't like you piling up stuff in my room. You take all of that stuff to your own room."

But that never happens anymore. He is not here to fuss, and, even if he were, there would be nothing to fuss about because I do not pile my things in his room when my own is overflowing from my things and Tristan's. I look around the room that is furnished just as he left it. The floor of his room still holds his desk and the old hope chest. I always teased him about having a hope chest. What man has a hope chest?

My Pap had his mother's hope chest. It was all he had that belonged to her, and he guarded it by keeping it in his room. He said that one day the hope chest would be mine. I wonder now if it ever truly will be. I have learned that hope cannot be locked inside a chest. Somehow, hope can escape.

When I became pregnant with my son Tristan, I remember feeling hopeless. I wasn't sure how I would finish school. I was trying to be the first person in my family to get a college education. Then I found out I was pregnant. I didn't even ask Tristan's father to marry me. He isn't a bad guy, but he couldn't support himself, much less me and a child. I went to Pap and cried out my fears to him. I expected him to fuss, to tell me he was disappointed, but he didn't. I never could predict Pap. He would fuss about the smallest things, like piling up my things in his room. He would fuss about bad choices and warn of the consequences until the bad consequences came, and then he never said *I told you so*. He never fussed. I guess the time for fussing was over. He just helped me find the ray of hope, like saying that the baby and I could move in and live with him when I got pregnant.

I moved out of the house after it first happened. Then seven months later, I moved back in because I knew the house needed to be taken care of, and he had left it to me. I had let him down once. I could not let him down again.

I looked around the room. I was finding it particularly hard to know what to do with Pap's things. It was time to move them out of the room, but I could not bring myself to remove anything that had been his. I felt the memories coming back. *Why, Pap? Why couldn't you find hope when you needed it?* I felt a sob coming from deep inside. I needed to get out of here, but it was too late. My mind drifted back to that terrible Father's Day . . .

I could not believe my eyes. Everything inside of me was screaming at me to move, but I stood frozen with shock. *Why is he like this?* my mind cried out, but I knew why. I knew he was gone. I just didn't know how.

My two-year-old son Tristan was as still as I was as he sat on my hip. I walked closer to my grandfather where he lay in his bed. His mouth formed a frozen scream as if that was what he had been doing when it happened. My body moved sluggishly as if moving through a dream. But this was no dream.

I rested my shaking hand on his leg. His frail bony body didn't respond to my touch. I found my voice and uttered a puny "Pap?" as if asking him if he was still here. But I knew the answer. I knew he was gone.

My son Tristan mimicked my question, “Pap?” he called out innocently. He didn’t know yet. He thought Pap was sleeping. Blessed is the young mind of toddler; how peaceful it must be not to know. I glanced over Pap’s face, and then I lost it. Frantically shaking, sobbing and screaming, I just lost it. I dropped the Father’s Day card and the photo Tristan and I had made for him, and I ran out of Pap’s house to get my grandmother. Tristan didn’t cry. He clung to me. What did he think was happening? He still didn’t know.

When I got to my grandmother’s house and tried to tell her about the horrible sight, my voice broke into a high-pitched scream, and I fell to my knees. She knew. She helped me up and started to cry. I don’t know how she knew, too, but she did. Maybe she knew because she had been married to him for 33 years. They had been as one. They were living separately, but they were inexplicably still one.

God, Pap! Why did you do this? Standing in his empty room, I wipe the tears that still accumulate when I think of the day I lost my grandfather. He was the man who raised me as his own from when I was a baby. In every sense of the word, he was my father. I miss him every day. Looking back at his wise words, now I take heed of all the advice he gave me over the years.

I had once mistaken his advice as “fussing.” I would roll my eyes and say, “Oh, Pap! You don’t understand!” or “Times have changed, Pap!” or “That’s not gonna happen, Pap.” Now I understand that Pap was not “fussing.” He was warning. He was giving advice. He was sharing the wisdom that comes from heartache that could have been avoided. My Pap loved me. That truth helps me survive life without him. I cling to his love and to the hope he had in the future he could see for me.

My biggest heartache is not that Pap died. Everyone dies eventually. My great sadness is that I took him and his life for granted throughout my entire life. He was always there, when no one else was. He was the one person who never let me down, until that day. I am not sure if he knew how much I loved him, how much I respected him, how much I needed him. I am not sure that even I knew how much I depended on him until he was gone.

For now, I walk out of the room and shut the door behind me. I go outside to collect my thoughts and sit in the oak rocker under the carport, the chair I never saw my grandfather sit in until after he discovered he was sick.

I remember the day he delivered the bad news to me. My grandmother had gone to the doctor with him so she already knew, but still she sat beside me as if she needed to hear the words again. “Danielle,” he started as he always did when he was about to say something I didn’t want to hear. “They found a spot on my lungs and ran some tests. They thought it may have been pneumonia. It ain’t though,” he told me.

I knew then. He didn’t have to say anymore, but he did. “I have cancer. They want me to do treatments,” he continued. “Well, are you going to?” I asked him tenderly. “I’m going to try the treatments, but still, I’m not going to be here forever. You need to . . .” but I lost the rest of his words when the tears sprang into my eyes, causing my face to burn. I knew what he was trying to say was there was a chance the spot had gotten too large for treatments to work. “Well, please try, Pap,” I managed to get out through the tears that attempted to strangle me.

Well, it’s not that bad yet, I thought to myself the next afternoon as I watched him getting ready to mow the grass. He had on his everyday blue jean overalls and was one foot into his rubber outside shoes. I walked to the bathroom and brushed my teeth. As I walked out of the door, I kissed Pap on his cheek and muttered a hasty, “Love you, Pap.”

In the following weeks, Pap became unable to do all these things that his stronger healthier self could. I knew the disease was taking over. On this particular morning Pap was already awake in the living room watching the news when I came out of my room and started getting ready for class. The night before I had heard him coughing erratically and trying, only half successfully, to catch his breath. He had been telling me how sick he felt. Cancer, chemo, and radiation had joined forces, working together against his increasingly frail body—the disease attacked his lungs while treatments attacked the rest of him. Once a healthy man weighing 220 pounds, Pap was now a thin man, weighing only 170 pounds. His medium tanned, healthily flushed face had become dull and lifelessly pale. He could not eat certain things because of the burning in his

throat from the radiation, and the things he could eat would not stay down because of nausea from chemo. My once strong, independent grandfather was also emotionally affected by not being able to do what he used to.

I kissed him on the forehead that morning as I left for school. I told him I loved him before grabbing my sleeping son out of the bed and walking out the door. After I dropped Tristan off at my grandmother's and got on my way to school, Pap's health weighed heavy on my mind. *I'll know when it gets here. I will know when it's time*, I thought. Only a few short days later it came. It came totally unexpected, although anticipated. My grandfather ended his life on his own terms and not the disease's. I can only imagine now the courage one must possess to pull the trigger on their own life, but also how much pain they must carry, too.

As I sat in his old lightly used rocking chair, I wondered what he used to think of when he sat here looking out across the kudzu gully and cow pasture. Was he thinking about taking in the scenery before it was too late? Or was he looking back on his life? I wish I had asked him about all of these things. There are still a lot of things I wish I had wanted to learn from him before he was gone. He could make a mean blackberry cobbler. He knew something about almost everything. I had tried to take care of Pap. I wanted to cook for him, and I even tried to get him to show me how to work the lawn mower, but he always insisted, "I got it." He knew I was busy with school and Tristan, but, more than that, I think he just refused to be helpless.

When he was still here, I often felt guilty when I was busy and couldn't do something for Pap. Since his death, regret has been my constant companion. All of the things left undone and unsaid lurk in the corners of my mind. Some days I think maybe I will leave this old house with all of its memories, but then I sit in his chair and look out over this patch of land that he loved, and I know that I can never leave. As much as I miss Pap when I am here, the pain would be unbearable anywhere else.

So I just sit in this old rocker and look at the things he looked at and hope I am thinking about the same things he thought about. I hope he knows that after all his efforts he did not fail to leave behind a little wisdom with me. I see Tristan playing in the tall grass. He is laughing as he chases a butterfly. I smile and I know for sure in that moment that I am thinking about what Pap thought about. He thought about me, and he thought about Tristan, and he thought about hope. The weight on my chest feels a little lighter. *I won't give up, Pap. I'm gonna make you proud.* I continue to rock back and forth. Pap's chair comforts me and holds me.

Later I will go back into Pap's room. Maybe not tonight or even next week, but later I will go into his room, and I will place his things inside the hope chest, and I will remember every single story, every single moment, as I place those items safely in the chest, where I can treasure them for a lifetime.

Not Alone

by

Abby Ray Vance

Second Place Essay, Grenada

Sometimes, I just wonder, “Why? Why did this have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?”

Ever since I was a little girl, I was typically happy and energetic. I characteristically woke up grinning from ear-to-ear and looked forward to whatever the day would bring. I enjoyed hanging out with my friends, staying up late, eating copious amounts of junk food, laughing at jokes that were not all that funny, and, most of all, I LIVED. I enjoyed being naive and oblivious to what I would do the next day, much less the next minute. However, my mindset seemed to drastically change—with little or no warning.

Honestly, I do not know what triggered my mindset to change, but somehow, I became obsessed—obsessed with planning, having a rigid, structural routine, and working out. I was no longer that little girl who woke up and vibrated the room with her little smile or the girl who made everyone laugh by always volunteering to goof off. If I did smile or laugh, the expressions were “put on.” By that, I mean I was never mentally in tune with what others were saying. I had such tunnel-vision and obsession over what was next that I could not enjoy the present moment. I smiled and carried on conversations, but I was not mentally engaged with the people closest to me. I slowly became drained and was tired all of the time.

Planning became second nature to me, and constant obsessing began to take a toll on my body and my attitude. If my family decided to spontaneously go eat at a different restaurant from the first one suggested, my mood immediately changed because I had planned my food intake and my workout for that day based on where we were going to eat. Sadly, if my mood suffered, so did everyone else's.

I started making up excuses not to hang out with friends; and, after a while, they grew tired of my excuses and stopped asking me to do things with them. I withdrew from many opportunities because of my rigid, structural routine.

During this period of my life, I had no idea that my parents were concerned for their little girl. I did not know because they were afraid to tell me, afraid of my reaction, or rather of my overreaction. Honestly, my reactions were so defensive and aggressive that sometimes I felt as if I had a demon inside of me. I was determined that I was going to exercise in the 98 degree heat and risk having a heat stroke because I wanted to work out outside, no matter the conditions. Most people who knew me were concerned as well. “Oh, Abby has gotten SO thin, Tammy. Her back bones just stick out. Y'all need to feed her something!”

“Well, she's been working out hard to fix that problem. She eats! She really does,” my mom would reluctantly reply. Some people would even tell me, “Girl, go eat you a cheeseburger—no, a DOUBLE cheeseburger! Look at your little legs, your tiny, muscular arms, and your waist.” (At the time, my waist was probably 24 inches at the most.)

When people told expressed concern, I heard only judgement. I thought they were just jealous of me. I did not see that the people making comments genuinely cared for me and were concerned for my life. “Y'all, I eat ALL the time...I just ate a large waffle fry and a chicken sandwich at Chick-Fil-A!” These conversations were typical and occurred for about two and a half years. No matter what anyone said, I was not going to stop working out.

Even though I received a lot of concern, I also heard praise. “Abby, you're so skinny. You're so fit. I want to look just like you when I get older!” These comments are the ones that drove me, the “compliments” that made me push harder and harder—to the point of my detriment.

When I look back and begin to think of a starting point of this, all I can think of is wanting to enter our school beauty revue in the 10th grade. Like most girls who want to look their best for an event, I decided to get in shape and eat healthy. I began running and made drastic changes in my diet. I swapped potato chips for pretzels or apples, ate a lot of eggs, and cut out desserts, sodas, and my Moma's sweet tea, and

reduced my serving sizes. I only ate about half my plate of food at dinner. “Come on, Ab, you need to eat a little more than that,” my daddy would say. “But, Daddy, I’m full,” I would tell him, after eating only two bites of green beans and a couple pieces of meat. After I decided to get healthier, guess what? I LOVED feeling refreshed and having my clothes not fit so tightly anymore! From that point on, I was dedicated to living a healthy lifestyle. None of my friends enjoyed working out, so that was my “me” time. They didn’t like to eat as healthy as I did, but I still went to eat and hung out with them. I would do my best to eat healthy all week and on the weekends, I would do whatever my friends did and eat wherever they wanted to eat.

Fast forward to senior year of high school: I still had my same group of friends, but I did not hang out with them after school any more. I didn’t do anything, for that matter, if it interfered with my “gym time,” if the food was not healthy, or if anything was spontaneous. The relationships I had were strained. I made up excuses so I wouldn’t have to go eat with my friends on a school night or hang out with them after football games because I knew I had to get up and run or do a hard-core agility workout the next morning. “Come on, Abby. Let’s go eat at No Way Jose! We’re throwing a surprise birthday party for Mallory tonight,” one of my friends might say. “Oh, I wish I could, but I have so much homework to do,” or, “I can’t because my grandmother is coming over for dinner, and I haven’t seen her in a while,” were some of my famous excuses I used to ease my way out of many fun times with my friends, fun times that can never be brought back. Deep down, I knew I did not have a lot of homework to do, and so did my friends. My friends knew I was working out or was planning on working out the next morning. I thought my friends were silly for thinking I had an exercise problem. “Oh, they just don’t understand. They don’t work out or eat healthy. There’s nothing wrong with doing those things.” By the middle of senior year, I was so ready to graduate and move onto college—the ultimate freedom.

Once I got to college, my problem grew worse. I did experience freedom—I became more imprisoned. As soon as my classes ended, I would rush to the gym and workout for at least two hours—sometimes three. Even the personal trainer at the gym noticed I was working out too much. I did not care what the trainer thought of my exercise routine. My energy was fed from my fellow “gym buddies” saying, “You’re such a beast. Look at you on that stair master! Your arms and legs look SO good!”

My parents grew more concerned, noticing their little girl was disappearing more and more. They were concerned for my health and even worried that my addiction could leave me infertile. My body fat had dropped so low that my hormones were up and down like the stock market. I didn’t think I was in danger of being unable to have children because many doctors assured me that I had an “athlete’s body” and that my body would catch back up over time. And oh man, did I love hearing that! Having a low body fat percentage meant that I had visible abs—a “4-pack”, but I also had visible bones and an invisible personality. The little girl who was always laughing with my parents was no longer there. Our conversations flipped from talking about family and fun times to food and exercise.

Unlike most people, I did not look forward to the “restoration and relaxation” part of summer. Having summer off meant I had more time in the gym. Because I am also OCD, I woke up every morning at 5:18 SHARP to hit the gym for an early morning workout so I could be at my babysitting job by 8:00. The kids I babysat for loved that I would swim with them and run around and play with them. I did the best I could to be the most fun babysitter ever, but swimming every day and running around with them on top of working out was slowly killing my body. I never listened to my body screaming for nourishment, pleading for help, or asking for the smallest little break—until June 7.

On June 7, I had an emergency appendectomy. The first question I asked the doctor was, “Will I still be able to work out?” I was not concerned with my appendix being four times the normal size and almost rupturing; I was concerned about losing what I had worked so hard to accomplish. The doctor told me I was not going to be able to work out or lift anything for at least four to six weeks. I thought my world was over because my world was the gym. My life was so focused on eating only healthy foods and working out that I couldn’t see my healthy was slowly diminishing.

Then, when I thought things could not get any worse, they did. Ironically, these next events saved my life. My parents decided that we would go to the beach for a quick vacation, and we had made reservations to stay from Sunday through Thursday. While we were on vacation, I could tell something was clearly bothering my daddy. I asked him what was wrong, and he said, "I am SO worried sick about you, Abby. This really is killing me." "Well, Daddy, what do you want me to do?" "I really wish you would go to the doctor just for them to say you either have a problem or you don't." I could not bear to be the reason my daddy was in such pain, so I agreed to go to the doctor.

We left the beach a day early. The change in plans greatly affected my mood, and I was not the happiest person to be around. I did not want to go see "The Lady Doctor." I was scared, scared to hear the truth that I needed help. But I didn't want to surrender to my fear of going to the doctor because that would make me weak, right?

In some ways, I did want help. I wanted to end the controlling battle in my brain, but I could not. My OCD had completely taken control, and I loved the control I seemed to have on my body. But, truthfully, I was exhausted. The turning point for me was when I saw my weight on the scales at the doctor's office that day. Seeing that terrifying number, I realized just how small I was.

My bones stuck out, my face was drawn, and my hair would not grow, I could not sit down without my tail bone hurting, and my size 0-2 shorts were nearly falling off of me even with a belt on. "The Lady Doctor" told me that I was in danger of never having children due to my lack of menstruation for nearly two years. She looked at me and said simply, "Abby, you have an eating disorder."

I fought back the tears, but I did not try to argue with her. The stark truth hung in the air. I was ready to change and get the help I needed. I had hope that Jesus would deliver me from the darkest part of my disordered body and place me into the body He created: one that is fearfully and wonderfully made.

I agreed to go for counseling. Somehow, a counselor had an opening for me that very afternoon. Before I could change my mind, I met Hope (that is truly her name). Hope diagnosed me with an eating disorder N.O.S., or not otherwise specified, and helped me come face-to-face with my disorders and my addictions.

I had a severe case of OCD; and similar to cancer that metastasizes and spreads throughout the body, OCD had taken control over my life and my body. I was an exercise addict who suffered from exercise bulimia.

Since I faced my addiction and admitted I needed help, I am a different person. I can distinctly remember falling to my knees one night beside my bed and finally coming to a place of complete surrender to Jesus. "Lord, You are in control. I am not. Heal me. Rid me of me so I can be filled with You. I want to live. I want to be happy." Just as David wrote in Psalm 30:2, "I called to You for help, and You healed me." God truly is the only way I have been able to recover: He receives all the glory.

I feared that my life would be ruined when I could not work out; instead, my life has been restored. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NAS). His words are still true today.

I may have lost some muscle mass, but I have gained: my life, my relationship with my family and friends, a new found love for health and fitness, the ability to have children, balance, some MUCH needed weight, and most importantly, strength and a new relationship with Christ to overcome to my disorder. The little girl who used to walk with her daddy can now enjoy those same simple, memorable mornings. I have never felt more freedom in my entire life, and I can honestly say this with all my heart.

Getting help was worth all of the fears I had for seeking help. Admitting I needed help did not, in fact, make me weak. I realized that admitting I needed help from Jesus meant that I was strong enough to let go of having control and obsessing over my compulsions so that Christ could fully take over. I learned that being in control and planning everything is not as much fun as being spontaneous. Some days, I feel like a fluffy puffin or a whale, but I have to remember that I am being made in HIS image. What really motivates

me to continue my recovery is hearing my parents say, “We’ve got our little girl back! Our laughing, happy, bubbly, and charismatic little girl is back!”

When I have days of doubt and anxiety, Ms. Hope reminds me to have courage. She has told me, “Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is having that fear but being able to push through.” Because of the power of Jesus, I am going to push through! This battle is going to be won, and my disorder will NOT receive the victory.

So now, I don't really ask, “Why me?” anymore. I know why now. I tried for so long to be someone God did not create me to be, and I suffered the consequences. In the process I have learned that because I am His child, He will not abandon me. Nothing can separate me from His love. He truly is my help and my strength.

I am thankful that God healed me and made my struggle a testimony for Him. I have shared my story with church groups and with individuals. I want to shout to others who are trapped by an eating disorder that they do not have to skip out on birthday cake and ice cream or an extra helping of sweet potato casserole on Thanksgiving. I want them to find freedom from thinking they can only be happy if their bodies look a certain way.

Since facing my addiction, I have learned that I can never achieve perfection—only God is perfect, and only can He ever be perfect. Through the help of Hope, I understand that my addiction is always lurking around hoping to destroy me, but I do not live in fear; for “He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses . . .for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-11).

The Faces of Homelessness

by

Karishma Patel

First Place Essay, Ridgeland

On my first trip to the shelter, I almost stopped and asked my dad to turn the car back home, but a compelling urge to confront the faces of homelessness subdued the waves of fear that thrashed against my stomach. I tapped the address of Stewpot Community Center into my touchscreen GPS. At first, we weaved through streets lined with flashy commercial signs and alluring fast food restaurants. As we entered the downtown, these were substituted by neo-classical architecture, pristine lawns, and seamless parking lots. Men in crisply ironed suits strutted briskly across the streets.

A row of lofty columns bolstered the domed rooftop of a government building. The structure towered over a platform that spilled into a staircase. The edge of the stairs cut into a wall where "SUPREME COURT OF MISSISSIPPI" was engraved in silver letters. After we had departed from the downtown, we wended down side roads for only a few minutes, but the ominous shift in the atmosphere was unmistakably clear. Cracks and potholes littered the neglected roads, the bright, enticing store advertisements vanished. Instead, graffiti marked the sides of abandoned buildings and passing trains. People wandered aimlessly beside shabby houses, their tattered clothing smeared with dirt.

A derelict abandoned house, now devoured by vines, faced the intersection. According to the GPS, we were only hundreds of feet from our destination, but I insisted to myself, “This can’t be the right neighborhood. . . Can it?” I didn’t expect luxurious estates in a gated community, but I was unaware of the

severe extent of poverty in the outskirts of metropolitan Jackson and the dire need for Stewpot Community Services. Stewpot reaches out to over 650 impoverished people in central Jackson. Most of them live in the neighborhoods encompassing Point Dexter Elementary School, where more than half of the population is swamped by poverty. Nearly all of the residents in this area are black and one third of them are children (Stewpot Community Services Inc.)

As I was climbing out of the car, my dad told me that he didn't want to leave me there alone. He warned me to take my cell phone with me and return the GPS back into the compartment, where it would be concealed. As we ventured across the parking lot and towards the building, I stopped to ask a man unloading boxes if I could go upstairs. His dreads dangled beside his dark, thin face and he blinked at me through bloodshot eyes before asking, "Are you makin' a donation?" I shook my head and explained I wanted to speak to the director. He mumbled something that I didn't hear and led me up a rickety staircase. I wrinkled my nose at the trace of alcohol that lingered closely behind him. I kept distance between us while looking over my shoulder to make sure that my dad was still there. As I followed him, I wondered if he misunderstood me and was taking me to the wrong staff member.

