



# inkwell

Literary Magazine

## Optimism



# Introduction

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With the release of our second issue, Inkwell Literary Magazine is looking forward to a future filled with creative works that push people to look beyond their circumstances, to think outside the box, and to find joy in everyday life.

We've barely scratched the surface of the wonders of the inkwell - so it's fitting that the theme for our second issue is optimism: an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcome.

Our writers have shared vulnerable, inspiring moments with us and crafted works of hope for our second issue. From stories of love in unlikely places to poems on the comfort of friendship, we hope this issue shows you an optimistic look at the world and a new look at what it means to have hope for the future. We hope you see the sunrise after the storm, the life after death, and the peace after chaos.

"For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness; but of power and love and discipline."  
- 2 Timothy 1:7 ASV

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*cover art by Cara Olechea*



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# When the Dog Bites

By Katelyn Lain

Freshman year. Stepping onto the soil of Bob Jones University University with bags full of clothes and heart full of hopes and a sign across the front of my shirt: THRIVE.

Soon Brody the Bear no longer seemed like the mascot of my happy new home. Schoolfield, the dining common, dorm life, a freshman fifteen, and speech class seemed like the theme of the next four years of my life.

When I look back on freshman year, all I can hear is an anthem song.

*“When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I’m feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad.”*

Sound of Music and my hero, Julie Andrews—the adventurous governess and disobedient nun who sings her way through the lessons of life.

I’m convinced Julie Andrews would make the best Freshman Seminar peer leader. Why? Because of her song, “My Favorite Things.” Life in an abbey must have resembled college life a whole lot.

The college life version of Sound of Music may look like this:

- “The dog bites” whenever your early-rising roommate opens each drawer in order to practice kick-boxing. Or waking up for your 8 am by the class bell instead of your alarm clock. Having three trash bags hidden in your closet because you didn’t have time to take them to the dumpster outside. Losing your mind is losing your water bottle twice in one week. The one day you are running late to class is the one day the printers decide to conspire against you.

- “The bee stings” when your know-it-all seat buddy raises his hand to ask a question one minute before the bell rings. That’s when the food server refuses to give you a third chicken tender in the “buffet line.” What to do when you get assigned to the gold section for the fifth time in a row (Solution: bring your teddy bear). Wondering why the grab n’ go is so slow today? Meet sloth the ID swiper; don’t be late to class.

- “Feeling sad.” Walking from chapel to the DC in the rain without covered walkways. You might be interested in someone but don’t worry—the whole campus will know you are “talking”! Whose idea was it to give the girls only three stalls in the bathroom? Now a colony of female ants block the hallways to class. A nearby ancient church bell chimes like a haunted house with its minor key songs.

But, as the song of eternal wisdom says, “I simply remember a few of my favorite things.” Yes, even college students have a few things. Forget the half-empty glass. Be glad you at least have your water bottle.

- “Raindrops on roses...” Oh yes! That’s Miss Kathy remembering my name in the DC line.

- “Whiskers on kittens...” That’s curling up for a three hour nap on Sunday.

- “Bright copper kettles...” That’s the dazzling sight of ushers, like Captain Americas with golden shields, running down the aisle to take the offering.

- “And warm woolen mittens...” Wrapping up in warm blankets on the frozen

bleachers to watch the Turkey Bowl.

- “Brown paper packages tied up with strings...” Those were the packages we used to get from our sympathetic mom freshman year.

So whenever the dog bites—remember life is more than dogs and bees—remember a few of your favorite things. Now go drink your half full water bottle! Hydrate or ‘die’ drate.

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## Totally Ticked Off

By Kaleb Shelton

It started as a strangely comfortable yet alarming pulsating throb in my spine. I was about ten years old at the time. I can remember having this feeling during PE class while sitting on the cold, dusty rubber floor of the gym in my elementary school in Vienna, Austria. The school was an older building, constructed just before Hitler’s rise to power and his annexation of Austria to Germany. I have many memories from that old building, but the memories stop after the feeling in my spine, because it only got worse.

I remember sitting in the doctor’s examination room at the large hospital down

the main road from our house. The doctor was a tall man with curly hair who only used his index fingers when he typed. A thick bushel of curly hair that stuck out of the back of the collar of his blue medical shirt testified to a hairy back. I had heard stories in school about men with hairy backs who were actually werewolves. “Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis,” the werewolf-doctor said, swiveling in his desk chair to face me and my parents. “I’m sure of it.” I looked down at my pale legs dangling from the high examination table, unsure of what the words meant. The doctor handed a prescription of antibiotics to my parents and a new life began for me.

I was now exempt from all physical activity except walking and sitting. Instead of the cold, dusty floor of the gym I now felt the hard, wooden bench under me as I sat on the sidelines during PE class. As I watched my classmates play all my favorite games without me, it occurred to me that I had suddenly become different. Soon I couldn’t stand the looks the other kids gave me when I told them I was sick and couldn’t play with them. My relationship with my younger brothers deteriorated after I kept getting angry at the smallest touch, claiming that it hurt me because I was sick. I was mad at everyone and everything. I became very depressed. To make matters worse, the antibiotics didn’t help; in fact, my pain increased. I now suffered from severe joint pain all over my body. Some days I couldn’t even walk. I missed weeks of school. My brain became affected and I couldn’t think enough to do my homework. Why was my pain getting so much worse, you ask? Well, as it turned out, I didn’t have arthritis.

During my treatment for arthritis, I had suffered from an itchy thin red circle on the left side of my chest. Occasionally, a very severe pain would occur deep under my skin in that place, causing me to gasp in pain and freeze for a split second. I called these instances “mini heart attacks.” My parents noticed my worsened condition and took me to more

doctors. Finally, one diagnosis seemed to fit: Lyme Disease. The thin red circle had been the result of a tick bite. This scared me at first. Was the tick still inside me, burrowing its way through my flesh to get to my heart and kill me? No, thankfully not, as I found out later.

As encouraging as it was to know that I wasn't suffering from a condition that usually only elderly people are known to have (I actually did use a cane for a time), I did have to start my treatment all over again, and Lyme Disease seemed just as incurable as arthritis. Through trial and error, my mom set up a very strict diet for me. It was the kind of diet where, after asking what I couldn't eat, people's jaws would drop and they would ask, "What can you eat?" In addition to that, my mom forced me to take dozens of little natural supplements that came in bottles that looked like eye-drops. I started carrying all my "medicine" and "special food" around wherever I went. This was even more humiliating than the first treatment had been. How would you like to show up at the Wilds Christian Camp carrying two huge containers of personal food? How would you like to lead the same conversations about your health several times a day whenever you were at a place where you met new people?

Thankfully, I'm glad to say that it was all worth it. After seven years of pain, I finally completed my treatment in 2017. I have not felt that same pain since. However, as agonizing as the whole ordeal was, I see it as an essential part of me. I would not be who I am today if I had not gone through this. I went through the fire to become a hardened tool of steel. The fire heats the steel to a very high temperature and the blacksmith uses his hammer to change its form, but at the end the tool is shaped to fulfill a purpose. Now I am a tool in God's hands that can sympathize with others. I can encourage others because I know what it's like to be in so much pain that it makes you feel *old*. I have learned that the ultimate source of joy in life is not found in

my physical body, but in *Him*.