Finally, we reached the food pantry, a musty, open room with dark paneled floors; Sunlight filtered through two large, dusty windows on the opposite wall and circular wooden tables were scattered across the room with several foldable chairs stacked on top of them. The hint of tenderness that manifested this dated room made it almost inviting. On one wall, a bible quote was painted in cloudy white letters against a sky blue background and patches of reds, purples, yellows, and whites were stitched onto a homemade quilt that hung next to the quote.

The man passed the steel serving counters and stopped in front of a door that read "Volunteer Director: Tara Lindsey" The director wasn't in her office, so he offered to inform her that I was waiting. I thanked him sheepishly, ashamed, because I had judged him so rashly and assumed that he didn't know who I was looking for.

Tara Lindsey was a stout, friendly woman with a rich, jovial laugh. She fumbled with a stack of papers, lightly tapping it against the desk as she answered my questions "Working here keeps me humble, it keeps me grounded. She glanced up briefly, immersed in thought, "I'm really thankful, because I know, for the Grace of God, that that could be me or my family living in a shelter."

Ms. Lindsey told me about a heavy-set black man that used to sleep out on the porch near the center. He refused to take baths, so his afro had branched out into dreads that twisted wildly in all directions. During the summer time, he always asked Ms. Lindsey for the water bottle or popsicle that she carried. "I was a little timid of him just by the way he looked," she admitted. "So, I would give it to him, but I would never look at him."

He was once a normal working person, until somebody broke into his home. The burglar brutally attacked him, raped and then murdered his wife, and killed his only child in cold blood. The trauma triggered a nervous breakdown; his mental health deteriorated and eventually, he became mentally ill. "For me to judge him before," she broke off into pensive silence. "It could have been me. It could have happened to anybody."

"Fast-forward five years later," she chirped, gesturing her hands forward as she spoke, "We finally got him committed to taking his medication; he's doing very well. Whenever you see him now, he's clean cut and will hold a conversation with you."

"Sometimes, all they want is a smile or a conversation," she shrugged, "they're just like you and I." By seeing not only humanity, but a trace of herself in the homeless people that she has worked with, Ms. Lindsey has penetrated the barrier of discomfort that alienates most people from the homeless population.

Stewpot Community Center operates a food pantry, a clothing closet, three women and childrens' shelters, one mens' shelter, and an opportunity center where people can bathe, clean their clothes, and even find employment. They also provide voluntary chapel services, behavioral counseling for mentally ill clients, a legal team to help people who've committed misdemeanors, a clinic that performs all services excluding emergencies, and after school programs for the youth.

Stigmas of homelessness define people's perception of shelters and the people that they serve. "We've had some people come in and say 'Oh, it doesn't smell bad!' Well, what's it supposed to smell like? We work with what we have. We wish that we had more resources to do things with, but we try to take the best care of what we have and our clients take pride in it as well," said Christie Burnett, the director of Stewpot's Opportunity Center. When I asked her about the general stereotype that most homeless people are reckless, money-hungry bums, she quickly debunked the myth. "The majority of homeless people are homeless either, because of a bad decision, or they lost a job, or became mentally ill. They're things that are sometimes beyond their control," she clarified.

The same warmth that I found in the food pantry pervaded this small building, which staff members and clients refer to as 'home-base.' "We can't be a home, obviously, but we can try to help provide things that you would use if you had a home. We have fun around here. Sometimes, it's interesting, sometimes it's scary. Sometimes, we have lots of addicts and mental folks. It's wonderful to see the good sides of those people."

Ms. Burnett told me about the connections that she's formed with some of the regular clients at the center, "We like to say we're a big, dysfunctional family. All kinds of funky looking people, pretty people, and we just do it together." She told me about one guy that she encountered the other day. He was in her face, aggressively cursing her out, but she didn't feel that she was in danger, "I had about four of my clients, I know in a heartbeat that if anything would have happened to me, those guys would come in a heartbeat. We are a family," she declared, "That's very different from what most people think."

The center's operations revolve around nurturing relationships with the people. "Many people don't think you can have a relationship with a homeless person, but that couldn't be further from the truth." Ms. Burnett encourages staff members at the center to prove to their homeless clients that they are all the same at heart, "If they're painting, we're going to be painting too," she beamed.

According to Ms. Burnett, personal connections become meaningful when homeless clients feel it is safe to invest trust in them. "If we have a relationship with our clients and get to know them, then we can speak for their lives in ways that we couldn't if it's just 'Hey.' So, we try to get their names and get to know about them. We want to know them, we want them to know us."

Being praised for their resilience, work ethic, or talent is a phenomenon for most homeless people, who are too often avoided by the general public and pushed into shadows by municipal governments. According to a report conducted by the National Coalition for the Homeless, 188 cities nation-wide have gone as far as prohibiting panhandling, food-sharing, or sleeping in public spaces. In many ways, when they are not being harassed, homeless people fade into the dark corners of the world. Stewpot helps them cross the threshold into visibility.

"We have guys that can sing out of this world, we have guys that can draw. We have amazing artists. We have guys that are gifted in painting, tiling, lumber, and carpentry. You wouldn't believe it. Most people think that homeless people just sit around and do nothing or that they drink and use drugs. That's not true. They're people just like you and I. They're fun to be around, they work hard, some of them just have had some bad luck," she explained.

For some, bad luck is an understatement. One homeless twenty-one year old had been sleeping in his car for a year and a half before he came to the center. His mother was an addict and he had never known his father. His grandmother originally had custody of him and his sister, but when she died, he was utterly deserted. Someone took his sister into their care, but no one wanted to take him. One night, while he was sleeping, someone jumped him and broke his jaw. The hospital released him after discovering that he had no insurance and sent him to the opportunity center. "We see things like that all the time, things that would break your heart. No twenty-one year old should be homeless, on the street, without parents," she sighed. "But in the matter of days and weeks, we were able to find someone in his family that would take him. We found him some place to stay until they decided. It's just the little bitty things."

At Stewpot, steps to success are small, but monumental for the people who've made them. "We rejoice in the little things," Ms. Burnett affirmed. From taking medication to cutting hair to getting employment, these modest changes can redefine lives.

Christie Burnett shared another illuminating story, this time about her six-year old son, Jamison. While most parents try to shelter their children from the world of homelessness, Ms. Burnett invites her wide-eyed child to explore it by letting him come with her to the opportunity center. "He's been at Stewpot since he was little, but he walks in here and he knows everybody by name. They know him. These guys are some of his best friends. They're like his family."

In the wintertime, the staff is sweeping the cold stone floors of the center and setting up cots to save sixty homeless people from catching hypothermia in their sleep. At a table in some corner of the building, Jamison is engrossed in a card game with a crowd of homeless people. "He's learning that these people are no different. We have some of the best discussions; He'll ask, "Well why did this person use drugs? Why did they bring drugs up here and now, they can't come back?" Yesterday, we had a talk about a lady that threatened to kill me and he just said, "Well they're just sick in the head mommy and we still have to be nice to them and love them."

In a world that treats homelessness and the mental health issues that can lead to it as taboo subjects, discussing her work at the Opportunity Center with her young son at home is a courageous decision for Ms. Burnett. If a six-year-old can contribute to these discussions, why do we steer away from them? Why don't we dissect issues such as the on-going prevalence of substance abuse among the homeless population? When we skip these conversations, we miss that there is an abundance of drug houses coupled with a lack of grief resources for the homeless. Until we talk about them, we remain oblivious to these issues and the vicious cycle is repeated in the next generation by the children in these same households.

"Children will accept anybody, unless they're told not to. With my son, there's nobody that he won't talk to," Ms. Burnett smiled. As I settled back into my car, I thought about how I would be returning to a home tonight, while some people would turn to Stewpot. Some of them would never be able to get a job, because of their criminal background history or their mental illness. There is no 'easy-fix' for homelessness, but maybe if we unlocked the six-year-old Jamison within us, we could end the stigmas against it.

Socialization of Homeschoolers Unveiled

by

Joshua Gibbons

Second Place Essay, Ridgeland

If you ask where a child you just met goes to school and get the response, "I'm homeschooled," what would you think of that child's social life? It is a common myth that homeschoolers are confined to their homes with little or no interaction outside. This misconception leads many people to believe that socialization – the process by which people learn how to interact within their social environment and react to certain verbal and nonverbal cues (McMahon) – of homeschoolers is inadequate. Homeschooling parents are constantly asked how they keep their children exposed to society and not hidden from it. Even children themselves, after telling someone they are homeschooled, are often asked if they have any friends or how they meet people. Little research has been done on this topic mainly because homeschooling parents, being afraid of biased or dishonest people interpreting the results of such research, are reluctant to participate (Reavis and Lakriski 5). Because of this lack, most people come to the inference that homeschooling hampers students socially, but this deduction is based on a misconception of homeschooling.

By definition, homeschoolers are students who, as their name suggests, are schooled at home instead of at a public or private institution. Parents may decide to homeschool their children for many reasons, and often multiple ones at once. According to a study done by the United States Census Bureau in 2000, 50.8 percent of homeschooling parents homeschooled because an education at home seemed a better choice, 33 percent homeschooled for religious reasons, 29.8 percent homeschooled because they disliked the learning environment at other schools, and 11.5 percent homeschooled because they felt their children were not challenged enough at school (Gathercole 58). Many parents choose to homeschool their children, the number of which is growing every year. In 1999, there were 850,000 homeschooled students in America; by 2003, that number had risen to 1.1 million; by 2007, to 1.5 million; and by 2013, to 1.77 million (Smith). Although most homeschoolers are taught by a parent who may not have a degree in education, on average they are excellent academically and statistically score in the 70th or 80th percentiles on standardized tests (Gathercole 58). Overall, homeschooling seems adequate, but the socialization of its students is a major area where many people worry it could be ineffective.

According to social scientists, a child is socialized at three major places: at home, at school, and with their peers (Lebeda 102). Since homeschoolers are taught at home, this is not an area where they would lack. At school, a child would interact with peers and adults, and interaction with peers would be simply spending time with friends. Since homeschoolers do not go to a public or private school, it is often deduced that they miss out on these types of interaction. However, schools are not the only place for them.

Recreational activities, field trips, community service projects, church gatherings, extracurricular classes, and simple social gatherings are only a few of the places a child has interaction with other people. To ensure their children have plenty of social exposure in these areas, homeschooling families have come together to create what they call, "homeschool groups," which are organized social assemblies for homeschool children within a certain geographical area. These groups will organize many activities so homeschool children can spend time together doing things in the community, like visiting a nursing home, or just for fun, like enjoying a movie together. In addition, since homeschool students are not bound by strict time schedules as are public or private school students, they can do any of these activities at any time (Gathercole 59-60).

Although little research has been done on the socialization of homeschoolers, some small studies have been conducted comparing homeschool children to traditionally schooled children. In one such study, as noted by Chris Klicka in his article, "Socialization: Homeschoolers Are in the Real World," Thomas Smedley, while creating a master's thesis for Radford University of Virginia, did an experiment using the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales on twenty homeschool and thirteen public school children assessing their communication skills, socialization, and daily living skills. In all of these areas, the results showed the homeschool children, who scored in the 84th percentile, were significantly more mature than the public school children, who scored only in the 27th percentile. Klicka further reports Smedley stating, "In the public school system, children are socialized horizontally, and temporarily, into conformity with their immediate peers. Home educators seek to socialize their children vertically, toward responsibility, service, and adulthood, with an eye on eternity."

In another study summarized in the *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter*, authors Rachael Reavis and Audrey Lakriski report on 16 homeschooled and 48 traditionally schooled children from the ages of 9 to 13 being tested in three areas: friendships, peer victimization, and psychological adjustment (3-5). For friendships, they say both the homeschooled and traditionally schooled children in the study had about the same number of friends, although the homeschoolers relied more on strong friendships, without which they might have felt more anxiety and inadequacy (5). They further state that for psychological adjustment, both groups showed positive adjustments, but there was evidence for stronger relationships between homeschoolers and their parents and teachers. For peer victimization, both groups reported experiencing peer victimization, but homeschoolers appeared more resilient to these situations (5).

Klicka also reports on another study comparing behaviors and social development of homeschool and public school children. Dr. Larry Shyers, the director of this study, states, "The results seem to show that a child's social development depends more on adult contact and less on contact with other children as previously thought." Klicka also notes a quote made by Dr. Brian Ray, after Ray reviewed four other studies: "...these children [homeschoolers] are actively involved in many activities outside the home with peers, different-aged children, and adults. The data from their [the researchers] research suggests that homeschoolers are not being socially isolated, nor are they emotionally maladjusted."

All in all, homeschools provide plenty of opportunities for children to socialize, and oftentimes, as research shows, they provide even more of these chances than traditional schools. Most homeschoolers, though shielded from society, are not completely hidden from it. Though you can find people from homeschools who lack social skills, you can also find the same from public and private schools. So the next time you meet a homeschool student, recognize they do have opportunities to socialize and the only major difference between them and other children is where they do their schoolwork.

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Playing Dress Up Can Be Painful

by

Chandra Butler

First Place Essay, Goodman

Have you ever heard your parents or grandparents say, "I'll blister your butt and you'll have to stand up to eat?" or "I'm going to give you a whipping, and you won't be able to sit down for a week?" I'd heard these all my life, but I didn't understand what they meant until the day I decided to play dress up with the dog. Knowing something will get you into trouble won't always keep you from doing it.

This story begins on a Saturday during my summer vacation, and I was bored out of my mind. I was 7 years old at the time, so I don't know how bored I actually could have been. I was an only child, and playing by myself was a regular thing. Periodically, I would have a cousin or friend sleep over, but on this particular day it was just me. We were going out of town the next day, so I wasn't able to have anyone over to play. My

parents were working in the garden, there were no cartoons on TV, and I decided to use my imagination. There were many things that I could have done to occupy myself. I could have played with my dolls, my hot wheels, built a fort, or put a puzzle together. However, since I had no one to play with I decided to play dress up with my dog, Mandy. I sat down and made a list of the things we would need.

My plan had been set into motion, so I set out to gather the items that I needed for this adventure. I knew I wasn't supposed to play with my mama's things unless she gave me permission, but I decided to do it anyway. I went to her closet to get a couple dresses. I opened the door only to realize they were hanging too high for me to reach. I tried jumping to reach the hangers, but found out rather quickly this wasn't going to work. Next, I decided pulling them off the hangers would be a good plan. This idea failed too because when I pulled on the dress it made a noise like it tore. As you may have guessed I panicked, froze in my tracks, and listened for footsteps. When I heard no one coming down the hall I went back to the task at hand. I decided this time that standing on a chair was the best option, and so I got the chair from mama's sewing table. Mission accomplished, the dresses were mine. Now, off to get the makeup I also wasn't supposed to play with. Mama kept her makeup in her dresser, so it was easy for me to reach. She had a rainbow of eye shadow colors for me to choose from. They consisted of blues, greens, purples, pinks, browns, and golds. She had false eyelashes, pretty lipsticks, blushes, and mascaras. Just as I got all the things together, Mandy bounced into the room. Mandy was a big mixed breed dog with light grayish brown shaggy hair. She was thigh high to my parents and almost as tall as me. She was my best friend and always up for anything. We had played everything together, from cowboys and Indians, to pirates, to cops and robbers, and today we were going to play dress up. The first thing I did was put our dresses on. Next, it was time to put on Mandy's makeup. I put her eye shadow on first and I used every color. I decided to put her lipstick and blush on next, because that is the way mama did it. Mandy looked just like a pretty princess. I wanted to look pretty too, so I started putting my makeup on. I don't know what gave me the idea that any of this was a good decision.

The next thing I realized was the sound of footsteps behind me, and I turned to see my mama standing in the doorway. She walked into the room, and I saw all the color drain from her face until it was white as a ghost. This was the beginning of her descent into madness. Her face started turning multiple shades of red, and her eyes glazed over. Though she never said a word, I knew I was in for it, big time. She started walking toward me with smoke coming out of her ears, and she grabbed the belt from the dresser as she walked by. I thought about running, but that was a lost cause when she grabbed my arm. I began dancing around as the belt made contact with my butt. Whack, whack, whack, was the sound that I heard again and again. I kept dancing around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to avoid the belt but that didn't work either. Now she spoke, a word with every lick, what-have-I-told-you-about-playing-with-my-things-without-my-premission? By the time she finished whipping me I had tears pouring from my eyes like Niagara Falls, snot hanging from my nose like bungee cords, and my butt was on fire. I mean, I could literally see and smell smoke.

I learned a few things that day that I wouldn't soon forget. First, it's ok to play dress up with the dog. Second, it's ok to be adventurous with your imagination. Last but not least, it is never ok to play with someone else's things without their permission. The whipping I got turned out to be a whipping that was burned into my memory like a cattle brand, and my backside was as colorful as the dog's makeup. I had plenty of time to think about what I did wrong. I couldn't have anyone over, no TV for a week, and I had to bathe the dog by myself. I definitely regretted what I had done, and not for the reasons you might think. I regretted what I had done, because I hurt my mama's feelings and damaged her trust in me.

The Experiment

by

Charles Burroughs

Second Place Essay, Goodman

When I was younger, I was full of excitement, wonder and rebellion. I didn't always get in trouble, but when I did I was sly as a fox. Some of the times I would have gotten in trouble were accidents, and the other times were on purpose. This story is about one of those times that was on purpose.

One fall day my cousin was working on a science project for school. "What are you doing?" I asked him, remembering the adorable little scamp I was at the age of four. "Working on my school project," my cousin replied. He explained he had to make an alien. I still remember the alien. The alien he had made was green and slimy. It had to be made like an easy bake oven pastry alien. I remember my cousin putting in the oven. The alien emerged from the oven a slimy, jelly-like, ten inches long creature. I was so amazed by it that I had to make one of my own. "Wow!" I exclaimed. "That's so cool can I make one?" "No." Said my cousin. I begged and pleaded for hours until he reluctantly obliged. "No," my cousin using his this is the last straw voice. A voice I knew too well, and when he used that voice painful punishment was going to come. So I stubbornly stormed off. My cousin thought he had won, but I would get my way; I made sure of it.

Hours later after my cousin left, my dad was tending to the garden like he does every afternoon. Even though it was fall, it did not get so cold yet that any plants wouldn't grow, and every day my mom prepared a meal for my dad before he got home. That day she was feeling a bit tired so she just made him a sandwich. I don't remember the sandwich too well, but I remember it might have had tomatoes, lunchmeat, and lettuce, but all I knew was that it was my next target. That was my experiment.

In the corner of my eye I saw it a bottle of hot sauce. I was eyeing it like a hungry lion eyeing a juicy gazelle in the Savannah just planning on what he was going to do when he got his claws on it. Then I grabbed the bottle and made my way to the sandwich. I unscrewed the lid, and as soon I reached the food, my mother was suddenly behind me. With a loud bellowing voice she said, "What are you doing." "A science experiment," I said as innocent as I could be, hoping that would make my mother go away. "Don't touch that; that is your father's dinner until I get ready to make supper." My mother told me giving me this look that said, "If anything happens to that sandwich, you're dead meat." "Ok," I said innocently. I walked to the living room to watch some cartoons until supper time, but every so often I eyed that sandwich like a trained, hardened sniper watches his target, not leaving his sight, waiting on that one moment for the perfect opportunity. Sometime later my mother told me and my three sisters that she was going to the store, and if my father got home early to tell him where she had gone. "Perfect," I thought, the moment I was waiting for. As soon as my mother left, and my sisters went back to their rooms, either on the house phone, or lost in a book. I ran like a track star to the sandwich and poured the red hot sauce on it. With my mission complete, I set out to do something else, and I did it.

When my father came in, one of my sisters told him that my mom went to the store to get some food for supper. She told him where my mom prepared the sandwich for him before she left. As soon as he walked over to the stove where the sandwich was located, he bellowed out our names. "Nancy, Neicy, Adrian, Charles come here," "NOW!" he bellowed so loud that it could wake the dead.

We lined up single file and he asked each of us who did it. Everyone else said they didn't do it, but I tried to lie and said it was Nancy and Neicy. They argued with me trying to plead their case, but I was confident. I don't remember what I was saying, but I felt like I was winning the argument. My father finally had enough and sent all of us to our rooms.

When my mother came home the house was quiet. "Where are all the kids," she asked. "In their rooms where I told them to go," said my father sounding annoyed. "What happened?" My mother asked?

“Someone put hot sauce on my sandwich and everyone claimed they were innocent,” said my dad. “It had to be Charles. I told him not to do it before I left. I knew I should have taken that boy to the store with me,” my mom said. When my parents called me to the kitchen I felt nervous because I knew what was going to happen.

In the end that night I knew never to mess with my dad’s food ever again, lie on my sisters, and that leather could sting so much. To my surprise they asked me why I lied. I explained why and said. “We’re not angry because you ruined the sandwich,” said my dad. “We’re mad because you told lies about your sisters.” From that day on I learned if I do something bad to just accept my punishment; and not blame it on other. The punishment might be rough if you admit to it, but it will be harsher if you lie about it.

Short Stories

Jackson

by

Danielle Deaton

First Place Short Story, Grenada

First Place Short Story, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

Where in the hell are we gonna go? she wondered as she drove down the desolate highway. The only lights she had seen for miles were her own car's headlights. She glanced in the rearview mirror and looked in the back seat. Jackson was curled into a ball as he slept. She smiled to herself thinking how peaceful it must be to be so young. Returning her eyes to the road ahead she choked back the tears. She knew she was doing the right thing, but why did it feel so damn wrong.

She was young when she found out she was pregnant, not even out of high school. Her boyfriend of seven months wasn't tickled when he found out her news. Although he didn't like the situation, he had said he would be there for her, and he was. Looking back from where she was now she couldn't help but think of how things would be if he had just left her then. She wouldn't be driving on this dark cold night in the middle of nowhere. She wouldn't be leaving him now.

With his part-time seasonal job and her full time job at the diner, they had saved up enough money for a small trailer house. It wasn't much to look at, but it was theirs. She had been so excited about having two bedrooms, one for them and one for the baby. She had big plans for the nursery. The second-hand store on the other side of town had a basinet adorned with teddy bears for ten dollars and she had built the nursery around it with teddy bears lined to the ceiling from the old dresser from her room at her mom's house. A co-worker had shared some yellow paint she had left over from painting her kitchen. It was a sunshine color that brightened the otherwise dingy trailer. The more she prepared the nursery the bigger her belly got, and the more Josh warmed up to the idea of being a daddy. "You can't ever leave me now," he had told her.

They were happy for a little while. Not quite grown, but playing all the parts right.

Once the baby arrived, life and their relationship were really good. Both Dianne and Josh laughed over the silly noises and faces Jackson made. Of course there was stress, with both of them being so young, but mostly there was stress for her. The late nights with the baby were strictly her duty because, even if Josh was at home, he said that she was the one who had the baby, so the baby was her responsibility.

For the most part she hadn't minded that too much because as hard as some of the long nights were, those late night moments with baby Jackson belonged solely to them. She would hold him close, smell his sweet baby breath, and know that every little smile was meant just for her. Soon enough she would feel his little body grow still as he went to sleep, and she felt his trust deep within her being. Life could have been perfectly imperfect for them, but too soon, the relationship between her and Josh turned sour.

Lights up ahead pulled her from her thoughts. Squinting, she tried to make out what they may have been coming from. As the car drew closer, she could make out a sign that was supposed to read Midnight Motel, but instead the letters spelled Midnit Motel with one of the P's dangling to form an upside down exclamation mark. Weary from the long trip, she pulled into the dirt parking lot and brought the car to a stop at the front, where she could see a small lamp burning through the window.

The parking lot was empty except for her car and beat up old red Dodge pickup. She glanced once again at Jackson snoozing in the back before clambering out of her door. When she went to stand, her torso twisted and sent sharp pains through her stomach. She pulled up her shirt to find that blood had soaked through her makeshift bandage.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed pulling her shirt back down with a grimace. She walked to the door, thankful that only the rag she had taped to her stomach was stained with blood and not her shirt. She didn't

want to have to make up any lies because the sight of blood always led to the question, ‘Are you all right?’ and the answer was no, but she always said, “yes.”

The door jingled as she pushed it open and shut it behind her. The air was toasty inside this little room, and, to her surprise, the room appeared extremely clean. She looked around cautiously.

“Hello?” she called uncertainly. Footsteps thudded from somewhere hidden by a curtain hanging in the doorway behind the counter.

“Be right there,” a female voice chimed. A woman, in her late forties from the look of her, stuck out her head and then the rest of herself from the curtain that shielded her and gave her private space. *God, what would it be like to have a place of your own? A place to hide and peek out?*

“You needin’ directions ma’am, or a room?” the woman asked as if it was a usual thing for people to be lost around here.

“A room, please,” Dianne replied.

“Sure thing, just sign in here, please,” the woman said pushing a thick book towards Dianne. When the woman turned to retrieve a key from one of the hooks behind her, Dianne couldn’t help noticing her long dark hair sprinkled with gray. She wondered if the woman was the only one here or if there was a man in the back, a man who owned the truck in the parking lot. Maybe the truck belonged to another guest.

“Is there anyone else staying here tonight?” Dianne asked sheepishly.

“No, ma’am, you’re the only visitor we have had this week.”

Nodding her head, Dianne pulled out a couple of twenties and handed them to the woman. She felt better assuming that the woman’s husband was in the back also. She didn’t put it past Josh to come looking for her, though she wasn’t sure if he would come this far or not.

She thanked the woman and walked back to her beat-up car. She couldn’t believe she had made it this far. For one, she had a bad habit of leaving just to turn right back around because she didn’t know where else to go. Second, she had been driving this piece of junk since two months after Jackson had been born. It was a piece of shit then, and it still was now. She hadn’t felt comfortable being on the outskirts of town with a baby with no way to go, so she had talked Josh into helping her get it.

She pulled Jackson from the backseat and staggered under the weight of her five-year-old to the door of room Number Three. Laying him across the bed, she collapsed beside him and grimaced from the pain shooting through her abdomen. *I need stitches* she thought as she closed her eyes and began to drift off to sleep.

A knocking at the door made her nearly jump out of her flesh. Crazy thoughts ran through her mind. *How did he find me so fast?* Just as quickly as she panicked, she came back to her senses. The black-haired woman stood at the door with an armful of fresh white towels. The gray of her hair seemed to glow in the moonlight.

“Goodness, I didn’t mean to scare you ma’am,” she apologized. “Here’s you some towels.” She glanced down and noticed Dianne holding her abdomen tenderly. “Are you all right?”

Say, “No! I’m not all right. My husband beats me when our son is asleep.” Say, “He’s not even my husband. He just calls himself my husband” Say, “I need help. You look like a nice lady. Can you help me?”

“Oh, uh, yes, I’m fine,” Dianne lied as she took the towels from her. “Thank you,” she said politely as she shut and locked the door.

She couldn’t help but feel anxious. Although this wasn’t the first time Josh had hurt her, he had never hurt her like this. Before she had only carried minor cuts and really nasty bruises. Every time she had left before, he had come to get her. She hadn’t been hard to find though because she had gone to her mom’s house a couple of towns over from where they lived. Each time she had sworn she wasn’t going to go back with him no matter how hard he pleaded, but each time she had given in to him.

Never had she had any doubt about the damage that was being inflicted on Jackson. The only misconception she had was the hope of things being different. “I promise this won’t happen again,” Josh would plead with her. “I’ll change, baby! You know I ain’t no bad guy! Hell, you know I love you!”

Dianne just hoped he wouldn't come looking for her now, but still the thought of him seeing her vehicle and busting in made her nervous. Would he beg her back or finish the job? Maybe if she hollered loud enough the man she hoped drove the red pickup would hear her.

She sat back down on the bed and watched Jackson as he slept. She hated that he had seen as much as she had. She honestly couldn't believe she had allowed him to see any of it, knowing the pain she had gone through watching her mom and dad fight. She knew Jackson's pain intimately. She had felt it as a child. She could feel it as his mother. Somehow every pain he felt was her pain, too, and his pain was more than she could bear.

But not anymore she told herself. She went to the bathroom and looked into the mirror. Even through the streaks and the dim yellow lighting, she could see how bad she looked. She could only imagine what the woman at the desk must be thinking. She washed her face and replaced the blood stained rag with a piece of one her old holey t-shirts. *I'll go to the nearest hospital in the morning* she told herself as she crawled under the covers. She snuggled Jackson close to her. As she closed her eyes, she dreaded the thought of the interrogation she would undergo if she followed through and went to the hospital. Sleep overtook her as lay there worrying about how she would answer the questions.

Morning came, and with it came anxiety. She wiped the sleep from her eyes and sat up in the bed, the movement caused even sharper pains in her abdomen than the ones she had felt last night. She had tossed and turned during the night and could see that the blood had again soaked through her bandage. Just then Jackson sat up in the bed and caught her off guard. "Mommy, why are you bleeding?"

At a loss for words, she stammered, "I'm a little hurt, baby, but I'm ok."

What else could she tell her five year old son? *Your daddy is a drunken lunatic, and he tried to kill me this last time?* No, she hoped he wasn't putting two and two together. He had heard their arguing, but had not seen them as fists hit her over and over and feet in heavy boots had kicked her in the side. She thought she had gotten away. Somehow she had sprung from a fetal position on the floor and lunged for the door. Just as her hand reached the door knob, she felt his calloused hands pull her back. She had screamed when it happened. She had not seen the knife coming. In shock, she thought he had just uppercut her in the gut until she felt the blade pull out. She made herself stop remembering.

She instructed Jackson to get up and get dressed while she went to check out of the motel.

"Where we goin', Mama?" he asked her curiously.

"Baby, I'm not sure just yet," she answered him. At least she could be truthful about that.

"Will Daddy be coming, too?" She wasn't sure, but something in his voice sounded as if he did not want her answer to be yes. Still, she fumbled over her thoughts, trying to find words to answer this question for a five year old.

"No, honey, me and Daddy are not getting along really well, and I think it's best if me and you stay away from him." Her voice cracked. It was hard to speak the truth, hard to hear the truth. She could not look directly at Jackson.

"Did Daddy hurt you again?" he asked.

She reiterated her demand for him to get dressed as she tried to keep her composure. *Jackson knows. He knows the truth.* She got herself dressed and left the door open as she walked to the front office. It was chilly this morning, but the sun was shining. The dreary darkness she had driven through last night was gone.

Then Josh's face popped into her mind. The dawn of realization came as she remembered what he had done after he stabbed her. He had left her there to bleed. She wondered what he thought of her not being there when he got back. No doubt he was angry. Had he hoped she would die there?

Well, she didn't die there, and she wasn't going back to die there. She wasn't sure where she and Jackson would go after the hospital, but she suddenly wasn't worried about the questions the doctor was bound to ask. She didn't care that charges would be pressed. She only cared that he couldn't hurt her or Jackson ever again. Her heart was filled with hope at that last thought. She went to check out of the hotel.

The woman from last night was still on duty. This morning she was standing behind the counter, not hidden behind the curtain. She smiled at Dianne and seemed to look at her closely. Normally, Dianne would have shied away from her gaze, but today she gave a little smile in return.

“Did you sleep well?”

Diann considered her answer. “I did not sleep as well as I would have liked, but today I feel refreshed and ready to face whatever comes my way.” For once in her life, she had answered with honesty. She felt herself stand straighter.

The woman’s eyes looked relieved as she smiled at Dianne with a look of understanding. “I worried about you last night,” she said in a kind voice.

“Thank you,” Dianne said. “I wasn’t feeling well last night, but today I feel much better.”

The woman gave her a receipt and then asked, “Where are you headed?”

“Mississippi,” she said surprising herself. *Where did that come from?*

“Do you have family there?”

“Not anymore, but my grandparents lived there when I was a kid. All of my memories there are good ones.” She knew it was true. Every memory in Mississippi was a good one. She would start by going to the little country church and visit her grandparents’ graves. She would let Jackson put flowers on them. Then they would go have a picnic by the creek where her grandfather taught her how to skip rocks. Jackson was old enough to learn.

The pain was tolerable as she walked to the car and put Jackson in the back. They were going to a better life in Mississippi. She put down the window just a bit even though the air was cold. “Do you feel that, Jackson? It means we’re alive.” She was surprised to hear her own laughter.

Jackson’s eyes met hers in the rearview window. They shared a smile. “Yes, Mommy, we’re alive!” he said in agreement.

Backwater

by

Jacob Pharr

Second Place Short Story, Grenada

“How can silence be chaos? How can silence be the loudest thing heard? When the silence is the loudest thing heard, there is nothing; but fear, chaos, and the echo of nothing but silence. Silence has come upon us. It crept upon us until we were completely surrounded, just like the midnight mist that comes over a field. The uncertainty of what is so close, yet, seems so far away is a fearful and terrifying thing. We never saw this coming, and when it completely surrounded us, it was complete chaos. Our children were born in this dark, silent chaos. They know of nothing else. Few of us who remain know what it’s like to live in a normal world. The silence has taken away everything that was normal. The silence took the life away from everything, like money, and even our freedom. We are the fortunate few who have experienced freedom, but the freedom, just like everything else, is silenced.

“Before the EMP (Electric Magnetic Pulse), we just thought we were experiencing a computer hack. Hacks had become so normal that we paid little attention to them. The stock market fell the needed seven percent to stop all trading. That was the last time there was stock market trading. Airlines were getting hacked, and all planes were grounded. That afternoon was chaos. We knew we had to hide. When everything shut off, we knew exactly what was happening. Those of us here had been preparing for this day. We knew where to go and what to take, but we never truly thought this day would come, until the silence fell.”

The fog hovered over the plain of sage grass, with beams of golden sunlight popping through every once in a while. It was cool and quiet, except for the sound of Adam's axe splitting the chunk of wood that sat before him on the old, weathered stump. Adam's black t-shirt was speckled with wood shavings. He took the two pieces of wood and stacked them under the tree with the other logs he had split. The neatly stacked wood, all hand cut by Adam Douglas, stretched out past the tree a good ways and was worth four cords. Luckily, he didn't have to move the logs because they were centralized in the middle of the colony. Everybody could get wood when they needed it. After Adam stacked the two pieces of wood, he pulled the old tattered green tarp over the section that wasn't under the tree, to keep moisture from getting on the fruits of his labor.

Adam knew the day ahead of him was long. He and the others would be picking peas, squash, and beans all day, and toward the evening, they would take inventory of everything they had picked. Though it was hard work, it was peaceful work, and everyone in the colony knew how blessed they were to have food. Adam stopped walking to put his axe away inside the door of his house. He listened intently. All he could hear was the sound of flowing water from the Tallahatchie River in the distance. They were in a perfect spot for survival, and everyone around him knew how to survive in this spot.

Adam looked on all the log homes around him, and he remembered when the landscape had been different. In this very spot, an old log barn had stood ready to succumb to the passing of time, and they had torn it down before it collapsed. There had been no joy in its destruction. There had been no sorrow either. Taking down the old barn had been a necessity. Everything they did now was done out of necessity. Pragmatism won out in every decision. Throughout the demolition, they had worked alongside each other with quiet movements. There was no greed. They were a band of survivors.

They had put different amounts of logs into stacks, depending on how many logs each person would need to build a house. No one ever said the word *home*. Homes were what they once had. Homes were places where people plan to live permanently. Now they were building houses, habitats, places to protect them from the elements for as long as they were here.

They were amazed that the wood, so close to the river, had no termite damage. They felt a presence in the silence watching over them, protecting them, covering them. Over time, little by little, they brought in pieces that were missing, and even brought in tin for all the roofs. None of the houses were mansions by any means, but the colony created an atmosphere of providing everything a person could need.

By now, some of the fog had rolled away, and Adam looked at the fields. When things were normal in this autumn part of the year, farmers gathered crops with their tractors and combines. But now, this once abundant field was the dominion of high sage grass and small pine sapling trees. When the group had first begun planting, they had used the edge of this field, because they knew of the rich soil beneath the sage grass and dead leaves from the previous fall. They knew the soil could sustain them.

Somehow, the fertile Mississippi soil had sustained their families for generations. During the years of plenty, after the civil war, throughout the Great Depression, and in the decades that followed with the poverty that always haunted them and never seemed more than a generation removed, the soil had always been there providing for them, sustaining them, reassuring them that they would survive. An unseen presence hovered silently over this land. All that they needed had been provided.

Adam heard the crunch of leaves and knew that someone had come out of a cabin. He looked to his right and saw Mark and his three-year-old son walking toward him. They tipped their heads at the same time and gave each other a "Mornin'." Adam took a few steps toward Mark's cabin and watched Mark put on his boots to go to the colony garden. He leaned on a pole at Mark's cabin.

"How's Angela?"

Mark looked up at him. Concern clouded his eyes, but he was characteristically optimistic as he answered. "She's a lot better today. She actually got out of bed and made coffee." Adam nodded his head in encouragement. "Well, at least she's getting around a little better." Concern darkened his eyes a bit more, and

he looked down as though interested he needed to check his bootlaces. He looked by up when he had gathered his composure. “Yeah, to be honest with you, I was really worried this fever would get her.”

They both stood up straight and walked slowly toward the garden. Fear was always hiding in the corners of their hearts, but they tried to ignore it. They were purposeful in their resolve to survive. They assessed the field to see what needed to be gathered. To preserve their supply and their energy, they gathered food once per week, making sure that every food gathered was fully matured. As they prepared for the task, Sherman, David, Gill and a few more, joined them, ready for day ahead.

The October day was typically warm. It was a beautiful weather for harvesting. There were 35, 20-foot rows of vegetable plants. Each worker in the garden worked to make sure he no vegetation was overlooked. It was not a matter of being stingy, but a matter of surviving. Each worker had a small bucket. Their movements were slow and methodical—fill the bucket, dump the contents into the wheelbarrow until it was filled, roll the loaded wheelbarrow to a storage area where other workers were cleaning the vegetables and putting them into storage jars. Halfway down each row, they stopped to dump their buckets. It was the best crop they had had, and they were proud and thankful. They felt the silent presence in the small breeze. They would have plenty for the days ahead.

By noon, the workers were done with harvesting and turned to jarring food and putting it into the storage cabin. They knew that there would not be many more times to harvest. Soon they would expend their energy hunting and fishing. Once those activities were part of relaxation, but now they needed the meat for survival. The rest of this evening, they would patch up cabins for the winter. Winter could be unpredictable. There might be bitter cold with cutting wind and a foot of snow, or mild days that seemed to usher in early spring. They had to be prepared for whatever came their way.

As the last load of vegetables came through the door, the work halted at the sound of a man screaming across the field. A single heartbeat could be felt in the entire room. Adam looked over at Sherman and Gill, the only other two besides Adam who had military experience, “Get your guns, and sit at the edge of the trees. I’ll go get him.” The three scrambled out the door. Adam sprinted past the garden to survey the situation. He stopped and crouched in the sage grass to see if he could see anyone.

Everyone in the colony carried some kind of weapon. Adam always had a military issued Desert Eagle .44 magnum strapped to his belt. As he looked at the field, he remembered why he had left the military. The thoughts that floated across his mind brought back the feelings of dread and thoughts of *what if* he had to use force. He knew at this point and time that he was defending the only family he had left. Everyone else had been taken from him. Still he wondered if he could do it? Could he kill another man?

Adam looked over at the tree line to his left and barely saw Sherman already taking aim from behind a fallen log. Adam was keenly aware of his surroundings. He felt his body taut with anticipation as he used his senses to locate the source of the scream. Finally, he saw him, a man dressed in a military uniform tattered with scorch marks, revealing bleeding cuts and some exposed skin.

Adam stood up with his pistol drawn and stopped the man dead in his tracks with his stern command, “Stop right where you are.” The man did so immediately. Adam felt himself relax imperceptibly. If the intruder were a threat, he would have tried something. The two stood looking at one another. Adam still stood with his arms extended and pistol aimed at the man. Finally, he broke the silence, “State your name and purpose.”

Adam took in every detail of the man, bald head, right side covered in black smut, noticeably nervous, but not a coward, smart and well trained. Slowly the man turned toward Adam. His posture, his voice, everything about him said, “I’m not a threat to you.” He spoke calmly. “I’m Sergeant Luke Davis from the United States Army. My platoon, as well as a good many more, have been combating and enemy invasion and advance onto American soil. My platoon was overtaken, and I am the only one who hasn’t been captured or killed. Our makeshift communication went down, and I am running to report to General Bates what has happened. I have handwritten reports from my captain. I must deliver these as quickly as possible.”

Adam looked dropped his pistol with the assurance of Sherman and Gill already in position. “You look bad hurt. Come to our place, and you can tell us more of what’s going on.” He went to the sergeant’s left side and helped him. As they walked, Adam could not stop his questions. “Sergeant, where is the front line?” The Sergeant, struggling to walk, looked puzzled. “You don’t know where the front line has been? We are fighting over Highway 55 North.”

Adam felt numb. That was close. Too close. “How long do we have until they get in this area?” Still struggling to walk, the Sergeant did not answer until he stopped as they finally reached the edge of the garden. “With the second wave platoon gathering at Charleston and the militia forming up, I figure about three to four days.”

Adam was hearing what he was most afraid of, war. He had prepared, and prepared well for surviving, but not for killing. He said nothing more to the Sergeant and shouted across the colony, “Guys! Injury!” Mark and David rushed out to help the Sergeant get to David’s cabin where all the medical supplies were, and Adam stayed where he was.

Sherman and Gill came out from the positions. “What’s going on, Adam?” He stared at the bare dirt road in the middle of the colony. He could not look at the faces of the men who had joined with him in search of peace. “Get everyone together at the meetinghouse,” he said. “The Sergeant will tell us everything.” He started toward the medical supply cabin and then turned back. “Bring your weapons,” he added. “Tell everyone to bring their rifles and all their ammunition.” With that, he walked away. Sherman and Gill remained where they were, absorbing what Adam had said. Neither spoke. Silently, they moved toward the cabins to do as Adam had said.

The Sergeant sat in a chair with his leg elevated in David’s cabin. “How bad is his leg?” Adam asked. David looked at the Sergeant and then back at Adam. “It’s just a sprain, but he needs to rest it.” Adam nodded his head with relief. “How many medical supplies do we have?” David opened all the cabinets and drawers to reassure Adam.

Adam looked at the supplies with approval and David shifted closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Adam, what’s going on?”

Adam dropped his head, “I don’t know, but he will tell us full detail in the meetinghouse. Let’s get him there.”

David opened the door and saw everyone headed toward the meetinghouse. He looked at Adam, but he was talking to the officer. “Sergeant, we need you in the meetinghouse to debrief us.” His tone was that of a commanding officer.

The Sergeant stood up and reached for a crutch propped beside where he was sitting. Adam tried to assist him, but the Sergeant said he was all right and headed toward the direction of the meetinghouse.

The meetinghouse was the biggest building in the colony. There were tables in the back, and when Adam walked in, he looked at the tables to find that they were loaded with guns and ammunition. He looked at Sherman and Gill’s table piled high with military equipment and weapons and was surprised at how well equipped the community was for war. He knew that had weapons for protection, but he did not realize how many weapons they had. He was torn. Would he be able to join the others if the weapons were needed? His body was tense.

The room fell silent, and Adam thanked everyone for coming. He was worried and everyone sensed his unease. They were not accustomed to seeing him like this, but still he was in charge. Everyone respected his leadership.

“I’ve called everyone here for a debriefing. There is something going on that only the Sergeant can explain to us. He will leave soon and try to cross the river. Sergeant, the floor is yours.” The sergeant remained seated, and everyone strained to see him.

“Ladies and gentleman, I am Sergeant Luke Davis from the United States Army. The country that you have known has been disintegrated.” A single, faint heartbeat seemed to pulse through all of them. No one spoke or moved to break the silence.

The Sergeant continued, “Since that fateful morning of the stock market crash, the power has been out all over the country. After about 45 minutes of the outage, the EMP hit and fried everything. After that, enemy forces mobilized their troops and were on American soil by late afternoon.

“We scrambled everything together, but the Eastern seaboard was lost in a matter of hours and the line stopped on the far side of the Alabama-Georgia line. It took the enemy almost three years to cross the Appalachian Mountains because people came out of the woods and began defending their land. Eventually, the people grew scarce. The ones who remain are hidden.

“Since the enemy forces crossed the mountains, they have slowly crawled their way across Alabama. They have also lost many lives, but they continue to advance. We finally retreated from battle and came this way to defend Highway 55 North. They have taken the Delta region already, where my platoon was.” Silence continued in the room.