## "Franny and Ellis"

By Jessi Skrade

It is an undeniable truth that in the small hours of the morning, reality becomes distorted. Sometimes a fairly strong breeze sets in, strong enough to make the leaves on the trees shiver and rattle like the bones of long-forgotten creatures, ancient and mysterious. When a person steps outside into this darkness, and stares out across fields and the abandoned road, they become aware that they are utterly alone. Toads grumble in the grass and bats fly overhead. If that person chooses to look up, the surface of planet Earth has a way of racing up to meet the gently smoky sky, a dizzying effect that causes knees to shiver, for fear that the two planes will clap together and crush anything in between. The face of the sky peers back, curious at who dares to break the frozen night. One may feel infinitely tiny yet wildly important to all of time; for if one were not awake to live this moment, it would pass into eternity past having never been known. These were the exact thoughts of Francis Baulden.

Francis believed herself to be a ghost

of some sort, though she was, it must be noted, very much alive and in excellent health. But being a ghost of the alive variety for more than five years had turned her into a bit of a hermit, with a touch of madness. No, she knew that she breathed and blinked and bled, but she couldn't help feeling there was something else to her. Perhaps she spent too much time alone, but she didn't mind it. People were difficult, she thought.

Francis would put on an impractical, frilly grey dress and very practical rubber boots, grab a flashlight, and set out at four in the morning every day to look at the world in its throes of Slightly Off. Her activities in these precious few hours consisted almost solely of looking for toads in the grass and wading in the shallows of the bog. If she were lucky, she could frighten anyone who came across her by simply shutting off her light, standing there, and staring. This last part she took intense delight in, as a validation of her Ghostliness. It was a misty May morning and someone had seen her.

Francis dropped the toad she had been holding and wiped her hands on her dress frantically. She hadn't noticed a man in the bog with her until he was less than ten feet away. She fumbled with her flashlight, shutting it off just as the man's silhouette began to approach her. Her heart pounded in her ears. The bogwood's edge was her special place. Intruders were supposed to run if they saw her. And yet, here a stranger wandered too close for comfort. It scared her more than she'd like to admit. She stood firm and stared with wide eyes at the man.

"Um. . .are you alright?" he asked. Francis stared. The man fiddled with the zipper on his jacket and glanced around, unnerved. "I asked you a question," he said louder.

"I am." Francis said. He was a very average-looking man, she thought. A little disheveled, which made her suspicious. "What are you doing here?"

"What's your name? I'm Ellis. Are you okay?"

"You already asked me that." Francis' eyebrow twitched in annoyance.

"Right. Well. I don't think you should be alone out here."

"Why? I live here." Francis unconsciously stepped towards him.

"Because, you could get hurt or lost. Nobody would find you. You'd turn into a bog mummy!"

". . .I don't think I'd mind being a bog mummy, eventually," she said. "It's a kind of romantic idea." Ellis shook his head and let out a short little laugh.

"You're nuts." She noticed the humidity caused his brown hair to curl and frizz. It bounced. Ellis turned and began to leave as quickly as he'd arrived. "If you're sure you're alright then!" Francis could only watch him go.

"My name is Francis!" She shouted into misty air though his back gave her no indication of hearing. She shivered and frowned; her muddy dress was cold and Ellis had ignored her question. "Not very polite of him," she whispered to herself. She didn't see him again for several days.

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"Hello," Ellis' voice exploded right next to her ear. Francis' fist jerked backwards instinctively in a punch. She whirled around with her flashlight raised.

"I could have knocked your lights out," she spat. Ellis smiled and bounced on his toes. She rolled her eyes, but lowered her clenched fist.

"Ah, but you didn't. Are you hungry?" he held up a tote. "I made oatmeal. It's maple sugar." Francis eyed the bag warily, but nodded.

"If you're trying to poison me, I'll know. You'll regret it."

“I’m not!” Ellis protested. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Turn me into a bog mummy, maybe.” Francis felt her cheek twitch into a smile in spite of herself. “If you want to sit, there’s a good log over here.”

Ellis made fantastic oatmeal, Francis decided. It somehow complimented the stars and the feeling of soft ground underneath her boots, and warmed her from the inside out.

“You never answered my question,” she said.

“Hmph?” he grunted around a mouthful of oats.

“Why are you here?” Ellis said nothing, instead choosing to shovel a final spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth and began to clean up the dishes he’d brought. Francis did her best unnerving stare, eliciting a chuckle from him. Finally, he spoke.

“I wanted to see if you were here again. You intrigue me.”

Francis fiddled with the hem of her dress. The idea that anyone would ever want to see her a second time hadn’t crossed her mind until now. She twitched. Her Ghost Façade was beginning to crack, and yet, she didn’t dislike him nearly as much as she had.

“I am sorry to leave you; I have a real job I have to get to.” Ellis shot a wink at her, collected his tote, and patted her shoulder. “Be safe doing. . . whatever it is you do out here.” She felt heat rise in her cheeks at the gentle weight of his hand on her shoulder.

“I have a real job!” she objected.

“Yeah? What do you do?” Francis studied his freckled face. He was teasing her! The audacity! Francis folded her arms.

“I do illustrations. And paint.” Ellis laughed and turned to leave.

“I should have guessed. That explains a lot,” he said over his shoulder. “Good for you! See ya later, Franny!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she called. He gave her no reply. For the first time in her life, being ignored actually bothered

Francis.

Ellis’ visits continued on and off well into the summer, usually with some form of snack in the tote. After that second meeting, Francis had discovered she enjoyed his company. She would give him feathers she’d found, or interesting rocks in exchange for the food, and they’d talk and explore together. Francis’ daily life faded even more out of her central focus, and every minute spent sitting at her desk drawing little gnomes and animals for children’s books was a minute she’d rather be back in the wetland with her friend. She enjoyed everything about that time, especially when Ellis started bringing along a little radio to add some human music. From four a.m. to seven every day was when she felt alive. Their time together grew from unfamiliar caution to comfortable relaxation. But the peace couldn’t last forever.

“There’s going to be a storm here. Just you wait, those big trees over there have a lot of dead limbs. It’s going to be a wreck. You shouldn’t be out here this week.” Ellis was leaned back in a grassier area in his shirt-sleeves, his tinny little pocket radio playing some bluesy tune. Francis paused in her wading in the shallows to look at the red sunrise coming through the pines.

“You’re right. I wonder how bad it’ll be.” Like a response, the wind picked up and whipped her black hair back. Ellis grinned and splashed over to stand in front of her. He took her hand, fingers intertwining with her own.

“No matter. It’s a beautiful morning right now.”

Francis’ eyes widened. “Excuse me! What-?”

“Do you know how to dance, Franny?” His eyes sparkled with mischief, voice softer than normal. Francis’ ears burned, but she couldn’t tell why.

“Only from what I’ve seen in movies,” she said.