“They hit us with a late night assault and took out our artillery. I’m the last man to escape. Everyone else is dead or captured,” his voice wavered and grew quiet, but then he regained his resolve. “Across the Mississippi River, General Bates sits staked out in the Arkansas hills ready to hit the enemy when they cross the river. You have about 48 hours to do something. The second wave platoon and local militia are gathering at Charleston and will hold them off for about two days. You can leave, or you can stay and fight.” He looked over the group of men, women, and children and saw their uncertainty. “I do not recommend that you stay. I’m surprised you people have lasted as long as you have. I commend all of you, but I advise that you move to American soil because where you stand now will soon become enemy territory. If I found you, so will they.” He paused for impact. “There is no shame in going across the river. The choice is yours. You must decide what you will do.” He stood up with effort. “God bless you, and God bless America,” he said with conviction.

The room was silent. Nothing could be heard except the single heartbeat of these people. Miles, the oldest man in the colony at age 77, stood and looked at everyone. “I remember the day these events began. It was difficult to understand the silence that fell upon us. I questioned over and over in my mind, how have we come to this point?” Miles continued to talk of the day the silence fell and the events leading to it. The fighting American spirit began to rise within the people as he continued to speak. When Miles sat down, Adam stood up.

He followed Miles’ example and looked at everyone. “I believe everyone in here knows what they want to do. We set up our system of government in this country on Biblical principles. Now we have to ask ourselves whether it is within Biblical boundaries for us to stand up and defend ourselves? I know the Founding Fathers found Biblical evidence to shed blood. They fought for liberty. They fought for an ideal, for a way of life. Are the reasons that led them into war good enough to lead us into war again? Can we justify taking up arms against other men?” Everyone looked at one another in silence.

Sherman and Gill stood up. Gill began to speak as Sherman nodded his agreement. “We believe going to war against these men is both Biblical and necessary. Sergeant, can you tell us if the Americans will eventually lose?”

The Sergeant looked down in hesitation and then lifted up his head. “If this war and invasion continue, we will lose. When they attacked, they caught us totally unaware, and when they shut down our electronics, they sealed our fate. Yes, we will eventually lose.”

Still standing, Sherman and Gill, looked back at Adam “We will have to run all the way to the Pacific if we run, so we might as well stay right where we are and wage guerilla warfare. They attacked us, so we are justified in defending ourselves.”

The two began talking about tactics and ways of surviving. Adam kept his head down as they spoke. He listened to them and sought within himself whether he would be able to kill someone. He remembered the night he was in a church service and found the Lord. He had left the military for that very reason, and even in this time, he was unsure if killing another human was justified. He didn’t want to hurt anyone, but he knew deep within that he would defend his friends. He began nodding his head in agreement.

Gill and Sherman sat down, and Adam spoke, “Many of you don’t know that I quit the military after I found the Lord. I didn’t think I could do anymore killing, not even in service to my country. Today, I have faced again the feeling that I had on the battlefield after I got saved. I have wondered if I can kill a man.” Adam paused. Every man and woman watched him.

“Gill and Sherman, I appreciate you two bringing up about our actions being justified as self-defense. The Lord said that any man who sheds man’s blood will have his blood shed by man. The Lord called King David to be a warrior king. Deep within my spirit, I am grieved to take the life of a man, but I know that God will help us protect each other.”

Adam stopped. He remained silent as he gathered his thoughts. His voice grew strong and confident as he said, “I am prepared to fight and defend each of you. I guess for me the greater question is not whether I would kill for you: It is whether I would die for you, and the answer is yes. The servant is not greater than his master. Our Lord laid down His life for us and rescued us through the shedding of His own blood.” He looked around the room. “I will not run if you want to stay. I will take up arms and fight with you.”

Silence hung heavy in the room. The silence was not filled with absence. It was filled with presence. Women who had been trembling grew still. Men who had been raging with emotion grew resolute. Adam looked at each one with strong, quiet eyes. “I am prepared to fight for freedom, the freedom to worship as I choose, the freedom to serve my God and my fellow man. I will not fear those who can kill only my body but cannot kill my soul.

“By the charter that we signed when we formed this community, we will vote. All those in favor of going to war say ‘Aye.’ All of those against say ‘No.’” The room was silent. Then Sherman and Gill stood and voted yes. Others began to stand and their voices rose as one to a resounding swell of “yes.” Adam looked out among the crowd. All those opposed say ‘nay.’” No one spoke. The decision was unanimous.

Adam looked at the Sergeant. “I understand you have orders to get that information across the river, but you are welcome to join us in the fight.”

The Sergeant responded, “I must take these orders across the river, but I will come back with more supplies and ammunition. I will persuade the general to send troops to you. You guys know these woods, you know the terrain, and you can make them pay for invading American soil.”

Adam shook his hand, “Thank you, Sergeant. We will need you.” He turned back to his fellow soldiers. “Everyone needs to put on dark clothes or camouflage, including all women and children. Everyone sixteen and up will be armed with a pistol at all times. Go quickly and return in thirty minutes. Then we will assign jobs and a task force of main fighters. Anything that can be used for defense should be brought here when you come back.”

Adam went to his cabin and changed his clothes. He put on his military clothes but did not look in the mirror at his reflection. As he walked from his cabin back to the meetinghouse, he saw the Sergeant standing by one of the horses owned by Bryan Ortiz. Adam went to speak with the Sergeant one last time.

“Sergeant, may God bless you on your journey. We will survive until you return. We trust you to bring back what you can when you can.”

The Sergeant mounted his horse. “I’ll get to the river by early morning, and I’ll probably arrive at the base in Arkansas by tomorrow night. I’ll come back as soon as I can.” Adam nodded his head.

“Is there any place where we can get ammo and maybe some supplies abandoned by the army around here? Or maybe a place where we could steal from the enemy forces?”

The Sergeant stared at the tree line trying to think of anything particular. “Go to Camp McCain south of Grenada. The army makes it a point not to leave ammunition, unless there is an emergency mobilization, but you never know what you might find. Remember, Highway 55 is a battleground; the enemy may already be in the area. Their hackers got a list of National Guard and Army bases, so I’m sure they would’ve ransacked Camp McCain, too. It looks like you’re going to be stealing from the enemy forces if anything, and that’s not very difficult. They always have trucks come in a particular base area, and they never

have patrols in the area, so you can walk in unless they are mobilizing troops in the area, but Adam, I don't advise it. In fact, I don't advise engaging unless it's an absolute threat. And don't do it within 10 miles from here. They will follow you back here."

Adam had enough information. "Thanks, Sergeant. We will wait for you as long as we can. We will only do some strategizing and scouting. We've got great hunters here who know the area. You better get going." The Sergeant saluted as he got the horse moving out of the colony.

It was dusky dark and the cold, fall air had begun to set in, but the fire of anticipation kept everyone warm as they entered the meetinghouse. Some of the men's wives and some of the men lit the candles in the meetinghouse so they could see. Adam brought not only his military equipment, but also two giant maps. One was of the five-county area, with Tallahatchie being in the middle, and the other was a state map for pinpointing the advancement of the enemy. Adam unrolled both and put them on wall for everyone to see.

"Ok, we are going to try and sit tight until we have supplies from the Sergeant. If he's not back within three days, we'll engage. First, we will do some scouting. I am going to find out where the second wave and militia are engaging the enemy forces. We will be able to get a good idea of where their advance is going directly." He paused. "Sherman, I have a special mission in mind for you. Do you think you can go to the Camp McCain area south of Grenada? I want you to see if any enemy forces are there, and if not, see if there are any supplies or ammunition there. Report any and everything you find on the base, but be careful. If enemy forces are anywhere within five miles of the base, leave. If they aren't anywhere around it, there could be a gap."

Adam turned to his right. "Gill, I want you to see how far away another colony or another group of people may be. If they are anything like us, we could use their help. Be our representative and persuade them. I'm not positive what you will find. If you find any remnants of the Mississippi Militia, do what it takes to bring them in." His eyes swept over the men and settled on Mark, "Mark, go with Gill for a distant ways, but then take this smaller map of the area and figure out the terrain within a twenty mile radius. Look especially for high hills, low areas, and places where we can engage. The rest of the men are going to defend this area. There's about one-hundred of us here."

Adam gave his full attention to the remaining men. He felt love for them and compassion. These men were his new family. "Men, I want twenty of you on a night watch rotation every two hours. Make it a good rotation so it's not the same two every night. We'll build a watchtower on the top of David's cabin since it is centrally located." He stopped for a moment and then continued. "Guys that are scouting, we leave in fifteen minutes to use the cover of night to get to our destinations." He paused once more and let the silence seep into his mind, his heart, his very being. No one moved. They stood waiting for what he would say next. Adam knew there was only one thing left to do.

"Before we leave," he said, "We will pray for God's protecting hand upon us and this colony." They bowed their heads in one accord. As Adam prayed, they joined silently in their hearts. They were armed and ready for battle. This place was their home. They would defend it with their lives.

Debating Freedom

by

Hannah Wingard

First Place Short Story, Ridgeland

Three Days:

It's dark all around me, only a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. The floor is hard, concrete probably because of how cold it is. My head is still kind of fuzzy. My vision is still hazy, the edges blurred out like a fogged camera lens. I need to find out where I am.

As I stand up I wobble, my legs shaking and shoulders slumped. I think I was drugged, maybe. That's the only explanation for these types of symptoms. My vision is clearing up now and I'm definitely in a basement. A storm cellar perhaps? Concrete walls, floors and ceiling. A set of stairs in the corner, leading up, but a wall blocking halfway. A fence is surrounding me, like a cage for a big outside dog. There's a blanket and bottle of water in the corner.

"Hello?" I call out, praying whoever took me would give me just a recognition.

Right then, a door opens and loud footsteps come down the stairs and I back up, my back hitting the fence and making a loud clanging noise. Someone comes into view and it's a man, tall and lean. I can't see him too well because of the light, but he's carrying something. The closer he gets the more I think about how I should act. Looking down I think I shouldn't scream, it will only make him angry. Don't fight him, he'll kill you, he looks big enough to kill you. As the rules scream through my mind, a voice pulls me back into the cage.

"Are you hungry?" The voice asks and I glance up and he's right at the cage door, in his hands a tray of Taco Bell? One, who puts Taco-Bell on a tray, and two, gross.

I shake my head quickly side to side, my blond hair swaying along. He sighs and I give him a once over. He has to be in his mid-twenties, his hair short and crazy, dark brown, almost black. His eyes blue, ocean blue like those pictures you see on Pinterest where the boat is floating on the water so clear you can see the shadow at the bottom. He's tall too, if he wanted to enter the cage he would have to duck.

"You need to eat." He says quietly and I shake my head again so he rolls his eyes and flips the latch on the cage. I press back again and he ducks inside and places the tray on the floor, "I'll be back in an hour. Please eat." he says and then leaves me alone.

I watch the food, almost waiting for something to blow up or try and kill me, but it's only food. This can go so many ways. I can eat the food and there be something inside of it and I die. He could have put some type of drug in it and once I wake up I'll be tied to a bed in a dark room. Then again, it could just be food. I sit on the floor and stare at it, feeling my stomach growl and my mouth dry. He could be tricking me, waiting for me to be helpless and fall into his trap. My mind thinks rational while my stomach gurgles and yells at me to eat the food and drink the water.

I finally decide to place the food and water in the corner and curl into the blanket. He can't make me eat. I refuse to let that happen. I'll act good, do what he says, be quiet and not fight but one slip up and he tries to hurt me, hell will break loose. I might be small, but I can cause some serious damage.

An hour later the door opens and he comes back down. I sit balled up, my chin on my knees and he walks over and a look of disappointment crosses his face. "You didn't eat." He states.

I squint at him and he sighs heavily, "Well, come on. You need to come upstairs."

I shake my head and he flips the latch, "Don't be stubborn, you can't be down here."

"Why not?" I finally ask, my hands balling up ready to fight.

He stares at me for a moment and then answers, "I'm about to paint down here. You don't need to breathe in the fumes. You'll get sick, and it'll take at least a week."

Suddenly all of this seems wrong. Shouldn't he want me to get sick from paint fumes? Isn't that what a psychotic kidnapper does? He looks genuinely concerned, so I stand up and slowly walk over. Play nice and

he won't kill me. "*Unless he's taking you upstairs to kill you.*" my mind yells at me and my step falters. Could he be taking me upstairs to kill me? That would be just my luck.

I stare at him, keeping eye contact and he gestures with his hand, "I don't have all day." his voice impatient and quick. I nod and take the final steps to him and he grabs my upper arm and leads me out. His grip wasn't tight enough to hurt, but just enough to keep me in place.

I walk beside him up the stairs and into the hallway but I don't have enough time to look around and find an escape route because I'm placed in a bathroom right across the hall. He flips the light switch on and says, "I'll bring you some fresh clothes and more food tonight. You need to eat Penelope."

My eyes widen and just as he shuts the door I call after him, "How do you know my name?" I press my hands against the door and then my ear. All I hear is him shuffling around and the sound of plastic. Who the hell is this guy and what does he want?

One Week and Three Days:

I wake up to the bathroom door opening and I sit up from the bathtub and the guy is standing there holding a cup of coffee. I rub my eyes and he walks in and leans against the sink counter, "I'm going to take you back downstairs today."

"Oh joys." I mutter as I stand up and he side glances at me, "You should be somewhat thankful. I'm doing all of this for you." he says sharply.

I roll my eyes and step out of the tub, "Yeah, then let me go. You haven't even told me what I'm doing here. You haven't killed me yet or tried to rape me. Is that later on or something?" I ask. I know I shouldn't be asking him anything or giving him ideas but it's been a week. All he's done is left me in a bathroom, brought me three meals a day, and fresh clothes.

He laughs lightly, "You're so creative. I'm not going to hurt you, so come on Penelope. You will want to see downstairs."

He holds his hand out so I squint and cross my arms. The only thing I've learned in this week is he won't hurt me. We stood for ten minutes staring at each other the other day when he tried and take me to the kitchen to prove he wasn't poisoning my food. I eventually let him and he ate half of everything he prepared for me.

I finally give in, grabbing his hand and let him lead me back downstairs. Once we reach the bottom, I stare in disbelief. No way he did all of this. The floor is now covered in laminate wood flooring. The walls painted a pastel pink, the ceiling painted white and a ceiling fan where the old hanging light was. A full bed with its headboard against the wall, a dresser against the right wall and a love seat beside the bed with a small round coffee table between them. A bookshelf in front of the bed against the wall with a TV on top and shelves filled with books I would like.

The guy releases my hand and says, "Go on, you're going to love being here."

I turn to him and I know I have a look of disbelief on my face because he smirks and says, "This is so you're comfortable."

"What? Make me *comfortable* before you *kill* me?" I say sarcastically and his face contorts to anger and he steps toward me, causing me to step back and my legs hit the couch, "I would never hurt you so get that idea out of your head." he says slow and steady.

I only nod and he loses the anger and gives a blank stare, "Well, get comfortable. The bathroom is through the door beside the bookshelf and you have clothes in the dresser. I have to go to work. I'll be back. The TV works and I know you'll like those books. See you tonight."

He leaves me alone and I hear the clicking of the locks. I walk to the corner, sit down, curl up and finally cry. I haven't cried since I've been here but now I am. My body can't fight it anymore. I'm terrified. Frankly, I don't even remember the day he took me. I can't remember if I was shopping or headed to work. Nothing. It's all black.

My cries get louder and then I'm screaming out, sobbing. "Help. Please help. Somebody." my voice rising and echoing off the walls. There aren't any windows so I know no one can hear me, but it's still worth a shot. After minutes of this, I finally lay on my side and continue crying. I have no one who will look for me. No family who is trying to call me and getting worried. Friends who live out of state and will take my not answering as me just being me. I'm completely alone and something tells me he knew it.

Four Months and Eighteen Days:

I'm sitting in the center of the bed, flipping through the TV channels when the guy comes down with dinner. I glance over at him and he smiles, like he always does and he's brought his plate too. I throw my legs off the bed and he hands me my plate, only a salad and places my bottle Gatorade on the bed.

"What have you been up to today?" he ask, as if I've actually done something productive.

"Watched TV, read half of that Nicolas Sparks book you got me and did some exercising." I say as he sits on the love-seat. He takes a bite of his food, "The book any good?"

I shake my head, "To cheesy for me."

"But you liked *A Walk to Remember* last month." He says confused.

I roll my eyes and take a bite of my salad and chew. He waits until I finish and I say, "You recommended I read it. I've just read all of these books. They're starting to get boring."

"I'll get you more books then." He says matter-of-factly and I sigh, slump my shoulders, and ask, "Why did you take me?"

He stands up and starts to leave like he always does when I ask that question. That's how it's always been. Me asking why he took me and him leaving me with my question unanswered. I back track, trying to keep him down here, "Wait! I'm sorry. Please...can I get to know you?"

He stops and turns back, "Why?" he ask and I shrug, "I mean, I would like to get to know you. I don't even know your name."

"Cal," he says sharply and I nod, "Cal. Cool. Is that short for something?"

He walks back over and nods, "Yeah, Calvin."

I throw my hands up and smile, "We're getting somewhere! We've established names! Now, what is your social life like? Are you a creepy loner?"

One thing about me was I was blunt and this made him laugh, which wasn't so bad. He shakes his head and lets his laugh dissolve. "I have friends."

I shake my head, "Cal, Cal, Cal...no one has friends and then kidnaps somebody."

He looks up suddenly and stares at me, "You aren't just somebody Penelope."

I stare at him, and him at me for a moment. Those words making me feel a little tiny fluttering feeling and then my mind pops in and yells, "*He kidnapped you! This is no time for goo goo eyes and smooth words. Focus.*" I snap out of the tiny haze and shake my head, "We're talking about your social life. How many friends?"

"About twenty I see on a daily basis and I have two thousand on Facebook." He says and I make a face, "You have friends? What? How do you have friends, look like that, have a job and then kidnap someone?"

He sighs and stands up, "Finish eating and goodnight."

While he walks up the stairs I call after him, "Cal! Wait! I need to know why I'm here! How long will I be here?"

The door shuts loudly and I scream out in frustration. I sit on the couch and ball up, staring at the salad on my plate. I was getting tired of this. The same routine. Wake up, hang around, read, watch TV, then him come down, talk to me and go to bed. That was it! I'm actually surprised I haven't gone crazy. Yet.

Six Months:

The sound of Cal walking down the stairs wakes me up and I sit up just in time to see him standing at the bottom of my bed holding a cupcake with a single candle in the middle. He smiles wide, his dimples deepening and he holds it out, "Happy Birthday."

I sigh heavily and get off the bed and walk to him, "Thanks."

I take the cupcake and blow the candle out. He watches me as I take it to the coffee table and set it down. "What's wrong?" he asks and I turn and shake my head, "It's time for me to go."

He widens his eyes, "No it's not."

I nod, "Cal. I can't stay here anymore. I have a life! Unless you have plans for me, I need to go. Do you plan on killing me?" I ask even though I know the answer.

"You know I would never hurt you," he says quietly and I nod, "See, I need to go. I can't keep living here like your pet!"

He goes to walk away like always and I feel anger boil up causing me to finally snap. All of the rules I set flying out the window. I pick up my book from beside my pillow and throw it at him.

It misses him by a hair and slams against the wall. He whips around and I yell as loud as I can, "Let me go!"

He yells back with equal force, "No! You need to be here!"

"Why? Why do I need to be here? I have a life! I have an apartment that needs to be paid. I have a pet. Also my car, I don't even know where it's at."

He walks toward me, "I took care of all of that. You were evicted and I got your stuff and stored it in my garage," before he can continue I hold my hands up and squeak, "You did what?"

He nods, "I handled all of that for you. I gave your cat away too. So he would have a home. Your car is in a parking garage too."

I stare at him in disbelief, completely disregarding the information about my car and yell, "I've had that cat for *six years*. Who do you think you are? I want to go! I'm tired of being here! Let me go now Cal!"

He laughs once and says menacingly, "Who do you have on the outside? You don't have anyone. No friends. No family. You're alone. You need this."

I shake my head and yell back, "What I *need* is to go! Let me go!"

His face suddenly softens and my vision goes blurry. Tears stream down my cheeks and I brush at them, trying not to appear weak but he's already seen them.

"We used to know each other Penelope." He says softly.

I furrow my brows, shaking my head and step back, "What?"

"When we were little. We were friends."

I try and think if I knew a Calvin when I was younger and can't remember. I blocked out so much of my unfortunate childhood. I stare at him and shake my head, "I didn't know a Calvin."

"We lived in the same foster house. For at least two years," he says and I squint, "I never had friends in any of the houses I was in. How do you know I was in the foster care system?"

"Like I said, I was with you," he says, his voice tinted with annoyance. I squint at him and place my hands on my hips, "Why did you take me then?"

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. I wait and when he opens his eyes, he looks almost sad. "*He's got no reason to look sad.*" My mind says and finally he answers.

"I was protecting you from yourself."

I make a face and cock my head to the side, "Protect me from myself? That's malarkey."

"I'm serious. I'd been watching you. Trying to make sure you were safe, but you were alone. No one. You have no one and I was scared for you."

I laugh once and yell a bit, "So you kidnap me? Hello jack-ass, you could have walked up and talked to me!"

He squints, "You and I both know you would have brushed me off. It took me months to get you to let me be a friend to you."

“I didn’t know you.” I say again. I was getting frantic. All of this was lies and I needed to get out of here. Tears start to gather again and I look down. I’m going to go crazy here.

I hear, him take a deep breath and ask, “You really don’t remember do you?”

Glancing up, I shake my head, trying again to wrack my brain for a Calvin from my childhood. In my twenty-three years of life, I never knew a Calvin. Not even in school.

He steps away and motions for the stairs “You can go…”

I stare at him in disbelief and shake my head, “What?”

He takes a steady breath, “You can go. Leave.”

I dart my eyes to the stairs and back to him, my body coiled and ready to move. I almost don’t believe him though. “You first.”

He turns and walks up the stairs and I follow along quietly. Once at the top of the stairs he points to the door at the end of the hall, “Freedom is that way.”

I look at him and suddenly bolt to the door, running as fast as I can. I throw the door open and just as I step out he calls out, “You have a place here, just know that. I’m your friend. I’ve always been your friend.”

I stop and turn back to him, him giving me a soft smile and I step outside. It’s sunny and bright, the weather pretty and cool. I quickly jog down the walkway to the sidewalk and start running. I’ll find a phone and call the police.