“Good enough. Dance with me?”

“. . . Alright.” His other hand rested on

the small of her back and they swayed together, water and lily pads around their ankles. The pink sunrise behind Ellis illuminated his hair like a halo, the toads croaked as if they were singing along to the music, and Francis felt a laugh bubble up inside her. The ghost and the wanderer. They were a good, odd pair.

The red sun said there was going to be a storm.

Late in the evening, a clap of thunder rolled across the bog like it was announcing doomsday and the wind that cracked the dying pines screamed back a retort. The rain had been pouring down for hours and the bogwood flooded quickly. Francis looked out the window of her little cabin to watch. Lightning flashed. A figure stumbled beyond the glass. Francis pressed her nose to the window, eyes wide. She squinted against the lighting that flashed again. The figure stumbled, raised an arm, and fell. She shot up, yanked on her rubber boots and raincoat, grabbed her flashlight, and sprinted out into the storm, shouting the only name she could think of.

“Ellis?!” Francis trudged through the mud as fast as her legs would take her, to the place where she thought she saw the person fall. The wind and rain kept pushing her hair into her eyes and the thunder rolled, almost deafening. This kind of lightning could easily strike and kill someone, she thought. Her flashlight caught a cream shape in the dark. Sodden and empty, Ellis’ tote lay on the ground.

Something deep in Francis’ chest broke. Ellis was lost. Her annoyance at him that he dared to invade her alone time in the bogwood’s edge had vanished long ago, transformed into something new. Her friend whom she loved, hurt and alone, flashed through her mind. For a moment, raw terror gripped her so hard she fought to breathe. Rain blinded her, and yet she pressed on. She was going to find him. Francis wandered the howling bogwood’s edge like a spectre, haunting it.

“Ellis!” She shouted into the dark.

The thunder rolled over her voice. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and shouted for him again, silently cursing herself for not bringing her phone. A faint cry carried on the wind answered her, so she plunged into the dark towards it. The sun was rising again. She was going to find him even if it killed her.

And she did find him. It took more than two hours of searching. Her flashlight died, and after a while, her voice grew hoarse from yelling, but there Ellis sat, leaning against their log by the shallows. He smiled at her weakly; he looked pale in the dim daylight.

“Hello, Franny,” he said. “Incredible how you can get turned around in this place when it’s this bad of weather.”

“Hello, yourself! Why on earth were you not home?!” Francis sloshed through the water to help him up.

“I got worried about you. You live alone in the middle of nowhere.” Francis glowered at him.

“That’s stupid! You almost got yourself killed, and for what?” She rubbed his cold hands. “I’m fully capable of taking care of myself. Don’t ever do this again! If that’s not the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard, I don’t know what is. Why I-,”

“Franny,” He said. She continued her lecture, pulling him along towards her house. “Franny!” Ellis said louder and planted his feet. Her arm jerked and she was forced to stop walking. She fell silent. “It wasn’t smart, you’re right. But,” he reached up and pushed her wet bangs back. “I knew you’d find me. I’m not hurt, just a little banged up.” Francis pushed her face into his shoulder without thinking, and he wrapped his arms around her.

“. . . I’m glad you’re alright,” she said.

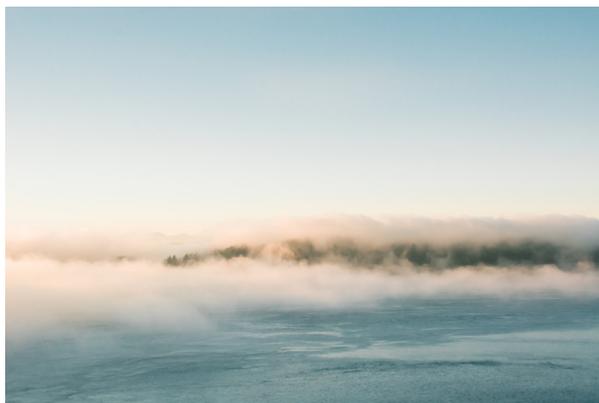
“Me too.”

Francis Baulden, local haunter of the bogwood’s edge and general disliker of people, felt a warmth bloom inside her. Ellis, never once been bothered by her abrasive attitude, had become her closest friend. And so, the pair

fell in love with each other as much as they loved the wetlands, though it would be some time before either of them acknowledged it.

It is, after all, an undeniable truth, that in the small hours of the morning, reality becomes distorted. A young woman in a grey dress can look very much like a ghost, a familiar stomping ground can become a dangerous maze, and a young man can look like a threatening figure. Perhaps, it is a good thing that the small hours do not last very long and, like all dark times, it eventually comes to an end.

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## Willow on the Atlantic

By Jacie Pridgeon

There's nothing like these fog banks—how they stop time except for the few inches in front of your face, Willow thought as she walked toward the docks.

She could hear the waves lapping against ships and wood. The only workers out so early in the morning were the ticket takers setting up their stands before the first round of tourists filed down from the Boothbay inns and cafés. Willow headed to Captain Faulkner's Whale Watching Tours, its sign so faded it was nearly illegible.

"Morning, Sully," she told the man sitting behind the stand. He hesitated, dog-eared his book before glancing up at the woman, her auburn hair thrown into a bun.

"Willow! A bit early to be down here, don't you think?"

"You know my brother. . . . Rob's just going to drop Carly off before work. I thought this would be a good way to eat up some time until he gets off."

Sully nodded. "The deckhand was starting to get lonesome for you," he said with a chuckle. "Been saying he'd have to start getting his coffee from the café as an excuse to say hi."

"Oh, please," Willow muttered. "Well, there's nothing to stop him. If I'm not home, I'm there." Not that leaving hadn't entered her mind. Seems to be the thing to do these days, she thought, comes so easy for some.

"When was the last time you saw Carly?" Sully asked.

Willow gave him a sharp look. "Recently enough that my brother should be grateful for today." She exchanged her tickets with the sailor for two wristbands. Scraping—the first word that came to mind when she thought of them, her brother with his two jobs and the girl with her messy braids. Never would've thought he'd be able to hold on to the kid this long, Willow mused.

Three hours later, the life jackets were making their rounds, required for everyone under the age of twelve, the voice over the speaker announced. Willow glanced at the little girl beside her, who stared down at the water beside the boat in turn.

"That means you, Carly." The girl would have to take off Willow's overcoat first before they'd be able to fit the orange vest around her. Willow had simply shaken her head when she saw Carly's thin long sleeves earlier. You'd be surprised at just how cold you can get when leaning over the boat railing in the Atlantic, scanning each swell for a dorsal fin, Willow thought.

The child cocked her head. “Those are for kids who can’t swim.”

“No, they’re for kids who want to stay on the boat and see whales.” Willow motioned one of the deck hands over and took the jacket. “Arms up.”

Carly watched each move as Willow snapped the fasteners in place; the girl’s eyebrows furrowed. The last passengers filed in and found seats, some on the upper deck, some in the cabin, and some on the outside rim, like Willow and Carly. I never could have dragged Grant inside, Willow thought. Even now she grinned at what he’d always said of himself—“born to the sea.”