“*It’s not like he hurt you,*” my mind tosses at me. My running falters and I come to a staggering stop. He didn’t hurt me. He never once touched me inappropriately, hit me or even insinuated he wanted sex. Nothing. He was just a friend. “*A friend?*” My mind sneers and I take a deep breath, calming my fast breathing. I glance back and his house is in full view, the door still open. That’s the best thing I’ve had in a long time. An actual friend. Despite everything, we had good conversations, liked the same stuff and watched movies together. A few times he would lay on the floor and just talk to me until we both drifted to sleep. The whole idea of the situation seems crazy and if I were to ever read about something like this I would think the girl was insane for just thinking about what I am thinking about.

I purse my lips and turn back to the street sign in front of me and up at the stop sign above. I could go back. He said I was welcome. I start to chew on my bottom lip and my mind adds to my confusion, “*You have no where to go now. No friends to call or family to help you. You’re homeless and petless. How dare he take my cat!*” I stop my runaway thoughts quickly and glance back one more time. Cal is standing in the doorway this time. He might help me get my job back and just have somewhere until I can get my own place. He said he was my friend. He said he knew me. Some deep part of me wants to believe him, to trust that he won’t hurt me. I take a deep breath and turn back, walking slowly and he watches me. As I get to the walkway to his house, he nods and turns around, heading back inside and I follow.

The Truth Will Not Set You Free

by

Jade Dalton

Second Place Short Story, Ridgeland

His gleaming green eyes feel like they are piercing holes into me. I try to open my mouth to talk, but no words come out.

“If I were you, I would be talking right now,” he says, almost on cue as if he was reading my mind.

“It was an accident,” I say, but it doesn’t sound very convincing. I try to put more forcefulness in the words, “I swear, I didn’t mean to do it.” This was all so overwhelming.

“You keep saying that. I just don’t think I believe you though.”

“I don’t care what you think.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You don’t care? You should care.” He points a pudgy finger at his chest. “What I think matters a whole lot.”

“It’s so hard, the pieces are fuzzy and they just aren’t sticking together right.” I lean forward on the cold, metal table and rub my eyes. Tears trickle down my face. “It just feels like a bad dream.”

My lawyer, Matt Waldrop, speaks up, “I think my client has had enough for today. Do you have any other questions for her?”

“We’ll approach this again in a few days. You’ll definitely be hearing from us. Get some rest Mrs. Lyons. Traumatic situations can often make someone feel how you are but normally it’ll sort all out and if it does so before we contact you, please, contact us first.” He stands up and exhales. “I’m not trying to be a jerk; I’m just trying to get answers.”

“Of course,” I sob out pitifully, offering him my hand. He shakes it lightly and grimly smiles at me.

Matt just rolls his eyes. “She just got out of the hospital for Pete’s sake.” He turns to open the door for me and I walk out of the room. I let out a heaving sob and continue to cry until we are in the parking lot.

“He’s so pompous. He has nothing to go on and he knows it. That’s why he’s pushing.”

I wipe at my eyes. “You think?”

He scoffs. “Look, I want you to go to back to your hotel and get some rest. You’re so upset.”

I nod my head.

“Will you meet me at my office tonight around six? We’ve got to go over this thing in full detail. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“The worst is over,” he says.

I say nothing in response and turn around, pulling the keys out of my purse. The worst is over.

I wake up feeling refreshed. It feels so weird to know that I am finally free.

The drive to Matt’s office is a long one, but I enjoy it. I pull into the parking lot and am opening the door to his firm promptly at six.

“Are you feeling better?” He asks. He’s standing in the lobby with his hands in his pockets.

“A little bit,” I say.

“Let’s go ahead and get this done.” We walk down the hall together in silence and enter the room. He sits down on a couch and I sit opposite from him. This is all so formal.

“I’ve been thinking over everything in acute detail and I’m ready to talk about the whole thing.”

“Are you sure? We can wait if you’re still not ready.”

“No, I really want to get this over with.”

He pulls out a tape recorder and places it on a table that separates us. "Alright, I'm hitting record right now."

So I begin...

It was raining when I woke up that morning. I woke up early, around seven. My hand instantly stretched out to the right of me. That's where my husband slept. It was cold; he hadn't come in the night before. I wondered who he was with. I was well aware of his affairs. I didn't care when I found out. Love had left our marriage a long time ago.

When I was younger and deluded into thinking that I loved this man, the one whom I said the supposedly sacred, *'I do'* to, I didn't think everything would fall apart the way it eventually did. I was stupid back then, and believed in fairy tales.

Anyway, I got out of bed, walked over to my closet and stepped inside. I put on sweats and slid into my favorite pair of sneakers. That was routine. I ran every morning, although usually not that early. I walked downstairs. Our house is huge. The corridors that I wanted to be filled with children are instead filled with silence. I walked into the kitchen and turned on the lights.

"Are you the maid?" A woman asked me. My eyes widened in disbelief as I stared at her. She was naked, standing in front of the fridge with a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and an apple in the other. What a healthy breakfast.

"Who are you?" I asked her.

She smiled at me. "I'm Tina. Do you watch the news? I'm the weather girl!" She was so bubbly, and so very drunk. She brought the bottle up to her lips and took a huge gulp.

"Where's Dan?"

"Dan? He told me his name was Tommy."

"Of course he did. Where is he?"

"We're out in the pool house. We drank all the liquor so I was sent over here on a mission to get some."

I left Tina the weather girl behind in the kitchen and stormed out of the house. Music was blaring so loud I hear it even halfway across the yard. I entered the pool house and Dan was sitting on a barstool banging drumsticks against the counter. Empty bottles were everywhere.

"Dan!" I yelled, trying to be heard over the music. He must not have heard me because he just kept flailing his head around. I walked over to the stereo and turned the volume dial down. "Dan," I said again.

He spun around in his chair. His mouth dropped down into an 'o' shape when his glazed eyes took me in. "Jill," he sputtered out. I don't know what he was on but I could tell that he was on something.

"Who the hell is the naked girl running around in our house?" My voice was calm because yelling at him when he was like that wasn't a smart move. Sometimes he was very violent.

His face looked blank. "I don't know."

"So, Tina the weather girl broke into our home to steal booze? I don't think so." His face lit up at the word "Tina". What an idiot. He really didn't know. I rubbed my forehead.

"It's hard to remember their names."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh don't be so judgmental."

"We have a reputation to maintain, Dan! What if somebody were to see you two together? That could ruin us. What's the excuse? Have you even thought this through? Of course you haven't. You probably got drunk at a bar last night and met her. Do whatever you want but don't burn us up in flames in the process."

"We're already well beyond being toasted."

"Our careers aren't!"

He threw a drumstick at me. It struck my cheek. "I don't love you."

It stung. “I know this. You don’t love anybody but yourself. Which fine, I’m okay with. I’m not okay with you bringing home women. You want to sleep around? Go for it. I already know about all your stupid affairs. If you keep acting the way you’re acting the rest of the world is going to know, too.”

He stood up and smacked me upside the head. “Did you fall down the stairs, Jill?”

“What?”

He shoved me. I tripped over something and tumbled onto the couch. “To me, it looks like you had a really bad accident.” His fist pummeled into my nose. Blood dripped down my face. “Don’t preach to me you little skank.” His wound his fingers in my hair and he pulled down hard.

“What drugs are in your system? You’re acting crazy!”

“I saw you!” He screamed. He smacked me again. Harder that time, as his rage was building.

I had to move. I quickly hopped up and over the back of the couch. “You need to calm down,” I said. I made a lunge for the door as he made a lunge for me. My fingers closed around the handle and turned it. We fell out into the yard, him on top of me. “Get off of me!” I protested.

“I’m going to kill you!” he said. I honestly thought he had truly snapped. This was the breaking moment for him. I don’t know why. Had he finally in his drunken and high stupor come to the realization that if I was gone everything would be so different for him?

His fist once again hit me in the face and then he put his fingers around my throat. He had gone too far this time. I knew that he dabbled around in drugs but this person was not my husband. This thing that was on top of me trying to kill me wasn’t a man, it was a monster.

By this point Tina had made her way out of the house and probably witnessed the whole thing. She started screaming her head off. She ran up to us, I guess, and shoved herself into Dan, knocking him off of me.

I wanted to just lie there on the ground and inhale air but I was scared for my life and hers now. I got up, feeling like I was in a dream, and went back into the pool house. There was a phone in there. I thought I could call 9-1-1 and get help. I made my way down the hallway. I heard a high-pitched scream. Panic shot through my body. Dan was somewhere behind me now. I heard him cussing and snorting his way to me. I grabbed the phone off the hook and turned around. He was standing in the doorway, just glaring at me.

“Put the phone down,” he said. “I thought you cared about our reputation.”

“You’re scaring,” I started to say but he lunged at me. I dropped the phone and spun around; fearful he would start punching at my face again. That’s when I saw them. There was a bunch, all standing perfectly still in that block of wood. I just reached out and grabbed one, turned around slightly and stabbed. It went into his side. He let out a scream of pain. I was in a trance, just wanting to survive. My hands were wrapped tightly around the handle as I plunged it into him again.

My back was still to him. His groans filled my ears as the blade penetrated over and over. I turned around, pushing at his body with my free hand. Blood was everywhere. My hand was slick with it but I held on to the knife. He slumped over on me, pushing me back against the counter. His grip on my arms loosened. It was almost like a goodbye hug. I dropped the knife. I heard it clatter onto the ground.

The rest is a blur almost. I grabbed the phone and called the police. I didn’t move from that spot till they got there. I just sat there staring at his body unable to feel anything, really. It turns out that he had killed Tina. Nothing good ever comes out of affairs but momentary happiness.

“What?” Matt says, interrupting me. “No, don’t say that last line.”

“I get lost in it all, you know?”

He leans forward and turns the tape recorder off. “Well you don’t want to lose the jury in case you do get charged so don’t say that. You’re brilliant. You know that? I can’t believe you just made all of that up.”

I smile. “Thanks. It’s kind of like a two in one for us.”

“It’s way better than that.”

“I know, I can’t imagine what would have happened if I hadn’t gone through his phone a few months ago. To think, he was going to leave me for that stupid weather girl. I mean, really. I endured so much for him.”

“You would have left him for me first.”

“You’re probably right, but now I don’t have to do anything but cry and act emotionally shattered. All that planning paid off.” I stand up and walk over to him, kissing him on the lips. “Now we can be together, openly, in just a few short months. The traumatized victim of an abusive, manipulative, cheating husband falls madly in love with her lawyer who defended her innocence in the court room!” I throw my hands out dramatically.

He laughs and pulls me close against him. “Are you ever going to tell me how you really did it?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Maybe. For now, just know I’m a mastermind.”

“All I have to do is not piss you off,” he says, and then lets out a short awkward laugh.

I look at him, eyebrows raised. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

A Victim of False Love

by

Gabrielle Saffold

Second Place Short Story, Goodman

Honorable Mention Short Story, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

Harley always woke Paisley up before the crack of dawn. Paisley was Harley’s oldest daughter. Harley and his wife, Linda, lived in the very small town of Fiasco. Their house was about fifteen miles from town, hidden by the tall trees, hilly dirt roads, and secrets. As Harley tiptoed into the small box room his four children shared, Paisley tugged the blankets higher, clenched her fist and squinted her eyes trying very hard to ignore the creaks of the floor confirming her father’s presence.

“Paisley,” Harley barely whispered as he gently shook his daughter, “put some clothes on. Its time.”

Paisley knew this routine all too well. Every organ, bone and muscle in her body rebelled as she rolled out of the bed she and her sister shared. Paisley was about ten years old. She had long, poofy hair and long feet to match. Many people described her as a stick. She was tall and lanky, very insecure. As she fumbled in the dark searching for her glasses, she could hear the jingle of her dad’s keys.

“Hurry, Paisley. I wanna beat the sun.” Harley ordered.

Paisley was the smallest member in their family excluding her baby brother, the new edition. She didn’t understand why she was forced to do this every morning. Why not Leigh or Charlie? Why not her mother for goodness sake? Paisley never uttered a word as she quickly dressed and brushed her teeth.

“Why me?” she mumbled to no one.

As she entered the living room, she could feel her father silently scolding her for taking so long. Harley was an impatient man. Everything was either his way or no way. Paisley often challenged that. As her father blankly stared at her and she stared back, she recalled the time he blackened her eye after she refused to willingly be spanked. After about a minute, Harley tore from his daughter’s gaze, swung open the door and stormed outside.

The biting chills of the wind slapped Paisley cold in the face. Paisley groaned. Robotically, she marched straight outside to her bike. She watched as Harley slid on his Bluetooth. Paisley rolled her eyes. Harley started down the long road first. Paisley followed suit a minute later.

“Come on, Paisley! Keep up!”

Paisley remained silent. And then it began. Paisley purposefully lagged further behind trying to ignore the phone call she knew so well. She could hear her father mumbling in hushed flirty tones. She thought back to the times she tried to believe that the female’s voice on the other end belonged to her mother. A lot of things confused her these days. She didn’t understand why she was forced to be a part of such an awful thing. Why must she be a part of “the secret”? I wish they’d shut up, she thought to herself. Paisley peddled along angrily.

“Hey, dad its freezing. Can we please go home now?”

Harley chuckled loudly. “Haha, yeah. My daughter can’t hang. She’s been doing good though. I think I’m gonna win this weight loss thing. Don’t you?”

“Dad!” Paisley yelled. She sped up a little. “Dad, please, I’m tired and cold.”

Paisley held up her swollen pink hands. They’d already gone two miles. It was six miles from their house to the main road. Paisley rarely said much of anything, but whenever her dad would get on the phone with that woman, she talked, whined, fussed, anything she could possibly think of to keep Harley distracted. He ignored her half the time. Still, she tried. Another fifteen minutes dragged by.

“Dad, I’m tired. I’m hungry.” “Paisley, I’m on the phone!” he barked. “Oh. Well, tell mom I said hi!”

An awkward silence filled the air. Paisley always challenged her father. Harley never outright said he was involved in an affair, but Paisley was smart. They both knew she knew. She could hear her dreadful voice so clearly. Her ears had become keen to that sound.

“Yeah”, Harley replied to something the woman had said.

“Dad, can I speak to Mom?” Paisley begged.

She was so good at her innocent role, she even believed herself. Harley raced off. Paisley was tired. She finally just stopped. She resentfully watched as her father trudged along the rocky road. The robust wind came rushing cold and hard, slamming Paisley off her bike. She just lay there numb and silent.

“Dad”, she whispered hoarsely.

Again, he didn’t hear her. She could hear the crunching ground groan as her father sped along. She could hear her dad laughing. He was happy. She was cold. A minute or two later, she heard Harley stop.

“Hold on. I don’t see Paisley anymore” he noted nonchalantly. “Paisley,” he called. She just lay there. “Paisley!” he screamed.

Still, he received no response. She heard the rocks scattering as her dad finally rushed to her aid.

“Paisley, what are you doing!?” he exclaimed.

“I’m cold, Dad,” she mumbled.

“Well, the ground is no place to be!” he scolded. “I’ll call you later”

Finally, Paisley thought. “The wind blew me over,” she told Harley.

“Well, why didn’t you yell for me?” he yelled.

And then she said it. “You were on the phone with that woman,” Paisley muttered.

Their eyes locked.

“What’d you say?” Harley barely croaked.

More boldly, she repeated herself. “You were on the phone with that woman.”

Harley stared astonished. “Let’s go home,” he said.

That ride home was deadly silent.

Eggs and bacon filled their nostrils as they neared the driveway. Paisley sped to the porch, threw her bike down and ran inside. Linda was setting the table. Harley never came in. Thirty minutes passed by, and he still hadn’t come in. Linda liked to eat as a family, so Paisley just sat there emotionally drained and starving. Charlie and Leigh lay in their room singing along to “Dora.” Linda fed Nolan as they waited.

“Mom, I’m hungry,” Leigh proclaimed.

“Okay,” Mama said smoothly, “We’re just waiting on Daddy.”

Paisley tiptoed to the big window and peaked through the dusty blinds. And she saw him, chuckling. He was happy. They were hungry. Paisley stormed outside and slammed the door behind her.

“Daddy, we’re hungry! Stop talking to her! Just stop!” she sobbed.

Harley quickly shut his phone and rushed to Paisley’s side.

“I’m sorry, Baby. Don’t cry,” he soothed.

“Why are you doing this to us?” she shuddered.

Harley never answered his daughter. He waited until she finished crying, and then they entered their home together. Paisley didn’t want her mother to know. Like a mime, her face instantly transformed. Instead of the sad eyes that previously held accusations, she now wore a bright smile. It didn’t reach her eyes, but it was believable.

“Leigh! Charlie! Come eat!” Linda hummed.

She was such a sweet lady. The Carter’s comfortably devoured their meal after they said their grace in unison. As Linda cleared the table, Harley gently grabbed her by the waist and kissed her softly.

“I love you”, he whispered.

Paisley stared blankly. She felt nauseous.

“Ewww!” Leigh and Charlie giggled.

Paisley just stared. Linda glistened with love for her husband. How could he? How could he pretend to be so perfect as if he’d done absolutely nothing? Paisley grew ill with anger. Quickly pivoting on her heels, she noisily stomped into her room hoping someone would notice. Nolan began to wail loudly.

“Paisley, get back here!” Linda demanded.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked her husband.

Paisley could hear her mother consoling Nolan. She could hear Leigh and Charlie arguing over whose turn it was to wash dishes.

“It’s your turn!” Leigh shouted.

“Well, I can’t even reach the sink!” Charlie shouted back.

Usually, Paisley would easily cease their bickering by simply doing their chores herself. This time, she just lay there numb and silent. Just as her lashes had brushed her face for the last time, she could hear someone silently creeping upon her. She was too dazed to move. So, she just lay there almost sleeping, almost dreaming.

“Paisley” Linda softly whispered, “Paisley, honey, are you alright?”

Linda cautiously slid onto the bed beside her daughter. She began to stroke her daughter’s hair the way most caring mothers did.

“Your dad told me about your fall. Did you break anything?”

My heart, Paisley thought.

Paisley slowly rolled over facing her mother.

“I’m fine, Mama. I’m just tired. I wanna sleep.”

“Okay, well, just don’t sleep the day away. That’s not good. You’re too young.” Paisley was too bummed to even reward her mother with one of her smart aleck remarks. She just sighed softly and closed her eyes. Linda lingered for a moment longer tidying her children’s room to disguise her true concern for Paisley. Paisley never really opened up to people. She found it easier to simply handle things independently.

As Paisley’s eyes fluttered open, she could hear the clanking of dishes as the NBA announcer blared from the living room. Paisley just lay there not really registering the time. Charlie and Leigh sat in the center of their bedroom hovered over some puzzle. Paisley sat up just staring. She wasn’t really awake. She wasn’t exactly asleep either.

“Paisley’s up!” Leigh sang.

“Come here, Paisley!” Harley yelled.

“Daddy said he wants you,” Leigh and Charlie sang in unison tugging on Paisley’s feet.

She slowly slid onto her feet and treaded into the living room.

“Paisley, you feelin’ better?” Harley questioned.

She rolled her eyes. Harley fell silent with shame.

“Paisley, that was very disrespectful. Honor your mother AND your father” Linda preached, “It is not his fault you fell. Apologize!”

Paisley stumbled over her own feet.

“What?” she whispered. “Just...” Paisley shook her head at a loss for words.

Harley suddenly hopped up loudly clasping his hands together as if he’d just received the grandest idea.

“Tell you what,” he began, “Let’s go get ice cream!”

“I don’t want any ice cream,” Paisley replied.

“She hasn’t had any real food,” Linda chimed in.

“Okay, well, let’s go get ice cream for after you eat. How’s that sound, baby?”

“Well, what about that, Paisley?” Linda asked.

She really didn’t have very much of a choice by this point. Paisley crossed over to the door, lightly twisted the knob and strolled outside. Harley didn’t immediately come out, so Paisley just stood there. She didn’t know what to expect anymore. She felt dirty, lost and alone. She tilted her head up towards the twinkling stars and just stared. She went to church sometimes, but she didn’t really know how to pray. However, she knew God was her only help now. She silently talked to God.

“I LOOOVVVEEE YAAAA!” Harley sang jokingly finally joining Paisley outside. “Ready?” he asked.

Have I ever been? It was only a matter of time before Paisley’s silent remarks would come to life.

As Harley pulled out of the long driveway, Usher’s “Confessions” blared loudly sending vibrations up Paisley’s bottom. She nonchalantly lowered the volume. Incidentally, this gave Harley an opportunity to speak. For a while, they drove in a comfortable silence.

“We’re just friends,” Harley said smoothly.

“Okay,” Paisley responded.

“She helps me out, you know? She’s really a nice person. Don’t hate her, okay?”

“Okay,” Paisley said plainly.

As if on cue, the phone rang. Harley glanced as the screen then quickly answered.

“Hey,” he said warmly.

Paisley stared out the passenger’s window. She wanted to scream. She was so angry and annoyed. Instead, she swallowed her tears and just sat there. The conversation went on and on. It was like a relentless buzzing in the back of her mind chasing her to insanity. She trembled with anger. Finally, they pulled into the parking lot of Fiasco’s tiny grocery store.

“Yeah, we’re here. I gotta go,” Harley told the woman.

He hung up.

“Coming inside, Baby Girl?” he asked.

Paisley continued to glare out the window. She somehow couldn’t convince any part of her body to respond to Harley’s question. She just sat there.

“Well, okay. Be right back,” he said.

He left. After a moment, Paisley noticed something lighting up in her peripheral vision. Harley had left his phone in the cup holder. Paisley hesitantly grabbed it. As first, she just held it. She thought about hiding it from him. Then, it came to her. “*57*!” lit up the screen. Paisley knew that must have been the woman’s code contact name. She hit reply and quickly composed her message. “I hate you,” it read. Paisley pressed send. As first, she sent the message out of true hatred. Then, it dawned on her. If “Harley” told her he hated her, she would go away. Everything would be normal again. She was only ten years old though. Although she was very mature for her age, she didn’t know any better. Harley climbed into the truck.

“I hope cookies and cream is okay cause that’s what we’re having,” he said as he buckled his seat belt.

Ring ring ring. Paisley froze. She hadn’t considered the fact that the woman might have been smart enough to work things out.

“Honey, where’s my phone?”

In the heat of the moment, Paisley had forgotten to place the phone back where she’d found it. Paisley shamefully handed Harley his phone.

“Why’d you have this?” he asked confused. “Hello.”

She couldn’t tell if she was screaming or crying. Harley was quiet for a moment then he turned towards his daughter.

“Paisley, did you text my friend?” he asked cautiously.

“Yes,” she replied bluntly.

Harley gulped.

“Okay. I’ll handle it,” he told the woman.

Over the years, Paisley had gained a new boldness. Usually she would’ve lied to Harley or just anything to avoid her father’s overly cruel punishments. Paisley was terrified. All she wanted to do was crawl into a hole and die. See, the downfall of adrenaline is, any form of common sense is completely nonexistent. Sweat suddenly dripped from her pits. Her hands trembled and her face bloodshot. Harley said nothing for a while. The silence was piercing.

“Paisley”, he said finally.

His voice was raspy, threatening.

“Paisley, you don’t say that to people. That’s evil.”

“Well, so are you,” she muttered.

“What’d you say?” he growled. “Paisley, I don’t know what the heck your problem is anymore but you need to fix it before I do.”

Paisley just sat there emotionally wrecked. She was sad, helpless, hopeless, angry and heartbroken all at once.

“Dad, why don’t you love my mom anymore?” she blurted.

“W-what?” he stuttered completely taken aback.

Paisley was so confused. She wanted to cry. She almost did, but she couldn’t. It was like the tears froze as soon as they reached the entrance of her lids. And that’s when she realized she was now broken, cold hearted: a victim of false love. At that moment, her trust for any male had graduated from slim to none. Harley attempted an explanation for his failures as a husband; as Paisley’s role model, but he failed at that too.

“I do love your mother. She gave me four beautiful blessings...”

Paisley zoned out. Harley was a very competitive man. He was smart. He absolutely loved to win and that’s what he did. He was a perfectionist. In Paisley’s eyes, he was her hero. Her daddy could do anything, and she’d believed that for so long only for him to prove her wrong. His one mistake completely ruined Paisley’s opinion of him, of men. He’d just failed at the one thing she deemed more important than anything: love.

No one really knows how Linda found out. Paisley replayed the first time she’d seen her mother cry as she lay in her bed. She’d walked in from school one day and noticed a balled up piece of notebook paper on the living room table. Out of curiosity, she unfolded it and began to read. In the back of her mind, she could hear faint thuds. It was like someone was throwing things. By the end of the letter, she realized that

what she'd just read was from her father's lover. "Love, Felicia" it read. Paisley crossed over to her parents' bedroom door.

"I love you, Harley. I'm trying so hard to be who you want me to be. Just... just please don't do this anymore. I read that letter, Harley! She is more than a friend!" Linda screamed.

"Paisley, what's going on?" Leigh asked innocently.

"Dads cheating," Paisley answered carelessly.

"How you know?" Leigh asked shocked.

"I just do. Go away."

Harley suddenly stormed out of his room brushing past his two daughters unapologetically. Leigh stared offended. Paisley just walked away already immune to Harley's venom. BOOM! Harley slammed the door sending a shake throughout the entire house.

"Paisley, go get him!" Leigh yelled.

"No," she replied flatly.

"You don't care about anything but yourself!" Leigh screamed as she ran into their room.

Paisley had known about, lived with, fought against and ignored Harley's affair longer than anyone else had even suspected it existed. She was tired. She dealt with so much during that six month span. No one except God knew the half of it. Again, she was only ten. Between school, home and herself, she was on the path to insanity. She never told her mother she knew. It was pointless. The Carter's once happy home was now a sad depiction of an almost broken home. Almost is always worse than actuality. It's like saying "I almost loved you." It hurts. Linda was never the same. She grew paranoid and mean. Harley was always happy until he got home. Family meals had become extinct in the Carter's home.

Paisley had balled up on the sofa at this point. She just lay there almost crying; cold hearted. Suddenly, Harley's phone rang. Well, why'd he leave that? She replayed that dreadful sentence in Felicia's letter. "We're both married, but we're working on that." Linda rushed into the kitchen snapping Harley's phone open.

"Hello!" she snarled.

Leigh and Charlie entered the living room alarmed.

"What's going on?" they whispered.

Linda hurled the phone at Harley as he obliviously entered the house.

"Who is she?" Linda growled, "And why is she calling you?"

Harley's answer was a blur as Linda blindly snatched a butcher knife from the nearest kitchen drawer. Paisley leaped onto her feet absolutely terrified begging her mother to spare her father's life.

"Mama, please stop it!" she sobbed. "Please!"

Leigh and Charlie cried and pleaded with their mother completely mortified. Harley stood there frozen; speechless, ready to die. Guilt does that. Linda hovered over Harley as if she was some sort of vicious beast. The knife was aimed directly at Harley's navel.

"Please, Mama stop!"

Paisley threw her phone at her siblings and ordered them to call their Aunt Katie. Leigh and Charlie huddled in their bedroom closet sheltering Nolan and sobbing. Aunt Katie prayed with them over the phone. A single tear escaped Harley's bottom right lid. Paisley begged. Linda just stood there lost in betrayal; ready to kill.

"God, please save my daddy!" Paisley prayed.

Aunt Katie still prayed. Suddenly, Linda's hand began to tremble. Slowly her knuckles loosened and her fingers began to unravel. *Ting!* The knife hit the tile floor. For a moment, no one moved. Then, Linda reached out to touch her husband. He cautiously backed away from his wife terrified and disgusted.

"Harley," she barely croaked, "I'm so s-sorry I..."

She collapsed. Harley just glared at her. Again, she reached for him. He turned and quickly walked to the door. Linda just lay there shattered; a victim of false love. He stood there for a while as if weighing his

options. Linda, weak from heartbreak, painfully crawled to where her husband stood gripping the cuffs of his jeans. Harley abruptly stormed outside slamming the door forcing Linda's hand away. Linda trembled. She punched the door hard three times as if it was Harley himself; as if he'd open the door and invite her into the cold world to which he belonged. Her hand lingered there for a moment, knuckles white. Slowly, her hand limply slid onto the floor and she lay there sobbing. Paisley, Leigh, Charlie and Nolan watched as their mother cried, as she screamed at no one.

"I love you, Harley," she whispered.

Charlie rushed over and laid with his mother kissing her; consoling her. Leigh and Nolan joined them. Paisley just stood there frozen; destroyed. Harley never came back.

Swamp Devil

by

Stephen Wozencraft

First Place Short Story, Goodman

Let me tell you young'uns about something that happened to me awhile back. As I was walking back home from Darcy's one night, down near old Spanish trail just past that ole street lamp, the crickets was a chirping, and the frogs were a croaking when I got the feeling I was being watched, you know that feeling, like a spider was crawling up your back. So, I turn around and by the street light, a shape as dark as a shadow in the night, like a man the night had just clung onto even in the light. I'll be the first to admit that I had more than a couple while watching the Tigers play that night. So, off the bat, I thought the alcohol had gone to my head, or that my mind was was playing tricks on me again. So, I ask him, "Como Sauv , can I help you with something, man?"

For a minute or two, he just stood there not doing nothing, and when he spoke, it was the most terrible voice I ever heard, like one of the swamp critters had done got up on its hind legs, and was talking like a man., and he said "Saun, you been living in sin for so long, it's come time for the devil to get his due."

He started walking towards me, his eyes started to glow red as hell fire, and it seemed like he was growing even as he come at me. My heart stopped, and a fierce terror done gripped a hold of me, seeing this devil coming toward me. I decided there was nothing for it but to run like all get out, and I swear I ain't never run so fast in my life, devil being at my heels and all. I made it to my place faster than two shakes, and I run straight in the door, and lock it behind me, and just stood there looking out the window, heart pounding, and dogs looking at me sideways from the couch., waiting for the devil to come, but he didn't.

As soon as I got myself together, I grabbed my gun, and I called up Pastor Keith. He asked why I was calling so late, I told him that the devil had just chased me down the street, and he asked if I had been taking my drugs I like the doctor told me to. I told him that I hadn't because I didn't like what they did to me, I heard him say something to his wife, Sarah, and then he said that he would be over as soon as he could. Before he hung up he told me that if I see the devil again before he got here to close my eyes, tell myself it was just my mind playing tricks on me, and count to ten.

I took a sip from my whiskey bottle to help calm my nerves, and then went back to the window to watch for Keith. I knew he wouldn't be too long, coming from just down the road a ways. This time when I looked out the window, I saw the devil's eyes staring back at me. So, I closed my eyes, told myself I was being foolish, that it was all in my head, and when I opened them the eyes had turned yellow. It took me a minute to realize that these weren't the devil eyes anymore, and that it was Keith's headlights coming down the road.

Then I heard the screeching of brakes and tires, and the sound of meat hitting metal. So, I ran out there to see if Keith was okay when I saw his truck go forward a little bit then stop. Once I got past the glare of his headlights, I saw that Keith was whiter than a ghost. "You alright? Did you see him?"

"See him. I hit him." He said breathing hard and the color coming back into his face.

Sure enough, the body of the devil was all twisted up behind his truck. It wasn't a true devil. But, it was close enough. It looked like a gator, or some other kind of lizard, built like a man only bigger. Its hide was made up of dark green scales, and its eyes were big and red, like those frogs in the rainforest that they put in the science shows. Apparently it had jumped out in front of the truck as Keith was coming down the road. Keith, seeing what he hit, and that the son of a bitch was still kicking, ran it over for good measure.

"For a second," Keith said getting out of his truck, "I thought you was losing your mind again."

"For a second I did too."

We threw the body of the in the back of his truck and pulled into the driveway. While Keith was on his phone talking to the cops and whatnot, I got him a cup of coffee and me a cup of Irish coffee. Keith told me I should cut back on my drinking, and take my medication. Otherwise I might not live to see sixty-five. I told him that I would try to cut back on the drinking. But, there was no way I take those pills again. Sarah showed up around five to check up on Keith and see the body for herself. Soon afterward the cops showed up, asked me and Keith some questions, and asked Keith if he could bring the body down to Andy's meat locker so it wouldn't turn before people got to examine it. From what I heard, no one who rightly knew what they was doing got a chance to look at it. Apparently someone broke into Andy's and stole the dammed thing right from under their noses. That caused quite the stir. Some people thought me and Keith did it, and that our "Swamp Devil" had been nothing but a hoax. Others thought the government had took it to cover up immoral experiments, or alien contact. Me, personally, I don't know what happened to it. But, I did stop drinking... Well, on Sundays at least.... Except if the Saints or the Tigers are playing.

Literary Essays

Sin and Cynicism in “Young Goodman Brown”

by

Joelle Young

First Place Literary Essay, Grenada

Throughout the ages, literary works have discussed the effect of others' hypocrisy on one's belief in goodness. However, few have considered the damage one's own sin can do to one's belief in others' goodness. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is one story that explores this theme. Known for works with deep moral messages, Hawthorne portrays in "Young Goodman Brown" a Puritan man from Salem who sets out on a one-night journey of sin that ends in a witch-meeting with lasting impacts on his psychological well-being. D. M. McKeithan, a professor at the University of Texas, states that the theme of "Young Goodman Brown" is "Hawthorne's favorite one: sin and its blighting effect" (94). Although the intersection of hypocrisy and personal sin in the story is complex, it is clear that Brown's knowledge of his own sin leads to a heightened awareness of the sin in others. Specifically, Hawthorne uses the relationship between Brown and his wife Faith to express the consequences of his sin on his belief in the goodness of others.

The story begins with Brown's decision to leave his wife Faith for a nightly journey. At this point, Brown is unaware of the consequences his actions could have. He says to Faith, "[N]o harm will come to thee" (Hawthorne 387). His confidence, however, is not reciprocated by Faith, who says, "[A] lone woman is troubled [and] afraid of herself" (Hawthorne 387). Unlike Brown, Faith realizes that she will not do well separated from him. Faith's objections here represent the objections of Brown's conscience, while Brown's own dismissal of them reflects his ultimate decision to ignore his conscience and proceed on his sinful journey. The decision being made, he strengthens his own resolve and belief that everything will be fine. "[A]fter this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven," he says (Hawthorne 387). It is important to note that Brown is innocent from the idea that others have evil in their hearts, believing his wife Faith to be a "blessed angel on earth" (Hawthorne 387).

The next part of the story details the devil's temptation of Brown to complete his journey by lying that Faith will come to no harm. When Brown sets out on the walk, he is unaware of the intensity of the devil's influences on him and sees it as only a frightening possibility: "What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!" (Hawthorne 387). However, he has certainly planned to meet another traveler, who, it becomes increasingly evident, is the devil in Brown's own image, whether or not Brown realizes it. The traveler is described as "he of the serpent" and is later called "your worship" by a witch (Hawthorne 388-89). He is described as "bearing a considerable resemblance to" Brown (Hawthorne 387). This similarity shows Brown's belief that his sinful desires come from himself, even though the devil is actually actively engaged in the process of tempting him. The devil's success is largely due to his cunning deception when Brown hesitates, fearing breaking Faith's heart. The devil says, "I would not... that Faith should come to any harm," even though this will certainly not be true (Hawthorne 389). At this point, Brown is growing increasingly aware of the sin of others, meeting people he once thought godly accompanying him on his journey.

Finally, Brown's journey into the forest culminates in his spotting Faith herself at the witch-meeting when he believed her to be safe at home, which ultimately damages their relationship irreparably. "What polluted wretches would the next glance shew them to each other, shuddering alike at what they disclosed and what they saw" (Hawthorne 395). This shows his faith was never safe as the devil tried to make him believe; rather, it has followed him and been polluted along with him in the depths of his sin. Brown's destruction of his relationship with Faith corresponds to the departure of his belief in others' goodness. When he returns to the village, he is convinced that all the churchgoers are evil because they were present at the witch-meeting. Interestingly, there is an ambiguity to Brown's experience. "Had goodman Brown fallen asleep... and only

dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting” (Hawthorne 395)? Logically, though the people of Salem are certainly not perfect, it is highly unlikely that every church member is actually a devil-worshipper. But Hawthorne uses Brown’s cynicism at the end of the story to show how one’s own sin can lead one to see sin in others when in reality there only exists a sign or possibility. Brown’s attention to others’ sin has been heightened by his own. No longer able to see goodness, he becomes a dark and gloomy person until the day of his death.

Brown’s descent from an ordinary Puritan man into a miserable cynic due to a broken relationship with Faith demonstrates how a person’s belief in goodness is damaged by sin, even fleeting sin for one night. At first, Brown convinces himself that Faith is safe as he goes on his journey of sin, and later, the devil convinces him that he would not let Faith be hurt. However, Brown finally finds Faith present at the witch-meeting, an experience that destroys him. As he grows distant from Faith, so increases his disbelief in the goodness of others. Hawthorne presents an important message in this story. The hypocrisy we see in others may be a result of our own defiled consciences. Next time we look around and judge others, we might do well to examine our own hearts.

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Unnecessary Censorship

by

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First Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

Honorable Mention Literary Essay, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

Ray Bradbury wrote in *Fahrenheit 451*, “There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running around with lit matches” (Hauss). This quote rings true when compared to the current witch hunt in libraries and schools to label books and other learning materials as threatening. The situation of censorship has become so extreme that a single complaint can have a book “unshelved” (Barnett). The challenge of banning books has extended even beyond the libraries and schools and into the realm of internet access. In other words, “filtering has become the 21st century’s bonfire” (Hauss). Perhaps the greatest censorship threat occurs in school materials. According to an article published on Education World, “A report by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) found that challenges of school materials are common throughout the United States. Those challenges frequently work; nearly one-third result in materials being withdrawn from schools or their use curtailed” (“Banning”). Further, most state and government cases regarding censorship concerned materials used in the classroom (Barnett). Little known to the public, 464 book bannings have been attempted in the last year (Hauss). Statistics show that over 49 book bannings and removals of books from school shelves took place in 29 States in 2013 and such bannings are steadily on the rise. From 2012 to 2013, challenges increased 53% from 14 incidents to 31 (Barnett). Of course, to fully understand the situation, a person must first ask, “What is censorship?” As defined by Henry Reichman

quoted in “Banning Books from the Classroom,” censorship is “the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational materials...on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of the standards applied by the censor.” Censorship of books and other teaching aids in schools must be eliminated because such censorship discriminates, inhibits freedom of expression, and creates a severe social and educational disadvantage for students.

Firstly, the censorship of books and other teaching aids discriminates. Such censorship can discriminate by banning the teaching of materials regarding certain topics. According to an article published on the Guardian website in December 2013, “An anti-censorship group in America has reported a flurry of attempted book bannings in the last quarter of the year and has said there are increasing numbers of books being taken off school shelves that deal with race or sexuality or are written by ‘minority’ authors” (Barnett). Many times authors’ works are suppressed because of the authors’ minority statuses rather than their actual writing. Books such as Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, the “vile outpourings of a lewd woman’s mind,” and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a “lurid tale of sexual perversion,” have been attacked and banned from the classroom (University). Books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* have been banned for being too “pornographic” (Barnett). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in many predominantly white communities has been labeled as “filthy,” “racist,” and “criminal” and banned from school libraries as recent as 1994. The censoring of such authors’ writings has caused uproar over the current situation (University). These discriminatory actions do nothing but encourage racism and sexism among communities. Materials about differing sexualities are also on the forefront of fire. For example, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) books are frequently targeted in school library bannings. A list of frequently banned books includes *The Family Book*, typically banned for stating “some families have two dads,” and *And Tango Makes Three* about two male penguins finding and raising an abandoned egg. Positive LGBT resources are under scrutiny, being termed as “sexually explicit” and filtered from student access (Block, “Don’t”). To censor websites and other learning sources is to stigmatize these discriminated groups (LGBT community, women, minorities, etc.) as something “dirty” or “shameful.” Luckily there is hope. The “Don’t Filter Me” campaign challenges the software blocked access to sites with information about LGBT families (Block). Such censorship can also discriminate by restricting information regarding certain topics. Restriction generally occurs with sources that mention sex and drug education, reference to creationism, literature that encourages children to question authority, and women’s liberation just to name a few (“Banning”). Schools have also begun to censor resources that come via the internet. Although this censoring is not necessarily a bad thing, schools do not take into account that filtering software sometimes prevents access to non-threatening sources of information (“Intellectual”). Nevertheless, the problem reaches far beyond the realm of technology and library. Censorship does much more than discriminate.

In addition, censorship of books and other teaching aids can inhibit freedom of expression. Such censorship can limit literary expression of authors and the individual freedom of students and teachers. According to an article published in the *English Journal*, “A particularly insidious effect of censorship is its power to silence teachers. Few teachers take a proactive stance or speak out against censorship unless forced to do so as a result of public challenges to the literature curriculum.” Even though teachers are asked to implement diverse, contemporary materials, teachers run the risk of jeopardizing their careers by doing so. In her article “The Effects of Censorship on Experienced High School English Teachers,” Jane Agee further writes:

Well-publicized cases of teachers whose professional and personal lives have been damaged by lengthy debates that take place in courts of law or school district offices have effects on English teachers and school districts everywhere (e.g., Marion Goldwasser; Cissy Locks; James Moffet).

Without a doubt, the effects of censorship should never interfere in the personal life of a teacher.

More experienced teachers try to strike a balance between materials they feel would fit best with the curriculum and those that would prove problematic. However, the process of selecting and approving

various teaching materials in schools is only implemented “when needed” (Agee). The real question seems to be what is the real concern or motive behind censorship, when half of the challenged books regard race and sexuality (Barnett)? Selecting print and non-print materials is “charged with social and political tensions that extend far beyond the classroom.” Even with given guidelines of accepted literature, teachers still are unsure of consequences of selected teaching materials (Agee).

Just as teachers’ individual freedom is often censored so is students’ freedom. Many forms of student expression, no matter how educational—from school newspapers to school plays—are under fire by school and community officials (“First”). Indeed, such censorship is in violation of students’ and teachers’ rights as American citizens “to say, think, read, and write” what they feel without fear of reprimand (Haus).

Censorship of books and other teaching aids also can create a severe social and educational disadvantage. According to Agee, “In recent years, censorship cases have escalated as teachers are asked to introduce more contemporary and culturally diverse texts.” Further, she writes, “One disturbing aspect of censorship is its power to deny students in one class or an entire school system the right to read particular texts.” Some of those texts being censored include: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (Haus). Religious texts such as the Holy Bible and the Qur’an are also among the growing list of banned books. Books’ educational and ethical values also come under fire over minor incidents, such as if a child laughs when reading or if a child is inspired to question the world around him or her (Blume). However, an important question that needs to be asked is how are students expected to hold an intellectual conversation when they have been exposed to little of the world around them? Unfortunately, the censorship extends beyond the classroom to create a great ethical concern that extends beyond in the generations (Block, “Don’t”). Acacia O’Connor of the Kids Right to Read Project (KRRP), as quoted in “Book Bannings,” states, “It has been a sprint since the beginning of the school year.... We would settle one issue and wake up the next morning to find out another book was on the chopping block.” The situation is clear that such censorship is an issue that is not stopping any time soon. The censorship of books and other teaching aids will continue to create a severe social and educational disadvantage for students.

In contrast, proponents of censorship of books and other teaching aids argue that such censorship will aid in students’ growth educationally and ethically. These claims come from proponents of censorship throughout communities and the country as a whole. Which leads to the question who is a censor? According to the article “Intellectual Freedom & Censorship,” “There is no single source of censorship, with forms of censorship found at various levels in society. The government, local communities, and individual librarians can all be considered to practice censorship in various ways.” The article goes on to say, “Government censorship influences our legal definitions and interpretations of the issue.” In fact, the United States has a government group which reads books and determines if their educational value “outweighs the objections against them” (Kelly). At a smaller scale, censorship at a local level is often responsible for the restriction or banning of certain teaching materials. These local “concerned citizens” usually belong to local religious groups or school boards (“Intellectual”). Proponents maintain that banning certain books and other teaching materials from the curriculum protects children from K-12. Contrary to this belief, opponents hold that banning materials “violates the academic freedom and diversity of thought protected by the U.S. Constitution” (“Banning”). For many proponents, “Books can be offensive for many reasons” and should be banned regardless of context; for example, the use of the ‘n’ word in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Kelly). Materials are usually cited as being censored for labeling, obscenity, racism, gender/sex, illegal acts, or questionable truths (“Intellectual”). Further, “censors don’t want children exposed to ideas different from their own.” Often times fear is responsible for much support in banning books. Additionally, many parents do not like not having control in their kids’ lives or the fear of their kids coming in contact with “language” and “sexuality” (Blume). Proponents of the above reasons believe that protecting books and teaching aids will allow students’ grow educationally and ethically.