Carly’s voice distracted her from the memories. “Dad said you guys went out on Sully’s boat all the time growing up.”

Willow nodded. “Sure did.”

“He said you used to teach him to paint when you were kids, too,” Carly said.

“You could say that. Always thought he might’ve had a gift.” Willow almost smiled at the memory—the mild Maine afternoons before their mom would get home.

The girl nodded, and the speaker announced that they were about to embark.

Carly’s voice was small. “I don’t know how to paint.”

Willow hesitated. The girl was staring out at the waves again, her arms folded around herself. “How about drawing?”

Her niece shrugged, and Willow opened her bag beside her. Some note cards and two pens were all she had.

The morning wore on, yet they became only colder the farther away they got from shore. Willow drew five shark outlines, Carly colored in three, and the ocean swallowed one errant card when Carly took a break to lean on the railing.

Willow’s last time whale watching had been about three months ago. Grant had seemed unfocused, jittery. Even the sound of the waves couldn’t hold his attention. The thought had struck her as she looked at his sun

bleached hair, his sharp jaw, that she’d either get engaged tonight or lose him. Then he showed her the acceptance letter to the graduate program. California.

Two months had been the extent of her college attendance. Goodness knows I wasn’t cut out for hour-long lectures and research papers, she thought. Maybe if I’d waited a year . . .

Hadn’t seemed like a mistake though. Not when the lab assistant with the crooked grin had started coming in for coffee every week during her shift.

Willow waved at Sully as he walked toward them, offering small bottles of water to the passengers.

“I’ve seen him before,” Carly said, looking at Sully. “At church, I think.”

Willow and Grant had visited Sully’s church once or twice, shook hands with the other older people in the congregation. The building hadn’t aged well, she’d noticed. And it had been too long since she had come as a child to remember many of the songs.

Grant had laughed as he tried to read the notes she’d scribbled on different pages of the Bible she’d brought and the memory verses underlined in crayon from grade school.

Carly grinned shyly at Sully before going back to her picture. The sailor stood by them a minute, his smattering of blonde beard shifting a little in the breeze.

“Haven’t heard anything from Grant, have you?”

Willow shook her head. “I haven’t called.”

Sully seemed to begin to say something, but looked down at the deck.

“Everything’s so new for him right now. . . . Don’t want to pull him away from that,” she said.

“Still got Boothbay, Willow.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Exactly.” Still within thirty minutes of her childhood home near the harbor. “But what about you, Sully? Any plans for this weekend?”

“Ah, you know me. Nothing much, unless one of the kids calls.”

She nodded. Willow knew there was a daughter, a son, and two or three grandkids. They hadn’t left Maine, she didn’t think. But they’d stayed in Boothbay only long enough for her to get used to how his daughter laughed like Sully’s wife did before her death, and how you could confuse the son’s voice for the father’s. Guess they haven’t needed him, though, like we have, she thought.

As another twenty minutes passed by, Willow closed her eyes to the sea breeze, to the sound of Carly’s ink scrawl.

Carly’s voice broke into her memories. “What do you think?” she asked, holding up a sketch.

“I’d say you draw like your dad. Maybe even like me,” she said with a laugh.

“I want to look at yours.” Carly leaned over to look at the paper in Willow’s lap. A small boy had been sitting on the other side of Carly, playing a handheld video game. He gave Willow a little wave.

“Can I see your pictures?”

Willow nodded and motioned him over.

“Cool,” he said to Carly. “Is your mom an artist?”

Carly looked up at Willow, wide-eyed. “I don’t know . . .” The little girl’s voice trailed off.

“You would think so from the way Carly draws, wouldn’t you?” Willow said. “We could give you some pointers, if you want to stay around a few minutes.”

Somewhere in the world, she thought, there’s the woman who named this child, who maybe has the same eyes. Willow couldn’t even remember whether they had been Carly’s hazel. But the girl could learn to have hands like mine, hands that create something, she thought.

The girl stood as the speaker crackled again. “If you look to the right side of the boat, at about 3 o’clock, you can make out an

adult humpback making its way alongside us.”

The girl hopped down from her seat and started to sprint down the deck before Willow could speak. Other families stood up too, the children chattering.

“Carly, give me a minute!”

The girl looked back, her eyes wide. Willow couldn’t hear her over the others, but she seemed to be laughing.

Might be a rarer sight than the humpback, Willow thought, Carly giggling. The girl disappeared in a flash of dark hair, weaving between the moms and dads. Willow rounded the corner, hands raised to avoid knocking into anyone.

“Sorry,” she said as she brushed by a middle-aged man. “That girl’s with me.”

And I have to be there when she sees it, Willow realized.

“I see its back!” someone exclaimed as Willow reached the other side of the boat. There, tucked behind a couple of teenagers, Carly stood on her tiptoes.

The girl accepted Willow’s hand submissively. “Do you see him?” Carly asked.

Willow nodded. People were already lining the railing.

“Is that your friend?”

She looked up to where Carly was pointing. On the second deck, Sully was leaning over the railing, waving both arms as if trying to signal a helicopter.

“Think he wants us up there,” Willow said, shaking her head. As Willow and Carly walked forward, people stepped aside distractedly, everyone squinting out at the waves or scanning them with binoculars.

Sully was already part way down the steps when they reached the stairway.

A grin split his freckled face. “Hand her up.”

He took Carly from Willow’s arms and dashed up to the second deck. She followed more carefully, sidling between the other passengers.

If there was one memory that she held

onto more than the rest from growing up, from when faith came easily, it would be the sailing—with church groups, with Sully, and his wife.

And all Sully's worry over whether we'd find our way, she thought. All the words he wanted us to live out, the words she had once written out by memory, some of which still hadn't faded.

If anyone hears my voice, Willow remembered as she followed, from which chapter or verse she couldn't say. Did that voice sound like an old sailor's? Like a child's? Or the morning song of a small coastal town?

On the top deck too, people were scrunched together on the right side. But Sully's navy posture stuck out, the child atop his shoulders.

And opens the door. What if I don't know how to anymore? she wondered. How to take someone for his word . . .

"Anything?" she asked as she stepped up next to them.

"Saw some spray from his blowhole," Sully answered with a wince. The girl's fingers curled around his hair in excitement.

She heard Carly's gasp as the humpback's head emerged from the water, then its right fin, only to fall with a slap. The girl reached down her hand to Willow without looking away from the aqua sea.

I will come into him. Willow squeezed her hand in response. Those around her waited in silence, cameras held out.

"Aunt Willow?" Carly whispered. "Will you teach me how to do a watercolor when we get back?"

"Wouldn't mind that."

A streak of gray caught Willow's eye as the front half of the whale seemed to stick up at an angle. A few people on the upper deck started clapping.

Willow sighed and pulled out the cards they had been drawing on from her bag. Carly had signed her name on the last one in wobbly print, as if she hadn't wanted Willow to lose

it among all the other whale sketches surely populating Willow's fridge.

People began drifting back to their seats, resigned to the fact that the whale had dived. Willow wrapped the coat around Carly when she got down.

The sea-salt air was a friend to her, what she'd tasted each day since she was seven years old. And maybe that another of His voices—what never changed, she thought. What always stood open.

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## Happiness Starts with Everly

By Kathleen Coyle

Hayden rolled his eyes towards the entrance of the classroom at the sound of a tinkling laugh. Everly Jones, the bane of Hayden's existence. Normal people just aren't that happy. Hayden was sure of it.

"Hi, Hayden," Everly said followed by a wide grin. "How was your weekend?"

"Fine," Hayden replied without peeling his eyes away from the front of the classroom.

"My weekend was fantastic. I bought a new succulent. I named it Phoebe. I think she fits in very well with the others." Everly's eyes drifted up to the ceiling in thought. "Do you

like succulents, Hayden?”

“They’re fine.” Hayden mumbled while scribbling the date onto his notebook.

This exchange was a regular occurrence unfortunately for Hayden. Everly would sit by Hayden in class and twitter on like a bird no matter how one-sided Hayden tried to make the conversation. No, more like squawking like a parrot, Hayden thought.

“I think they’re beautiful, unique. Each one has its own personality.”

“Plants can’t have personalities,” Hayden couldn’t stop himself from answering.

“Well of course they can! Some are very showy and demand attention like the paddle plant but some are shy like the Echeveria and others are--”

Hayden regretted even asking. Everly chattered on until the bell rang and then she turned towards the front of the classroom, her ever present smile hovering at the corners of her lips.

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When the bell rang signaling the end of the class hour, Hayden swiped all of his papers into his backpack and made a beeline for the exit.

“Hayden, wait up!” At the sound of Everly’s voice Hayden closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Lord give me strength, he thought.

“What now?”

“There’s an event being hosted at the library. It’s a collaboration with Evercreek, the senior citizen’s home. I volunteered to read to them”

“And?”

“Well I was hoping you might want to come with me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“It’ll be fun. I really wish you would come.” Everly’s expression took on the slightest bit of a pout as she clasped her hands in front

of her.

“I’m busy.” Hayden brushed past her while Everly’s mouth gaped open.

“Doing what?”

“Anything but that.” Hayden answered, not bothering to look back. Everly’s laugh floated up to his ears.

“You’re funny.” Hayden stopped walking and turned slightly towards Everly. She was standing there, smile pressing into her cheeks. Hayden narrowed his eyes at her.

Don’t even ask, Hayden. Just keep walking. Hayden raised an eyebrow at her then slowly turned on his heel and strode forward.

The next morning Haden was greeted by another loud, “Good morning!” from his least favorite ever-cheery voice. Does she ever give up? He clenched his fists atop his desk and gritted his teeth. He tilted his head in Everly’s direction. Clasped in her hands in front of her face was a small pot with an even smaller plant.

“It’s an Echeveria! A shy lil’ guy, just like you.”

Excuse me? Hayden thought.

“I asked Mrs. Patterson, from Evercreek, what kind of succulent matched your personality and we both agreed that it had to be an Echeveria and then I saw one at the store and I just had--”

“What is it doing here?” Hayden asked, pointing his hands at the plant.

“It’s for you, silly! Meet Petunia.” Everly gave him a massive grin.

“You can’t name it Petunia.”

“Why not?”

“I am not going to own a plant named Petunia.”

“So that means you’re going to keep her?” Everly raised an eyebrow, a grin still plastered on her face. Hayden pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Why, Everly?”

“Why what?”

“Why the plant? Why do you talk to me all the time? And why on earth is it named

Petunia?"

"I'm just trying to be nice."

"You don't need to be. Keep the stupid plant." Hayden turned back to the front of the class.

A few beats of silence went by before Everly spoke up. "You don't have any friends." Hayden turned back to Everly. She was looking down at her shoes. "You don't have any friends and everyone needs friends. I don't know why you don't have any friends, but I thought that I could be your friend." Everly ground the toes of her left shoe into the carpet.

Hayden heaved a great sigh. Then took the succulent from Everly's hands and placed it on the very corner of his desk. With her head still pointed down, she gave the tiniest of smiles to the floor.

When Hayden's last class of the day had just let out he once again heard that cheery voice.

"Hayden! Hey, wait up!" Everly jogged up to Hayden's side, a little out of breath. "Wow, you sure can move fast, you've got such long legs."

"What do you need?" Hayden had the succulent clasped protectively in both of his hands. He had held onto it all day afraid to let it get crushed in his bag. It's cute, I guess, not very manly though.

"Well you remember how I mentioned Mrs. Patterson to you?"

"Yeah."

"And she helped me pick your succulent?"

"Where is this going?"

"Obviously I had to tell her a bit about you. She said you sounded lovely. I thought that maybe you would like to come visit her with me."

"Look, Everly, I took your plant, ok? But I am not going to some senior home with you."

"Why not?"

"Why does this matter so much to you? You don't even know these people." Hayden

clasped the succulent a little tighter, his cheeks getting warmer. He just wanted to get on the bus and go home as soon as possible. Can't Everly see that?

"Some of these seniors don't have anyone. They're all alone, wasting away with no one to comfort them."

"That's not your problem."

"It's not." Everly turned away suddenly to cough into her elbow. It seemed as though her whole frame, tiny as it was, shook with the force, but when she turned back around her ever present smile was back upon her face. "But if I were old and alone I would hope that someone would be kind enough to come see me. Even if they hardly knew me."

Hayden sighed. "Not today. Besides, I have to get Petunia home." He lifted the plant a little higher and Everly's smile broadened.

"Another day then." She spun around and walked off, a light bounce in her step.

A few days later Hayden was studying at the public library when a loud, "Hi Hayden!" caused him to jump from where he was seated and spin around quickly in his chair.

"Quiet!" He hissed. "Can't you see that this is a library?" He widened his eyes and pointed around at all the heads that had turned in their direction when Everly greeted him loudly. Everly rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be so loud." She held her hands up and shrugged.

"Why is it that, lately, you seem to be everywhere that I am? Are you stalking me?"

"What are you doing here? It's late. Don't you ever go home?" Everly asked without bothering to answer his question. She slid into the seat across from Hayden, making herself comfortable. Hayden sighed and closed his textbook, resigning himself to the fact that he would not be doing anymore studying.

"I'm just not in any rush to go home. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." She turned away, once again coughing fiercely into her elbow.

"Are you ok?" Hayden asked, his brow furrowed.

"Yeah I just need some water." She produced a bottle from her bag and took a sip. "Sorry about that. I've had a dry throat."

"That's ok," Haden said, brow still furrowed.

"Why aren't you in any rush to go home?" Hayden's expression turned cool, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't have to explain my home situation to you. Don't ask." They were both quiet for a moment. Hayden almost thought that Everly would get up and leave. He wasn't sure if that would make him happy or sad.

"I know about what happened to your parents," Everly finally spoke. "I can't even begin to understand what it was like to lose them. But you shouldn't give up on happiness because they're gone." She reached her hand across the desk and put it atop his. "I don't think that's what they would have wanted." Hayden slid his hand out from under hers.