In conclusion, much debate on the censorship of books and other teaching aids in schools goes on at all levels. The government has had much to say on the issue, and much of the time it does not agree with such censorship. On one case in particular (*Island Trees Union Free High School v. Pico 1982*), the Supreme Court said the "Constitution does not permit the official suppression of ideas" ("Banning"). Further, according to the article "Banning Books from the Classroom," "Supreme Court cases that deal with censorship issues show a broad trend toward supporting the schools, but they also caution educators to remain aware of values, including minority values, in the communities they serve." The situation is clear that the censorship of books and other teaching aids in schools must be eliminated because such censorship discriminates, inhibits freedom of expression, and creates a severe social and educational disadvantage for students. Hopefully, censors may develop less drastic criteria for judging books and other teaching aids. Whoever the censor may be, he or she should seek help in decisions about censorship. For example, the censor should, in appropriate situations, ask parents to contribute; "give recommended, rather than required, reading lists;" seek out professional reviews; "discourage the concept that only one text can be used to teach a specific theme; negotiate; and develop a community census ("Banning"). If society ever hopes to end the dispute of censorship of books and other teaching aids in schools, both sides should find a common ground. Until then, censorship of books and other teaching aids must be eliminated.

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A Critical Analysis of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

by

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Second Place Literary Essay, Ridgeland

Much is to be said about Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce, also known as “Bitter Bierce.” Bierce was a Civil War veteran, a journalist for American newspapers and British magazines alike, an acclaimed satirist, and a world-renowned cynic. Still, what can be said of Bierce’s literature, particularly his most famous short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge?” What sets this story apart from most other American literature? Many criticisms have been made but one thing is painfully clear: Ambrose Bierce was a pioneer at his craft.

Interpretations continue to be made about Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” Bierce had an in depth understanding of the human psyche when it came to writing. In fact, “His most striking fictional effects depend on an adept manipulation of the reader viewpoint...” (*Poetry*). “Occurrence” is essentially a story of deception. Set during the Civil War, the story follows Peyton Farquhar after he has been captured by the Union Army. Farquhar is being hanged for supporting the “Southern Cause.” The story’s ending is one of pure surprise as Bierce was able to write “vivid portrayals of the improbable, the seemingly impossible, a quality probably best described as the uncanny” (Lavelle). Of course, many times Bierce’s attempt at a surprise ending failed, given that many expected this of him. Many critics argue that a person does not read Bierce’s works for the surprise twist ending; a person reads his works for “the profound perceptual play,” the same reason for which many people read modern writers such as Stephen King or Martin Amis (Lavelle).

Besides Bierce’s ability to write vividly the details of the story which made it seem to come alive, critics note that Bierce writes the story using key literary tools that any great writer would use. For example, Daniel E. Samide wrote in his article “Anatomy of a Classic,” that “Bierce chooses the only point of view possible for concealing Farquhar’s death—a first necessity if he wishes to mystify us,” not mention conceal the twist ending. This perspective is often called “limited omniscience,” meaning the story is essentially told by a narrator who acts as a spectator to the events and is actually not part of them him- or herself (Samide). This allows Bierce to tell the story in a way as to not give the plot of the story away but also allow the reader to know things that are germane to the story. Another great literary tool used by Bierce is characterization of Farquhar. Farquhar is a character with whom the reader can identify; not to mention the setting of the story, the Civil War, which increases the sympathy for the character under the circumstances in which he is living (Samide, Stoicheff). Again, this key element to the story relates to Bierce’s understanding the human psyche and being able to create a character that almost anyone can identify with (*Poetry*, Stoicheff).

A final point to be made is how Bierce intended “Occurrence,” as well as his other stories, to be interpreted. Bierce was very outspoken when it came to realist literature. In his essay titled “The Short Story,” Bierce explained his problem with realism was the question of “probability.” He would further explain that questions such as “Could this incident really have happened?” and “Would a person ever do such a thing?” were irrelevant to the story. Likewise, Bierce said that such reasoning was “preposterous, if only because it meant a story’s limits were determined by the reader, not the writer” and “It meant that if a reader couldn’t imagine that such an event was possible, probable, then somehow the writer had failed” (Lavelle). “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is one of those stories that should not be read for probability. Some critics may continue to read it to examine the psychological structuring; comparing it to Dr. Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretations of Dreams*, but that is not how Bierce intended for his story to be read (Stoicheff).

In short, Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek” will continue to be a much discussed piece of literature for all time. Whether or not the anatomy of the story should be dissected and critiqued for

some greater cause is subjective to say. However, it can be agreed that Bierce was quite the craftsmen in creating a story that has both key literary elements and psychological intensity for the reader to enjoy.

The Church's Response to the Orphan Crisis in Victorian England

by

Kristin Alexander

First Place Literary Essay, Goodman

First Place Literary Essay, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

In the novel *Oliver Twist*, there is an underlying theme of suffering that could have been prevented had mercy been a value of society. It seems as though cruelty and judgement were the basis of how people treated those they viewed as in the way of progress. One such scene takes place when Mr. Bumble, the beadle, punishes Oliver by forcing him to listen to the other boys' prayers that they not ever be as wicked as he, who had dared to ask for more food. This raises the question of how, in a society that was supposedly focused on morals and Christianity, did people come to be so uncharitable? Where was the Church in all of this? The seemingly obvious answer of its being in full agreement with this cruelty, or absent and unaware of it, does not suffice when we know that the Church did many charitable things toward orphans and was also a pillar of society, directing people's thoughts and actions. The role of the Church in the treatment of orphans in Victorian England was just as complex as the embattled character of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* for three reasons: Evangelicalism had evolved with Utilitarianism, Church power was an old institutional authority linked to the upper classes, and the poor were addressed by the Church with conflicting edicts.

Before we judge the Victorian Church too harshly, we must understand the public mentality of the time. We must find out what changes were going on in society and the economy. In the centuries leading up to the 1800's, English society had been led by the aristocracy and landed gentry, those who inherited their title and wealth. The Victorian age, however, began with the rise of industrial production and ended with the beginning of the age of finance and imperialism. This rise of industrial production refers not only to mechanical changes in manufacturing, but societal changes in the upper class. Men who had been born into obscurity could become, by their hard work and ingenuity, members of the rising upper class of business men. A philosophy and a kind of worship of efficiency called Utilitarianism came about with these changes. As work became an apparent source of bettering one's lifestyle, it also rose to be idealistically the salvation of the country. Business leaders were men who were changing the order, providing stimulus, and putting England back on the map as an economic power. Cotton and coal refining factories sprang up and flourished, filling the streets with their noises and filling their bellies with workers. These hungry factories were feeding a society hungry for the dual salvation of work and respectability.

The paradox created by the cooperation, and even the reinforcement, of the Church in questionable business practices can be explained by the fact that these changes happened gradually over decades. Who can stop the tide from coming in? It rises slowly, so that a person does not realize it has come in and the waters have them trapped. This was the force by which the economy drove the nation. Evangelicalism, the religious movement of the time, dove into this rising tide and tried to swim. The Church adopted Utilitarianism into its sermons as a mantra of bettering oneself, working for the common good, duty, and respectability. The business men, in their turn, attended services, donated money to charities, tithed, and lent their social status to the congregation. In *Portrait of an Age*, G.M. Young explains this contradiction in society beautifully, "It is

dangerous to force historic movements into exaggerated symmetry. But the parallel operation of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism cannot be ignored” (10). He goes on to say,

English society was poised on a double paradox which its critics, within and without, called hypocrisy. Its practical ideals were at odds with its religious professions, and its religious belief was at issue with its intelligence. We, for example, should probably count an employer who kept children of nine working nine hours a day in a temperature of 98 degrees as, at least, a very stupid man. If he went further and insisted that, when they wished to lift up their hearts in song, it must not be in carnal ditties.....but in hymns.....we might credit him with a touch of diabolical humor. (15)

But this was the result of the intertwining “faiths” of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism. The mill owners would collect orphans to work in their factories. The Church would say it was good for the children to have employment, a means to serve God, and gain respectability, which was defined in Victorian society as financial independence.

As the country divided into different economic factions, it was Evangelicalism which served as the societal glue, issuing moral decrees and conscious pricking sermons which told people to deny their “flesh” and work hard. Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, Christian Philosophers and commentators of their day, both fueled and fought with Utilitarianism in their statements. Their stance on orphans, and children in general, was that of a watchful, disapproving patron. The “earnestness” they preached had little allowance for a child’s weakness and neediness. This fit the Utilitarian business owner’s need to use the children as cheap or free labor. Why would the Church, an organization which had so many charities for the poor, allow the development of orphan workhouses? Why did the public not demand reform immediately and call out the Church for their hypocrisy?

In ages past, the Church was steeped in the traditional role of being linked with the aristocracy. In society, it was an inarguable force. Contradicting the Church in Victorian times, though no longer deadly as in ages past, was frowned upon. It was a pillar, an institution, closely linked with political authority. We can see this in the fact that the Church was viewed as an effective means of education for gentlemen. “.....he.....had a son... at King’s College, preparing for Cambridge and the Church- that being now-a-days the approved method for converting a tradesman’s son into a gentleman” (Houghton 186). The Church clergy was largely made up of upper class men, and was also beholden to the upper class. It therefore commanded the respect and authority of that station, in addition to its supposed authority from God. In *Portrait of an Age*, G.M. Young states, “Thus the Church of England after its long lethargy was reconsolidated, with a distinctly aristocratic colouring, about the time when the Evangelical example was raising the moral level of its ministers.....The best of parsons could not help being a little too much of a magistrate and landowner, and not enough of a pastor” (65-66). In other words, the clergy had power, authority, and a sense of title that our modern pastors do not. They tended to uphold the status quo of society, even when railing against injustice from the pulpit.

When the humanitarian craze hit, partially driven by the writings of Carlyle, who believed that the business leaders of the time were national heroes sent by God to impart their methods and wisdom, it was easy for people to follow along and not question the duplicity of allowing the situation of the poor and orphan workers to worsen while forming charities to alleviate it. “.....God has made many revelations: but this man too, has not God made him, the latest and newest of all? The ‘inspiration of the Almighty giveth *him* understanding’: we must listen before all to him” (Houghton 314). Carlyle’s stance as a prominent leader in the Evangelical movement was that people should listen to their “betters” and not question the policies being made by them. This had been an accepted way of life for centuries. The focus shifting onto heroes and off of victims was blatant. Yet the public did not see this as hypocrisy, rather, they viewed it as nationalistic optimism. Victorians tended to focus on the lovely and admirable things in life, especially when it came to those in authority.

There was also a growing duality in how the clergy handled the expanding suffering of the poor in cities. They taught people to work hard and be “earnest,” or serious, about everything they did. They also taught that to attain respectability or financial independence was to do their moral duty by God and country. For most of the Victorian century, the Church did not address the conditions in workhouses, which were designed to be uncomfortable enough to discourage people from going on relief. Child labor was accepted and even justified. In the past, England had pitied their poor entirely. The new mantras of respectability, cleanliness being godliness, and pull yourself up by your own bootstraps were issuing from pulpits at a time when a huge immigrant influx combined with the beginnings of a recession driven by market speculation. This brought huge losses in the job market and unemployment. The attitude toward poverty hardened into resentment and suspicion. Unfortunately, this affected orphans as well, who had already suffered from having no advocacy within the system which would see or voice their helplessness. They were seen as a burden. The meeting of their needs, even if it came in the form of a workhouse, was seen as above and beyond the call of duty. It was common practice for mill owners to collect orphans as a labor force.

In the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the birth rate was high and many people died before middle age. More than half the population were children, and many were without parents. . . . Millowners made arrangements with the local authorities in impoverished areas to take orphan children as young as seven off their hands. They were lodged in dormitories and worked in shifts, twelve hours at a time, day and night. (Mitchell 43)

Over time, due to conditions such as these, tensions began to rise in society. The Church had enforced its morals rigorously on the poor, while being a part of the system which created their situation. When tensions began to boil over, they began humanitarian efforts such as charity bazaars, orphanages, and schools in order to stabilize society and avoid a revolution similar to that which had occurred in France. Some of the humanitarian leaders in the Church, such as William Wilberforce, were sincere in their efforts. There came to be, toward the end of the Victorian era, an ever increasing vocalization against injustice and a call to remember what the Bible actually said on how to treat the poor. But these efforts came too late to alleviate the suffering of thousands of children.

Though abhorrent on so many levels, the actions and inaction of the Church regarding orphans can be understood, though not justified, when we take into account the intertwining it had with Utilitarianism, the ties it had to the upper classes of both business and the aristocracy, and the conflicting edicts with which it had addressed the poor. It was a complex interaction set off by a misguided understanding of both Scripture and history. The Church suffered from a form of blindness and yet acknowledged there was poverty, mishandling the parts it was able to see. Like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, who both longed to see Oliver yet couldn't bear the sight of him, the Church was conflicted from within on how to handle its responsibility toward the weakest members of society.

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The Realization of a Fantasy

by

Darnell Campbell

Second Place Literary Essay, Goodman

J. D. Salinger introduced the rebellious, opinionated, and fantastic character Holden Caulfield in his book, *The Catcher in the Rye*. The story is a peek into a specific period of one man's life who is at a crossroads. Holden reveals to the reader his seemingly altruistic vision of being a catcher of children, who have unwittingly come dangerously close to falling off the cliff at the edge of a field of rye. If falling represents the maturing into adulthood, then what Holden is proposing is to suspend childhood eternally. One could see Salinger's timeless work as a story of the birth of a serial killer.

To label Holden Caulfield as a potential killer, and *The Catcher in the Rye* a manifesto of sorts is quite ambitious yet plausible. One must first understand the psychology of a serial killer. According to Zelda Knight, there is no formula to attribute to the psychological make up of a serial killer, however they are generally "predominantly male, ... antisocial, ... [schizophrenic], ... dissociative, ... narcissist, ... from dysfunctional families, ... abuse ... alcohol, ... and [have] inexplicable mood swings. Most are aggressive [with] an insatiable preoccupation with death, are ... indifferent to others, while their relationships may be described as shallow, [and] ... [voyeuristic]" (1191-1192). There is a correlation between the prescribed mind of a mad man and Holden, who is going mad.

Salinger opens the reader to Holden talking with someone saying, "If you really want to hear about it ... [and] Where I want to start telling," and Holden continues in narrative form throughout the book (1-2). It has been generally accepted that Holden was talking to a therapist. Possibly because he references his breakdown prior. However, Salinger does not state whether or not Holden is with a therapist. Therefore, one could envision that he is talking to himself. In either case, Holden starts his narration with the story of his diminished mental capacity. As Anna Freud said in her interview with Robert Coles, "all of us have our extended spells of fantasy," but Holden has slipped into a mental state that could lead him to delusional thinking (219).

A disorder common to murderers and Holden is antisocial disorder which is marked by the lack of concern, remorse, and regret. Irresponsible behavior and disregard for the law are also symptoms of this disorder. Salinger gives the reader examples of Holden operating within antisocial disorder parameters. Although Holden had been kicked out of the fifth school, he had no concern for his situation. Stradlater was bigger and stronger than Holden. He still "tried to sock him ... to split his ... throat open" and showing no regret or remorse (Salinger 42). Holden continued to pick a fight and lost terribly. Blood spilled from his head and down his face, and "it partly fascinated [him]. All that blood ... sort of made [him] look tough" (45). Holden leaves Pencey, with incident, yelling insults and expletives at the top of his lungs.

Schizophrenia can also play a part in murderous inclinations; and Holden is displaying some signs of it. He avoids social situations. Stradlater suggests that Holden go greet Jane "instead of keep saying it," but Holden avoids meeting with Jane (Salinger 33). Schizophrenics also suffer feeling of detachment and indifference. When in New York, "every time [Holden] came to the end of a block and stepped off the ... curb [he] had this feeling that [he'd] never get to the other side ... [he] thought [he'd] just go down ... and nobody'd ever see [him] again" (197). Holden spent some time concerned about his parents discovering that he had been kicked out of school, but after spending time in the family home with Phoebe, "[he] didn't give a damn any more if they caught [him] because their disapproval or acceptance didn't matter to him" (180).

Holden displays some symptoms of dissociation, symptoms such as depression and mood swings. Holden was functioning, but his depression had crippled him socially. He wanted to be a part of society. However, he could only see everyone's faults (not his own). He constantly labels everyone as phony, yet he

never speaks his mind, therefore, showing himself to be the phony. In an instant he can go from elation, like when seeing his sister, to sitting on the edge of her bed, sobbing uncontrollably.

Holden also displayed symptoms of narcissism.. As Freud remarked, “he’s a bit bossy and impudent and brash—that he’s smitten with himself, a victim of abundant narcissism” (Coles 221). By labelling everyone else, he then leaves himself judge of all things moral and immoral. He met three women in a bar. Instead of finally enjoying the company of the women, he judged them silently in his head. He judged their social aptness and their looks, when he had recently been in a fight with Stradlater and must have been swollen and beat up. “We bring ourselves down, when we strike out at others ... dismiss them with our sharp words or not very friendly judgements that go unexpressed” (Salinger 220). Also, he was unable to hold any conversation with anyone for any extended period of time without insulting that person. He seemed to have all the answers to other people’s problems, like telling Ackley what he needs to do about his inability to be accepted in social circles. Holden had no circle of peers in which he was accepted.

Holden hints to being sexually abused. After making it to New York, Holden calls Mr. Antonelli to set up a visit. The visit goes well until he wakes up in the middle of the night and finds Mr. Antonelli “petting” his hair and “that kind of stuff’s happened to [him] twenty times since [he] was a kid “(Salinger, 193). This cycle of abuse Holden finds himself going through is another stressor for him and another similarity with serial killers.

Holden was given over to voyeurism also. His hotel room in New York looked across to the opposite side where he viewed a guy “[put on] women’s clothes-silk stockings, high heeled shoes, [bra], and corset. The trouble is that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch” (Salinger, 62). Holden continues to observe the goings-on in other windows, as if living vicariously through these random strangers.

Holden proclaims, “I am the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life” (Salinger, 16). So, the reader cannot trust his narration. Holden exploits his lying prowess blatantly throughout the book. One could assume that other parts of Holden’s journey are fictitious. He confesses more than once that he is a liar. That destroys any trust the reader could have for Holden. All that is left are symptoms of a severe break from reality.

With all these things in place, the reader could surmise that this is a descent into depravity. Along with depravity, Holden is drawn to the words of a popular poem in which “thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around—nobody big—except [him]. [He has] to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. [He’d] be the catcher in the rye. And [he’s] standing on the edge of some crazy cliff” (Salinger 173). It is Holden’s fantasy to become the catcher in the rye, to suspend children from maturing to a world of phonies and maintaining innocence. And one can finally arrive “to the painful truth of the novel: the only way to keep a child from adulthood is to kill [the child]: the catcher becomes the killer, the preserver the destroyer” (Lettis 45). Holden has not given himself over to murder, but with careful study, one can see the dangerous potential. Since the death of his brother Allie, Holden has been preoccupied with “his obsession with innocence” (Walters 4). In fact, one could say that Allie’s death [is the] starting point of most of [Holden’s] problems” (Privitera 204)

Salinger cleverly hid this intelligence, understanding that “people always think something’s all true,” just as it is generally accepted that Holden is some type of hero, who calls out the phonies of the world and gives voice to a generation. However, Holden says it plain, “people never notice anything” (Salinger 9). Holden is far from heroism. He is mentally sick, on a “sad spiral into a nervous breakdown” (Privitera 205).

Holden’s perception was skewed. His snarky remarks had no filter, and anyone was susceptible to his flippant whims, except Phoebe. Holden’s attitude and character seemed to be morphing into homicidal tendencies based on his desire to captivate childhood innocence. His attire also echoed his intentions. Holden wore a red hunter’s cap, which he lovingly called “a people shooting hat, [he] said I shoot people in this hat” (Salinger 22). At the time, he was shooting words and denouncing everyone a phony

It is possible that Holden could somehow recover. “Unfortunately, Holden’s move westward takes him only to a mental hospital; one wonders if this development is cruel irony or, perhaps, a real start on a

new life for Holden” (Walters 4). Holden’s friend, Carl, agrees when he tells Holden, “Naturally. Your mind is immature” (Salinger 147). One can only speculate the fate of this young man. Salinger leaves no clue.

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Drama

Finding Jesus Investigative Special

by

Jacob Pharr

First Place Drama, Grenada

Anchor: Jesus. Who is this man? Is he a prophet? Is he a teacher? Is he the Messiah? Now, we will investigate the man that has caused the stir this past week in Jerusalem. Time and again, we interrupted normal television with breaking news of the miracles this man had allegedly performed. We have several Field Correspondents travelling throughout Jerusalem attempting to search and find out who this man really is. We begin at the Garden of Gethsemane.

Corr. #1: I'm here at the Garden of Gethsemane where Thursday night, Jesus of Nazareth was arrested. This man, who just last Sunday made a triumphant entry into Jerusalem, was sought out and arrested. What could have changed in a matter of five days? I have here with me now the Gethsemane Gardens caretaker. Could you tell us what you saw here Thursday night?

GGC: Yes, I can tell you. All I saw Thursday night was Jesus of Nazareth praying and I mean praying as I have never seen any man pray before. He was in such agony that his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood. He kept calling out to his father. I had a hard time hearing him, but he said something about wanting a cup to pass from him. It was very strange. Very troubling to see a man so grieved. But there was nothing criminal in his words or actions that I could see. Then a man came up to him and kissed him on the cheek, and soldiers came out of nowhere to arrest him. Then one of his followers cut off somebody's ear, and Jesus picked up the severed ear and gently put it back on the man. It was a miracle! I mean I have never seen anything like this! I believe he may have been Messiah.