"You don't know what they would have wanted." He kept his gaze pinned over her left shoulder, not looking into her eyes.

"I guess you're right." Hayden snapped his eyes back to Everly. She was shrugging. "But I want you to be happy. I feel like that should be enough."

Hayden paused for a moment, bewildered at the cheery expression in front of him. He couldn't bring himself to be annoyed by it any more.

"You are such an odd girl." At Hayden's words Everly's smile grew, etching it's lines into her cheeks. Hayden gave a ghost of a smile back.

"Come with me tomorrow to see Mrs. Patterson."

"You are relentless!" Hayden placed his forehead on the table and let out a dry chuckle. "Why is it so important to you that I go?"

"I just think that you'll enjoy it! Please come?"

Hayden lifted his head a little, keeping

his chin on the table as he looked into Everly's pleading eyes.

"Alright, alright! I'll go, just stop looking at me like that." Everly clapped her hands in front of her and more heads swiveled their way. "But let's get out of here because you obviously don't understand the phrase 'quiet zone.'" He scooped up his things and dragged Everly out by her wrist to avoid anymore scathing looks from people trying to read.

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As they walked together to the bus stop Hayden noticed the air wheezing out through Everly's lips.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Just a little tired. And my bag is kind of heavy."

"Here let me." Hayden lifted the bag from her shoulders and slung it over his own. He shrugged his shoulder up and down a little, noticing the lightness of the bag but deciding not to say anything. There's no need to embarrass her by pointing out that it's not that heavy.

As they approached the bus stop a bus just turned the corner.

"Perfect timing," Everly said.

"Here's your bag." Hayden held it out in front of himself.

"Aren't you getting on?"

"This one goes north. I live south."

"Oh." For seemingly the first time Everly looked sad to Hayden. "I'll see you tomorrow, right? At Evercreek? You can't back out."

"I won't. See you there." Hayden gave her a two-fingered salute and Everly turned to board the bus.

.....

The next day Hayden waited for Everly at the front steps of Evercreek shifting from foot to foot as the minutes dragged by. Everly was late.

“Hey Hayden.” Everly waved as she approached the steps, panting and her shoulders sagging a little.

“You took your sweet time.”

“It’s a beautiful day. I’m allowed to take the time to enjoy it.” Everly crossed her arms in mock anger but couldn’t stop her lips from tugging upward. “Come on, let’s go in.”

“Mrs. Patterson! I finally dragged him to come see you.”

“Who is this handsome young man?”

Mrs. Patterson sat up in bed, reading glasses perched low on her nose and book in hand. A lamp in the corner put off a soft glow.

“This is Hayden. I told you about him. He’s the Echeveria.”

“Hi ma’am.” Hayden gave a little wave, his other hand shoved deep in his pocket.

“Ah yes, the mopey one.” Mrs. Patterson smirked.

“Mrs. Patterson! You’re not supposed to tell him I said that.” Everly turned to Hayden, a hand over her mouth. Hayden couldn’t help but grin at her embarrassment.

“Yeah I guess you could say I’m a little moody. I didn’t realize you talked about me this much.” Everly’s cheeks reddened. Hayden liked that look.

“Well don’t all just stand in the doorway. Come pull up a seat.” Mrs. Patterson waved her hands to some chairs in the corner. They sat and talked and Hayden began to enjoy himself. He had almost forgotten what it was like to laugh.

“Hayden, could you be a dear and get me some water?” Mrs. Patterson asked when some time had passed. “But not the water from the tap. It never gets cold enough. You’ll have to go to the cafeteria.”

“Of course. Be back in a second.”

When Hayden returned with a tall glass of cool water he caught the tail end of Everly and Mrs. Patterson’s conversation.

“ . . . this trial going?” Mrs. Patterson asked.

“I’m not sure how well it’s working. The

bad days are seeming to start to outnumber the good days. But my doctor said I should stick with it for a little longer. Lyme disease is still so mysterious. No one really knows how it will respond to medicines.”

“Is he optimistic?”

“He doesn’t like to say, but I don’t think he’s liking the results.”

“Will you try another experiment?”

“I’m not sure. There’s a trial in Mexico that has shown some progress but I’m not sure if I want to leave here. It might not even work. Time will tell.”

Not wanting to let on that he had heard, Hayden knocked twice on the door. “I’m back ladies.”

“Oh, what a dear boy.” Mrs. Patterson patted his cheek as he gave her the glass of water.

“We should probably go. It’s been wonderful to see you again.” Everly leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“The pleasure was all mine, dear. And bring this young boy around more often, I like him.”

Everly laughed. “I’ll try to force him here again.”

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Hayden held the exit doors open for Everly then paused at the top of the stairs. “You never told me you were sick.”

Everly’s steps halted and she turned back towards him. “You overheard?” Hayden nodded. “Can we sit? My legs are a little weak.” Everly sat on the steps, not waiting for Hayden. He sat next to her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He wrapped his arms around his knees.

“I didn’t think it was necessary. It doesn’t change anything.” She stared straight ahead.

“Are you dying?”

“The data on Lyme disease is very small. So, yes, I’m sick and yes, I might die. It’s

hard to say if that time will be sooner or later.” Hayden stayed silent for a few moments.

“How do you continue to be so happy?” Everly turned to face him, her ever-present smile back on her face.

“That’s easy. Look around you, Hayden. Feel the sun, smell the air. It’s a beautiful day and I’m not going to let Lyme disease take that away from me.” She rested her cheek on her knees and took in a deep breath.

“But how do you do it? Enjoy it?”

“I live day by day, moment by moment. If anything, I’m happier than I’ve ever been. If each moment could be my last then I live every moment as if it were.”

Haden stared at her mouth agape. Then spoke. “You’re amazing.”

Everly laughed loudly. “I don’t have time to be sad and neither do you.” She placed her hand on Hayden’s arm. “Your parents are gone. You’re mad at the world.

“I’m not mad at the world. I--”

“You’re not? Hayden,” Everly laughed. “I smile and you frown. I give you a gift and you don’t want it.” Hayden fought to keep the smile from his face.

“That’s not the same thing as hate.”

“You and I got dealt a bad hand of cards but I choose to keep playing the game and you want to fold. The longer you spend hating the world the less time you spend enjoying life.”

“I’m grieving!”

“Then grieve! But don’t shut me out.” Everly and Hayden were silent for a moment, both looking straight ahead.

“I guess,” Hayden began, still not looking at Everly. “I have room for a little more sunshine in my life.” Everly grinned and clapped her hands together. “But you’re going to have to take Petunia back. I don’t know a thing about succulents and I think I’m killing her.”

“Oh no, you’re keeping her.” Everly pointed a stern finger at Hayden. “I will teach you all there is to know.”



## Ella’s Surprise

By Kenzie McGregor

“Grandma, would you please tell us a story?” Mazy looked up from playing nurse with her cloth doll from their perch on the third glossy pine step. Her deep green eyes glittered with delight like the Emerald City of Oz.

“Yes, please. We’ve been so good today, Grandma.” The little boy rolled over onto his stomach, spreading his arms in a belly flop pose, gazing with puppy eyes at the straight-backed matronly figure in her worn rocking chair. She could easily pass for the queen of Iowa, no, of the whole world without so much as a crown from the quarters of her large veranda.

“Is that so, Max?” Grandma threw a wink at the splayed figure, looking up from her latest project. She continued her knitting, the needles sliding in and out of tiny knots with uncanny ease and precision, and chuckled a little, showing glowing white teeth.

“Wow, those go so fast!” Mazy’s mouth hung open as the flat, metal tools hummed rhythmic measures under the steady creaking of the old rocker. “Do you ever get tired? And Max is right, Grandma. We were extra good on our long walk with you today and we didn’t even throw pebbles at Mr. Pe-

ter's old dog."

"I suppose you're right." Grandma ran a strong hand over her sculpted chin. "Let's see here. . ." The bronze skinned sage furrowed her lineless brow and contemplated.

"I have an idea!" Max interjected. "I want to hear a story about knights and goblins and buried treasure." He mimicked an attack of a castle on a wayfaring beetle with his faded green army men.

"No, I want a story about princesses and dragons. Oh, and candy." Mazy compared the length of each of her braided, blonde pigtails. Her head snapped up, small wisps of untucked hair flying in every direction. "Can we hear something new?" she added.

"You children get me every time." Tiny crow's feet were the only visible wrinkles on her face; Grandma's muscular shoulders shook with amusement at the differing requests. Perhaps she could mix a little bit of both. Children of any age always enjoy a good story, after all, she almost whispered towards the ears of the cornfield that touched the house. A spring breeze shook the new husks and threw baby dust particles in the air as nature's confetti.

Yes, that'll do quite nicely. But are they ready? Grandma nodded with hesitant approval and joined her grandchildren on the planks of the porch, tucking her lightweight skirt close under her polished knees. They have to learn eventually. I might as well be the messenger.

"I think I have just the story. Darlings, come sit a little closer to me." Grandma beckoned the bouncing bundles of joy and they bounded an inch from her smooth, bare feet, promptly sitting crisscross applesauce. Story time was no time for messing around.

"Shh Julia," crooned Mazy. She held the green skirted plaything close to her chest and positioned its face towards the grand storyteller.

"Get comfortable now. There you go." Grandma brushed with strong, supple fingers

the haphazard halo of bleach blonde curls that sprung from Max's head, away from the forest in his eyes. She then rearranged the endless strings in her lap and folded her unblemished hands like the cherry on top. "Are you ready?" Grandma settled into a comfortable position and both children nodded and clamped their mouths shut. They were about to go on an adventure.

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Ah, the smell of rain. It'll surely help break the wretched heat we've had these past few days. What a wonderful morning! The young girl meandered the dusty path home with her hands jammed in her whitewashed overall pockets, her bare feet skipping every fifth-and-a-half step. So many corn fields, she thought. Around her stood acres and acres of ripe corn ready for harvest. Mmm. I can't wait to sink my teeth into a juicy cob. She looked longingly at the husk enclosed plants, almost feeling the warm butter running down her chin and dripping into her lap. Her favorite part was popping the plump kernels coated with salt and giving her taste buds the time of their lives. The familiar tinge of lye soap and aftershave overpowered her nose, wafting the scent overtop the pointed husks.

"Well if it isn't Ella Bella," sang a high tenor. A teenage boy about Ella's age appeared from behind a dilapidated wagon on the side of the road.

"Joe, you should really lay off on that aftershave, you know? I can smell you a mile away." Ella fixed his ruffled bangs and creased the collar of his plaid shirt. "Orange looks good on you." She caught a glimpse of faint pink in his cheeks.

"Is now better?" said Joe as he leaned into Ella's personal space. He flashed a telling grin.

"Nah. This is better." Ella playfully shoved him out of her bubble.

“Hey, I have something to show you,” Joe said when he recovered his balance. “It’s this way.” He waved her to the left side of the road and into the cornfields.

I wonder what he found this time. I hope it’s something nice and cool like water. It sure is hot today, even with the rain coming, she thought.

“Wowie, Joe. Those are some perfect specimens of corn kind.” Ella stared at the stalks in an especially large field a few plots over that reached to the sky, tanning their earthy green husks in the sun’s penetrating rays. “Not a brown one among them!” Every stalk seems to be in the prime of its life.

“It’s in here.” Joe pointed to that field, the healthiest in sight, and walked in.

“Wait. You know we can’t go in. That’s trespassing.” Ella shook her wavy blonde hair in disapproval and crossed her arms.

“C’mon, it’s fine.” Joe rolled up his sleeves even higher past his elbows under the shade of the mammoth stalks.

“I don’t know.” Good thing I chose my white shirt today, she thought. As the sun ascended to its zenith, Ella noticed the sweat trickle down her back while the dust between her toes became a humid kind of stuck. She peered up at the bright blue sky but couldn’t catch any wisps of clouds for miles. Yuck. Whatever rain there was evaporated right out of the sky.

Joe tapped his foot in the dust and pleaded her on with his eyes. “Ella, it’s so hot. Just a quick break, please? Then we can go right on home.”

I feel like a baking pie, she thought. But trespassing—such a dishonorable thing to do! Ella expected her skin to be cracked and flaking like the white paint on the outside of her house and was surprised to find it still intact.

“Okay fine, but just for a few minutes to get out of this blistering heat.” Ella wiped the glistening drops from her forehead onto her dusty thighs. I guess it’s not trespassing

if you don’t know who it belongs to, right? She followed Joe into the sea of green and felt immediate relief from the heat wave.

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“Grandma, I’m hungry.” Max rubbed his stomach as the grumble of gastric juices gurgled from his abdomen.

“Maaax, you interrupted!” Mazy pouted and folded her arms. “You can’t just stop Grandma’s story because you’re hungry.”

“Says who? You’re not the boss of me,” Max said.

“Well I’m three minutes older so you have to listen to me,” Mazy gloated. She flipped her braids in his direction and smiled that triumphant smile so becoming the eldest child (albeit the luckier of the set by birth order).

“Well, I’m a boy so I automatically win.” Max smirked over his trump card.

“Boys are losers!” Mazy stuck her tongue out at him and wrinkled her nose.

“Now children, stop that nonsense. We’ll have no more of that today, do you hear?” Grandma looked each child in the eye and stood to her feet, towering over them like a powerful oak tree. “I think a snack break will do us good.” The next part is the most important anyway, she thought.

Grandma strode into the house and reappeared a minute later with a brimming bowl. The children cheered and Max squealed with delight.

“Oh, Grandma, is it the caramel kind this time? That’s my favorite.” Max tried to peer over the edge of the bowl but was unsuccessful.

“I hope it’s just plain buttered popcorn—that’s the best kind.” Mazy leaned Julia against a porch post and rubbed her hands.

Grandma’s laugh sounded like the light clinking of a windchime. “Yes dears, I brought both of your favorites out.” She munched on a few puffed kernels herself and placed the bowl

in between them. "Make sure you share now, or story time is done."