Anchor: After the Thursday night arrest of Jesus of Nazareth, the mindset of Jerusalem began to change. The citizens were given a choice by Governor Pontius Pilate to release Jesus of Nazareth or Barabbas, a notorious prisoner. Governor Pilate seemed to reason with the people that Jesus of Nazareth had done nothing wrong to be put to death. The people held strong and chanted "Crucify him." What would possess this crowd of people to call for the crucifixion of an innocent man? What could have happened to change the chants from, "Hosanna" to "Crucify Him"? To understand more about this man, Jesus, I had an exclusive interview with His mother, Mary.

Corr. #2: Mary, our condolences on the loss of your son, Jesus. I know this is a difficult time for you and your family. There are so many questions surrounding your Son. His birth is alleged to have been the result of an immaculate conception. There are reports that He was teaching in the Temple when He was only 12 years of age.

In preparation for this report I have found numerous allegations of miraculous occurrences done at His hand. What can you tell us about Him?

Mary: I can tell you He was the Son of God. I can tell you, Angels heralded His birth. I can tell you about many miracles I saw my Son perform. I can tell you of the excruciating pain I felt when they beat Him, humiliated Him, and nailed Him to a cross; for He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him and with His stripes, we are healed. I can tell you all these things but until you believe, you will never understand.

Anchor: With that interview, we hear Mary refer to the Prophet Isaiah's words. Could Jesus have been the Messiah as Mary so clearly believes? There's more evidence that we have not yet heard. Let's take an exclusive look inside his circle of followers to find out more about Jesus.

Corr. #3: Thank you for joining me, ladies. I am very sorry for your loss. Could you, ladies, tell me about your time with Jesus?

Mary: We started following Jesus several years ago.

Martha: Yes, there was just something about Him. His love and compassion for others was like nothing we had ever seen.

Mary of Bethany: We saw miracles and healings...

Martha: Yes, and then He raised our brother from the grave.

Corr. #3: Wait, do you want me to believe that he actually brought someone back to life?

Mary: Yes, He did that many times. He gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, delivered the lunatics . . .

Anchor: Could these acts have been the reason he was arrested? Did he perhaps have a demon as some have said? It has been reported that some members of the Sanhedrin felt he was breaking the law of keeping the Sabbath Day holy. We have found evidence that He was about doing good deeds and helping His fellow man regardless of the day or hour. How could this be wrong? Is healing on the Sabbath worthy of death? Was there more to his death, or another reason that we don't yet understand? We go now to Golgotha where the verdict against Jesus was carried out.

Corr. #3: Golgotha Hill, the place of the skull, where Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. After severe beatings, Jesus was forced to carry his cross down the Via Dolorosa, up this giant hill. Once he was here, they laid him down and nailed him to the cross. I am here now with a centurion who witnessed the crucifixion and reportedly said that Jesus was "surely . . . the Son of God." Centurion, could you tell us your reasoning for pronouncing Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God? Had you seen him perform miracles prior to that day?

Centurion: I had never met Jesus of Nazareth before the crucifixion. I knew him only from the reports that we heard. He did not seem guilty of any crime, but who I am to question the authorities? I performed my duties that day as I was told and stood guard, but I could feel something when they nailed his hands into the cross. I watched as men passed by and hurled insults at him. They mocked him and told him to come down and save himself if he was truly the Son of God. Then it got dark really fast. There was an earthquake. Jesus cried out in a loud voice and died. Complete chaos ensued. There were shouts that the curtain of the Jewish temple had torn in two from top to bottom. I have never seen or felt anything like that day in my life. I could not take my eyes off him. Hanging from that cross he had forgiven everyone. It was unlike anything I'd ever heard. That's why I believe he is the Son of God. As I said it, I looked around to see if others agreed. But most of the men were gone. I saw women watching from a distance. Those women did not leave him even when the world seemed to be ending. I wondered where his accusers were. The only ones left were those who loved him, the women who had followed him and cared for his needs. I said it then, and I say it now. Surely, this man was the Son of God.

Anchor: Interview after interview, we're hearing evidence to support Jesus's claim that He is the Messiah. Was He the Messiah? We may never know. His followers are scattered, all the miracles have ceased, and all that seems to be left now, is the place where His body lay. Let's go live to the tomb where Jesus of Nazareth is buried with our chief correspondent, Stephen of Bethlehem.

Corr. #1: I am arriving now at the sepulcher where Jesus of Nazareth is buried. Wait!! What is going on here? Jacob, I am here at the grave and the stone has been rolled away!!!! Wait, wait here are

two women, let me ask them what they have seen or heard. Excuse me! What have you seen here? What has happened?

- Mary:** **(Excited and emotional)** We arrived this morning to anoint His body with spices. When we got to the tomb, the stone was rolled away and an ANGEL told us that Jesus was no longer here for He is risen!!! Praise be to God, He is risen!!!! We must go! We must tell the others! **(Leaving rejoicing)**
- Corr. #1:** Jacob, I'm not sure what has happened here, but it appears that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and that He has risen from the grave!!!! More on this story as it continues to unfold in the coming days!

Palm Sunday Report

by

Jacob Pharr

Second Place Drama, Grenada
Honorable Mention Drama, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

- Anchor:** We interrupt your Passover celebration with breaking news from the city gates of Jerusalem. Hello, I am Jacob of Jerusalem. Large crowds of citizens massed early this morning on the inside of the city gate. We are getting reports that Jesus of Nazareth has entered the city of Jerusalem. We have been following the prophet-teacher who has upset the Pharisees and the Sadducees with his outspoken rebukes of ceremony and tradition, which he frequently calls hypocrisy. We now go to our Field Correspondent Stephen of Bethlehem. Stephen, can you tell us what happened this morning?
- Corr. #1:** Yes, Jacob, I'm here where the crowds of people are now dispersing. What I have just witnessed is absolutely amazing. The prophet-teacher entered the city riding a donkey, and as he passed by, the people placed palm leaves and their own garments on the path before him. The commotion could be heard from all around the city. People were shouting, "Hosanna in the highest and Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!" Standing here with me is a local carpenter, Daniel, who was a part of the crowd. **(Turns to man beside him.)** Daniel, can you explain what happened this morning?
- Daniel:** **(Obviously excited.)** Man, it was unlike anything I've ever seen! I was working in my shop and my sons started seeing the crowds of people going towards the city gates. We left our work and went to see what was happening. When we reached the gates, we saw people laying down their garments – expensive garments – and they just let the donkey trample over them. My sons and I followed closely along and saw people laying palm leaves in his path. They were shouting victoriously as though a battle had been won. I wondered who this man was. He was dressed like me, an ordinary carpenter, and he was coming in peace on the back of donkey, yet people were singing in victory as they shouted, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." I tell you, we've had many who come saying that they are the Messiah, but when the people began to shout "Hosanna," I felt something! This is not an ordinary man!
- Corr. #1:** **(Crowd is loud and boisterous in the background. Reporter and Daniel are being jostled.)** Thank you, Daniel. Back to you, Jacob.

Anchor: Thank you, Stephen, interesting. With the excitement of Passover and the disturbances of the zealots, the Roman soldiers are on full alert as it is, especially since the arrest of Barrabbas, the murderer. We, now, turn back to Stephen of Bethlehem who has moved down the road.

Corr. #2: Thank you, Jacob. I have here with me Joanna. Joanna, can you tell us what happened here?

Joanna: He's here! He's here! The Messiah we have long awaited for! We sang Hosanna! Hosanna, blessed be the rock! Blessed be the rock of our salvation! Hosanna, blessed be the rock! Blessed be the rock of our salvation! Our salvation is here! Hosanna! **(Chorus of Oh, Magnify the Lord.)**

Corr. #2: **(Crowd makes it difficult to hear. Stephen yells to be heard.)** Thank you, Joanna. Back to you, Jacob.

Anchor: I believe we have one more correspondent, who has a different perspective from some. Let's go down the street from Stephen to Marianna of Macedonia. Marianna?

Corr. #3: Yes, Jacob. I have here someone who is not buying that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Can you tell us what you think?

Doubter: Well, to me, it's just another man riding a donkey. There does not seem to be anything special about him. He is dressed very simply. He does not have royal garments. He does not have any armor. People say he has performed miracles, but I have not witnessed one. Who is to say that he is the Messiah? He hasn't proven anything. Some of these Jewish people are just so determined to be *special*. They insist that God has chosen them and that Messiah will come to rescue them. It seems like they would have given up by now. I mean, seriously, how many years has it been since Messiah was prophesied?

Corr. #3: Well, thank you for your perspective. Back to you, Jacob.

Anchor: Thank you, Marianna. A very interesting perspective, one that many share, I'm sure. We want to remind our viewers that we always interrupt when breaking news happens. I'm Jacob of Jerusalem, and this has been your Jerusalem News Now Breaking News Report.

5 Years

by

Christina O’Cain

First Place Drama, Ridgeland

Second Place Drama, 2016 MCCCWA Competition

Brock: Twenty, 5’9”, blonde, very talkative and easygoing

Jason: Twenty-two, 6”, brunette, talkative but quiet

Dylan: Twenty, 5’10”, blonde, brother to Brock, sense of humor,

Lana: Twenty-two, 5’4”, brunette, easy going, very shy

Act One, Scene One

Setting: After the death of a close friend, four friends reunite five years later. Everyone is sitting outside on a patio, having beers. Everyone is laughing, talking, and having a good time.

Dylan: (cigarette in his hand, looks over at Lana) Lana, seriously, why did we ever stop hanging out?
(Brock looks over too, cueing for her to answer, Dylan occasionally takes a drag from his cigarette)

Lana: (taken aback, fumbling for words) After I graduated high school we kinda did our own thing that summer. And then, you know... **(trails off)**

(The atmosphere is slightly awkward; everyone shifts noticeably in their chair)

Brock: Kyle.. (takes deep breath)

Lana: (uncertain to continue but does, stutters) I-I wanted to give you guys your space because nothing like that had ever happened to me before. I wasn’t sure how to act. **(she nervously fidgets with her hands avoiding eye contact)**

(Beat)

Jason: (sitting with his head leaned back, beer in his hand, slurring slightly) Man, I remember that day all too well. **(pauses)** I found out and told you guys. **(he gestures towards Brock and Dylan)**

(Brock and Dylan begin talking at the same time, both trying to speak before the other)

Dylan: We were on vacation..

Brock: (cutting in) About to go to the pool.

Dylan: (glances towards Brock, annoyed) Obviously we didn’t after that.

Brock: (ponders, looks around, leans forward in his seat) I remember getting in the shower. I was in there at least an hour.

Jason: (sits up) I did that too, just sat down in there and cried. **(leans back in his seat, his head against the wall behind him)**

Lana: (sitting with her back straight, speaking softly, tense) I threw my phone against a wall, surprised it didn’t crack.

Everyone: (light laughter, then a long silence)

Dylan: We made our parents come home from vacation. **(puts out his cigarette)** You know? So we could go to the funeral and everything. **(he waves his hand dismissively in the air)**

Brock: (sneering) Yeah that kinda shot our vacation to shit.

(Beat)

(Tension is thick)

Brock: (sits up straighter, voice rushed, hands moving to emphasize his point) What I want people to understand. No, what I *need* people to understand is that Kyle wasn't a bad kid. *We* aren't bad kids. **(gestures towards everyone)** Kyle just got caught up in some bad things. **(pauses)** And, I hate to say it, but he wasn't the brightest kid. **(looks around at everyone, lowers voice)** You could tell he only did some stuff to see if he could get away with it.

(Beat)

(Lana looks uncomfortable)

Dylan: (lights up another cigarette, looks over at Lana, speaks in a low voice) Hey, I just want you to know that we're over it. **(he leans over to gently tap her knee trying to comfort her)** We can talk about it now. You don't have to be afraid talking about him around us. **(smiles)**

Lana: (giggles) You think I can get a beer before we go deeper into this conversation?

Jason: (lifts head up, gestures towards the house) I got some. **(leans head back)**

Brock: (stands) I'll get it, just a sec. **(gestures towards Dylan)** But what Dylan said, Lana, I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable. **(looks at Lana, Lana nods, visibly relaxes in her seat)**

(Brock exits then enters with a beer in hand, hands to Lana, she slowly begins sipping on it)

Brock: (sits down, his back not touching the back of the couch him and Jason are sitting on, elbows resting on his knees) I think about how it leads up to that. The warning signs were there. But I thought it was Kyle being Kyle, you know? **(pauses)** Oh, he's just being dramatic. **(waves hand dismissively)**

Jason: (talks with his head leaned back, eyes closed) I knew Kyle had some problems but we were teenagers, we all did.

Brock: (glances at Jason) Yeah, I saw all those scars on his arms and just.. **(places his head in his hands, slowly runs hands down his face)** I asked him, 'Kyle, why do you do that?'. He just shrugged me off though. **(softly laughs)**

Dylan: (snaps fingers to get everyone's attention) I was at his house once with Kyle and his brother Luke. And we were in the game room playing Call of Duty, whatever. Luke saw the scars and then just starts yelling at Kyle telling him he's a dumbass. And I'm like, Luke chill. Yelling's not gonna help him. **(frustrated, pauses)** I don't know, Luke became a huge dick that day. **(sighs)**

Lana: (aggravated, looks at Dylan) Are you serious? That's not a way to handle it.

Brock: (looks at Dylan too) His brother was always a little weird. I didn't like him too much.

Lana: (softy) I saw the scars too, that night of the big party we had. You know the one that *everyone* was there. I pulled him out of the bushes because he was so drunk he fell down in them, **(laughs lightly)** and that's when I saw them.

Jason: (shifts in his seat, lifts head up) Remember that summer we all used to hang out at the kitchen? That little outside room at Kyle's? **(he glances towards everyone)**

Brock: (excited, smiles, sits up straighter) Dude... that was such an awesome summer. Going to the kitchen every night, all of us just hanging out. **(laughs)** We never did much of anything then but still. **(looks down)**

Jason: (chuckles) I keep saying that was the best summer ever.

Dylan: Yeah, what made that summer different from anything else?

Lana: That was the summer we felt alive.

(Everyone stops abruptly)

(Beat)

Brock: (looks at Lana) Yeah, we did. **(pauses)** What happened after that? **(props his elbow on his knee and rests his chin in his hand)**

Jason: I went back home to Louisiana.

Lana: (finishes her beer and sets it down, sits back) Yeah, then that party, and after that we kinda went our own way for a little bit. Remember it was my senior year? You guys started getting in more trouble.

(looks at Brock and Dylan)

(Dylan nods, everyone was jittering nervously, Dylan was consistently shaking his leg, Brock was fumbling with his hands trying to be still)

Brock: (sits on edge of seat hunched over) When we started stealing. **(puts his head in his hands, tries to stop squirming)** God, if I could stop from doing *that*. Not the best thing I've done. Kyle and his friend JD wanted to do it. And I thought I was so cool. **(chuckles harshly)** You wouldn't believe what people leave in their cars, Lana. We found phones, blackberries, iPhones, iPods, cash. It was like we hit the jackpot. It was our own personal lottery. **(looks up, prideful, then guilty)**

Jason: (annoyed) If I was here I wouldn't have let you guys do something so stupid. **(glares at Brock)**

Dylan: (cuts in) Look who you're talking to, we *were* stupid. **(laughs)**

Lana: (looks at Dylan) You guys had that bag of stuff right? **(sits up, faces Dylan)** Dylan, you called me telling me you dumped it all on the other side of that fence by the church across the street. **(gestures generally in that direction)**

Dylan: (frowns, his leg has stopped shaking) I..I don't remember that.

Lana: You said I could come take whatever I wanted... **(trails)**

Dylan: (gasps) OH that was a decoy. I told you so if the police were to ask you'd point them in the wrong direction.

Brock: Eventually we got caught, **(points to himself then Dylan)** I mean you know that already. **(gestures towards Lana)** But we got caught and forbidden from seeing Kyle.

Lana: I remember you and him stopped hanging out for a while. And I believed I knew why, but I never said anything. **(shrugs shoulders)**

Brock: (sighs) Yeah, we stopped hanging out for a while. I did my own thing, and he did his. And eventually we met up again.

Lana: (ponders) You guys gave me that ride once. **(looks around)** We went to Kyle's for a few minutes. So you guys were talking again by the end of my senior year.

Brock: (looks like he's trying to remember)

(Beat)

Brock: (low voice, ashamed) We did it again. Barely squeaked by police last time because all of us were minors but Kyle had turned 18 when weren't talking. Technically an adult.

(Tension is building)

Brock: (breathes heavy) We got caught. And this time some of us weren't so lucky.

Jason: (speaks softly) He called me, Kyle did. Said if he got sent to jail he was gonna do it. **(voice wavers)**
End it there.

Brock: (tears up) He did it for us. **(pauses to collect himself, hides his face in his hands for a moment, avoiding eye contact)** There was talk that we could go to jail too, and this was his way of distracting them. Throwing them off their guard.

(Everyone was thinking of something to say, Brock tears up but never fully cries)

Brock: (sits hunched over his seat not making eye contact with anyone)

Lana: (whispers, leans closer towards Brock) It's not your fault.

Brock: (looks at Lana, smiles slightly, whispers) Yes it is. But thanks for saying it.

Act One, Scene Two

(Brock exits)

Lana: (faces Dylan) Did I do something?

Dylan: (sighs) No, no. Brock's just... **(trails off)** Look, he'll be fine. Just give him some time.

Jason: (looks at Lana, tries to ease the mood) So what's new with you, Lana?

Lana: (re-adjusts in her seat) Nothing much. I've changed my major a couple of times before deciding on something.

(Brock re-enters and sits)

Lana: And I recently got my two year degree. Took a while but I did. **(smiles)**

Dylan: (leans towards Lana, pats her knee again) Hey, that's great. Keep pursuing it.

Lana: (looks at everyone) What about you guys?

Jason: (sits up straighter) I have a kid now. Back in Louisiana.

Brock: (points at Jason) Look at this guy, Twenty-two and already a dad. **(laughs)**

Lana: (smiles) I thought I remember seeing something about that but wasn't sure. Congratulations, man.

Dylan: (dismissively) Brock and I both got our two-year degree. And got accepted to Colorado University.

Lana: (enthusiastically) That's great. Are you going in the Fall? **(looks back and forth between Brock and Dylan)**

Brock: (looking down, nervously fidgets with his hands) Well, **(pauses)** we got accepted but can't go.

Lana: (pauses) Oh...

Jason: (stands, yawns) Well, guys as fun as this is I'm dead tired. Lana, good seeing you. **(waves to her)**
Night.

(Jason exits)

Dylan: (sighs heavily) I need to go bed, too. I've got work in the morning. **(begins to pick up empty beer bottles)**

Brock: (stands) Hey, I got that. Don't worry about it.

Dylan: Alright. **(stands behind Lana, pats her back)** Lana, take care. Night.

(Dylan exits)

Act One Scene Three

Lana: Well, looks like it's just you and me. **(laughs nervously)**

Brock: (sits down) Yeah, just you and me. **(smiles)** Kinda like old times again. **(pats the seat next to him on couch)**

Lana: (moves to the closer seat) So how have you been? **(leans forward resting her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, looks at Brock)**

Brock: (avoiding eye contact) Like I said earlier, you know?

Lana: No, Dylan told me. You didn't say much. **(pauses)** How have *you* been?
(Beat)

Brock: (sighs heavily) Things are... complicated. **(looks at Lana, talks lower)** Dylan and I are on house arrest. We can only work and come home basically.

Lana: (looks down) Oh

Brock: (leans back against his seat) That's why we can't go. We were so excited.. **(pauses)** And we had all our stuff packed, found a place. Everything was set. **(sighs)** But you know me, always caught up in something. **(looks away from her, avoiding her gaze)**

Brock: We got caught, arrested, and later placed on house arrest.

(Beat)

Brock: Lana, I don't even know why I did it. **(looks at her)** I mean, look at the house. **(gestures around him, then towards himself)** We've got money. I didn't grow up poor as hell and I'm using this as a means to fight back. My parent's weren't overly strict, I had a pretty mellow childhood. **(pauses)** And when all this was going down I just kept thinking 'There's no reason I should be doing this.' But that didn't stop me.

Lana: (leans head on his shoulder, speaking softly) You gotta stop though. You know that.

Brock: (sighs) Yeah, I am.

(Beat)

Brock: (looks down) Lana, you were the only person I could talk to about some of these things. I can't believe it's been five years since we've last seen each other.

Lana: (eyes closed) Yeah, time passed us by didn't it.

Brock: (looks over towards her without disturbing her) What happened to us? We talked every day and told each other everything. **(waits to see if she answers)** I mean we live right down the street from each other and still didn't talk for so long.

Lana: (softly) You make it sound like we dated.

Brock: We did basically. I mean, you had your thing and I had mine, but you were the one person I could call at 2 am crying and I'd *know* you'd listen. I can't say that about most people.

Lana: (lifts her head up and looks at Brock, whispers) You were my best friend, too. **(shivers)**

Brock: (motions for her to get up, both stand) It's warmer inside, we can go in my room. Just be quiet when we go in okay.

(Both sit on Brock's bed, Brock lays down. Lana sits)

Lana: (looks around) It's been awhile since I've seen this room. **(pauses)** Everything still looks the same.

Brock: (looks at her while she looks around) How are you? And no one's around so you don't have to lie.

Lana: (startled, glances towards Brock) I've been better.

Brock: (leans up) Yeah, how so?

Lana: (pauses) You know when you're growing up and everybody talks about the future? Some day I'll do

this and that. **(shrugs shoulders)** Get married, have kids, buy a house, go to college, all that stuff. Everyone talks about the future so much, saying that it'll be great. These are supposed to be the best years of my life. But I... I just expected.. **(pauses)** more.

Brock: It'll happen one day for you. I know it. **(smiles)**

Lana: (leans closer to him) What will?

Brock: Things will get better.

(Beat)

Brock: Hey after this night's over we have to promise not to let so much time pass before we see each other again.

Lana: (laughs) Yeah, okay.

Brock: (laughs) I mean it. Dylan and I got a birthday coming up. We'll be twenty-one. Jason's supposed to come down. We're gonna be careful and sneak up to the casinos. Drink a little, and maybe gamble. You should come. **(looks at her)**

Lana: (laughs) Alright, alright. **(yawns)**

Lana: (stands) Tonight's been fun, but I think it's time for me to go.

Brock: (stands, reluctant) Okay.

Lana: (hugs Brock for several seconds, speaks softly) I've missed you. **(she turns to leave)**

Brock: And Lana,

(Lana turns to face him)

Brock: It was good seeing you.