"Yes ma'am." They agreed and took fistfuls of the airy treat.

Grandma sat down on the porch again. This is the best part. I wonder if they'll understand.

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Ella breathed a sigh of relief. It must be 15 degrees cooler here, she thought.

"Right this way, madam." Joe interlaced his fingers with Ella's and walked her through the straightest rows of corn her eyes ever saw.

What wonderfully rich earth. Freshly tilled too. Ella breathed in the sweet smell of a hidden corn crop accented by the musky soil.

"Tah dah!" Joe pushed through the giant leaves and came to a small clearing in what was probably the middle of the field.

"Aw, you trickster. Is this for me?" Ella gestured at the picnic spread, barely containing her blush; the blanket was laid just so, the ham and swiss sandwiches carefully cut.

"No, this is for us." He led her to the array and tucked a loose strand of silk hair behind her freckled ear.

"Joe, I--I don't know what to say."

"Say you like it," he replied with a smile, bringing her calloused hand to his lips.

"Oh, I do," she breathed. She looked all around and then at the food. "Let's eat! I'm starving."

They sat down on the blanket and Joe served the lunch.

"You're not hungry, are you?" Joe teased.

"What?" Ella managed to reply with half a sandwich already in her mouth, shrugging her powerful shoulders and throwing a questioning look at Joe.

Joe cut his chuckle short. "Did you hear that?" He looked up at the burning sun for some reason.

"Hear what?" Ella stopped mid chew

and listened.

"It sounded like a crack or something. There it was again." They strained their ears and heard slight pops in the distance.

There it was again, but louder. Ella and Joe stared at each other, puzzled. The sun beat down with extraordinary intensity that threatened the shade of the cornfield.

"Hey, look." Ella pointed to the bulging husk of the nearest stalk. Joe and Ella stared at each other, their mouths gaping open. "Not possible," she breathed. Before their eyes the corn cob inflated and sent its kernels flying into the air like mini balloons that floated to the ground. As it hit the sunlight, every kernel in the entire field crisped into popcorn!

"I don't believe it!" Joe pinched himself while Ella rubbed her eyes. The popcorn fell in drifts as snow falls, each cob ripening in succession.

Ella laughed and ran around the clearing, attempting to catch the golden fluff in her outstretched arms. "This is the best thing I've ever tasted in my life. It melts in your mouth. . .mmm." Ella closed her eyes and shoveled nature's treat into her mouth as Joe finally caught up. I could eat this forever, she thought.

"Uh, Ella." Joe's tone concerned her, so she opened one eye and peeked at him. "You're glowing."

She laughed out loud. "Oh, Joe, you're too sweet."

"Uh, no. Like you're actually glowing. Look." He picked up a handful of the stuff on the ground and tried it.

Ella stared at her hand, shocked. She was glowing. "So are you!" She pointed to Joe's vibrant cheek. I feel amazing, so full of life. Hunger always has a way of making you feel down, I guess.

"Do you feel different?" Joe asked. "I feel like a thousand bucks right now!"

Ella nodded her consent and twirled in multiple circles. "I feel invincible!" She beckoned Joe closer and took his hand. They gawked at each other with clear eyes and un-

blemished faces.

“Let’s get as much of this stuff as possible,” Joe said. “Here, use the blanket.”

They gathered enough for a feast and returned to their picnic.

“Can you believe this stuff is still popping? This field must be twice as big as it looked from the outside.” Ella closed her eyes and let the popcorn hit her face the way one would stand vulnerable in the rain. So soft and light, she thought. We must be eating spun air.

“Let’s stay here a while,” Joe said. “I mean, if that’s okay with you?”

Ella’s eyes twinkled with joy. “Let’s.”

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“Aw Grandma, is that really the end?” Max rolled onto his back and felt around for his scattered army men.

Mazy stared at the empty bowl of popcorn in amazement. “Is that really how we get popcorn, Grandma?” She brushed the crumbs onto the pine planks, and they disappeared. “I thought it was a good story.”

“But what about the goblins and dragons and stuff? I think I missed that part.” Max shook his head and squinted, trying to remember all the details.

“Ah, children. I’m afraid that’s the one I have for today.” Her eyes laughed as she watched them finish the afternoon snack. If anything, they looked happier and brighter, she thought. Stooping down to pick up the empty bowl, thick, golden locks fell around her shoulders and framed her face. She stood up straight with ease and maneuvered around Max’s sprawled limbs. My, how she loved these grandchildren of hers, even if they didn’t quite understand the story. Before turning into the house, she contemplated a cornfield a little ways off and smiled. Am I a Ponce de León? The world may never know. With that she walked into the kitchen and started supper.



## Note to A Friend

By Matthew Miller

Here’s something nice I want to say:  
I’m blessed to watch you on your way  
On down this path to Glory,  
Humbly

I know you try your very best;  
You never seem to get to rest  
Though you bear your burden onward,  
Steady

I’m not the only one to see,  
Though I am very glad to be  
Someone who knows how good you are,  
Always

But God is also watching you,  
He’s seeing all the things you do  
And He’s laying up your treasure,  
Gladly.

.....



## Untitled

By Meredith Thomas

Though he rarely laughed, his eyes did often,  
so as I stood silent over his coffin,  
tears filled mine.  
The tempestuous weather matched my heart;  
wind cruelly whispering “Now you’re apart.”  
There was no silver line  
to the storm clouds blocking out the sun.  
Though the rain had not yet come,  
thunder grumbled far away.  
How vicious a truth: my love had left me,  
my heart fading with each hollow beat.  
Could Death not tarry? Not let him stay?  
Feeling cold and alone, I decided to leave,  
and discover somewhere safer to grieve  
beyond the silent trees.  
Walking through the vast, solemn park,  
I watched as the encroaching dark  
claimed the sky and me.  
As the first stars reached my eyes,  
I heard him speak, “No one dies,  
we only sail on.”  
I stopped in my tracks, searching the sky for his face,  
and cherishing his last spoken embrace,  
sighed,  
and waited for dawn.

# Girl in Blue

By Sarah Kanoun

Girl in blue,

There's a pressure in you—

Let it out.

All the little things you've built up,

All the big things you've been hiding—

Let them free.

The world wants to take your pain.

They want to use you like a puppet—

Let it go.

Your days tick by faster and faster,

Your life blurs into a whirling cloud—

Let it spin.

Your fear rises to the edge of your skin.

Your walls creep up higher and higher above  
you—

Let them down.

Girl in blue,

There's a Savior in you—

Let Him in.



## He's so in love with all the things I hate

By Olivia Thomas

He's so in love with all the things I hate  
    most about myself  
I always wished I could be more  
    like the girls on my shelf.  
But this is not a book  
And he isn't real  
And it's not romantic as I forlornly  
    write down what I feel.  
I cannot wave a wand and be magically transformed  
I can only stand here and be drenched by life's storm.  
But I'll be alright, it's a fading pain  
    No need to rush to save me  
    Cause I quite like the feeling of my hair slick with rain.